

# Cool Games, Cool Japan

## Staged Atmospheres in CYBERPUNK 2077 and GHOST OF TSUSHIMA

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### INTRODUCTION

The presence of East Asian aesthetics in popular culture is nothing new. Ridley Scott's *BLADE RUNNER* is perhaps the most prominent example, featuring Japanese neon signs, billboards, advertisements, and food stalls in the Hong Kong-inspired cityscape of 2019 Los Angeles.<sup>1</sup> The cyberpunk genre turned these elements into genre-marking motifs, from current television shows such as *ALTERED CARBON*, to mainstream video games such as *CYBERPUNK 2077* or indie titles such as *CLOUDPUNK*.<sup>2,3,4</sup> With gameworlds becoming grander and more explorative in their nature, video games—open world games in particular—are marketed as unique experiences enacted within staged spaces and distinct atmospheres. Open world games emphasize this experience by encouraging free traveling, exploring, and even sightseeing in their gameplay. The space these actions take place in, and the atmosphere that surrounds them, become a centerpiece. As I argue here, the *staged atmospheres*—following Mikkel Bille, Peter Bjerregaard and Tim Flohr Sørensen—are commodities and, as such, are deeply embedded in power relations

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1 *BLADE RUNNER* (US/HK 1982, D: Ridley Scott).

2 *ALTERED CARBON* (US 2018).

3 *CYBERPUNK 2077* (PL 2020, O: CD Projekt Red).

4 *CLOUDPUNK* (DE 2020, O: Marco Dieckmann, Ion Lands).

and cultural-social dynamics, such as tourism or nation branding.<sup>5</sup> To address the nature of these commodified staged atmospheres, I consider two games: CYBERPUNK 2077 and GHOST OF TSUSHIMA.<sup>6</sup> The former will demonstrate how staged atmospheres build cyberpunk cities with themes of post-human technology, multiculturalism, and rapidly changing society. GHOST OF TSUSHIMA, on the other hand, is an example of how staged atmospheres in an open world game function as a marketing tool, in this case Japan's soft power diplomatic strategy.

## CYBERPUNK: STAGED ATMOSPHERES AS EXPRESSIONS OF POWER

From the beginning of CD Projekt Red's marketing campaign for its open world game CYBERPUNK 2077, they emphasized free-form gameplay, including the exploration and experience of the game's metropolis, Night City. An official promotional video described its gameplay as: "[...] a glimpse into the world of perils and possibilities that is Night City – the most vibrant and dangerous metropolis of the future."<sup>7</sup> Its vibrancy and danger are shown through its cyberpunk setting: street food vendors, bustling streets, various shop fronts and neon signs across towering buildings, and crowds of people live their lives among many others. Fractions of dialogues from passing strangers, police sirens, and announcements in various languages fill the soundscape. The player is promised a video game city more organic and livelier than ever before, a promise built on a captivating cityscape that uses its cyberpunk setting to explore themes of technology in contention with what it means to be human, or consumer capitalism and corporate power. The game does not sell Night City the game, but Night City the experience.

It is here concepts of experience, tourism, and atmospheres collide. Almost too naturally do video games fall into the "experience economy" as defined by Joseph Pine and James Gilmore.<sup>8</sup> In this sense, they are commodified products that aim to provide "time enjoying a series of memorable events that a company stages – as in a theatrical play – to engage [a person] in an inherently personal

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5 Bille, Mikkel et al.: "Staging Atmospheres: Materiality, Culture, and the Texture of the in-between", In: *Emotion, Space and Society* 15 (2014), pp. 31-38.

