

# The Purposes and Meanings of Video Game Bathrooms

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**Abstract**— Through an archaeogaming framing and an object-inventory method, the purposes and meanings of video game bathrooms are put forward with a framework. The framework assesses each video game bathroom based on its immersive qualities, ludic affordances, and ideological commentary. By analyzing games and establishing the framework, this article addresses how designers employ these affordances to use bathrooms as representative spaces. While bathrooms in video games contribute to a sense of place through environmental storytelling, they also represent situated perspectives on privacy, cleanliness, dirt, gender, and other ideological concepts. This article places video game bathrooms in a larger history of bathroom representations in media. However, unlike other media, video games enable players to view themselves in different bodies within bathrooms, engage in potentially taboo behavior, and interrupt conservative or traditional understandings of bathroom use. This enables designers to take spaces that are political, in some cases even dangerous and antagonistic, and make them playful.

**Keywords**—Game Design, Game Studies, Bathrooms, Game History

## I. INTRODUCTION

This article explores the purposes and meanings of video game bathrooms—not just their aesthetic and ludological construction, but their ideological comments on privacy, cleanliness, dirt, gender, and society’s anxiety around bathroom use. We define a bathroom in a video game as any virtual game space or object that purports to allow in-game characters to cleanse and reflect upon their in-game body or dispose of bodily waste.

We develop a three-part framework using an archaeogaming framing and an object-inventory method established by Jess Morrisette [1]. Using this method, our framework assesses each video game bathroom based on its immersive qualities, ludic affordances, and ideological commentary. This framework comes from an analysis of 427 games. While bathrooms in video games clearly contribute to a sense of place, they also represent situated perspectives on privacy, cleanliness, dirt, gender, and other ideological concepts. This historical practice starts with the pixelated toilet in 1984’s *Jet Set Willy* on the ZX Spectrum [2].

## II. PRIVACY AND THE HISTORICAL REPRESENTATION OF THE BATHROOM

An analysis of video game bathrooms to ascertain their purposes and meanings intersects with the concept of privacy. The bathroom or toilet has been historically viewed, in Western culture, as a private and solitary affair [3], [4]. As urban studies scholars Rob Kitchin and Robin Law observe, “The dominant Western norms of proper toilet behaviour for adults include discreetly dealing with your body’s needs, away from the gaze of others, in demarcated settings with some spatial separation from other activity spaces, using facilities which meet public health standards on the disposal of human waste and control of dirt” [5]. The private act of disposal of waste and removal of dirt is a critical component of the bathroom and is steeped in ideological, political, cultural, and aesthetic understandings of privacy. How privacy is defined, enacted, or enforced, and what its representational purpose through media accomplishes, intersects with bathroom use.

A modern definition of privacy is instructive: “(1) the state of being apart from other people or concealed from their view; solitude; seclusion; (2) the state of being free from unwanted or undue intrusion or disturbance in one’s private life or affairs; freedom to be let alone; (3) freedom from damaging publicity, public scrutiny, secret surveillance, or unauthorized disclosure of one’s personal data or information, as by a government, corporation, or individual” [6]. For this paper, we define privacy as providing solitude and concealment for an individual to attend to their affairs free from undesired attention. Bathrooms enact or enforce this working meaning of privacy. Extending a bathroom’s material conditions into the immaterial space of video games extends these same practices [1].

Cultural understanding of bathroom privacy has evolved along with the composition and location of the space. Public restrooms are particularly charged spaces. Their modern introduction was in the 1850s when they were first installed in the Crystal Palace [3]. This was a marked revolution of bathroom use in urban settings. While those who had access to private bathrooms, chamber pots, and public houses of easement shifted with the centuries, the act of using the bathroom was frequently a private affair. Public bathrooms expanded with the growing use of the railway. In 1907, most hotels and clubs in upper-class England had flush toilets [4]. Public bathrooms became necessary to maintain the urban environment. Anthropologist Ian Scott Todd observes, “The public restroom

became a means of organizing urban space, theoretically containing its dirt (urine, feces, and other bodily excretions) and maintaining the propriety of its citizens, particularly women” [4]. The public restroom became a place for the everyday person to relieve themselves. It also became, in the eyes of the upper class and social conservatives, a place where women might lose their propriety. This double bind, particularly for women, enabled bodily privacy while at the same time impugning their character and agency [4]. To modernist artists and writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as James Joyce and Jean Rhys, the private act of using a bathroom becoming increasingly public created an opportunity to develop stories and representations that upset existing conservative ideals [4].

