Awakening in ruins: The virtual spectacle of the end of the city in video games

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Abstract

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With reference to Walter Benjamin's work on nineteenth-century Paris, and Debord's work on the spectacle, this article argues that the depiction of ruined cities in video games – as virtual ruins of the present – simultaneously reproduces the empty novelty of the commodity (the phantasmagoria of progress-oriented civilization), and offers a vision of failed progress through counter-spectacle. One means of understanding Benjamin's dreamworld of modernity is through ruins and rubble – not only as material remnants, but in other visual or artistic forms that might reveal the illusion of progress as a fallacy, particularly in contrast to an urban-focused commodity capitalism. With an emphasis on *Fallout 3*, *Hellgate: London* and *The Last of Us*, and the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R* series this article argues that, if cities can be read as dreamworlds, and films, art and ruination as the means for awakening, then urban destruction in the virtual sphere can provide a counter to the collective dream of eternal progress.

Keywords

urban ruins

Walter Benjamin

Phantasmagoria

video games

dreamworld

play

This article expands urban and screen-oriented discussions of Walter Benjamin's writings, in combination with his work on the phantasmagoria of commodities, cities and history, to critically reflect on video games set in the ruins of recognizably contemporary cities, using several specific examples. With reference to Guy Debord's Marxist-derived conceptualization of the spectator and *Situationist* approaches to play (shared by Michel de Certeau), this discussion will contrast the shallow commodification of urban decay in video games against the productive, critical potential of ruins as they appear in virtual renderings of the end of the city.

Since the development of three dimensional video games in the early 1990s (and to some extent, even prior), settings of ruin and decay have been a staple of a number of game genres. Despite the fact that the decay or abandonment of human landscapes has been particularly prevalent in 3D, first and third-person games since the release of titles such as *Myst* (Cyan 1993) and *Riven* (Cyan 1997) (followed by the *Tomb Raider* (Core Design 1996) and the *Uncharted* series (Naughty Dog 2007, for example), video games have received comparatively little attention in relation to ruinscapes and spaces. Exceptions to this lack of attention include Dunstan Lowe's 'Always already ancient' (2013), which offers a

summary of particularly teleological understandings of classically framed ruination in games, and Daniel Vella's 'Spatialised memory' which includes a discussion of 'The ruins of the past' in terms of embedded narrative in games (2011), although neither of these focuses on the modern ruins that are a key concern of this article. Several articles do foreground the significance of more contemporary ruination in terms of games and gaming: Evan Watts considers the subversive affects of ruin aesthetics in games (2011), while Stallabrass (1993) and Bulut (2013) focus more closely on urban or post-apocalyptic scenes of ruination, which are essentially the ruins of the present (most often either projected into the future, or as an alternative history of the contemporary era). These three texts in particular, spanning almost two decades, reveal the ongoing relationship between games, representation, and settings of modern ruin.

Frequently, such settings are generic – the abandoned bases of *Doom* (id Software 1993), or the obligatory level in almost every *Sonic the Hedgehog* game (1991) that is strewn with fragments of Roman, Greek and Egyptian architecture – but real cities in a state of hypothetical ruin increasingly feature in video games such as *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog 2013), *Hellgate: London* (Flagship Studios 2007), the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R* series (2007–2010), and *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios 2008), which form the main cases for this discussion. Very little attention has been turned to either the depiction of urban space, or of ruined cities in such titles – despite the precedent for other media to be read critically in terms of fragmentation and ruin (from German rubble cinema, to the photography of urban decay) – perhaps due to the supposed shallowness of games, or the lack of

a frame through which to view titles beyond the activity of structured, repetitive play.

The argument that this article puts forward is that ruins might be one avenue through which to detect critical potential in games, particularly through a relationship between real and imagined ruination, urban theory and architecture (and especially through the work of Walter Benjamin on ruins, dreaming, and the phantasmagoria of commodity fetish and progress-oriented histories). In order to expand these notions to some degree, it is important to offer a slightly different reading of play than is typical to video game studies – an urban-centric framework influenced by the *Situationists*, in conjunction with Debord's Marx-influenced experiments with spectacle and counter-spectacle – and to consider the limitations that the consumption-driven experience of video game media places on the critical potential of ruins and fragmentation in a mainstream context.

Playing in Ruins

A number of people have identified architectural and material decay as a recurring theme in video games, 'if we look at contemporary video games we find an abundance of ruined buildings, of mould, and of all forms of decay of organic matter and inorganic materials' (Fuchs 2012: 1). These are most frequently discussed in terms of ancient ruins (a category that most people would identify more readily than modern ruins), and as texts or histories to be read, rather than spaces to be played. For example, Daniel Vella speaks of the aesthetics of a ludic sublime (Vella, 2015), and Dunstan's Lowe, with the term

'always already ancient', also points to the historical-temporal quality that is inherent in the way we understand the idea of ruination itself (Lowe 2013).

Ruins in games do not just belong to the sublime or the melancholic, however, and their predominance is not only for ease of narrative or space-time organization. The argument put forward here emphasizes particularly contemporary and urban ruins – the kind found in *The Last of Us*, *Fallout 3* (and 4), *S.T.A.L.K.E.R* (*Shadow of Chernobyl* [GSC Game World 2007] and *Call of Pripyat* [GSC Game World 2009]) or *Hellgate: London*, in particular. Modern ruins that create recognizable scenarios feed into the apocalyptic imagination, and 'encourage the participation of a new generation in exploring the projected sensual spaces of ruination' (Apel 2015: 65). According to Apel, this imaginary is post apocalyptic, and spans the framing of real-world Detroit as 'a post apocalyptic landscape' (2015: 4), but equally informs the hypothetical ruination of cities in games, for example Washington in *Fallout 3* (Apel 2015: 64). As one developer suggested to me in personal correspondence, many landscapes of modern ruin in games are designed with real-world ruins in mind, including visits to derelict and abandoned locations by art directors and lead artists (anon. 2015).

