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Why the spatial epistemology of the video game matters: *Mētis*, video game space and interdisciplinary theory

ABSTRACT

Drawing on the Greek concept of mētis *provides a way of highlighting the unique spatial epistemology of the video game and establishing connections between game theorists and scholars working on issues of space/place in other fields. Addressing 'the antagonist[ic] relationship' between the humanities and the social sciences with regard to video game studies (Wolf and Perron 2009: 14; citing a personal e-mail from critic Jesper Juul), this article emphasizes the priority of a mobile knowledge of space as enacted in video gameplay, and subsequently establishes important connections with key ideas on knowledge and space from Lefebvrian philosophy and from the interdisciplinary field of spatial theory.*

KEYWORDS

mētis
video game space
spatial theory
philosophy
Detienne and Vernant
interdisciplinary approaches

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that mētis is a type of intelligence and of thought, a way of knowing; it implies a complex but very coherent body of mental attitudes and intellectual behavior which combines flair, wisdom,

> forethought, subtlety of mind, deception, resourcefulness, vigilance, opportunism, various skills, and experience acquired over the years. It is applied to situations which are transient, shifting, disconcerting and ambiguous situations which do not lend themselves to precise measurement, exact calculation or rigorous logic.
>
> (Detienne and Vernant 1978: 3–4)

> In Pac-Man, as in other video games, no one tells the player the rules governing each monster's behavior; these rules must be induced from observation. In this way, Pac-Man is more like life than chess.
>
> (Greenfield 1984: 110)

If there is reason to believe that the development of film and television profoundly affected the way we think over the course of the twentieth century, this shift cannot but be overshadowed by that which accompanies the ongoing rise of video games. From a perspective that is simultaneously philosophical and cultural, the significance of the video game lies in the way that it makes use of and encourages a particular epistemological approach to space. In contrast to the filmgoer's more passive reception of cinematic space, the video game player's experience of space is interactive. As Mark J. P. Wolf (2001) compellingly argues in his book *The Medium of the Video Game*, we form knowledge of this space not through the passive absorption of images, but rather through an active and largely self-directed process of exploration. In most cases, as Wolf recognizes, video game space is seldom exhausted after one hour or even 400 hours of gameplay. Furthermore, it is the very nature of space in the video game to be greater than any one player's experience. 'Completing' a given video game may no longer depend on an exhaustive knowledge of the game world, leaving no stone unturned, but may instead develop along a number of possible routes. This is – continuing the metaphor – to necessarily leave quite a few 'stones' untouched and more still unseen. Certainly, as is well noted in historical accounts of the development of video games, the use of space in their early manifestations (late 1950s, early 1960s) was much more limited and bordered on a simplistic flattened geometry (Wolf 2001). Yet nonetheless, even in its origins, the player's exploration of space differed fundamentally from that of the cinematic spectator. Even early manifestations of video game space entailed a self-directed process that – while perhaps not initially iconic or indexical in the same way as film space – already squared with a conception of knowledge as embodied, dependent on accumulated time and mobile.

Intended as a contribution to the existing literature on video game theory (e.g. Wolf and Perron 2003, 2009), this article seeks to complement approaches to interactive media grounded in psychoanalytic theory (Rehak 2003), aesthetics (Martin 2007), the trope of postmodernity (Filiciak 2003), gender and sexuality (Consalvo 2003), temporality (Crogan 2003), and literacy (Gee 2003; Zimmerman 2009) by fleshing out the more philosophical significance of the spatial epistemology of the video game. This spatial approach highlights the way we actively form our knowledge of space by returning to the Greek concept of *mētis*. Ultimately, the study of video games is relevant not only to the cultural or technological critic, but also for the spatial theorist who draws on a vast theoretical literature blending philosophy and geography on the way towards understanding how we perceive, conceive and live space. From this perspective, video games successfully create a more visible model of how we form knowledge of our spatial environment not merely through abstract

modelling and static representation, but through the embodied experience of movement.