As Todd states, “What we see in these works, then, is not merely an ethnographic or sociological interest [...] but moreover the radical impulse to take up and consider the leavings of modern culture—its waste and its dirt—and to throw them onto the page” [4]. This exploration of the bathroom and its themes connects to contemporary filmmakers’ approach to privacy in the bathroom. From Hitchcock’s iconic shower scene in *Psycho* (1960) to the activity occurring in bathrooms in *The Sweetest Thing* (2002), *Dumb and Dumber* (1994), and *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001), the tropes of privacy, the male gaze, disposal of waste, and the act of cleansing continued to be interrogated and exploited [7]–[10].

Whereas authors use writing; performers, the stage; and filmmakers, the camera; game designers and developers rely on computational affordances for interactivity [11]. Privacy, then, is not a part of our framework but instead a subject of the framework: a culturally constructed, politically infused, and ideologically steeped idea that game designers interrogate through their bathrooms. Just like the modernist authors and artists, contemporary game designers interrupt and augment our understanding of privacy and bathrooms, transforming them into spaces of play, storytelling, and connection. Bathrooms in video games, just like bathrooms in modernist novels, become a place to interrogate our cultural understanding of privacy—idealized visions of cleanliness and sanitation, fears around dirt and human waste, political struggles around gender and identity, and fascinations and anxieties over the increasing visibility of our private spaces.

### III. METHODOLOGY

This paper borrows the methodology established by Morrisette’s article, “I’d Like to Buy the World a Nuka-Cola: The Purposes and Meanings of Video Game Soda Machines” [1]. While our derived framework differs from Morrisette’s, the method that guides our research does not. For our database of bathrooms and toilets in video games, we leveraged existing repositories that we then formalized [12]–[14]. After cross-referencing and validating entries, our database totals 427 games at the time of submission. It can be found at [vgbathrooms.colum.edu](http://vgbathrooms.colum.edu) and remains open for submissions.

For our analysis, we used our previously stated definition of video game bathrooms, which includes the use of bathroom sinks, showers, toilets, bidets, toilet paper, outhouses, spaces for defecation or urination, and spaces for cleaning up. This broad definition is intentional as it recognizes the evolution and cultural situatedness of the bathroom over time. For example,

outdoor urination in *Death Stranding* (2019) is certainly a form of going to the bathroom [15], as is the use of the bathroom stalls in *Goldeneye* (1997) and the squat toilets in *Echoes of You* [16]–[18]. We are cognizant of the plurality of understandings of bathrooms that might be pursued by game designers around the world. We believe our definition upholds this pluralism.

Our wide range of data points presents how game designers have used bathrooms for immersion and interactivity in ways that reflect and impress ideological, social, and political values upon players. This paper engages in a critical analysis of video game bathrooms using an object-inventory [1], [19]. We treat the bathroom and its accoutrements as an object that is intentionally designed and implemented in the game to produce an impact defined by our framework. The inventory allows us, as researchers, to ask questions about how the bathroom is designed, in what context the bathroom exists, what the bathroom’s purpose is, and how that purpose is achieved.

Further, we take up the archaeogaming framing used by Morrisette. Morrisette invokes Andrew Reinhard, explaining that “archaeological sites, landscapes, and artifacts, and the game-spaces held within those media can also be understood archaeologically as digital built environments containing their own material culture” [1], [20]. In the same way that Morrisette’s Video Game Soda Machine Project catalogs virtual vending machines as “artifacts of material culture in immaterial space”, our project catalogs virtual bathrooms as spatial constructs of material culture in immaterial space [1]. In this way, each bathroom can be situated with its own unique scope and place in the larger visual history of bathroom representations.

### IV. THE BATHROOM FRAMEWORK

Through our analysis, a set of patterns arose that helped to assess the purposes and meanings of individual bathrooms. These patterns are immersive, ludic, and ideological commentary. Immersive includes aspects that encourage interactivity, realism, narrative presence, and agency. Ludic describes any game mechanisms or structures that encourage play or are integral to a win, loss, or reward condition. Ideological commentary addresses how the design of these bathrooms reflects or critiques cultural trends.

