Framing American Space: Everyday Brutality in No More Heroes

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Abstract

Video games take place in virtual spaces that contextualize player activities while often evoking real-world environments. These virtual spaces serve as structures that frame both moment-to-moment gameplay and the broader narrative world that it takes place within, and a better grasp of this framing process can help us understand how players experience video game worlds as meaningful and memorable places, ones which can offer a defamiliarizing frame for the spaces of everyday life. This paper will introduce framing theory as a tool for analyzing video game spaces, exploring how the Japanese game *No More Heroes* uses its banal environment to critique everyday urban space in North America, and by extension, the culture that constructed it.

Disclaimer: the sections "Framing Theory" and "Framing in Video Game Environments" revisit and expand upon ideas from the author's recent book, *Expressive Space: Embodying Meaning in Video Game Environments*.

Introduction

Video games take place in virtual settings, ones that contextualize player activities while often evoking the qualities of real-world environments, be they lush forests, dense urban settings, or quaint villages, among countless other possibilities. The same types of places appear in vastly different game genres – as backgrounds for peaceful puzzles or violent conquests – and this speaks to the charged figure/ground relationship between "place" and "occasion" identified by the architect Aldo van Eyck (2008, 61). The qualities of an environment shape our understanding of activities happening within it, and the sorts of activities occurring will colour our view of the place: we expect to cook in kitchens, shop in stores, and climb mountains, and these expectations make it easier to predictably live our day-to-day lives. While many video game worlds casually reinforce these spatial expectations, others subvert them (often for narrative effect). We typically understand schools as places for learning and socializing, but the game *Danganronpa* (Spike 2010) turns this familiar setting into a prison-like backdrop for a battle royale between the students confined inside, framing this everyday place in an oppressive light that echoes well-known criticisms of the institution (e.g., Foucault 1977).

Environments – both physical and virtual – serve as frames around the events taking place within them, helping people quickly make sense of a situation and determine how to act within it (Nitsche 2008; Whistance-Smith 2022). Video game worlds take on much of their meaning by serving as structures that frame moment-to-moment gameplay and the broader narrative world that it takes place within. A better sense of this spatial framing process can help us understand how players experience video game environments as meaningful and memorable places, and how these virtual spaces can offer defamiliarizing frames for the physical environments that players inhabit. This paper will introduce framing theory as a tool for analyzing virtual spaces, exploring how the Japanese video game *No More Heroes* (Grasshopper Manufacture 2007) uses its banal gameworld to critique everyday urban space in North America. I will begin by discussing framing theory and its cognitive variant adopted here, proceeding to unpack the implications for video game environments generally and the world of *No More Heroes* in particular. Frames offer a potent link between real and virtual spaces, and *No More Heroes* embraces this in its darkly comic simulation of a typical postwar North American city. Here, life consists of little more than work, consumption, and fleeting moments of leisure against a background of car-centric streets and bland and forgettable buildings.

Framing Theory

The contemporary concept of framing was first formulated by the anthropologist Gregory Bateson, who noted that frames are a type of metacommunication: "any message, which either explicitly or implicitly defines a frame … gives the receiver instructions or aids in his attempt to understand the messages included within the frame" (1972, 188). Two years later, Erving Goffman published his pioneering study *Frame Analysis* (1974), exploring how we develop behavioural frames for everyday situations, such as visiting a doctor or going to a restaurant. Reflecting this, frames have also been termed "scripts" for how they direct our behaviour in particular situations (Stockwell 2005, 77), and when people break a frame with unexpected behaviour – such as a patient trying to inspect their doctor – other people become confused and uncomfortable (as was demonstrated in Harold Garfinkel's infamous "breaching" experiments [Garfinkel 1984]).

While framing has taken on different meanings in fields such as sociology and communication studies (see Borah 2011), this paper adopts the cognitive science perspective that frames are mental schemas that people use to reason about the world (Barsalou 1999; Goffman 1974; Stockwell 2005, 77–79). Daily life is full of repetition, and over time we build up patterns of information that help us quickly understand common situations and how to behave within them. Lakoff explains that:

> The neural circuitry needed to create frame structures is relatively simple, and so frames tend to structure a huge amount of our thought. Each frame has roles … relations between the roles, and scenarios carried out by those playing the roles. … A hospital, for example, has roles like doctors, nurses, patients, operating rooms, X-ray machines, and so on, with scenarios like checking in, being examined, having an operation, being visited, and so on (2008, 22).

