

### 3 Romantic Precarity: *Eastshade* as a Fantasy of Work

Eastshade is a glorious place to be a wandering artist. The dappled air sparkles, beckoning you into villages brimming with cozy cheer. Sky, sea, beach, and forest shimmer with the promise of beautiful, contemplative adventures, complete with a flutter of golden glitter whenever you encounter a new place. Running water and birdsong complement the serene soundtrack, accompanied by the scribble of a pencil on paper whenever you update a quest. Anthropomorphic NPCs endear themselves to you with their gentle grumbles and requests, which never seem high stakes (even when they narratively ought to be quite important). Between the golden light, the supernatural beauty of each biome, and the low-pressure tasks given to you by kind, friendly creatures, playing *Eastshade* feels like the loveliest respite for anyone who imagines that they too might find it quite satisfying to travel to a faraway land and spend their days drinking tea and pursuing creative passions.

In reality, it is of course exceptionally difficult to travel and work in a foreign country as an itinerant freelance painter. Practicalities intrude immediately on the dream—language barriers, taxes, travel delays, terrible weather, homesickness, instability—such that the precarious life of a wandering artist little resembles the fantasy of what that life might be. *Eastshade* revels in this gap, offering the player a fantasy tailor-made to soothe the particular terrors of late capitalist precarity in 2019, and doing so with such charm and panache the player hardly recognizes it happening. Indeed, *Eastshade* works so well as escapism precisely because of how expertly it anticipates (and preemptively counters) any activity, ideology, or inconvenience that mars the dream of being a wandering artist.

This chapter looks at how *Eastshade* delivers a fantasy of late capitalist precarity. First, I delve into the aesthetic and sociocultural mythmaking

surrounding the wandering artist, a character who became increasingly important during the nineteenth century. I show how the player's response to the landscape traces out the relationship between aesthetic theories of the sublime, the beautiful, and the law of gentleness. In addition to embodying the early nineteenth-century Romantic ideal of the wanderer, the player is also put into the role of that character's more pragmatic and impoverished cousin: the mid-nineteenth-century artisanal journeyman who migrated in search of work. In the second section, I weigh more carefully the balance of economic considerations that drive the player in *Eastshade*, closely reading the player's actions within the context of millennial anxieties about precarity, love, and labor. Finally, I consider *Eastshade* as a labor of love of its programmer and analyze how Eastshade Studios embeds itself within intersecting late capitalist ideologies as an independent game developer. The studio's careful performance of itself—precarious, ambitious, dreamy yet practical—mirrors rather beautifully the tension embodied in the wandering artist/laborer PC of the game they created.

### Romantic Wandering

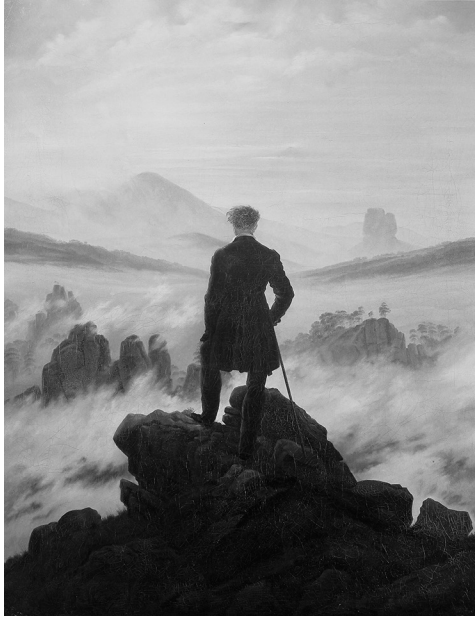
Everyone in *Eastshade*, from the villagers in Lyndow to the city folk in Nava, expect you to want to wander through the countryside on foot—in part because you're an artist, in part because you're a tourist, and in part because everyone agrees on the unparalleled beauty of the landscape. Some of them announce those expectations explicitly, like Emine, who “imagine[s] you'll be traveling all around this island, being a tourist and all.” While players can eventually find ways to travel more quickly—conveyances like bicycles and carts or psychotropic tea that warp-travels you to your desired location—these methods pale in comparison. As Tifa says if you try to hire a cart too early, “You're a newcomer and you've never been to Nava! It's not so far and the walk is lovely. Everyone going to Nava for the first time should approach by foot. I won't be the one to cheat you out of an enriching experience.” Wandering around *Eastshade* is framed as an aesthetic luxury, to be savored as a fundamental part of your experience.

