

Cultural heritage as a play space: representing New York City in Marvel's Spider-Man 2

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Abstract

The paper analyzes the way in which the video game Marvel's Spider-Man 2 from Insomniac Games represents and conveys the cultural heritage of New York City in the environment of an interactive digital medium. The aim of the paper is to explore how game representation transforms real architectural monuments, public spaces, city districts and other elements of the city's cultural identity into a part of a virtual and at the same time playable space. Through qualitative content and visual analysis of selected locations, the research focuses on the relationship between their real prototypes and digital interpretation in the game environment, paying attention to the degree of visual and spatial authenticity, ways of fictionalization and the function of cultural symbols in the game story. In particular, it examines the principle of playable cultural heritage, through which cultural and urban elements of the city change from passively depicted objects to an active part of the game experience. At the same time, the paper points to the possibilities of video games as new media in the popularization of cultural heritage, but also reflects the limits of its digital representation resulting from selectivity, simplification and transformation of real space. On the example of Marvel's Spider-Man 2, it presents the digital game as a specific medium of cultural representation, in which documentary reference, popular culture and interactivity are combined into a new form of mediating urban cultural heritage.

Keywords

cultural heritage, video games, new media, digital representation, New York, Marvel's Spider-Man 2



Introduction

In recent decades, video games have established themselves not only as a key form of mass entertainment, but are also increasingly becoming an environment for learning about cultural heritage and urban realities. Thanks to the possibilities of current technologies, virtual worlds can convincingly convey the atmosphere of real places, which naturally changes the way the audience perceives well-known cultural landmarks. Unlike traditional forms of presentation, such as books, photographs or documentaries, video games provide space for free movement. Thus, they offer recipients not only passive viewing, but an immediate experience of exploration and direct interaction with the environment itself.

This article explores how the popular video game Marvel's Spider-Man 2 digitally transforms the cultural heritage and identity of iconic New York City. Architectural landmarks, world-famous public spaces, and specific urban neighborhoods are transformed into an integral part of a playable virtual space. While the connection between games and the past often focuses on titles set in ancient historical epochs, this study focuses on the digital representation of a contemporary global city in the specific context of a superhero story.

Our effort is primarily to explore the tension between the visual recognizability of real urban locations and their integration into an interactive environment. The analysis observes how real cultural symbols and monuments change from passively perceived objects to spatial obstacles, navigational landmarks or places of direct action. At the same time, the work reflects the extent to which the creators deliberately simplify, transform and adapt the space of the real city for the sake of smooth gameplay. Using the example of digital New York, the paper thus points out what visual possibilities, as well as design compromises and limits, video games bring when depicting real urban space.



Video games as a medium of cultural representation and participation

Cultural heritage in the digital era is not only dependent on static memory institutions, archives or traditional mass media such as books or documentaries. The current digital environment and video games shift the perception of cultural message to an interactive level, in which passive viewing is replaced by active participation (Pitoňáková and Kubala 2025). From a theoretical point of view, video games represent a different type of text, for which Aarseth (1997) introduced the term ergodic literature. This concept emphasizes that unlike reading a book or watching a movie, where the recipient passively receives pre-formed content, a video game directly requires the user to perform specific physical and cognitive actions. The player must move in space, solve spatial tasks and make decisions, because it is only through these steps that the text of the game itself develops and moves forward. Thus, the game is not a closed work, but an open process that is updated only at the moment of interaction.

This fact has a direct impact on how the audience perceives and processes the cultural environment. While the film viewer follows a precisely defined section of the city presented to him by the director, the player unlocks the virtual city at his own pace and through his own lens. The architecture of the city in the game environment communicates not only through its visual form, but especially through how it can be handled. Cultural landmarks cease to be untouchable historical icons that would serve exclusively as a photorealistic backdrop. On the contrary, they are transformed into surfaces intended for action, which changes the anchored relationship between the recipient and the monument.

Through interactive mechanisms, video games can engage the audience in a way that other traditional media do not provide, making them a relevant tool for popularizing and disseminating knowledge about cultural heritage (Kubala 2024). In the current environment, the audience is no longer just a passive consumer of isolated content. It is becoming part of a broader participatory culture in which recipients actively associate in communities, share their experiences and directly complete the original work. This blurs the traditional boundaries between the author and the viewer, as users jointly create new meanings and dynamically participate in the media experience (Jenkins 2013). This concept is directly followed by



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Pitoňáková and Kubala (2025, p. 92), when they emphasize that *"the audience cannot be perceived only as passive consumers, but above all as a community that actively participates in the creation and interpretation of content"*. Players appropriate the virtual city, discover its details and create specific spatial experiences through their own actions, which transforms cultural heritage from a protected artefact into a space of co-creation.

