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Special Issue

Democracy Dies Playfully. (Anti-)Democratic Ideas in and Around Video Games

edited by

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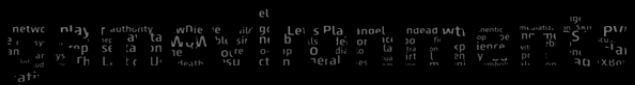

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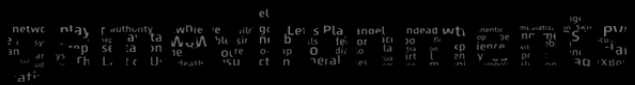

report

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review

The Missing Memorial. *The Division 2* and the Politics of Memory

Joseph Meyer

Abstract
The Division 2 (2019) presents players with a near one-to-one recreation of Washington, D.C. with a glaring omission: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial. How does the erasure of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial reflect the politics of an apolitical approach to game design? What does the playable spectacle of military action but erasure of the remembrance of lives lost say about the politics of environmental design? The following details the development of *The Division 2* and the controversies that surrounded it following the critiques of *The Division* and the developer's insistence on the apolitical nature of their entertainment product. Utilizing Avery Gordon's theory of hauntings, I apply an ethnographic approach to the digital recreation of the D.C. landscape to explore the creative and technical decisions developer Massive Entertainment made in their creation of D.C. to examine the significance of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial's absence in *The Division 2*. I analyze what the claims to apolitical creation mean in the context of an explicitly ideological game set in the Tom Clancy universe and how this reflects the ways power operates through video games as a means of enforcing American exceptionalism and techno-military fetishism to the detriment of contemporary democratic values in the United States.

Keywords: Environmental Design, Public Memory, Hauntings, Tom Clancy, *The Division 2*, Vietnam Veterans Memorial, gamevironments

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On 11 April 1969, William John Bannon Jr. died through "non-hostile action, vehicle crash" (National Archives 2008) in the Pleiku province of South Vietnam. He had only been in Vietnam for 9 days before he was killed. He was 18. With the opening of the

Vietnam Veterans Memorial on 13 November 1982, Bannon was memorialized via inscription on Panel 27w, Line 54. On 9 August, my mom was brought to tears the moment she saw his name, a boy she had dated on and off for a year or two in high school before he went off into the service. The memories of a boy from Milford, Connecticut rushing back and the trauma of a life lost too soon. She reached out to touch his name on the black, reflective surface of the wall as if to physically touch his memory. I stood by stunned at the emotions pouring from my mom while my dad comforted her and my best friend, Ricky, went to the nearby park ranger to grab a pencil and a sheet of paper so she could create a rubbing of his name; a small memento of that moment of connection to national trauma and individual grief.

I think about this moment often and my own relation to historical events; my grandfather was on a troop transport in the Pacific Ocean headed towards Japan when the atomic bombs were dropped, my aunt's close friend, Tom McGuinness, was the co-pilot of American Airlines Flight 11 on 9/11, and my mom lost her high school boyfriend in Vietnam. Seeing my mom overcome with emotion, to connect with a national trauma so closely, was something that brought the work of American Studies on the everyday home to me. These moments become reflection points for critical inquiry when I encounter ruptures in my everyday life, in this case my experience playing the video game *Tom Clancy's The Division 2*.

When *The Division 2* (2019) was announced in summer 2018, I was excited about the change in location from winter in New York City to summer in Washington, D.C. Having spent five years living in the area, I was especially interested in seeing Massive Entertainment's interpretation of D.C. in the post-pandemic capital and how the collapse of United States society would affect the landscape. *The Division*'s near one-to-one recreation of Midtown Manhattan was now being applied to D.C. and I was

looking forward to spending hours walking through the city, finding interesting locations and landmarks, and letting the environmental storytelling wash over me. After its release in March 2019, I played through much of its main campaign taking in the action in familiar locations; retaking the White House to establish a base of operations, a control point takeover in the Navy Memorial next to my favorite burger restaurant, stopping a fascist militia from creating rockets through salvaged parts from the Air and Space Museum. As I began fighting my way across the National Mall towards the Lincoln Memorial, I decided to take a brief detour and see what the collapse of the nation's capital had done to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. When I arrived, it was not there (fig. 1).

Figure 1. The Missing Memorial – *The Division 2* © Ubisoft.

Confused, I went online to see if there had been anything written about the missing memorial. Aside from a single article (Bower 2019) noting its absence and a few *Reddit* posts (CrazyCanuckUncleBuck 2019, Nick930930_ 2019, N-I-K-K-O-R 2019, SJ135 2019), there was no sustained conversation about the missing memorial. I wondered what the reasoning could be behind the memorial's absence, especially

when nearly all of D.C.'s memorials – from the towering Washington Monument to the unassuming James A. Garfield Monument – were present. What does the removal of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial from the lavishly recreated D.C. say about the politics of memory in environmental design? How does that erasure challenge the developer's argument that *The Division* series should be seen as an apolitical entertainment product?

In what follows, I detail the development of *The Division 2* and the controversies that surrounded it following the critiques of *The Division* and the developer's insistence on the apolitical nature of their entertainment product. Then, utilizing Avery Gordon's theory of hauntings, I apply an ethnographic approach to the digital recreation of the D.C. landscape to explore the creative and technical decisions developer Massive Entertainment made in their creation of D.C. to examine the significance of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial's absence in *The Division 2*. Finally, I analyze what the claims to apolitical creation mean in the context of an explicitly ideological game set in the Tom Clancy universe and how this reflects the ways power operates through video games as a means of enforcing American exceptionalism and techno-military fetishism.

Unity through (the) Division

The Division 2 is an open-world, online, multiplayer, role-playing game. Players are cast as Division Agents, autonomous soldiers trained to activate in the wake of a government-toppling crisis and help restore order (Peckham 2016). Division agents were activated following the release of a weaponized smallpox variant on Black Friday in New York City. Set seven months after the events of *The Division* in New York, *The Division 2* tasks players with responding to a distress call from Washington, D.C.

following the collapse of the United States government and the deactivation of the SHaDe (Strategic Homeland Defense) network. Players spend their time on a string of missions across D.C. to fortify civilian settlements and retake control of the region from three factions; the nihilistic Hyenas, the fascist True Sons, and the vengeful Outcasts.

Developed by Massive Entertainment and published by Ubisoft, *The Division 2* was meant to showcase a true-to-life replication of D.C. as much as it was the tactical third-person shooting mixed with RPG elements. Creative designer Julian Gerighty called D.C. one of the main characters of the game (Bower 2019) and while D.C. in *The Division 2* is a post-pandemic warzone, the developers wanted to structure the fantasy on the closest proximity to reality as they could get. They utilized Geographic Information Systems (GIS) data to create a digital D.C. that was nearly one-to-one and sent teams to D.C. to scout areas and interview residents (Kratsch 2019, Bower 2019). This attention to detail makes the experience of traversing D.C. in *The Division 2* familiar to anyone who has lived in the area – down to the locations of Starbucks replaced by fictional Kerman Coffee – and encourages players to explore every corner of the map for new and interesting sites.

D.C.'s position as a central character is even more apparent when compared to the anemic narrative that drives the main campaign for players. Charlie Hall and Cass Marshall of *Polygon* noted the core thesis of *The Division 2* on rebuilding D.C. could never fully be realized due to the mechanics of the gameplay requiring conflict to continue engaging players and becoming ever more powerful (Hall and Marshall 2019). Stephen Totilo agreed with this sentiment in their review in Kotaku, stating that *The Division 2* "doesn't have a story so much as it has a situation" (Totilo 2019). The lacking narrative and justifications for player actions fit into a larger design goal of

publisher Ubisoft's slate of games that aim to create worlds that players engage in for over 60 hours (Batchelor 2019). For *The Division 2* D.C. becomes the central organizing principle through which player engagement is maintained. Narratives are added on top, but it is the gameworld that becomes the central feature.

