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## **GOTHAM ON THE GROUND: TRANSMEDIA MEETS TOPOGRAPHY IN THE ENVIRONMENTS OF THE *ARKHAM* VIDEOGAME SERIES**

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**Abstract:** Contemporary franchised media production is marked by heavily polished, highly coordinated instalments that harness and synergize multiple media concurrently in order to more effectively saturate markets with manifold iterations of singular intellectual properties. But how do the unwieldy protocols of transmedia impact upon the narratives of our pop culture icons, their identities and the fictional worlds that they inhabit? In the context of 21<sup>st</sup> Century licensing, where extended universes and (proposed) narrative coherence across various properties abound across media, it is useful to look back upon the history of how multiple iterations and continuity were handled in pre-networked production, and how the transition to franchised transmedia has worked on what we think of as narrative cohesion. Though such an undertaking may appear daunting in its magnitude, by focusing on specific aspects of transmedia production—such as worldbuilding—we can begin to make headway.

This paper takes as its object of study Gotham City, longtime home of globally-recognized pop culture superhero icon Batman. Using an interdisciplinary approach to issues of both aesthetics and circulation, the article charts traditional representations of Gotham across media and focuses particularly on how the city has been realized in videogames, where audiences become officially participating players as not only the Dark Knight himself, but as circulators in Gotham's sprawling urban environment as well. By looking at how the map of Gotham has mutated through the *Batman: Arkham* game series and how the player is encouraged to navigate that environment, the paper exposes that protocols of transmedia mapping at work and theorizes the ways in which Gotham City in videogames constitutes a "real virtuality" that layers decades of transmedia Batman history upon each other for players and even incorporates aspects of our own physical world is constructing its reality.

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Most fictional cartographies, when an official source bothers to map them, are set out by a masterminding author or at least built upon with consistency: in the first editions of the *Lord of the Rings* series, Tolkien included maps of Middle Earth so that readers could follow the trajectory of the Fellowship's journey; L. Frank Baum's world of Oz, though expansive and expanding, always fits its new fantastical locales in relation to those areas of Oz already visited; and even the shifting, convoluted island of *Lost* is represented by a definitive map within the television series. Historically, this has not been the case for comic books. The reason for this is probably a mix of the work-for-hire political economy of the comics industry and the speed with which most comics are produced. As of this writing, there are currently 13 different Batman-related comics titles published monthly, with over 30 different writers and artists involved in their production (not counting guest creators). This multiplicity of voices and creative directions, converged upon occasionally by a crossover "event" storyline, has long been the standard in mainstream English-language comics production. The comic book industry has always commonly used a work-for-hire productive process, with writers and artists rarely holding any intellectual rights over their work; ultimate creative control instead lies in the hands of an editorial process more invested in output than consistency.<sup>1</sup> However, it appears today that transmedia business model approaches to comics properties are beginning to change this in interesting ways, to the extent that the layouts of fictional urban spaces like Batman's hometown Gotham City are beginning to build consistency in the pursuit of a canon that allows readers, users, and audiences to cut across media without losing their sense of place. In what follows, I will sketch out how and why Gotham City has traditionally defied notions of consistent geography and design sense, how the 2013 WB Games Montreal videogame *Batman: Arkham Origin* illustrates a new sensibility for the geography of the Batman mythology, and how player circulation through that fictional space is achieved. Not only does the Gotham City of *Arkham Origins* operate as a palimpsest of the aesthetic modes and architectural spaces of Gotham that have come before it, from the aesthetic tones of the Batman films that precede it to the architectural spaces of the comics and videogames, but it also creates a virtual geography by incorporating real-world graffiti from the city of Montreal, leading to what we might think of as a "real virtuality" as opposed to a virtual reality. Finally, I will show how the game connects to the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. John Molinaro, "Who owns Captain America? Contested authorship, work-for-hire, and termination of rights under the copyright act of 1976," *Georgia State Law Review* 21.2, 2004.

ultimate chapter in the *Arkham* series, Rocksteady's 2015 *Batman: Arkham Knight*, and how this game slots in with other elements of the Batman transmedia milieu.

## I. Gotham's Genesis

With the publication of *Batman* #4<sup>2</sup>, the fictional Gotham City was introduced as a faceless American metropolis to serve as a locale for Batman's adventures. Batman creators Bob Kane and Bill Finger were first going to call Bruce Wayne's hometown Civic City:

[Civic City] seemed a bit dull, so we tried Capital City, then Coast City. Then, I flipped through the phone book and spotted the name Gotham Jewelers and said, 'That's it,' Gotham City. We didn't call it New York because we wanted anybody in any city to identify with it. Of course, Gotham is another name for New York.<sup>3</sup>

Kane, Finger, and the offices of *Batman* publisher DC Comics (then National Allied Publications) all resided in New York, so it's little surprise that though Gotham continued to develop as an environment all its own, it has always retained many geographical and aesthetic resemblances to NYC. Many Batman stories involve the ocean, so it's clearly a coastal city, and its dense urban population, clustered high-rise buildings, and Eastern weather patterns all also strongly suggest Gotham is a surrogate for New York City. Other creators in Batman's 75 year history have also compared Gotham to NYC: both Frank Miller and John Byrne have been paraphrased, calling Gotham "New York at Night,"<sup>4</sup> and writer/editor Dennis O'Neil has said that Gotham is "New York's mirror-world counterpart...Manhattan below 14<sup>th</sup> Street at eleven minutes past midnight on the coldest night in November."<sup>5</sup> Though the analogy remains, Gotham's status as a fictional city has allowed its multifold creative teams to add different landmarks and architectural features to the Gotham skyline, giving it a life of its own. That life, however, has historically lacked consistency. If we confine the topic to the culture of comic books, the city has become layered over time rather than schematically graphed: certain landmarks are known to be there, such as the Wayne Enterprises Building, the nightclub My Alibi, Wonder Tower, and Crime Alley. However,

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<sup>2</sup> Bill Finger and Bob Kane, *Batman* volume 1 #4, December 1940.

<sup>3</sup> Bill Finger quoted in Edwin Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), xiv.

<sup>4</sup> Frank Miller qtd. in Vic O'Sullivan, "Manhattan Unmasked," *The Sunday Times*, July 17 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Dennis O'Neil, *Knightfall: A Novel* (New York: Bantam Books, 1994), 344.

the looks, locations, and spatial organizations of these landmarks change considerably from creative team to creative team.

