

Journal Title: *Wide Screen*

Vol. 6, No.1, September 2016

ISSN: 1757-3920

URL: <http://widescreenjournal.org>

Published by Subaltern Media, 153 Sandringham Drive, Leeds LS17 8DQ, UK

PLAYING LOS ANGELES ITSELF: VERSIONS OF AND FROM THE HISTORICAL CITY IN *LA NOIRE* AND THE “SEMI-DOCUMENTARY” NOIR

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Abstract: This paper considers *LA Noire* (2011, Team Bondi), a police-procedural video game featuring eight square-miles of navigable 1947-era Los Angeles terrain, as an occasion to interrogate the relationship between “real-world” historic cities and their counterpart versions experienced through video games and films. Upon noting *LA Noire*’s distinct modes of narration produce both fictional and historical versions of the city simultaneously, this paper positions *LA Noire* in relation to a peculiar cycle of mid-century American films sometimes referred to as “semi-documentary” noirs. In addition to the fact that *LA Noire* adapts one of these films, Jules Dassin’s *The Naked City* (1947), into a playable sequence within the game, the crucial connection between *LA Noire* and the semi-documentary noir actually resides in their parallel projects of setting fictional stories within “real-world” settings. By recognizing how these semi-documentary noir films maintain a documentary function despite their inclusion of fictional elements, this paper suggests that *LA Noire* allows us to recognize a comparable, yet distinct, documentary function in certain video games.

I. “The Most Accurate Version of Los Angeles”

One of the chief pleasures of playing Team Bondi’s *L.A. Noire* (2011)—a police-procedural, open-world¹ video game in which the player controls a young detective solving criminal cases in post-war Los Angeles—is driving period cars around an ostensibly faithful depiction of 1947 Los Angeles complete with impeccably-modeled topography, street layouts, storefronts, and landmarks. It is a virtual landscape that is at least precise enough to evoke

¹ “Open-world” video games provide players with a fairly large environment to explore at will. Often these games make an effort to avoid restricting the player to a single task or single location during gameplay.

considerable reverie in the account written by journalist Christian Donlan who decided to play the game with his father, himself a native of 1940's L.A. and the son of an Angelino beat-cop. Donlan reported that his father was transfixed:

...the whole experience was actually far more affecting and far more powerful [than we expected]. Dad just trailed off, really, lost in the texture of *L.A. Noire*... surfacing now and then to announce a car or a familiar sight. ...*I remember that restaurant-- Rialto? God, that place used to show all the old burlesque stuff. What's the name on that oil pump?*

...So did my dad find *L.A. Noire* accurate? Intoxicatingly so...the little details were the most affecting, though: the tyre-changing bay outside a gas station, or the wooden crate of bottles stacked next to a vending machine...²

The elder Donlan's reaction is a testament to *L.A. Noire*'s environmental designers who were reportedly meticulous about the accuracy of their reproduction of the Los Angeles 1947 cityscape, drawing on archival material including period maps, photography and film footage.³ One effusive press account related that "Team Bondi pored over [archival material]...which provided the designers everything from building locations and conditions, public transportation routes, traffic patterns—the real arterial structure of a city preserved mostly in film and literature."⁴ Donlan himself even makes the remarkably sincere claim that "as a result [of *LA Noir*], gamers will be immersed in the most accurate version of 1940s Los Angeles ever created."⁵ Donlan is evidently overlooking the notion that the "most accurate version...ever created" would more likely be the *original* version of Los Angeles—the version people were "immersed" in because it was where they actually resided in 1947.

Still, poking holes in Donlan's statement (which, to be fair, may be referring only to video games) is far less productive than exploring some of the ambiguous terminology and ideas we rely on when referring to how cities are represented through the moving image. After all, what does it even mean to *create an accurate version* of Los Angeles? Within common parlance, designating something as a "version" implies that it is one of multiple existing iterations. Maybe, then, 1947 Los Angeles only becomes a *version* of itself—the *original or historic version* of Los Angeles—

² Christian Donlan, "Night and the City," <http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2012-10-09-night-and-the-city>.

³ Much of this was obtained from a number of Los Angeles archives including those of USC and UCLA. See Nathan Marsters, "How Archivists Helped Video Game Designers Recreate the City's Dark Side for 'L.A. Noire'," kcet.org/updaily/socal_focus/history/how-archivists-helped-video-game-designers-recreate-the-citys-dark-side-in-la-noire-33822.html

⁴ Joseph A. Bernstein and Dan Nosowitz, "How L.A. Noire Rebuilt 1940s Los Angeles Using Vintage Extreme Aerial Photography," popsci.com/technology/article/2011-05/using-extreme-aerial-photography-1920s-rockstar-rebuilt-1940s-los-angeles-la-noire.

⁵ Donlan, "Night and the City".

only once it is simulated, re-produced, and/or re-presented. We also probably want to avoid implying that the historic Los Angeles, a city developed by countless entities over time, was “created” in the same way as a representation of the city might be created by an intentional organizing force (e.g. a video game manufacturer). Concerning representation, we might also be concerned with assessing the level of “accuracy” of a given version. Even if *LA Noire* had managed to provide the player with a photo-realistic, outwardly precise, video game version of Los Angeles—something which the game heralds the possibility of, even if it may not have been accomplished⁶—it seems impossible to measure the “accuracy” of a given version of Los Angeles.

Consequently, we are left with a series of interrelated questions. How do we compare a *created* version of a city with the version that we presume to have historically existed? Do we compare it to other “versions” we have seen in representations or the traces left in archives and period footage? How might, then, a graphically rendered version compare to those countless photographic versions of Los Angeles which have served as settings in countless films and television shows? What is at stake in *LA Noire*’s attempt to (re)create a version of a location which has (or had) a real-world referent especially in relation to those seemingly parallel versions appearing in live-action television shows and movies? Should we assume that a film shot on location in Los Angeles in the period the game depicts, something like *He Walked by Night* (Anthony Mann, 1948), provides a more accurate version of Los Angeles precisely because it relies on the city of Los Angeles to supply its own visual referent within the diegesis?

My motivation for raising these questions is less about trying to determine a hierarchy amongst specific texts and forms of representations in terms of accuracy, than it is about

⁶ Besides the current technical and economic constraints that make such a feat impossible, there are those who dispute the historical precision of *LA Noire* for other reasons. In an extended blog post by the website *1947 Project*, a website dedicated to history of 1947 Los Angeles, Nathan Marsak writes that *LA Noire*’s “omission of oft-photographed ... buildings is a bit perplexing.” He goes on to remark that “[*LA*] *Noire* shall then be the introduction for many to the wonderful world of 1947 Los Angeles, and as they learn it in its eidetic state, they are going to come away with a view of the City at a place in time that is almost, but not quite. If they learn it here first, then, when they subsequently see it presented accurately, they’ll figure the simulacrum to be the true version.” Nathan Marsak to Nathan’s Blog, April 20, 2011, <http://www.1947project.com/47PlaysLANoire>. . Further still, *LA Noire*’s own developers (or, more likely, their attorneys) downplay any expectations of the game’s “accuracy” in the legal disclaimer that briefly appears each time the game is loaded: “This videogame is a fictional story set in 1940’s Los Angeles. It depicts invented fictionalized historical characters, groups, location, scenes and events in a manner that is not historically accurate.”

interrogating broader issues related to the representation, historicity, and visual memory of real-world locations that are become diegetic worlds through moving image media.

