

An Archivist's Exploration of Tom Clancy's *The Division 2*

<https://www.ubisoft.com/en-us/game/the-division/the-division-2>

Reviewed by Becky Briggs Becker, Editor-at-large



Exterior shot of the National Archives and Records Administration building in Tom Clancy's The Division 2.

When I began writing this review, I thought it was amazing that the video game *Tom Clancy's The Division 2* included a mission to recover the Declaration of Independence from the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) building in a virtual Washington, DC, besieged by a pandemic and violence. In the game, a rogue militia captures the NARA Building as one of its many safehouses, along with several museums and landmarks scattered across a virtual DC. Reclaiming the famous archival document becomes a symbol of resistance for civilians and government agents holed up in settlements, bases, and safe zones across the city. Here it is, a video game referencing the plot to *National Treasure*, a movie my fellow editor-at-large Samantha Cross explored on her *POP Archives* blog.¹ Indeed, most of my previous encounters with libraries, archives, and museums in popular culture depict these spaces as quiet interludes to gain knowledge during grand adventures, suspenseful mysteries, or historical docudramas in film,

¹ Samantha Cross, "Archives in the Movies: National Treasure," *POP Archives*, January 28, 2020, <https://www.pop-archives.com/post/archives-in-the-movies-national-treasure>.

television, and video games. However, these spaces in a gritty action-game like *The Division 2* simultaneously serve as places of refuge and safety for both the protagonists and their enemies, as well as explosive set pieces to drive the story's plot. For the protagonists, this means moments of quiet and respite to recover from missions. For the rogue militia that ensconced itself in NARA and other federal buildings and museums across virtual downtown DC, the protagonists disrupt their quiet moments to recover lost territory, rescue hostages, or recover important mission data or items.



Where the reviewer recovers the Declaration of Independence in Tom Clancy's *The Division 2*.

Tom Clancy's The Division is an online action role-playing video game developed by Swedish-based Massive Entertainment and published by Ubisoft in March 2016. Their follow-up, *Tom Clancy's The Division 2*, was released on PC, PlayStation 4, and Xbox One on March 15, 2019. French video game company Ubisoft reserves its "Tom Clancy" branding—named for the American author best-known for his military novels such as *The Hunt for Red October*—for tactical shooter games set in modern or near-future conflict situations. Players star as agents serving a fictional federal organization, the Strategic Homeland Division, to supplement civilian and regional governments' efforts to stabilize areas affected by catastrophic events. The best analogy for this agency is to imagine the Federal Emergency Management Agency combined with the Special Operations of the US military. The first *Division* game involves the player character reestablishing normalcy in New York City following a weaponized smallpox pandemic, known as the "Dollar Flu" or the "Green Poison" based on the super virus spreading on contaminated dollar bills during Black Friday sales. *The Division 2* takes place seven months after the previous game's onset, set in Washington, DC, after the Green Poison spreads through the city. Roving bands of marauders and paramilitary militias wrestle for control of DC, and threaten the remaining civilians living in settlements across the city. For the basis of this review,

my husband and I played through the game's main story until we reached the last level of the game's progression system. By that point, the game's sharp difficulty spike and uncanny resemblance to current events did not compel me to continue playing the game.

As my husband and I traversed through virtual DC, we could see the care Massive Entertainment took to recreate the locale. Even *Washington Post* journalists remarked how closely Massive Entertainment recreated DC locales in the game, right down to the placement of restaurants and grocery stores.² Since I toured the areas referenced in the game in-between sessions at the Society of American Archivists' Annual Meeting in 2018, I could see the parallels and make connections. For example, The True Sons, the rogue militia group, hunkered down in buildings that served as familiar information centers and cultural heritage sites like the Capitol Building and Smithsonian museums.