#### A. Immersive Purposes of Video Game Bathrooms

Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern describe immersion as, “the feeling of being present in another place and engaged in the action therein” [21]. Our database revealed several instances of video game bathrooms that served to increase immersion and a player’s sense of presence in the space. These instances are broken down into interactivity (the number and quality of interactions in the environment) and narrative immersion (how the bathroom itself is used as part of environmental storytelling or the general narrative).

##### 1) Interactivity, Realism, and Agency in *Duke Nukem 3D*’s Cinema Bathroom

*Duke Nukem 3D* (1996) is often discussed in popular press on bathrooms in video games [17], [22]–[24]. While the game’s juvenile sense of humor and violent gameplay contributed to a limited cultural understanding of video games, it also heralded a new era of interactivity and immersion in games [17], [24].

Early in *Duke Nukem 3D*'s first level, the iconic "Hollywood Holocaust" map, the player enters the cinema that contains the game's famous bathroom scene that elevated gamers' expectations for video game interactivity and immersion [17], [24]. Consider the scope and magnitude of interactions possible in this scene. The player can (1) urinate in and flush toilets—the player character expresses relief after urinating; (2) observe their avatar's reflection in the mirror—interacting with the mirror causes Duke to say "Damn, I'm looking good."; (3) open stall doors to reveal hidden items and an enemy; (4) destroy the toilets, resulting in a water spray—if the player interacts with the water spray, Duke laps up the water, restoring one health point per button press; (5) surveil enemies through a security camera's view of the bathroom; (6) enter a ventilation duct by climbing on the sink and then jumping on bathroom stalls; (7) toggle bathroom lights on and off; and (8) destroy a light bank on the bathroom ceiling.

Realism and agency are two key qualities of this bathroom's interactivity that serve to enhance immersion. Regarding realism, the closer that the virtual world resembles the real world, the more believable and more immersive it becomes. While mimetic visual fidelity is one way that video games approach realism, another way is through their simulation and interactive qualities [21], [25]. When a virtual world depicts elements of reality, its contents initially evoke the same affordances that they have in reality [26]. Here we use the term affordance, as defined by James J. Gibson, to mean "the 'values' and 'meanings' of things in the environment that can be directly perceived" by the player [27]. In our instance, the values and meanings of the environment may take the form of possible interactions with objects, surfaces, layouts, places, and persons situated in the space. Some affordances are ludic, impacting the state of play or victory conditions, and will be discussed in a later section. Other affordances increase the fidelity of the virtual space's simulation of reality. For example, if a player attempts to open a door in a video game and succeeds, the affordance of doors in the virtual world is reinforced, solidifying the connection with reality. However, if the player attempts to open a door in a video game and discovers that this interaction is not possible—that the door is simply artwork decorating the scene—then the virtual world feels artificial. In this case, the affordance of subsequent doors erodes, creating a divide between the virtual world and reality. As this divide grows, the player's active creation of belief diminishes [11], [21].

*Duke Nukem 3D*'s bathroom interactions generally map to their real-life affordances. This alignment bolsters realism. And, while the visual fidelity of *Duke Nukem 3D* was not as graphically sophisticated as *Quake*, the innovation of the functional mirror was an unprecedented leap in realism and immersion. As game developer John Howard Scott describes, "[*Duke Nukem 3D*'s] mirror reflections left a bigger impression on me than any raytracing I've seen." The natural affordance of a mirror is to reflect its environment. Beyond this, the mirror serves to ground the player in the game world and establish presence in a way that the first-person gameplay camera cannot on its own. The mirror helps the player feel more like they are Duke Nukem and less like they are piloting a disembodied, floating camera with human arms attached to it.

Beyond the abundance of affordances and interactive elements in *Duke Nukem 3D*'s bathrooms, the fact that bathrooms exist in Nukem's world contributes to its realism. Level designer Max Pears illustrates this concept in his account of one of his levels being reviewed by his supervisor, while working on *Tom Clancy's The Division* (2016):

*Overall, the review was going well, the flow was good, it had good landmarks for players to orientate themselves in case they were lost. But Dan felt some of these areas were not believable because there were no toilets. Because The Division is based on reality I had skipped one thought process when doing my research... 'How would these spaces have been used before chaos struck?' [28]*

Though not necessarily required by game mechanics or plot, the presence of bathrooms enhances the believability of game levels as actual spaces that could exist beyond the context of a video game. As writer and teacher Matt Margini Ph.D. puts it, "[bathrooms'] very optional-ness made them crucial to the game's performance of a believable space" [17].

