The Urban Intersection: Resisting Control in the City of *Mirror's Edge Catalyst*

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Abstract

This article examines environmental storytelling in the 2016 video game *Mirror's Edge Catalyst,* which is set in an urban control society. The article discusses the link between 'the urban' and 'the control society,' paying attention to the digital aspect of (urban) control mechanisms and how these (invisible) mechanisms are consequently represented in *Catalyst*. It argues that through parkour gameplay and emergent narratives—both of which are firmly rooted in the urban setting of the game—*Catalyst* allows the player both to imagine and enact resisting control, thereby furthering understanding of the representation of (resistance to) control in the smart city.

Stadtluft macht frei—or does it? The question how city dwellers engage with the environment around them has fascinated thinkers for a long time. Michel de Certeau engaged with the topic in the context of the urban walker; a wall might pose a restriction, or a path might pose an invitation, but if the walker decides to climb the wall or create a short-cut and circumvent the path, then the walker "transforms each spatial signifier into something else" (98). The most extreme form of engaging with urban spatial signifiers, perhaps, is that of parkour—bodily mobility in an urban context epitomised. Parkour originated in the suburbs of Paris (Bavinton 392; Wheaton 113) and its name comes from "*parcours du combattante*, which translates approximately as 'running against' or 'way of the fighting'" (Bavinton 392).[1] Parkour is firmly situated in the urban context and, as its French denominator implies, promises a potential for resistance.

The 2016 video game *Mirror's Edge Catalyst* is well-known for its parkour gameplay. The first game in the series, *Mirror's Edge* (2008), was particularly innovative due to its first-person parkour gameplay, which has since elevated the game to a (cult) classic (Byrd; Thier). *Catalyst* builds on the framework that the first game set up, but takes place in an open-world setting: the city of Glass, an urban dystopia. Its society is a highly stratified corporatocracy, ruled by the Conglomerate: a Board consisting of the members of the largest corporate families, with Gabriel Kruger as its de facto leader ("History"). The Conglomerate rules through surveillance and control; Glass can be said to be a control society as per Gilles Deleuze's "Postscript." This society is resisted by *Catalyst*'s playable character and protagonist, Faith Connors. She is part of a group of Runners, a cabal of outlaws who live 'off the grid' and are classified as outCaste, that is, not belonging to the hiCaste, midCaste, or loCaste to which everyone else in Glass belongs.

The city of Glass provides the game's playground; all missions and narrative events take place there. Taking his cue partly from Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City*, Henry Jenkins discusses narrative architecture, or the "narrative potentials of city spaces" in video games (129).

[1] An echo of de Certeau can be found here: he writes of the "art of composing a path (*tourner un parcours*)" (100).

The concept of the narrative architecture of the city has the potential to straddle the various intersections between the control society, parkour, and the video game. This paper will discuss *Catalyst*'s urban, environmental storytelling by examining the link between the urban setting and the control society. The control society and its (digital) effectivity in an urban context will first be explored, after which parkour will be examined as a means to empower its practitioners ('traceurs') to resist control in that same urban setting. *Catalyst*'s environmental storytelling will subsequently be close-read in light of the established framework, to cultivate a better understanding of the representation of urban control mechanisms and resistance in the medium of video games when part of this control is enacted digitally and thus 'invisibly.'

Control in the (Digital) City

Deleuze posits the society of control as successor of the disciplinary society. A major surveillance mechanism of the disciplinary society was Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon: the disciplinary model applies to "environments of enclosure" (Deleuze, "Postscript" 3). In the control society, such enclosed spaces no longer exist; they have been replaced by "an open environment" (6-7). Nevertheless, disciplinary surveillance mechanisms "do not disappear altogether in the control paradigm" (Muir 265). Deleuze implies that there is no clear binary division between disciplinary and control societies ("Control" 174), and surveillance still has traction in the control society. This becomes clear in Deleuze's definition of control mechanisms, which are capable of "giving the position of any element within an open environment at any given instant," and he continues with the warning that such a mechanism "is not necessarily one of science fiction" ("Postscript" 7). To illustrate, Deleuze points towards Félix Guattari who

> has imagined a *city* where one would be able to leave one's apartment, one's street, one's neighborhood, thanks to one's (dividual) electronic card that raises a given barrier; but the card could just as easily be rejected on a given day or be-

> tween certain hours; what counts is not the barrier but the computer that tracks each person's position—licit or illicit—and effects a universal modulation. (7, emphasis added)

Guattari's urban model combines surveillance (the computer tracking someone's position) with control, or modulation (the barrier is raised—or not). Guattari's city provides a good example to think through control and surveillance mechanisms. These mechanisms, as implicit in Guattari's description, are grounded in technology. Deleuze argues that each type of society has a corresponding kind of machinery. Control societies use "computers, whose passive danger is jamming and whose active one is piracy and the introduction of viruses" (6). This is relevant because the *language* of control is "numerical […: it] is made of codes that mark access to information, or reject it" (5). Control is (at least) twofold: control mechanisms control flows of bodies, as in Guattari's example in the city with barriers, and flows of information. These mechanisms of control are facilitated by the new machine—computers.