In other words, the game reflects Romantic attitudes about the beneficial art of walking in nature. Rebecca Solnit describes “the Romantic taste for landscape, for wild places, for simplicity, for nature as an ideal, for walking in the landscape as the consummation of a relationship with such places

and an expression of the desire for simplicity, purity, solitude,” and notes that “choosing to walk in the landscape as a contemplative, spiritual, or aesthetic experience has a specific cultural ancestry.”<sup>1</sup> In the Western cultural context, that ancestry dates to nineteenth-century European Romanticism, predominantly in the German and British thought traditions. In one of the most famous depictions of the Romantic wanderer, Caspar David Friedrich’s 1817 painting, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, shows an upper-class male figure gazing resolutely into a mysterious foggy valley, gazing at a pastel horizon. Friedrich’s wanderer—bold, dynamic, individualistic, seeking the unknown—exemplifies the way the character functioned in the heyday of Romanticism and illustrates his mythic appeal (figure 3.1).

Our attraction to this character has, if anything, grown stronger in this era of exploratory and fantastical ludic worlds, even as we spend less time wandering around the real natural world. But if we seem to have lost our Romantic attraction to rambling through the wilds of nature, as Alenda Chang suggests, perhaps the answer can be found in our enthusiastic taste for tromping around virtual rather than physical environments.<sup>2</sup> As wanderers in game environments, we implicitly understand ourselves as descendants from Friedrich’s wanderer, even if only subconsciously. Compare one of the title screens for 2017’s *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* to Friedrich’s painting (figure 3.2).<sup>3</sup>

The quintessential Romantic wanderer is Novalis’s fictional Hyazinth from *The Apprentices of Sais*, and his quest resembles the PC’s quest in *Eastshade*. The story features a world in which nature is enchantingly alive. But Hyazinth, an artistic youth, feels inexplicably melancholy, despite the love of his family and his girlfriend, Rosenblüthe. When Hyazinth meets an old man and a wise woman who tell him stories of foreign lands, “astonishingly wonderful things,” and prophesy that he shall be whole only if he leaves, Hyazinth latches on to the possibility of finding his happiness by venturing out into the world.<sup>4</sup> After some thought, he astonishes his friends and family with the sudden decision to go, saying simply, “I must go forth into strange lands . . . maybe I’ll come back, maybe I never will.”<sup>5</sup> In his travels, he comes at last to a heavenly place, falls asleep, and dreams he’s in a temple. In that temple, he lifts a shimmering veil, behind which he finds his beloved Rosenblüthe. In discovering her again, so far from home, he realizes the value in what he’s always had and finally feels satisfied.



**Figure 3.1**

*Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, 1817, by Caspar David Friedrich. Kunsthalle Hamburg. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Compare Hyazinth's story to the PC's journeying in *Eastshade*. The PC, a similarly Romantic young person with a penchant for travel, art, and the beauties of nature, ludologically cannot find the inspiration to paint without experiencing new ideas and new places (because the inspiration meter will not fill and thus the mechanic of painting will be unavailable to the player). An old woman—the PC's late mother—has told him he must travel to this astonishingly wonderful place and that only by doing so would he understand its magic. Rather than seeking something mysterious, however, the PC of *Eastshade* knows precisely what he seeks: to paint four special paintings his late mother requested. The lesson of Hyazinth—by bravely striving for the transcendent and unknown, Romantic wanderers can discover that their heart's desire was theirs all along—is transformed into a series of tasks that are very much known and matter-of-fact. One needn't stride into the mists, yearning toward the ineffable; one can simply follow directions, the completion of which (a wise elder figure promises) will yield satisfaction. Once the PC has successfully painted these views,



**Figure 3.2**

*The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo, 2017). Author screenshot of title screen.

they can conclude their journey at any time. They can sail away from Eastshade and, in an epilogue, sit in a wooden room, surrounded by their framed paintings and a collection of letters and memorabilia from acquaintances they met during their adventures. Already, we can begin to read the PC as a combination of Romantic wanderer and practical realist—yearning toward the indescribable but well satisfied by a nice trip and the completion of a to-do list.

Romanticism is characterized by an attraction to nature and an appreciation for the unknown, two desires that meet in the concept of the sublime. The sublime encompasses that heart-pounding, awe-inspiring exhilaration that occurs when we encounter something in nature that is both stunning and deadly—a sheer cliffside, a mountain peak, a vast ocean.<sup>6</sup> Only in our distance from it can we appreciate its beauty but control our fear. That combination—starkly powerful beauty, terror, and sufficient distance—creates the sense of the sublime. The landscape of Eastshade frequently inspires a sense of the sublime. We behold rivers, cliffs, oceans, mountains, the glimmering vista of Nava, the Tiffmoor Bluffs, the massive eclipse that blots out the sun over this entire planet every midday. Many of these sights could be deadly if we perceived them in person, but through the distance of the computer screen, fear and dread turn into appreciation for their beauty.

