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1 Introduction

What does it mean to take a walk in the gamified, late capitalist Anthropocene?

One answer could be the purposeful speed walks of Amazon warehouse low-wage workers, who race around facilities of over a million square feet to find and grab ordered products. Managers expect a worker/walker to locate 100 items per hour. "IT'S GOING TO BE HARD," warns one Amazon brochure given to temp workers when they begin. "You will be on your FEET the entire shift and walking upwards of 12 MILES per shift. (yeah, that's really far!)"[1]

Another answer could be the one I spend the next two hundred pages investigating: the virtual wanderings of the millions of players who roam around digital worlds and use them to make meaning.

It may seem a stretch to connect the two. By the end of this book, I hope it won't.

Walking Simulators are exploratory, nonviolent video games without points, goals, or tasks, in which the undying, third-person player character (PC) wanders around a narratively rich space. Classics of the genre emerged as artistic experiments—*The Path*, *Journey*, *Proteus*—and modifications (mods)—*Dear Esther*, *The Stanley Parable*—in the years around 2010. They were beloved by small groups of devoted fans but essentially cult favorites until the genre burst fully into the mainstream with *Gone Home* in 2013. The next generation of Walking Sims in the mid-2010s—*Firewatch*, *Virginia*, *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture, Tacoma*—refined and expanded the form. A vast array of games in the following several years incorporated aspects of the genre, creating fascinating hybrids and pointing toward the future. These hybrids are the topic of this book.

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The term *Walking Simulator* originated as a derogatory sneer, intended to denigrate games that were less violent, less task oriented, or less difficult to complete. Gamer culture's dissatisfaction with such games, and fury at the critics and players who found them valuable, formed a substantial thread of #GamerGate. But what began as the insult "Walking Simulator" has, over the past decade, become a catch-all term for games that are interested in alternative modes of expression, embodiment, environment, orientation, and community. The genre now serves as a catalyst for debates about anti-game aesthetics, changing gamer demographics, and the radical potential of poetic spatial storytelling in video games. And in its attempt to slur a certain mode of play, the term *Walking Simulator* semi-accidentally tapped into something brilliant: the vast heritage and intellectual history of the concept of walking in fiction, philosophy, pilgrimage, performance, and protest.

To give a few examples: the gendering of Walking Simulators as a "feminine" mode of engagement stretches back to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century discourses about *flânerie* (urban rambling) and women's rights (or lack thereof) to occupy public space. Complaints that such games are boring draw their thrust from anxieties surrounding purposelessness, loitering laws, and the Protestant work ethic. Dissatisfaction with their contemplative, ambivalent, experimental tone harkens back to the founding of video games within the military-industrial complex, and the formal tension thus created when a video game functions as a meditation or pilgrimage instead of a conflict. Discomfort with their exuberant, intentional weirdness harkens back to performance art and Kaprowian *Happenings* of the late twentieth century.[2] The concept of a walking artwork itself stems from Situationist experiments of the 1950s and 1960s, which developed into the pedestrian and site-specific performance works of the 1990s through today. Within digital games alone, there are many clear precursors—the peaceful, clue-filled worlds of puzzle games like *Myst*, the exploration and clickability of point-and-click adventures, the wordy spatiality of 1980s text adventures, the 3D PC perspective in a first-person shooter (FPS). These threads all contribute to the intellectual history of the wandering game.

The title of this book is an attempt to invite these myriad discourses explicitly into the discussion of walking and games and simultaneously to broaden our focus beyond the games conventionally understood as Walking Simulators. By conceptualizing these as wandering games, I'm calling for a broader understanding of this form of play—one that draws from vast

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scholarly, popular, and historical notions of wandering rather than solely from the history of digital games.

The games considered here contain some elements of the classic Walking Simulators of the early and mid-2010s. Instead of giving a history of that genre, I show how the Walking Sim has inflected some of the most interesting hybrid games of the past several years. I analyze games that are connected to "wandering" as a theme, a formal mode, an aesthetic metaphor, or a player action. Through troubling the concept of what it fundamentally means to wander—literally, metaphorically, virtually, subversively—these wandering games tap into some of the most crucial conversations going on in gaming today. Whether we mean mimetic walking or something more like escaping, traversing, meandering, erring, resisting, returning, marching, or journeying, wandering in games exposes the multiplicitous possibilities of the simple human act of moving through space and complicates what such movement might mean within different game worlds. I develop this term throughout the following pages, complicating and problematizing it as I come to see different ways of understanding what wandering is doing in that particular game.

I primarily analyze the following works: *Return of the Obra Dinn*, *Eastshade*, *Ritual of the Moon*, *80 Days*, *Heaven's Vault*, *Death Stranding*, and *The Last of Us Part II*. These games run the gamut in terms of genre, mechanics, themes, player base, studio size, and funding. Most of them would not be considered Walking Simulators by most players; rather, they'd be acknowledged (in some cases begrudgingly) as video games with Walking Sim elements that fit more traditionally into the genres of interactive fiction, simulation, puzzle, experimental, role-playing game (RPG), action, adventure, and others. But by taking seriously the valences of walking in these works, my analysis highlights how wandering as a concept underlies games across multiple genres.

In analyzing these games from this perspective, I found the project coalescing around four major themes: work, gender, colonialism, and death.[3] None of these central preoccupations have stayed in their separate boxes throughout the chapters. Each inflects the others, and each provides a multifaceted lens through which to understand what wandering does, lacks, implies, and offers. Here were my initial framing questions, followed by a deeper consideration of each thread and how it appears throughout the book:

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- *Work*: How does wandering in games attempt to reinstate a radical boundary between work and play, subversively responding to late capitalism's erasure of that boundary? How can we understand the reaction against Walking Sims within gamer culture as a resistance to any games that criticize the unthinking replication of capitalist success paradigms? How are wandering games designed to provoke unproductive, contemplative, anticapitalist play?
- *Gender*: How and why are Walking Sims often gendered female, and how does this gendering map onto long-standing discussions of female agency and presence in the public sphere? How do wandering modes queer traditional video game play?
- *Colonialism*: How does the construction of empty landscape in Walking Simulators replicate a colonizer's understanding of space and place? How does the heroic monomyth of the wanderer and the ubiquity of exploration within narrative gaming invite colonialist game design despite its postcolonial affectations? How does the negative-space violence of an emptied landscape connect to the broader conversation surrounding violence in gaming?
- *Death*: How does the central tension of traditional Walking Simulators—an *undying* PC traversing a *dead*, haunted world—help us understand ludic conventions, metaphors, and obsessions surrounding death and play?