Agency is the second key quality of the *Duke Nukem 3D* bathroom scene that works to create immersion. As defined by Mateas and Stern, "Agency is the feeling of empowerment that comes from being able to take actions in the world whose effects relate to the player's intention" [21]. The entire bathroom scene in *Duke Nukem 3D* is optional and is not part of the critical path. This means that everything the player does here is grounded in intention—the game does not force them to explore the bathroom, the player elects to. Since affordances in bathrooms are so familiar, players may have expectations of interactivity. If the toilet flushes, the player buys further into the game world [11]. *Duke Nukem 3D*'s cinema bathroom established bathrooms as a litmus test for interactivity, agency, and immersion in video games that endures to this day.

## 2) Narrative Immersion and Video Game Bathrooms

Narrative contributes to immersion [11]. Players are immersed by actively creating belief in a game's stories, cultures, and histories. Bathrooms are emblematic of video game designers' employment of this narrative immersion.

Most early uses of bathrooms in video games were attempts at scatological humor [17]. For example, the comedic platforming games *Earthworm Jim* (1994) and *Boogerman: A Pick and Flick Adventure* (1994) used toilets for transporting players to new locations, a play on the warp pipes in *Super Mario Bros.*—but using bathrooms to evoke a vulgar and visceral comedic tone [29], [30]. This scatological tradition exists in contemporary video games such as *Lego Batman 3: Beyond Gotham* (2014), where the player must destroy golden toilets to get rewards, or *Gekisou! Benza Race -Toilet Shooting Star-* (2019), where characters race while riding toilets [31], [32]. However, as the medium has evolved, more complex narrative uses of bathrooms were established [17].

All video games have designated environments to contain their gameplay [33]. Game environments then have a gameplay purpose connected to their contents. In addition to this gameplay purpose, some game designers assign each game area a narrative purpose in pursuit of deeper immersion. The narrative purpose of a game environment answers questions like "How do people

interact with this location before the player arrives?” and “What happened in the environment prior to the player getting there?” [34], [35]. Bathrooms in video games thus have implicit narrative purpose. The clear signifiers of bathrooms immediately resonate with audiences’ cultural context of how, when, and why these rooms are used, which encompasses more than simply the disposal of bodily waste. Further, game designers have developed *mise en scène* storytelling techniques to convey narrative elements of their game’s plot or characters, often housing these techniques within bathrooms.

*Gone Home* (2013) employs *mise en scène* as a primary storytelling device. It uses a first-person perspective, and the core game mechanics are walking and picking up objects for visual examination. The player explores an empty house, attempting to discover the fate of the player character’s missing younger sister, Sam. The game establishes a horror atmosphere by isolating the player in an old, dark house during a thunderstorm. It uses this atmosphere to tint the player’s interpretation of scenes and objects. The guest bathroom exemplifies this technique. The bathroom is interactive. The toilets can be flushed; the bathroom cabinets and drawers can be opened and their contents investigated; and the sink and tub faucets can be turned on and off. Upon investigating the bathroom, the player notices red liquid in the bathtub. The game’s unsettling atmosphere raises player suspicion that this is blood, perhaps even marking Sam’s demise. However, closer inspection of the room uncovers a bottle of red hair dye which, combined with one of Sam’s journal entries that mentions dyeing her hair, changes the player’s understanding of this bathroom scene [36].

While primarily a puzzle game, *Portal* (2007) is renowned for environmental storytelling [37]–[39]. The game begins with the player in a glass-walled chamber enclosing a toilet. The implication is that the player is a monitored test subject in a futuristic laboratory, which is all conveyed by this simple bathroom environment. The environment’s shiny, white, and modern aesthetic extends to the toilet. Closer inspection, however, reveals a contradictory grime and lack of maintenance that sets the stage for an uneasy feeling that something is amiss about this lab. Interacting with the toilet causes it to flush with a splash of water and play a computerized voice that says, “Thank you for your business,” developing the game’s comedic voice while providing immersion [40].

Graffiti in bathrooms is a common, interactive way for real-life bathrooms to convey narrative. The game *Life is Strange* (2015) demonstrates how this function applies in video games. The player explores a high school bathroom as part of the game’s required path of progression. The bathroom contains various instances of graffiti that have a dual purpose. First, they help the scene resemble a real-life high school bathroom. Second, the content of the graffiti serves to develop the game’s characters and their culture. From the graffiti, we learn about school gossip and student reputations [41].