It is also crucial to acknowledge that because *LA Noire* specifically depicts Los Angeles, a location so frequently visualized already as the center of film production and thus the de facto setting for so many movies, it places the game into a fairly robust conversation about distinct versions of the city. Thom Andersen's brilliant video essay *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (2003) makes it eminently clear why Los Angeles in particular has spawned a plethora of prominent critical inquiries into the lived city's relationship with its fictional counterparts. Among these is Mike Davis' instantly canonical book, *City of Quartz*, in which he points out that Los Angeles is an exceptional city precisely because it has been "infinitely envisioned," which is also what makes uncovering an *accurate* version of the city all that much more elusive.⁷ In what amounts to Davis' faint dismissal of Baudrillard's "hyperreal" Los Angeles,⁸ Davis sardonically insists that "beyond its myriad rhetorics and mirages, it can be presumed that the city [of Los Angeles] actually exists."⁹ And so, Davis' strategy for recovering some existent Los Angeles requires a thorough reckoning with those mythologizing "mirages," each of which he understands as distinctive "attempts to establish authentic epistemologies for Los Angeles."¹⁰ Like the noteworthy projects of Kenneth Anger, Joan Didion, Reyner Banham, Michael Sorkin, David Fine and Norm Klein, Davis' recognizes that understanding the idea of Los Angeles inevitably involves a complex dialectic with its many collective versions.¹¹

Within the scope of this paper, however, Los Angeles is representative of a broader set of questions regarding the relationship between a "real-world" city—the *original, historic version* that, in Davis's terms, we presume "actually exists"—and its assorted visual simulacra. While

⁷ Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, New ed. (London ; New York: Verso, 2006), 23.

⁸ See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

⁹ Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, 23.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ See Kenneth Anger, *Hollywood Babylon* (Phoenix, Ariz.: Associated Professional Services, 1965); Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, vol. 1st Touchstone (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979); Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (London.: Allen Lane, 1971). Norman M. Klein, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (New York; London.: Verso, 1997). David M. Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles : A City in Fiction*, 1st ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000). See also Charles G. Salas and Michael S. Roth, *Looking for Los Angeles: Architecture, Film, Photography, and the Urban Landscape*, vol. 8 (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2001); Ian Scott, "Filming Los Angeles: History, Hollywood, and the City's Disastrous Imagination," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (2009).

there has been substantial critical attention paid to this phenomenon in film,¹² there has been far less consideration toward understanding the parallel phenomenon in video games.¹³ Accordingly, Donlan's slippage, which apparently supplants the lived experience of 1940's Los Angeles with that of played experience of *LA Noire*'s digital version, provides as good a moment as any to reflect on what it means to "accurately" (re)create, (re)present, or document a version of a real-world city in a video game. The relevance for exploring this relationship is in part a response to the increasing prevalence of video games that use cities from our world as open-world settings—something we see in the Rockstar North's *Grand Theft Auto* series' parodic caricatures of New York, Miami, and Los Angeles; Bethesda's *Fallout* series' post-apocalyptic Washington DC, Las Vegas, and Boston; and Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* series' depiction of a growing number of historical cities including Renaissance Florence, Venice, Rome, revolutionary-era Paris and colonial cities of the Americas.¹⁴ As video games increasingly render their own versions of historic cities, aiming for some type of "accuracy" architecturally, geographically, topographically, historically, or otherwise—it is imperative to reflect on how we experience these games and the worlds they create.

LA Noire may be a somewhat atypical example amongst these open-world city games in that it particularly aims to elicit the experience of a historic or "authentic" version of Los Angeles as opposed to the parodic, foreshortened, or fantastic renderings featured in the majority of video games, as mentioned above. At the same time, because it puts the "infinitely envisaged" Los Angeles front and center and relies heavily on cinematic modes of production, cinematic style, and film genre,¹⁵ *LA Noire* is also particularly instructive for situating this inquiry within an existing

¹² See various collections of essays including Tony Fitzmaurice and Mark Shiel, *Screening the City* (London: Verso, 2003); Barbara Caroline Mennel, *Cities and Cinema*, Routledge Critical Introductions to Urbanism and the City (London ; New York: Routledge, 2008); Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice, *Cinema and the City: Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context* (Malden, Mass;Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell Publishers, 2001); Andrew Webber and Emma Wilson, *Cities in Transition: The Moving Image and the Modern Metropolis* (New York;London;: Wallflower Press, 2008). On Los Angeles in particular, see previous note.

¹³ Perhaps the only substantial and sustained attention comes from Robert Schweizer's fairly recent dissertation on video game cities. See Robert Thomas Schweizer, "Videogame Cities in Motion" (Dissertation, Georgia Institute of Technology, 2014).

¹⁴ Rockstar North's *Grand Theft Auto* games referenced here include *GTA: Vice City* (2002), *GTA: San Andreas* (2005), *GTA: IV* (2009), and *GTA: V* (2013). Ubisoft various subsidiaries developed *Assassin's Creed* games referenced here include *AC II* (2009), *AC Brotherhood* (2010), *AC III* (2012) *AC IV: Black Flag* (2013), *AC Unity* (2014). Bethesda's games referenced here are *Fallout 3* (2008), *Fallout New Vegas* (2010) and *Fallout 4* (2015).

¹⁵ In both its production and in its content *LA Noire* showcases its affiliation to cinema and cinematic history. Beyond the game's overt references to specific films and an arching narrative that evokes film noir, the performances of all the actors in the narrative portions of the game were actually filmed on cameras using live actors and motion capture technology before they were adapted into the game's world.

critical framework from film studies. While a more comprehensive critical account of *LA Noire* might engage with the noteworthy scholarship on Los Angeles as a city with an exceptional municipal and institutional history—especially as it relates to film noir¹⁶—or delve into the broader scholarly conversation about open-world video games,¹⁷ my more narrow aim here is instead to situate *LA Noire* in relation to a particular cinematic tradition of using real-world cities—as places, ideas, and phenomenological experiences—within moving images.

On this note we will see that while *LA Noire* is unabashedly indebted to the film noir and neo-noir canon, the game's tension between fictional narrative and historic versions of the city actually pinpoints a more peculiar cinematic lineage—specifically, that of a small cluster of noir-adjacent films from the post-WWII period known as “semi-documentary” noir films, which are fictional narrative films that incorporate documentary features in atypical ways as we shall later see.¹⁸ This connection particularly helps explain *LA Noire*'s seemingly idiosyncratic decision to choose Jules Dassin's 1947 film *The Naked City* as the only film it fully adapts into a playable criminal case; “idiosyncratic” because *The Naked City*, as an example of semi-documentary noir, plainly lacks many of the more recognizable noire tropes—the “hard-boiled” detective character, the femme fatale, the low-key lighting scheme—that appear in other noir films referenced in the game. Moreover, the qualities of the semi-documentary noir allow us to recognize a critical framework for understanding *LA Noire*'s ability to signal the possibility of a video game variant of a documentary function. That is, following Bill Nichols, if we understand the documentary function to be comprised of images that serve as evidence in arguments about the historical world, this project hopes to use *LA Noire* to begin defining a video game documentary function that is both reminiscent of and distinct from that the documentary function contained within the photographic form.

¹⁶ See Nicholas Christopher, *Somewhere in the Night: Film Noir and the American City* (New York: Free Press, 1997); William Hare, *L.A. Noir: Nine Dark Visions of the City of Angels* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2004); Alain Silver, James Ursini, and Inc ebrary, *L.A. Noir: The City as Character* (Santa Monica, CA: Santa Monica Press, 2005); Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles : A City in Fiction*.

¹⁷ See for instance Steffen P Walz, *Toward a Ludic Architecture: The Space of Play and Games* (ETC press, 2010); Gordon Calleja, *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation* (MIT Press, 2011).

¹⁸ I say “noir-adjacent” because there is some debate about whether they should even be considered film noir. William Park refers to these films as “docu-noirs” but says “only some spirit of inclusiveness would admit them into the noir fold.” See William Park, *What Is Film Noir?* (Lanham, Md;Lewisburg [Pa.];: Bucknell University Press, 2011), 60. More discussion on the “semi-documentary” is found later in this paper.