Work

Walking Sims are uncomfortable because there is often nothing that explicitly *must* be done. This creates anxiety in those who have largely played task- and goal-oriented games (which is almost all of them) that recreate the dynamics of labor in a ludic context: complete a task, receive a reward from an authoritative power, take on a more challenging task, and some form of symbolic compensation. Such a dynamic creates a powerful feedback loop of positive feelings and accomplishment and also motives the often strong reaction against games that criticize the unthinking replication of this capitalist success paradigm. But wandering is an activity designed to provoke unproductive, contemplative, anticapitalist play—or at least it can offer a provocative space for challenging (if not completely avoiding) the success paradigms and systems that have evolved around gameplay.

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This is complicated by contemporary ambivalence about leisure time, which, under late capitalism, doesn't exist, is quickly disappearing, or has been transformed into a guilt-ridden misery. Adults report feeling increasingly guilty about taking any breaks from work, especially in the millennial and Gen-Z generations, in which an anxious culture has grown up around monetizing beloved hobbies, cobbling together part-time gig work alongside unpaid internships, and being financially buried under enormous amounts of college debt.[4] In response, games have grown increasingly like labor, the better to trick us into relaxing despite ourselves.

This slippage between work and play has been part of gaming since the beginning, and it hasn't gone unmarked in the scholarship.[5] Early theorists of video games found reason to be alarmed at the powerful capitalist indoctrination wrought by the bright and cheerful techno-utopian arcade. In 1985, Fiske and Watts observed with chagrin the inverted relationship between the arcade and the factory, pointing out how the player/symbolic worker in the 1980s arcade paid a machine in order to do activities that, in a different context and with another color scheme, would be considered work.[6] For Stallabrass in 1993, computer games were "a capitalist, deeply conservative form of culture, and their political content is prescribed by the options open to democracy under modern capitalism."[7] As Carly Kocurek has written more recently, "Arcades became a crash course in spending for youths who had not yet passed into the economic order by joining the labor force."[8] Bernstein noted in 1991 that "our unrestricted play is constantly being channeled into goal-directed games; how appealing then to find a game whose essence seems to be totally useless play."[9] But at the current stage of late capitalism, this is not necessarily appealing; it's stressful and unpleasant, and it makes many of us too nervous to enjoy the meandering, antiwork pleasure offered by non-task-oriented games.

Accordingly, chapters 2 and 3 focus primarily on work, late capitalism, and the many economies and exchanges competing for a player's attention. In chapter 2, I consider how the player and PC's exploration of the archive of corpses in *Return of the Obra Dinn* serves as a heuristic for understanding the intersection between death and capitalism. In chapter 3, I analyze how the PC's love of their work in *Eastshade* operates as a perfect fantasy of late capitalist precarity.

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Gender

This is the thread I've focused on the most in previous work, and consequently the one covered in the least depth here.[10] Walking Simulators are often gendered female within gamer culture, and sometimes the presupposed masculinity of video gaming juxtaposes disjointedly with the alleged femininity of the Walking Sim. Game studies scholars (in particular Bonnie Ruberg, Cody Mejeur, and Dimitrios Pavlounis) have done significant work to articulate queer aspects of Walking Simulators—that is, the gameplay mechanics and effects that oppose traditional (straight, cis) game design.[11] But all modes of resistance, divergence, rebellion, or subversion are not innately queer—or, rather, not *only* queer. While I agree with Ruberg's provocation that "videogames have always been queer," modes of resistance, divergence, rebellion, or subversion can be read beyond (and in addition to) the concept of queerness. Naming these modes of play *queer* can even unintentionally flatten them, leaving us less likely to see the ways they also subvert (for example) capitalism or colonialism, in addition to their subversion gender norms. This project expands the smorgasbord of ways that wandering in games invites alternative modes of being and exploring and other kinds of futures.

This is not to say that the fundamental queerness (and genderedness in general) of wandering games should go unmentioned. Concerns about gender and its performance (in physical and virtual spaces) suffuse these games, and no wonder. What does it mean to be a wandering body in a game world? If your body is a normative gamer body—White, straight, cis, male, young—you might not take much notice of that body and how a ludic world reacts to it. But in nonnormative bodies, you'll notice pretty quickly. New work on the intersection between walking and queer personhood comes out all the time, building on earlier foundational texts from Ruberg, Shaw, and Phillips in particular.[12] In chapter 4, I focus especially on gender and sexuality, considering *Ritual of the Moon* as a queer, feminist take on wandering under constraint.

Colonialism

What happened to the people who used to be in this space before the wanderer wandered in? What violence might (or must) have occurred to empty

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this space, so it just seems to be here waiting for the player? It is a colonialist choice to depict ludic landscapes as mostly empty, descending from the era of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century landscape painting in which imperialist ideologies abounded—visions of manifest destiny and land eager to be colonized.[13] When a player confronts any landscape with a gun in hand, its violent takeover feels both literally and morally easier. In Walking Simulators, despite the lack of a gun, it sometimes feels as if the violence has simply *already* been completed before the player arrived, perhaps accomplished by an entity so long ago that its discovery seems more archaeological than anything else (for example, in *Journey* or *Abzû*). But just because it occurred in the past doesn't necessarily make the spatial construction less exploitative; it just makes the player feel less guilty about it.

There are often technical reasons for these design choices, especially in smaller game studios. It's cheaper and quicker to create empty landscapes than to fill them with non-player characters (NPCs). The narrative rationale for this economic choice is then often written into the game afterward, as in *Gone Home*, where the absent family members spur the mystery forward. Kate Craig, the environmental artist of *Gone Home*, spoke about this pragmatic explanation at a conference (in response to a bunch of academics speculating on possible creative rationales for the choice).[14] Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.

It's also important to clarify that there are many different ways of walking through space and claiming landscape. I tend to use the term *wandering* with its common connotation of meandering, a mode of movement much opposed to purpose-driven conquest. But as chapter 5 examines in detail, one can travel through a space in very different ways with only slightly altered affects. The valence is actually quite thin between the wanderer, the explorer, and the conqueror. And the slippage between those categories ideologically enables the violence of conquering to slip in under the guise of purposeless meandering, noble adventuring, or victorious homecoming. To draw from only one historical example, there's a famous photograph of sixty-six Jewish families at the founding of Tel Aviv in 1909 (figure 1.1). In the photograph, we can see the crowd of people holding a lottery to allocate plots of land to each family. Particularly important in the original photo is the angle; by framing the scene the way he did, the photographer avoided showing the ancient city of Jaffa on the right or the Mediterranean Sea on the left. Instead, the photograph presents Palestine as an

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Figure 1.1
Avraham Soskin, photograph of land lottery at the founding of Tel Aviv, 1909. National Archives (UK).