When considering the sublime in game worlds, scholars have focused primarily on expansive landscapes and how the subsequent mastery of those landscapes through play transforms the vast sublime into something like an idyllic, preindustrial pastoral. Paul Martin, for example, argues that *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* “is encountered in the sublime mode . . . in that it emphasizes an incomprehensible largeness and expanse. This lends the game’s moral framework an epic grandeur. But as the landscape becomes more familiar to the player it tends to migrate from the sublime to the picturesque mode.”<sup>7</sup> This is how, Martin says, comfort and familiarity can render a vast, awe-inspiring landscape into an unassuming pastoral.<sup>8</sup> Daniel Vella counters that the surprising uncertainties of gameplay can result in the continuing presence of the sublime, even after a player’s extensive experience of the world has rendered it more familiar.<sup>9</sup>

The traditional pastoral is characterized as a sanctuary sandwiched between the chaotic danger of wilderness and the dirty terror of industrialization, which Leo Marx calls “counterforces” to the pastoral.<sup>10</sup> We can recognize the pastoral element of *Eastshade*—a preindustrial fantasy, an arcadian idyll—but the island lacks the “counterforces” that make the pastoral what it is: defined in relation to that which tries to disrupt or destroy it. *Eastshade* appears unthreatened by either wilderness or industrialization. Modernity seems to have appeared in precisely (and solely) the ways that are useful and positive: the expertise to construct bicycles and zip lines, casual embrace of queer sexualities, no sexism, and some central governing body that employs park rangers to manage the country’s extensive natural resources. Yet these modern or postmodern incursions on the high fantastic don’t threaten or disrupt this culture’s values; rather, they serve to render the fantasy even more delightful to players.

Because of this complication to the pastoral—because of this world’s placid, imperturbable, eternally preindustrial quality—I suggest that *Eastshade* is better understood through the related concept of poetic realism rather than that of the pastoral. Despite the awesome natural beauties meant to evoke the sublime, *Eastshade* truly shines in its quieter, homier, cozier beauties: what in German aesthetic theory would be called poetic realism, or Adalbert Stifter’s “law of the gentle.”<sup>11</sup> For Stifter, historical events—natural disasters, grand vistas, great human dramas—pale in comparison with the everyday wonder of the small. This “gentle law” elevates

small-scale occurrences to the same level of breathtaking awe as the sublime. As one critic writes, poetic realism “is concerned with the everydayness of life rather than with its exceptional moments, and the Poetic Realism of the middle of the nineteenth century, unlike the thoroughgoing naturalism fifty years later, looked upon life and found it good, and recorded with loving and minute care the details of existence.”<sup>12</sup>

*Eastshade* doesn't need to be pastoralized by increased familiarity with the landscape, and it doesn't evoke terror through sudden surprise; it's a domesticated sublime from the first moment, immediately containing both awe and coziness at once. In *Eastshade*, the sublime is always in the background, unavoidable and unforgettable, and nowhere more obviously than in the huge planetary bodies that are visible in the sky at all times of the day and night but especially intrude on our notice at midday, when the daily eclipse turns the sky bright pink. Despite the constant intrusion of this epic, supernatural event, our experience of *Eastshade* is entirely peaceful and mostly quotidian. On the windswept and precipitous Tiffmoor Bluffs, you can light a campfire and drink some tea with a massive Earth-like planet filling the sky behind you. It's like the sublime has lost its power to evoke terror, but we can still recognize it for the terror it *would* evoke in a different context.

But while we're safe in terms of sublime terror, we still find ourselves negotiating the economic complexities of being an artistic wanderer. And the way that the wanderer evolves over the course of the nineteenth century indicates how life in *Eastshade* can go sour. At first, the wanderer is a young, wealthy man traveling for education and self-edification. In this guise, he's steeped in the Enlightenment tradition—respect for education, travel, the classics—but he's looking for something a little more, and that desire pulls him into a series of natural rambles and adventures. Shortly after, this wanderer grows into the High Romantic figure we know and love: yearning toward nature, the sublime, the ineffable, and a notion of infinity he can satisfy only by spending time in the “wilderness” (a concept that was concurrently rising in cultural estimation because of the spread of industrialization and the concurrent loss of natural habitats). As the century drifted into the increasingly revolutionary 1830s and 1840s, traveling political poets came to exemplify a wanderer as revolutionary figure: traversing the countryside to disseminate dissident texts and rabble-rouse for

greater democratic enfranchisement and leadership. Then, after the failed revolutions of 1848 and the disappointed hopes of so many leftist intellectuals, the wanderer in the Biedermeier era came to describe the practical, precarious journeyman class of artisans left behind by industrialization, who traveled in the hope of securing work or to participate in growing labor movements.<sup>13</sup>

