

Humanistic Practice Between Virtuality and Reality: An Analysis of the Humanistic Value and Realization Paths of Digital Spaces Based on AAA Game Case Studies

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Abstract

With the rapid development of digital technology, high-budget, high-profile AAA video games not only occupy an important position in the entertainment industry, but the virtual spaces they construct have increasingly become crucial media for carrying cultural, historical, and emotional experiences. These digital spaces are no longer merely backdrops for game narratives; instead, they demonstrate profound humanistic value through meticulous reconstructions of the real world or imaginative creations. Drawing on theoretical discussions of "Place" and "Space" in the humanities, this paper focuses on "humanistic spatial practice" in AAA games—a concept referring to the conscious integration of humanistic care, ethical considerations, and depth of meaning into the design of virtual spaces.

Through a systematic analysis of AAA games such as *Black Myth: Wukong*, the *Assassin's Creed* series, and *Ghost of Tsushima*, this paper illustrates how spatial aesthetics, environmental storytelling, and sense of place construction within virtual spaces are used to convey humanistic value. Due to their unique interactivity and immersion, AAA games exhibit powerful capabilities in cultural communication, historical consciousness shaping, and emotional resonance evocation, despite the tensions they face between commercial logic and humanistic care, as well as between historical accuracy and subjective authenticity. This paper primarily explores the approaches to realizing the humanistic value of digital spaces, emphasizing the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration, experiential understanding, ethical reflection, and the application of digital humanities methods, serving as a reference for future game design and research.

Keywords: Digital Spaces; Humanistic Practice; AAA Games; Spatial Aesthetics; Virtual

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Reconstruction; Sense of Place; Environmental Storytelling; Cultural Communication

I. Introduction

Numerous AAA video games invest massive resources to reconstruct real or historical scenes in virtual worlds with astonishing visual fidelity. From Renaissance Florence to the vast lands of ancient Egypt, these digital spaces, with their unprecedented complexity and detail, attract hundreds of millions of players worldwide to immerse themselves. Virtual environments have far transcended the traditional concept of "background"; they have become the core of the player experience, and their design concepts, interactive mechanisms, and the cultural meanings they carry are attracting in-depth discussions from scholars in multiple fields including game studies, architecture, digital humanities, and cultural heritage ^[1].

The core issue of this paper is the "humanistic spatial practice" embodied in the construction of virtual spaces in these AAA games, that is, a series of actions and considerations that consciously integrate humanistic care, cultural connotations, and depth of meaning into the design, development, and presentation of digital spaces. Beyond providing entertainment, how do these vast virtual spaces create humanistically valuable experiences between "virtuality and reality"? How do they tell stories, convey emotions, and provoke thinking through spatial design?

Drawing on the growing attention to the importance of "place" and "space" in the humanities, particularly in digital humanities research ^[2], this paper argues that analyzing humanistic spatial practice in AAA games has multiple significances:

- **Cultural Communication in the Digital Age:** Interactive virtual experiences provide a brand-new way for the public to access, understand, and even participate in the protection of historical and cultural heritage ^[3].
- **Cognitive and Emotional Experiences:** This environment profoundly affects players' cognitive and emotional experiences, including immersion and the sense of place shaped through bodily experience [4].
- **Historical Consciousness:** The representation of history in games influences the formation of players' historical consciousness and values ^[5].

This topic itself constitutes a cutting-edge intersection of technology, art, and humanities, opening up new theoretical horizons for us to understand how digital media shape human spatial perception and cultural identity.

This paper aims to draw on the ideas presented by Urszula Pawlicka-Deger in her research on places

for humanities practices—emphasizing the importance of "place" for knowledge production, community building, and disciplinary development^[2]—and apply critical reflections on "space" to the virtual worlds of AAA games. Through a systematic analysis of specific game cases, this paper attempts to sort out the ways in which humanistic value is embodied in digital spaces and summarize their possible realization paths, providing a foundational discussion from the perspective of spatial theory for future game design and related academic research.

II. Theoretical Framework: The Humanistic Dimensions of Digital Spaces

Just as physical spaces shape humanistic practices^[2], digital spaces are not value-neutral technical containers, but constructs full of social, cultural, and emotional meanings. Understanding humanistic spatial practice in AAA games requires introducing a theoretical framework capable of interpreting their humanistic dimensions.