empty desert, seemingly waiting for colonization by the Jewish families in the foreground. After surviving millennia of anti-Semitism, pogroms, and forced migrations, the Jewish people in the photograph could have, quite understandably, seen themselves as victorious over the hideous "wandering Jew" myth (an anti-Semitic European legend pervasive since at least 1602). Here, at last, the mythic wandering Jew would find a homeland, his wandering at an end. But the people who settled in what would become Israel participated no less aggressively or violently in colonialist ideologies, occupying land they considered their own and forcing other groups into the status of transient wanderers.[15]

In short, the colonialist imaginary at the core of Western conceptualizations of space does not disappear just because a represented landscape contains no visible human inhabitants, and this holds true for in-game landscapes as well. A player wandering through an empty space is often still conceiving of that space as a place to conquer. But by emphasizing the wandering part—trying hard to stick to the connotation of meandering—the theorization in this book is an attempt to move beyond that baseline

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assumption of violence, past or future. Were players always expected to remain wanderers—not explorers, not occupiers, not conquerors—we would learn to see the spaces they move through quite differently. In chapters 5 and 6, I analyze two Inkle Studios games that encourage us to do that, and I draw from the work of a dozen postcolonial theorists to illustrate how a different way of walking through space is made more possible in certain games and less possible in others.

Death

Digression has always been metaphorical way for characters to cheat death. In *One Thousand and One Nights*, Scheherazade successfully survives her husband's daily threat to kill her in the morning by ending each night's tale on a cliffhanger; Emperor Shahryar, who has long vowed to kill his wives the morning after he marries them lest he find himself cuckolded, forestalls Scheherazade's execution each day so long as she manages to tell her stories digressively enough. In Sterne's paradigmatically digressive *Tristram Shandy*, when Death knocks on his door, Tristram sneaks out the back and runs away to France. Tristram's rambling descriptive style, in which he continuously promises to come to the point but never actually arrives, mirrors his physical journey, and both are designed to avoid the end of both the character's life and his text. Tristram refers to this directly, noting that "the more I write, the more I shall have to write."[16] Twentieth-century digressive author Italo Calvino has also been clear that "digression is a strategy for putting off the ending, a multiplying of time within the work, a perpetual evasion or flight. An evasion from what? From death, of course."[17] Digression postpones the conclusive end to a work, keeping the characters moving and avoiding their fictive deaths at the conclusion.

In the medium of video games, this phenomenon shines, as the PC's task often involves some form of digressing from quest to sidequest, task to task, trying and failing to stay alive for as many activities as possible. In the midst of all of these small deaths, the metafictional one still looms—that of an eventually completed game. But this threat lessens in many contemporary open world games, when the player can continue roaming the game world long after they've completed every mission. Chapter 7 analyzes *Death Stranding*, one such game, in terms of its overall mechropolitics (Amanda Phillips's term for the politics of death in video games).[18] In postapocalyptic

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games, another layer is added to the metaphor of digression-as-death-avoidance because the world itself has already died.

Furthermore, a complicated tension exists in the relationship between death and Walking Simulators. These works often feature an undying PC, a rarity in video games and a defining feature of the genre. Yet in Walking Simulators, the game world and game narrative tend to revolve heavily around death. Often the world is postapocalyptic, haunted, or both. This tension—between an undying PC and a dead, empty world—creates a focus on death by intentional omission. Death is everywhere and nowhere in Walking Simulators, haunting the player and the PC.

In another sense, however, this tension is imaginary, dissolving when we reconsider our expectations about the work of death. With this shift in perspective, we can also better understand why Walking Sims are often gendered female (in addition to the misogyny explanation). Since Sophocles' Antigone defied King Creon and prepared her dead brother for burial, the events surrounding death in Western fiction have frequently been gendered. In a far-too-simple articulation: to masculinity has belonged the work of creating corpses and, to femininity, the work of shrouding and mourning them.[19] In video games, this manifests as a plethora of games in which a masculinized player kills infinities of characters, and a minority of games in which a feminized player shrouds, mourns, and remembers them. While there is a way to make such work funny—think of 2015's *Viscera Cleanup Detail*—Walking Simulators are games that take seriously the work of mourning death.

Consider *Doom* designer John Romero's "tidiness theory," in which he argued that all games are about cleaning something up. If it seems that you're accomplishing a different action—eating, digging, killing—that's because every mess is different: "In *Pac-Man*, the mess is the maze full of dots. You need to clean them up to achieve your goal of cleanliness. In *Space Invaders*, the aliens are the mess. Clean them up and you reach your goal. In *Bejeweled* you are presented with a messy screen of jewels. Arrange them in groups of matching threes and you clean it up, one match at a time. Chess? Clean the board of your opponent's pieces, specifically his king."[20] In Walking Sims, you're cleaning up the story with your feet. And often, you're doing the memory work involved in emotionally tidying up the story of a corpse's life.

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In the remainder of this chapter, I situate wandering games within historical and cultural context. First, I highlight philosophical ideas of walking, counterwalking, and otherwise moving through spaces in ways that threaten to upset established power and ideology—the flâneur, the Situationist International, and the massive protest marches of the twentieth century. Next, I explain how twentieth-century performance experiments fundamentally altered our perception of fictive space—the concept of interactive and site-specific theater: Marina Abramović and Ulay's "The Lovers," Boal's *Theater of the Oppressed*, and Tehching Hsieh's *One Year Performances*. Then I trace landmarks of digressive literature that demanded respect for meandering, purposeless, anticapitalist leisure: the picaresque, Laurence Sterne, Virginia Woolf, "Hysterical Fiction" and its crossover into the digital. Finally, I turn toward the fundamentals of walking in games, explaining how these precursors resulted in the form we see today.

Subversive Walks

While observers and critics of the Walking Simulator have noted that the genre descends from bits and pieces of other art forms, what's gone largely unspoken is how the genre's formal critique of hypermilitant, patriarchal, late capitalism in gaming mirrors one of the best-recognized functions of walking: the protest. In the political-cultural imaginary of the twenty-first-century, to walk is to protest, even if its initial aims seem apolitical. When we start asking questions about walking, we are talking about the intersection between bodies and space. Walking, writes Rebecca Solnit, "is a state in which the mind, the body and the world are aligned."[21] When inspired by a philosophy, walking easily "becomes testifying . . . even the most innocuous parades have an agenda."[22] Individual walkers, too, come to seem political when they move through spaces hostile to their bodies or move in ways for which those spaces (virtual or physical) were not designed. To understand how walking bodies subvert space, we must first understand the norms they are subverting, and the ways the walking body creates or confronts those norms.