*Eastshade* encapsulates that trajectory of the wanderer figure as he transforms from striving Romantic hero to pragmatic migrant laborer. Andrew Cusack notes that the motif of the wanderer, for all its connection to transcendental yearning and nature-loving sublimity, “is always available as a vehicle for the theme of homelessness.”<sup>14</sup> As the ideology of individualism increasingly took off in the industrializing nineteenth century, reinforced by the seductive promise that hard work could conquer even the most systemic hardship, individuals found themselves moving more frequently, chasing the dream of self-sufficiency. As they migrated to follow the demand for labor, workers were indeed individualized—treated as atomic units, unmoored from family and community, and considered interchangeable. As Nicole Grewling puts it, “Ultimately, a national and individual desire for and belief in political and material stabilization and, hence, a settled lifestyle (mostly promoted by the bourgeoisie) in the mid-1800s clashed with antagonistic tendencies of restless activity, mostly in economic terms.”<sup>15</sup>

The following section considers how the ideal Romantic spirit counterposes with the realities of labor and how this tension manifests for the player who is wandering across the gameworld of *Eastshade*. In order to play the game successfully, you need to pay attention to all the different economies at play while maintaining a double consciousness about the philosophy of “doing what you love.” There’s quite a lot of grinding in the game, but the game’s discourse occludes any dissatisfaction you might feel about having to do work you might not like. Instead, *Eastshade* promises a world that rewards the labor philosophy of late capitalism. *Eastshade* won’t save you from capitalist exploitation; it doesn’t need to because the very notion of exploitation has been removed. The tension between Romantic wanderer and pragmatic journeyman melts away, leaving behind inculcated job satisfaction.



## A Labor of Love

I begin by tracing out the economies—obvious and hidden—in which the player participates throughout the game. Your character is a penniless artist who travels across a fantasy land, painting beautiful landscapes and exchanging them for money known as glowstones. You paint by framing an image (adjusting borders as necessary) and clicking the mouse once, at which point a stylized screenshot appears on a canvas. In order to paint, the player needs material objects (canvas and frame), access to the location, and at least 1 unit of inspiration. The inspiration meter increases mainly when you explore new areas of the map, although there are some ways to trick inspiration out of a landscape you've already explored. If you want to keep your inspiration meter high enough to continue painting, you'll need enough glowstones to buy the tools required to explore unknown sites. You earn glowstones most often by running errands or doing favors for friendly NPCs, although you can also earn them for completing commissions (by painting a particular location at a particular time). The player thus grows resources in multiple currencies—glowstones, inspiration, inventory of objects, time and daylight, good relationships with pivotal NPCs—and slowly learns how each currency intertwines with the others. You travel and gain inspiration; in traveling, you chat with an NPC who misses the sea; you use 1 unit of inspiration to paint a seascape; you return to the NPC, who gives you glowstones in exchange for the painting; the glowstones enable you to buy a bicycle so you can travel farther and faster, and so on.

The delicate relationship of these different economies highlights how, for all the nonviolent and autotelic qualities that make it seem in some ways like a classic Walking Simulator, *Eastshade* is an RPG deeply invested in the going rates of various kinds of labor and the importance of maintaining the status quo. Whatever your initial intentions or artistic aspirations, you quickly find yourself devoting your time primarily to activities that will earn you glowstones or to the next task indicated in your notebook of active quests. The initial fantasy of roaming the landscape as an independent, itinerant artist is quickly subsumed into the practical business of completing tasks and painting on commission.