While traditional storytelling is primarily linear, video games work primarily as complex simulation systems. According to Frasca (2003), games do not only represent a static representation of the world, but directly offer its functional model, in which it can be freely experimented and physically discovered. When building large-scale urban environments, developers do not have absolute control over every detail of the player's movement, so they apply the principle of procedural authorship. In practice, this means that the designer only creates a certain framework of possibilities and physical rules, within which the player autonomously builds his own spatial orientation. As a result, the digital metropolis becomes an interactive environment in which the audience redefines its relationship to the city itself and its historical landmarks.

In this context, architecture itself communicates not only through its aesthetics, but above all through how it can be handled within the framework of programmed rules. According to Frasca (2003), games do not only represent a static representation of the world, but directly offer its functional simulation model, in which it can be freely experimented and physically discovered. These game mechanics and systems can transmit values directly, which the theory refers to as procedural rhetoric (Bogost 2007). The way in which the game avatar moves in space, for example by moving between skyscrapers or interacting with facades, imprints a new, highly pragmatic meaning on buildings and streets. Familiar landmarks or vertical structures thus function not only as aesthetic carriers of cultural memory, but directly direct the flow of the gaming experience. In this way, video games blur the traditional line between cultural representation and popular interaction, bringing an innovative model for conveying cultural heritage in the digital age.



The architecture of the city between authenticity and game fiction

The transfer of real urban spaces into the environment of a video game brings specific design and interpretation challenges. Every video game, by its very nature, constantly balances on the edge between exact game rules and free fiction (Juul 2005). In the representation of real metropolises, this tension in practice means that the visual side has the task of evoking an existing city, while the game mechanics inevitably transform it into a closed system adapted to the rules of the gameplay. In the virtual space, architecture thus serves not only as a passive backdrop, but becomes a direct tool for navigation and movement of the player.

When looking for a functional intersection between reality and interactivity, creators encounter objective design limits. Although the gaming industry is a relevant tool for mediating culture, this process requires compromises. In academic discourse, it is pointed out that when creating virtual environments, there is often a tension between the requirement for the accuracy of realities and the need for a functional experience for players (Kubala 2024). In order for the game experience to be smooth, the digital representation of space must go through a process of selection and adjustment. When designing digital cities, developers are forced to adapt geographical realities to the limits of game mechanics. In the context of Marvel's Spider-Man 2, this means deliberate proportional adjustments to city districts, modification of building heights, or selection of selected landmarks so that the space does not form an obstacle, but an optimized environment for the dynamic movement of the character.

However, these necessary simplifications and topographical distortions do not diminish the cultural value of the interactive work itself. Expert studies confirm that rigid architectural accuracy and absolute conformity with reality are not always crucial for the successful presentation of cultural heritage in games (Copplesstone 2016). The primary goal of a game text is not to create a flawless documentary record. Digital space functions as a highly elaborate construct in which the authentic atmosphere of the monument is subordinated to the rules of game logic, whereby cultural heritage acquires completely new forms of presentation (Pitoňáková and Kubala 2025). This creates the phenomenon of so-called playable heritage,



which changes the way recipients perceive and process information about historical and cultural landmarks.

Research methodology

Given that the subject of the paper is the mediation of cultural heritage through an interactive digital medium, we have chosen a qualitative case study based on the content and visual analysis of selected image material from Marvel's Spider-Man 2 as a methodological framework. The research problem lies in the tension between the recognizability of real urban locations and their inclusion in virtual space, in which architecture and public spaces acquire importance in relation to the character, the perspective of the representation and the game situation. The analysis focuses on a specific set of screenshots supplemented by reference documents about real locations and official materials about the game environment.

The aim of the research is to identify through which visual signs the selected localities refer to real prototypes and how cultural reference is connected with the game context in the analysed shots. The partial objectives are to compare the ways of depicting individual locations, to distinguish between panoramic and immediate contact with the environment and to define the boundaries in which the principle of playable cultural heritage can be inferred from static image material.