(I) Spatial Aesthetics and Humanistic Space

Originating from architectural theory and environmental psychology, "spatial aesthetics" focuses on the emotional and aesthetic experiences evoked by spaces and places^[6]. It transcends the physical form and function of space, emphasizing the meanings, atmospheres, and narratives embedded within it. Applying this concept to virtual worlds means that the design of game environments itself can be regarded as an artistic practice that creates meaning and evokes emotions^[6]. Carefully designed virtual spaces, like physical places with "poetic power", can carry profound humanistic connotations. The trend of architectural space design in games is also receiving increasing attention, with reflections on how to construct the lifestyles and world perception experiences that humans need^[7].

In this context, "humanistic space" can be understood as digital places endowed with specific cultural, historical, social, or emotional meanings in virtual reconstruction or creation. It emphasizes the attribute of space as a carrier of human experience, memory, and values. When the reconstruction of real locations in AAA games goes beyond mere visual imitation and strives to convey the *genius loci*, historical atmosphere, or the cultural texture of specific communities, it can be regarded as a form of humanistic spatial practice. This practice is increasingly associated with the production of urban public art spaces, which present fluid aesthetic scenes under the intervention of digital media [8].

(II) Key Theoretical Perspectives for Interpreting Game Spaces

The academic community has developed various theoretical tools to analyze game spaces and their

meaning transmission mechanisms:

- **Environmental Storytelling:** Refers to the way of telling stories, conveying background information, or implying the state of the world through environmental details such as the placement of objects, scene design, and textual clues. A good narrative structure not only complements gameplay but also drives players' emotions and enhances game immersion ^[7]. Players piece together narratives by exploring and interpreting clues in the space, and the space itself becomes an "evocative event", with architecture and narrative connected through the human (player) as the link ^[7]. Environmental storytelling is an important means of building depth and credibility in game worlds, and the audience's attentional activities also participate in the generation of spatial sense in images, determining the final realization of spatial meaning ^[9].
- **Sense of Place and Presence:** Sense of place and presence are key concepts for understanding player experience. *Sense of place* refers to the subjective feeling of "being there" that players experience in virtual environments, a psychological and emotional connection established with the virtual world ^[1]. *Presence*, on the other hand, focuses more on describing this psychological state or subjective perception—that is, the individual feels "right there" and ignores the mediating role of technology ^[10]. Factors such as the visual design of the space, soundscape, interactive feedback, and narrative integration work together to shape the sense of place and presence ^[10]. Among them, the creation of auditory atmospherics is crucial for breaking the visuocentric paradigm and creating a more comprehensive spatial experience ^[11].
- **Immersion:** Immersion is often associated with presence but is distinct. It can generally refer to the technical characteristics of the system itself, such as "system immersion" brought by high-fidelity graphics and surround sound ^[12], or the subjective psychological state of the player, such as when the player is fully absorbed in the game world and ignores the real environment ^[13]. Some scholars further subdivide it into system immersion, narrative immersion, and challenge-based immersion ^[14]. It is generally believed that a higher degree of system immersion helps enhance players' sense of presence and psychological immersion ^[10].
- **Atmosphere and Genius Loci:** Atmosphere and *genius loci* are often associated with the sense of place. *Atmosphere* refers to the overall emotional tone evoked by a space, while *genius loci* refers to the unique, ineffable soul or character of a place. Together, they form the basis of players' experience of "authenticity" in virtual places.
- **Bodily Experience:** In immersive communication, especially in virtual reality games, bodily experience has become a key dimension for understanding player experience. Virtual reality reshapes players' spatial practices, identity (through avatars), emotional responses, and even memories by substituting sensory inputs [4].

These theoretical perspectives are not competitive but complementary. The foundation of spatial aesthetics relies on the details of environmental storytelling and the creation of specific atmospheres, and conveys humanistic content through players' bodily experiences. By mastering these theoretical tools, we can systematically study how AAA games realize their humanistic potential through spatial.