There are two points that guide my analysis. Following on the heels of noted film-maker and critic Pier Paolo Pasolini's (1988) assertion that 'the semiotic code of cinema is the semiotic code of reality', I believe that 'the epistemological mode of video games is the epistemological mode of reality'. In a sense, this is another way of highlighting an aspect of video games that has frequently been pointed out by other scholars. Espen J. Aarseth, for example, has written that 'in games, just as in life, the outcomes (winning, losing) are real and personal to the experiencer, unlike in stories', characterizing narrative in video games as 'architectural rather than sequential, enacted rather than related, experienced personally and uniquely rather than observed collectively and statically' (2004: 366). By moving from Pasolini to Aarseth, my intent is not to suggest that video games are necessarily like movies, but rather to emphasize that, just as scholars were forced to think of cinematic texts differently from print literature (above all else due to film's reliance on iconicity and indexicality), the study of video games requires a further shift in perspective. By foregrounding a discussion of *mētis*, I want to emphasize that video games reveal something crucial about knowledge in general and specifically about the knowledge we form of space and places. Moreover, this article asserts that the form of spatial knowledge that underlies the phenomenon of the video game is relevant to numerous other fields of enquiry. As a cultural product subject to the same inflections and interpretations as other visual and cinematic art forms, the video game is significant as an object of cultural criticism in that it allows for a greater articulation of the key notions of the contemporary 'mobility turn' in the hermeneutic practices of both the social sciences and the humanities. The video game thus begs to be recognized as one of the most important focal points of philosophical and cultural inquiry in the twenty-first century.

Appropriately, the first section of this article delves into the rich theoretical history of the notion of *mētis* in order to highlight those aspects of knowledge formation that are highlighted in the video game experience. The second section moves from the understanding of knowledge as active, mobile and embodied, to the significance of video games as a spatial medium. Significantly, video games not only allow us to see how we form knowledge of space in general and of concrete places, they also resonate with the theoretical foundations of contemporary research being done across disciplines under the name of urban spatial theory.

1. MĒTIS AS ACTIVE, MOBILE AND EMBODIED KNOWLEDGE

In myth, as Detienne and Vernant point out in their landmark book-length study titled *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, Mētis is the name given to a female deity – the daughter of Okeanos and Tethys, and the first wife of Zeus who swallows her after Athena has been conceived (1978: 11, 107). As a form of knowledge, however, *mētis* is deeply relevant to current theoretical postures across a number of disciplines. Whereas knowledge traditionally conceived is a static deposit made directly into the mind of the passive student, critical pedagogues such as Paolo Freire and bell hooks (the pen name of Gloria Watkins) have criticized this insufficient model, one that they have labelled 'banking education'. Education, Freire writes, cannot be seen as 'a set of things, pieces of knowledge, that can be superimposed on or juxtaposed to the conscious body of the learners' (1970: 72; also

hooks 1994). As a model for the formation of knowledge, *mētis* is not merely abstract and representational, but rather embodied, active, mobile and always rooted in accumulated time. To return to the notion of *mētis* in the context of today's complex world is to return to the real movement of everyday life and to revitalize the practicality of small-scale human experience in the face of the simplifications espoused by large-scale solutions.

This discussion of knowledge and *mētis* is relevant due to the fact that in order to excel in the medium of the video game, quite a different approach to knowledge is needed than that which is traditionally a part of schooling or even much academic research. Generally considered, this traditional idea of knowledge to which I refer is disembodied, owing to a perceived schism between the heart and the head that has driven the philosophical tradition of the West and that is thus reflected in what might be seen as a common-sense approach (see the philosophical critiques of knowledge launched by Henri Bergson (1859–1941), Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995) and Henri Lefebvre (1901–1991); discussed in Fraser 2010, 2011). This section thus outlines the mobile character of *mētis* as a basis for our knowledge of space. Appropriately, it starts from a brief summary of Detienne and Vernant's historical contextualization of *mētis* in order to then explore its direct resonance in the writings of Michel de Certeau (*The Practice of Everyday Life*, 1988) and James C. Scott (*Seeing Like a State*, 1998). In every case, *mētis* asserts the inadequacy of totalizing systems of thought when faced with an ever-changing living world best understood in terms of complexity and innovation – and more importantly, it squares with the key epistemological premise guiding our experience of space in the video game. If, as Detienne and Vernant note, there are no 'treatises on mētis' (1978: 3), this is not because scholars have not yet broached the subject. Instead, this is due to the fact that there is something in the notion of *mētis* itself that escapes the facile reduction requisite of many logical or philosophical classifications. The authors write that although *mētis* operates within so vast a domain, although it holds such an important position within the Greek system of values, it is never clearly revealed in a theoretical work that aims to define it. It always appears more or less below the surface, immersed as it were in practical operations that, even when they use it, show no concern to make its nature explicit or to justify its procedures (Detienne and Vernant 1978: 3; Certeau 1988: 81 himself makes implicit reference to this passage). To a great degree, the nature of *mētis* cannot be made explicit – and its procedures cannot be justified – by traditional thought. This impotence of thought that arises when it is faced with the complex nature of *mētis* speaks just as much to a teratological error of thought itself as it does to the elusiveness of the concept it takes as object. The concept of *mētis* itself – Detienne and Vernant prefer the wording 'mental category' (1978: 3) – is best seen as a point of departure for assessing the schism that often distances practical from categorical knowledge, doing from thinking, and praxis from theory. It is also the spark that ignites the far-reaching ontological question of what constitutes the thing itself. In this re-evaluation of traditional ontological posture, relations rightly supplant objects, and the latter are thus enfolded back into the former from which they have been abstracted by the common method of intellect. *Mētis* reveals that intellectual thought purports to work with ideas as it does with things (Bergson 1912), that in fact the intellect itself has evolved by forming an ever-tightening relationship with matter (Bergson 1998), and that it thus discards that which it cannot effectively treat as an object. As a complex way of knowing applied to ever-shifting and