Three research questions follow up on the goal defined in this way:

VO1: Which visual features of selected sites mediate their relationship to real prototypes?

VO2: What forms of spatial relationship between the game character and the cultural site does the analyzed material capture?

VO3: How does the footage connect cultural reference with elements of the game world, and what are the limits of authenticity and gameplay on this basis?



Subject of research and research package

The subject of the study is the visual representation of the urban cultural heritage and cultural identity of New York City. In this analysis, the term cultural heritage includes architectural objects, technical structures, monuments and historically formed public spaces. We classify Times Square as an urban and popular culture space; its inclusion does not mean that we assign the same monument or legal status to all the sites studied.

The research set consists of 12 images arranged in three four-panel image compositions, which capture seven locations. It is a purposeful selection of specific examples, the extent of which is determined by the available image documentation. All 12 images were included in the analysis. The unit of analysis is the location; an individual image represents evidence of its specific depiction. Therefore, we do not count multiple views of the same site as separate cases.

Table 1 Composition of the analysed image file

Location	Footage	Marking and position in the composition
Empire State Building	2	E1–E2: composition Empire State / Brooklyn, top row
Brooklyn Bridge	2	B1–B2: same composition, bottom row
St. Patrick's Cathedral	2	K1–K2: composition cathedral / sculpture / library, top row
Statue of Liberty	1	S1: same composition, bottom left panel
New York Public Library	1	N1: same composition, lower right panel
Central Park	2	C1–C2: composition park / square, top row
Times Square	2	T1–T2: same composition, bottom row
Total	12	7 locations



Analytical procedure and evaluation categories

The methodological support is the distinction between image content, user interface and interaction, which was developed by Consalvo and Dutton (2006) in the analysis of digital games. From their framework, we use the attention paid to the individual components of the game representation. At the same time, we distinguish the recognizability of the object from documentary accuracy. The London Charter emphasizes the need to clarify what visualization represents and what uncertainty accompanies it (The London Charter 2009). We use this principle as an interpretative support when comparing cultural reference and its digital representation.

The analysis took place in three follow-up steps. First, we recorded the number of shots, their assignment to locations and visible architectural, landscape and compositional elements. Subsequently, we confronted these features with publicly available descriptions of real prototypes on the websites of their administrators or relevant city institutions. In the last step, we compared the position of the avatar, perspective and the presence of the game interface across individual cases. Reference web sources were verified on September 22, 2026.

We have expanded the reference file with the official map of Central Park, a description of the architectural layout of Bethesda Terrace and a guide to the game's news on the PlayStation portal. The materials were selected according to the authorship of the site administrator or the publisher of the game and according to the direct connection with the analyzed character. The first two sources are used to contextualize the real prototype, the third to explain the declared game mechanics. Their function in the analysis is summarized in Table 3.



Table 2 Qualitative analysis categories

Category	Tracked characters	Analysis output
Visual reference	Silhouette, façade articulation, towers, statue, fountain, staircase	A description of the site's identifiers.
Spatial context	Overview, soffit, distance, surrounding buildings, water and greenery	Characteristics of the view and spatial connections.
The relationship of the avatar to the site	Position on the ground, near an object, above space or near a structure	Description of the position of the character in relation to the site.
Game layer	Minimap, Navigation Marks, Alerts, Hero Presence	Identification of the information layer of the game image.
Historical interpretation	Visible explanatory texts and cultural information	Evidence of explicit cultural information in the frame.

Individual categories have been processed by verbal description; cases are assigned the same analytical meaning regardless of the number of screenshots. We distinguish between a directly observable sign, its support in the reference source and subsequent interpretation. Names inserted into pictorial compositions are recorded as author's descriptions of the material. The diagram of the procedure is shown in Figure 1.