Indeed, far from embodying the Romantic wanderer who strives toward the ineffable, the player becomes an attentive errand runner almost immediately. In the conventional manner of an RPG, the game elides what counts

as work and what counts as play as activities that seemed voluntary quickly become imperative for any player who wants to continue exploring the landscape. After orienting yourself in Lyndow, you need sixty glowstones in order to cross a bridge that separates you from the rest of the map. Not knowing how to earn money, you find yourself in a typical RPG interaction model wherein friendliness is monetized and rewarded. By conversing with the Lyndow villagers, you can get a few commissions for paintings, or find a man who will buy the feathers you collect, or accomplish similar small chores. In so doing, you'll also talk with a troubled father, try (and fail) to console a desolate ship captain, and collect a dozen plants that don't yet have a use for you. Running errands and doing unpaid favors allows you to happen upon the few actions that will earn you the money you need to cross the bridge. At the following chokepoint, you'll need three letters of recommendation from villagers with whom you've developed a relationship by doing unpaid labor. You don't ever negotiate a price for your services beforehand; you simply do the work and hope that it'll be rewarded in some capacity. By expecting the player to do that work by default, uncomplainingly, the game obscures the fact that friendliness has real economic value here. In the context of late capitalism, this character participates in the gig economy because they lack the bargaining power to negotiate a fair wage for their work.

But *Eastshade* can paper over any ugly ramifications of laborer/employer dynamics because in this precapitalist dreamscape, your labor is appropriately rewarded and valued. The world of *Eastshade* is a cozy, beautiful fantasy, and nowhere more than in its erasure of poverty. If you find yourself outside too late at night and you start to get cold, the game transports you automatically to your previous bedroom. You don't need to eat at all, and other costs are kept to a minimum. In this fantastical countryside, the anthropomorphic animal residents spend most of their time in upper-class-coded leisure pursuits—reading, playing instruments, and pondering scientific questions. Some of them practice a traditional craft or trade (making pots, innkeeping, metalworking), and some have anachronistically modern occupations. When you're tasked with testing a tincture for illegal substances and take it to the university scientist Zahra, she meets you with her typical greeting: "A fine day for science!" followed by the incredulous question, "You want me to check for trace elements of endangered plants?" There's a bewildering moment where you might hear the outlandishness

of the request in its real context—Who barges into a scientist’s lab and demands they drop everything and run a complicated experiment just for you?—but of course Zahra’s love for her work conquers all. “I enjoy running tests!” she replies enthusiastically. “Just give me the potion and a few minutes.” Class distinctions don’t exist in *Eastshade*, and everyone seems to have chosen the worthwhile occupation that suits them best.

In other words, *Eastshade* offers a world in which everyone can “do what you love,” the phrase that Miya Tokumitsu calls the “unofficial work mantra of our time.”<sup>16</sup> She argues that treating work as a labor of love, combined with late capitalist trends like online microlabor and a gamified gig economy, has resulted in a romanticization of work that benefits employers far more than employees. Inspirational messaging such as, “Do what you love, and you’ll never work a day in your life” or “Do what you love, love what you do,” obscures the economic realities that necessitate undertaking work that you *don’t* love, and can even make doing so seem shameful. As Tokumitsu explains, “The problem is that [the ‘do what you love’ mantra] leads not to salvation, but to the devaluation of actual work, including the very work it pretends to elevate—and more importantly, the dehumanization of the vast majority of laborers.”<sup>17</sup> Brooke Erin Duffy terms those caught in this cycle “aspirational labourers,” who “pursue productive activities that hold the promise of social and economic capital; yet the reward system for these aspirants is highly uneven. Indeed, while a select few may realize their professional goals—to get paid doing what they love—this worker ideology obscures problematic constructions of gender and class subjectivities.”<sup>18</sup> Duffy argues that aspirational labor is rarely financially worthwhile, despite its implicit promises to “a growing number of these amateur Creatives [who] believe their reserves of time, energy and capital will pay off as they ‘get discovered.’”<sup>19</sup> But while such aspirational labor might not be successful in terms of earning money for those who do it, she darkly concludes, the rhetoric around it *has* succeeded at “romanticiz[ing] work in a moment when its conditions and affordances are ever more precarious, unstable, flexible—and *unromantic*.”<sup>20</sup> In *Eastshade*, the dangers of precarity under late capitalism are similarly erased—not just by a romantic notion of work but by a world in which such a romanticization truly isn’t exploitative at all.

In another sense, we could say that *Eastshade* positively reclaims many of the same philosophies and ideologies that have been rightly recognized

as toxic, racist, or discriminatory in contemporary discourse. I don't mean that such philosophies are also problematic in *Eastshade* and the game ignores their toxicity; rather, these philosophies do not, for the most part, reflect anything rotten within this fantasy world. Consider, for example, Efe's explanation at the bridge into Nava the first time the player tries to cross into the city. Efe requests your reference letters and, when asked why letters are required, replies by confirming a nativist, anti-immigrant policy that's apparently new in Nava: "It hasn't always been this way, but lately we've been getting more newcomers than usual. We don't want to be unwelcoming to new folk, but we are trying to have some measure of security." While this can set the player slightly on their heel (requiring a backtrack to Lyndow or the intervening forest), the friendly NPCs with their harmless errands make the gating mechanic feel like a nudge to explore your world a bit more, not a nativist exclusion tactic. The game reflects twenty-first-century ideologies and prejudices—like an exclusionary immigration policy—but depicts them as part of a world where those ideologies *make sense to have and do no harm*. They aren't underhanded, racist, or backstabbing, and they result in a gorgeous experience where everything's beautiful and nothing hurts.