II. LA or Noir?

In its very premise as a noir-esque, story-driven video game set in a historically scrupulous depiction of Los Angeles, *LA Noire* maintains certain tensions between contradictory narrative and documentary-like ambitions. In its narrative aims, the game wants the player to feel as if they are taking part in something like an elaborate, self-referential film noir, and thus inhabiting a stylized, resolutely fictional version of Los Angeles. At the same time, the game often retains a documentary-like ambition to make the player feel as though they are navigating eight square miles of a historic version of 1947 Los Angeles.¹⁹ In terms of the former, the game's designers are quite explicit in their indebtedness to a certain mythical Los Angeles cultivated by Hollywood through those noir films of the mid-century, evidenced in explicit namechecks and knowing citations of famous Los Angeles based film noir like *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Murder My Sweet* (1944), *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), and *Lady in the Lake* (1947).²⁰ Each of these films are, for instance, included among the games "Gold Film Reels" challenge, which, in an obvious break from historical pretense and realism, provide the player with an optional scavenger hunt for hidden film canisters strewn about the city. The homage to the version of Los Angeles of film noir also carries over into the game's affected dialogue and lingo, which recalls those noir books and films of the era. At other times, though, what could be self-reflexive noir stylization within a post-modern pastiche, might also function as techniques for adding realistic detail to the experience of navigating a historic version of Los Angeles. Conceivably, the characters' seemingly stylized mannerisms could just as easily be depictions of 1940's Angelinos who could have modeled and fashion themselves after the film conventions of the period. And, when the movie theater marquees around the city display films like *Odd Man Out* (1947) and *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947), films that certainly could have been on theater marquees at the point when the game takes place, these references are as much instances of a "reality effect"—adding non-essential but plausible details to diegetic landscape in a manner that provides an air of authenticity—as they are winking references to those noir films. The point is that, by recognizing how the *LA Noire* relies on a text like *The Lady from Shanghai* to serve as both a reflexive citation and realistic historical detail, we

¹⁹ The basic tenets of this tension are already apparent in the way the game presents the option for the player to play the game in either the more noir-like black-and-white or in the true-to-life mode of color.

²⁰ Notably, many of the titles specifically referenced in the game were released after 1947. In this way they feel more like nondiegetic references.

can begin to understand the implicit tension between the game's narrative and historic modes of experience.

Essentially *LA Noire*'s conflicted ambitions reflect two distinct types of gameplay corresponding respectively to the fictional or historic versions of Los Angeles. To begin with, the fictional, "noir-esque" Los Angeles is expressed during the fairly lengthy, convention-heavy, narrative, which is strewn over the course of a couple dozen sequential police department "cases." That is, contrary to the free-form nature of the elder Donlan's encounter with the game, the central narrative of *LA Noire* puts players in control of Cole Phelps (voiced by and visually modeled after Aaron Stanton),²¹ a young American war veteran slowly working his way up through the ranks of the Los Angeles police department as a detective. Phelps is the player's primary avatar, progressing through the game's narrative by solving the increasingly available cases (many of which are loosely based on real-life crimes committed in 1940's Los Angeles). This is accomplished by driving around between relevant locations, exploring crime scenes, collecting clues, inspecting significant objects, and interrogating persons of interest.²² While the narrative structure within individual cases provides some room for variation depending on a player's actions and decisions, the larger trajectory of the narrative is entirely fixed.²³ For instance, if a player misses enough clues or makes enough wrong decisions, the principal consequence is that the case

²¹ Aaron Stanton is one of several actors in the game selected from television's *Mad Men* period drama (AMC, 2007-2015). It is a production decision that perhaps aims to tap into a contemporary sense of the American mid-century by borrowing associations from other texts.

²² While somewhat outside the scope of this particular essay, the interrogation sequences are actually paradigmatic expressions of the fundamental tension between *LA Noire*'s desire to provide an experience that is both authentic and "fictional" simultaneously. Without going into too much detail, the gameplay relies on closely reading the body language and facial expressions of these digital characters to determine a statement's veracity. Consequently, the developers put a tremendous emphasis on utilizing innovative technology to closely capture and reproduce the details of actors' performances in terms of facial expressions and body movements. The justification being that human performance will capture something more authentic than a completely fabricated image. In essence, the player is tasked with scrutinizing the actor's performance, which has been translated into a digital animation, in order to determine the veracity of the character's statements. The irony is, of course, that, in performing as a character, the actor is essentially always "lying" no matter how accurately they have been rendered. For an account of the technology. See Leigh Alexander, "L.A. Noire Debuts New Animation Capture Solution from Depth Analysis,"

gamasutra.com/view/news/27492/LA_Noire_Debuts_New_Animation_Capture_Solution_From_Depth_Analysis.php

²³ This narrative structure, in which periods of player agency are contained in between moments of narrative progression, is akin to what Epsen Aarseth described metaphorically as a "string of pearls": "Within each pearl (or microworld) there is plenty of choice but on the level of the string there is no choice at all." See Aarseth's "Quest Games as Post-Narrative Discourse" in Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*, *Frontiers of Narrative* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 361-77.

must be re-played from the beginning in order to receive more cases and, thus, progress the narrative.

It is crucial to recognize that the version of the city the player encounters during this narrative mode of gameplay is the one brought to them through the scripted, pre-coded arrangement. Every characterization, every significant location, every line of dialogue, was thoughtfully composed to convey a particular segment of the city, one that the designers have principally constructed to feel reminiscent of film noir. Accordingly, within *LA Noire*, the narrative mode of gameplay often explicitly relies on cinematic narration, chiefly through a tremendous amount of “cut-scenes” (expository cinematic sequences during which the player has no control), to relay its central story. These are sequences that particularly use conventional (although probably more “contemporary” than “classical”) cinematic techniques of narration including continuity editing—complete with establishing shots, general adherence to the 180-degree rule, and shot-reverse shots—along with a variation of camera angles, shot distances, and camera movements. Moreover, while such a mode of narration would be largely “invisible” in movies or television, within *LA Noire* these cut-scenes are often acutely foregrounded as movielike through excessive narrational devices like a gratuitous “letterbox” style matte which masks the top and bottom of the frame—implying an aspect ratio that is cinematic simply because it is relatively wider than gameplay sequences in which the player maintains control over Phelps—constantly shifting camera angles, and disproportionately fast editing. These stylistic excessive or *marked* cut-scenes primarily occur at moments of lengthy exposition, like the beginning or end of cases. In these moments, the player is decidedly relegated to role of spectator. In fact, it is also during these sequences that we might say that we encounter an unambiguously fictional, stylized version of Los Angeles.

Notably, however, the game also utilizes cinematic narration in a more subtle manner during gameplay through *unmarked* cut-scenes designed to remain mostly inconspicuous to the player. As such, the unmarked cut-scenes refrain from stylistic flourishes like letterbox mattes and excessive camera movement, and instead they utilize cinematic narration more economically, in a manner motivated by immediate narrative goals in game scenarios, for much shorter periods of time. We might say that these unmarked cut-scenes are embedded moments of cinematic narration that are supposed to feel as though they occur as a direct result of the player’s input, thus concealing the fact that the player does not actually maintain continuous agency over the

synchronal narration. For example, during an interrogation scene the player could direct Phelps to approach a suspect, and, when close enough, they can instruct Phelps to begin a conversation. In the following moment of the game's narration, an unmarked cut-scene will occur, and the game seamlessly cuts to a reverse angle that frames Phelps as he sits down in a chair across from the suspect. The player did not instruct the movement into the chair so much as they provided the primary directive to "interact," at which point the game responded with the unmarked cinematic narration showing Phelps sitting down and opening up his notepad. Further still, during the ensuing conversation, the game's perspective might shift from moments awaiting the player's input, to a more cinematic shot-reverse shot based on the direction of the conversation as guided by the player. While the dialogue's general flow may result from the player's inputs, the player lacks any synchronal control over the specifics of the narration—the dialogue, the editing, the camera placement—during the majority of the exchange. That is to say, despite being a kind of hypertext, the specifics of both the narrative and the narration are all tightly scripted ahead of time.