To provide another example, a classroom includes roles for teachers, students, desks, learning materials, and whiteboards, and its scenarios include lecturing to the whole class, writing tests, small group activities, students passing notes, and one or more students causing a commotion. We can see from these examples that the roles of a frame can be filled by human and non-human entities, with scenarios arising from the interactions between the humans, the objects, and the spaces containing them. Since most spaces are designed around particular activities (and contain objects reflecting this), the configuration of an environment often suggests a particular frame for us to adopt (Miller 2010, 50). If a room has a grid of desks and a whiteboard, it is likely a classroom, and if it has dining tables and a kitchen in the back, it may be a restaurant. By clarifying the social context of a setting in this way, the objects and atmosphere of a space offer a potent form of spatial communication.

This phenomenon reflects the cognitive process of priming, where a stimulus in our environment involuntarily provokes us to have particular thoughts; in more technical language, "priming research centers on the temporary activation of an individual's mental representations by the environment and the effect of this activation on various psychological phenomena" (Bargh and Chartrand 2014, 314). Graffiti on a wall primes us to think of the person who drew it, and the sound of a gunshot has us quickly thinking of violence. In the examples above, the spatial layout and objects within hospitals, classrooms, and restaurants prime us to adopt the cognitive frame that unifies these elements within a coherent social setting. And now that we have been primed to adopt this frame for the environment, we have a sense of who we are within it, how to behave, and perhaps who we should be looking for. In a hospital we know to speak to a receptionist prior to meeting with a doctor or nurse, and in a high-end restaurant we know to wait for staff to guide us to our seats. All of this background knowledge comes with us into our interactions within fictional video game worlds when those spaces recreate the environments of daily life, and game designers can both reinforce and subvert our expectations.

Frames differ between individuals and cultures in subtle and major ways, and one's frame for a type of space can change with new experiences (Stockwell 2005, 79). For example, the ticket machines for ordering in many Japanese restaurants require foreigners to adjust their "restaurant" frame to include this ordering scenario by adding a new role for the machine and modifying the role of the human server. The act of tipping is also removed from the general scenario, probably to the surprise of most North Americans. This example also hits at the imaginative dimension of frames: once we have built up a general frame for "restaurant" by visiting a few, we can quickly imagine countless others. Modifying certain roles and scenarios allows us to innovate within the bounds of this frame and come up with surprising ideas for restaurants, good and bad (Barsalou 1999, 586). Visiting restaurants that are spatially and culturally diverse also helps us develop a more flexible

understanding of the frame, likely making our imaginative acts all the easier.

While we have kept a focus on framing as it relates to spaces, it is worth noting that frames are also operative in other areas of cognition. Lakoff argues that simple narratives are structured like frame-based-scenarios, with additional elements like protagonists, affective states, and events (2008, 23), and stereotypes are a common type of frame that we use to crudely categorize the people we encounter. A particular stereotype includes roles for character traits and visual features, and the scenarios that we expect this sort of person to appear in (being altruistic to a stranger, cheating someone in a deal, etc.). While this paper's focus is on the relevance of framing to the meaning of game environments, this other dimension is equally relevant to video games, since most are built around simple narratives and include stereotyped characters (at least in the supporting roles).

In any case, we can sum up this section by defining frames as dynamic cognitive structures that arise from the repetitious experiences of daily life, ones which help us to rapidly understand places and people, and how to act in relation to them. We can also define the act of framing as a form of metacommunication, where the aesthetic character of an environment (background) shapes our understanding of the events occurring within it (foreground).

Framing in Video Game Environments

Moving into the realm of video games, framing takes place at different scales and in a range of ways. Beginning at the furthest remove, players experience all virtual spaces via computer hardware; as such, they are likely to develop a frame for "video game space" itself. This frame will no-doubt emphasize the unique qualities of virtual space, and the critical fact that players are free to explore and experiment with no real-world consequences for their behaviours inside the video game (Whistance-Smith 2022, 72). In this sense, all video game environments become one more type of location that players visit in their daily lives, akin to libraries, supermarkets, or sports arenas, one with its own behavioural norms. A layering occurs here, too, where a player's outward engagement with a game space shifts between play sessions at home, on a mobile device, or in an arcade (Whistance-Smith 2022, 43–44).