6 GHOST OF TSUSHIMA (US 2020, O: Sucker Punch Productions).

7 Cyberpunk 2077.: "Gameplay Reveal – 48-minute Walkthrough." YouTube, 28 Aug. 2019. <https://youtu.be/vjF9GgrY9c0>.

8 Pine, Joseph/Gilmore, James: *The Experience Economy*. Updated Edition. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press 2011.

way.”<sup>9</sup> Tourism is directly tied to these commodified products, as John Urry and Jonas Larsen observe, because experiences need staged places, and thus, tourist places are designed to provoke what they call the tourist gaze.<sup>10</sup> They explore venues that make full use of their space to tell a story and follow a visual and architectural narrative to guide their guests through its space, such as Disneyland or the hotel and casino resort Luxor in Las Vegas. Similarly, atmosphere is closely tied to these spaces, emphasizing not the structure of the place itself but what can be felt there:

“atmospheres can be produced consciously through objective arrangements, light, and music [...]. But what they are, their character, must always be felt: by exposing oneself to them, one experiences the impression that they make. Atmospheres are in fact characteristic manifestation of the co-presence of subject and object.”<sup>11</sup>

The purposeful creation of atmospheres for entertainment has become a dominant strategy to make experience-based products such as video games appealing. This can be referred to as a staged atmosphere, as Mikkel Bille, Peter Bjerregaard, and Tim Flohr Sørensen describe:

“Still, architects and designers intentionally shape the experience of, and emotional response to, a place through the material environment, seeking-with various degrees of success-to affect people’s moods and guide their behavior for aesthetic, artistic, utilitarian, or commercial reasons.”<sup>12</sup>

Although they shape the material environment to create a place, video games seek the very same in their spatial architecture. Indeed, the spatial dimension is inherent to video games, as they share an infatuation with theming of their spaces by “[finding] a spatial and architectural form that will resonate with people,” an “architecture of persuasion.”<sup>13</sup> Perhaps because video games lack a physically real space, they are even more obsessed with creating it digitally—a kind of “spatial fetishism,” as Rolf Nohr describes. Traveling, exploring, observing, and conquering space becomes the primary drive in open world games: “the experience of a vast

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9 Ibid., p. 3.

10 Urry, John/Larsen, Jonas: *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*. Los Angeles: SAGE 2011, p. 120.

11 Böhme, Gernot: “Atmosphere as an Aesthetic Concept”, In: *Daidalos* 68 (1998), pp. 112-115, here p. 114.

12 Bille, Mikkel et al.: *Staging Atmospheres*, p. 33.

13 Lukas, Scott: *Theme Park*, London: Reaktion Books 2008, p. 69.

landscape becomes an end in itself.”<sup>14</sup> Just as tourist spaces are intentionally designed to create atmospheres that serve as commodified products, video games design atmospheres to deliver unique experiences in a similar fashion. Night City’s allure is the vibrancy, liveliness, and cyberpunk themes embedded in its environment. Thus, a closer look at its environment will yield insight into how atmospheres are staged.

In its endeavor to give players a unique cyberpunk city experience, the game uses well-known cyberpunk visual tropes to create its cityscape. Comparing CYBERPUNK 2077 to one of the most well-known and genre-defining cyberpunk films BLADE RUNNER, both emphasize their respective city’s atmosphere. First, Night City and the futuristic Los Angeles of BLADE RUNNER embody the dominance of technology in almost all aspects of life. This is reflected visually in the city through its holographic billboards, advertisements, and high-rise apartment buildings. Second, the same billboards also suggest the multicultural aspects of the city, particular Asian-themed places such as “Masala Studios,” “Kabayan Foods,” or “Kiroshi Optics.” The cityscape and the social spaces “borrow from Asian motifs, albeit vague and general ones” to create a “futuristic noir atmosphere.”<sup>15</sup> This includes both city’s frequent depiction of Asian food stalls: BLADE RUNNER’s protagonist Deckard visits an Asian noodle stall with a Japanese-speaking owner and CYBERPUNK 2077’s protagonist V meets their friend Jackie, who is slurping away on noodles at a similar stall. Although Night City is nowhere near as noir as BLADE RUNNER’s Los Angeles—particularly the bright and colorful views of daytime Night City—both cities have strong similarities in their shared fictional locations with real cultural currents of California. The cityscape builds its atmosphere not only through specific visual tropes, but also on cultural themes.