Modern ruins are easy landscapes to work with – they give the player freedom, a sense of atmosphere, and the chance to experience spaces that they otherwise don't have access to. Their incomplete or fragmentary forms make for far more believable play than a realistically modelled functioning city, with traffic, doorways, pedestrians, and so on (anon. 2015). The ruins are an integral part of the playable landscape, and the kind of play that it produces. In such games,

playing in ruins is an activity that takes place through, but also alongside, the gameplay itself, tied with urban play, spatial play, and potentially occurring outside the central storyline or action of a game. The possibilities offered by ruin landscapes demand a less game-oriented definition of play that can make room for the particular qualities of urban and ruin centred landscapes in certain titles (as opposed to other kinds of landscapes in games), and also expand the field to include more critically informed conceptualizations of media, urban experience, and the political sphere of action open to the player.

The justification for an atypical definition of play in these games comes from several sources. In *Half-Real*, Jesper Juul lists seven different definitions of play, some concerned with freedom, some with goal oriented tasks, some with rules, systems, or logic, and others with recreation and detachment from ordinary or everyday life. Only one definition listed by Juul touches on representation or the image, and none of those listed touches on space or the city (Juul 2005: 30). While Sutton-Smith refers to a play of signifiers and the 'rhetorics of the imaginary' his understanding of play isn't easily mapped to the landscape of a ruin-filled digital game that is as much film or media as it is rules or make-believe (1997: 127), a landscape that facilitates play, not just narrative or fiction. As Juul also points out, the use of the term play is problematic from the very outset, as linguistic distinctions between the words game and play (and their equivalents) vary significantly across languages. This has resulted in a decades-old struggle to define play, game, and related terms, which does not seem likely to be resolved any time soon (Juul 2005: 29), and which does little to enhance a discussion of cities and play in games.

The term play, as it relates to the concerns outlined here, is therefore most usefully an urban focused definition, akin to that of the *Situationist* play-tactics (Andreotti 2000; Debord [1970] 2010), but also as employed by researchers and urban theorists (and also in relation to *Fallout*, see Kemmer [2014] and Tulloch [2009]), which has the benefit of highlighting experimentation, practice, politics, space, imagination and many other related concepts within an urban-centred theoretical framework. In this context, play is used to delineate a players' engagement with a ruined city that they recognize as such, contrasted against the real, urban play of the *Situationists*.

To take on an approach that is sympathetic to the play-tactics of the *Situationists*, and apply this to urban spaces in video games, is to emphasize adventure, experimentation, and also a degree of resistance. This framework suggests that play 'triggers creativity and innovation, subversive activities that may lead to the (temporary) reversal of power' (Ensslin 2014: 19). Such active participation in the world amounts to more than passive spectating – the spectator, if not given over to 'the stupor of consumption' might (perhaps through exploration and active navigation of an environment through play) participate more freely in the 'production of everyday life' beyond consumption and alienation (Best and Kellner 1999: 142). As an example, Best and Kellner refer to the interactive spectacle 'that involves the creation of cultural spaces and forms that present exciting possibilities for creativity and empowerment of individuals' (1999: 144), particularly through their more active/interactive involvement of the audience.

Both the *dérive* and *detournement* are identified by Ensslin for their relationship to 'free exploration and experimentation, or spatial and temporal free play… appropriation and subversion', including intentional repurposing or misreading of commodities, cities or society (Ensslin 2014: 25). This relates also to the concept of disruption, borrowed from Dadaism, and employed by the *Situationists* to describe politically motivated tactics in urban space, as well as literature, poetry and other work, derived from such tactics (emerging later in aspects of punk and culture jamming). Michel de Certeau calls for an expansion of tactics as a playful means by which to undermine 'foundations of power' – in urban space, in politics, or through more creative 'methods [for the] everyday art of war' (1984: 38–39).

For a more contemporary example, many urban explorers who visit abandoned buildings – or, modern ruins – consider their actions to be intrinsically playful, as well as subversive. Abandoned and derelict sites provide the opportunity for explorative, often risky play beyond surveillance, in spaces that are open, free, and suggestive of myriad imagined scenarios. Exploring ruins is a form of play for both adults and children, affording pleasure in disorder, experimentation, even danger. In particular, urban explorers are drawn at least partly to derelict and abandoned sites as places of adventurous play, enabled by 'the right to transgress regulatory regimes' (Edensor 2005: 30). The 'derelict playgrounds' (Garrett 2013: 14) habitually infiltrated by urban explorers can be consciously negotiated as playful, yet revolutionary spaces. 'Urban explorers insist on the right to enter places, to enjoy them on their own terms, and to create counter-

topographies that playfully undermine the conventional narratives of history' (Garrett 2013: 38).