Take for example Crime Alley, the inner city locale where Thomas and Martha Wayne were gunned down before young Bruce Wayne's eyes. A depiction of Crime Alley is essential to any retelling of Batman's origin story, and consequently it has appeared innumerable times in Batman comics (according to comic book wiki Comic Vine, Crime Alley appears in 166 issues as of this writing).<sup>6</sup> In one of the most well-known Batman stories ever told, *Batman: the Dark Knight Returns* (1986), Crime Alley is depicted as an open space foregrounded in front of chain-link fences.<sup>7</sup> Only a year later, however, in *Batman* #409 (1987), the same spot sits in front of a brownstone walkup stoop and appears surrounded by tightly-packed buildings on all sides.<sup>8</sup> Only the streetlight remains to retain sense of visual consistency. Meanwhile, in more recent comics depictions of Crime Alley, the locale lives up to its name, portrayed as an actual back alley behind the Monarch Theatre.<sup>9</sup>

In a tendency that is perhaps the most familiar toponymical trope in the franchise, tribute has been paid to iconic creators of the past by naming locales in Gotham city after them. For decades, writers of various Bat-titles have been naming Gotham City landmarks after their authorial predecessors. For example, in the first issue of the *Batman: Year One* story arc (serialized in *Batman* #404-407, January-May 1987), Bruce Wayne makes his way into one of the sleazier areas of the city as he narrates his journey on foot: "I was sized up like a piece of meat by the leather boys in Robinson Park. I waded through pleas and half-hearted threats from junkies at the Finger Memorial. I stepped across a field of human rubble that lay sleeping in front of the overcrowded Sprang Mission."<sup>10</sup> The landmarks mentioned here (though not depicted visually) refer to artist Jerry Robinson, Batman co-creator Bill Finger, and artist Dick Sprang. Looking through other comics, however, will reveal that each of these creator's names has been used on multiple other occasions to name other Gotham landmarks. Examining the *Batman.wikia.com*

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<sup>6</sup> Comic Vine, "Crime Alley," *Comic Vine*, accessed January 20, 2016, <http://comicvine.gamespot.com/crime-alley/4020-55715/>.

<sup>7</sup> Frank Miller, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (New York: DC Comics, 1986), 13.

<sup>8</sup> Max Allan Collins, Ross Andru, and Dick Giordano, *Batman* #409 (New York: DC Comics, 1987), 1.

<sup>9</sup> See for example *Batman* #29 by Scott Snyder and Greg Capullo (March 2014) or *Detective Comics* #6 by Tony Daniel (April 2012). Additionally, for a wonderful illustration of Crime Alley's changing nature over the years, cf. Warren Ellis and John Cassaday, *Planetary/Batman: Night on Earth* (New York: DC Comics, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Frank Miller and David Mazzuchelli, *Batman* #404 (New York: DC Comics, 1987), 10.

entry on Gotham City, one sees reference to Robinson Plaza and Robinson Square, but no Robinson Park; rather than mentioning the Finger Memorial, the entry lists Finger Memorial Park; and while the Sprang Mission is also absent, the entry mentions both a Sprang Bridge and a Sprang River.<sup>11</sup> Turning to competing resource *DC Comics Database*, the Gotham City entry makes no mention of public landmarks related to either Finger or Sprang, but does link to an entry for Robinson Park. The Robinson Park entry mistakenly lists the landmark's first appearance as *Batman* #404 rather than #405, and offers a list of some four dozen subsequent appearances.<sup>12 13</sup> While we can see from these cases that depictions of Gotham areas largely adhere to a sense of history, they rarely appear concerned with consistency on any deeper level.

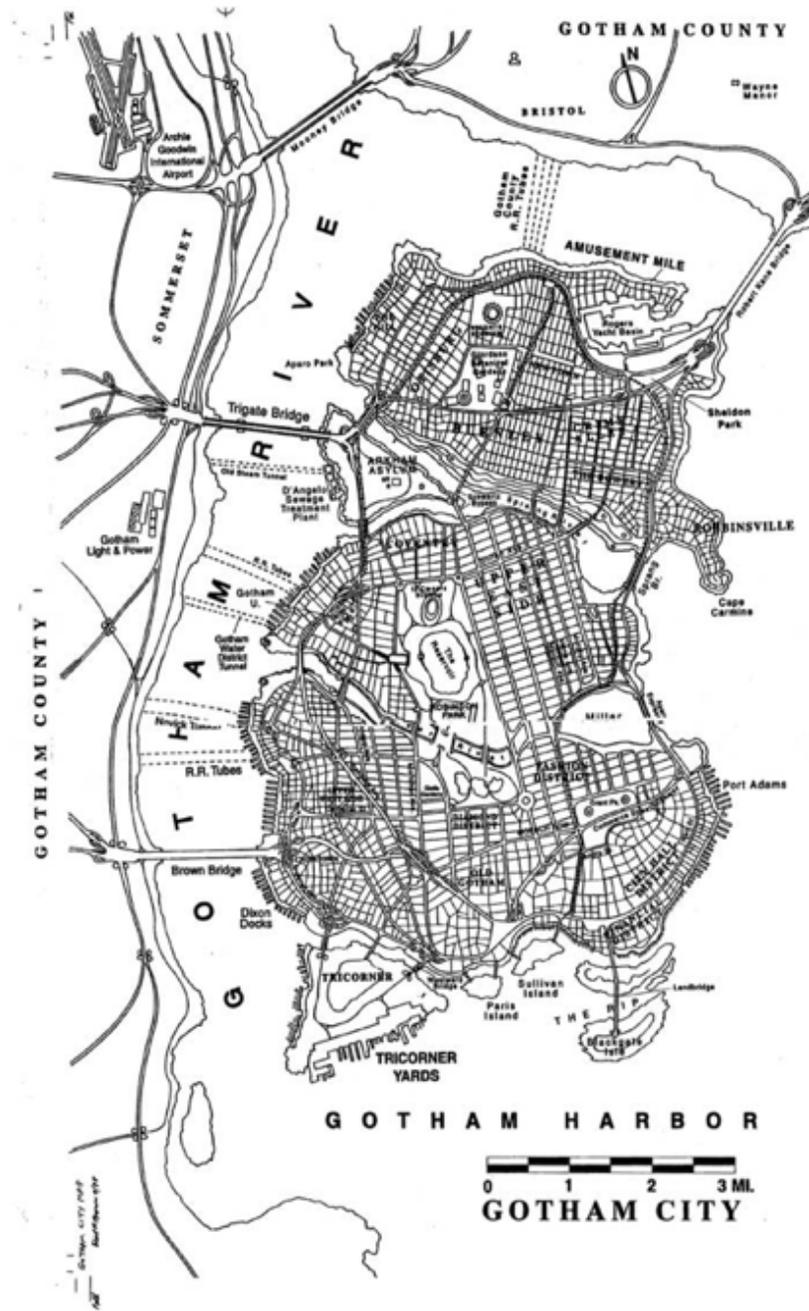
So too has it been for the neighborhoods of Gotham. Over time, certain names have cropped up and become tropes to denote any given locale in which the action may be taking place: "Burnley," "Bristol," "Amusement Mile"—all these and more have been referred to or depicted multiple times in Batman comics over the years, though inconsistently described and drawn. For the comics, the occasional nod to a built-up world was usually enough to lay claim to narrative cohesion and a sense of realism. While the landmarks of Gotham have changed their looks and locations over time, they have retained their narrative significance. And the truth is that Gotham *was* singularly designed at one point for comics, schematized in a map that's been used every time cartographic representation has been called for since its creation (fig. 1).