Creative director of supporting developer Red Storm Entertainment, Terry Spier, was adamant to avoid placing any emphasis on larger stakes or political motivations in *The Division 2*. In a preview interview following *The Division 2*'s reveal, the lengths to which they would defend an apolitical stance were stretched to their limits in the following exchange:

> "Spier: The message for *The Division 2* is on more of unity…Division agents are going in and they're unifying and they're helping and they're rebuilding…we're definitely not making any political statements. Right? This is still a work of fiction, right?
> Hall: Taking up arms against a corrupt government is not a political statement?
> Spier: No. It's not a political statement. No, we are absolutely here to explore a new city.
> Hall: You have this grin on your face.
> Spier: I can absolutely understand the question, the assumption, and the nature of it, but I'm here to tell you that DC, the reason that we chose it was for the ones that I said." (Hall 2018)

This statement produced a round of surprise in the video game press, particularly as *The Division* had previous issues with the way it appropriated tropes that had come to represent deep systemic issues within the United States. The first faction players encountered in *The Division* were the hoodie-wearing *Rioters* that players gunned down throughout the city, creating parallels between the games fiction of civilian

sleeper agents executing hooded figures in the streets with the murder of Trayvon Martin and the continuing protests against police brutality and government overreach with the Black Lives Matter movement.

These disconnects between the gameplay and the narrative were noted in multiple instances. *Wired*'s Daniel Starkey (2016) compared *The Division* and other fantastical online worlds like *Destiny* (2014) or *World of Warcraft* (2004) with one crucial distinction:

> "*The Division* wears the trappings of every other AAA game, save for the fact that its villains aren't monsters. They're desperate people. And while *The Division* claims again and again that you're helping, that you're the last bastion of goodness and Manhattan's only hope for survival, you're killing people who, not long ago, were your friends and neighbors." (Starkey 2016)

Heather Alexandra, writing for *Giant Bomb*, goes further stating that *The Division*

> "isn't the first game to call me a hero for coldly and pragmatically gunning down a foe, but it is possibly the most egregious. I was free to shoot any and all threats to society without question." (Alexandra 2016)

Alexandra dives deep into the power fantasy of gaming and how that framework can fail in games like *The Division* when questions about the power you are entrusted with to protect civilians is primarily used to kill all those who fall outside the society that you are protecting. They note that this "Exceptionalism puts the player outside of the bounds of responsibility, and in doing so, it divides them from the rest of the world's inhabitants" (ibid.). This position outside of the bounds of responsibility is repeated in *The Division 2* and illustrated by Spier's insistence on the apolitical nature of the game's narrative and actions.

That *The Division 2* puts players outside the bounds of responsibility within a fantasy set in a realistically rendered D.C. produces a type of ethical schism from previous conceptions of computer gaming. In *The Ethics of Computer Games*, Miguel Sicart argues that visual and narrative elements are secondary to the rules and gameworld (Sicart 2009, 22-23). What constraints the developers have placed on the players through the rules and interactions they are allowed creates the basis for whether or not a game can be considered ethical. In the case of *The Division 2*, its constraints as a third-person military shooter limit player interaction to shooting and deploying military technology. When placed within the fiction of a fallen D.C. recreated nearly one-to-one, the narrative of shooting fellow citizens for their actions that fall outside the developer's imagined morally correct way of dealing with a collapsed society produces a rupture in a player's suspension of embodied morality to the rules of the gameworld when forced into "killing people who, not long ago, were your friends and neighbors" (Starkey 2016). To claim an apolitical position while mining real-life situations for fantasy interactions in the gameworld fundamentally changes the developer/player arrangement and creates more opportunities for highlighting the dissonance between claims of apolitical *fun* and the very real world implications of the fantasy.

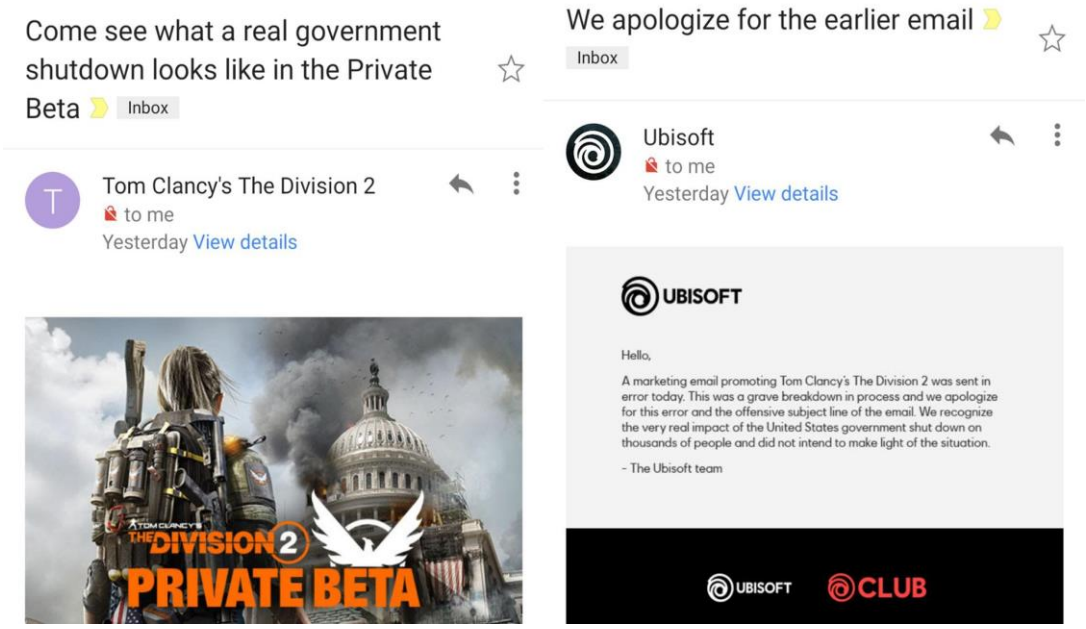


Figure 2. A Real Government Shutdown © Joseph Meyer.

This is highlighted by the marketing of *The Division 2* falling into multiple situations wherein the promotional materials directly contradict the positioning of the game as apolitical. The initial E3 "Aftermath" trailer detailing the fall of D.C. asks: "How do you save a nation when its enemies come from within?" (Ubisoft North America 2018). In a promotional email to sign up for an open beta of *The Division 2*, the subject line read, "Come see what a real government shutdown looks like in the Private Beta" (Meyer 2019a, see fig. 2), referencing the ongoing U.S. government shutdown during the signup period in January 2019. While the designers of *The Division 2* argued for the pure entertainment value of its setting and gameplay, their continual stoking of the fears of government corruption and a collapsing system betrayed their positionality as apolitical. Regardless of the intent of their marketing and promotional materials, the denial of responsibility for the positions that they promote through the games setting and content shows an extreme lack of understanding of the power and influence games can have.

Ultimately, these gaffes leading up to the launch of *The Division 2* illustrate the ways that an apolitical approach to game design and content creates a space for unintended political statements that are, nonetheless, reflective of the contemporary moment and speak to a particular ideology, and, yes, politics within the game. While these examples are overt in their embrace of a specific military fantasy as depicted within the pages of Tom Clancy novels (detailed below), the environmental design of D.C. and the design choices players are confronted with speak to a larger issue with the claims of apolitical stances in *The Division 2* that are undermined by world design.