Such counter-topographies and counter-histories can also be detected in urban-based video games – particularly those set in ruins. Certain titles can be read as products of our urban sensibilities, and our interest in tactical, unstructured adventures in urban space as a means to disrupt the usual ordering of the city without moving completely beyond a world governed by rules and laws, and without risk to ourselves. The experience of playing in the hypothetical ruins of a real city opens up a critical moment which resembles The *Situationist*'s iconoclastic play-tactics in city-space, which sought to subvert the urban spectacle with experimental wanderings and activities undertaken in forgotten or forbidden parts of the city. In video games, such sentiment is transferred to the player who wanders a (reasonably) open form cityscape in ruins, a space of urban alternatives and counter-spectacles which encourages players not only to observe particular images or aesthetics through familiar tropes and clichés, but to expose themselves to different ways of thinking and seeing the world around them. Such a mode of play may not have inherently critical import, but I would suggest that it has inherently critical potential, particularly through the implications of alternative futures or histories, or the depiction of an urban-alterity, or counter-spectacle, through ruins. Ruins as counter-spectacle in games also reflect the real-world possibilities to resist order in the urban environment through play, which in turn suggests an in-game subversion of a play dynamic that also relies on rules to regulate activity (see Huizinga [1949] 1980).

The virtual spectacle

Starting with *Hellgate: London*, the discussion will now turn to concrete examples of such spectacles and counter-spectacles in action. *Hellgate: London* invites the player into a demon-infested depiction of central London, a depiction that suggests forces of destruction and decay, leaving the city in ruins. *Hellgate: London* a near open-world MMO, is designed to allow players to simply wander the ruinous landscape if they wish without necessarily being caught up in battles with monstrous enemies. The spatial – navigable, explorable – depiction of a contemporary London in ruins entices the player to explore an inverted urban environment, revealing many iconic features of the city (from buses to newsstands) in a state of decay and uselessness.

Representing an iconic city beyond everyday experience disrupts the contemporary urban space of London, as the surreal experience of a player slaying enemies (with sword or gun) in Whitehall gives the real city a new character, through the action of a counter-spectacle, presenting an everyday space as a singular *loci* (Sadler 1998: 69) by leveraging the sublime character of the London architecture and 'the ruin', simultaneously contrasted against the detritus of the modern world. This is an affect very similar to the charm Debord found in a derelict toll-house building in Paris, which was standing next to an elevated subway – one of many sites of the contrast between beauty and ugliness that Debord and others felt was essential to 'rethinking' urban space (Sadler 1998: 72–76).

‘That which changes our way of seeing the street… is more important than that which changes our way of seeing a painting’ (Debord in Sadler 1998: 69) argues Guy Debord, in favour of the subversion of dominant perceptions of the urban. According to Simon Sadler, this playful-constructive behaviour took the form of an organized spontaneity – identifying strange zones, and their potential for interference, to destabilize ‘the architectural place-form’ of cities (1998: 32). *Fallout 3*, set in Washington following a nuclear war, is full of sewage pipes, radio towers and train yards – reminiscent of the hidden spaces unearthed and produced by the *Situationists* and, according to Benjamin, present in early film – urban reimaginings that can be seen to perform a powerful role in shaping or altering the way in which we see the city.

Of course, the in-game experience lacks real-world tactility, smell, depth of field, and so on, but this lack of sensory detail does not necessarily diminish the representational power of the ‘textual space’ of games (a space that according to McCrea’s work on Hauntology, defines the representational space of a specific game and specific experience [in Perron 2009: 229]). Furthermore, unlike the architecture of the real-world city, which significantly impacts the everyday experience of urban space, the ludic architecture (Adams 2003) that constructs (and is constructed by) the ruined cities of video games allows players to explore a decaying or abandoned space without personal danger and, most importantly, suggests alternatives to the dominant perceptions and experiences of urban space. As game designer and critic Ian Bogost states: ‘Video games represent processes in the material world – war, urban planning, sports and so forth – and create new possibility spaces for exploring those topics’ (2008: 121). Ruins too

create new possibility spaces beyond the commodified spectacle of the city, in the same way that zombies challenge ‘the commodification of human bodies and the threat of consumerism to human culture’ (Aarseth and Backe 2013: 13) because the ‘zombie’ trope is ‘inherently fused with suggestive potential’ (Aarseth and Backe 2013: 4) that extends beyond the game and into the world, and is capable of critiquing the structures of that world.

Marc Bonner makes a clear link between urban architecture (including design culture and urban experience) and the often dystopian cities in which many games are set, even as virtual or clone architecture (e.g., the skyscrapers of *Bioshock*, reminiscent of Manhattan [Bonner 2014a, 2014b]). Furthermore, practices, tactics, walking and other urban-centric models for experience in space can provide critical insight into the spatiality of games including *Assassin’s Creed*, which Bonner reads through the work of Michele de Certeau (Bonner 2015). As Daniel Golding also attests, walking (also as in the work of de Certeau) is quite possible in game space, including getting lost – the potential for disruption that seems native to the city can carry beyond bodily encounters to in-game urban architectures.

This is an argument that challenges the view of games as inherently shallow or restricted in their wider political impact. Graeme Kirkpatrick notes that play has a ‘critical function in relation to the real’ with the same potential to be subversive or disruptive as other media (2011: 35). The ‘spaces that images themselves produce’ (Ash 2009, 2105) in games give them a phenomenological affect through their geographic function, as technically distinctive interactive images on-screens, which shape experience. Similarly, within the virtual construction of

worlds through screens '[r]emediated memories' of Lisbon in *Second Life*, for example 'can blur spatio-temporal boundaries and can be materialized through the recreation of historical and contemporary settings in virtual environments' (Ferreira 2012: 77). Sybille Lammes, speaking of real-world and in-game mapping, proposes that ideologically shaped mapping practices can be subverted through 'playful spatial practices' in games (2009: 224). All attest to a link between the depicted gameworld and the 'real' world of everyday experience in which the virtual urban space can feedback into reality, giving the spaces themselves (not just the ideas or content) impact beyond the game. To take this further, de Castell et al. refuse 'any strict real/virtual dichotomy' between games and the world from which they are played, although they do refer to (particularly online play) as constituting virtual and material elements (2014: 9).