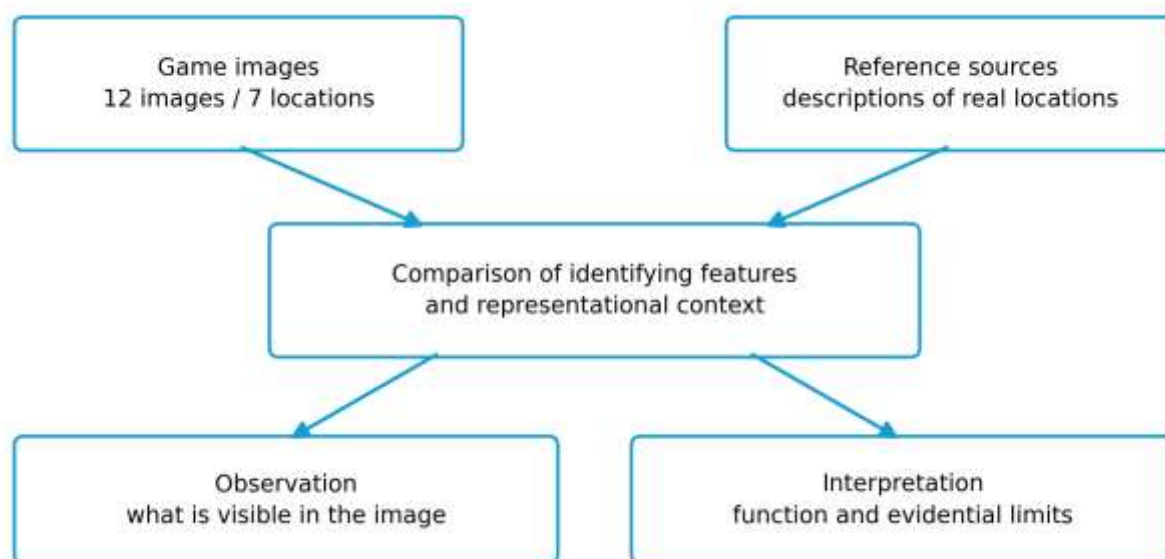


Figure 1 Procedure for the analysis of the game representation of cultural sites (Source: own processing)

Analysis and interpretation of research

In the analysed set, cultural sites appear in three mutually intertwining forms: as visual dominants of the panorama, as the environment of spatial movement and as public places of the depicted stay of the characters. The differences between the cases are mainly related to the distance of the camera, the available detail and the position of the avatar. Therefore, we divide the results according to the way in which specific architectural or urban features enter the game image.

Architectural landmark and space of movement

The Empire State Building is recognizable in shots E1 and E2 through its stepped receding mass, vertical articulation and distinctive tower termination. The official description of the building characterizes it as an art deco building and an important part of the New York skyline. In shot E1, the object is applied in the context of the surrounding buildings; shot E2 zooms in on it through the ceiling and emphasizes its height. In both cases, the avatar is captured in the



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air in front of the building. The cultural reference is thus associated with the vertical organization of the game image.

The Brooklyn Bridge is mediated in shots B1 and B2 by stone towers, broken openings and a system of ropes and lattice elements. Its cultural-historical status can be based on the documentation of the Municipal Transportation Authority, which also mentions the monumental declaration of the bridge in 1967 (New York City Department of Transportation, undated). B1 shows the bridge from an elevated position and highlights its linear arrangement across the body of water. B2 captures a figure in the air near the tower. Compared to the Empire State Building, the center of gravity of the painting shifts from a solitary vertical landmark to a structure connecting the two banks.



Figure 2 Empire State Building (E1–E2, top) and Brooklyn Bridge (B1–B2, bottom) in the game environment (Source: author's screenshots from Marvel's Spider-Man 2, Insomniac Games 2023)

Facade detail and panorama

At St. Patrick's Cathedral, the importance of the multiple view is particularly clear. The K1 shot captures the towers, the roof parts and the setting of the sacral building in dense modern buildings. K2 makes it possible to observe the angled portals, the circular window, the ornamentation and the rhythm of the façade. A historical overview of the cathedral documents the completion of the tower spikes and the installation of a large rosette above the west portal (St. Patrick's Cathedral, undated). This data provides a reference support for identifying the relevant elements in the game image. At the same time, the pair of shots shows that the visual reference does not have to lie only in the overall silhouette: approaching the facade makes a different level of detail available.

The Statue of Liberty represents a different way of conveying a cultural symbol. In the S1 shot, the statue is positioned in the background behind a body of water, while an avatar on a railing dominates in the foreground. Recognition is supported by an upright figure with a raised arm and pedestal; the iconographic sign of the torch is also indicated by the National Park Service. In this case, the panoramic presence of the monument is documented in particular. The case shows that the incorporation of a cultural monument into the game world can work just through its visibility.

Shot N1, New York Public Library, shows a bright monumental building with a regular articulation of the façade, plastic decoration and balustrade; the avatar is captured in the air in front of its exterior. The official presentation of the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building classifies the main building of the library as Beaux-Arts architecture. In the game image, the contrast of the ornamentally articulated building and the surrounding high-rise buildings is mainly applied.



