

Script for “Video Games as Data: Gathering Place-Based Data from Player Exploration in Video Game Environments”

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Title Slide/Slide 1: Hello all! I am going to jump right in and note this is completely preliminary research that just exists in my mind right now. Video games provide players an opportunity to explore fantasy worlds, virtual representations of real landscapes, and alternative realities to escape from, and/or enhance, our daily lives. The 2016 release of Hitman and the 2018 release of Hitman 2 offers players the opportunity to explore in-depth maps of places across the world, including Mumbai (India), Miami (USA), Hokkaido (Japan), Colombia, Paris (France), and Italy. These maps are heavily researched by the game developers, a diverse team that takes great care to closely mimic the real geographical areas on which their maps are based. Characteristics of these maps, including character dialogue, scenery, clothing, and architecture, all represent data in which we can extract and interpret to have a better understanding of the geographical area being represented in these missions. However, it is important to also understand that some of these digital representations of real places may perpetuate harmful stereotypes, and like with any form of data, we need to be critical of where it comes from. I also want to note that there’s so much more nuance to explore here, particularly when we consider the context in which we explore these maps based on game objectives. I am also cognizant of the potentially negative impact of highlighting games with this particular subject matter during this tumultuous time we are all experiencing, and rather than focusing on the game objectives, I’ll be focusing specifically on the maps themselves. (Next Slide)

Slide 2: Here we can see the game’s representation of a typical suburban town in the United States, called Whittleton Creek. The map consists of many common elements typically associated with the Homeowner Association owned North American middle-class suburb, including large cookie-cutter homes, two-car garages, and copious sightings of the USA flag. While the US is incredibly diverse, for someone living outside of the United States, exploration through this map would give a pretty reasonable impression of these particular kinds of North American suburbs. (Next slide)

Slide 3: We next see a fictional town in the country of Colombia with dialogue, scenery, and imagery that mirrors real landscapes of the country. While much of this in-game data about the country does in fact mirror reality, it’s worth noting that the storyline revolves around drugs and can perpetuate, particularly for outsiders, harmful stereotypes about the country. (Next slide)

Slide 4: We then move to Mumbai, India, where the map primarily centers on informal settlements within the city, highlighting the severe inequalities present in the actual city of Mumbai, as skyscrapers loom above these informal settlements. The map also features chawls, a real form of housing present within informal settlements in the city. (Next slide)

Slide 5: Further, the map features examples of mercantile activity common within these informal settlements and allows the player to even take part in these activities. (Next slide)

Slide 6: Finally, we travel to the fictional town of Sapienza, Italy, heavily modeled after the real Amalfi coast of the country. Here, facets of the architecture and scenery provides players with a glimpse into portions of what this area of Italy actually looks like and how it might look and feel to walk through the streets of this area. (Next slide)

Slide 7: I want to end this lightning talk by reiterating that data can be diverse - it's not just numbers in a spreadsheet. In this case, "data" are the landscapes, clothing, architecture, and scenery we see in these levels which give us insight into real geographical locations without actually visiting them. The level to which these data actually mirror reality varies, but is nevertheless an important data source we can gather from video games. For someone who, for a host of reasons, could not visit these actual places, using this data to extract information about the locations can provide a cursory view into what it might be like to be there. Of course, video games can distort reality and even perpetuate harmful stereotypes about geographical areas and the people residing in them, so these maps should not serve as the standalone method for learning about an area. However, speaking for myself, these maps indeed can provide a stepping stone for learning more about a place: for example, I've never traveled to Mumbai, but by playing the Mumbai level of this game and noticing the skyscrapers looming above the informal settlements, it inspired me to learn more about the striking income inequalities present in the actual city beyond the game.

Thank you! And if anyone would like to collaborate on further iterations of this research, feel free to reach out to me.