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<sup>11</sup> "Gotham City," *Batman Wiki*, accessed November 20, 2015, [http://batman.wikia.com/wiki/Gotham\\_City](http://batman.wikia.com/wiki/Gotham_City).

<sup>12</sup> "Gotham City," *DC Comics Database*, accessed November 20, 2015, [http://dc.wikia.com/wiki/Gotham\\_City](http://dc.wikia.com/wiki/Gotham_City).

<sup>13</sup> "Robinson Park/Apearances," *DC Comics Database*, accessed November 20, 2015, [http://dc.wikia.com/wiki/Category:Robinson\\_Park/Apearances](http://dc.wikia.com/wiki/Category:Robinson_Park/Apearances).



**Figure 1.** the map of Gotham created for the “Cataclysm” and “No Man’s Land” story arcs by Eliot R. Brown in 1998. Though the story involved the entire city being demolished by an earthquake, this same map is still in use today. Image via eliotrbrown.com.

Brown designed a unified Gotham just in time for it to be torn down.<sup>14</sup> In the aftermath, the map was kept (despite the diegetic contradiction)—but none of its reference points were ever to be employed with any consistency.

## II. Designing the City on the Screen



**Figure 2:** Gotham as it has appeared on television and in the cinema of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Clockwise from top left: *Batman* (1966), *Batman* (1989), *Batman: the Animated Series* (1992), *Batman Returns* (1992), *Batman Forever* (1995), and *Batman & Robin* (1997). All images via Google.

In other media, Gotham's look, feel, and nomenclature have depended on particular creative visions (or budgetary constraints) largely unfettered by the editorial processes of comics production. Over the years, this has led to an inconsistency in tone and an almost total lack of cohesion in geography. For the sake of brevity, I'll concentrate here only on the better-known

<sup>14</sup> Jimmy Stamp, "The Cartographer Who Mapped Out Gotham City," *Smithsonian*, accessed August 20, 2015, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/cartographer-gotham-city-180951594/?no-ist>.

depictions of Gotham, beginning with the popular campy *Batman* TV show of the 1960s. The television show's budget called for filming to take place largely on studio backlots and interior sets in Hollywood. Because of this, issues of geographical consistency and human circulation within the city were largely elided. However, the producers still endeavored to depict Gotham as New York—just New York in daylight during the summertime. Establishing shots usually used stock footage of recognizable NYC locations like Central Park or the Flatiron Building, and the show even featured a “Queen of Freedom” statue in one episode,<sup>15</sup> clearly in tribute to the Statue of Liberty. The only two truly memorable exterior locations from the television production are the Wayne Manor façade (actually a house in Pasadena)<sup>16</sup> and the Batcave entrance (a corner of Griffith Park in Los Angeles),<sup>17</sup> and even these two are only remembered because they appeared in nearly every episode of the program. In the accompanying 1966 film *Batman: the Movie*,<sup>18</sup> however, more exterior locations were used, as well as a surfing sequence, exposing the production's West Coast situation. Meanwhile, the look and feel of Gotham was geared towards bright colors and cartoonish interior design to accentuate the camp tone of the program. The show's style aptly illustrates an entire approach to Gotham City, in which the city's location and appearance is a tertiary consideration at best, following the needs of the story. In approaches like this, Gotham really is Anytown, USA.

Moving forward more than 20 years, the next well-known depiction of Gotham is Tim Burton's 1989 *Batman* film and its 1992 sequel *Batman Returns*. For these films, production took place almost entirely at Pinewood Studios in England, with almost all location shoots taking place in nearby Hertfordshire. Gotham City was designed by production designer Anton Furst to look crowded, intentionally hideous, and rife with clashing architectural styles, as almost an “essay in ugliness” to accentuate Gotham's crime-ridden history.<sup>19</sup> Chief among these were art deco and art nouveau with gothic features mixed in. This look was maintained in *Batman Returns*, and the art deco aspects were kept for the 1992-1995 cartoon *Batman: The Animated Series*. Both the films

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<sup>15</sup> *Batman*, “When the Rat's Away, the Mice Will Play,” *Batman*, ABC Studios (New York: WABC New York, February 17, 1966).

<sup>16</sup> “Good Manors,” *Movie Locations*, accessed December 15, 2015, <http://www.movie-locations.com/features/001/wayne-manor.html#.VrozGd-rSHp>.

<sup>17</sup> “Bronson Cave in Griffith Park,” *hikespeak*, December 14, 2015, accessed January 15, 2016, <http://www.hikespeak.com/trails/bronson-cave/>.

<sup>18</sup> Leslie H. Martinson, *Batman: The Movie*, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1966.

<sup>19</sup> Anton Furst quoted in Richard Corliss, “The Caped Crusader Fliers Again,” *Time* 133.25 (1989), 60.

and the cartoon used matte paintings for backgrounds, though while Gotham was largely depicted in ashen greys and blacks in the films, the color palette for the cartoon was warmed up to browns, oranges, and reds. However, the effect was a certain level of consistency—the Gotham of both *Batman Returns* and the animated series were layered with the aesthetic considerations of the 1989 blockbuster.

Joel Schumacher departed considerably from these aesthetic inclinations when he took over the director's chair for the 1995 instalment *Batman Forever* and its 1997 follow-up *Batman & Robin*. In making these films, Schumacher chose to create a Gotham City inspired by New York architecture of the 1930s and modern-day Tokyo. The resulting designs by production artist Barbara Ling gave life to an architecturally improbable day-glo and neon playground, where skyscraper-sized statues held up municipal fixtures such as observatories and museums. These visions of Gotham City, inspired in equal parts by the machine age and neon-saturated Tokyo, left the impression of a “World's Fair on ecstasy”<sup>20</sup> and matched well with the over-the-top characterizations of Batman and his enemies that were themselves inspired much more by the 1960s TV show than the comics or preceding movies. Interestingly, the opening action sequence of *Batman Forever* sees the Caped Crusader fly a helicopter into the Statue of Liberty's face (inexplicably located off the shores of Gotham), symbolically severing the movie's ties to the 1920s New York aesthetic Gotham had cultivated in the preceding films and other media. Still, the Dark Knight's city was built on the aesthetic of the 1960s show—only set at nighttime, with blacklights and neon adding bright splashes of color to every corner and alleyway.