What complicates this reading is the treatment of the indigenous people of *Eastshade*, who seem to fall into two groups: the first folk, who live underground but occasionally emerge at night for drumming circles, and the indigenous people, whose ancestors created the ruins on Tiffmoor Bluffs. The first folk offer no ideological difficulty; they, like the others in *Eastshade*, seem to be living their best lives, enjoying their drums, and remaining generally happy with the status quo. You engage more fundamentally with the colonialist power structures of *Eastshade*, however, in the depiction of the indigenous people in the "Thief of Sinkwood Inn" storyline. On an isolated island in the midst of a storm, you investigate a small theft in an Agatha Christie-like mystery. Someone has taken a book from a historian, so you rifle through everyone's belongings and interrogate them on their whereabouts and motivations. The denouement reveals the reason for these heightened stakes: a long-running battle among university anthropologists, business developers, and an indigenous woman trying to protect her land from both interests. The player discovers that a native woman, Helena, has taken the historian's book to try to translate ruins she's seen on her ancestral land. As a result of the investigation, Helena is

not only shamed but utterly defeated as the objects of importance discovered during the investigation trigger the takeover of the ancient land by the university for further study. Helena wanted desperately to avoid this outcome—"I can't afford for the ruins to go to science—Science doesn't pay!"—but as the belated investigator summarizes when she finally arrives, "Unfortunately for her, we've now got solid evidence that the ruins are filled with ancient relics. No chance of selling the property now. Ownership will most likely default to University."

In questioning each character, the player can develop a fuller picture of the range of opinions in Eastshade regarding its indigenous inhabitants. The historian Omiros calls the ruins "an incredibly rich source of heritage and culture for the people of Eastshade. I believe that within the ruins there are relics that would help us understand our beginnings on this island," suggesting that all current Eastshaders might descend from the indigenous population. But other evidence in the inn, including an article in the *Shadian Post*, separates out some group of Eastshaders as indigenous and others as not. Innkeeper Kevork explains to you that "indigenous people think no one should even look at [the ruins]. Most everyone else just wants to see what's inside!" Reiley the musician says sympathetically, "It's such a bad situation. The indigenous people just want the land to stay sacred. All they ask is that no one goes in the ruins. But the university is constantly sending people over to investigate. They want to 'extract the artifacts.'"

The game gives no clear response to the colonizer mentality on display in the Sinkwood Inn storyline, but its subtleties are most clearly elucidated in the way different characters treat theft—which is to say, what the game treats as unproblematically free for the taking (or free with a bit of a wink) and what counts as private property for which the taker will be prosecuted. Vadim the businessman possesses a relic from Tiffmoor Ruins in his briefcase, but this "theft" is not treated with equivalent investigative rigor as the missing book. When you find similar relics in Nikol's suitcase (which you demand to search despite her discomfort), she says defensively, "I didn't steal them. They belong to my ancestors!" It feels pretty hypocritical for the player character to be questioning potential thieves when the player has been harvesting every plant and scooping up every candle, board, and canvas in the country without any respect for property rights. It's not as if your theft is somehow less criminal or even unacknowledged; Bojan, when he gives you the schematic for a raft, shamefacedly admits he sometimes

also steals candles in order to get the required wax. But *this* theft of a book (in which the player absolutely would have participated if they'd only had the opportunity) motivates an open police investigation and a total lockdown of the crime scene. Why is Helena's theft of the book a crime, but the player's theft of every plant in the inn's garden unremarkable? Why can the other inhabitants of Eastshade, including the player, roam the countryside and take what they find, almost entirely without repercussion? It seems as if everyone in Eastshade can do what they love except some of those coded as disenfranchised, who are criminalized and erased as quickly as possible.