One of these recurring themes is techno-orientalism in cyberpunk cities. Although otherwise not an overt theme of BLADE RUNNER, certain scenes set the tone of the film and thus the atmosphere of futuristic Los Angeles:

“Indeed, one of the most iconic images from the film is of a giant electronic advertising billboard featuring a woman made up to look like a Japanese geisha (played by American

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14 Cf. Nohr, Rolf, F.: “Raumfetischismus. Topografien des Spiels”, In: *Repositorium Medienkulturforschung* 3 (2013), pp. 2-24; Bonner, Marc: “On Striated Wilderness and Prospect Pacing: Rural Open World Games as Liminal Spaces of the Man-Nature Dichotomy”, In: *Proceedings of DiGRA 2018*, p. 1-18, here p. 3.

15 Kin Yuen, Wong: “On the Edge of Spaces: ‘Blade Runner’, ‘Ghost in the Shell’, and Hong Kong’s Cityscape”, In: *Science Fiction Studies* 27 (2000), pp. 1-21, here p. 4.

actress Alexis Rhee). This image, and the film in general, combines the exoticism of Japan with its electronic (and western) commodification.”<sup>16</sup>

In CYBERPUNK 2077, these tropes are still present. Kiroshi Optics, for instance, is an eye implants manufacturer. On the other hand, The Arasaka Corporation is the game’s antagonistic security and banking megacorporation which manufactures vehicles and military equipment for global distribution. Thus, BLADE RUNNER offers the most well-known example of the continuation of techno-orientalism in pop culture. However, techno-orientalism also refers to Western cultural anxiety of being overtaken socially, culturally, and economically by Asia. Although techno-orientalism is mainly associated with Western dependence on Japanese manufacturing and technology, it should also be further contextualized within the broader immigration history of the US.<sup>17</sup> It is no coincidence that both Night City and futuristic Los Angeles are in California, a state with a long history of East Asian immigrants. From Chinese immigrants who first came to California during the ‘Gold Rush’ period in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and built North America’s first trans-continental railroad, to the detention of Japanese American citizens in WWII internment camps, and finally Vietnamese refugees escaping a communist regime after the fall of Saigon in 1975. Indeed, techno-orientalism is the embodiment of a larger cultural anxiety. As part of the staged atmosphere, technology expresses the tension between the foreign and the US cultural landscape through Asian-themed motifs present in the staged atmosphere of the cityscape. Techno-orientalism also expresses radical cultural change: when BLADE RUNNER’s protagonist Deckard sees the billboard, it represents the exoticizing beauty of an American woman donned in Japanese clothes and make-up-an allegorical expression of the US taken over by other, foreign cultures.

However, techno-orientalism alone does not constitute Night City’s staged atmosphere. Whilst techno-orientalism has established itself as a cyberpunk visual trope, Night City amplifies its techno-orientalism to evoke a sense of grandeur, exemplified by the city’s fittingly named Japantown district, along with neighboring (sub-)districts Kabuki or Little China. CYBERPUNK 2077’s game database gives the following description of Japantown:

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16 Ruh, Brian: “Japan as Cyberpunk Exoticism”, In: Anna McFarlane, Graham J. Murphy, Lars Schmeink (eds.), *Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture*, London and New York: Routledge 2020, pp. 401-407, here p. 404.

17 Cf. Morley, David/Robins, Kevin: *Spaces of Identity*, London and New York: Routledge 1995, pp. 148-149.

“Given its popularity with tourists, it’s no wonder Japantown feels like it’s constantly buzzing with life. Crowds occupy the local bars, upscale restaurants, the famous Cherry Blossom Market and especially the Shinto Shrine that’s a must-see if you’re in the area. Every corner holds a luxurious backdrop for a photo op—Japantown doesn’t disappoint.”<sup>18</sup>

The game not only posits Japan as a site of advanced technology, but also the center of tourism. The popularity of its district—according to the game’s database—is due to its attractions, hospitality, and other sightseeing spots. Tourism is at the forefront of this district’s popularity, a reflection of Japan’s continuous rise as a popular tourist destination, rather than only exporting tourists.<sup>19</sup> With the Japanese economy nowhere near the threatening force it was by the end of the 1990s, the country’s reputation as a technology powerhouse has dimmed somewhat.<sup>20</sup> Only in 2014 did Japan succeed in generating a positive tourism balance of payments for the first time in 55 years, in part due to several government campaigns to improve the country’s image overseas.<sup>21</sup> Night City itself encapsulates Japan as attraction through visually stimulating points of interests: torii gates (gates signaling the entrance to a shrine) placed in urban areas, food markets such as Cherry Blossom, and a Shinto shrine. To add another layer to the staged atmosphere, many non-playable characters walking in these areas speak Japanese and announcements ring through the city in Japanese as well.