Digital Hauntings, Gameworld Ethnography, and Prosthetic Vision

My work is inspired by the ruptures in my own experiences of everyday life. In this case, the marketing of *The Division 2* as a near one-to-one recreation of D.C. coupled with my previous experience with *The Division*'s recreation of New York and my lived experience of D.C. produced a rupture in my expectations when confronted with the missing Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The mission structure and storyline leading up to this discovery highlighted many D.C. landmarks and included experiences such as stopping True Sons broadcasts from the Viewpoint Museum (the Newseum in reality), stealing the Declaration of Independence from the U.S. Archives, and securing the Washington Memorial as a control point to stop further reinforcements from taking over the National Mall. When I approached the location of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, I was struck by not only its absence upon my arrival, but also the absence of player activities in the surrounding area. Only after revisiting did I discover a spawn location for random encounter activities that are part of the *living world* near the missing memorial. The absence of one of *the* major memorials in D.C. was itself jarring, but the distinct lack of engagement with the space gameplay-wise produced a type of ludic silence that highlighted its absence even more.

With this rupture, the missing memorial in *The Division 2*'s digital recreation of D.C. produces a haunting as theorized by Avery Gordon. A Haunting

> "describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities, the ghost is just the sign, or the empirical evidence…that tells you a haunting is taking place." (Gordon 2008, 8)

The haunting, according to Gordon, affectively draws us into a structure of feeling of our experienced reality as a transformative recognition of the complexity of personhood within contemporary structures of power. In the case of the *ghost* of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, I was drawn to the presence of its absence and questions arose both in regards to game design as well as the politics of an *apolitical* game. Gordon notes,

> "the post-modern, late-capitalist, postcolonial world represses and projects its ghosts or phantoms in similar intensities, if not entirely in the same forms, as the older world did. Indeed, the concentration on haunting and ghosts is a way of maintaining the salience of social analysis as bounded by its social context." (Gordon 2008, 12-13)

Within this conceptualization, an analysis of digital hauntings is possible through a grounding of digital subjectivity within virtual space.

Kiri Miller's exploration of ethnography in single-player gameworlds is the foundation of my approach to digital subjectivity. Focusing on the *Grand Theft Auto* (*GTA*) series (2001-2008), Miller frames players' gameworld explorations as a form of ethnographic fieldwork through the lens of tourist experiences (Miller 2008). Miller applies Arjun Appadurai's concept of "imagined worlds" (Appadurai 1996) to gameworlds like *GTA*, noting their inclusion of "human communities in motion, commercial media, culturally specific technologies, a financial system, and invocations

of both gameworld and real-world moral and political issues" that play a "significant role in their perceived realism, depth, and complexity" (Miller 2008). However, within the imagined worlds of *GTA* there is an ironic distancing between the player and the world through a design that "blends immersion-enhancing realism with immersion-disrupting parody and citation" keeping players in a "liminal state" that "partially defines the classic fieldwork experience" (Miller 2008). Noting that these are not closed systems, Miller lays out the co-production of the reimagined American city via the subjectivity of players and the design intention of the international team of Rockstar Games that creates a reenactment of American stories commenting on American popular culture and politics. While this type of ironic distancing works for games placed within fictionally adjacent locations like *GTA*'s Liberty City (New York City) and Los Santos (Los Angeles), this is problematized by a trend in video games to recreate specific real-world locations like D.C. in *The Division 2*.

Digital recreations of real-world locations have been a part of video games for decades. From the DOS version of Los Angeles in *The Terminator* (1991) and *The Getaway*'s (2002) London, to *Sleeping Dogs*' (2012) Hong Kong and Ubisoft's recent slate of open-world games like *Watch Dogs*' (2014, 2016) Chicago and San Francisco, real world locations have been the inspiration and setting for many video games. In most instances, these games use well-known landmarks to create a sense of reality within the limited space of the game, but with *The Division*, developer Massive Entertainment set out to create as close to a one-to-one recreation of the respective environments of New York City and D.C. for players to explore. Miller's description of ethnographic fieldwork in *GTA* relies upon a reading of games through the lens of tourism and ironic distancing that allows for a playful exploration of American culture that touches upon but does not take seriously the politics inherent in the series. D.C. was also previously featured in *Fallout* 3 (2008), but similar to *GTA, Fallout 3* featured

an alternate future D.C. where the transistor was never invented and a post-war 1950s nuclear age persisted into the 21st century prior to nuclear war and devastation. Its narrative fiction allowed for an ironic distancing and tourism of a nuclear age D.C. ravaged by war coupled with tongue-in-cheek 1950s satire and commentary. With *The Division 2*, the post-pandemic setting provides a fantastic layer on top of D.C., but its narrative is taken seriously and does not necessarily allow for the liminal state of ironic detachment players of *GTA* may experience. To further expand upon the foundation established by Miller, an understanding of the work digital representations can do is required.

Rune Klevjer's writing on virtuality and depiction in video game representation helps in this regard. Klevjer (2017, 733) states:

> "During play, we are, via the screen, able to experience real-time modeled objects and environments *as if* they were physically present, even if they are, underneath, mathematical in nature. Real-time virtual objects are second-order models – visual models of algorithmic models – that appear in experience as first-order concrete models of the quasi-physical kind. Such *virtual* objects are, at once, algorithmic entities and tangible objects. This dual ontology carries associations to the scientific concept of nature as information, nature as code."

Building off nature as information and nature as code, D.C. in *The Division 2* is constructed via GIS and location scouting. This, combined with artists' imaginative construction of an alternate reality wherein a pandemic has toppled D.C. and society has collapsed are supplemented by interviews with experts to model the collapse. According to an interview with the National Mall Coalition, environmental artists talked to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for how to model pandemic responses on the Mall and used flood data to depict how a major flood on

the footprints of the D.C. landscape would affect the area (Zad 2019). Within *The Division 2*, nature is coded into an alternative reality of scientifically modeled and measured D.C.

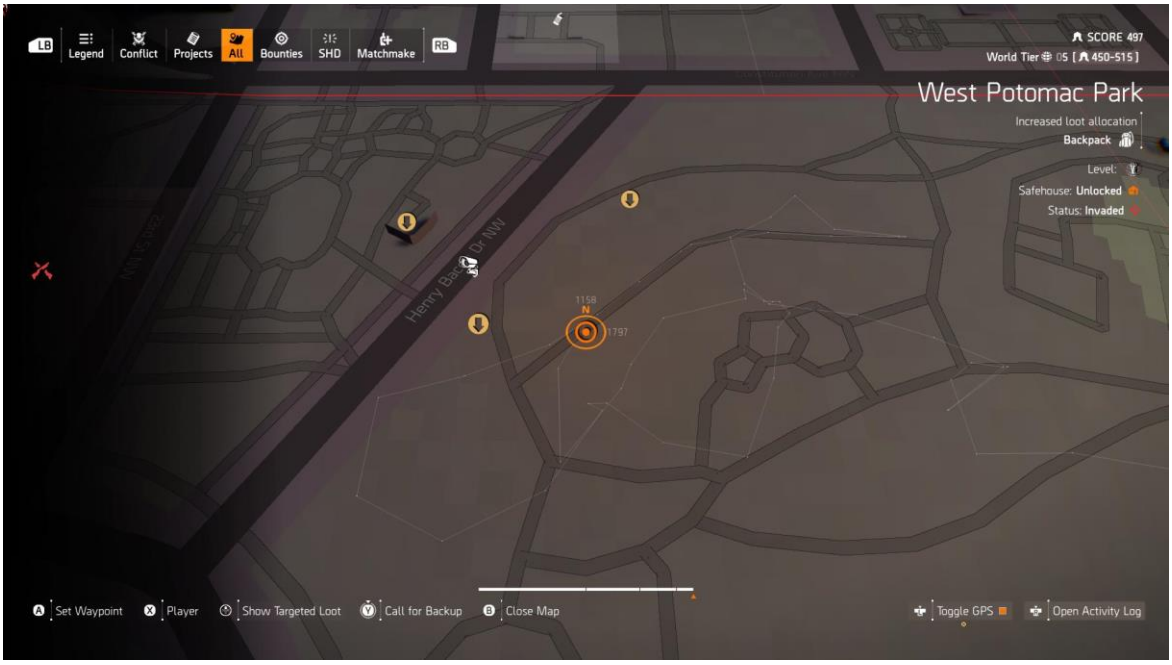


Figure 3. The scar is present, but the memorial is not – *The Division 2* © Ubisoft.