### B. Ludic Purposes of Video Game Bathrooms

Video game bathrooms serve ludic purposes when they directly motivate play or affect player success outcomes. Our framework breaks these instances into two categories: when the

bathroom functions as a playground and when the bathroom functions as a game mechanic.

#### 1) Bathroom as Playground

As cultural historian Johan Huizinga explains, “all play moves and has its being within a playground” [33]. When expressed within a video game bathroom setting, we can understand the bathroom as a playground. The bathroom contextualizes and influences gameplay, allowing players to explore how the affordances of the bathroom can become ludic when intertwined with the game’s overarching mechanics. While we have established how *Duke Nukem 3D*’s cinema bathroom serves an immersive purpose, it also simultaneously functions as a playground. While the interactivity of this bathroom corresponds with reality, typically we do not blast apart urinals with firearms or barge into closed bathroom stalls to catch adversaries with their pants down. In this way, the bathroom becomes a playground: a space for players to engage safely and playfully, separate from the rules and expectations of regular life.

Additionally, the unique ludic affordances of bathrooms, combined with their loaded cultural meanings, inspire emergent gameplay. In such instances, players leverage game mechanics in an open-ended way to evoke the form and style of play that suits them, as opposed to pursuing an outcome preconceived by the game’s developers. For example, in the video “Video Game Bathrooms,” the YouTube channel Curious Reviewers demonstrates how some players might choose to escape the intense combat scenarios of the *Hitman: Codename 47* (2000), *Deus Ex* (2000), and *Silent Hill* (1999) by simply relaxing in the privacy of these games’ interactive bathrooms [42]. The author even shows how to remove enemies and other “distractions” that may invade the player’s privacy in the bathroom. The bathroom becomes a playground for Curious Reviewers’ self-care and they encourage their viewers to use it in the same way. Similarly, YouTubers have documented myriad examples of emergent bathroom gameplay in *Half-Life: Alyx* (2020), such as cleaning the virtual bathrooms and hoarding virtual toilet paper [43], [44].

#### 2) Bathroom as Game Mechanic

There are instances where the bathroom provides unique game mechanics that relate to the strategy and overall success or failure at the game. Game designer and scholar Gonzalo Frasca categorizes game mechanics related to determining a winner or loser as “ludus” [25]. Because ludus game mechanics directly influence success and failure outcomes, which can be interpreted simply as good and bad respectively, bathrooms used as game mechanics often connect to our next framework category: bathrooms as ideological commentary [25].

For example, in *Duke Nukem 3D*, drinking the water that sprays out of destroyed urinals restores Duke Nukem’s health. Health is a primary variable in the player’s success at the game; if it reaches zero, the player loses. Also noteworthy is that drinking the water to restore health in this way occurs at a rate of one health point per button press. Because the player has 100 possible health points, this is a laborious method for regaining large amounts of missing health.

The game *Death Stranding* has robust bathroom mechanics and tracks the player character’s bladder fullness. The game underscores the public versus private opposition of bathrooms

by allowing the player to urinate either in their private bathroom or outdoors. An interface tooltip advises the player to “be considerate and relieve yourself away from other people and their property.” The game also has rules that prevent the player from urinating near friendly characters. On the other hand, the player can urinate on enemies to repel them. Through enforcement of these bathroom rules, the game conveys ideological commentary. If the player urinates in private, they receive a special grenade. If the player urinates outside, mushrooms grow where the urine contacts the ground. As more players urinate in that location, the number and size of the mushrooms increase. If enough players urinate in the same spot, insects that give the player health will gather around the mushrooms. Further, the game rewards the player with an achievement the first time they urinate outside [15].

The game *No More Heroes* (2007) uses the bathroom as an integral part of progressing through the game. The player character, Travis Touchdown, must defecate in the toilet for the player to save their progress. Players save their game when they need to take a break from playing, creating a reflection of the in-game narrative where the player character is concurrently taking a break in the restroom [45].

#### a) Privacy and Vulnerability as Game Mechanics

As a signifier of privacy, video game bathrooms help designers provide intuitive, privacy-related gameplay. This can take a wide range of forms. For example, in *Hitman: Codename 47*, the player uses the privacy of bathrooms to don disguises or hide weapons for later retrieval [42]. In *Catherine* (2011), when the player character receives suggestive photo messages from a character he is having an affair with, the player can only view them when while in the privacy of the bathroom stall [46].