Table 1: Comparison of Key Concepts in the Theoretical Framework

Concept Name	Core Definition	Application Focus in Game Space Analysis
Spatial Aesthetics	Focuses on the emotional and aesthetic experiences evoked by spaces and places, emphasizing their meanings, atmospheres, and narratives.	Analyzes how game environment design itself, as an artistic practice, creates meaning and evokes emotions.
Humanistic Space	Digital places endowed with specific cultural, historical, social, or emotional meanings, emphasizing their attribute as carriers of human experience, memory, and values.	Identifies and evaluates the humanistic connotations carried and conveyed in virtual spaces.
Environmental Storytelling	Tells stories and conveys information through environmental details (objects, scenes, texts, etc.).	Interprets how space serves as a narrative medium to build world depth and credibility.
Sense of Place	The subjective feeling of "being there" and emotional connection that players experience in virtual environments.	Assesses the degree to which virtual worlds evoke players' psychological sense of belonging and emotional connection.
Presence	The psychological state in which players feel "present" in the virtual environment and ignore technological mediation.	Measures the effectiveness of technical and design factors in creating the experience of "being right there".

Immersion	The technical characteristics of the system (system immersion) or the psychological state of the player (psychological immersion), referring to absorption in the game world.	Analyzes the ability of games to attract and maintain players' attention, as well as their different types (system, narrative, challenge).
Atmosphere	The overall emotional tone evoked by a space.	Captures the specific emotional color created by the game space.
Genius Loci	The unique, ineffable soul or character of a place.	Explores whether virtual places have shaped a distinct and perceptible "sense of place".
Bodily Experience	Players' experiences of practice, identity, emotion, and memory in virtual spaces through sensory substitution.	Understands how interaction and avatar mechanisms shape players' perception and response to virtual spaces.

III. Case Analysis: Humanistic Spatial Practice in AAA Games

With profound technical strength and huge resource investment, large game development teams have carried out various humanistic exploration practices in virtual spaces to varying degrees. The following analysis is conducted through several representative cases:

(I) Cultural Connotations and Eastern Aesthetics: *Black Myth: Wukong*

The single-player game *Black Myth: Wukong*, officially released in August 2024, caused a global sensation upon its launch due to its unique Eastern aesthetic style and innovative adaptation of the Chinese classic novel *Journey to the West*.

Set after the story of *Journey to the West*, the game follows the player-controlled "Destined One" who embarks on a journey to resurrect Sun Wukong by searching for six "Root Artifacts" scattered across the world. The development team conducted on-site digital scanning of numerous ancient buildings and cultural sites across China, especially in Shanxi Province (such as Dazu Rock Carvings, Xiaoxitian Temple, and Nanchan Temple), and integrated these real historical and cultural elements into the game's scene design. The game is filled with architectural styles such as ancient temples and

monasteries, natural landscapes such as steep mountains and deep forests, and monster designs that integrate elements of Buddhism, Taoism, and folk legends, demonstrating a profound understanding and inheritance of traditional Chinese visual symbols and aesthetic conceptions.

The space conveys background information and advances the plot through environmental storytelling, such as broken Buddha statues, mysterious murals, scattered texts, and even non-player characters in the scenes. While exploring the vast maps and solving puzzles, players fight against classic monsters and their variants such as the Black Bear Spirit, the Yellow Wind Sage, and the Hundred-Eyed Demon Lord. Not only do they experience character growth, but they also gradually piece together the truth of the story through interaction, understand the positions of different characters, and generate individualized meanings and emotional resonance.

The observation and exploration of the practice path of *Black Myth: Wukong* lie in the high integration of cultural depth, artistic quality, and technical strength by its development team. Through cultural recreation and the digitization of real cultural sites, it is committed to reproducing humanistic places with Eastern aesthetic characteristics. Its huge success proves the effectiveness of this path in cultural communication, thereby demonstrating the potential to arouse global interest and real-world attention. This practice also needs to face the inherent complexity of cultural representation accuracy, artistic authenticity, and humanistic spatial practice under the background of commercialization.