A panoply of twentieth-century spatial thinkers, from Gaston Bachelard to Yi-Fu Tuan to Doreen Massey, have broken open our cultural understanding of the way that space and place are constructed and perceived by

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moving bodies.[23] While walking and philosophy have been linked since the Aristotelian Peripatetics, philosophies derived around the idea of walking begin in earnest in European culture with two nineteenth-century figures: the Anglo-Germanic wanderer and the French flâneur. The former is primarily associated with the early nineteenth-century rural adventuring of young, artistic, upper-class men who are seeking something ineffable from the natural world (think of Wordsworth's clouds or the characters in Goethe's coming-of-age novels). This Romantic wanderer will feature centrally in the third chapter, where we see him reimagined as the PC of *Eastshade*. The flâneur, alternately, is associated with urban cosmopolitanism and the detached, aimless observation of modern life. Again, he's embodied by a young, artistic, upper-class, White, European man.[24] Between the Wanderer and the flanêur, European modernists became increasingly interested in how certain bodies moving through space (in cities and across invisible borders especially) made meaning.

The misogynistic gender politics of #GamerGate (especially regarding its antipathy toward *Gone Home*) dates back to Baudelaire's negative conceptualization of women walkers in the city. For Baudelaire, while a cosmopolitan woman might look in shop windows, she did not possess the artistic temperament or subversive marginality of the idling flâneur; women are there to be looked at, not to look themselves.[25] In public spaces, they are always on display, even when involved in activities demanding their sight and perception.[26] For Benjamin too, male flânerie is a totalizing, authoritative, distanced kind of observation, while female rambling through a city is low stakes and flighty, an unreflective result of commodity culture and bourgeois urban pressure.[27]

The historical flâneur was thus a male observer—both because women were not granted the scopic agency to be consider flâneurs themselves and because, when they tried, they were aggressively observed by men already in that space.[28] This confusion of spectatorship and spectacle inhibited the aspiring female flâneur from observing at a distance like her male counterpart. But as Deborah Parsons argues, the early twentieth-century saw women in the city becoming "an increasingly autonomous and observing presence," gaining scopic authority as they gained economic freedom.[29] The New Woman, the working girl, and the suffragette all became more visible, and vision-having, figures in the new metropolis.

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Predictably, narratives of women wandering in the city from this era usually depict them as sexually fallen or about to fall. Parsons and Deborah Epstein Nord have demonstrated how prostitution was coded as the female version of flânerie in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Restricted from many areas of public life, women walking in the city at unusual times or in unusual areas were often perceived not as aimless dandies but as prostitutes at work.[30] Whereas a (again: rich, White) male flâneur could separate himself from the depredations of the market and critically observe modern consumption, a wandering woman was seen as inexorably enmeshed in the network of consumption: she must be either buying (shopping) or selling (her body—as a prostitute if lower class or promenading as an eligible bride if upper class). These narratives spilled over into the treatment of actual women. Solnit retells historical anecdotes of poor young women arrested for solicitation in London and New York solely because they were caught walking alone at night.[31] The connection between female mobility and female promiscuity thus justified curtailing female motion by claiming that a wandering woman was both metaphorically and literally fast.

Drawing its ideological underpinnings from the earlier writings of Benjamin and Baudelaire, the Situationist International was founded as a revolutionary artistic movement in the late 1950s. Its participants (a group of Marxist artist-revolutionaries) crafted psychogeographic experiments that might, they hoped, remake conceptions of urban space.[32] Convinced of the dangers of commodification, advanced capitalism, and a spectacle-obsessed society, the Situationists promoted the techniques of *dérive* (drift) and *détournement* (diversion, or hijacking) to foment an anticapitalist occupation of urban spaces. These included practices like counterwalking established routes through a city, critiquing authoritarian urban structures of control that made such counterwalking impossible, and trying to reorient oneself (and one's followers) to a personal, nonalienated understanding of space. Astrid Ensslin brought the concept of the Situationist dérive to game studies, arguing that the meandering and purposelessness invited by experimental art games (like those from the studio Tale of Tales) mirrored the anticapitalist, psycho-geographical roaming of the Situationists and their twenty-first-century counterparts.[33] Situationist ideas helped to inspire the rash of revolutionary protest movements that swept across cities worldwide in 1968.

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But before and beyond the Situationists, the metaphor of the Walk had become a crucial strategy in twentieth-century anticolonialist and civil rights protest movements around the world. In the Salt March of 1930, Mohandas Gandhi led followers on a peaceful 240-mile walk to the sea, where they collected salt from seawater in protest of the British monopoly and tax on salt in colonial India. After Gandhi's arrest, Sarojini Naidu led several thousand on a similar march, meeting with brutal police violence (which was crucially recorded and disseminated by journalists), causing worldwide outcry against British policy. Civil rights leaders elsewhere found inspiration in Gandhi's methods of civil disobedience (and public walking as a way to perform it). Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Stride toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* and Nelson Mandela's *No Easy Walk to Freedom* highlight the crucial iconography of the Walk in the context of civil disobedience.[34] Congressman John Lewis centered it in *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* and elsewhere, highlighting its spiritual dimension by citing a proverb he found inspiring: "When you pray, move your feet."[35] Protest marches long preceded the movements of the twentieth century but had more often taken the shape of angry militants threatening violence. The twentieth century, with its technologies of mass communication, saw the rise of peaceful protest marches that aimed to draw global attention to unjust spatial fault lines. The idea of meaning making through walking took on increasingly political and cultural importance in the latter half of the twentieth century, in ways that have continued and increased as people all over the world resist and subvert oppression.[36]

Finally, anticolonial conceptualizations of land ground some Native American and Australian Aboriginal philosophies.[37] Some Australian Aboriginal philosophies conceive of territory as "an interlocking network of 'lines' or 'ways through.'"[38] These lines reflect ancestral walks and are remembered through song: "A knowledgeable person finds his way by singing the song that identifies waterholes and landmarks."[39] Shaun Hooper, a Wiradjuri man cited in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, said, "All across Australia there's pathways that people could use to move about the country. As long as you knew the protocol and the proper ceremonies associated with each place, you could use those pathways."[40] Some Aboriginal Australians call these "Footprints of the Ancestors" or the "Way of the Law," and in creation myths, they tell of a being "who wandered over the continent in the Dreamtime, singing out the name of everything that crossed their path—birds, animals,

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plants, rocks, waterholes—and so singing the world into existence."[41] In chapter 6 especially, some of these philosophies of wandering become an increasingly important way of understanding movement in game worlds.

Pedestrian Performance

While subversive walking practices were spreading around the globe, twentieth-century performance art experiments were also fundamentally altering cultural perception of the relationship between real and fictive space. The second half of the twentieth century saw a veritable paradigm shift in the way Western culture came to perceive space as a kind of theater set—as lived-in, malleable, walkable, mappable, and replete with stories. While plenty of experimental performance artists could be featured, I highlight three in this section whose work has been imperative to the development of performative walking art: Augusto Boal, Tehching Hsieh, and Marina Abramović. Then I sketch out the genre of pedestrian performance as it emerged and now evolves (especially technologically) into the twenty-first-century.