An important shift is taking place in games and in popular media generally: in the context of Japanese culture, the tourist experience has shifted from tense to celebratory. This is reflected in the game’s architecture, language found on billboards and spoken in the streets, or other cultural aesthetics integral to their narratives. Western media seems to have found an (often superficial) infatuation with Japan-themed narratives. WESTWORLD, a sci-fi television series, sets its initial plot around a Western-themed park and later reveals another area called Shogun World, stylized after the Edo period of Japan.<sup>22</sup> In another animated film, BIG HERO 6, protagonist Hiro lives in San Fransokyo—a fusion of Tokyo and San Francisco not only in name but also in architectural style.<sup>23</sup> Numerous other

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18 Game’s database, Japantown entry. CYBERPUNK 2077 (PL 2020, O: CD Projekt Red)

19 Cf. Jimura, Takamitsu: *Cultural Heritage and Tourism in Japan*, London and New York: Routledge 2022, p. 4.

20 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 405; cf. D. Morley and Robins, K.: *Spaces of Identity*, p. 173.

21 Cf. Jimura, Takamitsu: *World Heritage Sites. Tourism, Local Communities and Conservation Activities*, Wallingford: CABI 2019, p. 82.

22 WESTWORLD (US 2016).

23 BIG HERO 6 (US 2014, D: Don Hall and Chris Williams).

popular, Western films are heavily influenced by Japanese aesthetics: KILL BILL: VOLUME 1, THE LAST SAMURAI, LOST IN TRANSLATION, THE FAST AND THE FURIOUS: TOKYO DRIFT, or THE WOLVERINE to name a few.<sup>24, 25, 26, 27, 28</sup> As far as video games are concerned, CLOUDPUNK is another cyberpunk title that uses nearly the same strategies as CYBERPUNK 2077 and BLADE RUNNER to portray its own cyberpunk city, Nivalis.

These titles commodify the aesthetics of a specific culture, incorporating this into the respective media's environment to create a particular experience. Undoubtedly, this process is deeply embedded in power relations perhaps integral to staged atmospheres as described by Mikkel Bille, Peter Bjerregaard and Tim Flohr Sørensen:

"[...] we want to question the role of staging atmospheres in the formation of power, and instead explore atmosphere as a space of political formation that underlies the realm of discursive politics, but cannot be controlled in any simple and unambiguous way by political agents."<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, the Japanese government pushed the appeal of Japan under the umbrella term of "Cool Japan"—a slogan to describe Japan's influence on pop culture. Particularly, it is the "global appeal of Japanese popular culture," with the country's government recognizing its potential to promote, export, and develop national branding strategies.<sup>30</sup> After all, many Japanese video game titles and companies

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24 KILL BILL: VOLUME 1 (US 2003, D: Quentin Tarantino).

25 THE LAST SAMURAI (US/NZ 2003, D: Edward Zwick).

26 LOST IN TRANSLATION (US/JP 2003, D: Sofia Coppola).

27 THE FAST AND THE FURIOUS: TOKYO DRIFT (US/JP 2006, D: Justin Lin).

28 THE WOLVERINE (US/UK 2013, D: James Mangold).

29 Bille, Mikkel et al: *Staging Atmospheres: Materiality, Culture, and the Texture of the in-between*, p. 33; Whilst the cyberpunk genre uses general motifs from Asia, the primary focus in this essay will lie on those borrowing from Japanese culture. Whilst other Asian cultures may be found in the cyberpunk genre too, this essay cannot address all these relationships without oversimplifying them. Moreover, this would risk leaving the impression of all Asian countries being similar or alike, disregarding their own social and cultural histories often at odds with Western powers.