The mixture of marked and unmarked cut-scenes demonstrates how the narrative mode of gameplay explicitly and implicitly relies on a tremendous amount of cinematic narration. Thus the player experiences a particular, perhaps familiar characterization of the city, one stylized to feel like the setting of a fictional noir; it is the fictional version of Los Angeles that "feels like a movie." Alternatively, when the player evades the central storyline and related scripted sequences, the player is provided a significantly greater level of narrational agency. In this mode of gameplay, the player avoids narrative version of the city, one that is curated to provide a particular story, and encounters a categorically distinct version of the city. To understand the distinction, it might be helpful to take a closer look at the first moment of an initial playthrough of the game, in which *LA Noire* essentially switches between the distinct modes of gameplay/narration, and the game cuts from its opening cinematic montage—a marked cut-scene (*fig 1*)—to a high angle perspective directly behind the police cruiser containing Phelps where the player takes over control (*fig 2*). As with the countless subsequent instances in which narrational agency will be transferred to the player, the game cuts to a third-person, high angle perspective that centers Phelps in relation to the world immediately in front of him, and the letterboxed mattes quickly recede out of the frame, to

provide an aspect ratio that fills the entire screen. In concert, a non-diegetic “heads-up display”²⁴ showing a small circular street map of the avatar’s immediate vicinity in Los Angeles appears in the lower left corner of the frame along with some non-diegetic instructions for the player. It is a conventionally familiar way for video games to communicate to the player that the player now controls both the avatar’s spatial location and the perspectival view—or camera—in the world.²⁵ With this shift, comes a marked change of the player’s relationship to the diegetic world.



Figure 1: A selection of shots operating from the “marked” cut-scene before the player has any agency. These are fully operating in the cinematic mode of narration.



Figure 2: The perspective at the moment when the player first has control over Phelps. The player can now control both where Phelps is in relation to his environment, and, within limits, where the camera is in relationship to Phelps.

²⁴ A “Heads-up Display,” or HUD, is essentially an image that overlays (or frames) the primary world image and provides information to the player without forcing their perspective to change. It is common for HUDs to tell the player how much “life” a character has left or how many seconds the player has to complete a level.

²⁵ In Alexander Galloway’s terms, the game is switching from a mode of narration that only includes “diegetic machine acts,” to a mode that includes both “diegetic machine acts” and “diegetic player acts.” See Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). The “HUD” (see previous note), meanwhile, represents a kind of non-diegetic communication between the machine and the player.

In contrast to the cinematic narration's variation in shot-distances, editing, and camera mobility, in this mode, the player now maintains significant agency over the game's narration (albeit a narration that is procedurally limited in relation to the avatar). As evidenced in Donlan's account, the player can now eschew the central narrative altogether and instead direct the avatar to explore the extended 1940's Los Angeles terrain. Outside the confines of the story arc, the motivation to investigate the city is not necessarily tied to solving a crime or completing a specific, structured task; instead, the player maintains the possibility of experiencing a version of the city that mostly lacks a frame that charges the city and its locations with a particular noir-esque sentiment. This version of Los Angeles is mostly presented without the variations in shot-distances, editing, and camera mobility outside of those controlled by the player in relation to Phelps. This version of the city is encountered based on the whims of the player who controls both the avatar's spatial location and perspectival view of the city. In this mode, the player can walk or drive around at their leisure, taking in the sights and exploring locations like a time-travelling flaneur. The player can, for instance, linger in the interstitial spaces and admire views of the city, spaces which fall outside the narrative framework but resonate with a lived experience of the city.

In this open mode of gameplay, Los Angeles is mostly devoid of those narrative aspects that present a stylized, imagined, and mythic version of the city, and we instead encounter a version of Los Angeles more like the one experienced by Donlan—a historic version of the city that can somehow be described with the terms “real,” “authentic,” and “accurate.” While these are all very problematic terms, to better understand the experiences elicited by *LA Noire*'s alternating modes of narration it is helpful to recognize the game's affinity with a specific cinematic lineage, the semi-documentary, which, like *LA Noire* is torn between narrative and historic versions of cities.

III. “This is the City as it is”

There are a few superficial explanations of *LA Noire*'s decision to adapt *The Naked City* as a stand-alone case in the game.²⁶ For one thing, the game and the film are each set in 1947, and, consequently they both choose to underscore the same moment in US history when young

²⁶ The game's version of the case follows the general details of the crime of the film almost beat-for-beat: after a young in-store dress model is found dead in a bathtub, the detectives find out the victim was secretly working with her coworker's fiancé to burglarize the rich friends of a love-struck doctor, before she was eventually murdered by a hired goon in an effort to cover up the crimes. According to players' testimonials “The Naked City” case is possibly the longest in duration of the dozens of plotlines in the game. See lanoire.wikia.com/wiki/The_Naked_City

American veterans came back from WWII to a more cynical home front. Also, one of the film's detectives, James Halloran, greatly resembles *LA Noire's* Phelps in a number of ways: they are both are young, straight-laced veterans, family men, and novice detectives, and they even look alike. However, focusing on these superficial resonances largely misses the point of what makes *The Naked City* an atypical film, and, therefore, what makes *LA Noire's* adaptation of the film so peculiar and suggestive. The fact is that the main plotline *The Naked City* is somewhat forgettable. What actually makes the film unique and interesting is its essential relationship to New York City where it was set and filmed. This point is explicitly emphasized by the film's producer and narrator, Mark Hellinger, during the opening voice-over narration which runs over aerial shots of the city:

Ladies and gentlemen the motion picture you are about to see is called *The Naked City*. ...And I may as well tell you frankly that it's a bit different from most films you've ever seen. ...As you see, we're flying over an island. A city. A particular city. And this is a story of a number of people—and a story also of the city itself. It was not photographed in a studio. Quite the contrary... [the] actors... played out their roles on the streets, in the apartment houses, in the skyscrapers of New York itself. And along with them, a great many thousand New Yorkers played out their roles also. This is the city as it is.

From the outset, the film openly insists that its images should not be apprehended in typical fictional terms, as the version of the city it is depicting, it contends, is not a fictional version. Like the tabloid photographer Weegee's infamous book of candid street photography, *Naked City*,²⁷ which provided both the title and certain inspiration for the film, Hellinger and Dassin's decision to take the film out of the studio set and shoot the film almost entirely on location is part of a rhetoric of authenticity. They are selling a notion that they are capturing "the city as it is," rather than the creating another fictional version like those found in "most films."²⁸ And, what Edward Dimendberg describes as the film's "insistence on apprehending an unmediated and architectural reality,"²⁹ is essentially a mode of narration that asserts the film's ability to capture a genuine, authentic, real, original version of New York City. The city which we will see captured visually, the film claims, is the historic version of the city, the same city that could be found in a non-fiction, documentary film.

Notably, *The Naked City* was not the only noir-age film with a tendency to use certain documentary rhetoric to elicit a sense of authenticity within a narrative film. According to film

²⁷ Weegee, *Naked City* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1975).

²⁸ Edward Dimendberg, *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2004), 50-53.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 41-43.

scholar William Lafferty, the film can be included amongst other “semi-documentary” noir films, such as Henry Hathway’s *The House on 92nd Street* (1945) and *Call Northside 777* (1947), Anthony Mann’s *T-Men* (1947) and *He Walked by Night* (1948), and Dassin’s own *Night and the City* (1950), each of which distinctly highlight their relationship to some combination of real events and/or real locations through documentary film conventions.³⁰ More importantly here, as in *LA Noire*, the distinct modes of narration within the semi-documentary noir film similarly express certain tensions between their narrative and documentary ambitions.

Most scholars characterize the significant driving forces behind the semi-documentary noir films to be the prominent producers Louis de Rochemont and Mark Hellinger, who both brought a certain investment in the journalistic notion of capturing the world rather than representing it. Rochemont was an Academy Award-winning documentarian who had previously co-created the widely seen 1930’s series of newsreels, *The March of Time*, and Hellinger was an immensely popular newspaper columnist in New York City prior to producing films. It is no wonder, then, that one of the documentary conventions routinely exhibited in these films is the “voice of god” narrator who often directly addresses the audience in an instructive or informational tone so reminiscent of the newsreels of the era. Further, when this spoken narration is present, the semi-documentary noir films essentially operate in a conventional expository documentary mode with a voiceover providing a contextual description of non-narrative sequences that would otherwise fall outside classical continuity editing.