Augusto Boal, a Brazilian theater maker and political activist, devised a critical theater practice in the 1960s and 1970s in which the urban street became a stage. Despite political persecution in his native Brazil, Boal published *Theatre of the Oppressed* in 1973, a book detailing his vision for a truly political theater. With forms like image theater, forum theater, and invisible theater, Boal and his troupe combined improvisatory exercises with direct calls to political action.[42] When engaged in invisible theater, for example, actors perform hyperrealistic scenes on provocative themes in public areas, drawing unsuspecting passersby into the drama and prodding at their complacency. The line blurs between performance and protest, actor and spectator (Boal called them "spect-actors"). In inciting and encouraging observers to intervene in unjust situations happening right in front of them—events they assume to be completely nonfictional—invisible theater orients citizens to take action against real-world injustices. Boal's elision between private and public space and the creation of a half-real, half-fictive theatrical interaction became hugely influential. His work made manifest the notion that "the street is democracy's greatest arena, the place where ordinary people can speak, unsegregated by walls, unmediated by those with more power."[43]

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Tehching Hsieh, a Taiwanese American performance artist, crafted his works of art from time—more specifically, from the inscriptions that time made on his body. In his series of One Year Performances in the early 1980s, he lived according to certain rules for entire years, making his art and his life coterminous. For instance, in *Time Clock Piece* from 1980 to 1981, Hsieh punched a timecard once every hour and took a photograph of himself doing it, yielding a six-minute video and a critique of pointless capitalized labor in which the artist "labors but evidently does not produce."[44] The following year, in *Outdoor Piece*, Hsieh did not enter an indoor space, instead living outdoors in New York City. As Hsieh and his chronicler and critic, Adrian Heathfield, write about this project, "Hsieh is suspended, loitering, drifting; uncertain of his destination, his course is determined by organic choices, by physical necessities or by aimless whim. He takes the route of a responsive organism, each gesture in space, each turning of the way, each decision to move or stay, returned by his self-imposed laws of action, to the barest negotiations . . . it is these decisions, these moves of privation, these transient and unrecorded life choices that take the name of art."[45] Heathfield connects Hsieh's *Outdoor Piece* to the dérive and to "Buddhist practices of meditation, migrant passages," reading it as a critique of the predations of capitalism on the worker experiencing homelessness.[46] In constraining himself to live entirely outdoors, Hsieh turns his walking body into a work of art. He commits to a small constraint that, if followed, forces a simple walk into an act that's some combination of boring, uncomfortable, and aesthetically transcendent—a model (perhaps unconsciously) replicated by early Walking Simulators.

Marina Abramović's highly conceptual performance art similarly focuses on the body—its frailty, desire, pain, and endurance—and how it can be held in suspension by the threat of other people. In Abramović's *Rhythm O* (1974), she proposed a grim sort of game in which audience members were invited to use any of the seventy-two props she'd provided on her mannequin-like body. She did not visibly resist as audience members sexually assaulted her, cut her skin with a knife, and held a loaded gun to her head. Her artistic partner and lover for much of her early career was Ulay, a male performance artist. In an iconic co-performance of 1988, Abramović and Ulay created *The Lovers: The Great Wall Walk*, in which they began on opposite ends of the Chinese Great Wall, walked toward each other for

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ninety days, and, on meeting in the center on June 3, 1988, ended their long relationship and collaboration.[47] We can trace elements of this performance to indie durational games like *Ritual of the Moon*—the ritualistic daily sequence of acts, the physically harsh environment, the doomed sense of progress, the heartbreak at the center. In terms of walking art, we can also see how *The Lovers* reappropriates a public act of devotion (a pilgrimage) into a private act (a breakup).

In the wake of such experimental walking performance art and the broader dissemination of Situationist ideas, a more accessible (and commercially successful) genre known as pedestrian performance, promenade theatre, or environmental theatre emerged.[48] Works from Wrights & Sites, Punchdrunk, and Janet Cardiff have challenged and broadened theatrical traditions, inviting audience members to walk a mobile show. These pieces are often immersive, such as in Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*, produced in London (2003), Boston (2009), New York City (2011–) and Shanghai (2016–). In the New York production, visitors to a derelict Manhattan building wear white face-masks and interact with an intricate, many-story theatrical set based on the story of Macbeth. Audiences may follow performers, who abstractly act out the play's scenes, but primarily experience the piece by immersing themselves within the intricate world of the McKittrick Hotel. Drawing from their Situationist forebears, works of immersive theatre are often also critical of urban space, like the Wrights & Sites series of "misguided" tours of European cities.[49] Much of the work of pedestrian performance has to do with a reimagining of place, a site-specific theater in which the site is the primary object interrogated. In site-specific theater, we see a shift "from performance that inhabits a place to performance that moves through spaces."[50]

Since the turn of the millennium, advances in GPS and internet access have enabled a cavalcade of artistic walking and mapping projects.[51] Specifically, locative media projects put a technological spin on the philosophical idea of walkers co-creating and criticizing the spaces through which they walk, combining Situationism, protest, and new technologies like GPS, pervasive internet access, and mobile computing.[52] Visionary locative media artists like Gwek Bure-Soh, Andrea Wollensak, Teri Rueb, Masaki Fujihata, Eduardo Kac, Jeremy Wood, Esther Polak, Laura Kurgan, and Steven Wilson have created artworks that use new technologies to make manifest the

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poetic and political possibilities of the walking body.[53] These projects play at the intersection of a variety of late capitalist preoccupations, including contemplations of nomadic bodies, national borders, and surveillance culture.[54] Beginning in 2001, Blast Theory's *Can You See Me Now?* staged elaborate virtual/real-world hybrid chases in cities around the globe, in which runners in actual cities chase virtual players maneuvering around a virtual map of the same city.[55] The arts collective Social Fiction created *.walk*, in which participants walked a randomly generated route through a city, thus "'calculating' the city as though it were a 'peripatetic computer.'"[56] As Karen O'Rourke notes in *Walking and Mapping*, "Spatial annotation projects aimed to reintroduce layers of stratification into maps, allowing us to collectively haunt one another."[57] Similar projects today, like the community-generated ongoing spatial annotation project *Queering the Map*, build on the heritage of these earlier works.[58]