We commonly blend multiple frames together to understand more complex situations – the idea of a "bake sale," for example, combines frames for charity events and commercial transactions (Lakoff 2008, 23) – and this blending allows players to encounter most video game environments as composite locations: *virtual*-forests, *virtual*-cities, and so on, places that are grounded in our experiences of real environments. This grounding in the qualities of the physical world has led some theorists to claim that virtual spaces are fundamentally allegorical, since our ability to understand them is bound up in how they simulate physical spaces (e.g., Aarseth 2001). For example, when we see a virtual door or a virtual lever, we expect it to have many of the properties and affordances of one in the physical world (Nitsche 2008, 34; Rambusch and Susi 2008). A deeper discussion of this goes beyond the focus of this paper, but it is worth noting that work in cognitive science and linguistics offers evidence that "understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" is central in human cognition, and this type of metaphoric thought lets us map the roles and scenarios from one frame onto another (Lakoff and Johnson 2003, 5; see also Lakoff 2012). In the context of the discussion above, it is commonplace metaphoric reasoning that leads us to understand a virtual forest by way of physical ones.

When a desire for in-game realism enters the mix, players judge the visual and experiential fidelity of game environments against their physical counterparts: since it is possible to steal cars and rob pedestrians in real cities, should avatars in virtual cities also be able to engage in these criminal behaviours? In practice, the answer to this question is usually bound up with the genre of the video game (and perhaps its narrative), and this takes us down to the next scale of framing. As conventionalized schemas of roles and scenarios, genres are a type of frame, and they impact how players understand a virtual space far more than the types of locations that make up its world. After all, the same virtual forest offers very different experiences if one is harvesting it for lumber, defending it from invaders, or building a secluded garden within it. To give a larger example, if a game begins with a murder and casts the player as an investigator, it has quickly primed expectations for a detective story. This narrative frame includes roles for criminal, victim, detective, suspects, clues, and a crime scene, and scenarios for the murder being committed, investigation of the crime scene, interrogation of suspects, and apprehension of the criminal or their escape. Whether this game takes place in a neo-noir city or at a tropical resort, the genre frame has quickly let us know how we can expect to engage with the gameworld. This situation where genre (occasion) frames place is true for the vast majority of

video games, since only role-playing, sandbox, and life simulation games strive to offer players a wider range of activities within the same virtual world. And even these typically have over-arching narratives that frame the player character's place within the gameworld, such as Link serving as Hyrule's hero in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo 2017).

Recalling the unease that arises when people break frames, video games that subvert their apparent genres tend to provoke intensely negative reactions from some players. And other games that fall outside of conventional genre classifications, such as *Katamari Damacy* (Namco 2004) and *Killer7* (Grasshopper Manufacture 2005), have been received as love-them-or-hate-them classics, experiences that ask players to learn them fresh without preconceptions. It is in these video games that the aesthetic character of the gameworld has the biggest impact, since its design becomes critical in shaping what frames players will adopt to make sense of their moment-to-moment gameplay experiences. Here, the backstory of the gameworld may be a key part of the narrative, or the player may not be told who their avatar is or why they are exploring the space they are in, forcing them to interpret the gameworld to arrive at an answer. This uncertainty can be quite desirable: since we are naturally motivated to understand our surroundings to stay safe in a situation, ambiguous settings can evoke a sense of danger, excitement, or both. Video games that use environmental storytelling often rely on this design strategy, filling their virtual spaces with evocative and ambiguous elements that provoke players to make sense of them. *NaissanceE* (Limasse Five 2014) is one example, where players traverse an infinite and unsettling megastructure, with no clear narrative beyond an initial first-person cutscene where the player escapes an ambiguous monster. As players wander through spaces grand, claustrophobic, and alienating (inspired by the manga *BLAME!*), they encounter evocative forms that infuse the world with a strong sense of meaning. The earlier Japanese game *LSD: Dream Emulator* (Asmik Ace Entertainment 1998) is equally reliant on the design of its gameworld to convey meaning, leaving players to wander surreal and unsettling environments.