unpredictable situations, *mētis* is an underappreciated and ever-present part of all human activity (Scott 1998: 313).

Detienne and Vernant's attempt to define *mētis* is in no way constrained by the simplistic approach of an intelligence that seeks to make precise and pin down. Instead, their definition opens up the mental category and embraces the idea of complexity. This definition itself is a challenge to traditional, intellectual ways of knowing (Detienne and Vernant 1978: 3–4; see epigraph above). As the authors document, Greek myth often turns to *mētis* to explain the triumph of the weak over the strong. The use of *mētis* is the opposite of the use of strength (Detienne and Vernant 1978: 13), just as it is the opposite of impulsiveness (1978: 15). It 'constitutes a threat to any established order' (Detienne and Vernant 1978: 108). As a quality possessed by some gods and not others, Detienne and Vernant describe the role *mētis* plays in the chariot race of Antilochus, in Oppian's treatises on fishing and hunting (where the fox and the octopus possess it in spades), in the combats of Zeus, and in many other mytho-historical situations. Nevertheless, although Detienne and Vernant catalogue the importance of *mētis* for the Greeks, their interest in the mental category is not purely historical or mythical in nature. For Detienne and Vernant, *mētis* reveals an age-old struggle between being and becoming, one that continues to be characteristic of western thought as a whole.

Importantly, Michel de Certeau, in his *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1988), mentions the term *mētis* while also citing Detienne and Vernant's work on the subject explicitly in a discussion of tactics and strategies. Of these he writes:

> Although they remain dependent upon the possibilities offered by circumstances, these transverse *tactics* do not obey the law of the place, for they are not defined or identified by it. In this respect, they are not any more localizable than the technocratic (and scriptural) *strategies* that seek to create places in conformity with abstract models. But what distinguishes them at the same time concerns the *types of operations* and the role of spaces: strategies are able to produce, tabulate, and impose these spaces, when those operations take place, whereas tactics can only use, manipulate, and divert these spaces.
>
> (de Certeau 1988: 29–30, original emphasis)

He goes on to say that 'It [mētis] is close to everyday tactics through its "sleights of hand, its cleverness and its stratagems," and through the spectrum of behaviors that it includes, from know-how to trickiness' (de Certeau 1988: 81). Strategies, interestingly enough given Bergson's spatialized understanding of intellection, 'privilege spatial relationships' (1988: 38), whereas tactics subvert those relationships (he gives *perruque* as an example 1988: 24–28). Recalling Bergson's discussion of memory (particularly the now infamous cone model of *Matter and Memory*, 1912), de Certeau also emphasizes that from the treasure of past experiences those that are relevant surge up when they are needed (a selective theory of memory; see also McNamara 1996). Just as for Bergson it is the whole of the past that persists in the concept of *durée*/duration (see Bergson 1912, 2001), for de Certeau, the knowledge that surges up in *mētis* is not intellectual knowledge, but rather nontransferable knowledge that is irreducible to a formula.

