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The City by the Bay: San Francisco in Games

Every year the Game Developers' Conference happens in San Francisco, California. GDC is one of the most important events in the games industry. It should come as no surprise then that its host city, San Francisco, has been a source of inspiration for games. Here are a few of Alpha's favorite representations of San Francisco in video games.

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Watch Dogs 2

Watch Dogs 2 succeeds in ways the original game didn't. Part of this is due to a new setting. The second entry in the series moves locales from Chicago to San Francisco and follows the exploits of vigilante hacker Marcus Holloway.

Watch Dogs 2 plays up the hacking, drones, and tech side of the San Francisco region, encouraging players to explore an open world and complete missions in multiple ways. It also isn't afraid to occasionally poke fun at the local tech scene. Developer Ubisoft even broke the fourth wall by including their San Francisco office in the game. In a side mission called "Ubistolen," you can hack into their office and leak a game trailer to gain more media followers for your hacktivist group, DedSec.

The San Francisco of Watch Dogs 2 feels lived in and alive. There are plenty of famous local landmarks that made it into the game, and plenty of fictional counterparts to real-world places (the Nudle campus is clearly a stand-in for Google). Additional touches like realistic street art and tons of non-playable character dialogue lend credibility to Watch Dogs 2's San Francisco. The San Francisco of Watch Dogs 2 is more than just a set piece, it's a condensed, dynamic portrayal of the city and the Bay Area.

2064: Read Only Memories

As the name implies, 2064: Read Only Memories takes place in the near future. A point-and-click cyberpunk adventure game with modern sensibilities. 2064: ROM has you exploring a future city, Neo-San Francisco, as you track down your missing friend. Neo-San Francisco is a city struggling with many social and political issues, such as the morality of genetic and machine augmentation to the human body.

This new, near-future cyberpunk version of San Francisco is portrayed as a complex blend of politics and races. It's the natural evolution of current San Francisco.

Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4

San Francisco has been a favorite location for the Tony Hawk series since its inception, with the original game having a level called "Streets" that was set in San Francisco.

Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4 brought San Francisco back as a level. Unlike previous entries in the series, THPS 4 has no time limits on levels, allowing you to freely explore them in a career mode, which tasks you with accomplishing a set of different objectives.

Naturally, this being a skating game, the city is full of conveniently placed ramps and rails that are perfect for performing tricks and chaining together combos. This interpretation of San Francisco is very loose since it's designed to be friendlier to gameplay. However, the level does include an interpretation of Fisherman's Wharf, and their local visitors, California sea lions.

San Francisco even has a long history with skateboarding, so it's no surprise that it would be included in the Tony Hawk series.¹

Next time you're in San Francisco for an industry event like GDC, take some time to explore the city. Odds are, you might recognize some locations from your favorite games.

¹ <https://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/Thrasher-skateboard-culture-s-hot-spot-on-13496440.php>

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