Set in a 1962 roadside bathroom, Robert Yang’s *The Tearoom* (2017) uses the public/private dichotomy in public restrooms for its core gameplay. The player uses their gaze to identify and signal potential sexual partners while standing at the urinals. The object of the game is to complete a sexual experience with a partner in the bathroom without being surveilled by others, especially police who trigger a lose state [47]. The game tacitly engages with Laura Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze by encouraging the player to utilize their own situated gaze to exploit men as sexual objects [48]. This departure from Mulvey’s conception is a realization of the instrumentality of the gaze as discussed by documentary scholar Bill Nichols, scholar and activist bell hooks, and others [49]–[53]. Specifically, *The Tearoom* utilizes scholar Mitchell J Wood’s *Gay Male Gaze*. According to Wood, the *Gay Male Gaze* is a complicated reckoning with the need to be gazed upon affectionally, but also to have the power of the male gaze to subjugate [54].

As Alexander Kira describes, the bathroom’s relationship with privacy also makes it a space of vulnerability:

[Bathrooms are] *isolated and deliberately secluded so as to afford the maximum privacy. In many such instances, few people are ever around. The ideal physical arrangement for public elimination is also the ideal physical arrangement for committing a crime. In addition, of course, such*

*intentions are further facilitated by the relative helplessness and immobility of a person engaged in elimination activities; that is, one may be literally “caught with one’s pants down.”* [3]

This concept extends to video games, where the bathroom becomes a common site of crimes inflicted by and against player characters. Many stealth games involve the player learning enemy patterns and attacking enemies when they are not aware. Bathrooms, used daily by players in real life, create clear signifiers about where and when to take advantage of enemy characters. For example, in *Metal Gear Solid* (1998), the player can wait for enemies to use the bathroom before ambushing them or simply sneaking by [55]. Alternatively, like horror films, horror video games often use restrooms, with their loaded cultural meanings about dirt and privacy, as settings to make the player feel uneasy or vulnerable. In *Silent Hill 2* (2001), the player character is in a dark, filthy bathroom and must reach into a toilet bowl to recover a wallet containing a clue to a puzzle [56]. In *At Dead of Night* (2020), the player can hide in the bathroom from a killer who may still intrude on their privacy as he systematically searches for them [57]. Games also create scares by taking advantage of the familiarity of mundane bathroom interactions, like opening a stall door or lifting a toilet seat, to startle the player with unexpected results [58], [59].

#### C. Bathroom Design as Ideological Commentary

In Margini’s essay “Bathrooms without Bodies”, a case is made for video game bathrooms as ideological spaces but then largely ignored to explore their role in evoking realism and environmental storytelling. Margini begins by examining the film *Inside Rooms: 26 Bathrooms, London & Oxfordshire, 1985* (1985) by Peter Greenway [60]. The film looks at bathrooms across London and “implies that even the bodily functions [that bathrooms] are built to serve can be different, too: bathing, defecating, and even just resting—pausing from the world—become different things inside different frames” [17]. This same observation was made by Joyce and other modernist authors when they turned their eye on the public restroom [4]. In the 2021 film *White Tiger*, director Ramin Bahrani critiques inequalities in Indian society. In one series of scenes, he contrasts the hotel bathroom of Ashok, a wealthy Brahmin, with that of open-air defecation by Ashok’s servant Balram who, during the act, has a mental breakdown [61]. Each space, framed by the camera or the writer’s pen, offers a comment about the world that the bathroom exists within—not just for the characters in the scene, but for the reader or viewer as well. Video games are an extension of this aesthetic tradition of using the bathroom as a form of social commentary.

Slavoj Žižek explored the bathroom as an ideological space in his 1997 book *The Plague of Fantasies* [62].

*In a traditional German toilet, the hole into which shit disappears after we flush is right at the front, so that shit is first laid out for us to sniff and inspect for traces of illness. In the typical French toilet, on the contrary, the hole is at the back, i.e. shit is supposed to disappear as quickly as possible. Finally, the American (Anglo-Saxon) toilet presents a synthesis, a mediation between these opposites: the toilet basin is full of water, so that the shit floats in it,*

visible, but not to be inspected. [...] It is clear that none of these versions can be accounted for in purely utilitarian terms: each involves a certain ideological perception of how the subject should relate to excrement. [...] It is easy for an academic at a round table to claim that we live in a post-ideological universe, but the moment he visits the lavatory after the heated discussion, he is again knee-deep in ideology. [62]