Moving down to the scale of in-the-moment gameplay, the virtual world serves as a frame by providing a particular atmosphere, one arising from the forms of the simulated architecture and landscape, the quality of light and darkness washing over them, and the peace, unease, or tension of any background music. Many theorists have argued that we experience situations as wholes prior to considering their parts: "Before you perceive this or that tree, bush, rock, pond, stream, tree trunk, or deer path, you are caught up in the pervading spring-light-bathing-the-valley quality of the *entire situation*" (Johnson 2007, 73, emphasis in original). As such, the general atmosphere of a place will have a major impact on how we make sense of it, particularly from an affective standpoint, and video game environments often use evocative lighting and music to frame a scene (Johnson 2007, 73; Norberg-Schulz 1980, 8; Tversky 2003, 72). For example, the world of *Shadow of the Colossus* (Japan Studio and Team ICO 2005) is washed in a sickly green light, and its musical score is full of tension and unease, inviting players to question the morality of their avatar and his violent quest in a forbidden land – no matter how enjoyable the gameplay.

Certain atmospheres are also tied to stereotyped locations, such as dark forests, tropical beaches, or bustling city streets, and game designers often use these as a shorthand to emphasize particular qualities. For instance, *Wii Sports Resort* (Nintendo 2009) is set at a tropical beach resort to comfortably reinforce players' expectations that relaxing recreation takes place in this sort of environment. This type of framing can also be used to stereotype the NPCs that inhabit particular areas of a gameworld: players fight swarms of machines in *NieR:Automata* (Platinum Games 2017), but they will eventually discover a village of treetop huts populated by peaceful machines that do not want to fight them. The ramshackle dwellings of the village quickly frame these machines as primitive and tribal, and potentially more trustworthy, due to the sense of innocence that this harmful stereotype of Indigenous peoples implies. *NieR:Automata* also uses another common form of spatial framing, where contemporary locations are represented in abandoned and ruined forms, evoking a sense of loss and decay (and perhaps the Japanese affect of *mono no aware*). Its world includes the ruins of a shopping mall and modern housing blocks alongside those of a medieval castle, emphasizing how built environments from all times and places will one day fall apart; it is only the natural, biological environment that renews itself ad infinitum.

Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, video games allow us to play with frames themselves by constructing situations out of their components (Whistance-Smith 2022, 72). As explained earlier, frames are comprised of roles, relationships between these roles, and the scenarios that arise from them. Since video games are an ideal medium for simulating systems, it is possible to embody a particular frame in the design and mechanics of a video game, letting

players poke and prod at its internal logic and perhaps gain a critical perspective on it. *Katamari Damacy* (Namco 2004), for example, invites players to question the economic frame of consumerism by parodying an extreme form of it, where even people become objects to consume. In a more serious tone, the game *Papers, Please* (3909 LLC 2013) models a border crossing frame complete with guards, documents, refugees, and other elements, and it forces players to consider the impossible situations that arise when they must rapidly screen people attempting to cross the border for noble and nefarious reasons. Both of these examples reflect Bogost's (2007) notion of procedural rhetoric, but my emphasis here is on how these games rely on virtual re-creations of frames from our physical lives: we already hold a cognitive frame of what a border crossing is prior to playing *Papers, Please*, but the game forces us to reconsider that frame in depth: its roles, scenarios, and common gestalts. The meaning of the game is thus fundamentally bound up in how the border crossing frame links a fictional virtual space to very real physical ones. Inversely, escape rooms existed as codified video game spaces prior to physical ones being constructed, setting a surprising precedent for virtual spaces inspiring the design of physical ones (Nicholson 2015).

Just as the relationship between place and occasion creates a charged figure/ground that defines the gestalt of a particular situation, the simulated worlds of video games can also serve as a figure that helps reveal the ground of our physical world. Speaking of art more broadly, McLuhan argues that it can offer potent "counter-environments" that allow us to perceive our everyday spaces in a new light (Allan 2014). Here, a fictional environment becomes a frame for viewing a real one with a defamiliarized clarity. Along with *Katamari Damacy* and *Papers, Please*, above, *The Witness* (Thekla Inc. 2016) offers another example of a video game that adopts this framing strategy. Like *NaissanceE*, it leaves players free to explore a virtual island with little in the way of narrative grounding, but here players are invited to solve puzzles on discrete boards strewn throughout the space. As they spend more time on the island, players will encounter puzzle boards that can only be solved by paying close attention to their surroundings (e.g., the sound of their footsteps through a maze), and eventually they will realize that the distinctive form of the puzzles is woven into the fabric of the virtual environment. By integrating puzzles into this spatially-realistic gameworld – one designed with the aid of an architect and landscape architect – *The Witness* effectively

encourages players to become more aware of the natural and architectural minutia of their day-to-day surroundings (see Whistance-Smith 2022, 202–213).