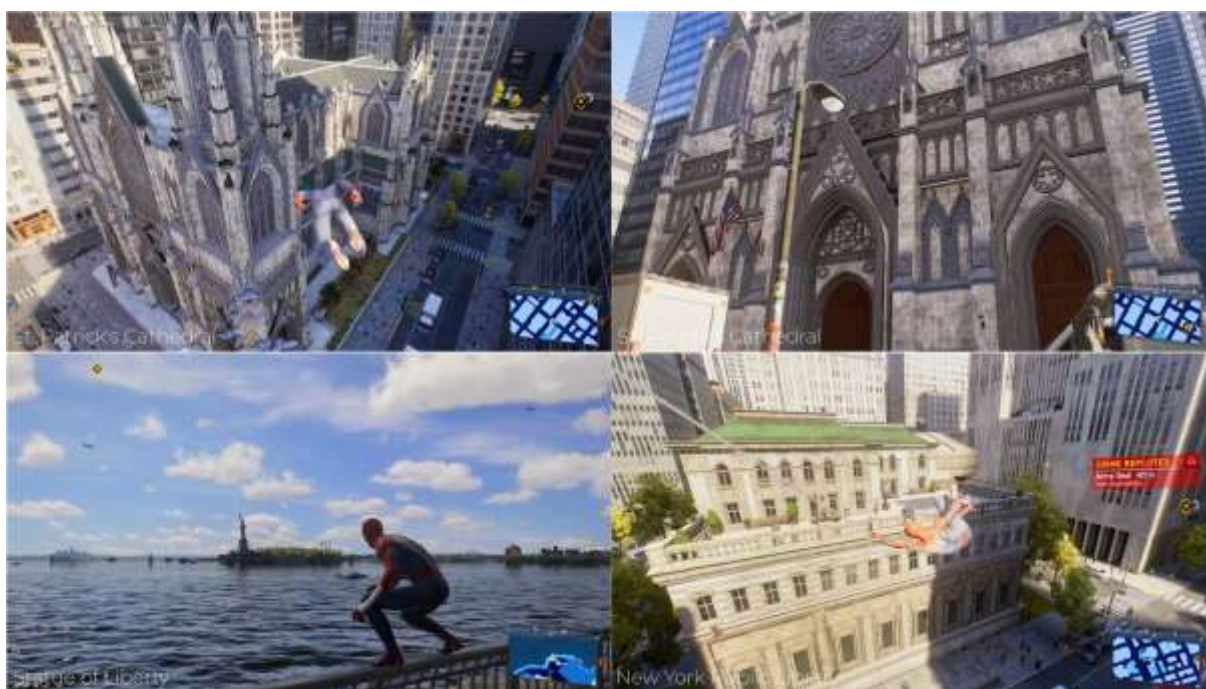


Figure 3 St. Patrick's Cathedral (K1–K2, top), the Statue of Liberty (S1, bottom left), and the New York Public Library (N1, bottom right) (Source: Marvel's Spider-Man 2 screenshots, Insomniac Games 2023)

Public space as part of cultural identity

Central Park is represented by an overall view of the greenery, the body of water and the network of paths (C1) and a closer look at the fountain with a winged figure (C2). The second shot shows the signs of the Bethesda Fountain, the top of which is formed by the Angel of the Waters statue; this element is described by the park manager Central Park Conservancy. The combination of both perspectives combines the landscape character of the site with an identifiable art object. While in C1 the avatar is in the air above the park, C2 places it on a paved area near the fountain among other figures. Thus, changing the scale of the view makes the difference between the park as part of the skyline and the park as a place of residence accessible.

Times Square is identifiable in T1 and T2 shots mainly through the high concentration of advertising spaces, vertical buildings and a distinctive red staircase. The reference to this element is also supported by the description of the Times Square Alliance, which places the TKTS point of sale under Red Steps. On T1, the advertising layer forms the main visual frame



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of the view from below, while T2 shows a staircase used by seated and standing characters. The cultural identity of the site is conveyed here by a combination of media images and public living space.



