Cybernated constitutionals – a variety of virtual vistas

Ruminations over walking simulators and other forms of digital hikes
– are game designers the landscape painters of our time?

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Shoot shoot, bang bang, hack hack, slash, slash, puzzle puzzle puzzle – these are common reverberations of video games being played. Virtual action heroines – and occasionally also heroes – rush through lush digital natural environments growing ever more realistic year by year. Followed closely by the player's gaze, such digital avatars are much like the *Rückenfigur* (German: "back figure") of Romantic landscape painting – figurations seen from behind against depictions of epic sceneries so that onlookers may project their own consciousnesses into them, and thus let themselves be immersed into overwhelming confrontations with the grandiosity of nature: the sublime!

The most famous *Rückenfigur* in all of art history is probably the titular wanderer in Caspar David Friedrich's (1774–1840) painting *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* ("The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog", 1818). If one can talk of a phenomenon such as the *Rückenfigur* in video games – and one can: "The history of one form of images can be used as a model for the development of a different type of image", as stated in the German artist Harun Farocki's (1944–2014) video essay *Parallel I* (2012) – then two comparably iconic examples from this adolescent medium would be

Lara Croft of the *Tomb Raider* series and Kratos from the *God Of War* games, both seen from behind as they traverse virtual mountains, woods, overgrown ruins, and open fields.[1]

Even though advancements in computer graphics have made possible the creation of some truly breath-taking panoramas that could potentially rival even the most classic of landscape paintings, our avatars' perilous heroic journeys won't allow us to dwell upon the digital sublime in silent contemplation for long. Soon we will be summoned back to action-oriented ordeals involving copious amounts of shooting, hacking, slashing, and puzzle solving. But then again, the time spent looking at most paintings in museums is only a mere 10 seconds.[2]

It is not just showers of bullets, gushing blood, traps and in-game obstacles in themselves that hinder us from paying attention to the wondrously detailed, often awe-inspiring sceneries contained within contemporary games. I'm not opposed to action and challenges in games per se – the occasional chain explosion within a virtual environment can be a cathartic experience, and some logical code cracking and riddle solving can help stimulate the intellect as well as providing the occasional dopamine kick. However, learning curves can be steep and the road to new experiences fraught with frustrating hurdles – and many games demand the investment of unreasonable amounts of hours. Fortunately there exists an alternative, less (time-) demanding scene at the fringes of the gaming industry, namely the "walking sim", a genre where strolling is the sole game mechanic.

01. THE VANISHING OF ETHAN CARTER
The Astronauts, 2014.
A walking simulator where the player takes on the role of paranormal investigator Paul Prospero.

02. ROCKY MOUNTAIN LANDSCAPE
Albert Bierstadt, 1870

01. FIREWATCH
Campo Santo, 2016.

02. HINTERLANDS
From Connor Sherlock's
Walking Simulator A Month Club Vol. 1.

01. EVERYBODY'S GONE TO THE RAPTURE
The Chinese Room, 2015.
A virtual hike through desolate, rural,
post-apocalyptic landscapes. From the
developer of Dear Esther.

02. PROTEUS
Ed Key and David Kanaga, 2013.
A highly stylized walking simulator.

WARPING INTO THE WOODS
According to Jean Campbell Cooper's *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols* (1978), the wanderer is one who "engages in aimless movement, as opposed to the pilgrim who takes a direct and purposeful path." In games, even so-called "open world games" which do allow for a measure of meandering, players usually work towards more or less pre-defined goals or end states. For example, in the most recent *God of War* game, the player character Kratos and his magical helper-son travel between Midgard and its neighbouring dimensions, as mapped out in Norse mythology, with the help of the World Tree, Yggdrasil – a multiversal mode of transportation rooted in the pre-cosmic void of Ginnungagap – with a single end in mind: climbing the highest mountain to spread mother's ashes.

In contrast, the Belgian game – or "Notgame", as they tend to dub their medium – developer Tale of Tales released *The Path* in 2009. Here, contrary to Ghandi's famous words, the path is not the goal, even though the game tells you from the start not to stray from the path. This one and only rule is made to be broken, and it is when you stray from the straight and narrow and wander off into the woods that interesting events start to occur.