30 Kimura, Tets: "Evolution of the Perceptions of Japanese Culture in the West: From Unknown, Mysterious, Exotic to Cool", In: Tets Kimura, Jennifer Anne Harris (eds.), *Exporting Japanese Aesthetics. Evolution from Tradition to Cool Japan*, Brighton: Sussex Academic Press 2020, pp. 12-39, here p. 12.

achieved global success, with Nintendo as one of the country's most influential video game producers. In recent years, games not only produced in Japan but also taking place in Japan have found global success, such as SEKIRO: SHADOWS DIE TWICE, the SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI: PERSONA or YAKUZA series.<sup>31, 32, 33</sup> Tets Kimura even speaks of a new-found "supremacy" of Japan, one that exceeds the economic power the country held before.<sup>34</sup> Staged atmospheres play an integral role in delivering this global appeal, whether consciously through active governmental policies or subconsciously through Western media indirectly inferring to Japanese culture. Staged atmospheres can express this kind of power:

"All measures of direct and indirect urban design that influence the change, overlapping or construction of atmospheres unfold power in a specific sense over the *experiences* of the city and over the being-in [*Ergehen*] a city."<sup>35</sup>

As Jürgen Hasse further observes, this power can be used "to impress, for directing attention, for subtle suggestions, [and] for ideology-constitution."<sup>36</sup> Thus, staged atmospheres can be a practice of soft power, that is, the political power to shape outcomes in a country's favor through means of culture, political values, and foreign policies.<sup>37</sup> In the context of Japan, soft power is primarily associated with the country's rising cultural influence. The staged atmosphere in Night City not only reflects this change but it is also a subtle marketing tool reinforcing Japan's position as a cultural powerhouse.

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31 SEKIRO: SHADOWS DIE TWICE (JP 2019, O: FromSoftware).

32 SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI: PERSONA (JP 1996-2020, O: Atlus).

33 YAKUZA (JP 2005-2021, O: Sega).

34 T. Kimura: *Evolution of the Perceptions of Japanese Culture in the West: From Unknown, Mysterious, Exotic to Cool*, p. 12.

35 Hasse, Jürgen: "Atmospheres as Expressions of Medial Power. Understanding Atmospheres in Urban Governance and under Self-Guidance", In: *Lebenswelt. Aesthetics and philosophy of experience* 4 (2014), pp. 214-229, here p. 223.

36 Ibid., here p. 224.

37 Cf. Nye, Joseph: *Soft Power. The Means to Success in World Politics*, New York 2005: Public Affairs, p. 11.



## PROMOTING TOURISM: GHOST OF TSUSHIMA AND COOL JAPAN

It is here where GHOST OF TSUSHIMA comes into play, a game truly capturing staged atmospheres as a marketing tool for Cool Japan. An open world game set in the Edo period of Japan, the game's story focuses on samurai Jin battling the invading Mongol forces. Aside from this inherently specific setting, the game also affords many explorative activities tied to Japanese culture: composing haiku poetry, bathing in a hot spring, and visiting shrines and temples across the island. Before diving into these cultural aspects tied to gameplay, however, it is important to understand GHOST OF TSUSHIMA in the overall context of an open world game.

As Night City is defined by its density of people and buildings to explore, the island of Tsushima is defined by its wilderness and landscapes often void of any humans. The few man-made structures that exist are either abandoned or occupied by hostile forces that must be cleared before villagers can return. Despite the absence of an urban city and a lively population, the staged atmosphere is just as pervasive: "the very idea of wilderness as pristine and untamed nature derives from the man-nature dichotomy and thus mankind's progression away from nature towards an artificial environment."<sup>38</sup> Further, Marc Bonner stresses the importance of appropriating this wilderness in gameplay through the staging of nature. Leaning into Jay Appleton's prospect-refuge theory, Bonner uses the term prospect-pacing to describe a player's exploration from one landscape to another, always on the lookout for the next aesthetic experience of landscape.<sup>39</sup>

GHOST OF TSUSHIMA offers many opportunities for the player to savor its experience of landscape by offering places of refuge or "opportunities to hide [...]."<sup>40</sup> Although, like other open world games, the world of Tsushima is pristine wilderness, it is filled with quests and points of interests to guide the player from one landscape experience to the next.<sup>41</sup> The places may be man-made structures, yet deeply tied to nature or its experience: hot springs, for instance, are places of

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38 Ibid., p. 2.