Klevjer also expands upon the function of the player camera within games utilizing the concept of image consciousness. Klevjer begins his argument by stating that it could be argued that any photographic reproduction is transparent, that any photograph or video recording is not a representation but a technologically mediated prosthetic vision (Klevjer 2017, 735). Klevjer problematizes the transparency argument through a phenomenological lens, whereby an egocentric understanding of a broadcast image does not fill in the missing spaces missed by an image's space compared to actual space, and therefore live feeds and broadcasts are experienced only through their framing, and not as technologically mediated prosthetic vision. However, placed within the context of an interaction like video conferencing, these images fundamentally change from an image *in* a camera to being present and in contact with you through the technologies of the camera, screen and internet. It

becomes an experienced reality, in which you are in contact and interacting with the screen image in a meaningful way. This leads to Klevjer's larger argument that video games become a "shared present reality" (Klevjer 2017, 736) beyond the framing of movies or other image-based media that allows players to engage with real-time environments through the camera; "a way of being able to look and move around, to perceive and act" (ibid.). This helps to reshape the relationship between the player and game that removes the distance between player reality and in-game reality through the tangible contact of the shared present reality on the screen.

Miller's conceptualization of ethnographic fieldwork in gameworlds like *GTA* through the subjectivity of the player influencing their reading and understanding of the gameworld is strengthened by Klevjer's conceptualization of the tangible contact of gameworld and player via prosthetic apparatus. Taking these two theories of gameworld interactivity into *The Division 2* produces a framework for analyzing the politics of the gameworld through the environmental storytelling and the digital haunting produced by the decision not to include the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Wherein ironically detached approximations of real world locations and American culture can produce a liminal state of interaction for digital tourism in *GTA*, *The Division 2*'s use of GIS-based information and mapping (fig. 3) with one-to-one recreations of the landscape along with a narrative and environmental storytelling that produce a researched and consulted possible pandemic reality refuse players the option of the split from the reality they contend with in real-time polygonal worlds. This is not to say that there is not a practice of disconnection between the player and the fantastical world as experienced in *The Division 2*, but its near exact recreation of the landscape of D.C. produces a different kind of recognition and engagement with the world experienced by the player as opposed to a place like *GTA*'s Los Santos.

Bearing this in mind, I return to Gordon's conceptualization of haunting to frame how we can read the absence of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in *The Division 2*.

Gordon (2008, 16) frames hauntings as the appearance of an absence within the hypervisibility of postmodernism:

> "In a culture seemingly ruled by technologies of hypervisibility, we are led to believe not only that everything can be seen, but also that everything is available and accessible for our consumption. In a culture seemingly ruled by technologies of hypervisibility, we are led to believe that neither repression nor the return of the repressed, in the form of either improperly buried bodies or countervailing systems of value or difference, occurs with any meaningful result."

In the lead up to *The Division 2*'s release (and *The Division* before it), much of the coverage was based upon the one-to-one recreation of D.C. and the lengths to which Massive Entertainment and their development partners went in order to create as realistic a virtual world as possible. Utilizing GIS, interviews, and on-the-ground scouting, Massive Entertainment's claims were backed up through their vigorous employment of the technologies of hypervisibility. With the absence of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, there is a break within that reality constructed through the technologies of hypervisibility, while simultaneously allowing for its absence because of the context of the gameworld and the game industry's conception of itself. This, then, is what Gordon refers to as the "crucible for political mediation and historical memory" (Gordon 2008, 18). In what follows, I will analyze this haunting as a means to produce Gordon's "alternative diagnostics" (ibid.) in which I will "link the politics of accounting, in all its intricate political-economic, institutional, and affective dimensions, to a potent imagination of what has been done and what is to be done otherwise" (ibid.). The exclusion of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in *The Division 2* produces a digital haunting that must be addressed, examining the political factors

motivating its absence within a company and an industry's insistence on their apolitical nature as creators of pure entertainment.

Recreation, Desecration, and Absence. The Monuments of D.C. in *The Division 2*

Exploring D.C. in *The Division 2* is an activity unto itself, especially for someone that has spent any time in the city personally. The disruption to my immersion in the digital world due to the missing Vietnam Veterans Memorial triggered a deeper curiosity in me to seek out and examine other areas and monuments of D.C. that I was familiar with to see whether this was a common practice, or an explicit decision to modify the landscape and erase that memorial. While surveying the digital landscape, I came to the conclusion that, with some exceptions that prove the rule,[i] most memorials, landmarks, and statuaries were reproduced faithfully, if not exactly. In most cases, the landmarks were faithful recreations, with many showing signs of wear and tear after seven months without public services taking care of them or purposeful defacement in the aftermath of the pandemic. Few instances had complete omission of a specific monument like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and this absence creates a haunting presence within the context of the larger gameworld. I explore this further below by performing a brief analysis of the two primary forms of monuments in *The Division 2*'s D.C.; near one to one recreation as illustrated in the Lincoln Memorial, and desecration as illustrated by the Peace Monument. These monuments speak to the dissonance between the marketing and promotion of *The Division 2* as apolitical and data-driven and the haunting absence of the missing Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

While many of the memorials around D.C. go unmarked within the game, the Lincoln Memorial is one of a handful of monuments the player can *discover* while exploring D.C. When approaching the memorial, a contextual prompt appears for the player to press a button to trigger a brief release of the camera behind the player character into a pan and tilt that focuses the memorial in view and an overlay displays "Discovered" (*The Division 2* 2019, fig. 4). This same interaction is triggered when approaching the Washington Monument, the Capitol Building, and the District Union Arena (the stand-in for Capital One Arena). It is also used within story moments occurring in missions while players battle through them, allowing the player to focus on the story unfolding around them as they work towards their goal.

Figure 4. Discovering the Arena – *The Division 2* © Ubisoft.

This mechanic illustrates one way that D.C. becomes a character within *The Division 2*, its monuments are themselves interactive and discoverable. A goal for players can be to discover all of the major monuments that Massive Entertainment saw fit to include in this virtual recreation, producing a new way for players to interact with the

environment and the story while simultaneously granting legitimacy and value to certain monuments over others. Of the three discoverable monuments mentioned above, two are spaces where main missions occur and the third – the Washington Monument – is a control point with an added hidden mission below the monument in a basement hideout. The Lincoln Memorial is also a main mission, which utilizes the developer's discovery of the Lincoln Memorial Undercroft (Carter n. d.) to build a massive underground staging area for the True Sons faction that players must fight through.

Beyond the unique and creative level design utilized to create an interesting mission and encounter structure, what stood out to me while exploring the memorial is the fidelity of the creation of the memorial itself. While the memorial is damaged and tagged due to the collapse of D.C., Lincoln is left relatively untouched, and the walls within the memorial are similarly bare. What struck me was, upon closer inspection, the faithful recreation of the *typo* etched into the Lincoln Memorial in the north side in which *Future* was etched with an *E* and the bottom horizontal line was filled in (fig. 5). What this indicates is the extreme care and research that went into recreating the sites as faithfully as they could, even beyond reason. This type of flourish in which only someone who had taken a tour, stumbled haphazardly across, or researched extensively the weird quirk of this memorial would find that tiny piece of environmental design coded into *The Division 2*.