Like *LA Noire*, however, these films seem torn between relaying a plotted story using formal conventions of narrative cinema and establishing the veracity of their settings. As in the concurrent Italian neorealist films, the semi-documentary noir films are shot on location, include non-professional actors, and demonstrate an interest in the quotidian happenings of urban residents.³¹ However, unlike the Italian neorealist films, these features remain in the relative

³⁰ William Lafferty has pointed out that the term “semi-documentary” is used by film historians and popular critics to refer to a cluster of American films from the mid-to-late 1940’s. Lafferty points out that the term was used regularly in newspapers from the time to describe films characterized by “the topicality of the subject matter, reliance upon ‘location’ shooting, and particularly, the influence of one producer, [Louis] de Rochemont, and one studio, Twentieth Century-Fox.” William Lafferty, “A Reappraisal of the Semi-Documentary in Hollywood, 1945-1948,” *Velvet Light Trap*, no. 20 (1983): 24. Also see Randal Clark, “This Is Not: Falseness in Documentary Cinema,” in *Trompe(-)L’oeil: Imitation & Falsification*, ed. Philippe; Aïssatou Sy-Wonyu Romanski (Mont-Saint-Aignan: Publications de l’Université de Rouen, 2002), 341-58.

³¹ Randal Clark argues that the semi-documentary was Hollywood’s “response” to Italian neorealism. “This Is Not: Falseness in Documentary Cinema,” 341-42.. However, arguing that the “semi-documentary” was a “response” is

periphery because the “semi-documentary” noir films inevitably include a central criminal investigation. Looking a bit more closely at what is often cited as the first semi-documentary noir film, Hathaway’s *The House on 92nd Street*, provides a helpful illustration of this phenomena.

In an attempt to fuse an apparently historical account of the FBI’s uncovering of a Nazi spy ring operating out of Manhattan with a filmic style of the period, *The House on 92nd Street* includes sequences of non-narrative, silently-filmed documentary footage, which plays underneath the confident voice of an anonymous narrator who explains narrative portions shot in a style more reminiscent of a typical film noir.³² The “documentary” footage is stylistically distinct, looking more like a form found more often in social issue informational films from the era.³³ One reason for this, according to the American Film Institute’s catalogue entry for the film, is that much of the documentary portions were taken directly from the FBI’s “photographic files,” which seems to have included what amounts to b-roll footage of daily work within the FBI and what is purportedly FBI surveillance footage of the German embassy during WWII.³⁴ In one telling sequence, which includes the FBI footage, the film cuts from a distinctly professionally framed, exterior, medium shot of a window with a camera peeking through noir-esque, venetian blinds, to a reverse shot (ostensibly point-of-view) of surveillance footage, with a markedly different style and quality, that shows a Nazi flag waving outside a building we are told is the German embassy. The ensuing, nearly two-minute montage of surveillance footage shows people walking to and

misleading considering the fact that these films were essentially developed concurrently to those films commonly classified as Italian neorealism. Lafferty additionally makes the points that neorealism did not invent “location shooting [which dates] from the commercial birth of the medium,” and, further, that the American “emphasis upon location [in the semi-documentary films] seems to have arisen out of economic necessity during the mid-to-late 1940s.” Lafferty, “A Reappraisal of the Semi-Documentary in Hollywood, 1945-1948,” 24, 25-27. (Hyphenate altered slightly.)

³² This point is made by R. Barton Palmer who argues that these films “[follow] long-accepted documentary protocols, sequences shot silent are explained by the self-assured and omniscient narrator. R. Barton Palmer, “Crime Fiction and Film Noir,” in *A Companion to Film Noir*, ed. Andrew Spicer and Helen Hanson (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 134. However, I disagree with Palmer’s claim that even the narrative portions of the film have “a neutral, unglamorized visual style [that] attests to the film’s accurate reenactment of the official response to the discovered threat.” Ibid.

³³ For more on these types of films, see Arch A Mercey, “Social Uses of the Motion Picture,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 250 (1947)..

³⁴ The AFI entry underscores the FBI’s cooperation in its aim to produce a candid view of an otherwise clandestine realm: “Numerous contemporary sources note that J. Edgar Hoover gave approval for the film’s production.... According to a studio press release, the Bureau’s cooperation included providing the production crew with a special surveillance vehicle from which they could film street scenes on location in New York City without attracting a crowd.” American Film Institute, P.K. Hanson, and A. Dunkleberger, “Afi: American Film Institute Catalog of Motion Pictures Produced in the United States : Feature Films 1941-1950 Indexes,” (University of California Press, 1999), 1100.

from the building, each with a similar amateurish quality—readjusting focus, off-center subjects, jump cuts—as the narrator dramatically explains to the audience that “these are the actual films taken by the FBI.” (fig 3)



Figure 3

The House on 92nd Street initiates a trend found in the semi-documentary noir films that work to establish the veracity of their narrative worlds by interspersing sequences that retain the experiential affective qualities of a non-fictional, documentary tradition. Merging together what is essentially a reenactment with archival footage is not an unusual practice in documentary film, but it is certainly much more unusual to have extended documentary sequences edited into narrative films. Yet, this is something we find again and again with these films; both *Call Northside 777* and *T-Men* employ actual newsreels to set up their narratives.

At the same time, the documentary portions in these films often seem somewhat extraneous to their central narratives—providing, say, superfluous details of the FBI’s fingerprinting identification process or minutiae about one-way mirrors. The point seems to be less about confusing the narrative footage with the documentary footage, and more about bolstering the credibility of the central narrative by associating it with the primary sources of non-fictional, non-narrative footage. The implicit argument is that documentary aspects of the films maintain their non-fictional status despite their associations with narrative portions. Meanwhile, the narrative portions should gain a sense of veracity from the documentary portions. This rhetoric is further expressed in the way these semi-documentary noir films frequently provide shots that include deep-spaces or significant landscapes which showcase environments virtually impossible to replicate in a studio at the time. In *The Naked City*, for instance, the detectives conduct a quick interview atop a skyscraper mid-construction, surrounded by New York’s downtown skyline. In *Call Northside 777*, long shots of Jimmy Stewart frame him from a distance walking through a massive panoptic prison complex. Even if the particular scenery is not immediately identifiable to the general viewer, the films implicitly corroborate the idea that the narratives take place in the “real” world, the world that the spectator exists in.

On one hand, one might argue that the non-fictional rhetoric of the semi-documentary noir films are yet another in a line of techniques used to establish a sense of realism. Following this idea, the semi-documentary noir—as in Bill Nichols account of neorealism—would “retain the fictional quality of a metaphor: it presents a world *like* the historical world and asks that we view it, and experience the viewing of it, *like* the viewing, and experience of history itself.”³⁵ The “like” in this statement is important here because it categorically distinguishes the semi-documentary noir from the documentary form, the latter which removes the “like” as it asks that we view its form as a history itself. If the semi-documentary noir’s rhetoric merely asks us to view its world *like* the historic world, then it should be understood like other fictional narrative films shot on location, in which a real world location “plays itself,” asking us to suspend our cognitive dissonance about the setting and to experience the world of the film effectively—and affectively—as a metaphor of our world, *like* our world. From this perspective the use of location shooting and documentary rhetoric only works to reduce the amount we need to suspend our disbelief for this process.

On the other hand, perhaps we can argue that the semi-documentary noir film’s rhetoric retains certain documentary aspects and such a suspension of disbelief is not even necessary. That is, perhaps its rhetoric claims not to *represent* a version of our world, but instead to capture and document aspects of the historical world we live in. This is an essential part of how the documentary film is experienced differently from the fictional film. If the fictional image has the “quality of a metaphor” in being *like* the world, the documentary image somehow retains the affective quality of the original, being the world. (This is not to say that the documentary image can present reality, only that it retains the “quality” of something real in our affective experience. Whether or not it should—an issue that comes up for Baudrillard and others—is a different question.) That is to say, the documentary image functions as a trace of reality, instead of a mere representation.

Consider the idea that semi-documentary noir films—and perhaps even *LA Noire*—do not merely use the documentary form in the service of realism, but in their split modes of narration they manage to maintain certain documentary functions within their texts. To make such an argument we can look to the way that these texts privilege the documentation of their real-world

³⁵ Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 170.

locations over their narratives. The cities foregrounded in these works are not merely playing versions of themselves (as Andersen might phrase it), they are also consciously working to document the city in the same manner as a documentary film might. In these works, capturing and relaying the truthfulness of an experience, often the experience of a particular city, is effectively privileged over any individual story. One version of this comes in the consistent trend amongst the semi-documentary noir films to begin with an opening spoken narration, which foregrounds its ability to reveal a city in an account that is supposed to seem honest and raw, often running over a montage of establishing shots of skylines and aerial, birds-eye-views of the urban grid. In these mythologizing introductions, the semi-documentary noir films exhibit their unabashed willingness to depict the setting as a character unto itself. In fact, all of these opening voiceovers spend most of their time setting up their locations without expending nearly as much time setting up their central narrative.