So play in games goes both ways – navigable ruin spaces feedback between hypothetical and imagined ruins across media and lived experience – games might also feedback into our bodily experience of the city, into the 'lived space' of our lives (Swalwell and Wilson 2008: 10). This means that, to return to Guy Debord and the *Situationists*, games do in fact change the way we see the street, and also that our encounters with the real world are what makes play in the urban ruins of the gameworld possible. Even more significantly, it is this quality of interpenetration of experience that enables games and play to open up possibilities and alternatives in actual space. Melanie Swalwell directly contradicts Miriam Hansen to claim that Benjamin's interest in the emotional affect of film (innervation) is a means to open up alternative imaginaries, possibilities that (she says) might be afforded by video games, under the right

conditions (Hansen dismisses them as too violent or otherwise caught up in oppressive structures of power [see Swalwell 2008: 86]). This possibility for reinvigoration through media-driven experience is also acknowledged by Tara Forrest, who similarly reads cinema (but also television, children's play, and alternative forms of history) as offering vital materials from which a viewer (or player) might assemble an alternative political sphere, or way of imagining their contemporary present (2007).

The concept of play can thus be made use of in terms of *resistance* to dominant forms, politics, and practices – In *Fallout 3*, for example, the disruption is caused by the opportunity to 'play' – in the sense of explore, tour or encounter – a real, iconic city that has been hypothetically ruined. The premise of the game relies on a kind of subversion of the play-dynamic in an almost forth-wall breach that reflects the fears and concerns of the player's everyday world by inviting players to 'Witness the harsh realities of nuclear fallout rendered like never before in modern super-deluxe HD graphics, appearing to speak directly, and even politically, to players *as* players in the contemporary moment. From the barren Wasteland, to the danger-filled offices and metro tunnels of DC' (cover text). The *Fallout* series generally is a consciously spectacle-oriented franchise that intentionally critiques contemporary culture through the gaming medium, showing landmarks in ruins, and actively commodifying the epic vision of a ruined city, thus (paradoxically, perhaps) offering a kind of counter-spectacle which is to some extent pointing beyond the capitalist dreamworld that binds (and produced) it in reality.

Phantasmagoria and dream

Despite his departure from Marx's historical materialism, marked most clearly in Convolute N of *The Arcades Project* (W. Benjamin, 1999), Benjamin frequently returned to the notion of *phantasmagoria* in an attempt to reach a critical understanding of the commodification of everyday life and experience as a kind of illusory capitalist dreamworld, propagated – but also potentially countered – not in high art or literature, but in everyday mass media, urban spaces, and the valorization of history-as-progress. Such phantasmagoric qualities, as I will argue, are both produced and resisted through games. This is not the 'child phantasmagoria' of disordered play that Sutton-Smith describes (1997: 151–73), but rather a world-constructing illusion etymologically linked to an early form of projection that cast eerie shadows and ghosts to a credulous audience.

In studying the development of mass media, Benjamin concentrated on originary forms – daguerreotypes, magic lanterns, moving panoramas, dioramas and the like – which he valued for their relationship to film and the nineteenth-century spectacles, which he believed would provide insight into the workings of the capitalist dreamworld. The first 'phantasmagoria' was developed from the magic lantern, using early projection technology. Unlike the magic lantern 'which knew nothing of perspective' (Benjamin 1999: 531), the phantasmagoria (or 'fantasmagorie') developed by Étienne-Gaspard Robert used smoke and moveable glass slides to give the illusion of movement, projecting ghostly images (often out of focus) on a screen, to a terrified audience, as early as 1797. A kind

of relationship can be sketched between such detached forms and video games, where games exploit human fears and motivations, and work through historically embedded myths and symbols to produce thrilling entertainment, a kind of smoke and mirrors setup that is constructed from materials and tactics that cannot be discerned by the viewer.

While Margaret Cohen clearly marks a separation between Benjamin's work on dreaming and the phantasmagoria, stating that he 'turned away' from the former in favour of the latter (1989: 89) Rolf Tiedemann understood both notions to include the reifying nature of culture (and especially media) as an expression of the dreams, which condition us to accept as normal the uneven structures that make capitalism possible (Tiedemann in Benjamin 1999: 936–38). Although the concept of phantasmagoria is most familiar in relation to commodity forms (Tiedemann in Benjamin 1999: 938) for Benjamin, phantasmagoria transfigures material and historical content into a deceptive form that obscures truth and operates in the interests of the ruling powers of any era, perpetuating an 'illusory sense of security' (Benjamin 1999: 15) about commodity production and its associated 'pomp and splendour' (Benjamin 1999). This approach perceives the phantasmagorical not only as the obsession with newness and the utopian dreaming of capitalist mass production, but also teleological histories that conjure fulfilled futures, history as progress into empty time yet to be lived, thus obfuscating the real state of the world as one of catastrophe and ruin. Ruins appear in games that imagine such a fulfilled future as one of catastrophic collapse, haunting the player by stripping away the illusions of security and progress, simultaneously reifying and resisting a vision of history as perpetual

novelty or beginnings and endings – it is the image of the ruin, deployed for play beyond the moment of death, that enables such resistance, and potentially reveals the phantasmagoric illusions of modernity as such.