An intersection of elements emerges here, in the form of an urban environment in which the mechanisms of control are not only physical, but also partly virtual or digital (Muir 264). This informational, or smart, city "is a spatial embodiment of the society of control" (Krivý 21). In the open (urban) environment of the control society that starts replacing the closed disciplinary spaces, the relationship between space and the body changes; the "flows" that "shape both the spaces and subjects" change, making movement essential (Muir 267) in understanding control in the informational city. The body, however, exists not simply corporeally; it is divided between physical entity and code, becoming "*dividual*" (Deleuze, "Postcript" 5, emphasis original).[2] Muir suggests that "the physical body and material space are coded to interact with digital technologies which are embedded within the very fabric of urban city spaces, facilitating the 'flow' of the body within the city" (267). How this flow is tracked and, above all, regulated is where 'control' comes into play. The city (and person) being partly virtual, though,

[2] Recall Guattari's example above; someone's card is scanned (code) and access is denied to the person (body). Someone becomes divisible—thus, a dividual rather than an undividable *in*dividual—by being perceived as both digital (code) and physical (body).

raises the question of representation: "if much of the surveillance technology is computer and digital in form," how can *Catalyst* "make visible the potentially invisible?" (264). This question of the representation of urban, environmental storytelling will be taken up in the close-reading section below.

(Re)Negotiating Space Through Parkour

Establishing that the regulation of the flow of bodies and information is central to the urban control society invites a discussion of parkour. Parkour is the major gameplay element of *Mirror's Edge Catalyst.* The practice of parkour allows traceurs to resist the control mechanisms in an urban control society. Power—in the context of spatial navigation and the creation of space—is central to parkour. Parkour "developed into an 'art of movement' [that is] focused on discovering original and creative ways to negotiate city spaces" (Bavinton 392). A key principle of parkour "as a spatial practice" is a "practical and cognitive process of urban reinterpretation" through which "dominant power relations that organise and structure urban public space and privilege certain behaviours, while marginalising others, are challenged, disrupted, and resisted" by the traceur (392-93). It can be seen as a "political reappropriation of commercial urban spaces" (Atkinson 183). Flows of people are regulated by the arrangement of urban elements—and thus by those in power (Bavinton 396). In this context Nathaniel Bavinton uses the concept of affordances, whose definition bears heavy traces of de Certeau's walker. Affordances are

> the possibilities an object affords the perceiver as determined by the perceiver's capacities and abilities. For example, a chair is normalised by disciplinary power/knowledge as being for sitting on […] Sitting, however, is only one of many possible uses, but is the one defined as correct by discourse and habitualised as correct by discipline. (397)

Traceurs resist expected and "normalised" behaviours (407). Christoph Brunner further builds on the potential for resistance that parkour offers, in "dialogue with […] mechanics of power and control": "Architecture in light of urban practices such as Parkour collapses as a rigid concept and opens itself toward a rhythmical differentiation through movement" (146). Parkour, then, can be said to offer its practitioners opportunities to re-negotiate their relationship to the urban environment, through engaging in non-normative behaviour by re-conceiving the affordances that that urban environment offers.

The singular traceur embodies the resistance to the urban control society. In an article exploring the city of the first *Mirror's Edge* game as a locus of "dystopian anxiety" (243), Craig Johnson and Rowan Tulloch argue that mobility is crucial to resist control: the game "fram[es] the individual body as the core of resistance" (254). They do not focus on resisting control in a specifically urban setting, however; the first *Mirror's Edge* game does not take place in an open-world setting, but consists of various levels within which movement is limited. Nevertheless, their argument invites an in-depth exploration of movement in the open space of the city as portrayed in the second instalment of the franchise.