This seems like an exception to my previous argument. If *Eastshade* succeeds as a safe space for particularly US American millennial anxieties about precarity—if it offers an idyllic place where the problematic ideologies of our culture are tamed and made just—how do we square that with the colonialist double standard we find here? It's uncomfortable; Helena has been mistreated, and we have participated in that mistreatment (and gotten paid for doing so). Why offer the storyline at all? I think the explanation here is twofold. First, the game seems to be trying to engage honestly with an ugly issue and illustrate its ugliness through the unfairness of Helena's fate; in so doing, it's out of joint with the game's overall tone (which is one of ideological comfort rather than conscience prodding), but its heart is in the right place. The second reading, more insidious, is that the Sinkwood Inn storyline illustrates the limitations of trying to present all these ideologies as good at once. When a commitment to anticolonialism comes into conflict with a romanticization of the gig economy and the PC's love of labor, the latter wins.

Throughout, *Eastshade* comes across as openly subversive in its rejection of violence but neoliberal in its economics. You cannot buy a sword in Eastshade because, the blacksmith tells you, they would much prefer to make tea kettles and zip-line mechanisms. But even in this subversion of traditional ludic norms, the predominant philosophy ("do what you love!") shines through: you cannot buy a sword because the blacksmith only does work they love, not because violence is inherently bad. In its adherence to the ideals of late capitalism—the veneration of productivity for its own sake, the notion that loving your work will conquer all economic difficulty, the unquestioning respect for problematic ideologies that (mostly) don't seem problematic here—*Eastshade* provides a perfect escape for its late capitalist audience, seamlessly merging our longing for a world in which our

work had meaning with our desire for a world where everything didn't seem so broken, so in need of fixing and critique and awareness.

The following section broadens to consider *Eastshade* as a work of art developed during a particular time and with a particular set of cultural expectations placed on the artist. Indie game development has embraced the mantra of “doing what you love” perhaps more than any other industry, for reasons we consider in these final pages of the chapter. Players of an indie game who are disproportionately powerful compared with fans of other art forms demand a unique performance of precarity from developers. Eastshade Studios does a masterful job at this performance and offers a fascinating perspective on *Eastshade* as a kind of wish fulfillment for the independent game industry.

### Playing with Precarity

In Nava, when you enter the inn below the Tarnished Teapot, the manager, Emil, tries to discourage you from taking a room, explaining apathetically that the inn is damp, odorous, and poorly maintained (by the manager himself). When pressed about his surprising success considering that attitude, Emil tells you he's still in business because Nava happens to be a boomtown with plenty of visitors who need a place to stay. His lesson: “Act impulsively and sometimes you get rich! That's what I've learned, anyway. Oh, and . . . have an inheritance.” It's a tongue-in-cheek joke, but also one that prompts us to understand *Eastshade* as an economic system related to the economic system in which it was developed—the late capitalist United States between 2013 and 2019. Doing so can help us better articulate “the relationships between the economic systems of software, in-game diegetic accumulation and exchange, through to the actual worlds of everyday play and global consumption.”<sup>21</sup>

*Eastshade* was developed over five years and eventually self-published by Eastshade Studios in 2019. As they tell it, “Eastshade Studios was founded in December 2013 when Danny quit his day job as a 3D environment artist in triple-A games to build a weird world (Eastshade). With collaborators sprinkled around the globe, we are committed to building worlds that feel like real places, explored through non-violent mechanics.”<sup>22</sup> Note the way that the studio introduces its core ideology within two brief sentences. It presents itself as a hopeful, anticapitalist, follow-your-dreams sort of company

(“quit his day job . . . to build a weird world”), bolstered by the imprimatur of a traditional capitalist authority (he was a successful “3D environment artist in triple-A games”). The description communicates expertise, authenticity, and humility, carefully balanced.

An early press video further emphasizes how the studio endeavors to present itself. In the short video (the only one posted in the Eastshade Studios press kit), a day passes in the life of developer Danny Weinbaum in early January 2015, a year after he quit his day job.<sup>23</sup> We first see him writing code at a nice wooden desk in a room that reads as solidly middle-class US American, working on the AI system that schedules the NPCs to complete their loops. Outside Weinbaum’s window, day turns into night. At 0:48, we see Weinbaum take a break to cook a packet of instant ramen for 10 full seconds (in a video that’s only about 100 seconds long; see figure 3.3). Weinbaum then returns to his desk, and as the shadows lengthen, the camera focuses on the disappearing noodles as Weinbaum’s hands type (figure 3.4). Posted four years before *Eastshade* would eventually be released in February 2019, this time lapse offers a masterful performance of precarity, patience, dedication, and Weinbaum’s willingness to suffer for his art.