Following in the tradition of the semi-documentary noir film, *LA Noire* likewise introduces its narrative with a non-diegetic voiceover narration running over a montage of quotidian scenes from around the city. It is a montage that specifically foregrounds its location, Los Angeles, as the central object of interest, instead of introducing the game's central characters and forthcoming story in any comprehensive way. In *LA Noire's* opening montage, we see ordinary scenes including a man closing on a deal before driving off a lot with a new car, a uniformed police officer (soon to be identified as our protagonist and primary avatar, Cole Phelps) getting a kiss from his wife on his way out to work, a professor-like figure lecturing at a university, a film crew working on a movie, and a busy street where a massive building is under construction. In fact, the general strategy of *LA Noire's* opening tableau of city scenes directly echoes *The Naked City's* own opening montage, which similarly begins with an assortment of seemingly quotidian moments plucked from around the city, some of which will be retrospectively relevant to the forthcoming plot and others which just express the range of experiences occurring simultaneously in the city. In both, the montage recognizes the multitudes of storylines the city contains at any given moment, too many to possibly represent within the confines of a film or game. What we understand on some level is that the plot we are about to experience is just one amongst countless plotlines existing simultaneously in the city. Actually, this notion is made quite explicit in *The Naked City*: after its montage of quotidian scenes from New York has come to a close and the opening aerial shots of Manhattan fade into a darkened but level shot of the city skyline, Hellinger's voiceover states that

the film will “begin [its] story this way” —the point of insertion, the particular narrative, was chosen somewhat arbitrarily from countless other possibilities for expressing the primary subject matter, that of New York City itself. In this way, *LA Noire* and *The Naked City* subjugate the narrative occurrences to the primary city setting—a point reiterated with *The Naked City*’s famous final voiceover: “there are eight million stories in the naked city—this has been one of them.”

This idea may also help explain another key reason that *The Naked City*’s narrative is so amenable to being adapted into a case in *LA Noire*. The particular plotlines in the semi-documentary noir film are, in a sense, iterative and replaceable, which is one reason that Tom Gunning is more likely to characterize them as “police-procedurals” instead as examples of film noir.³⁶ The point is that unlike like a more typical example of film noir which might rely on the distinctive methods of a singular detective, *The Naked City* depicts the systematic process of the investigation, following a formula we know today as the “police procedural.” Consequently, the attention to procedure in *The Naked City* allows the causal chain of events to be converted fairly seamlessly into *LA Noire*’s gameplay. That is to say, the methodical steps of investigation in the film—examining the body, searching for evidence at crime scenes, interviewing and re-interviewing suspects—also comprise the bulk of *LA Noire*’s gameplay within the narrative. Consequently, the more bureaucratic, procedural elements of *The Naked City*, those which distinguish it from more paradigmatic examples of film noir, are also amenable to the vernacular of the iterative cases in *LA Noire*. Likewise, it makes sense that both *The Naked City* and *He Walked by Night* inspired police procedural television shows with a tremendous amount of location-shooting in New York and Los Angeles—*The Naked City* (1958-1963) and *Dragnet* (1951-1959) respectively. The semi-documentary noir style was well-suited to the episodic structure of television in which the individual plotlines are essentially iterative.³⁷ It is also

³⁶ Tom Gunning and others are more likely to refer to these films as police-procedurals than film noir. In reference to *He Walked by Night* and *The Naked City*, Gunning explains that that these “police-centered films often adopted a semi-documentary style that characterizes the series known as the police procedural, as opposed to the more expressionist treatment of crimes of passion and femme fatales found in... earlier film noirs” Tom Gunning, “Invisible Cities, Visible Cinema: Illuminating Shadows in Late Film Noir,” in Tom Gunning, “Invisible Cities, Visible Cinema: Illuminating Shadows in Late Film Noir,” in *Cinematicity in Media History*, ed. Jeffrey; Littau Geiger, Karin (Edinburgh, GB: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 161-62.

Also, the idea of “procedurality,” which is an important part of how video games have been understood by Ian Bogost, helps express a kind of rules-based formula that these films follow. See Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games : The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

³⁷ Jack Webb, the creator and star of *Dragnet* apparently hatched the idea for the show while working on the production of *He Walked by Night*. Much of the film’s style provided inspiration for the show. See Michael J.

something we see again in *LA Noire*'s many "cases" which, too, are repetitive formulas in which the variables are expendable, but the project to depict the city "as it really is" remains constant.

The choice to elevate the city over the individual narrative, in a way that the narrative merely adds to the "cross-section of a day in the life," is also what allows Edward Dimendberg to link the montage portions of *The Naked City* directly to the tradition of "city symphony films,"³⁸ a group of non-narrative films from the 1920's and early 1930's, which illustrate the day-in-the-life of particular cities through thematic montages of scenes from those cities. Making the association is crucial because the city symphony films themselves demonstrate how documentary functions can essentially operate outside a traditional documentary format. Bill Nichols describes city symphony films as those that "imaginatively reconstruct the look of the world with images, or shots, taken of this world...[beginning] with images of a recognizable reality in order to transform it."³⁹ In this way, city symphony films function as hybrid forms that invite viewers to experience their cities from unexpected or inventive perspectives. More importantly, they do so by utilizing images that maintain their historical connection to the world of the viewer—the images never become metaphorical and are never fictionalized. That is, the version of the world presented in the city symphony film functionally remains a version of our historical world—not a version *like* the historical world, as in neorealism—even as it is aesthetically transformed through the radical form. Perhaps, then, the semi-documentary noir film and *LA Noire* are doing something quite similar. That is, by combining documentary and fictional forms, could we say that the semi-documentary noir films and *LA Noire* functionally aim to present a version of the historical world back to us in spite of their fictional elements?

To consider this idea, we need to clarify the distinction between experiencing an image within either a documentary or a fictional context. And, to do so, it is essential to turn to Bill Nichols as an authority on the documentary form. Nichols makes the following point:

Documentary evidence is ... distinct, less because it is of an entirely different order from similar historical evidence in the fictional film (the authentic firearms, waistcoats, and wall hangings in a

Hayde, *My Name's Friday : The Unauthorized but True Story of Dragnet and the Films of Jack Webb* (Nashville, Tenn.: Cumberland House, 2001), 20.

³⁸ Dimendberg, *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*, 59. Some of the films include *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (Hans Richter, 1927), *Manhatta* (1921), *Études Sur Paris* (1928), *São Paulo, Sinfonia da Metrópole* (1929), *À Propos de Nice* (Jean Vigo, 1930), and *A Bronx Morning* (1931). Bill Nichols sees the city symphony films as a documentary of the city by way of the "modernist avant-garde of the 1920's." Bill Nichols, "Documentary Film and the Modernist Avant-Garde," *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 4 (2001): 580, 91.

³⁹ "Documentary Film and the Modernist Avant-Garde," 596.

period film, for example), but because the evidence no longer serves the needs of the narrative as such. Documentary evidence is not a touch of the historically real used to embellish a world. It is not an element deployed and motivated according to the requirements of narrative coherence. Instead documentary evidence refers us to the world and supports an argument about that world directly. (It is still a representation but not a fictional one.) ...[E]vidence of and from the historical world may appear in either fiction or documentary film and may have the same existential bond to the world to the world in both. In [fiction] it supports a narrative; in the [documentary] it supports an argument.⁴⁰

We might say that the semi-documentary films and *LA Noire* attempt to challenge the relative mutual exclusivity of the fictional and documentary films in relation to evidence. In their dual modes of narration, the settings support the narrative, but more importantly the settings also make arguments concerning the authentic versions of the cities. The implicit argument made by the semi-documentary noir films and *LA Noire*, whether perceived consciously or not, is that even if the individual narratives are fictional, the settings they take place in are real. If anything, the narratives are replaceable, and they either function extraneously alongside the city setting or as helpful structural devices for relaying a cross-section view of the city. In this way, these texts work to present a version of the world that is not just *like* our world, but, in preserving a documentary function, presents a version that affectively retains the quality of our historic world. These images retain the status as an argument about the historical version of the world despite their relation to the fictional form.