Beyond his pioneering use of the powers of the phantasmagoric to articulate the eerie qualities of media under commodity capitalism (akin to the ghostly apparitions of Robert's projections), Benjamin provides a useful critical consideration of the relationship between ruin, media and the urban. Partly, this is because he is so often associated with less-literal emblems of ruin (the metaphorical 'trash of history', or the image of the Angel of History looking over an irreconcilably broken pile of rubble), but ruination also informs his real-life engagement with the Parisian Arcades in a state of decline during the 1930s. Benjamin outlines the Parisian arcades of his era (on the brink of oblivion), as sites in which the phantasmagoric structures of a capitalist dreamworld can be discerned – and, tellingly, *countered* – at the point of their disappearance and ruin. As Graeme Gilloch states, 'on the brink of oblivion, the crumbling arcade reveals itself as the locus of dreaming… the redemptive 'at last sight' of the ruined phantasmagoria of modernity' (1996: 127).

The understanding of modernity that perceives rubble and fragmentation as a mode of interpretation – particularly in the city – was adapted by Benjamin as an imagistic and experiential approach to ephemera and marginalia that provokes a questioning critical reflection on our relationship between past and present. This rubble and fragmentation need not be a real-world (that is, material) encounter – if anything, Benjamin would prefer to avoid such shattering violence. The concept of the phantasmagoria is so bound up in illusion and false consciousness

that it evidently pertains to abstract politics or cultural products, as well as straightforwardly commodified objects, or sites of consumption.

In the case of games, their very form is fused with modernity, as commodities (and physical machines), but also as media that signifies in a particularly immediate and fragmented way, constituted by dislocated landscapes built of individual models and files, and also, in the given examples, depicting ruins. Games, in this way, move between the abstract and real, making them useful for contemporary analyses using Benjamin's theory. *The Arcades Project* (1999) itself vacillates between the actual arcades and their role as symbolic signifiers for the rise and decline of capital and its phantasmagoric nature – appearing eternal whilst imminently transient; natural while fundamentally contrived; real, while totally false. This is a process simultaneously embodied and undone in the architecture (and decay) of the arcades, which were entangled with the emergence of a cultural fetishism that continues to blind us. 'The industrial metropolis became a landscape of techno-aesthetics, a dazzling, crowd-pleasing dreamworld that provided total environments to envelope the crowd' (Buck-Morss 1995: 6). This statement could equally be applied in a contemporary context to the spectacle of (particularly AAA and openworld) video games – Buck-Morss explicitly notes that 'dreams, too, have entered into this electronic space' of communication and media which 'provide mass reproduction of the image' (1995: 25).

This dreamworld might be the experience of the modern city itself, as suggested by Buck-Morss in *The City as Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, but Buck-Morss also states that 'the out of date ruins of the recent past appear as residues of a

dreamworld' (1995: 2). That is, in the moment of ruin, the utopian dreaming of the past is revealed as such, showing 'precisely this dream as a dream' (Buck-Morss 1995: 6) to a waking humanity, looking not only backwards at a past suddenly clarified in ruins, but also the truth of the moment in which they awaken. Thus, Benjamin sought, in the real-world experience of the derelict Arcade, a means to critique the origins of consumption and capitalism, as well as progress oriented historical narratives. Significantly, Benjamin also found this potential in all the constitutive and contributing cultural products and artefacts, which appeared to him as strange remnants of an earlier era, read and made accessible *through* the arcade-as-ruin (as a locus and as a motif). As a method informed by ruin and fragmentation, this approach could then be applied to the content of any era, including video games in the contemporary period (e.g., the nineteenth-century spectacle of the phantasmagoria is important to Benjamin in the 1930s for both its content and form [see Cohen 1989: 91–92]).

Benjamin's oft-cited quote from the *Work of Art* essay states that with its emergence, film 'burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling' (1970: 238). The section preceding this quote delineates the revolutionary potential of film to 'assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action', through 'close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects', by exploring the commonplace with new ways of seeing. If ruins transformed our way of seeing with a single point of view perspective, then video games that offer endless interactive close-ups of imagined urban environments have the potential to transform the world

around us in a similar fashion. The ordinary everyday world becomes an environment to be re-represented through media, and in Benjamin's reading, this act expands the very possibilities of space, and of thought. Benjamin considered the magic lantern to have no real depth or perspective, while the shifting perspective offered by film opened up the possibilities for action and thought – the roving perspective of games is the most recent iteration of a century-old movement to open our eyes to new ways of seeing.

If film (metaphorically) renders the world as ruin by making what we know appear strange – imbuing film itself with a revolutionary potential (which could also be likened to the powers of the disappearing arcades) – then what of the games, which render the cities we know, in vast, navigable, multi-perspective ruin? Benjamin understood Haussmann's transformation of Paris from a city of maze-like streets to a centre of boulevards as the 'manifest expression' of the 'phantasmagoria of civilization itself' (Benjamin 1999: 14–15). Thus a ruined city, a ruined environment, and a catastrophic ending viewed in 360 degrees all provide a different collective perception of the world we currently live in, and the future historical time we may inhabit, as well as the nature of the city itself. Playing *The Last of Us* (a gory survival horror set in the ruins of American cities including Boston and Pittsburgh) offers a peculiar experience of encountering familiar objects, architecture, or landscapes in a thoroughly unfamiliar state – a swivelling gaze that takes in the Bridges of Pittsburg piled with rusted out cars, or the swan boats of Boston riderless, slime-covered and stranded on the grass, all in the moment of their future decline, their obsolescence. *Fallout 3* focuses on the hidden parts of the everyday world, building the mechanics of play upon the

novelty of Washington (arguably the most well-secured US city) with its guts laid-bare. In both cases, the end-of-the-world narrative is expanded to an end-of-the-world city space, a dimensional and navigable world furnished with the kind of detail that – even in a phantasmagoric projection – awakens the dreamer to a conscious attitude that frames the real world as little more than future ruin, rather than future triumph, albeit as future ruins that persist, within a game that is, ultimately, designed to be won.