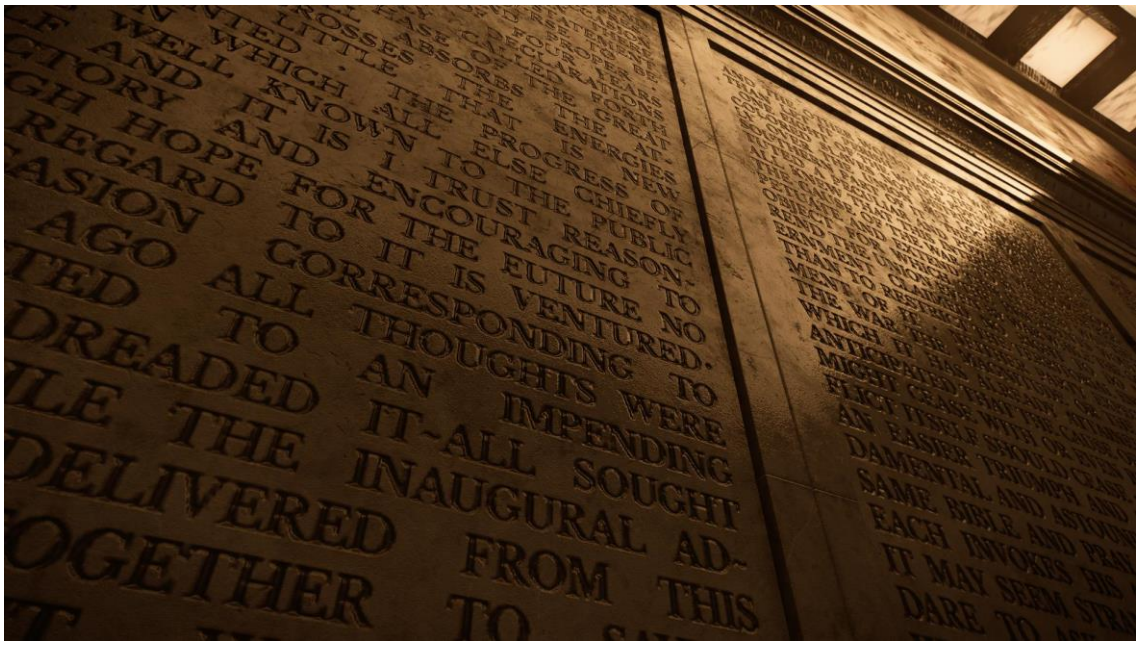


Figure 5. "Hope for the Euture" – *The Division 2* © Ubisoft.

The Lincoln Memorial illustrates the high degree of research and care that goes into creating a near one-to-one replication of D.C. in *The Division 2*. There is intention in what is included and what is not, and the complete erasure of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial speaks to the same degree of intentionality in its exclusion from their version of D.C.

The Peace Monument, Ulysses S. Grant Memorial, and the James A. Garfield Monument are three sculptures that sit in front of the Capitol Building. In *The Division 2*, all three have been faithfully recreated. However, while Grant and Garfield are basically untouched, the Peace Monument has been defaced following the collapse. Hung across the shoulders of Grief and History is a sign that states, "Walk Away," and the base of the monument has "We Only Speak Bullets" written across it (fig. 6). This defacement adds to the players understanding of the world as the nearby Capitol Building is the stronghold for the fascistic True Sons faction, who would have ostensibly written this message to warn others not to approach their stronghold. However, it is odd that the faction would not have spent time making the other

nearby monuments also warn those approaching of their dialect of choice. The designer's addition of these two statements to *only* the Peace Monument speaks to an implied disdain for a monument to peace in the time following the collapse. What chance does peace have when those with power exercise it through the barrel of a gun? What response can meet that form of power except through the judicious application of the same?

Figure 6. Peace defaced – *The Division 2* © Ubisoft.

The defacement of the Peace Monument is also unique compared to all the other memorials scattered throughout D.C. While there is some graffiti that can be found on the Lincoln Memorial or the massive "UNITE" (*The Division 2* 2019) written across the Washington Monument – an environmental artist's literal painted interpretation of the game's thesis statement – the other monuments encountered by the player in D.C. are left relatively untouched or remarked upon. Indeed, the choice to deface the Peace Monument in the game becomes an even clearer statement about the ideology reflected in the game's narrative and mechanics; peace is only achieved through the barrel of a gun.

When I first set out to visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in *The Division 2*, I brought up my in-game map and created a waypoint at the center point of the memorial. This was simple to do because the in-game map had the nearby street Henry Bacon Dr. NW just to the west of the V-shaped pathway that is marked on Google Maps, one of the GIS data sets that the creators of *The Division 2* consulted in their initial planning phases. Upon arrival, I was initially confused because there was nothing there. The area where the memorial should have stood was relatively flat and contained a number of portable buildings and scaffolding on top of what would have been the western wall. Rather than the black stone walkway that sits next to the memorial, the pathing is dirt with black mats creating a similar outline to the memorial. It is an oddly empty space, even with all the military and emergency materials scattered around the area, which makes the absence of the memorial all the more apparent.

To be certain the exclusion of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was an intentional design choice and not hidden underneath the earth and buildings that took its place, I walked around the area to see if The Three Soldiers and the Vietnam Women's Memorial were either present or changed into a generic statue like some other memorials and statues had been in the game. While The Three Soldiers rough approximate position was replaced with a single man, the Vietnam Women's Memorial was erased altogether. Only the American Flag added along with The Three Soldiers remains to mark the site in *The Division 2* (fig. 7).

Figure 7. All that remains – *The Division 2* © Ubisoft.

Cloe Hammoud, intellectual property researcher for Massive Entertainment, defended this choice by stating a, "sensitivity to important cultural icons" (Bower 2019). This included transforming the World War II Memorial to something of similar size and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as "inaccessible altogether" (ibid.). These are important contexts to consider within the larger design decisions made by Massive Entertainment, but their sensitivity seems ill defined in the final outcome of the virtual D.C. they created. One of the easiest ways they dodged inclusion of many of the memorials to past wars was an in-universe storm that ravaged the Tidal Basin area and felled trees that block player access to the Korean War Veterans Memorial and the D.C. War Memorial. Even the converted World War II Memorial can be given a narrative pass when it becomes a staging area for the final faction stronghold attack. However, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial's inaccessibility is not through environmental design, it is literally erased from the landscape. What is the value in erasing the built environment that marks the collective loss from a national trauma while simultaneously mining that same trauma for spectacle and entertainment? Moreover, how does that choice speak to an apolitical design goal?

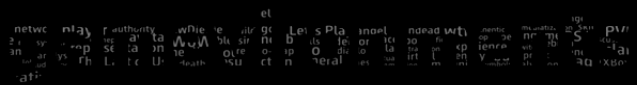
Unseen Politics, Haunted by Consequence

According to Jon Pahl,

> "The wall is at its simplest an eternal 'story' that cathartically exposes – even for those who know nothing of the history of the war – the consequences of violence." (Pahl 1995, 180)

The exclusion of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial from *The Division 2* is, at *its* simplest, the denial of the consequences of violence. Within the rich recreation of D.C. in *The Division 2*, somewhere the designers of the game decided to not include the exposure to the consequences of violence. While Hammoud stated that the decision not to include the memorial was made because of sensitivity towards cultural objects (Bower 2019) that statement does not fit in with other design choices by the developers; one example that immediately comes to mind is a side mission where characters are tasked with stealing the Declaration of Independence from the National Archives. What makes static memorials culturally sensitive while the founding documents of the nation can be used as a prop for a side quest?