IV. “The Slightly Uncomfortable Space”

Even as we recognize resonances between *LA Noire* and the semi-documentary noir film, it is still important to not ignore some fundamental formal distinctions between these texts. In Nichols’ formulation, what counts as “evidence of and from the historical world,” relies heavily on what he sees as the photographic image’s “existential bond to the world.” That is, for Nichols, the documentary function in cinema relies on the camera’s implicit ability— filmic image’s “indexical quality,” as it is often called—to accurately trace what appears in front of its filming eye so that the testimony about the historical world is fundamentally underwritten by the photographic images’ primary link with the world. Although notions of the photographic image’s indexical bond have been challenged in film scholarship⁴¹ and/or superseded by the prevalence of

⁴⁰ *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, 116.. My italics.

⁴¹ The argument that position the photographic image as exceptional for its indexical qualities often stems interpretation of the philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce and/or certain readings of Andre Bazin. For more on this see Tom Gunning, “Moving Away from the Index: Cinema and the Impression of Reality,” *differences* 18, no. 1

digital photography, Photoshop, and CGI (which, arguably, have turned the filmic image into a mediated graphic image),⁴² we can acknowledge that the documentary image's truth claims have not gone entirely extinct. In the law, in our personal lives, and in our social relations, the filmed image is still experienced and functions as "evidence of and from" something that occurred in our historical world; this is likely because we have not completely lost faith in the photographic form's ability record historical reality in some fashion. In other words, it is plausible to assume that truth claims of the documentary image hinge, at least in part, on a continued belief in filmic indexicality. Consequently, film's indexical quality, then, seemingly provides an ontological distinction between the filmed image and the graphic image, the latter which is considered a mediated, more suspect secondary account of the historical world. Such an understanding, however, potentially precludes a game like *LA Noire* from seemingly ever maintaining a documentary function, in spite of the game's possible resonance with a documentary form.

As the argument would go, the computer generated images in a video game like *LA Noire* should not be equated with those from a live-action film like *The Naked City* precisely because any video game comprised of rendered, representational, mediated drawings which lack the primary link to what happened in the historical world. In this formulation, we should not equate *LA Noire's* computer generated version of Los Angeles' "Brown Derby" building and with the version the Brown Derby we see in photograph. Essentially, this line of thinking makes a fundamental distinction between a "rendered" version of a city and a "recorded" version of a city. Even if both *LA Noire* and *The Naked City* aim to create evidence of and from historical versions of their respective cities, *LA Noire's* digitally animated version is a mediated rendering of the city, while *The Naked City* records a version of the world that can be functionally experienced as evidence of a time and place that existed in our historic world. (If nothing else, the camera's apparatus at least records the process of making a movie.) Meanwhile, the rendering of Los

(2007). Also see Charles S. Peirce and James Hoopes, *Peirce on Signs: Writings on Semiotic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

⁴² Lev Manovich argues that film in the age of the digital image, the photograph has lost its "privileged indexical relationship to pro-filmic reality" because of its pixilated materiality, a form which does not distinguish an artificial origin from a pro-filmic origin. He goes further to argue that "cinema can no longer be clearly distinguished from animation" and "has become a sub-genre of painting. This is similar to a point made by Bill Nichols. See Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, Leonardo (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), 254. Also see Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, 149-55. My point is simply that even the filmic image is suspect, it still functionally treated as a document recording historic reality which gains credibility from the indexical quality of the photographic image.

Angeles in *LA Noire* would ostensibly always maintain the status of a metaphor—even at its most rhetorically realistic, it would still be experienced merely *like* a version the historical world.

The question is, if the images in a video game like *LA Noire* have a different relationship with the world than those of film—if they lack the same existential bond with the historical world—does that preclude them from being experienced as images that contain truth claims about our historical world? Can *LA Noire* still provide evidence to produce an argument about the historical world—Nichol’s idea of the documentary function—if those images are not comprised of indexical images *of and from* the historical world? If so, how would this work?

Without disregarding the relevance of the material distinction between recording and rendering, perhaps Nichol’s notion that the same filmic image could be used to either “support” fictional narrative or “support” a documentary argument substantiates a more flexible notion of the documentary function than one that relies on indexicality. In *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, when Andersen constructs what he calls a “city symphony in reverse” assembling a historical, documentary version of Los Angeles using footage culled from popular fictional films shot on location, part of what he demonstrates is how fictional filmic images can be transformed to reveal a documentary function in their periphery. That is, the same images of Los Angeles used to support a metaphoric, fictional version of Los Angeles could operate, within a different rhetoric, to make an argument about the historical version of Los Angeles. That is, if we notice the importance of context and reception—if we focus on the experience that occurs during the aesthetic encounter—the material distinctions between rendering and documenting seem less relevant.

The elder Donlan’s firsthand account playing *LA Noire*—driving around familiar streets in utter nostalgic reverie—seems to support the notion that the moving image documentary function lies not in how an image was made, but in how that image is experienced. To understand this better, let us return to Donlan’s father’s articulation of his experience in playing *LA Noire*:

For a few hours I was able to re-explore the LA I knew in the late forties and early fifties with my son. The city was dark, but even with the period’s dim street lighting and within the slightly truncated map of the city, we were able to find our way around. ... I was able to remember exactly how to get around from both the towering City Hall and the slightly uncomfortable space of Pershing Square. This seemed a refreshingly thoughtful-almost intellectual-scenario that I would not have expected in something called a game.⁴³

⁴³ Donlan, “Night and the City”.

For Donlan's father, *LA Noire's* version of Los Angeles somehow maintains a primary connection to the historical world: the once existent "slightly uncomfortable spaces"—something that a recorded, filmic image may not have—are re-experienced through the sensorial occurrence of playing *LA Noire*. In this way, the documentary function—in which images make arguments about the historical world—seems to be less directly fueled by the image's production or its material indexical bond, but instead based on something much more particular about how we experience the world and how those experiences can be externally referenced in the act of reception. For Donlan's father, this process is quite personal, something that has to do with his own memory and familiarity of a time and place that could be brought back through an experience of the moving image. The distinction between the filmed and the rendered city is largely effaced when we turn our object of inquiry to the kinds of experiences which these media engender.

For Donlan's father, the rendered city is experienced as evidence of his personal version of the historic world, not unlike the way Anderson experiences his version of the historic Los Angeles through various fictional versions. That is, *LA Noire's* Los Angeles which is fictional to most, is experienced as a trace of an actual lived occurrence for the elder Donlan, indicating that, under certain circumstances, rendered images, those which have been mediated and plasticized, can still somehow provide a documentary function. In Donlan's case, the circumstances seem idiosyncratic, but, arguably, within the right kind of rhetoric—a video game version of a documentary rhetoric—it seems plausible that a broader range of reception could experience the rendered images within video games with a documentary function (i.e. as evidence in a way that can still support arguments about the historical world).⁴⁴ None of this is to say that *LA Noire's* potential to produce a documentary function should be understood as functioning precisely the same as it does in film. If anything, Donlan's description begins to illustrate what makes the experience of playing a video game so different from watching a film precisely because it emphasizes something about time and space.