Schumacher's vision of Gotham and its hero effectively killed the Batman movie franchise for almost a decade until Christopher Nolan rebooted it in 2005 with *Batman Begins*. Nolan would direct two sequels as well, *The Dark Knight* (2008) and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012). Studio production for the trilogy took place at both Shepperton and Pinewood Studios; Gotham locations, however, were done primarily in London and Chicago for the first film, Chicago for the second, and Pittsburgh for the third. In each film, the look of Gotham evolved with the state of the narrative: in *Batman Begins* it had a gritty feel of urban blight (with most of the action taking place in slum areas inspired by the now-demolished walled city of Kowloon in Hong Kong); in the following instalments our view of Gotham shifted uptown to large steel and glass skyscrapers and old stone

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<sup>20</sup> Barbara Ling in extras for *Batman & Robin*, DVD, directed by Joel Schumacher (1997; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2002).

buildings—fitting, as in the sequels Gotham is a city on the upswing under Batman’s protection. For *The Dark Knight* and *The Dark Knight Rises*, Gotham opened up, foregoing the cluttered and cramped alleyways of *Batman Begins* in favor of an enormous, sprawling megalopolis. For these two films Nolan also did less work to disguise and dress up the real-world locations used for filming, instead modeling Gotham after the cities in which he chose to shoot. In each film, Gotham’s geography played a key role—in *Batman Begins*, for example, the climactic clash involves a battle on a monorail careening for the Wayne Enterprises building at the heart of the city. However, rarely did aspects of geographical importance overlap from film to film, except perhaps for the fact that each instalment was explicit in situating Gotham as an island (in both films, villains blow up bridges to hold the city’s denizens captive). The most interesting aspect of Nolan’s vision for Batman’s world is the fact that the director based it upon the futuristic Los Angeles of Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982), a fact that returns us once again to the notion of the layered city. (fig. 3) Nolan wanted to base his Gotham’s look and feel on *Blade Runner*’s world because it served as “an interesting lesson in the techniques of exploring and describing a credible universe that doesn’t appear to have any boundaries.”<sup>21</sup> But my interests here lie not only with the credibility of *Blade Runner*’s Los Angeles, but also with that fictional city’s history as a palimpsest. LA in *Blade Runner* is often identified as the quintessential postmodern city: a world where a science fiction future has come to pass only to thrust the viewer back in time to experience a 1930s-era noir story, complete with a city rife with crime, vice, and alienation. This perfectly encapsulates the way Gotham functions in Batman stories: though the problems of the urban world are the same as they ever were (overcrowding, decay and neglect, corruption run rampant), Batman narratives usually place special focus on the futuristic technology the Dark Knight uses in his war on crime. The modernist utopian promises of technology and capitalism acting as savior, via Billionaire philanthropist Bruce Wayne and his alter ego, frequently fall short as the viewer, reader, or player watches Gotham City grow darker and more corrupt despite the hero’s best efforts.

Furthermore, Nolan is not the first person to think about Gotham in comparison to *Blade Runner*’s Los Angeles. Colin McArthur has described the former as exemplifying the “comic view” while the latter typifies the “postmodern view.”<sup>22</sup> Both views, however, “loosen the hinges

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<sup>21</sup> Christopher Nolan quoted in Pat Jankiewicz, “Dark Knight Resurrected,” *Starlog* 337, (August 2005), n. pag.

<sup>22</sup> Colin McArthur, “Chinese Boxes and Russian Dolls,” *The Cinematic City*, ed. David B. Clarke (London: Routledge, 1997), 33.



**Figure 3:** *Blade Runner*'s (1982) futuristic Los Angeles and *Batman Begins*' (2005) Gotham. Image via [lifehighfidelity.wordpress.com](http://lifehighfidelity.wordpress.com).

which have held cinematic representations of the city in some contact with 'real' cities...and reinscribe them into discourse once more, predominantly those discourses about the quality of the natural and the built world through which meaning has been imposed."<sup>23</sup> For McArthur, the cinematic city comes pre-layered with the discursive frameworks that constructed not only the real built world of the urban environment, but also the aesthetic and practical concerns of film production. In a 1992 *Screen and Sound* article, Peter Wollen describes both films as being fascinated "with the architecture of the modern city, but closer to Expressionism and Surrealism than to Constructivism and Rationalism," creating a landscape "dystopian rather than utopian."<sup>24</sup> In Wollen's view, cinematic cities like *Batman*'s Gotham and *Blade Runner*'s LA are layered not only with the architectural spaces of the 20<sup>th</sup> century metropolis, but also the emotional subconscious of 20<sup>th</sup> century art practices and the illustrations of unrealized visions both expressive and schematic (fig. 4):

In many cases these films borrow directly from the never-realized visions of 20s architectural illustrators. Thus the Gotham of *Batman Returns* is modelled on Hugh Ferriss' vistas of an imaginary Manhattan and Harvey Wiley Corbett's schemes for a city of multilevel arcades joined by bridges spanning the void between urban cliffs...monstrous Ferriss-style renderings adorned by massive caricatures of Paul Manship and Gaston Lachaise's heroic modern sculptures. Similarly, the central megastructure in *Blade*

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>24</sup> Peter Wollen, "Delirious Projections," *Sight and Sound* 2.4 (1992), 24-27.

*Runner* is the neo-Mayan style heralded in the 20s in Los Angeles by Robert Stacy-Judd and Francisco Mujica. In reality, Stacy-Judd and Mujica built very little, but their grandiose visions were realised in the cinema.<sup>25</sup>

Both *Blade Runner*'s LA and Gotham City share a vision of the urban imaginary on film, a vision not of a place that is, but of a place that could have been, inspired by unrealized architectural aspirations.



**Figure 4:** Sketch from Hugh Ferriss' *The Metropolis of Tomorrow*, and Paul Manship's *Mankind Figures*. Images via Google.

So Gotham becomes a city layered on many levels: topographically (in the sense of multilevel arcades and crowded urban clusters of people living on top of one another in nearly all its incarnations); narratologically (in the sense of the built-up geographical content passed from one set of creative hands to the next in the comics); and sensorially (in the sense of a created metropolis layered with the real cities from which it draws inspiration, the imaginary visions of what cities never came to be, and the fictional mythology that creators then pile upon both). In the next section, I will look closely at Gotham as portrayed in videogames where the user controls the direction of the gaze, and explain how the Gotham of *Arkham Origins* in particular operates as a palimpsest of the Gothams I've already discussed.

### III. The *Arkham* franchise and the Gotham of *Arkham Origins*

The vast majority of Batman videogames produced since the birth of the videogame medium have been less interested in adding a new voice to the conversation of Gotham City aesthetics and geography than in echoing the commentary offered by some other medium. This is

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 25.

because most Batman games have been tie-ins to and adaptations of Batman as expressed in film and television. Of the more than forty console, arcade, and PC games starring Batman that I was able to locate in my research, over three quarters were explicitly connected to the most recent Batman film or animated series at the time of release.<sup>26</sup> These games attempt to hew to the storylines, architectural aesthetics, colour palettes, and moods of whichever cinematic instalments they're tied into. Of the minority of games *not* explicitly based on other media, most were released before videogame graphics were advanced enough for the games to make a strong aesthetic statement about Gotham City (though it seems that almost all share the opinion that exposed brick is a Gotham mainstay). Furthermore, few of the games have maintained a sense of consistency in terms of developers or publishers: while Ocean Software published the first four Batman games, after that the property became somewhat promiscuous (the 1992 videogame tie-in for *Batman Returns* alone involved six different developers and two publishers across nine platforms). The first Batman videogame, 1986's *Batman*, rendered environments in a 3D isometric universe, while the vast majority that would follow over the next 15 years were sidescrollers. As gaming technology advanced into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the world of Gotham opened up considerably, notably in Traveller's Tales' 2012 *Lego Batman 2: DC Super Heroes*, which offered a fully explorable Gotham that took its aesthetic cues from not only Lego bricks but also the cartoony vibes of the 1966 TV show and the garishness of the Burton film series. Topographically speaking, the Gotham of *Lego Batman 2* uses roughly the same three-island schematic designed by Eliot R. Brown, but locationally speaking, the landmarks of Gotham are jumbled for this game, placing spots like Wayne Manor in the middle of the northernmost island rather than outside city limits and just down the road from Arkham Asylum and Amusement Mile. The overall effect hardly evokes a strong sense of urban planning.