Having discussed the diverse ways that framing shapes players' understanding of video game environments, and how these worlds can serve as defamiliarizing frames for contemplating physical places, we can now explore how *No More Heroes* wryly critiques American urban space.

No More Heroes

No More Heroes (*NMH*) is a third-person action game that casts players as Travis Touchdown, a deadbeat American *otaku* fighting his way up a list of ranked assassins in the fictional southern Californian city of Santa Destroy. In a short cutscene that frames the narrative, Travis meets a women named Sylvia at a bar and takes an assassination job; upon killing his opponent, she informs him that he is now the 11th ranked assassin and should start fighting his way to the top. He enthusiastically agrees given his crass lust for her (parodied throughout the game at Travis' expense), and players are thrown into the first mission, where they slice through faceless enemies until reaching the 10th ranked assassin, fighting through a gaudy mansion of red carpets, marble columns, and gold accents. This begins the core gameplay cycle that alternates between linear assassination missions and time spent in an open world where players must take on odd jobs to earn enough money to enter the next stage.

NMH is an incredibly rich video game despite its often-visible shortcomings, and it has already been analyzed for its use of comedy (Gallagher 2013) and for offering a defeatist perspective on neoliberal American life and its inescapable cycle of work and leisure (Bailes 2018). It is also a highly intertextual work, drawing on themes and aesthetics found in films such as Suzuki's *Branded to Kill* and Tarantino's *Kill Bill*, and tropes commonly found in video game and otaku culture; a wide set of references that are beyond the scope of analysis here. While the game has also gone on to have three sequels, these lack the cohesive satirical edge of the original and do not warrant discussion.

Since *NMH* was originally released on the Nintendo Wii, it uses motion controls for finishing cuts with the sword and to trigger wresting moves that do significant damage to enemies. This adds a certain kinetic brutality to the experience, as moment-to-moment gameplay alternates between fighting with the buttons and freeze-frames where players are prompted to gesturally slice through their

opponents, unleashing a fountain of blood and coins alongside a dying scream (accompanied with a crude taunt from Travis). Knowing that there is far more to say about *NMH* than this paper permits, the focus here will remain on how it uses the spaces and objects of its world as framing devices, ones which underpin the game's broader critique of American society. As a gameworld, Santa Destroy contrasts the boring banality of life in postwar American cities with the extreme violence of the ranked fights and assassination jobs, emphasizing the individualistic, self-serving motivations sitting just below the surface. Here, American life itself is framed as a violent rise to the top, where "doing one's time" at menial work is required, and other people serve as little more than obstacles or means to attain one's desires. This paper's analysis will discuss how *NMH* builds this frame, beginning with the design of the gameworld, the place, and moving into what players are permitted to do within it, the occasion they are partaking in.

Before proceeding, a brief note on methodology is warranted. Given this paper's focus on *NMH's* virtual environment, I explored the spaces and activities found in the open world and played through the sequential missions, taking screenshots and notes on the architectural and urban qualities of this gameworld and the objects found within it. I also made note of how the gameplay activities related to the places they were occurring within (reinforcing everyday frames or breaking them), and how the moment-to-moment elements of gameplay and larger structures of the game's narrative suggest certain frames for understanding Travis' place within in the world of Santa Destroy.

NMH wastes no time in using its environment as a framing tool: Travis lives in a dirty motel suite cluttered with Japanese figurines and Mexican wrestling masks, and this atmosphere quickly frames him as a person on the fringes of acceptable society, unable or unwilling to live a "regular" well-adjusted life. His nerdy passions show up in multiple ways: Travis fights with light-saber-style swords (the best of which is shaped like a katana), the design of his motorcycle nods to the iconic one from *Akira*, and the first t-shirt he wears features an illustration of lolita witches from a fictional game that recalls the *Touhou* series. All of these elements serve to frame Travis as a man ostensibly similar to the game's (presumably male) player: a hero at heart who is not valued by the world around them, perhaps due to their obsessive, *otaku* love of Japanese pop culture in a Eurocentric world (see Eng 2012; Galbraith 2011).

Figure 1. Typical North American buildings in Santa Destroy. Screenshots by author.

That *NMH* goes on to regularly humiliate and mock Travis – and by extension the player – for this deluded self-perception is one pillar of its satire. Living out the power fantasy of becoming a top assassin makes him no less pathetic, and no less of a comedic failure and misogynist in

his dealings with women (the fights with female assassins regularly showing off this side of his character).