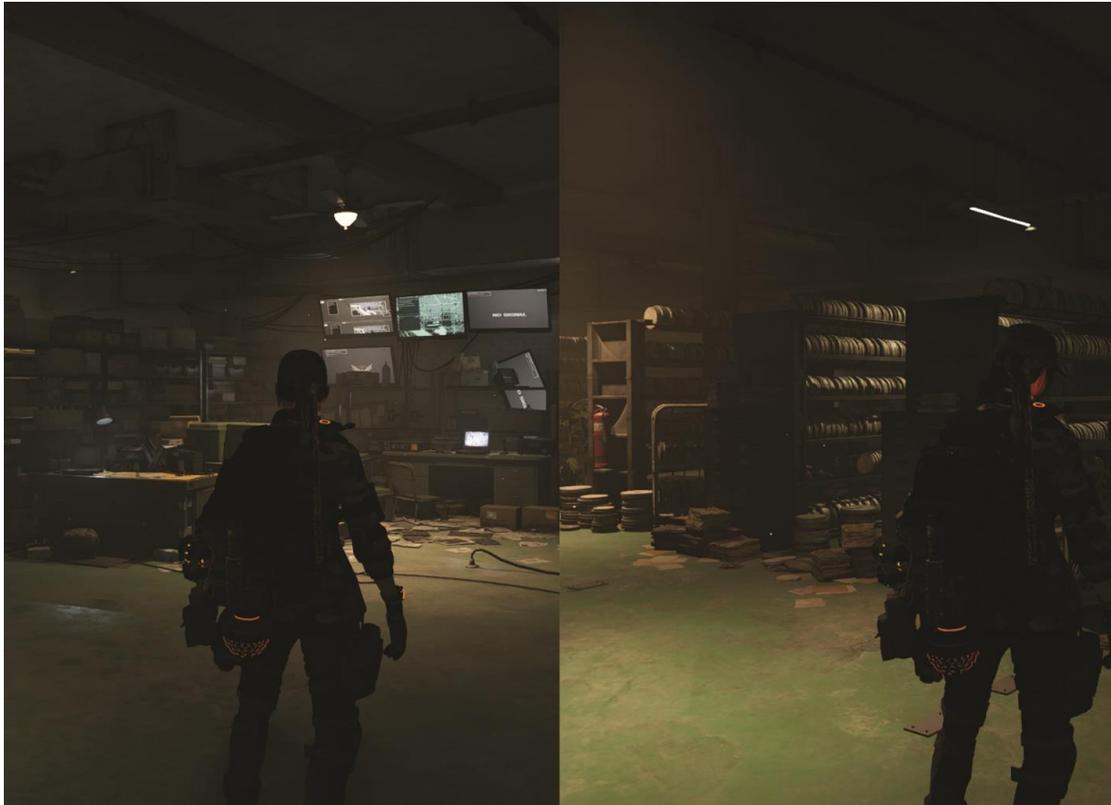


The reviewer's (crouched right) and her husband's avatars fight off The True Sons militia in the NARA building in Tom Clancy's The Division 2.

While my husband and I methodically moved from zone to zone from the game's base of operations in a repurposed White House, we encountered three major civilian settlements and numerous *Division* agent safehouses. These locations served as safe spaces for us to replenish our supplies, customize our skills, and receive missions to accomplish in the surrounding area. We assisted in rebuilding three major settlements vaguely named, yet connected to real world locations in DC: The Theater, a settlement located in what the game refers to as Downtown East; The

² Washington Post Staff, "The Division 2,' Reviewed by Real Washingtonians," *The Washington Post*, March 14, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2019/03/14/division-reviewed-by-real-washingtonians/>.

Campus, a university campus located in Downtown West zone that references George Washington University; and The Castle, or an expanded version of the Smithsonian Castle and grounds. Along the way, we located safehouses in attics, office buildings, basements, and other unassuming spaces across the downtown area. One of these safehouses, The Archives, is in an unnamed office building's basement. It exhibits stereotypes about archives, including dusty boxes and rusting film reels. While virtual DC shows seven months' worth of deterioration, this safehouse depicts years of neglect until an anonymous *Division* agent reclaims the space and installs her equipment inside of it for the rest of her fellow agents to use.



The Archives safehouse: The Division Agent's equipment (left) and the film collection storage (right) in Tom Clancy's The Division 2.

As an archivist playing a video game, I understand that generic spaces such as The Archives will not receive highly detailed attention from the game's development team. However, the Declaration of Independence rescue mission in NARA also shows the development team's focus on popular tourist spaces or spaces open to the public. The "behind-the-scenes" areas, such as NARA's storage areas, exhibit the media's stereotypes about archives being in dusty basements. Indeed, in order to retrieve the Declaration from True Sons' hands, player characters traverse NARA's depths to secure the document from the exhibit case that has been lowered into a secure room underneath the gallery. Along the way, the game treated this archivist player to flooded compact-shelving rooms and staircases. In interviews, Massive Entertainment revealed they consulted with experts and used GIS and LiDAR data to

ensure that virtual DC players experienced a realistic recreation, including working with Coast Guard experts to use data to determine where flooding occurs in the real world.³ My research did not answer whether developers consulted with NARA to faithfully recreate its spaces.



Flooded archival storage shelving at the NARA building in Tom Clancy's The Division 2.

Regardless of the archives-as-dusty-basements trope in *Tom Clancy's The Division 2*, the exploration of the archives-as-a-place to become a safe space for all characters in the story is intriguing enough. *The Division 2* is the first time I encountered galleries, libraries, archives, and museums as settings within an online multiplayer game that tied these spaces to several story mission objectives in the game. My husband and I had to disrupt paramilitary militia broadcasts from the center of the now defunct Newseum, protect a civilian settlement camped out within the Smithsonian Castle, and collect integral data on USB flash drives within office server rooms. Massive Entertainment adapted cultural heritage sites and information centers into virtual playgrounds while striving to—almost—recreate Washington, DC's downtown area as faithfully as possible. The fact I played this game during a real pandemic is just a case of bad timing.

³ Will Vitka, "How The Division 2 Video Game Recreated and Destroyed DC," *WTOPnews*, March 6, 2019, <https://wtop.com/entertainment/2019/03/washington-wasteland-how-one-of-the-years-biggest-video-games-recreated-and-destroyed-dc/>.