Figure 4 Central Park (C1–C2, top) and Times Square (T1–T2, bottom) as landscape, art, and public space (Source: author screenshots from Marvel's Spider-Man 2, Insomniac Games 2023)

Linking cultural reference and game situation

A common feature of the set is the presence of a superhero character who places cultural sites in a fictional world. At the same time, several shots feature a minimap, a navigation symbol or an indication of distance. On N1, a warning about a reported crime is also visible. The architectural image and the game information layer thus enter into a common composition: the location is displayed simultaneously with the data that orients the player in the current situation.

The spatial relationship to the site changes between cases. The Empire State Building and the Brooklyn Bridge are captured in relation to the height and position of the figure in a distinctive construction. The cathedral allows for a comparison of the perspective and detail of the façade. Central Park and Times Square include views from the level of the public space, while the



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Statue of Liberty remains a distant landmark in the supplied material. These are interlocking modes of display that emphasize different aspects of the spatial experience.

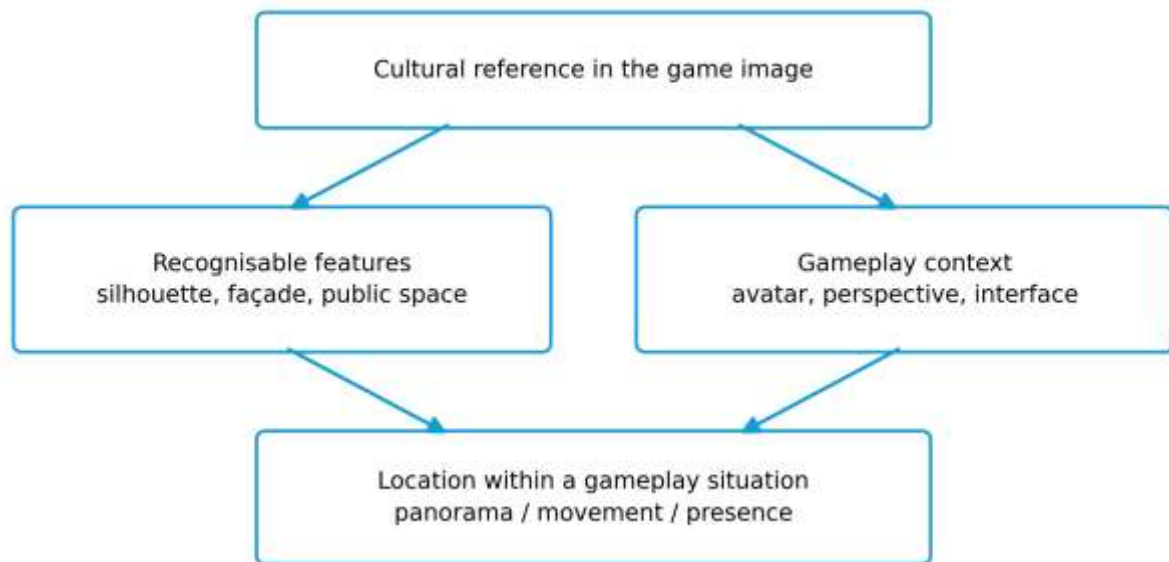


Figure 5 Linking cultural reference and game context in the analysed file (Source: own processing)

The principle of playable cultural heritage is manifested at the level of this set by incorporating cultural references into situations with a controlled character and a changing perspective. The official presentation of the game describes the connection of movement through the city with the exploration of expanded New York (Espinoza 2023). In this context, the analyzed footage presents concrete examples of the visual and situational accessibility of cultural sites.

From the point of view of visual reference, the analysis identified characteristic elements of several locations and different ways of incorporating them into the game image. In the assessed shots, cultural heritage is mediated mainly through architectural or landscape form, the composition of the view and the position of the character.

Addition of spatial and game context

The description of Bethesda Terrace by the park manager specifies the comparison of the C2 shot with the real prototype. He characterizes the terrace as a two-level public space with an



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arcade and a fountain, situated at the northern end of The Mall with a view of The Lake and The Ramble. In the C2 shot, in addition to the fountain, a series of arches and a balustrade can also be observed. The reference description thus extends the identification from an individual sculptural object to an architecturally organized space. We interpret this concurrence of signs as a visual reference to the Bethesda Terrace and Fountain ensemble.

At the same time, the official map of Central Park places Bethesda Terrace and Bethesda Fountain in connection with The Mall and The Lake. This provides a geographical framework for a closer look at C2. However, for the overall C1 shot, the map itself does not determine the exact position of the camera. The added material makes it possible to distinguish the general landscape representation of the park from the specific architectural reference contained in the second image.