This disconnect between the statements of the developer and the actual gameworld directly reflect the politics they profess not to hold. The setting of the game in the Tom Clancy universe creates a need to hold to a particular ideology that fetishizes military technology and the rugged individualism of singular government agents. Walter Hixson (1993, 605) has termed this the "cult of national security," based on the policy formulations of the Reagan years that inspired Clancy, creating characters like Jack Ryan that "could not hope to win the epic struggles of the late twentieth century without the backing of a dedicated national security establishment and the ready availability of the most sophisticated military technology" (ibid.). Clancy invoked "powerful themes that are embedded in the American cultural tradition…the enduring mythology of American exceptionalism – moral, political, and technological" (ibid.).



These themes are found throughout *The Division* in the backing of player agents by the SHaDe network that gives them powerful intelligence gathering systems and technologically superior weaponry in the form of skill mechanics in the game. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial's eternal story of the consequences of violence directly contradicts the exceptionalism and superiority of American military strength as imagined within the Tom Clancy universe.

Clancy's embrace of technology as extensions of the human senses that accelerate humans' abilities to analyze information and accrue greater power (Delgado 1996, 133) is a direct refutation to the new stage of American imperialism Vietnam signaled wherein "American military power came to naught" (Clarke and Hoggett 2004, 98). This also coincided with rising right-wing populism during the 1980s and led to a strengthening of American exceptionalism and individualism. Clarke and Hoggett (2004, 92) note a resultant "moral isolationism" within American society due to decades of neoliberal social and fiscal policies in direct response to the failures of the social safety nets set up in the post-World War II period. In concluding their examination of the United States as an "empire of fear" (2004, 104), Clarke and Hoggett state that

> "it is impossible to stress enough the narcissistic and fearful character of contemporary American power. This is a power based in a paranoid style of politics and expressed from a seemingly omnipotent position" (ibid.).

This position is echoed within the narrative through line of *The Division* with its story of singular sleeper agents being relied upon to take on the mantle of U.S. exceptionalism and maintain the tearing fabric of society through sheer will and technological superiority following a bioterrorist attack.

Within this universe, to reflect upon the consequences of violence through the inclusion of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial directly contradicts the techno-military fantasy of the source materials. The reminder of the cost of violence is not only applicable to the Tom Clancy universe, but gaming as a whole. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009, xiv) argue that the "militainment" of games like *The Division 2* display actual power in the context of Empire. That display and the concentration of video game culture in the rich zones of advanced capitalism produce a media of Empire. Publisher Ubisoft of France, developer Massive Entertainment in Sweden, and every other partner developer of *The Division 2* besides Red Storm Entertainment – the game company co-founded by Tom Clancy to develop the first Rainbow Six game – are located outside of the U.S.[ii], but are still deeply implicated in the techno-military fetishism and American exceptionalism that permeate *The Division 2*. Regardless of the creative intention of the developers of the game to make a *pure entertainment product* that is apolitical, the context of the medium and the universe they've chosen to situate *The Division 2* in produces a particular view of the world that is not just political, but steeped within an era of rising conspiracy, terror, and a retreat to individual exceptionalism and technologically sophisticated weaponry to maintain power in a changing world.

It is important to consider the decision not to include the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in relation to its initial conception and reception. The controversy that surrounded the initial design was itself intended to remove politics from the growing need to create a space for engaging with national trauma from the war. The organizing committee and U.S. government feared that any overtly political tones in the memorial would make it harder to unite the country in collective remembrance of the soldier's sacrifice, itself a question because of the failed imperial project and the massive protests against the war. Discussing commemoration as a genre problem in their

analysis of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Robin Wagner-Pacifici and Barry Schwartz (1991, 381) noted:

> "The Vietnam War differed from other wars because it was controversial, morally questionable, and unsuccessful. It resembled other wars because it called forth in its participants the traditional virtues of self-sacrifice, courage, loyalty, and honor. Tension between alternative commemorative designs centers on the problem of incorporating these contrasting features into a single monument."

This genre problem is embodied by the wall, its simplicity betrays the profound questions raised by its place of commemoration of a period of time wherein the country suffered a traumatic reckoning with the imperial-colonialist projects undertaken as a defense of democracy. The need for apolitical support was reflected in the design decisions of the memorial design contest winner Maya Ying Lin when she "declared that her design was not meant to convey a particular political message but to evoke "feelings, thoughts, and emotions" of a variant and private nature" (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991, 393). The apolitical design goals of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial are directly parallel to the design intentions of Massive Entertainment and *The Division 2*, and just as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial immediately became a space of profound reflection to those who visited it, its absence in *The Division 2* creates a space of reflection for meaning in its absence.

While only the military-based newspaper *Stars and Stripes* (Bower 2019) asked about the missing memorial in its coverage leading up to the release of *The Division 2*, some players were also surprised to find it missing in the gameworld. On *Reddit*, users created multiple threads (CrazyCanuckUncleBuck 2019, Nick930930_ 2019, N-I-K-K-O-R 2019, SJ135 2019) that asked where they could find the Vietnam Veterans Memorial only to be met with similar arguments put forth by Massive Entertainment about the appropriateness of including the memorial in a military open-world action

game. In the beginning of one thread, user N-I-K-K-O-R posted, "I've just tried to find it for the first time and it's not there. Kinda bummed" (N-I-K-K-O-R 2019). In a comment exchange on the post, StickyTwinkie argues for the devs, stating that many questions about how to represent the memorial in game would lead to a no-win situation for Ubisoft and that the only option would be not to include it. For some, its absence is itself disrespectful, particularly when matched with the marketing of *The Division 2* as containing a one-to-one recreation of D.C. in game. Wolfram521 (2019) wrote:

> "Honestly, I'd find it more disrespectful to have the entire memorial missing from a supposedly accurate representation of DC, than to have only the names missing…it just seems like a really weird decision to remove the memorial entirely. It's placed there as a reminder of the troops lost in that war, similarly to other monuments in DC which are all apparently present in-game in their real-life location. Removing this specific one almost undermines the significance and purpose of the monument."

By building up the real-world likeness of *The Division 2*, Ubisoft and Massive Entertainment set up expectations for certain content to be in the game, especially as it relates to the famous memorials that dot the landscape of D.C. However, the ideology underpinning the Tom Clancy Universe is directly challenged by the reminder of the troops lost in the Vietnam War. While Wolfram521's fairly innocuous statement of the purpose of a memorial as a reminder of troops lost in war, it is the specificity of the war that matters in this context. Tom Clancy and the Reagan-Era military industrial complex of Cold War technological might carry themselves into contemporary imaginaries of military fantasy.

This fantasy is fully realized in two spaces wherein the haunting of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial becomes ever-more present due to the referents to Vietnam *and*

the memorial constructed within the game: the American History Museum's Vietnam exhibit, and the black-stone memorial in the Southwest section of the gameworld.

Figure 8. Peace through strength – *The Division 2* © Ubisoft.

In an early mission in the game, players are tasked with the job of infiltrating the American History Museum that had been taken over by the True Sons as a prison for holding captured Hyenas. While the museum's relative layout has been remixed for the purposes of the game, multiple areas are faithful recreations of exhibits found in the real National Museum of American History. Players fight through multiple exhibits as they existed during the development of *The Division 2* including "The Star-Spangled Banner: The Flag That Inspired the National Anthem," (fig. 8) "American Stories," and "America on the Move" (*The Division 2* 2019). Following these encounters, players approach a hallway that is covered in what looks to be jungle leaves and an exhibition titled, "Patriotism and Protest, The Vietnam War" (*The Division 2* 2019). As players move down the hallway to the exhibition, they encounter an exhibit that is a recreation of Vietnam, with a setting sun at the back framing a helicopter and mounted machine gun along with a group of True Sons that the player

must dispatch. This exhibit reflects one section of "The Price of Freedom: Americans at War" (*The Division 2* 2019), but rather than having players engage with the larger exhibit and set pieces that could be made out of that, the developers chose to highlight this one section. This choice, and the scripted encounter players participate in, produces an experience of a pop-fantasy imaginary of Vietnam that bears a deeper reading.