It is just as easy for game designers to dismiss their bathrooms as merely an extension of the world, as Fullbright's Steve Gaynor does, "They exist as interactive objects to flesh out the 'realness' of the game world as a functional place" [63]. But they are also more than simply a space for a reflexive relationship with players where, as Arkane's Shawn Elliot states, "The proliferation of flushable toilets nudged designers to include content in and around them, [...] and this encouraged players to go poking around in them, which pushes designers to continue the tradition" [63]. Margini invokes Janet Murray's observation to claim that bathrooms are "[...] as if the programmer within the system is waving at us, but doing so in a manner that deepens rather than disrupts the immersive world" [16], [25]. But this fails to address that the designers and developers who produce said bathrooms do so from a deeply situated and ideological position at a particular moment in history [16], [25]. Video game bathrooms should be approached as extensions of the material world that produces them; they should be explored in the same manner as Žižek's comparisons of German, French, and American toilets. Even if game designers and developers fail to grasp the ideologies embedded in their bathrooms, they exist and impact players. Video game bathrooms are more than a designer's extra labor to show the players that they love their game [17].

In the niche world of video game bathroom studies, *BioShock Infinite* is often mentioned as a key example of bathrooms as social commentary. The *BioShock* series is known to use environmental storytelling to critique the gilded age and unchecked capitalism. In *BioShock* (2007), a player discovers a crumpled corpse beneath a toilet. Inside the toilet lays a bottle of whiskey. The storytelling is clear—in this sad world, liquor was the forlorn soul's final friend [64]. In *BioShock Infinite*, the environmental storytelling is even stronger. The oppressive regime has implemented segregated bathrooms: a set for Whites and others for Blacks and Irish. The White bathrooms are resplendent and cleaned by a Black bathroom attendant [65]. However, the white supremacy on display is offered up as an aside as the player is never required to enter the bathroom [66]. Even though these spaces are codified ideology, both in computer code and in the philosophical sense, the critique can be skipped by players. The critique only operates on a representational and narrative level and lacks ludic expression as part of some procedural rhetoric. If the player misses these bathrooms, this critique of Jim Crow laws and racism becomes ineffective [25], [67].

In *The Ship: Murder Party* (2006), players are invited onto a boat by a mysterious Mr. X, a nefarious character who has set up a manhunt battle royal. The player is one of many passengers that must track down and murder their fellow passengers in order to survive. The game's multiplayer version requires that all of the players engage in eight need-fulfilling activities, such

as drinking, sleeping, socializing, maintaining hygiene, and using the bathroom. The bathroom, as reported on player forums and in YouTube videos, is a common place to be attacked [68], [69]. By forcing players to engage in these behaviors, the game enforces normative behaviors related to cleaning, maintaining hygiene, and using the bathroom, and the player must perform them in an ideologically coded manner. Such a performance puts them at risk for punishment, that of being killed by another player. By putting the player in a risky position during these activities, the game tacitly demonstrates Michel Foucault's observation that we live in a society of surveillance. The game demands, as Foucault states, that "the individual is carefully fabricated in [the social order] according to whole technique of forces and bodies" [70]. The player is not merely using the bathroom or cleansing, they are being surveilled by other players and must protect themselves. The game enforces the idea that bathrooms are dangerous, socially constructed places, wherein their use in the eyes of others may result in punishment [71].

As game journalist Audric Figueroa notes, *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty* (2001) comments on ideology and privacy.

*Every time you're in the "facilities" you can radio your superiors, who will comment on their invasion of your privacy. Staring at a toilet or standing at a urinal during a call will prompt embarrassment from your commanding officer and girlfriend. Staring at a lewd poster in one of the stalls will elicit jealousy and disapproval. Call from the women's restroom once and you'll be mocked. Call a second time and you'll be branded a pervert. ... Break too many taboos and your girlfriend will think you're a bad person and refuse to save your game. [72]*

Other games comment on the ideological construction of gender in relation to bathroom access. For example, in the game *Bully* (2006), the protagonist is presented as male and can enter any boys' bathroom in the school. However, if the character walks into the girls' bathroom without narrative or ludic cause, they are given a trespassing violation [73]. Bathhouses, in real life, have a wide spectrum of restrictions—from gender neutral to religious. In *Stardew Valley* (2016), Eric Barone (the sole developer) separated the bathhouses by gender [74]. In *Murder by Numbers* (2020), the female detective main character's companion is a box-shaped robot with crude anthropomorphic features. When investigating a women's restroom, the robot asks if he is allowed in the women's restroom since he is referred to as a "guy." The main character gives him permission to enter with her [75]. In *Yume Nikki* (2009), the character Madotsuki can use either bathroom, a design choice that has resulted in players arguing that the character's gender is non-binary [76], [77]. The reaction of the player base of *Yume Nikki* is an example of how a design choice can have ideological consequences for players, regardless of whether designers intended it to.