All of this is to say that in the realm of videogames, rarely has a conversation developed amongst iterations of Gotham City. Batman games are either developed with a mandate to be reminiscent of a particular filmic vision, or attempt to have aesthetics and gameplay that adhere to a house style (as in the case of the *Lego Batman* games, where much of the ludological content

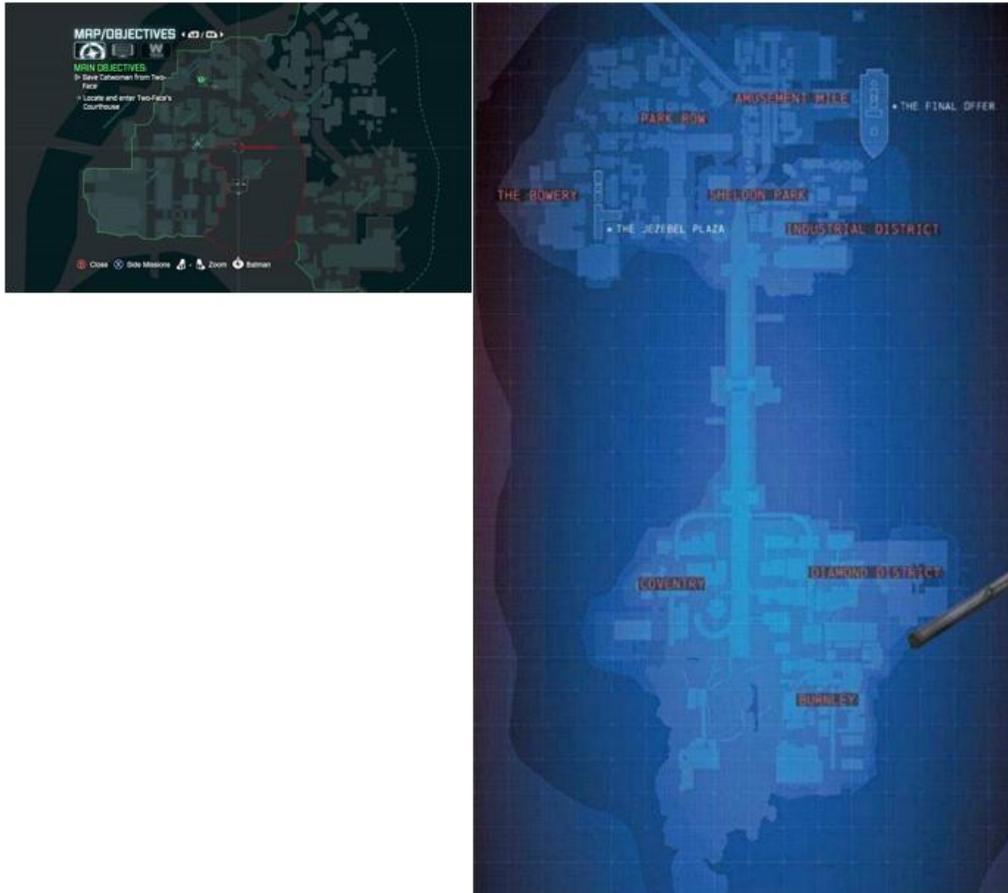
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<sup>26</sup> While an overview of this lineage would significantly exceed the scope of this paper, many excellent resources are available online for those interested in learning more about Batman's history in videogames. For a few places to start, cf. Kyle Hilliard's Batman Day article for *Game Informer* (<http://www.gameinformer.com/b/features/archive/2015/09/26/it-39-s-batman-day-here-are-all-of-our-batman-video-game-reviews.aspx>) or Another Nerd's YouTube montage "Gaming Evolution: Batman 1986-2014" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZYpDxNrKAY>).

and game mechanics are replicas of other licensed *Lego* games with a Batman veneer skinned over top on a narrative content level). However, a close examination of the *Arkham* videogames series shows a different operating principle in action, where an effort is made to draw upon and reconcile huge swaths of Gotham history simultaneously. This effort culminates almost by chance in the third instalment in the series, 2013's *Arkham Origins*.

The *Arkham* videogame franchise began in 2009 with *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, a console and PC game in which the Joker has taken over Arkham Island, on which the asylum housing Gotham's worst criminals and madmen stands, and through which Batman must navigate to defeat multiple villains from his rogues gallery. The game enjoyed extremely positive reviews and, in 2011, was followed by *Batman: Arkham City*. In this sequel, several months have passed since the events of *Arkham Asylum* and now Batman is trapped inside a city-sized gulag that stands on the remains of a desolated section of Gotham City. Again, the Dark Knight has to navigate the penitentiary and defeat multiple enemies to bring the prison under control. Both games were developed by Rocksteady Studios and met with a great deal of critical praise and commercial success. In 2013, Canadian developer Warner Bros. Games Montreal released a prequel to the series, *Arkham Origins*. In this game, Bruce Wayne has only been Batman for two years and faces off against the Joker for the first time as multiple villains converge on Gotham in response to a \$50 million bounty placed on the Caped Crusader's head. Between the first two *Arkham* games, a good deal of narrative consistency was maintained, with many of the issues faced by Batman in *Arkham City* acting as consequences of events in *Arkham Asylum*. However, little geographical consistency was called for: while the action of *Asylum* takes place in a mental facility off the coast of Gotham, the action of *City* occurs in a demilitarized zone of Gotham itself. How the section of the city came to be walled off and reformatted into a prison is explained in a kind of videogame equivalent to liner notes, peripheral textual material unlocked by in-game achievements that ask the player to temporarily become a reader if she wants all the background. The Gotham of *Arkham City* is a wasteland, dilapidated by neglect, half-drowned by flooding, and teeming with criminals. It appears as a diseased part of Gotham abandoned by the rest of the city, where churches are repurposed into triage centers and municipal landmarks like police stations, museums, and courthouses are repurposed as criminal strongholds. In this game, the greater geography of Gotham City is revealed as roughly double that of the Arkham City makeshift prison: a large bridge connects what constitutes Arkham City to the Southern half of the greater metropolis (perhaps

retroactively explaining how it was so easy for Gotham to just amputate its upper half, at least on a simplified logistical level). (fig. 5) From this, we can already see the Gotham of *Origins* being almost literally plastered over the geographical content of the preceding game. I will address the layering between the games in the third section of this paper on player experience in circulation, but first let us examine the aesthetic palimpsest the Gotham of *Arkham Origins* represents in terms of other media.