39 Ibid., p. 5.

40 Appleton, Jay: *The Experience of Landscape*, i.a.: John Wiley & Sons 1975, p. 73.

41 To navigate to these places, the game forgoes indicators through its user interface, such as arrows or a mini map on the heads-up display (HUD) that might intrude on the experience. Instead, following golden, singing birds will lead the player to a variety of interesting locations, foxes lead to their dens with a small shrine, and when the player looks for directions of their next place they need to go to, wind will indicate it (also see Magdalena Leichter's chapter in this volume on this).

relaxation. These places are signified visually through a colorful tree, such as a red maple tree that frames the steam of the hot springs. As player-character Jin relaxes in the water, he will often contemplate recent events related to the game's story through an inner monologue. At other times, the player can also find circular straw mats surrounded by candles, a place for the player to compose a haiku. To do this, they must observe their surroundings, usually a serene landscape. After gazing at particular sights, several options for each line of the haiku appear for the player to choose from. As if traversing the landscape alone is not enough, *GHOST OF TSUSHIMA*'s places of refuge are meant as a counterweight to Jin's often fast-paced and rather brutal fights. Felix Zimmermann and Christian Huberts describe these spaces as "action-reduced experiences," as they are an opportunity to savor the staged atmosphere without being disrupted by enemies or other hostile forces.<sup>42</sup> In the context of Cool Japan, these action-reduced experiences promote experiences akin to tourism in Japan, as will be illustrated more clearly later.

Activities with emphasis on exploring and appropriating spaces culminate in the numerous shrines found in the gameworld. Whilst exploring Tsushima, players may come across torii gates in the landscape. Unlike the decorative torii gates in Night City used to denote an area's cultural theme, the gates in *GHOST OF TSUSHIMA* indicate a nearby temple. The shrines follow Shinto, "polytheism based on Japanese myths, nature, and natural phenomena. Fundamentally, Shintoism equates our nature with deities (*kami*)."<sup>43</sup> Each shrine honors its deity and to receive the deities' blessing, one must offer prayers at the shrine. In the game, these are often hidden, for instance on top of a mountain ridge or in the middle of a small lake surrounded by rocks. After following the path indicated by the gates, the player will usually see the shrine itself but the direct path to it is destroyed or blocked. Instead, the player must find other ways to reach the shrine by means of climbing, scaling, or jumping across obstacles. The otherwise open spaces in the game that allow for freedom of movement become momentarily restricted. Hence, shrines afford a gameplay challenge akin to spatial puzzles in which the correct path must be found. Reaching the top shrine is rewarded by both an item but also a brief cutscene in which the camera zooms out, giving the landscape together with the shrine a full exposition shot. This is what Christopher Totten describes as a rewarding vista: "[they] attract players to linger at them by offering interesting

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42 Zimmermann, Felix/Huberts, Christian: "From Walking Simulator to Ambience Action Game: A Philosophical Approach to a Misunderstood Genre", In: *Press Start 5* (2019), pp. 29-50, here p. 37.

43 T. Jimura: *Cultural Heritage and Tourism in Japan*, p. 28.

or unique game art to look at [...].”<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the rewarding vista may invite the player to stay longer, perhaps to scout for their next point of interest indicated by rising smoke, or use the game’s sophisticated photography function. *GHOST OF TSUSHIMA* offers many of these action-reduced refuges as opportunities to experience the landscape and hence consciously engage with its atmosphere.