Further clarification is provided by the official PlayStation guide, which explains the use of Web Wings in areas with fewer tall buildings and cites Queens as an example of such an environment (Sony Interactive Entertainment, no date). Thus, the documentary source shows that the ways of movement are also designed in relation to the different urban structure. In relation to the analyzed screenshots, this supports the interpretation of the city as an environment whose high-rise and open spaces create different conditions for the movement of the character.

The same guide names Brooklyn and Queens as an extension of the game city and lists Brooklyn Visions Academy, Midtown High School, and Aunt May's house as places associated with the characters. The documentary layer thus completes the narrative dimension that the original screenshots capture only marginally: the meaning of the urban space is also created by combining geographical names with the fictional biography of the heroes. This is the context documented by the official guide; the seven locations of the analyzed image file remain a separate empirical layer.



Table 3 Supplementary materials and their use in the analysis

Material	What complements	Specific use
Bethesda Terrace	Architectural context	It specifies the interpretation of the fountain, arcade and balustrade in C2.
Central Park Map	Geographical context	It places the Bethesda complex opposite The Mall and The Lake.
PlayStation Guide	Mechanics and Story Context	It documents the relationship of movement to the buildings and the named places associated with the heroes.

Discussion

The data obtained from visual and content analysis confirm the theoretical assumptions about the transformation of cultural heritage in the digital game environment. Based on the analysis of 12 pictorial compositions capturing seven locations of the city of New York, it can be stated that the set research goals have been fully met. The answers to the research questions show that the visual features of cultural sites (VO1) are mediated primarily through characteristic silhouettes, architectural details (as in the case of the broken portals of St. Patrick's Cathedral) and the specific layout of the public space (Bethesda Terrace in Central Park), which allow for immediate identification of the monument. However, these features are directly confronted with the game interface, which proves that the monument in the game serves not only as an aesthetic backdrop, but also as a functional point on the map.

In relation to spatial arrangement (VO2), the analysis showed that the avatar directly interacts with the cultural space. Vertical landmarks, such as the Empire State Building or the Brooklyn Bridge, do not only serve an orientation function, but directly condition the way of movement in vertical space. This results in a synthesis of cultural reference and game situation (VO3), where strict documentary accuracy is deliberately subordinated to the rules of gameplay (Juul, 2005). The results of the study thus confirm the statement of Pitoňáková and Kubala (2025, p.



98) that digital space changes the anchored relationship of the recipient to the monument. The position of the presented research is that the successful presentation of cultural heritage in an interactive medium does not require rigid architectural accuracy, but primarily the functional involvement of the location in the game experience. This gives the architecture a completely new, action-oriented function.

Limits of research

The main methodological limitation of the presented study is the static nature of the analyzed material. Since video games represent a dynamic interactive medium defined by the principles of ergodic text (Aarseth 1997), the analysis of screenshots can only capture spatial relationships in a specific, frozen moment. This partially loses the smooth experience of movement, the smooth change of perspective and the overall dynamics of the gameplay in real time.

The second limitation is the scope of the research set limited to 12 shots and 7 locations within one game title, which limits the possibilities of broader generalization to other genres or other development approaches. In addition, the study focuses exclusively on the media product itself and the visual structure of the space, while the level of player reception is absent. These limitations open up space for further research, which in the future could focus on direct video analysis of game passages (gameplay recordings) or on empirical research evaluating how the modified cultural heritage in games is actually decoded by the audience itself.

Conclusion

The present study points to the fact that interactive digital media are currently one of the most relevant tools for mediating cultural memory and representing urban space. An analysis of the visual representation of the city of New York in *Marvel's Spider-Man 2* has shown that cultural heritage in the game environment ceases to function exclusively as a static object of passive admiration. Architectural landmarks, monuments and public spaces are systematically adapted



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to the game mechanics and movement possibilities of the avatar, thus becoming an integral part of the interactive experience.

The proven tension between documentary authenticity and game fiction does not diminish the cultural value of the depicted locations; on the contrary, it defines an innovative concept of playable heritage. The audience is thus enabled not only to visually learn about historical and cultural landmarks, but to directly appropriate them spatially within a broader participatory culture. The findings confirm that the design of virtual worlds in contemporary video games opens up new, highly functional avenues for the meaningful popularization of cultural values in the digital era.

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