As a virtual built environment, Santa Destroy faithfully reproduces the typical locations of postwar North American cities: suburban neighbourhoods, shopping streets, industrial areas, a motel, a gym, a high school, a tacky mansion, a metro line, a bus terminal, a beach, a baseball arena, and abundant large, mostly empty parking lots (see Figure 1). This collection of locations is regularly found in cities all across North America, and they are built in similar architectural styles, reflecting a crude capitalist development and construction paradigm looking for big profits as these cities rapidly sprawled from the postwar era to the present (see Goldhagen 2013, 24). Missions take place at these typological locations, and as one plays through the game they move through familiar North American spaces, violently slashing through waves of near-identical opponents against the architectural backdrop of everyday life. These opponents fight in a few common styles, and their appearance changes to match the "roles" one would expect to find at particular places: faceless suits in the mansion, baseball players at the arena, students at the high school, street thugs on the metro, extras at the film studio, and soldiers at a warzone on the beach (with the final missions including bizarre out-of-place enemies such as gangsters and faux-stormtroopers). All of this serves to frame them as interchangeable units that can be casually killed; any individuality is limited to their location-based outfits. Briefly returning to buildings, it is worth noting that churches are conspicuously absent in Santa Destroy, perhaps to avoid controversy. Yet this omission effectively reinforces the faithless character of the city, where advancement to the top and the fulfillment of one's base desires is the only *raison d'etre*.

Reflecting the era of *NMH's* initial release, its virtual buildings have a low polygon count and crude textures, ones which are repeated throughout the city. Yet far from a negative aspect, this is a crucial part of the world's realism: if Santa Destroy was an exciting virtual city full of unique and memorable buildings, it would no longer accurately reflect the careless banality of North American urbanity. Thanks to a shared development industry and construction culture of building quickly, cheaply, and *en masse*, the average buildings in both the United States and Canada are rarely any more inspiring or detailed than the ones found in *NMH* (see Figure 2). Santa Destroy also simulates the car-centric reality of North American urbanism, with huge

Figure 2. Typical North American buildings in Edmonton, Canada. Photographs by author.

amounts of space dedicated to roads and surface parking, and the distances between "points of interest" being far enough to encourage driving instead of walking between them. The inhabitants of the city are other vehicles and hapless pedestrians that cannot be spoken to, but which can

be run over without consequence. Lastly, the city is strewn with dumpsters containing money, t-shirts, and trading cards; buried stashes of money; and balls that Travis can collect in order to buy new abilities. These collectables provide a thin excuse for exploring Santa Destroy, and players that undertake the task of finding them will ease into the hollow ennui of the city as they aimlessly wander similar alleys and barren boulevards.

Moving from the virtual city to the gameplay activities that take place within it, Santa Destroy offers very limited things to do in comparison with entirely open world games like *Grand Theft Auto* (Rockstar 1997). Yet as with its crude buildings, this too becomes a virtue in the game's depiction of American urban life. While spending time in Santa Destroy between ranked missions, players can drive around, work menial jobs, visit the gym, buy clothes and videos, visit a dive bar, and relax at home with their cat and figurines. These are the sorts of activities that a deadbeat bachelor like Travis would engage in, and the only major thing missing in his life is time spent with friends or family (the latter absence becoming a plot point). In an amusing and iconic piece of everyday realism, *NMH* has players go to the bathroom as the way to save their game. Even though Travis is a powerful video game character, he still needs to relieve himself in-between taking on his opponents, and these little bathroom scenes inject a moment of everyday life right up against the extreme violence of the assassination missions and ranked fights.

Like all American cities, Santa Destroy is a "pay to play" sort of place, and players must earn enough money to pay the entry fee for the next ranked mission by working menial jobs and assassination missions. These regular jobs are a range of minigames, from mowing lawns to pumping gas and cleaning up graffiti, however they are not designed to be particularly fun, reinforcing that they are a form of work the player must engage in to progress. The fun here is restricted to combat, consumption, and improvement, as players get better at fighting, buy new in-game clothes, and increase their strength and vitality at the gym (after paying a fee, of course). And since the assassination missions only become available after working the menial jobs, they are framed as a form of reward for putting in one's time; more exciting work is a reward for banal work. The shady, track-suit-wearing boss that introduces you to each job reinforces this through his oblique monologues that include lines like: "Hard work will never betray you. Hard work will change your future", and "The unspoken rules of Santa Destroy dictate perseverance. Perseverance leads to money, which

in turn leads to wealth. The world will forever remain closed to those who do not persevere."