Flows in the City

Prior to analysing *Catalyst*, it is helpful to reflect briefly on the methodology of close-reading video games. The 1990s and early 2000s saw a debate surrounding the status of narrative in video games (Ang 306), which amounted to an opposition between narratology (story) and ludology (gameplay), leading to "two camps, each contending that games can or cannot tell stories" (Sim and Mitchell 137). This debate has since changed to the question *how* games tell stories, inviting discussions of how "narrative" and "ludic [gameplay] elements" can work together, or how "gameplay techniques [can be] used to convey the narrative" (139, 140). This paper will work with the assumption that *Catalyst* has some "ludonarrative resonance," meaning that the story and the gameplay enhance each other (139). The analysis below will focus on a ludonarrative technique that revolves around "emergent narratives" (Jenkins

128-29), which is the potential of "gameplay for exploring narrative settings" (144), and in which "game spaces are designed to be rich with narrative potential, enabling the story-constructing activity of players" (129)—in other words, environmental storytelling. With this technique in mind, a definition of close-reading a video game can be contextualised: "A close reading of a game involves deconstructing its features and elements to understand what contributes to a cohesive gameplay experience" (Sim and Mitchell 140). Working from the assumption that story and gameplay are intertwined, this paper will proceed by reading the narrative setting of the urban control society and how it is resisted through the parkour gameplay in *Catalyst*. The urban environment, then—the city of Glass—is crucial to both story and gameplay and ties them together.

The importance of movement in *Catalyst* is illustrated most clearly by the behaviour of the (CCTV) cameras in the game, which track Faith's movement. Some background on the game's narrative setting is necessary to contextualise the analysis of the cameras' behaviour, which will follow below. Every Employ, belonging to one of the castes, has a gridPrint; an ID that can be scanned, and is linked to the Grid, a kind of internet, which is "the main data network and primary form of communication and entertainment," the activity on which is "observed and tracked by the Conglomerate" ("The Beat"). The Runners are offGrid and instead use the Beat, which is similar to the Grid and uses its (digital) infrastructure but which exists outside the surveillance of the Conglomerate. Runners do not have a valid gridPrint because they are outCaste. The game starts with Faith in prison, who, prior to her imprisonment, has been given a fake gridPrint (using the name Phoenix Carpenter) by friends to lend her some legal status. *Catalyst*'s first mission sees Faith released from jail into Glass, which might already stand as a first indication of the (gradual) shift from closed-space prison surveillance to open-space urban control society. She is assisted by fellow Runner Icarus, who gives her a beatLink—a kind of contact

lens—providing Faith with augmented reality.[3] Some "interference" is caused as Faith still wears her prison gridLink (bracelet) and she is shown advertisements and news items—a continuous reel of controlling propaganda, with which the Employs have to live every waking hour (*Catalyst*, Mission 1). Icarus cuts her gridLink, setting off the prison alarm, after which the pair has to escape through skyscrapers and across the rooftops to the Runners' hideout.

The cameras are a surveillance mechanism, but are also involved in enforcing control. They are installed throughout the city, on its rooftops, at regular intervals, and scan the gridPrint of passers-by automatically. For the first third of the game, when Faith is 'scanned,' nothing happens—her false ID still holds up. This changes after Faith steals a hard drive containing the blueprint of Kruger's Reflection project.[4] Faith becomes hunted, and this is reflected in the behaviour of the cameras. After emitting the audio message "scanning gridPrint," the cameras now sound the alarm, and KrugerSec—Kruger's security force—arrives on the scene often within seconds (*Catalyst*). Digital surveillance leads to direct control measures. Faith, as a *persona non grata*, is not welcome on the rooftops of Glass; her physical presence there must be eliminated. A solution to resist control is movement; if Faith moves past the cameras quickly enough, they cannot scan and reject her gridPrint. As Muir argues for films, likewise in *Catalyst* "mobility (and speed) [are] of primary importance in avoiding discovery in this hybrid surveillance society" (270). Movement provides a way out of the conundrum that surveillance and control pose for Faith.

The surveillance exercised by the Conglomerate in Glass is digital, yet represented clearly through the audio feedback when the cameras

[3] The beatLink provides Runners with Runner Vision, which "colors 'usable' objects in red" (Bogost 73)—objects whose affordances can be reconsidered—and which makes objects stand out in the mostly white urban environment of Glass. This ties in with the manner in which control is enforced digitally; resistance to that control is *augmented* digitally.

[4] Reflection is marketed as a way to "[b]ecome the Grid" (*Catalyst*, Mission 6). However, the lead scientist of Reflection explains that "once you've been injected [with Reflection nanites,] the Conglomerate won't just track everything you do, they'll influence your emotions as well. It'll be the end of free thought as we know it" (Mission 6). Kruger retorts that "Reflection is not about control. It's about survival" (Mission 15). Nevertheless, Kruger uses Reflection to torture and kill Noah Kekai, Faith's mentor/father figure within the Runners and leader of her cabal, with a press of a button.

are "scanning [Faith's] gridPrint" (*Catalyst*). This is environmental storytelling; the urban environment draws on players' "story-constructing" imagination (Jenkins 129). While the cameras do not play a big role in the main missions, for many players the free-roaming in Glass is an attractive aspect (Mostafi qtd. in Byrd), and they will spontaneously encounter the cameras. A narrative of surveillance and control emerges quite naturally. The urban environment is saturated with cameras, and alongside chance meetings with KrugerSec, traversing the city becomes a thrilling experience. It is this very environment of the city in which the CCTV cameras and KrugerSec patrols flourish. Simultaneously, however, the urban setting provides Faith with opportunities to avoid and resist surveillance and control through parkour: she can climb walls and drainpipes, and flee through small spaces such as air vents to which KrugerSec has no access; she can wall-run across gaps or jump down from high places and avoid injury by skill-rolling away from her landing. KrugerSec is unable to perform almost all of these (parkour) movements, and this puts Faith at an advantage. The game's urban architecture thus provides a locus for a traceur to re-establish the affordances of spatial signifiers, thereby resisting normative standards, and *Catalyst* manages to represent this even though part of the surveillance and control are enacted digitally.