The *S.T.A.L.K.E.R* series consists of several First-Person Shooter Survival Horror titles, and is one of the more contentious gaming franchises to make use of modern ruins as a setting – primarily because the action takes place in the real abandoned cities of Chernobyl and Pripyat as they currently stand in ruins (following the meltdown at reactor number 4 in 1986) – but also contentious because of the kind of 'play' that happens in what many consider to be sacred memorial site. However, with their closer relation to actual events (despite highly fantastical construction), the series possesses the potential for political awakening by alerting the player to the threats posed at Chernobyl in various, sometimes quite subtle, ways. For example, the Ferris wheel in Pripyat is an iconic structure often photographed by visitors and posted on urban exploration websites, but is so heavily irradiated that the photographers cannot get too close. Similarly, depending on the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R* title, the Ferris wheel is either present in its rusted out form as an unplayable landscape in the game (visible only from a distance, replicating the proximity of a real-world visitor), or is a highly toxic structure for the player/avatar to encounter close-up, causing damage to the character.

In *S.T.A.L.K.E.R* in particular ‘post apocalyptic ruin becomes a playground for dreams of escape’ (Dobraszczyk 2010: 386), and yet the collective dream of a fulfilled future civilization is challenged, particularly where the city itself is understood to be a potent dreamscape under the influence of the forces of capitalism and modernity (Buck-Morss, 1995). *S.T.A.L.K.E.R* may be escapist in its horror-form, but it also has a powerful impact by conveying a ruined Soviet city. Such buildings, as Svetlana Boym attests, appear in the post-Soviet era as ruins of a utopia which never came to be, a dream ‘purged from sight’ after the breakup of the USSR (2001: 38), ‘a certain kind of industrial dreamworld’ (Buck-Morss 1995: 3) of production is dissipated through ruins, but can also be conjured through them.

That such reconfiguration of perception might be located in video games that are, at first reading, little more than superficial spectacles is no contradiction. The collective dreams utopian (and dystopian) alternatives in otherwise shallow popular forms – As Susan Buck-Morss attests, Benjamin, in an early departure from Marx, was one of the first to ‘take mass culture seriously not merely as the source of the phantasmagoria of false consciousness, but as the source of collective energy to overcome it’ (1989: 253).

‘Heaven and hell; phantasmagoria and shock; dreamworld and catastrophe. These polarities circumscribe the field of Benjamin’s images of the modern city and account for their critical, political charge […] they are constructions out of extremes, functioning both as revolutionary inspiration and as political warning’ (Buck-Morss 1995: 9). Although the will for political change in this context could be appropriately detected in independent games (especially those produced by

not-for-profit-collectives), this would not be in keeping with Buck-Morss' emphasis on mass culture. Her reading of Benjamin's interest in film, spectacles, the panoramas, the arcades, and so on, clearly locates the possibilities for awakening from the capitalist dreamworld in mainstream and popular media, even as they construct and are constructed by the forces of capitalism. Paraphrasing Jules Michelet, Benjamin states that 'every epoch… not only dreams the one to follow but, in dreaming, precipitates its awakening. It bears its end within itself and unfolds it…' (2002: 43). Dreaming the spectacle of a ruined city through pop-culture play in a hypothetical apocalypse precipitates awakening to the everyday ruins of the era.

Playing for awakening

Despite the prevalence of the spectacular in many titles depicting ruined cities, much of the detail within these games is less monumental and more everyday in nature, showing domestic spaces (houses, hotels); banal ephemera (smashed up drink machines, mouldering furniture); and broken windows or indoor puddles rather than fallen columns or crumbling monumental arches. The prevalence of the non-spectacular provides the foundation for counter or alternative histories because, although the lead narrative may be one of rise and fall, the underlying detail renders our intimate worlds in ruin.

In 'On the concept of history', Benjamin suggests that history tends to be told by the victors (and dedicates pages to the consideration of how inevitable teleology may be challenged). In this context, the argument can be made that games

requiring the heroes (often anti-heroes) to inhabit the ruins of contemporary society as survivors provides a form of counter history (perhaps even a post-history), which is not clearly narrated from the perspective of the victor. This story tends to be that of the anonymous or the oppressed, set in a subverted counter-city – the dead, inert, empty city, which – rather than quietly crumbling to dust – is the site of decaying relics, rusting towers, and everyday endurance, not the familiar reality in which we live.

The strangeness of our world (or its suggestion) turned to a ruinous landscape that we must play to understand performs a powerful critical role when assessed in light of Benjamin's investment in ruins for the purpose of awakening. As Gyorgy Markus observes: in critiquing modernity through ruination, Benjamin hopes to

> defamiliarize this way of apprehending reality as a 'phantasmagoria' by invoking its early transitory manifestations that are now present only in ruins, whose strangeness strikes us. At the same time it aims, precisely through such distancing, to bring our own way of perceiving the world to reflexive, but sensuous, presence, to make the veil, which our collective dream images impose upon it, directly open to the waking gaze. This veil not only conceals reality, but its very distortions also vaguely outline the possibilities of another, desired future as well. (2001: 16)

Might the strange ruins in video games point to that moment of awakening, the dormant possibility of an alternative world, encoded in ruins – in the distortions or fictions within the perceived, and ultimately false, real? Benjamin believed that such a resistance against the conditions of modernity could be identified in mass or popular culture (or at least in its critique), where such culture contained both the illusions of capitalism and a correlated progress-driven historical framework, but also the key to unlocking them (as noted by Buck-Morss, above). His approach effectively opens up the non-material ruin for such productive work, and Benjamin found the projection of such possibility in art, poetry, film and elsewhere, particularly in material that dealt with endings, ruins, remnants and fragments (the salvage work of the rag picker or collector are good examples).