Apropos of ashes and woods: In *Firewatch* (Campo Santo, 2016), the player enters the role of a troubled soul who takes up a job as a fire-watcher in the midst of the forests of virtual Wyoming in order

LOFOTEN
Jonathan Whiting, 2018.
A freeware archipelago generator.

to hide from life's realities among pine trees, and in Harocki's aforementioned video essay *Parallel I*, we learn about the historical representation of trees in video games. Two of the trees visited in this video piece stem from the role-playing games *The Legend of Zelda* (1986) and *The Elder Scrolls: Arena* (1994). The latter takes place in a virtual world measuring about 6 million square kilometres (in comparison, Norway covers about 385 thousand square kilometres), and wandering from one village to the next can easily take ten hours. Thus, the "fast travel" feature is indispensable: Bring up the virtual map, select the place you want to go, and *WoOoOoOoOoOoOoOofshhhhhhhh*,[3] you're there. No blisters or worn out shoes.

In the 2008 compendium *The Legend of Zelda and Philosophy: I Link Therefore I Am*, Douglas Wilson's essay "Look Before You Warp" explores a set of thoughts in relation to goal or end state oriented gameplay and the "warp" or "fast travel" phenomenon. "Virtual worlds that nurture environmental presence offer more than just escapist pleasure or action-based thrills. They give us a way to make sense of ourselves", he writes in a section about the cognitive dissonance that can arise in continuously changing urban environments. If we understand games as virtual worlds, he writes, then we can only "imagine the depth of experience that might be gained from a more uncompromising vision of digital space."

A RESTRICTIVE SENSE OF EXPANSE

The majority of the scenery in *The Elder Scrolls: Arena* is procedurally generated and quickly becomes repetitive, so "warping" or "fast travelling" doesn't make you miss out on any unique virtual nature experiences. *Firewatch*, on the other hand, takes place in a tightly planned, strictly limited game area designed to appear larger and more open-ended than it is, forest scenes are "tailor made" for the purpose of immersing the player in a linear sequence of events that reaches its end in just about four hours of gameplay – so that you'll have more precious time to spend on more important matters, such as binge watching the newest season of *Game of Thrones*.

Firewatch can be classified as a "walking simulator", a genre denomination that surfaced in the wake of the release of *Dear Esther*, a one-and-a-half hour long interactive narrative where you only do one thing: wander leisurely through an island landscape, discovering curious features and triggering spoken-word fragments of narrative along the way. Development started in 2007, the same year that video artist Bill Viola's wandering art game *The Night Journey* was first shown publicly. The term "walking sim" was originally used as a derogative term, but has since been embraced by players, critics, and developers alike, not unlike the term "impressionism", coined in a rant by French art critic Louis Leroy in 1874 – he absolutely despised Claude Monet's *Impression, Sunrise* (1873).

Walking sims take place in far smaller digital spaces than AAA titles like *Zelda*, *Elder Scrolls*, *Tomb Raider*, and *God of War*. But even the smallest artist-run galleries and independent project spaces can feel more expansive than the most spacious and well-funded museums. Video games are still a young art form, and the avant-garde is never as popular as the established segment of any given medium. However, the developments in walking simulators and adjacent genres during the past few years represent an unmistakable step towards Mr. Wilson's more uncompromising vision of virtual worlds – "an emerging art form in an increasingly placeless world", as he puts it.

1 The player–character relationship in the *Tomb Raider* series (1996–2018) is a complex one; while Steven Poole proposed the term "virtual stalking", Randi Gunzenhäuser interpreted the chasing third person camera as putting emphasis on the cooperation between player and player character, the self-assured, asexual Croft acting as a shield in the player's struggle against insecurity. Such considerations, although deeply interesting, are not the issue at hand here.
2 "Spending Time on Art", Lisa F. Smith, Jeffrey K. Smith, *Empirical Studies of the Arts*, Vol 19(2), July 2001, 229–236 and "Time spent viewing art and reading labels", Lisa F. Smith, Jeffrey K. Smith, Pablo P. L. Tinio, *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, Vol 11(1), Feb 2017, 77-85.
3 Voted best onomatopoeia for Star Trek transporter beaming on reddit. Runners up: *chink-schwchwchwchwaaaaaaaaaa* and *FFFFWWwwaaaaaaaarrrrrr-rmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmrrrr-rooooooooooommmmmmmmmm.* https://www.reddit.com/r/startrek/comments/5j268m/best_onomato-poeia_for_transporter_beaming/ , retrieved Oct 11th 2018.

01. PRELUDE TO IRRELEVANCE
From Connor Sherlock's
Walking Simulator A Month Club Vol. 1.

02. THE NIGHT JOURNEY
Bill Viola, Tracy Fullerton, USC Game
Innovation Lab, 2005–2018.

**03. EVERYBODY'S GONE
TO THE RAPTURE**
The Chinese Room, 2015

DEAR ESTHER. The Chinese Room, 2007–2016