(II) Cultural Representation and Communication: The *Assassin's Creed* Series

The *Assassin's Creed* series is a typical case for exploring the representation and communication of cultural relics in games^[5]. From the replication of Italian cities during the Renaissance in *Assassin's Creed II*^[7] to the grand reconstruction of ancient Egyptian and ancient Greek civilizations in *Assassin's Creed Origins* and *Odyssey*, the series is renowned for its detailed depiction of historical scenes, architecture, and social customs.

Embodiment of Humanistic Value: The game provides players with an interactive platform to intuitively understand the urban layout, social life, and cultural customs of specific historical periods. Its launched "Discovery Tour" mode, which focuses on educational exploration, further reflects its potential as a tool for cultural heritage communication^[3]. The development of such large-scale projects also demonstrates the necessity of interdisciplinary collaboration^[15]; for example, Ubisoft even collaborates with institutions such as museums using its game models^[3]. Through precise modeling of iconic buildings such as Notre-Dame de Paris and the Colosseum, as well as the rendering of era-specific atmospheres such as lighting, crowds, and music, the game successfully creates a strong sense of historical place, making players feel as if they are in that era.

This series demonstrates the path of combining rigorous historical research with commercial game development, although this combination sometimes sparks controversy^[5]. By collaborating with historians and archaeologists and using technologies such as photogrammetry, it carries a certain cultural communication function while pursuing visual spectacle.

(III) Spatial Aesthetics and Emotional Construction: *Ghost of Tsushima*

Ghost of Tsushima has received widespread acclaim for its poetic depiction of the natural scenery and traditional architectural aesthetics of Tsushima Island, Japan in the 13th century. The game does not pursue absolute historical accuracy, but focuses on creating an aesthetic conception consistent with the historical background.

Through the extreme use of color, light and shadow, and composition—such as dynamic landscapes of wind blowing through grass and falling leaves—and the selective reproduction of Japanese architectural styles, such as referencing architectural elements from the Yayoi period, the game successfully conveys a spatial aesthetics that is tranquil, solemn, and full of vitality. The spatial design of the game serves the core themes: honor, sacrifice, and the cruelty of war. The contrast between the open and magnificent natural landscapes and villages ravaged by war, and the echo between tranquil shrines and intense battle scenes, together create a complex and fascinating atmosphere.

The success of *Ghost of Tsushima* lies in its precise grasp of "authenticity" rather than rigid adherence to "accuracy". By refining cultural symbols and aesthetic characteristics and integrating them into compelling visual and gameplay design, the game creates a strong emotional experience and cultural identity, proving the central role of spatial aesthetics in the transmission of humanistic value.

(IV) Negotiation of Fidelity: Balancing Accuracy, Authenticity, and Gameplay

All virtual reconstructions in AAA games face the challenge of striking a balance between historical/realistic accuracy, players' subjective authenticity, and gameplay requirements^[5].

Pursuing complete historical accuracy is often unrealistic and may not align with the goals of commercial games, presenting limitations in accuracy. The *Assassin's Creed* series is often criticized for its "gamified" adaptation of history^[5]. Developers often make compromises to enhance narratives and improve gameplay—for example, adjusting architectural structures to facilitate climbing in *Assassin's Creed*—or to adapt to technical constraints.

Compared with objective accuracy, developers seem more inclined to create subjective "authenticity", that is, making players feel that it "feels like that era/place"^[5]. This feeling is closely related to

atmosphere creation and the establishment of a sense of place, and can better stimulate players' emotional investment and immersive experience ^[4].

Table 2: Comparative Table of Case Analysis

Game Name	Black Myth: Wukong	Assassin's Creed Series	Ghost of Tsushima
Source of Cultural/Historical Background	Chinese classic novel <i>Journey to the West</i> , ancient Chinese architectural culture.	Specific historical periods (e.g., Renaissance, ancient Egypt, etc.).	Tsushima Island, Japan in the 13th century (background of the Mongol invasions).
Focus of Spatial Aesthetics	Eastern fantasy, high-fidelity cultural reproduction.	Historical scene replication, architectural details.	Poetic realism, natural scenery, Japanese architectural aesthetics.
Ways of Embodiment of Humanistic Value	Cultural recreation, presentation of Eastern aesthetics, narrative experience.	Popularization of history and culture, creation of historical sense of place.	Conveyance of Eastern aesthetics, emotional atmosphere rendering.
"Authenticity" Processing Strategy	Integration of real sites, emphasis on cultural authenticity.	Focus on historical research (controversial), visual authenticity.	Emphasis on aesthetic conception (authenticity) rather than historical accuracy.
Main Realization Means	Integration of digital scanning, cultural recreation, technical integration.	Interdisciplinary collaboration, historical research, photogrammetry.	Artistic refinement, application of cultural symbols, visual design.