Yet it is James C. Scott who has given the term *mētis* the greatest amount of attention as regards social theory. This critic sees the mental category as revealing a crucial problem of scale – the friction between local and

large-scale conceptions of knowledge. In his work *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (1998), Scott takes on the necessarily simplified solutions to social problems engendered by the state formations, and contrasts these sharply with the complex and innovative solutions born of individual practice. Although his analysis allows for a historical link between innovative knowledge and its codification in large-scale abstract schemes, this act of codification has shown itself to be incapable of incorporating the subtle complexity of innovation. 'What they [large-scale schemes] ignore – and often suppress – are precisely the practical skills, variously called know-how (*savoir faire* or *arts de faire*), common sense, experience, a knack, or *mētis*' (Scott 1998: 311). There is a difference of kind between practical knowledge and its simplification by the state – a difference that he explains using the term *mētis*:

> Following the illuminating studies of Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, we can find in the Greek concept of *mētis* a means of comparing the forms of knowledge embedded in local experience with the more general, abstract knowledge deployed by the state and its technical agencies.
>
> (Scott 1998: 311)

This comparison is most strongly presented in Chapter 9 of Scott's work, titled 'Thin Simplifications and Practical Knowledge: Mētis', which includes many anecdotes concerning skills that are 'exceptionally difficult to teach apart from engaging in the activity itself' (1998: 313) – riding a bicycle, for example. There is also the practical knowledge of the ship captain who, through years of practice, may still awaken below deck because of a slight change in direction, weather or current (Scott 1998: 329). This type of knowledge even borders, as Scott says, on 'a sixth sense that comes with long practice' (1998: 328) – these skills, to put it simply, cannot be taught.

As Scott highlights, *mētis* is 'exceptionally difficult to teach apart from engaging in the activity itself' (1998: 313). It is knowledge of an implicit, automatic and experiential nature (Scott 1998: 315, 329), such that 'Mētis knowledge is often so implicit and automatic that its bearer is at a loss to explain it' (Scott 1998: 329). de Certeau points out that it 'counts on an accumulated time', upon which it draws in a given moment. Physical skills often reveal *mētis* in action, as in the case of 'the acquired knowledge of how to sail, fly a kite, fish, shear sheep, drive a car or ride a bicycle' (Scott 1998: 313). Scott writes that 'All human activities require a considerable degree of mētis, but some activities require far more' (1998: 313) – I would hasten to include video games as part of that list of activities that require 'far more' *mētis*.

2. FROM VIDEO GAME SPACE(S) TO URBAN SPATIAL THEORY

Video game playing involves a combination of the hand–eye coordination and the localized knowledge Scott attributes to *mētis*. As any seasoned game player knows, and as any novice game player soon finds out, practice makes perfect. Knowing the game board or the landscape of a given virtual world ahead of time may not be possible when playing a video game, and at best, even this knowledge will be a poor substitution for knowledge gleaned through direct experience. As Patricia Marks Greenfield has pointed out,

'In this way, Pac-Man is more like life than chess' (1984: 110; see epigraph above). The video game does not always consist of a logical if cumbersome combination of possible moves that may be deduced and meditated upon in advance. Even where the logical complexity of gameplay is somewhat rudimentary, it should never be reduced to a series of pre-established moves, nor could it without sacrificing a key governing principle of the video game. Outcomes and reactions must be reassessed in mid-move, mostly without drawing intellectually on prefabricated game representations and in the process harnessing a deep embodied knowledge previously built up over time. Responses must be immediate and precise to be effective – tailored to an ever-changing situation that is just out of the reach of 'intellectual' or 'analytical' knowledge (in the Bergsonian and Lefebvrian sense of the terms).