Finally, it bears mentioning that theorists of performance have long been interested in the way the walking body creates, destroys, or reconfigures metaphorical space through its movement. In Stanislavski's theory, the actor creates the floor of a performance through their footsteps, like a mime creates an imaginary wall with their hands. The fact that the floor of the physical stage is often coterminous with the fictional floor created by the actor striding across the stage does not mean that the fictive floor existed before the actor took a step.[59] Onstage, actors together share "common ground, as they are all reacting to and simultaneously sculpting a shared 'path.'"[60] In performative genres, the moving human body can symbolically sew space back together, metaphorically mending a broken community (illustrated in, for example, Tom Twyker's film *Run Lola, Run*, in which the titular character races back and forth between the former East and West Berlin). In their *Theatre/Archaeology*, Pearson and Shanks cite a range of landscape scholars who've written about what walking *performs*, noting the centrality of walking in understanding the past from an archaeological perspective and also in performing a landscape in the present.[61] And we see this connection vividly on display in art forms as varied as escape rooms, text adventures, live-action role-play (LARPs), and Walking Simulators like *Gone Home*, in which the player must knit a story together by walking between one archival object and another.[62]

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Digressive Literature

The idea of a literary text being metaphorically walkable has existed for centuries. But the inverse also appears in nineteenth-century Europe, when wandering was construed as reading the book of the city through one's feet. Ludwig Börne wrote in his 1824 text, *Dispatches from Paris*, that the French capital is "an unfolded book, [so] wandering through its streets means *reading*. In this instructive and delightful work, illustrated in such plenitude with images true to nature, I browse every day for several hours."[63] Wilhelm Raabe's *The Chronicle of Sparrow Lane* (1857) features the eponymous Sparrow Lane as its protagonist; the text is constructed as a succession of images and spatial relationships, a series of walks down the lane rather than in the form of a traditional narrative.[64] Börne's and Rabbe's conception of the city as a book of images becomes recognizable as protofilmic by the early twentieth century. Benjamin writes that the flâneur takes in the city as a set of discontinuous images: "They flit by quickly, like so many sheets of a tightly bound little book, the one-time forerunners of our cinematographs."[65]

Digression as a formal literary strategy grew out of the picaresque novel, a European genre popularized by Cervantes' *Don Quixote de la Mancha* (1605) and characterized by a lovable, lower-class rogue protagonist who goes on a series of (mis)adventures, all of it relayed with a satirical bite. Famous early modern examples of the genre include Grimmelshausen's *Simplicius Simplicissimus* (1669), Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722), Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (1749), and Voltaire's *Candide* (1759), followed by the nineteenth-century exemplar of the genre: Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). In the twentieth century, the picaresque morphed into a genre more commonly associated with serialized children's literature—for instance, Astrid Lindgren's *Pippi Longstocking* (1945–1948) and Beverly Cleary's *Ramona Quimby* (1955–1999). In its traditional role as trenchant social critique of vast political injustices and class disparities, however, the picaresque has remained quite available as a novelistic form—for example, in Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* (1959) or Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007).[66]

The picaresque's whimsical adventuring and narrative travels laid the groundwork for later texts, in which digressions started to occur in form rather than in plot. Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–1767), perhaps the most important digressive text

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in European literature, paved the way for this twentieth-century version of the genre by adding formal digressions to what was essentially a ludic picaresque. Tristram Shandy, the gentleman in question, travels often and converses with a wide variety of people, but he's most famous for his inability to get to the point. Instead, he opines on one topic until, distracted, he leaps to another. In this way, Sterne mirrors in form the character's narrative meandering (his travels) by crafting a text that is itself meandering.

Modern digressive works of literature are not necessarily lengthy, serialized, or picaresque; they are often not filled with the delightfully droll adventures of wandering characters. Rather, modern textual digressivity intentionally unsettles a narrative through diversions away from what seems to be the central plotline and the teleological thrust of the story, whatever that has been established to be. They're often conceived as serious literature and metafictional experiments, tackling hefty themes.[67] While the digressive text may have begun in the dark comic mode of the picaresque, nineteenth- and twentieth-century digressive works take themselves much more seriously.

Digressive literary texts are a challenge to analyze, since they, definitionally, tend to be uninterested in traditional models of plot and pacing. Ross Chambers's *Loiterature* analyzes literature that is made up entirely of digressions, highlighting the three-way crossing as a metaphor for digressive texts; an author might choose which way to swerve, but a digression of some kind is a foregone conclusion.[68] Such texts, Chambers argues, discomfit the reader by their lack of progression toward a teleological aim—instead, the reader loiters. Samuel Frederick's *Narratives Unsettled* expands on this point, analyzing authors whose textual digressions offer a refreshing disruption to traditional narrative unity.[69] Claudia Albes's *The Stroll as a Storytelling Model* differentiates between narratives that feature walking or wandering, versus literature that uses meandering as a formal metaphor.[70] Texts like Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* or *The Road*, for instance, tell the stories of wandering characters and discuss the difficulties of traveling, but they are written with a conventional focus on plot, character development, and narrative style. The text does not "wander"; the characters do. Conversely, works like Michel de Montaigne's *Essais* or David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* wander formally (in the reader's leaps back and forth between footnotes, for example), but don't feature wandering characters. Albes offers a list of characteristics that define the latter type as formally

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digressive texts—for example, they're overly detailed, discontinuous, and autoreflexive.[71]

But the ubiquity of these strategies in contemporary fiction can make their digressive characteristics less obvious (or less recognizably digressive). Digressive strategies once used intentionally to disorient and distance the reader under high modernism (think James Joyce's *Ulysses*) have become ubiquitous and even comfortable. James Wood problematically named the trend "hysterical realism" around the turn of the twenty-first century, pointing toward works like Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* to indicate one way in which digressive fiction became a mainstream form instead of an avant-garde curiosity.[72] As he writes, "Stories and sub-stories sprout on every page," leaping from one character's backstory to another's stream of consciousness, suggesting fragments from an infinity of unnarrated lives.[73] These are novels that constantly digress and threaten to digress further, a type of exuberant storytelling that Wood finds uncomfortable and shallow. Of course in naming such a style "hysterical," in an essay primarily critiquing the work of female writer Zadie Smith (although he also names works by Don DeLillo, David Foster Wallace, Salman Rushdie, and Thomas Pynchon), Wood boringly participates in a long tradition of treating digressive "female writing as conversational, epistolary and lacking in style."[74] The overabundance of the text—the threat that it might spill over in any direction, at any time—harkens back to older misogynistic myths of female overabundance, promiscuity, and general too-much-ness. When Lev Grossman writes about this kind of fiction a decade after Wood, he notes that "those books rarely end without a suggestion that they could have gone on and on indefinitely. . . . You rarely meet a character, even a minor one, without getting the impression that the camera could wander off with them."[75] In 2012, Grossman declares, such texts are a relic of the past—which is interesting, because this kind of storytelling in the digital arena both preceded and succeeded its allegedly short tenure in printed literature. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, hypertext, electronic literature, and text adventure games all made literal the notion that a reader/player could conceivably wander off with any character and find a story there. Text adventure games from the 1970s like *Adventure* and *Zork* established the spatial conventions of the "room" in parser-based games, creating the expectation in the reader/player that there would be an abundance of story in any direction.[76] Classic works from the early era of electronic