**Figure 5:** The Arkham City map (left) roughly matches the north half of the map in Arkham Origins. Images via Google.

In *Origins*, Gotham City is built up out of the look and feel of the films and the content of the comics. The game makes use of the same enormous statues seen in the Burton and Schumacher films, as well as the realistic grittiness juxtaposed with uptown glamour Nolan exhibits in his Batman movies. Even the neon brightness of Schumacher's films is represented in *Origins*: because the game is set on Christmas Eve, the city glitters with the lights of the season and buildings in seedier areas are adorned with neon signage. Most importantly, the urban imaginary of 1920s architectural illustration prevalent in all three directors' visions is well represented in

*Origins*. Though the idea of multilevel arcades connected by walkways has been abandoned, the buildings in the game are tiered and clustered together, connected instead by large pipes that Batman can climb over. In terms of geographical content, several of the neighbourhoods in *Origins* are named for those same areas frequently alluded to or depicted in the comics: Amusement Mile, Park Row, and Burnley are all present, as are comic book Gotham staples like Wonder Tower, Ace Chemicals, and the My Alibi nightclub. Before the player even significantly interacts with the Gotham of *Arkham Origins*, she can already see the layered history of almost 80 years of Batman media at work on the game.

#### **IV. Player Experience and Circulation in *Arkham Origins*' Gotham City**

Returning to the game franchise, it's important to observe how the most palimpsestual qualities of *Arkham Origins*' Gotham are tied up with the Gotham of *Arkham City*. The world of the franchise's first game, *Arkham Asylum*, was largely limited and matched the player's linear progression through the game's narrative. Players were allowed to visit one part of the game map at a time, and a heavy emphasis was placed upon indoor environments. Open movement through the exterior areas of Arkham Island was mainly used to go from building to building, with only sidelining points of interest. In *Arkham City*, however, the focus shifted from the inside to the outside, as the developers filled the game with side missions and enemies to face all over the map, as well as some missions that involved following a trail of clues from point to point in the city or chases that asked the player to traverse great distances over a limited period of time. This would not have worked on the Arkham Island map: the developers had built the environments to be too confining and prescriptive, with few areas of the island left unexplored. While the transition from *Arkham Asylum* to *Arkham City* moved the action from inside to outside and asylum to gulag, in *Arkham Origins* the geography of the game has expanded rather than relocated. *Origins* takes place before either *Asylum* or *City*, when Batman was just a few years into his career. The main problem this created (besides the issue of relying a bit too much on the content of the game's predecessor) was that there was suddenly just too much city to traverse. In fact, rather than expanding outwards, the Gotham of *Origins* simply expands down: another half of the city is revealed, connected by a bridge inaccessible in *City*. Setting aside the potential charges of laziness on the developers' part this might engender, it's interesting to see *Origins* strive for certain points of originality by reshuffling the interior locations of the map (those buildings available to be entered by the player

rather than just serving as impenetrable architectural monoliths). This is part of what makes the Gotham of *Origins* a layered version of the *Arkham City* map rather than just identical to it. For example, in *City* the old Gotham Police Department (GCPD) headquarters are located on the east side of Amusement Mile. Though in the diegesis of the game they were abandoned before that section of Gotham was walled off to create Arkham City, in *Origins* the GCPD headquarters are located at the other end of the map, on the south side of Burnley. Instead, the spot in Amusement Mile taken up by the GCPD in *City* is occupied in *Origins* by the Penguin's boat the Final Offer. Other aspects of the *City* map have been reorganized in *Origins* to add originality as well: the Sionis Steel Mill, Joker's hideout in *City* and Black Mask's in *Origins*, stands in the same spot on both maps (fig. 6). However, opposite sides of the building's interior are accessible in the two games. Familiar but novel architectural features like these affect the player's circulation through the city as well as her ability to cope with the game's challenges. They do so by combining with the in-game menu or Heads Up Display (HUD, the same system that allows Batman to choose gadgets, access the map and read background information) to create a well-known environment for the player by loading familiar landmarks with familiar challenges and juxtaposing them with nearby novel landmarks and challenges. Returning to the Sionis Steel Mill for a moment, in *City*, the mill is just South of a disused Ferris wheel, while in *Origins* the Ferris wheel is gone, and in its place stands a Gotham City Radio tower. In *City*, Batman is drawn to the Ferris wheel by a side mission involving detective work and the weaving-in of the larger Batman mythology; in *Origins*, the radio tower is a combat challenge location where Batman must defeat multiple enemies to unlock a fast-travel point for the Amusement Mile region (more on fast-travel points in a moment). Though the steel mill remains largely the same as it was in *City*, the experienced player is still drawn to the area by the novelty of a new landmark and a different kind of challenge. Meanwhile, the steel mill not only remains similar on the outside, but it acts in the same way as a cluster point for enemies in both games. This makes the player of *Origins* who has already gone through *City* an instant expert on central points on the map, and it only takes a momentary shift in the HUD for the player to see what lies in wait nearby. Not only is the map itself layered with the meanings of the previous game, but the player's experiences are as well: she can expect to find an experience similar to *City* on certain points of the map, but is also given novel experiences just next door.



**Figure 6:** The Sionis Steel Mill in *Arkham City* (left) and *Arkham Origins*. Images via screencapture.

The Gotham of *Origins* is also layered with fast-travel points, an addition designed to deal with the vastness of the game world. Fast-travel points are a commonly used feature of open-world adventure games. Retracing steps is a necessity of open-world games, where the non-linear playing style sees players begin side quests, tire of them, return to the main mission, and later return to the area with the side quest (either to complete it, or perhaps because a new element of the main mission has unlocked in that region, or just to explore). To allow the player to get around large swaths of already trod-upon territories, developers often divide game maps into regions, like the official or informal neighbourhoods and boroughs that make up a city. In a central spot of each region, a fast-travel point will be located that the player can teleport to whenever they choose, from wherever they choose, so long as this sudden teleportation does not get in the way of the game's other processes (for example, in *Origins*, fast-travel points cannot be accessed from interior locations because these are whole new maps loaded from other parts of the game's software). Here, the fast-travel points are also part of the diegesis of the narrative world, explained away by Batman's high-tech 'Batwing' jet. This feature compensates for the circulatory challenges presented by such a large map by letting the player move rapidly from region to region, and incorporating a diegetic explanation for the player's ability to safely return to "home base" at a moment's notice: in *Origins*, unlike in *City*, Batman can access the Batcave, a safe haven located far off the map of the rest of Gotham.