Wolf and Perron point out that video game theory 'must be a synthesis of a wide range of approaches, but at the same time focus on the unique aspects of video games' (2003: 13) – and, clearly, one of the most unique aspects of the video game is the player's experience of space. To this effect, Wolf has elaborated a now classic typology of space in the video game (2001, 1997; cf. Fernández-Vara et al. 2005; Fernández-Vara 2009; Juul 2007), and James Newman asserts that 'space is key to videogames' (2004: 31; also Keane 2007: 104; Aarseth 2007: 44). Wolf (2001: 55) even writes of the evolution of video game space as a series of progressive innovations that paralleled the development of space in the cinema. Video game space is, of course, noticeably different from cinematic space, in that a game world consists of 'entirely fabricated spaces' (Poole in Holland et al. 2003: 34) instead of indexical images of the extra-cinematographic world. Nonetheless, as Wolf notes, 'Gradually as technology improved, designers strove for more representational graphics in game imagery, and today they still continue to pursue ever more detailed representations approximating the physical world' (2003: 47). Even if video game space cannot be indexical in the same sense that the cinema can, in one key respect it goes far beyond what films can offer:

> Like the cinema, the video game screen predominantly stimulates perceptions of spaces and objects that are present to the senses, but they can be influenced by actions. In several respects, then, video games are, as mentioned, the medium that is closest to the basic embodied story experience.
>
> (Grodal 2003: 139; cf. on film and video games Keane 2007; King and Krzywinska 2002; Nitsche 2008)

The most compelling case for a model of spatial production that is relevant to the study of both video game space and 'real world' space is one advanced by spatial theorist, urban philosopher and cultural studies pioneer Henri Lefebvre. In his landmark work *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre outlined not merely a dialectical understanding of spatial production, but a triadic model comprising the complex relationships between representations of space, spaces of representation and spatial practices (1991: 33). Importantly, the relevance of a Lefebvrian understanding of space to the study of video games has already been recognized by a handful of scholars. Espen Aarseth explicitly seeks to 'refine' Lefebvre's spatial theory in his essay 'Allegories of Space' (2007: 45), and Stefan Guenzel in fact begins his essay 'Eastern Europe, 2008' with a discussion of Lefebvre's 'trialectic of spatial processes' (2007: 444). Nonetheless, the application of Lefebvrian terminology to the study of video games has not been consistent. For example, Guenzel suggests that video games be equated

with Lefebvre's notion of 'spatial practice' (2007: 444), and Aarseth writes that 'computer games [...] are a type of spatial representation he did not anticipate' (2007: 45; even if Lefebvre 'did not anticipate' the study of video games, readers may be interested to see that the cover chosen for the third volume of his *Critique of Everyday Life* as republished in 2005 shows two children playing an Atari 2600). I believe that a more thorough understanding of Lefebvre's work would suggest that there is a danger in reifying video games as themselves one aspect of his triadic model of space. The key legacy of Lefebvre's work, in general terms, has been to support the notion of space as a process over the idea of space as a static representation. For example, geographer David Harvey (following explicitly in the Lefebvrian tradition) has drawn together absolute space, relative space and relational space into a variegated theory ('Space as a Key Word', 2004). Likewise, it is precisely an understanding of knowledge as active, mobile, embodied and largely self-directed that is at the heart of the emerging shift in social science and humanities research that goes by 'The Mobility Turn'. What, in my estimation, differentiates the emerging emphasis on 'mobility studies' (consider the recently formed journal *Mobilities*, established in 2006) from a significant portion of previous research on the 'production of space' is merely that the approach is more carefully defined to prioritize movement. In the debut editorial from *Mobilities*, the authors in fact draw on Lefebvre and others in order to note that a 'mobility turn' in research is emerging that calls for a renewed interest in content that 'encompasses both large scale movements of people, objects, capital and information across the world, as well as the more local processes of daily transportation, movement through public space and the travel of material things within everyday life' (Hannam et al. 2006: 1). As argued elsewhere (Fraser 2010, 2011), the philosophical roots of this mobility turn lie with the focus on movement (emphasized by Bergson 1912, 1998, 2001), on the complex fusion of rhythms (Lefebvre 2006), and on the irreducible and ever-shifting forces that constitute the many contemporary urban worlds of the everyday (Lefebvre 2002, 2003, 2005, 2008). In the study of video games, just as in the study of 'real world' spaces, our approach must from the beginning emphasize space as a complex process, as a movement and as a relationship.