Figure 9. Setting the scene – *The Division 2* © Ubisoft.

There has been some work done on the ways memory is recreated in gameworlds (Cooke and Hubbell 2015, Hammar 2020). This work looks at how history and memory are reproduced in games through player input and play. Games like *Mafia III* (2016), *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (2010), and *Medal of Honor* (2010), present players with the opportunity to *play history* by taking on the role of a Black Vietnam Veteran in 1970s Louisiana, a black ops operative during the Cold War, or a member of a special unit in Afghanistan. While not producing gameplay-as-historical-re-enactment, *The Division 2* and the Vietnam exhibition sequence hues close to what Cooke and Hubbell term memory work, video games that represent past events through

historical, functional, and mimetic realism (Cooke and Hubbell 2015). While eschewing the historical, the Vietnam exhibition encounter does provide a functional and mimetic realism with its engagement of the players in gunplay and a reimagining of a pitched battle in the jungles of Vietnam (fig. 9). The encounter itself plays into the mythology of Vietnam, changing the standard enemy engagements up to that point as always pushing forward, players initially clear the exhibit of True Sons only to try and exit the exhibition and be ambushed from behind, forced to seek cover behind the sandbag battlements and mount the machine gun in front of the sunset-backed helicopter to take out multiple waves of rushing enemies from behind (fig. 10). Cooke and Hubbell (2015) state that memory work gameplay is based not just on historical accuracy, but also "…the combination of gamic action, the palpability of agency within the environment's algorithmic space, and the ongoing discourses in affinity spaces." This exhibition fits in with that type of work, even as the setting of *The Division 2* is itself a futuristic military fantasy. What is more, the space contains multiple affinity spaces as both the game environment wherein the encounter plays out, a space of learning as an exhibition recreating the "Patriotism and Protest" (*The Division 2* 2019) of the Vietnam War, and the greater D.C. gameworld as a one-to-one recreation.

Figure 10. Repelling the assault – *The Division 2* © Ubisoft.

Indeed, the haunting of the missing Vietnam Veterans Memorial within the gameworld is ever-more present with the inclusion of *this* encounter in *this* space that produces in one sense a glorified reimagining of a last stand against overwhelming odds in the jungles of Vietnam while denying the memorial that produces a reflection on the consequences of the violence of war. More so, the work that the environments of *The Division 2* can do in producing critical commentary on the United States' past happens within another museum space, but not in the Vietnam exhibit. In their discussion of *The Division 2,* Cass Marshall (Hall and Marshall 2019) notes that in a side mission where players work on getting running water from the National Museum of the American Indian, there is an exhibition display that discusses the then current events surrounding water rights and oil pipelines that includes

> "…indigenous communities once again find themselves in a precarious position and facing a modern cultural genocide as the pursuit of wealth and profit has created ecological disasters due to oil and chemical spills."

Apolitical indeed! Seeking similar commentary in the Vietnam exhibit that is titled "Patriotism *and* Protest," (*The Division 2* 2019, emphasis added by the author) I examined all of the display text for any signs of similar discussions of the protests against the war and the political fallout that resulted, but there was only a few text variants focused on either specific battles or tactics soldiers deployed during the Vietnam War repeated throughout display text areas. Even as other museums and monuments contain critical reflections of United States history, Vietnam is left unremarked, a space to recreate a heroic stand in the middle of a mission in an iconic museum.

That there is no counter-hegemonic representation of *protest* in the Vietnam exhibit you fight through speaks to the larger issues present within the developer's claims of apolitical entertainment as a defense against the creative choices they have made. There is indeed a particular claim to power and knowledge embedded within the gameworld wherein a mythical, technologically superior American agent overcomes the odds of waves of enemies attacking an entrenched position with no way out. The fantasy world of *The Division* is predicated on a technologically superior government agent that is capable, *and successful*. This brief narrative bit of fantasy imperialistic role-play within the mission echoes loudly against the absence of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, especially as the spectacle is not tempered by the memorials goals of reflection and memory. Add to this the marketing and promotion of *The Division 2* as a nearly one-to-one recreation of D.C. based upon scientific measurements and expert interviews, and a clash between the artistic interpretation and data-driven recreation becomes a schism between intended message and the communicated meaning. In a game that is so heavily reliant upon the environment to convey meaning and tell its narrative, the recreation of the jungles of Vietnam for players to fight through but the denial of memory work in player-directed visits to

the Vietnam Veterans Memorial by its absence produces a specific political statement on the ways that players should remember the Vietnam War.

Hypervisibility through technologies of GIS and 3-D rendering produce a player-consumer expectation of access and availability to all that D.C. has to offer. *The Division 2*'s repression of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the claims of apolitical creativity betray a meaningful result (Gordon 2008, 16). In other words, to claim a one-to-one representation while erasing specific memorials creates a dissonance between a hypervisible D.C. untouched by politics and the politics of erasure and structures of power embedded within the Tom Clancy universe. The challenging nature of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial reflects what Kenneth Foote (2003, 10) describes as, "added attention because they seem to illustrate ethical or moral lessons that transcend the toll of lives." Through this haunting, a political accounting of a Tom Clancy video game exposes the affective dimension of the dissonance between American military exceptionalism and a memorial affecting the consequences of violence. The digital recreation of D.C. betrays the specific political ideology at the heart of *The Division 2* through the choices of what history would be mediated within the environment, and what would be left out.

Even though the actual Vietnam Veterans Memorial is absent, however, does not mean that its presence is not still recreated within the gameworld. In the Southwest district of the D.C. map, sitting on the space that, in reality, is occupied by the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial, is a black wall with four columns of names written on it (fig. 11). In front of it is a reflecting pool with a flag on the opposite end. Bordering the Triangular shaped area is the same black stone that constructs the wall creating benches and waist-high barricades. The wall itself does not have a name, and there is no indication of whom or what the wall is meant to

represent. It is an odd, out of the way place situated in the bottom Southeastern portion of the map and there is little reason for players to encounter the monument beyond a side quest or two. However, if you arrive at the wall at night, shoot out the one functioning light illuminating the names, and perform the *salute* emote, a hidden encounter with a *hunter* is triggered and you can fight this particularly strong and equally technologically equipped enemy for the chance of getting a special mask to wear and one of eight keys to unlock a powerful weapon at your base of operations.

Figure 11. A reimagined wall – *The Division 2* © Ubisoft.

Returning to Hammoud's initial assertion that the developer's choice to not include the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in *The Division 2* was because of sensitivity to cultural icons, what does the choice to replicate the themes of the memorial on a repurposed memorial site geographically opposite to the real location say about that sensitivity? Similarly, the scripted events that must occur for a player to interact *properly* speak to a specific reverence towards the unidentified names on the wall. In order to trigger the encounter, players must salute the wall, a superficial *emote* in other contexts of the game becomes a prescriptive interaction with the world to engage in the content

of the game. Indeed, the redesigned memorial's reflecting pool is a direct refutation of one of the key emergent cultural forms of public memory to come out of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the leaving of objects for a person at the wall (Sturken 2007, 105). This is not to say that pop-up memorials do not exist in the world of *The Division*, its origin in New York left plenty of room for walls filled with photos, notes, and candles as referents to 9/11, but the striking image of objects of remembrance beneath the names of the fallen is not to be found in this replica. In fact, a makeshift memorial *is* present at this memorial on the opposite side of the wall. A key form of national cultural remembrance moved behind the memorial, out of sight, much like the memorial itself within the world of *The Division* (fig. 12).

Figure 12. Hidden remembrance – *The Division 2* © Ubisoft.