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literature experimented with less concrete forms of spatial construction—for example, the networked, rhizomatic, multiperspectival structure of Stuart Moulthrop's *Victory Garden*, which can be navigated by interacting with the hypertext directly or through a map or a set of paths.[77] Open world adventuring proliferated in franchises from *The Legend of Zelda* to *Grand Theft Auto*. And the decade after 2012 saw a veritable explosion of this kind of storytelling in games following the development of the technology necessary to craft truly massive open worlds. The "endlessly branching narrative tree" Grossman saw being pruned in printed literature continued its endless branching in series as diverse as *Red Dead Redemption*, *Far Cry*, and *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*.[78]

With the commercial release of *Dear Esther* in 2012 and *Gone Home* in 2013, the Walking Simulator emerged around 2012 as well—a controversial, subversive narrative form grounded in a certain understanding of literary digressivity and quickly associated with feminine too-muchness. In such games, the player connects fragmentary pieces of disconnected text, wandering from one to the next in order to do it. The profusion of narrative material in this style of play follows the lead of Wood's "hysterical fiction"—every frayed photograph could (and sometimes does) contain a wealth of information, the tragedies and travails of an entire other person currently unknown to the player.

But beyond any other reason, Walking Simulators feel digressive because of what they seem to be wandering away *from*, what they define themselves *against*. The player expects a conflict-filled storyline; instead, there are nothing but words, and then more words. Digressive prose definitionally feels digressive because it seems to be beside the point—but what about when a piece of text *has* no central point, no central plotline? Falling from digression to digression through a linguistic quagmire, reader/players do not know how to get their bearings. Gradually they begin to suspect that there are no bearings to get. The player is not wandering away from the point; the wandering *is* the point.

Yet this fact must be hidden, or at least not explicitly stated too often in games, in life, and in literature. Virginia Woolf, a famously digressive modernist writer, began her 1925 essay "Street Haunting" with a wry celebration of the modest pencil as a pretext for wandering: "No one perhaps has ever felt passionately towards a lead pencil. But there are circumstances in which it can become supremely desirable to possess one; moments when

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we are set upon having an object, an excuse for walking half across London between tea and dinner . . . under cover of this excuse we could indulge safely in the greatest pleasure of town life in winter—rambling the streets."[79] When, nearly a century later in 2019, Jenny Odell published a "field guide to doing nothing as an act of political resistance to the attention economy," she argued against the need for the pretext at all: "Solitude, observation, and simple conviviality should be recognized not only as ends in and of themselves, but inalienable rights belonging to anyone lucky enough to be alive."[80] Consistently, the form of her book refused to accord itself with the neoliberal attention economy's notions of good organization, offering "instead an open and extended essay, in the original sense of the word (a journey, an essaying forth). It's less a lecture than an invitation to take a walk."[81]

Walking in Games

All of this hovers—explicitly or not—in the discursive background whenever a PC wanders the world of a game. Multiple digital game genres have contributed to the conventions surrounding ludic exploration, and many scholars have worked to contextualize these conventions both before and after the Walking Sim gained prominence.[82] In this final section, I show how the Walking Sim emerged and came to ground the concept of wandering games analyzed in the rest of this book, ending with a brief overview of the subsequent chapters.

Walking Simulators emerged from the interweaving of two different impulses: (1) the noncommercial, explicitly countercultural, avant-garde thread of art that refuses to abide by conventional notions of fun and play and (2) the playful, puzzle-ful adventure-game genres that do have commercial aspirations and bank on the notion that players fundamentally enjoy the freedom to go anywhere. Both threads have had to wrestle with the anxiety of boredom versus the constraining constructs of fun, and their different answers help define which side of the divide they occupy. On one side, we find most electronic literature, early activist games, Alexander Galloway's notion of "countergaming," and Auriea Harvey and Michael Samyn's *notgames* initiative, which refused to abide by the conventions surrounding fun in their groundbreaking work as the studio Tale of Tales.[83] On the other side, we find the wide variety of adventure games that have long

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served as the playgrounds for Bartle's "explorer" player type, which are well analyzed in Reed, Salter, and Murray's recent book on the topic.[84] Finally, we find the synthesis of these forces in some of the more commercially successful and critically acclaimed indie darlings that went on to be categorized as Walking Simulators, like *Gone Home* or *Firewatch*.

The discourse on the Walking Simulator and its relationship to gamer culture is as old as the term itself.[85] Most critics date the genre's beginning to *Dear Esther*, in which the player roams around an empty island landscape, finding audio texts that tell pieces of a traumatic, a-linear narrative. The game began as a mod of *Half-Life*, offering the player a first-person perspective to walk around an unknown space, but lacking a gun or another person to confront. Since classic Walking Sims like *Dear Esther* and *The Stanley Parable* grew out of mods of *Half-Life*, they can feel that something is explicitly lacking—they were literally modified to take a gun out of the player's hand. Consalvo and Paul emphasize that lack, calling it "a series of choices that would come to define the genre" when "*Dear Esther* takes the viewpoint and world of an FPS, and strips out the other players and the combat."[86] While they note the game borrows from genres like adventure games, interactive fiction, and immersive virtual reality, they contend that "the whole point of a Walking Simulator is to strip down a game to the point where it becomes an immersive, compelling world that players step into."[87]

This is the classic way of understanding a Walking Simulator. It's a game that takes the shape of a familiar genre and removes something crucial: a gun, a mechanic, a certain kind of interactivity, an ineffable quality of fun. As Consalvo and Paul rightly identify, the genre's name itself becomes pejorative, a delegitimizing demand that such games, having lost some crucial element, now cannot be considered "real." An urban dictionary user in 2014 traced the coining of the term to *DayZ* and the notoriously mundane, monotonous boringness of survival in its unforgiving landscape—a negative assessment of a game that was trying and failing to be fun.[88] The term especially gained in critical heft when *Gone Home* garnered acclaim from professional critics, and some of those who disagreed with that acclaim formed a thread of #GamerGate. At that point, the gendered crux of the genre's (Freudian) lack of a gun came to the fore: Walking Sims were for girls and queer people and other outsiders to gamer culture who couldn't handle the masculine complexity of "real" games.

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While the phenomenon of the Walking Simulator and its uncomfortable position within gamer culture is both unsettling and fascinating, this book is more interested in situating its legacy within broader cultural preoccupations. To enable this, I'm developing the term *wandering game*, which points toward the importance of wandering in all games. Walking Sims can be seen as one kind of wandering game; AAA games in which the player can choose to meander from one side quest to another within an open world can be seen as another; an indie game in which the player character is constrained from wandering is another; and so on.[89] Reading any game as a wandering game means that you're focusing on how the cultural and intellectual history of wandering inflects that particular game. As with any theoretical apparatus, this construct could be applied to any work, but some results would be less interesting than others; for instance, analyzing *Tetris* as a wandering game, while possible, doesn't seem that compelling to me.