While earlier studies on video games may have asserted that spatial skills transfer across the video game/'real world' divide (e.g. Gagnon 1985), contemporary work has advanced a somewhat more sophisticated understanding of the connection of these two worlds, folding each into the other. In this way, some critics have even explored, for example, 'the effects of software code on the spatial formation of everyday life' (Dodge and Kitchin 2005: 162) and, as the subtitle of an essay by Daniel G. Lobo (2007) puts it, 'How SimCity influences Planning Culture'. Given that we live in an increasingly urbanized world in which cities have had great effect on both physical and mental conditions of modern life (Simmel 1996; Harvey 1989; Lefebvre 2003; Wirth 1938), the knowledge we form of space in video games cannot be understood in isolation from larger processes of urban spatial production, in particular. It is important to recognize that much recent work on video games has already begun to emphasize the theme of cities. For example, the 62 contributions to the volume *Space Time Play: Computer Games, Architecture and Urbanism* make it clear that video games cannot be treated as cultural products isolated from the larger interdisciplinary discourses that shape both today's cities and our experiences in and of them (see also Nitsche 2008: 2).

As noted by Adriana de Souza e Silva and Daniel M. Sutko in their introduction to the volume *Digital Cityscapes*, the creation and use of video

game spaces reflects a quintessentially modern 'conceptualization of city spaces as places to be explored rather than circulatory spaces' (2009: 6). The marked increase in '"themed" spatial representations' (Lukas 2007) in video games makes it possible to reconcile cities in video games with extra-diegetic urban spatial configurations. For example, in a book chapter titled 'Visualizing the Mediterranean (From Goytisolo to the Video Game)', I have written on the various ways the Mediterranean has been represented in on-screen interactive space (Fraser 2011). In the game *Mario Kart Wii* (2008) players drive around a themed Mediterranean city trapped in a perpetual sunset evoking an entire tradition of touristic and leisure perceptions of cities-such as Barcelona. In *Monster 4x4* (2008), also for the Wii console, the myth of Barcelona as a city that has constantly re-imagined itself (Resina 2008) is presented through an array of half-constructed urban buildings, complete with a glimpse of famed architect Antonio Gaudí's Sagrada Familia from privileged locations on the racetrack. Consider more generally the appeal of games such as *Grand Theft Auto* (Rockstar 1997–2011) that have presented fictionalized versions of American urban spaces (*GTA: San Andreas* as an amalgam of San Francisco, Las Vegas and Los Angeles) – with the experience of such urban centres heightening an appreciation of the game.

Michael Nitsche's *Video Game Spaces* (2008) makes a few lucid points that are relevant to the reconciliation of on- and off-screen spaces. His analysis fittingly prioritizes 'the concept of space and spatial experience' in a reading of video games he describes in this way:

> Game spaces are approached not as foregrounded spectacles based on visual cues such as perspective and parallax but as presented spaces that are assigned an architectural quality. [...] players want to engage not with the screen but with a fictional world these images bring to mind.
> (Nitsche 2008: 3)

Key to this approach is Nitsche's insistence that there are 'fundamental differences' between space in video games and space in the 'real world' (2008: 3). While this claim has a certain 'commonsensical' appeal and perhaps does not deserve to be vitiated outright, his position that interactive media spaces are 'told to us using certain forms of presentation' (Nitsche 2008: 3) suggests the need for video game scholars to more thoroughly assimilate work being done in urban studies. Although even Nitsche is attentive to Lefebvre's seminal work *The Production of Space* (2008: 6, 16–17, 236), his appropriation of Lefebvrian spatial theory might be a tad more nuanced. For example, his assertion that 'virtual spaces are highly directed in the way they can be used' (Nitsche 2008: 236) – which, given his argument (above), posits an implicit contrast with 'real world' spaces – ignores a whole tradition of urban criticism whereby city spaces have themselves been created in certain interests for certain purposes, necessarily encouraging or discouraging certain uses of the built environment (Lefebvre 2003, 1996; Mitchell 2003; Augé 2005; Flusty 1994; Fraser 2008, 2007). Nevertheless, these points do not detract from his analysis, but instead serve only to emphasize the need and importance of a more thorough reconciliation of video game studies with Lefebvrian spatial theory.