That the existence of this not-quite replica already troubles the deeply problematic assertions of sensitivity to cultural icons and apolitical nature of the game the designers had deployed as defense for their design choices is clear, but one last final piece is the name of the mask you receive; Wraith. The mask the player is rewarded for defeating a summoned enemy at a re-imagined veterans memorial is at once

easily dismissed as a coincidence and equally indicative of the specter of the death of American innocence and exceptionalism following the Vietnam War. On the one hand, other hunter encounters reward similar ghostly-themed masks like "Ghost" and "Spectre" (*The Division 2* 2019) that are themselves in reference to elite military units (another Tom Clancy game series, *Ghost Recon*, literally speaks to that), but on the other hand, wraith are spirits that portend death, and connected with the black walls of the memorial speak to a deeper meaning within the context of the haunted past and death of American military might abroad and support for an unexamined American imperialism domestically. While I may have been taken by the haunting of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial when I encountered an empty relief camp where it should have stood, the gameworld itself seems to cry out to what is missing through its rewards, mechanics, and environments in ways that force confrontation with the underlying themes and politics at the heart of *The Division 2*.

Conclusion. Memories of the Fallen Without the Consequence

In their review of *The Division 2*, Kotaku's Stephen Totilo took time to remark upon the previous controversy surrounding Spier's insistence on the apolitical nature of the game and what, if anything, *The Division 2* actually *said* about society:

> "What the game says most powerfully about society is expressed by playing through its version of Washington. It is expressed in the player's ability to explore the inside of the Lincoln Memorial and multiple floors of the National Museum of the American Indian, all while in machine gun firefights. Thanks to its sprawling fidelity, *The Division 2* is one of the most vividly rendered methods for letting people around the world virtually explore some of America's most culturally important museums and landmarks. It is both weird and unsurprising that such an offering would come via a blockbuster video game about shooting your way through Washington DC. Then again, no other enterprise may be lucrative enough to pull this off." (Totilo 2019)

Viewed through a lens of access to these places of history and culture, each decision of what belongs or not is the product of a specific set of values and principles as to what truly matters in the depiction of America's capital. Within the ideological universe of Tom Clancy, the challenge that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial poses to American exceptionalism and techno-militaristic, state-backed individualism is too much to include within the fantasy. At least that is what its haunting presence tells me.

Jeffrey Karl Ochsner (1997, 163) has called the Vietnam Veterans Memorial "A Space of Loss." Utilizing Richard Etlin's (1994, 172) concept of "a space of absence," Ochsner 1997, 163) argues, "a space of absence need not literally be a space, but can also be an object that has the ability to evoke this response." Ochsner views the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as a linking object that is a site of projection, wherein we *project* the life we find. This recalls Lin's design "to evoke "feelings, thoughts, and emotions" of a variant and private nature" (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991, 393). These variant and private feelings, thoughts, and emotions require human presence and interaction, and the wall becomes much more than an object or a space when these requirements are met. Writing about the reflectivity of the surface, the simplicity of the names on a wall, and the powerful connection they produce, Ochsner (1997, 164) finds a separate space is created:

> "We not only see ourselves superimposed on the names, we also see ourselves gazing out from within the wall. Thus, the space apart in front of the wall connects to a space apart that is seen through the surface of the wall. In optical terms, this is a 'virtual space'."

It is possible that any attempt to recreate the optical *virtual space* of the memorial would fall flat within the digital virtual space of the gameworld. Maybe the technology that allows me to shoot my gun at the Peace Monument to erase the

message “We Only Speak Bullets” (*The Division 2* 2019) just did not have the power to create a reflected player avatar in the all-encompassing black granite walls. Maybe it was that same ability to effectively destroy the environment with my weapons that stopped the developers from including the memorial. Maybe it was simply the challenge of how far the sprawling fidelity of a one-to-one recreation of D. C. could go within the context of reproducing the 57,939 names initially included in the memorial similar to their painstaking detail work in the Lincoln Memorial. Whatever the technical challenge may have been, the complete erasure of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and its challenge to American exceptionalism and mythmaking looms large in any analysis that takes serious claims of an apolitical game.

Much like their marketing detailing *what a real government shutdown looks like,* the parallels between the pandemic military fantasy and reality are far too close for my liking. As armed militias guard statues of the confederacy (Colton 2020, Schuessler 2020, Taft 2020) and the president calls out the National Guard against protestors in front of the White House (Allen, Clark and Shabad 2020); *The Division 2*’s imaginary sleeper agents look less like heroes and more like a warning of unrestricted state violence. As the entertainment of Tom Clancy’s near-future pandemic societal breakdown enters the streets of the real world, the actions and ideas carried forth by the game are having real consequences in the world.

Indeed, as set within the fantastical universe of Tom Clancy and *The Division*, the democratic processes that existed before the swift collapse of the U.S. government following the release of the weaponized smallpox is nowhere to be found in the world players encounter. Brief sound files players can discover around the city depict corrupt and inept politicians vying for power as society crumbles around them. As a Division agent, players only interaction is through technologically mediated force.

There is no way to discuss the issues of the day without weapons involved, and even as the game ends, a new private military contractor appears to challenge The Division's monopoly on techno-military might. It should come as no surprise that a military fantasy action game is focused on war, but it *should* be surprising to hear the developer claim an apolitical position in their choice of narrative frameworks that so swiftly abandon the principles of governance the U.S. was founded on and gleefully demonize democratically elected officials as unfit for the task of maintaining society in an emergency. The decision not to include the memorial to an unjust war predicated on executive decisions avoiding oversite by democratically elected representatives in a game about a secret military agency rebuilding the U.S. after the collapse of democracy speaks volumes about the ideologies present in *The Division 2*. Apolitical game design is an especially insidious politics of ignorance towards the harm military-based shooters have in perpetuating anti-democratic notions of individual exceptionalism and the fragility of democratic structures. *The Division 2* illustrates the game industry's reluctance to accept responsibility for the cultural impact of their creations. Playful or not, there is quite a lot of politics embedded within *The Division 2* and the erasure of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is just one way of marking the game as beyond entertainment and apolitical posturing that developers and publishers hope to portray.

In the end, I am haunted by the absence of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as I think on the 245,470 U.S. lives lost to COVID-19[iii], uncommented on in public mourning or remembrance. The Memorial's erasure reflects an inability of Americans to properly mourn the dead, especially within a context of exceptional individualism. While the memorial's presence seems like a divine intervention in mourning of life lost in the pursuit of imperialistic goals, its erasure from the digital landscape speaks more to the politics of memory in the United States and games of empire broadly conceived,

forcing a need for a political accounting of the cost of remaining neutral for the sake of interactive entertainment while the themes and activities represented in game directly threaten the democracy they purport to support.

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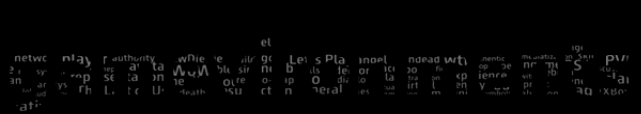

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[i] Besides the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the only memorial missing from *The Division 2* that I could find is the Einstein Memorial, located on the grounds of the non-governmental organization National Academy of Sciences. In addition, the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial is found on the same location as the relocated black granite memorial in Southwest district, so its presence is also erased. Lastly, the Constitution Gardens have a stone engraving of the 56 Signers of the Declaration of Independence that is present in game, but the actual signers are not depicted on the stones.

[ii] The additional developers are Ubisoft Annecy in Annecy, France, Ubisoft Bucharest in Bucharest, Romania, Ubisoft Reflections in Newcastle upon Tyne, England, Ubisoft Leamington in Leamington Spa, England, Ubisoft Shanghai in Shanghai, China, and Ubisoft Sofia in Sofia, Bulgaria.

[iii] As of 16 November 2020 at 12:16 PM according to https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#cases_casesinlast7days.