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Introduction to “Imagining Geography through Interactive Visual Media”

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WHEN *SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS* FOR THE PLAYSTATION 2 was released in 2005, the following advertisement was displayed on its back cover:

Some mountains are scaled. Others are slain. [...] Experience an unforgettable journey into a land forgotten by time... a seamless world filled with miles of majestic terrain... a story of companionship and undying love... and mythical giants to discover, unearth, and destroy.

(Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. 2005)

Although this quotation merely advertises the game, it also keys into important themes of virtual environments: escape to faraway lands, experience myth or legend through exploration and dominance, and feel wonder at the environment. While these are lofty claims, the game was developed by the same team that had previously released *ICO* (2001), a game noted for “presence” or a sense of reality in its spatial design (for more on presence, see McMahan 2003). The advertisement focuses on these themes as fundamental reasons for exploring virtual environments—rewards that the game promises to deliver. Not all virtual environments offer the same appeal. However, they do provide spaces for socialization, exploration, fantasy, productivity, or other activities; although intangible, virtual environments are used by actual people and are also real (see Shields 2003).

As an important element in the daily lives of many, popular media has a powerful influence on the way that people view the world around them. Representations of environments in media such as literature, film, and games communicate ideas, perspectives, and ideologies about fictional and actual spaces and places. Media representations contribute to the social construction of tangible places which are also, in this sense, imaginative landscapes. Within and beyond geography, it is important to

investigate imaginative representations and how they shape human understanding and interaction with the external environment.

For over a decade, geographers have examined representations in popular media such as film and the virtual spaces of the internet. Some relatively recent examples of geographic research into popular media include James Craine and Stuart Aitken's (2004) analysis of masculinity in *Fight Club* (1999); Deborah Dixon and Leo Zonn's (2005) critique of Fredric Jameson's geopolitical aesthetic and his reading of *The Perfumed Nightmare* (1977); Jason Dittmer's (2005) investigation of geopolitical scripts in Captain America comic books; Christina Dando's (2005) examination of the depiction of plains frontier and belonging in *Boys Don't Cry* (1999); Chris Lukinbeal's (2006) discussion of the outsourcing of movie production to foreign countries; Stuart Aitken's (2007) investigation of the representation of childhood in Scottish film; and Giorgio Hadi Curti's (2008) analysis of landscape in *Ghost in the Shell* (1995). Similarly, examples of geographic research into virtual spaces include Paul Adams' (1998) exploration of social structure, communication and virtual topology; Mike Crang, Phil Crang, and Jon May's (1999) edited collection examining the geographies of virtual environments; and Martin Dodge and Rob Kitchin's (2001) application of geographic analysis to cyberspace.

While video gaming now offers detailed, expansive, three dimensional landscapes for interaction and play, geographers have largely overlooked these environments, focusing mainly on other (although closely related) visual and interactive media. However, even in relation to visual media, such as film and television, and interactive media, such as the internet, video games and similar applications differ from these other types of virtual spaces in that they provide interactive, visual environments that can be explored at will. This results in a traditionally geographical experience of exploration and discovery of fantastic or distant lands (for a discussion of exploration and discovery being the basis of geography, see Parsons 1977). In addition, video gaming has become a very popular medium, earning more than \$18.8 billion in 2007, a figure which includes video and computer games but not other types of software (Riley 2008). Further, the average game player is 33 years old, and 24% of Americans over age 50 played video or computer games in 2007 (Entertainment Software Association 2008). Clearly, as scholars examine the geographical meanings that are communicated through media landscapes, interactive virtual environments should be examined as well as other forms of media representation. This special issue compiles contributions from both geographers and non-geographers for an interdisciplinary approach to the geographical aspects of interactive visual media.

The articles in this special issue examine topics ranging from representation within game landscapes, to the scales of virtual and physical places of gaming, to spatialization within the work and play spaces of computer operating systems. While the articles are varied, each explores the issues of representation and spatiality of intangible landscapes, spaces where the imagination becomes a reality to be explored and used for

socialization, that are nevertheless integrated into the material environment through social interaction, meanings of space and place, and infrastructure.

The issue opens with Harry J. Brown's "A Plague in Montiel: Plague, Quarantine, and Social Space in Role-Playing Games," which examines the spatial representation of disease in computer role-playing games. Brown draws upon historical views of disease to demonstrate the influence of discourses of control in social space on the representation of plague and quarantine in games. Through this analysis, Brown connects the construction of social space within games to larger discourses of illness, showing that game environments reinforce historical views of plague and distance the player from the infected.

The issue continues with Michael W. Longan's "Playing With Landscape: Social Process and Spatial Form in Video Games," which, similarly to the previous article, also examines socially constructed meanings of space through the utopian and dystopian environments of video games. Longan points out that like other forms of landscape representation, game environments produce social meanings, but unlike other forms of media, games allow interaction with the virtual environment and the social meanings embedded within it. Focusing on games as landscape representation, Longan investigates the portrayal of processes of production and suggests that the interactive representations of games not only communicate meanings about landscape and process but also propose new ways of conceiving meanings of landscape and process.

Following is Claudia Breger's "Digital Digs, or Lara Croft Replaying Indiana Jones: Archaeological Tropes and 'Colonial Loops' in New Media Narrative," which investigates imperialism in representations of archaeology in *Tomb Raider* games and films. Breger critiques colonial themes evident in the series, finding that while the games present a colonial narrative of 'tomb raiding,' the films both reinforce imperialist themes while also incorporating postcolonial elements into the narrative and environment. Similarly to the previous three articles, Breger shows how popular media can challenge or, in this case, reinforce larger discourses.

Though the first three articles of the special issue focus on the meanings communicated within or through game environments, the following article, Jeremy W. Aber's "Spatial Scales of the Arcade Collecting Community: A Photo Essay" leads the issue in a new direction by examining the use of physical and virtual space in social events of arcade game collection. While the landscapes of interactive software play a valuable role in discourse, Aber argues that games are also played within physical space and examines them within this context. Aber demonstrates collectors' use of both virtual spaces such as the internet to stay connected, and physical spaces such as regional and national events to gather, socialize, and trade over the virtual spaces of arcade games.

Similarly to the previous article, Giacomo Andreucci's "3D Graphical User Interfaces on Personal Computers: Space-Place Building Processes in Virtual Environments" points in another interesting direction by exploring the graphical user

interfaces (GUIs) of computer operating systems as virtual environments. Although GUIs do not typically present a landscape in the traditional form of hills, trees, and buildings, Andreucci shows that three dimensional GUIs create work and play spaces that can also be explored, modified, and shared. Andreucci focuses on themes of space and place, utility versus visual appeal, and visualization of abstract information in the form of a spatial environment.

This issue begins with analyses of the discourses of game environments, and also covers other topics in the physical spaces of interactive media and the abstract spaces of three dimensional software. This special issue addresses important themes of interactive visual media, placing them with other media as forms of spatial representations and as virtual spaces. These spaces are used for social interaction, exploration of ideas, and more generally for work or for play. As these articles demonstrate, the virtual environments of interactive media are part of the larger external environment through discourse, infrastructure, and activities. In addition, the three dimensional landscapes of interactive media and gaming differ from other forms of media in their combination of an audio-visual environment with the interactivity of computer software. The environments both communicate ideas about spaces and places, and also function as spaces and places. While the external environment is also socially constructed, virtual environments bring the imagination to life through sensory and spatial metaphors in a space that lacks the physical constraints of the material environment. Each of the following articles highlights the communicative and spatial natures of the landscapes of imagination.

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