All of this—familiar landmarks, fast-travel points, the similarity of maps on the HUD, and the nostalgic aesthetic and contextual qualities of the landscape—combine to make the layered Gotham City of *Arkham Origins* an environment optimized not only for the player's ability to navigate the game and its challenges, but also to allow the player to experience as much as possible what it is like to *be* Batman. The interesting rub here is that the game's surprises take the player

off-guard because the Gotham City of *Origins* is a reshuffled version of the Gotham of *Arkham City*, while they should be taking Batman off-guard because of his relative inexperience in the diegesis of *Origins*. Though the narrative and ludic reasons approach from opposite logics, the result is the same.

There is a final layer to be examined in the palimpsest Gotham of *Arkham City*: the real-world graffiti of Montreal imported into the game world. In articulating the gritty look of Gotham City, developer WB Games Montreal opted to add street art to the game taken from photos of the surrounding city rather than fabricate wholly new imagery to adorn the city's brick walls. In particular, the studio sent out photographers to collect pictures of tags and murals produced by prolific street artists Sake, Sino, and Omen. All three artists are well known to any observant citizen of Montreal: Omen paints large, ghostly faces in buildings all around the city's Plateau neighbourhood; Sino's tags can be seen in mostly in the Prefontaine/Frontenac area; and Sake is practically a welcoming banner for those entering the city by air, with tags all over the St Henri neighbourhood in the Southwest borough of the city and a few daring, large-scale works in the industrial area visible from the highway to Pierre Trudeau International Airport. The artists may only be well known to interested residents of Montreal, but any player of *Origins* is forced to notice their work on the walls of Gotham because the developer only incorporated a few pieces from each artist and then replicated each in multiple locations around the game world—unlike real graffiti pieces, each of which is one of a kind, street art in *Arkham Origins* is mechanically reproduced. However, this does nothing to negate the fact that the game has incorporated real-world, culturally specific features into a fictional environment, creating what Michael Batty calls virtual geography, the combination of real geographical features and invented fictional elements into the algorithmic systems of the computer.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, this virtual geography situates Gotham because of the graffiti's site specificity. The works of Omen, Sino, and Sake are more or less exclusive to Montreal (and certainly exclusive to Montreal in the numbers seen in *Origins*). When combined with the happy coincidence that Montreal, like New York City and Gotham, is an island located on the Eastern Seaboard of North America, this graffiti seems to imply that Gotham *is* Montreal in analogy, which in turn leads one to wonder what this says about corruption and danger in Quebec's most populous city.

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<sup>27</sup> Michael Batty, "Virtual Geography," *Futures* 29.4 (1997), 338.



**Figure 7:** An example of a Sake tag in *Arkham Origins* (above), and the real-world tag found in Côte Saint-Luc in Montreal. Image via mtlgraff.com.

In a conference paper on another videogame, *Assassin's Creed II*, Darren Wershler identifies Michel de Certeau's concept of the tour as exemplified in navigation of the game's vision of 15<sup>th</sup> century Florence. Wershler discusses the player's tendency to articulate Renaissance-era Italy in terms of both the overhead map and the ground-level walking tour, with neither functioning to complete the picture without the other:

de Certeau's second mode of writing and reading the city is from a great height above it. This is a space of privileged knowledge – panoramic views that are only available to gods, city planners and level designers. As opposed to the tour, this is the space of the “map”, which totalizes a space into a single description of a place. It pretends to a total knowledge of a given space, but that knowledge is only possible because of a particular kind of abstraction. The tour – walking – is what makes the construction of maps possible, yet de Certeau describes the process whereby the drafters of maps have gradually erased their connections to the itineraries of individual pedestrians in order to create a device for the planning and administration of the circulations of those same pedestrians.<sup>28</sup>

These ideas are prevalent in *Arkham Origins*, where the player also relies on a layered approach to circulating through Gotham City, using the HUD bird's-eye map view, the human-scale third person view, a working knowledge of the city's layout from the franchise's previous instalment, and the familiar aesthetics and architectural landmarks from Batman's transmedia history.

<sup>28</sup> Darren Wershler, “Walking in *Assassin's Creed*” (paper presented at Experiencing Stories With/In Digital Games, 24<sup>th</sup> Edition of the Entretiens Jacques Cartier, Concordia University, Montreal, October 2011) 3.

Wershler also parses his view of *Assassin's Creed's* Florence in terms of circulation because, as I have illustrated above in my discussion of the reshuffling of the map, circulation takes into account the materiality of objects as well as people as factors of analysis. "A city," like a game, Wershler says, "is nothing if not a set of entwined systems of circulation: people, information, objects, architecture."<sup>29</sup> Batman's city in *Arkham Origins* uses cultural, aesthetic, and informational layering to immerse the attentive player in the same credible universe without boundaries that Nolan strove to create in emulating *Blade Runner's* LA. This all combines with the player's actual experience of being Batman in the game to give off a strong sense of what Manuel Castells calls "real virtuality:" the immersive realistic experience of a virtual environment as mitigated by the same symbolic metaphors and frameworks that we use to experience and navigate the "real" world.<sup>30</sup> Real virtuality is a key component in thinking about the Gotham of *Arkham Origins*: it is a city built up of the same formal and geographical modes and content that make up the locations of the real city of New York, the architectural illustrations of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the landmarks of the Batman comics, the aesthetics of the Batman films, the layout of *Arkham City*, and the virtual geography created by mixing them all with recognizably Montreal-specific graffiti. Just as for de Certeau "walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language,"<sup>31</sup> in the layered world of *Arkham Origins*, playing is to the game system what walking is to the urban system: an action of articulation that helps constitute the real virtuality of the Gotham landscape. In the final section of this paper, I will illustrate how the transmedia approach at play in recent Batman media has begun to effect the back-and-forth of the geography in Batman comics and *Arkham* games.

## V. Transmedia consistency in cultivating recent depictions of Gotham City

In the wake of *Arkham City's* massive success in the videogame industry (receiving accolades and awards across the game industry and beyond, including multiple nominations from different organizations for 2011's Game of the Year), the Gotham City of the comics began to emulate that of the game. This is no surprise in transmedia marketing: often the atmosphere or visuals of one successful incarnation of a narrative will work on others in order to capitalize on the one medium's text by emphatically synergizing across others. For example, after the successful

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 1.

<sup>30</sup> Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 372.

<sup>31</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 96.