The many elements involved in the reception of post-apocalyptic games are amplified by the implication of a hypothetical history – the imagined world in which catastrophic events reduce the long march of history to one great pile of rubble, naturalizing inevitable destruction and romanticizing ruination as the symbol of heroic (rather than banal or brutal) loss. In this way, beyond the level of gameplay (and the horror or action elements that tend to accompany imagined urban ruins) the games discussed here all make use of common ruin-tropes to refer back to the grand narratives of history fetishizing rise and fall as the natural outcome of the passing of time. However, each game also reflects a multiplicity of histories: generally built on counterfactuals, hypotheticals, imagined or fantastical scenarios, and fractured or indistinct timelines, made possible – playable and plausible – through ruins. *S.T.A.L.K.E.R*, for example,

actively merges fantasy with reality – setting up an alternate historical timeline in which the real events of the Chernobyl meltdown result in a second disaster, producing otherworldly effects in the zone around the plant. The series takes advantage of the setting in a ruined city that exists in the contemporary present by fusing what has happened with what could happen in such a ruin space (albeit with fantastical elements).

The Last of Us is more concerned with realistically depicting the future ruins of America in a way that reflects contemporary ruins (particularly the post-industrial rust belt ruins that we know from ubiquitous 'ruin porn' [Dillon 2014; Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2014]). In this context, a ruin aesthetic for the point of epic spectacle reproduces the idea of history as a process of colossal and impressive ruination – possibly reinforcing teleological modes of imagining the past. However, for Walter Benjamin, history as ruin is potentially the antithesis of progress and linearity – an apocalyptic rendering of historical experience might also provide a framework for the cessation of perpetual growth and newness, a way beyond the rhetoric of progress.

The Last of Us subverts a neat or knowable history by featuring ruins of real places, detached from their geographical origins (there is a great deal of online discussion comparing settings in the game to the everyday cities they are modelled from) presenting a disturbing yet enthralling universe that shows the vital and powerful spaces of contemporary cities (such as Massachusetts State House in Boston) as the bricks and mortar they really are – a critical counterpoint to an inhabited and functional contemporary city.

Unlike *The Last of Us*, the ruins of London in *Hellgate* are simultaneously ancient and modern – appearing like the ruins of the colosseum, reminiscent of the colonial imaginary, yet littered with recognizably contemporary remnants – street signs, park benches, phone boxes. *Hellgate: London* utilizes a range of known locations, icons, and tropes to construct a setting that is simultaneously familiar and antiquated – to the point of directly adapting the famous 1872 image of The New Zealander (derived from Macaulay's speculation on the end of St Paul's) for the final section of the introductory cut scene. Throughout the game, *Hellgate: London* makes use of a pastiche of visual tropes from the nineteenth century, war ruins of twentieth, and the wrecked buses and tube stations of contemporary terror attacks (an approach which could be likened to Benjamin's collage-like assemblage of remnants in *The Arcades Project* [1999]). However, although *Hellgate: London* reproduces imaginaries about the end of the city from prior eras, this is partly through the appropriation and reframing of ruined icons and their previous iterations in a more contemporary (yet implicitly futural or co-linear) historical time. The ruins here also imagine a possible future in which the presumed triumph of progress does not take place.

Fallout 3, on the other hand, relies on the purely hypothetical Sino-American war to reduce the world to a post-apocalyptic ruinscape (with an emphasis on Washington), but simultaneously disrupts historical discourse by reproducing 1950s aesthetics and politics amongst ruins of the contemporary present, implying an alternative past in which the Cold War became a nuclear war and ended 'the world as we know it'.

As Stallabrass identified as early as 1993, most games do hinge upon the notion of progressing to a fulfilled end – a very anti-Benjaminian concept (1993: 97). Although *Fallout 3* might be an oft-cited exception, with its moral challenges and necessary concessions that render all victories problematic, and its alternative models of past and hypothetical histories, it could also be noted that the epic nature of the central tale strongly resists a non-linear framing, investing as it does in tropes of war and history not as a pile of rubble, but as a spectacle of ruin.

In fact, in all of these titles, the well-worn tale of apocalypse dominates, rendering history – or the end of history – as an epic spectacle, located in some alternative time, in which society breaks down and (most often iconic, western) cities come to a grisly end – the repetition of the fall of Rome, Carthage, or even Berlin, models of history that are not so much grounded in catastrophe as the commodification of the ruined city, or the history of defeat told by the victorious enemy.

However, 'Marx and Benjamin arrive at widely differing analyses of the nature of phantasmagoria, but the computer game apparently simulates them both', it constructs the world of phantasmagoria and, through the virtual, presents alternatives: 'The virtual world is a dream of an alternative, complete, and consistent reality in Benjamin's terms, while the cloaking of economy with chrome conforms to Marx's account of the camouflage of actual relations' (Stallabrass 1993: 103).

Conclusion

So here we have two readings: first, an almost shallow or surface imaginary in which all things crumble to dust, and in which history is a teleological tracking back from ruin and decay, cyclically leading again to ruin and decay in the future – perpetuated in endless tropes of epic, ghostly or haunted ruination; and second, a critical encounter with ruins that might finally provide a moment of contemplation and stillness in the march of history, a moment in which historical authority is undermined as the institutions, which support the notion of a knowable past are obliterated. The expectation of the end of the world, depicted in dimensional, navigable and recognizable ruins, is the acceptance that another history is possible.