Still, Nitsche's work succeeds in emphasizing that just like off-screen spaces, cyberspaces are diverse in nature (2008: 17). His astute observation that video games take up progressively more of the player's attention ('Multilayered access and spatial referencing can demand so much attention that non-game-related

information might be overpowered by the complexities of the virtual game world', Nitsche 2008: 36) bears a curious resemblance to what early twentieth-century urban theorists described as a 'chaotic' urban environment that required the savvy city-dweller to adopt a 'blasé attitude'/'state of indifference' merely to cope with the conditions of modern life (e.g. Simmel 1996). Moreover, there are other similarities to consider. Just as with non-digital spaces, video game/virtual space is interesting also from the perspective of its 'dialogic' qualities. Contemporary urban spaces are persistently being thought of in this sense, 'as a meeting place, the location of the intersections of particular bundles of activity spaces, of connections and interrelations, of influences and movements' (Massey 1995: 59).

Interestingly enough, this conception of space is increasingly emphasized in work on virtual spaces:

> What makes virtual worlds particularly interesting for the future of democracy is that they are conducive to groups coming together, working together, and staying together. Virtual worlds and visual technologies reintroduce place and space, they allow people to 'get next to' each other in real time and to assume discernable identities. This reintroduction of space and place renders cyberspace more hospitable to social interaction.
>
> (Noveck 2006: 258; cf. Taylor 2006: 158–61, on the notion of online participatory cultures)

Underlying these similarities, of course, there is the shared fundamental experience of the way our knowledge of space develops both inside and outside of the video game. *Mētis* speaks to a form of embodied knowledge of space that is equally applicable to both realms – one that is dependent on accumulated time and is mobile.

With this and other similarities in mind, the time is right to effect a thorough reconciliation of video game research and urban studies. While this article has directed itself to making a general case for this reconciliation, it leaves open the question of how this reconciliation might be realized in future research. For instance, where do understandings of both virtual and 'real' worlds as 'rule-based spaces' (Nitsche 2008: 31–32) intersect? What similarities exist between the static conceptualizations of space employed by city designers (as denounced by Lefebvre 1996, 2003) and by game designers? How do the intended uses of video game spaces as conceived by game designers compare to the intended uses of public spaces as conceived by city planners? In the end, discussion of these questions, although already under way (in *Space Time Play*, for example), will be enriched by a more sustained engagement with Lefebvrian spatial theory, and, moreover, by grappling with the spatial epistemology common to both realms of experience.

As scholars working in the field of video games undoubtedly know, one of the biggest obstacles to this interdisciplinary reconciliation has been a reticence on the part of prior generations of scholars (in other fields) to take the video game seriously (Wolf and Perron 2003: 1). In the broadly defined realm of culture and cultural studies, many scholars have decried the lack of attention given to video games. Wolf points out that '[d]espite three decades of development, there has been relatively little scholarly study of these games, or even an acknowledgment of the medium of the video game as a whole' (2001: 1), and James Newman suggests that even where this study has been undertaken, there is little agreement on how to go about investigating the video game (2004: 10). Given the need to cultivate inter/multidisciplinary approaches to the video

game (expressed recently by Mäyrä 2009), it is important to see that one way to connect study of video games to the larger humanities and social science fields is through recourse to spatial theory. This move may, in fact, function to correct 'the antagonist[ic] relationship' between the humanities and the social sciences with regard to video game studies as noted by Wolf and Perron (2009: 14).

By way of a conclusion, I return to an important question posed by Newman:

> Should we see videogames as continuations of other media such as film or television? Are they continuations of other non-computer games? Are they hybrids of both? Should we define them with reference to their uniqueness and dissimilarity from other entertainments, media or games, or as a consequence of their similarity?
>
> (2004: 10)

I believe that we should read video games both along with and against other media forms such as film and television – making sure to exploit their unique contribution to the interdisciplinary discussion on space and place. What the concept (i.e. 'mental category') of *mētis* can contribute to the analysis of urban spaces in video games is an appreciation of cities as part of a complex spatial process. This notion offers another way of getting to the idea that video games 'are not exclusively focused on representation' (Aarseth 2007: 47). The point is not merely to recognize that both video game spaces and 'real' spaces are caught up in Lefebvrian process of spatial production that includes 'representational spaces, spaces of representation and spatial practices', but moreover to understand that the method through which we form knowledge of video game space is in fact the very method through which we form knowledge of 'real world' urban spaces. In making possible a discussion on the significant intersection of on- and off-screen space/place, video games are important enough to warrant the full attention of spatial theorists and scholars working in the larger field of urban cultural studies. As video games continue to evolve, technologically speaking, this connection cannot but prove to be of increasing importance.

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