NMH also frames a clear link between violence and wealth: players earn money on each opponent they kill, and as noted earlier, enemies explode into a cloud of blood and coins as they die, with the noise of clanging money paired with their screams of agony. Since increasingly large sums of money are required to pay the ranked entry fees, rising up in this world is as much about money as it is about power. The ranked assassins Travis fights sometimes appear to live lavish lifestyles, implied to be covered by his exorbitant entry fees, emphasizing how those at the top live off of the dreams of those below; a late-game twist that the ranked fights were faked by Sylvia to con Travis out of his money (and pay for her luxuries) reinforces this further. While *NMH* presents this system in literally violent terms, it is easy to read the frame as a metaphoric nod to America's cutthroat corporate culture that rewards individualistic, competitive, and sociopathic behaviour. Once Travis reaches #1 at the end of the game, an assassin breaks into his motel room trying to kill him and claim the top spot; the fight is inescapable.

Taking all of this together, *NMH* offers players an underwhelming world that faithfully reproduces the banal atmosphere of many American cities, limiting the sorts of activities they can engage in to working, consuming, relaxing at home, and fighting their way to the top. This combination of place and occasion allow the game to frame American life as a violent struggle to ascend in an environment that offers little else: the roles of this frame include ambitious assassins, faceless enemies, menial jobs, enjoyable jobs, and material rewards, and its scenarios include working bad jobs to get better ones, having to earn money to advance in status, spending money to improve one's abilities (performance at work), overcoming swarms of easily-dispatched opponents, defeating higher-ranked competitors, and having one's status challenged by lower-ranked competitors. The easy mapping of this frame onto American work culture should be clear, along with *NMH's* dark conclusion that – at least for an American like Travis – this frame cannot be escaped (Bailes 2018, 160). For players who live in the many cities that look like Santa Destroy, the game invites them to see both the ugly banality of their space and the brutality of the game's garish violence superimposed upon their world, perhaps casting in relief patterns that were already there, hiding in plain sight. This sort of defamiliarization is what McLuhan identified in his concept of counter-environments, and spending time

in *NMH* pushes one to return to the world with fresh eyes and a clearer view of the frames shaping American life.

Conclusion

Video games are a uniquely spatial medium: while we see environments represented in paintings and films, we interact with them as simulated places in video games, engaging in activities like exploring and collecting that were once limited to the physical spaces we inhabit. This interactivity adds semiotic depth to virtual environments, allowing them to communicate in ways that are closer to architecture than to the depictions of buildings and cities found in other media. This paper has proposed framing theory as a tool for analyzing how virtual environments are experienced as meaningful, arguing that players bring real-world frames with them into video games, using them to make sense of their virtual surroundings and the gameplay taking place within them. Cognitive frames comprised of roles and scenarios arise for common places like restaurants or classrooms, and the affective atmosphere of a space will frame activities occurring within it. We saw that framing takes place at a range of scales, from the broadest idea of "video game space" through genres, stereotyped locations (schools, beaches), and evocative elements that suggest multiple frames for a space without providing closure.

Beyond being enjoyable fictional worlds to escape to, video game spaces can also serve as counter-environments that frame our everyday world in a critical light, both through spatial similarities to real places and through how gameplay activities reflect the roles and scenarios of real-world frames. *NMH* is a video game about the ugly realities of American life and American values, and its simulation of a typical North American city reinforces the game's broader critique by giving players an interactive taste of life in this world, ennui and all. Here players work *NMH's* menial jobs and directly experience the banality of Santa Destroy, paying for the enjoyment of another high-energy bloodbath against the next assassin, a fight that adds interest and vitality to a city sorely lacking it elsewhere.

While North American players can reflect on how this world compares to their everyday environment – and enter a liminal space by listening to the game's soundtrack while exploring their own city – Japanese players may be quicker to miss the point, simply observing that "the gameworld is poorly designed since it is not a fun place to be," perhaps a more obvious conclusion than "is North America really like *this?*" It may be that all Santa Destroy can do is prepare a Japanese player for the sort of environment they would encounter on a trip to the US, much as I was surprised to feel a vague sense of spatial familiarity when first visiting Japan after a few months of playing *Katamari Damacy*. While this experience of *NMH* may not be as rewarding as the sharp, defamiliarizing critique that it offers North American players, it remains valuable nonetheless.

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