It's easy to read classic Walking Simulators as wandering games. For example, by analyzing *Dear Esther* as a wandering game, we can see beyond its technical origins as a stripped-down FPS and notice how it resonates obviously and easily with philosophical and cultural traditions of wandering—as a site-specific performance, a piece of digressive literature, and a religious pilgrimage combined. As pedestrian performance art, *Dear Esther*'s assemblages of candles, notes, paper boats, and music are reminiscent of contemporary site-specific works. Based on those similarities to live performance, it's unsurprising that *Dear Esther* has found an afterlife of live performances inspired by its original virtual form—for instance, the piece *Dear Rachel*, directed by Mona Bozdog and Dayna Galloway, which staged an adaptation of *Dear Esther* live on Inchcolm Island, an island near South Queensferry, Scotland.[90] As a work of digressive literature, *Dear Esther* fits clearly into a long tradition of modernist digressive writing—it's abstract, fragmentary, returning again and again to important phrases or words, utilizing flashback and flash-forward, spiraling around a set of central plot points and relationships but telling them in an a-linear way. As a spiritual pilgrimage from lighthouse to beacon tower—a grief walk, undertaken in the hope that the mourner will find peace through this journey—*Dear Esther* falls neatly into the pilgrimage tradition as well. If players are familiar with these earlier traditions and norms, then reading *Dear Esther* as a wandering game is simple. One can clearly see how it's conversant in (and contributing to) the legacies of wandering thought. Other games, including

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the ones I've analyzed in the following chapters, are similarly descended from these traditions, but the resonances are not as clear as they are in a classic Walking Sim. That was my goal: to uncover how wandering thought has woven itself into the fabric of games that might not think of themselves as such.

Indeed, as games grow increasingly complicated and open world, the possibilities for misplay and wandering play become increasingly obvious. Just as philosophies of space (and who controls it) affect the way that humans traverse the physical world, the design of digital worlds enables, encourages, and forbids different movements. Players can and do take advantage of these affordances in critical playthroughs, like Brent Watanabe's "San Andreas Streaming Deer Cam," a livestreamed mod of *Grand Theft Auto V* in which Watanabe programmed an autonomous deer to wander through the fictional landscape of San Andreas.[91] In 2008, Joseph DeLappe used a treadmill and the virtual reality environment of *Second Life* to reenact Gandhi's march in protest of the salt tax, walking 240 miles on the treadmill and in cyberspace over twenty-six days.[92] Players like Youtuber ZversusA (in his series of Nature Walks of Bethesda games) or @VirtualRambling stream themselves walking through virtual environments.[93] Alenda Chang writes about the exciting possibilities of treating these virtual environments *as* environments, proposing "to refashion the game walkthrough from an expert guide for struggling players to an active exploration and appreciation of game space and place. [To do so] is a call to inhabit different game worlds and to inhabit game worlds differently."[94]

Consider Brendan Keogh's *Towards Dawn*, a project in which the author decided to walk east in an early iteration of *Minecraft* for as long as possible. If he died, his avatar would respawn at the very beginning of his journey, effectively making *Minecraft* a permadeath game for the duration of this experiment. Keogh's blog of the experience reads like the diary of any reflective explorer; he describes the landscape, his challenges to survive, his existential despair at a seemingly endless ocean, and his fear of the unknown. Eventually, after fifty-seven days, he builds a home. He'd intended to continue until he died, but his luck and talent hadn't ever run out. Instead, he chose to end the journey on his own terms. He named his home DAWN, retroactively giving his exploratory meandering the shape of a narrative arc.[95]

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Towards Dawn wonderfully exposes the ease with which a player can transform an open world video game into a wandering game—and indeed, how so many games are founded on some subliminal notion of wandering. In this case (and in that of many open world examples), that notion is concrete—the avatar walks in a journey through a landscape. In other games, the notion is abstract—the narrative meanders and digresses, by design; the meaning of a public/private space shifts based on supremacist powers and the subversive movements working against them; the player "wanders" the game into existence, connecting its many components through their feet, in the way of a pedestrian performance.

Further, the ending Keogh chooses creates a frame, giving the wandering a satisfying conclusion and imbuing it with meaning. Wandering without an end point feels very uncomfortable, but it's also the state in which much player wandering occurs. Keogh meant to die in order to give himself a natural end point—the most common choice game designers make to solve precisely this problem. But when he didn't die, he just had to . . . stop. He built a home and a garden and settled down. I read the massive anxiety around/orientation toward/obsession with death in games as a fundamental discomfort with eternal wandering (in both concrete and abstract senses). We want to stop, but we can't *just* stop.

The following chapters explore how twenty-first-century ideologies of work, gender, colonialism, and death intersect with one another in wandering games. Doing so helps to expose broader trends in gaming and contemporary culture at large. When we notice that *Return of the Obra Dinn* provides the player with an archive of corpses to investigate, rather than a more traditional archive of texts to wander around, we can better understand how death lurks in the background of all games, even (or, especially) those with undying PCs. In *Eastshade*, the player character combines the roles of Romantic wanderer and pragmatic laborer, exposing a particularly twenty-first-century fantasy of passionate work that also inflects the mythology of the game development industry. When wandering is sharply curtailed in time and space, as in *Ritual of the Moon*, the player comes to understand better the limitations forced on people in gendered, nonnormative bodies who are trying to move (or simply live) in public. Through an analysis of *80 Days*, we notice the gradations between different ways of traversing ludic space, as different game worlds invite us to perceive landscape

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as predators, as curious travelers, and as inevitable conquerors. When we come to see textual and linguistic digressivity as a form of wandering that parallels the postcolonial traversals of the PC in *Heaven's Vault*, we can more easily perceive the connections between protest, digression, and the undoing of colonialist structures through play. And when PCs are cursed to roam endlessly across postapocalyptic worlds, we can see much more clearly how an ancient notion of pilgrimage underlies big-budget, open world games, with the violence of the action serving as a distraction from a core of spiritual despair.

This book illustrates how the poetics of wandering have inflected the culture of video games across the genre spectrum, by recognizing the classic Walking Simulators of the early 2010s as both inheritors of a long artistic thought tradition and forerunners of a contemporary video game culture imbued with wandering elements. Wandering games show us different ways of relating toward gender, colonialism, work, and death. In doing so, they help us imagine what it would be—what it might take—to walk our way into a different sort of world.

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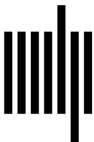

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