2000 release of Fox's *X-Men*, the X-Men characters of the comics all received makeovers in black leather, though the filmmakers of *X-Men* only outfitted the characters in such a way because the traditional blue and yellow spandex of the comic book versions would have shown up terribly on film. The decision for the movie was due to the difficulty of contrasting bright and dark primary colours on film, while the production processes of comics continued to work better with high contrast, but this did nothing to stop publisher Marvel Comics from capitalizing on the popularity of the Fox film. In the case of Batman and the popularity of the *Arkham* games, the transmedia relationship has been more nuanced. In the case of the *Arkham* series, the comics certainly began to emulate the geography of the games, but they also worked upon the geography of the next instalment in the game series. Case in point: in *Arkham City*, the Penguin (one of the first major boss fights) holds villainous court in a stronghold attached to the Gotham Museum of Natural History called the Iceberg Lounge. Not long after the success of *Arkham City*, Batman-related comic books began heavily using the same trope, only with the club rechristened the Iceberg Casino and relocated offshore, perhaps to better reflect the "Iceberg" name and accentuate the business's arctic architectural features. In *Arkham Origins*, the Iceberg Casino is gone, but Penguin's new hangout has become the Final Offer, a decommissioned ocean liner moored just offshore and featuring a casino. There seems to be little explanation for the change in venue besides the tendency in transmedia to brand each iteration differently enough to emit the aura of something new but similar; something adapted and reimagined rather than translated. This pattern established, one wonders if The Penguin is soon to set sail in the comics, eschewing a static establishment for one that can move from port to port. In either case, the Penguin of *Arkham Origins* is geographically located in the same region of Gotham as the Penguin of the current comics: just offshore on the eastern side of the city. More significantly, a 2012 storyline in the Batman-family title *Nightwing* features a version of Amusement Mile visualized extremely similarly to its depiction in *Arkham City*, and the storyline itself focuses on the revitalization of various areas and landmarks seen in the game.<sup>32</sup> The storyline appeared between *Arkham City* and *Arkham Origins*; as if in response to this story, the region in *Origins* is rendered to appear more prosperous and clean. At this point, Gotham City has become so layered that it's hard to tell which valence of the palimpsest sits on top of which.

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. Kyle Higgins, Eddy Barrows, and Geraldo Borges, *Nightwing* #10 (New York: DC Comics, 2012), 2-12.

There is a final metaphysical layer to the Gotham City of *Arkham Origins*. Because it serves as a prequel to both *Arkham Asylum* and *Arkham City*, the Gotham of *Origins* is not only layered with the media history of the Batman narratives that have gone before it (as well as all the other cultural influences in question), but also layered with its own bleak future, haunted by what has yet to happen in the game franchise's diegesis. For the initiate to the *Batman* world, the game serves as an effective entry point into Gotham and its colourful populace; for the experienced Batman, it not only effectively ties itself in to other media in the Batman universe, but also reflects a depressing worldview in which Batman is fighting a losing battle against crime. For the player who has already finished *City*, *Origins* may seem a rather pointless activity. Strive and struggle as he may to save Gotham in this story, the familiar architecture, geography, and circulation of enemies in the games imply that Batman is doomed to fight the same battles in the same locations over and over again in his own narrative timeline, with the only change being decay.

However pessimistic this view of the game's narrative world may be, it also makes Gotham feel all the more real just by being a prequel. The geography of *Arkham Origins* itself contains content and design drawn from 75 years of Batman media and almost a hundred years of architectural history, different elements and locations serving different purposes for different creative teams and audiences, all of it eager to justify itself as part of the Batman universe. Represented here, in a story taking place during the Caped Crusader's early years, these elements of *Arkham Origins*' Gotham City consolidate the suburbs of Batman's media history into a municipality with a shared history that has yet to take place, but can now be mapped in terms of space and circulation. Viewed through this lens, *Arkham Origins* is not just a palimpsest, but a blueprint, a sketch for greater adventures to come—even if those adventures are fated to become darker for the Dark Knight.

## **VI. Exploding the Map**

In June 2015, the *Arkham* series ostensibly concluded with *Arkham Knight* (though it's anyone's guess whether such a popular series will be allowed to remain dead for long). For this fourth and final instalment, development duties were returned to Rocksteady and a number of new gameplay mechanics were on offer. Chief among the additions was the introduction of the Batmobile as a useable vehicle. On this front Rocksteady opted to remove the fast-travel system utilized by WB Games Montreal in developing *Origins* so as to make the player's use of the

Batmobile both more appealing and more necessary. This is because, as far as spaces go, the Gotham of *Arkham Knight* is vast. This Gotham is roughly five times the size of the Gotham of *Arkham City*,<sup>33</sup> making it more than double the size of the Gotham of *Arkham Origins*. Gotham is three islands once again—though instead of being North/Central/South, they triangulate around a small Liberty Island-style monument called “Lady Gotham” (fig. 8). Virtually no resemblance to the layout of places in either *City* or *Origins* is evident: in this version of the city, Ace Chemicals is located offshore northwest of town (rather than centrally), the GCPD building has shifted closer to the center of town, and Wonder Tower is nowhere to be found. Content-wise, all the palimpsestual techniques remain: landmarks speak to the deep fictional history of Gotham City; the three islands making up the municipality are callbacks to comics content with names like Miagani Island and Bleake Island (named for a bat-worshipping Native American Gotham tribe and a prominent figure in Gotham’s history, respectively); and liberal use is made of the same



**Figure 8:** A side-by-side comparison the *Arkham City* map (left) and the *Arkham Knight* map, roughly to scale. Images via Google.

<sup>33</sup> Luke Karmali, “Why *Batman: Arkham Knight*’s Gotham is 5 Times Larger than *Arkham City*,” *IGN*, September 30, 2014, accessed June 29, 2015, <http://ca.ign.com/articles/2014/09/30/why-batman-arkham-knights-gotham-is-5-times-larger-than-arkham-city>.

giant statues and neon signage seen in the other *Arkham* games and many of the other nodes in the network of its heritage. For such a large map, it is also dense with allusions to relevant Bat-media.

But just as in *Origins*, the vague familiarity and sense of a built-up world foregrounds novel gameplay experiences for the user. In *Arkham Knight*, the previously claustrophobic and compact canyon-like streets of the environment have widened to accommodate the handling of the Batmobile, while the buildings have grown in height to allow for a wider range of movement while gliding, as well as the car's "eject into glide" mechanic.<sup>34</sup> In order to navigate such a vast environment using a hybrid of air, foot, and vehicular travel, much of the game makes use of flickering direction arrows to light the Dark Knight's path to his next destination. Indeed, if circulation in *Origins* relied on both the map and the tour to move the player elegantly through Gotham, then *Knight* layers on top of that the Guided Tour, an innovation of the locative media of the smartphone age.

In terms of narrative, the story of *Arkham Knight* is in many ways the fulfillment of the dark promises made in the previous games: while the game's Gotham may be the brightest and shiniest of the series, the game's status as the series' conclusion means that the developers were free to make this the Caped Crusader's bleakest adventure. In this way, the blueprint laid out in *Arkham Origins* has been realized here—"Be the Batman," urges the promotional material for *Knight*. Much as one might expect of a palimpsestual document, the Gotham of *Arkham Knight* complicates through sheer, massive addition and expansion as much as through contradiction, erasure, and permutation. How should the player expect this new layer of Gotham to alter the experience of "being the Batman?" The level to which these transmedia tactics bleed outward to affect other nodes in the Batman media network cannot be fully traced; too little is recorded for posterity and too much waits to be catalogued.

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<sup>34</sup> Jeff Cork, "The Keys to the Batmobile—Designing Batman's Iconic Vehicle," *Game Informer*, March 7, 2014, accessed October 6, 2016, <http://www.gameinformer.com/b/features/archive/2014/03/07/the-keys-to-the-batmobile-designing-batman-s-iconic-vehicle.aspx>.

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