IV. Realization Paths of the Humanistic Value of Digital Spaces

Based on the above theoretical discussions and case analyses, we can attempt to summarize several possible paths for realizing humanistic value in digital spaces such as AAA games:

1. **Deepening Interdisciplinary Collaboration and Knowledge Integration:** The successful construction of humanistic spaces cannot be separated from the integration of knowledge from multiple fields. Game developers need to more actively engage in dialogue and collaboration with experts such as historians, cultural scholars, anthropologists, and architects^[3]. Drawing on the model of establishing research centers and laboratories in the field of digital humanities to promote collaboration^[2], the game industry can also explore more institutionalized cross-border cooperation models.
2. **Emphasizing Experiential Understanding and Emotional Resonance:** The unique advantage of digital spaces lies in their interactivity and immersion. The core of realizing humanistic value is to make full use of these characteristics to create "experiences" that can trigger players' in-depth thinking and emotional resonance. At the same time, the creation of historical authenticity also profoundly affects players' experiences and value judgments^[5]. The goal should be to shift from "watching" history/culture to "experiencing" and "reflecting" on it. Using reception aesthetics theory to pay attention to players' "horizon of expectations" and interactive aesthetic experiences can better design works that resonate^[16].
3. **Balancing Commercial Demands and Humanistic Care with Ethical Consciousness:** As commercial products, the development of AAA games is inevitably influenced by market logic. When game content touches on real human experiences, historical traumas, or cultural diversity, developers need to assume corresponding ethical responsibilities. This requires maintaining humanistic care and critical reflection on the content being represented while pursuing commercial success, and avoiding stereotypes, excessive simplification, or inappropriate commercial exploitation^[17]. Establishing a more comprehensive content review and ethical consultation mechanism is a necessary consideration for the sustainable development of the industry.
4. **Encouraging Diversified Exploration of Humanistic Spaces:** The analytical tools and methods developed in the field of digital humanities, such as spatial analysis^[8], virtual ethnography, and close playing^[18], can not only be used for critical research on existing games but also feed back into the game design process. For example, applying space syntax during the development phase to analyze the potential impact of map layout on player behavior^[8], or conducting player research to deeply understand the effects of different designs on the sense of place and meaning interpretation^[4]. Although AAA games attract much attention due to their influence,

indie games and serious games have also demonstrated great creativity in humanistic spatial practice^[3].

V. Conclusion

The virtual spaces of AAA video games have become an indispensable part of the contemporary cultural landscape, and they not only showcase technological achievements but also provide potential spaces for humanistic practice. By combining the profound understanding of "place" and "space" in the humanities with the analysis of specific game cases, this paper analyzes the possibilities and paths for realizing humanistic value in digital spaces.

The study finds that AAA games can produce positive effects in cultural communication, historical cognition, and emotional experience by integrating elements such as spatial aesthetics, environmental storytelling, sense of place construction, and interactive experience design. This process reveals the complex tension between commercial logic and humanistic care, as well as the conflict between objective accuracy and subjective authenticity.

In the process of developing fascinating virtual worlds, developers are essentially engaging in cultural interpretation and value selection. Realizing more humanistic values in digital spaces requires the joint efforts of the game industry, academia, and the public. The deepening of interdisciplinary collaboration, combined with the emphasis on experiential understanding and emotional resonance, the maintenance of ethical consciousness, the adoption of digital humanities methods, and the encouragement of diversified exploration, will become the key directions for promoting the development of digital spaces with stronger humanistic depth and responsibility.

Just as physical spaces influence our thinking and activities^[2], the digital spaces we develop and immerse ourselves in will have a profound impact on the future prospects of human civilization. Continuing to pay attention to, analyze, and reflect on the humanistic practice "between virtuality and reality" in the future is of great significance in the present era.

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