To explore this idea further, *LA Noire's* adaptation of *The Naked City* provides a particularly lucid way to begin exploring possible attributes of a video game documentary

⁴⁴ This is an idea that D.L Maheiu essentially imagines when he describes "new type of historical archive" which we will experience through an "increasingly an immersive, multi-sensory activity, bound inevitably by the limitations of its authors, but relived in ways that traditional written narratives could never capture." D. L. LeMahieu, "Digital Memory, Moving Images, and the Absorption of Historical Experience," *Film & History* 41, no. 1 (2011): 82.

function. Specifically, looking at parallel narrative sequences from both versions—for example, the moment when the lead detectives are assigned to investigate a murder and they make their way to the crime scene—illustrates how differently these forms relate to time and space. In *The Naked City*, the sequence takes place in a succinct series of shots, paradigmatic of classical Hollywood efficiency, we see 1) one of the lead detectives exits his commanders' office, 2) a police car pulls up to a building before the lead detectives exit the car and walk to that building, and 3) the detectives exit an elevator and walk through a hall to an apartment door. As a fine illustration of the classic Hollywood editing style, the sequences contain three economical shots separated by two dissolves; the film's narration has moved the narrative from the police precinct to the crime scene while simultaneously communicating a number of interrelated details about the characters and the city itself in a span of less than 20 seconds. The two dissolves in this sequence in *The Naked City* operate as ellipses, used to indicate the absence—but implied existence—of the quotidian interstices of time and space that the narration omits.

The distinctiveness in experiencing *LA Noire's* version of the world, meanwhile, is found precisely in these interstices. Playing *LA Noire's* case of “The Naked City” begins with a marked cut-scene of the detectives being assigned the case and beginning to exit the commander's office. Where the film dissolves, though, the game transitions out of the cinematic mode by cutting to familiar third-person perspective behind Phelps as he is walking out of his commander's office, indicating to the player that they are now in control. Because it is an open-world video game, *LA Noire* now provides the player with agency to make his way to the crime scene or, alternatively, to travel anywhere else in the game world. This entails controlling Phelps as he navigates the halls of the police station, gets into a car in the parking lot, and drives through the streets with his partner to the crime scene—a sequence which, if rushed, takes a few minutes, but is essentially indefinite. After yet another marked cut-scene occurs providing an establishing shot of an apartment building, followed by three shots successively tighter shots showing Phelps and his partner getting out of the car and walking up to the building, the game returns the familiar third-person perspective, and the player's agency is returned. When approached, a uniformed police officer outside the building says simply “second floor, apartment six” and the player's next task is to guide Phelps up a flight of stairs to find the apartment in question.

If the description of this sequence in the game seems tedious, then it begins to capture the player's concurrent experience throughout many of seemingly interstitial moments of *LA Noire*. The Los Angeles of *LA Noire* is experienced in a very different manner from a filmic version of a city in part because the player can experience those the moments in between shots—those wearisome moments of a realistic depiction of time and space in a city that would sink momentum in a classical Hollywood narrative or even a documentary.⁴⁵ One of the points *Los Angeles Plays Itself* really emphasizes is the way Los Angeles is almost always spatially misrepresented on film—what Andersen calls the “geographical license” that films take when, in one of his examples, a “car chase jump[s] from the Venice canals to the Los Angeles harbor thirty miles away.” The idea is that while narrative films take poetic license in their depiction of space (amongst many other things) they might still call their location “Los Angeles,” while misrepresenting the city spatially. Part of the point is that the Los Angeles depicted through film—fictional or otherwise—never remains one continuous space shot through long uninterrupted takes; it is of course depicted through basic editing conventions that foreshorten the city for the sake of a continuous narrative or for convenience.

LA Noire's interest in presenting a historical version of Los Angeles means that the player particularly experiences those uneventful ellipses which would be edited out of a parallel cinematic sequence. While the player may, like the elder Donlan, marvel at the city while driving around, it quickly becomes something of a chore to spend upwards of 20 minutes driving a period car through traffic from one end of the city to the other. It is also during these moments that the player has Phelps driving or walking down some of the more unremarkable streets of Los Angeles: those which were not meticulously designed based on actual buildings like the landmarks of the city, but are instead based on general types. We see repeating housing structures, the indistinguishable storefronts, and billboards advertising the same products over and over, to get from one point to another. Perhaps this is a depiction of Los Angeles, which seemingly resonates a bit more with Reyner Banham's version of the city, is in fact more akin to one's lived experience in which the

⁴⁵ I say “can” because the player is at times given the choice to let his partner drive and thus, “skip over” the driving sequences. The designers of *LA Noire* must have realized the tediousness of driving such long distances within their Los Angeles because after a few cases, the player is given the option to ride as a passenger, providing the player with the option to cut over the travel time between areas with a tap of a button. This feature, known as “quick travelling,” is a regular convention in video games for allowing players to skip over tedious journeys in open-world games.

liminal spaces of our version of any city can pass by without providing any sort of real impression. This “filler” urban space is bounded by iconic, recognizable, and historically accurate places which may even feel more true to one’s memory: landmarks with characteristic, but not necessarily memorable, fabric in between.⁴⁶

Regardless of the reasoning behind the decision not to model these streets meticulously, what we can understand here is that the imagery and architecture are sometimes secondary to the sense of producing an accurate experience of a city by traveling through extended distances over periods of time. In fact, it is because the game’s restricted narration stays so rigidly tied to Phelps that we experience the city’s sprawling spatial coherence and its geographical precision. The city as a subject matter is primed to trigger such traces of memory because it presents a spatial index reminiscent of the experience of the masses of people that cohabited the same spaces of the urban environment at the same moment. When we see an iconic building like the Los Angeles Public Library in the game, it is not *being shown* or narrated to us—we narrate it ourselves. We might approach it slowly on foot as Phelps remains a few blocks away at the corner of Wilshire and Figueroa. As he walks along the city’s sidewalks, we struggle to see it from our restrained perspective and as it remains optically obstructed by the surrounding architecture and infrastructure. It takes time to walk around the building, and it feels all that much more colossal when we get up close to it. The spatial configuration of built environment, despite being rendered, can still evoke an experience of being a tiny presence in a much larger space, the feelings of being a lost soul in a much larger city.

What I am suggesting is that video games can maintain qualities of presenting historic version of city back to us in spite of their digital and manufactured qualities—whether filmed or rendered, a moving image can provide a documentary function as long as it resonates with our cognitive, affective, and phenomenological experience of the historical world. Admittedly, by privileging notions of receptive experiences over any material, ontological qualities, I seem to be fostering a pretty relativistic and somewhat circular notion of what it means to document the

⁴⁶ Schweizer makes the seemingly related point that by arguing that “using indexical references, games can develop senses of place by diagetically [sic] referring to locations and objects already imbued with strong meaning. See Schweizer, “Videogame Cities in Motion,” 204. For more on this idea see Ian Bogost and Dan Klainbaum’s essay “Experiencing place in Los Santos and Vice City” in Nate Garrelts, *The Meaning and Culture of Grand Theft Auto : Critical Essays* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2006).

historical world. That is to say, I recognize that my point here assumes that if the spectator experiences the image as one of and from the historic world—however mendacious this image may be may be—then this image is, in some sense, a “documentary image.” Perhaps, though, this merely recognizes the ways in which the documentary function has always hinged on relativistic experience and receptive context. After all, the documentary image should not be synonymous with the historical accuracy or truth; characterizing something as a documentary image indicates only that it contains *truth claims*. What is more, they can really only be understood this way if spectators have a frame of reference to recognize them as such (without a frame of reference, a spectator may not be able to perceive whether a given image is supposed to represent a version of the historical world or of a fictional world.).

My aim here is not to make arguments for what media forms are capable of presenting something historically accurate; it is to think about how images can be (re)presented to us in a way so that we experience those images as of and from the historical world, images that can present versions *of* the historical world by presenting images we take to be recordings *from* the historical world. Moreover, if photographs record a certain visual quality of a time and space, video games might be more suited to record other qualities that cannot be captured by the filmic image. As we continue this line of thinking, we should explore the ways that a video game like *LA Noire*, with its spatial coherence and adherence to a largely continuous experience of a historical city, seems suited record affective qualities related to scale, movement, spatial geography, topography, distance and maybe even architecture that the filmic image is less suited to record. That is to say, *LA Noire* perhaps symbolizes the video game form’s potential to record affective qualities of a version of the historical city in its images, which would literally be left on the cutting room floor during a movie production.

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Author's note: Special thanks to Sarah Rafson for her insight and editorial expertise. Thanks also to Lucy Fischer, Kevin Flanagan, Adam Lowenstein, Molly Wright Steenson, Daniel Cardoso Llach, and Harris Feinsod for additional comments and advice.

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