However, despite the overall call in this discussion in favour of more critical consideration – and provision – for video games through ruins, it must be conceded that they fulfil the role of a commodity. Though their exchange value may be complicated by emerging digital economies, video games are none-the-less saleable objects, with equally complicated and obscured use and labour values, whose existence – particularly in terms of Benjamin's vision of the ever-present phantasmagoria of modernity – implicitly facilitate the ongoing operation of unequal exchanges, and unfulfilled political possibilities, and illusory dream-states that are the very conditions under which the fetishized spectacle that Benjamin and Debord equally reject is able to flourish.

Mathias Fuchs refers to Benjamin's suggestion that Adorno 'compare players' activities with those of the workers in a factory' (Fuchs 2014: 149), to highlight the dangers of gamification. It is important to be cautious of overvaluing play as the way out, or of fetishizing play as a commodity, which (as Fuchs suggests), is the real threat posed by modern gaming culture – to package up fun and sell it. This is not just gamification bleeding into the world of work, but the logic of exploitative labour appropriating play for its own ends.

As liminoid forms (Hong 2014), certain games (including, I would argue, those set in ruins) occupy sites of exception, ambiguous places that are concurrently 'real enough' (Hong 2014: 4) and uncanny, landscapes innately imbued with the potential for alternative imaginings and politics. At the same time, '[c]onfined by the cultural logic of capitalism, play within industrial-liminoid structures loses much of its transformative potency' because games are consumed and offer the chance for escapism or distraction (Conway 2014: 132), rather than critical insight, which is not a given. They are, usually, little more than the very 'mechanisms of leisure and consumption, services and entertainment' – narcotics offered to the people under commodity capitalism – that are resisted by Debord and the *Situationists* (Best and Kellner 1999: 133).

Linderoth and Öhrn (2014), are also sceptical about the ability for games to subvert or transgress the world of their origin – their study on gender in games concludes that 'assumptions made about the transgressive potential of online gaming turn out to be false when studied empirically' (Linderoth and Öhrn 2014: 44).

Such concerns are not limited to games, but also to ruins in games (and ruin-related media overall). Bulut in particular uses Benjamin's theory to point out that

> games with a plot of ending the world and a hero saving it construct politics as spectacle, rather than as praxis and struggle, and marginalize and alternative imagination of organizing the world [...] It is precisely through such narratives that historical events are naturalized and mystified, potentially leading to fascism or at the very least a fascination with aesthetic images of destruction. (2013: 416)

What must be grappled with here is the relationship between the content of a game – images (effectively three dimensional grids covered in flat textures) that depict what we comprehend to be a ruined city, which are then 'navigated' – and the broader power of 'the ruin' to invert the spectacle. As Hell and Shönle ask, in relation to the current cult of ruins that generates film, photography and touristic practice: 'Does the aestheticization of the ruin belittle the human suffering that it connotes, pushing us into morally dubious territory? Indeed, does the mass production of ruins in various media numb our senses and trivialise horror? Or does it jolt us awake?' (Hell and Schönle 2008: 6).

There is no practical answer to this question – we can dismiss games as shallow cultural artefacts, commodities that do nothing to advance any programme for politically engaged media spheres, and fail to expand the possibilities for

thinking the alternative to the current state of things, or we can take the perilous path to vaunt their latent capacity to at least sow the seeds for critical alternatives, despite their compromised status as particularly fetishized objects; culturally embedded completely within capitalist modes of production, and on many levels truncated at the very point of significant emergence.

'Benjamin represents contemporary critique as the disruptive appropriation of existing visual technologies, translating into visual terms his understanding of critical activity as the disruptive appropriation of ideological transposition' (Cohen 1989: 103). This is the role that the phantasmagoria – as a concept – plays in providing games with critical potential. It is also, crucially, through the content of ruins that a critical dimension of video games can be fixed – if only in the moment, as Benjamin would have it – as it is fixed in early cinema; in photography; or in the obsolete and derelict remnants of the arcades, all of which might offer a moment of awakening, to counter the dreamworld of capitalism that presents itself through – but is also challenged by – the phantasmagoric operation of ideology through visual (and especially urban focused) media.

Benjamin, Debord, and many others were profoundly influenced by Marx's dialectics, which encompassed a model for historical materialism that rejected teleological readings of human history as somehow on a predetermined trajectory (rather than the result of complex social relations between different classes, with material success predicated upon the exploitation of people long dead, as well as living). The political project that carried such thinkers is inseparable from their calls for urban action and ideological resistance to the

powers that shape the world – and particularly the city – in forms dictated by the logics of capital and inequality. The call here, to consider ruins as critical interventions – whether real or imagined – reflects the role of Marx's theory in shaping models for political change, as well as his influence on later work, by Benjamin in particular, that sought to sew the seed for such resistance in accessible forms available to the masses. That this resistance might take the form of imagining differently through ruins is particularly Benjaminian. He spent his life in exile from war-torn Berlin, and read the potential for Marxist revolution in derelict arcades, new media forms, urban dystopias, and symbolic and metaphorical rubble and ruin.

If nothing else, urban ruins are breaks in the teleological march of history, crumbling signifiers that reveal perpetual progress to be a fallacy, but also suggest that life and possibility persist in ruins, that the fall is not the last chapter. Even as a 'dream of the apocalypse' (Stallabrass 1993: 105), to play in ruins is to play the possibilities of the end, to indulge in counter spectacle, and to imagine – through the virtual – some alternative constellation of events, to envision situations profoundly different to those within which we find currently find ourselves.

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