The shifting options for *The Sims*' character customization and their opportunities to use the bathroom reflect cultural anxieties connected to the bathroom wars. The wars about enforcing discriminatory laws on bathroom usage by transgender individuals began in 2014. These wars were a backlash to laws related to the introduction of gender-neutral bathrooms. These laws began to be implemented in Vermont in 2009. In the first release of *The Sims* (2000), only the male

avatars can use urinals [78]. This continues through *The Sims 2* (2004) [79]. In *The Sims 3* (2009), as gender-neutral bathrooms became more normalized, the game no longer gendered bathrooms. Further, players could choose whether their Sim urinates standing up or sitting down, regardless of their sex. At this point in the series, the bathrooms become fully interactive. Sims can do everything from washing their hands to taking a pregnancy test [80]. As some bathrooms were becoming a freer space in parts of the Western world, *The Sims'* designers created a more playful space. We do not contend that this was intentional, rather that this was an ideologically reflexive response to greater bathroom freedoms.

In 2014 and 2015, Texas and other states instituted “bathroom surveillance” bills that required transgender people to use bathrooms that matched their birth gender. *The Sims 4* (2014) was released at the end of 2014 and included an even wider range of bathroom interactions. When Sims are forced to invade stalls, the invaded upon character gains an embarrassed icon for hours. Notably, the invader does not get embarrassed. In *The Sims 4*, bathrooms are gender neutral by default. However, in what can be read as a direct response to the bathroom wars, players can optionally implement gendered bathrooms [81]. Gender is no longer assigned by the player in *The Sims 4*. Instead, the game automatically assigns a gender based on the composition of the Sim’s body. For example, if the Sim has breasts, the game labels the Sim as female. Further, the game continues to allow the player to choose how the Sim urinates—but only those that choose standing can use the urinals. These choices provide the player with the illusion of agency, but the designers still foist gender identities onto player characters in a way that affects in-game bathroom use. This is similar to *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020), wherein the choice of the player character’s voice assigns masculine or female pronouns [82]. The player is powerless to define their identity in its entirety.

Like Joyce and other modernist writers and artists, *The Sims'* designers use interactions in the bathroom to comment on society’s relationship with toilet use. However, where Joyce and the modernists critiqued oppressive ideals around women’s sexual empowerment and autonomy, *The Sims'* designers critiqued the increasing control and legislation around bathroom use by offering the player more (but incomplete) control over their Sims’ genders and how they might interact in the bathroom. Instead of critiquing societal anxieties by constructing lewd scatological scenes within bathrooms like the modernists, *The Sims'* designers did so by increasing player choice and making playful what was increasingly antagonistic and political.

## V. PURPOSES AND MEANINGS OF VIDEO GAME BATHROOMS

This paper explored the purposes and meanings of video game bathrooms. We created a framework to analyze these representations based on their immersive, ludological, and ideological aspects. We present the following conclusions:

- Representations of bathrooms in video games reflect social mores, anxieties, and beliefs around cleanliness, gender, waste, privacy, and bathroom use.
- Unlike other media, representations of bathrooms in video games allow users to inhabit different bodies,

engage in taboo behavior, and choose to interrupt or follow conservative or traditional bathroom use.

- Designing play in bathrooms enables video game creators to both critique how these spaces are used and to exploit cultural connotations and anxieties to evoke specific impacts on players. Players enact those understandings through interactivity. In this way, video game bathrooms have ideological meaning.

It is our hope that this paper, the framework, and the database will be of value to the game studies community. The database is live and available for submissions. As more game bathrooms are created, it is our hope that our collection will help to chart the history of video game bathroom representations. This is in many ways a community effort. During the review period, another Twitter account, @UseTheBathroom launched in June 2021 and has by the end of the month 6600 followers. Video game representations of bathrooms—along with those in art, literature, film, and theater—reflects humanity’s relation to our most private acts.

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