Takamitsu Jimura identifies pilgrimages to shrines and visiting hot springs as part of cultural heritage tourism in Japan.<sup>45</sup> Video games, particularly games like *GHOST OF TSUSHIMA* and *CYBERPUNK 2077* that emphasize exploring places and spaces, already have a particular relationship with tourism. Urry and Larsen describe tourist relationships as “movement of people to, and their stay in, various destinations,” which necessitate movement through space.<sup>46</sup> These destinations and places are “chosen to be gazed upon because there is anticipation, especially through daydreaming and fantasy, of intense pleasures [...]”.<sup>47</sup> Many video games are tourist experiences: players become travelers seeking out unique experiences and landscapes. The cultural context of *GHOST OF TSUSHIMA*’s anticipation, daydreaming, and intense pleasures is informed by both real-life tourism like visiting cultural heritage sites and popular culture. Concerning popular culture’s influence, developer Brian Fleming comments:

“So much of our inspiration comes from samurai cinema—not just Akira Kurosawa, but just movies in general, including movies that were inspired by samurai movies like westerns, *STAR WARS*, all these other different types of Western media that have been inspired by it. It’s hard to divorce the two, right, because they’re so embedded in the way that we think about samurai.”<sup>48</sup>

Additionally, Sucker Punch Productions worked closely with Japanese consultants, historians, and a local tourist organization during the game’s development. The collaboration with the Nagasaki prefecture tourist organization resulted in a promotional website for both the game and the actual island of Tsushima,

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44 Totten, Christopher W.: “Designing Better Levels Through Human Survival Instincts,” in: *Gamasutra*, June 21, 2011, [http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/134779/designing\\_better\\_levels\\_through\\_.php](http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/134779/designing_better_levels_through_.php).

45 Cf. T. Jimura: *Cultural Heritage and Tourism in Japan*, pp. 23-46, pp. 87-107.

46 J. Urry, J. Larsen: *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*, p. 16.

47 Ibid., here p. 17.

48 Tapsell, Chiris: “Sucker Punch talks *GHOST OF TSUSHIMA*’s Inspirations, Cultural Authenticity, and the Studio’s Growing Identity”, In: *Eurogamer*, July 21 2020, <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2020-07-21-ghost-of-tsushima-interview>.

informing prospective visitors of various cultural sites on the island. A player of *GHOST OF TSUSHIMA* may be inclined to eventually visit the island of Tsushima – a kind of tourism that has been described as “contents tourism” in Japanese contexts. This term refers to a practice aiming to “increase international visitor numbers and energize the tourism industry” with “the addition of a ‘narrative quality’ [...] or ‘theme’ [...] to a region – namely an atmosphere or image particular to the region generated by the contents – and the use of that narrative quality as a tourism resource.”<sup>49</sup> It is no coincidence that atmospheres are mentioned in this definition of contents tourism. On the contrary, staged atmospheres in *GHOST OF TSUSHIMA* serve as a commodity to promote tourism to Japan and are therefore an integral part of Cool Japan.

## ATMOSPHERE AS POWERFUL TOOLS FOR EXPERIENCES

In what sense can staged atmospheres express power? How can they become commodities and then serve as part of a larger marketing strategy? Both *CYBERPUNK 2077* and *GHOST OF TSUSHIMA* make their spaces and their exploration the main selling-point: they are sold as experiences. Staged atmospheres create these experiences and their staging is essential to understanding their inherent power relations. The consequences go beyond game and gameplay in effecting the way players think or imagine spaces and places. By identifying themes of techno-orientalism but also tourism in the Night City of *CYBERPUNK*, this chapter demonstrates that staged atmospheres not only express power but also signify changing dynamics of power. In *GHOST OF TSUSHIMA*, a similar power is expressed through its staged atmosphere. However, in this game the staged atmosphere is deeply tied to Japanese culture: a dense network that entails popular culture, history, and tourism. Staged atmospheres can also serve as powerful tools in international politics, such as nation branding or as marketing strategies for tourism. Just as atmospheres themselves are difficult to grasp analytically, so is the dense network of staged atmospheres.

Undoubtedly, understanding the concept of atmosphere is an interdisciplinary challenge. Rather than only concerning video games, staged atmospheres influence a wider array of cultural currents not bound to one medium but the entire landscape of experiences.

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49 Seaton, P. et al.: *Contents Tourism in Japan. Pilgrimages to “Sacred Sites” of Popular Culture*, Amherst: Cambria Press, p.2.

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