Deleuze explains that computers are the machines associated with the control society ("Postscript" 6), and suggests a way to resist its "continuous control and instant communication" ("Control" 174): the "key thing may be to create vacuoles of noncommunication, circuit breakers, so we can elude control" (175). This paves a way for understanding Faith's second way of dealing with the cameras, which is to hack them through the 'disrupt' prompt that is given in the game. This feature is unlocked once Faith upgrades her MAG (Manifold Attachment Gear) glove. This glove also helps Faith traverse the city, as it can shoot out a grappling hook that attaches (ironically) to security cameras, so she can swing between rooftops that are too far apart to jump regularly. Disrupting the cameras with the glove destroys them—for good, in the world of the game—and subsequently prevents them from scanning

Faith's gridPrint. By hacking the cameras, Faith acts as a circuit breaker of the urban CCTV network, resisting the surveillance and ensuing control of the Conglomerate and Kruger(Sec).

Returning to Muir's question of representation, the disrupting of the cameras is a clear representation of resistance; it is also a 'gameplay act,' as the player has to actively decide to disrupt, and hold down a button to effect the destruction. There are several other ways Faith can resist the control society by breaking the circuit of communication. Glass is crammed with advertisements, inviting emergent narratives. Faith can hack some of these billboards with her glove, after which the player's customizable Runner tag is displayed. The controlling, informational circuit is broken and the runner takes over control by spreading their own message. These billboards are hard to reach, and pose urban environmental puzzles to Faith/the player. Faith needs to perform a certain, difficult sequence of movements, that only a good Runner could perform. Flows, in this case, prove the key to Faith's resistance; she is capable of resisting the prescribed bodily flow and find her own way, after which she can manipulate the flow of information in the city.

Other hackable units in Glass are the gridNodes: they "contain massive traffic routers, data backup servers, and powerful wireless transceivers that co-ordinate the Grid into a single entity" ("The Beat"). The gridNode missions are large environmental puzzles. Faith has to reach the top of a tall, cylindrical-shaped room, where the hackable terminal is located. This requires a high skill level—for both Faith as well as the player, who needs to be extremely familiar with the game's controls: "Dangerous, and not designed for human access, navigating the alien interior [… hacking a Node] has become the ultimate demonstration of a Runner's ability" ("Runner Objectives"). These missions function as an emergent narrative; if Faith hacks the gridNode, the Runners will gain access to data and information which could benefit the outCaste's fight against oppression. Hacking gridNodes, moreover, unlocks safe houses in the part of the city where the Node is located. If Faith is pursued by KrugerSec across the city, she either has to continue running until she has been out of sight for a while, or find a safe house where she will be in the clear immediately. The safe house is a tangible

reward in the city for hacking flows of information. Several other side activities have Faith act as circuit breaker, such as destroying KrugerSec antennas to prevent them from communicating.

Conclusion

Catalyst's environmental storytelling represents control and Faith's resistance to it by creating opportunities for players to engage with the city's emergent narratives. These are represented through audio-/visual cues and can be 'played out' through the parkour gameplay. This bodily mobility is a way to resist the Conglomerate's control mechanisms, and is a clear way of making visible the act of resisting surveillance and control, in a setting where much of this control is enacted digitally. Many (side) activities invite the player to use their imagination, leading to emergent narratives that use the urban environment for storytelling. The city of Glass presents a convincing control society with (digital) surveillance elements, and provides ample opportunity for Faith/the player to interact with the mechanisms of control and surveillance, and thereby to resist the control that the Conglomerate and Kruger enforce. Control flourishes in the city, yet, ironically, it is also the specifically urban environment that allows Faith to resist control mechanisms through her parkour skills. Ultimately, *Catalyst* constitutes a case study of how video games set in a physical/virtual urban control society can represent resistance to that society, predominantly through parkour gameplay and environmental storytelling. Future research could interrogate the role of gender (cf. Wheaton on gendered resistance in parkour) in this intersection of elements, or examine further ways control is enforced in *Catalyst*'s narrative, examining the Reflection project in greater detail.

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Biography

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