In interviews after the game’s release, the same story prevails. Weinbaum saved up money and planned to spend two years developing his dream game, but, relatably and humbly, he laughs at this underestimation: “I felt like if I just had two years, I could make and finish something. Of course, that was totally wrong. It turned out to be five years, and I couldn’t even come close to doing it alone. I ended up hiring other folks to help me out.”<sup>24</sup> Again, he threads the needle between presenting himself as the visionary artist he is—he gave this interview after *Eastshade* had been published and critically acclaimed—and humble laborer. The message is that he sacrificed to create this piece of art, and it’s worth it. His work and his life merge seamlessly in anecdotes like the one later in the same interview, when he mentions that he and his girlfriend lived at his grandmother’s house during the last year of development in order to save more money for localizations.

Indie game developers have been framing themselves in a similar way since *Braid*’s Jonathan Blow—self-identifying with his piece, working in isolation with a single-minded obsession for years, sacrificing other parts of his life for the good of his work.<sup>25</sup> But Weinbaum’s self-presentation differs subtly from that of earlier game developers (and earlier stories about game developers). During the indie boom between 2008 and 2012, audiences were thrilled by heroic stories of indies that made it big on a shoestring





Figure 3.3



Figure 3.4

“Eastshade Game Development Time Lapse” (2015). Author screenshots of Eastshade Studios.

budget. By 2019, that story had become increasingly precarious, necessitating a self-presentation more humble, more compromising, more self-effacing, and more responsive to the player base.

In this paradigm, successful independent game development consists of a complicated cocktail of work, luck, and affect: extended precarity, enough privilege to survive precarity, and the promise of overcoming it through

hard work, patience, and (crucially) the subjugation of both personal needs and artistic vision in deference to player/consumers. If we combine this with Giddings and other economic theorists of gaming, it makes sense that this paradigm would suffuse the fictional worlds these developers create. Successful indie game developers are definitionally a population of artists who have turned themselves into business professionals. For Eastshade Studios, as for the PC wandering artist within the fantasy world of *Eastshade*, it is (to apply Mark Fisher) “simply obvious that everything . . . should be run as a business.”<sup>26</sup> The world of *Eastshade*, like the world of indie game development, is designed to seem like the ideal situation for inspired and inspiring artists, but its self-presentation is at odds with the business-based reality of both experiences.

As Ergin Bulut identifies, love itself has been industrialized by the intersection of precarity and passion in the post-Fordist, late capitalist game industry.<sup>27</sup> While “capitalism has always produced inequalities, the field of video game production presents a distinct form of inequality, since the affect of love and social glamor make it a highly desirable job where work *looks* and *feels* more like play.”<sup>28</sup> For independent game developers, or anyone with the privilege of working in a creative industry in 2010s, the “do what you love” philosophy functions as a velvet fist, offering the semblance of free choice but backed by the constant threat of insecurity. Work under this paradigm becomes what Bulut calls “an authoritarian labor regime that commands us how to approach work: love it. Anything other than love toward work becomes unacceptable.”<sup>29</sup> Under such a regime, the older evils of inequality continue, distributing themselves unequally across this new landscape of playbour and mandatory enjoyment, especially since calling one’s work a labor of love “negates the possibilities for individual and social critique. Liberal conceptions of work in the creative industries frame employment as a matter of pleasure and choice,”<sup>30</sup> a particularly dangerous move when “only *some* bodies seem to be able to practice a labor of love and take risks.”<sup>31</sup> The discourse of work as love serves to calcify existing inequalities, with the added bonus of soul-negating self-indoctrination that squelches a worker’s suspicion that perhaps they are being mistreated by an employer (or, in the case of independent game development, a fandom of consumers). And without job security, the playful qualities of creative work disappear into economic anxiety and insecurity, aided by the worker’s sense of guilt and shame that they may not truly love their work enough if they ever take a break.<sup>32</sup>

This internalized pressure to love and self-identify with one's labor was originally identified by feminist theorists of the 1970s, Bulut notes.<sup>33</sup> As Kathi Weeks argues in an article analyzing the similarities between 1970s feminist and twenty-first-century self-help career philosophies, contemporary laborers in creative industries design their sense of self around their love of their work in the same ways that earlier generations of housewives found their labor imbricated with their love for their families. It's something Weeks calls "a new career mystique, a version that extols the emotional commitment and entrepreneurial zeal of the ideal post-Fordist wage worker . . . banking on another familiar feminine mystique, one that celebrates the happy raptures of romantic love as the essence of feminine fulfillment."<sup>34</sup> Having been convinced that the achievement of enduring love is paramount to happiness (with husband or career, respectively), the ideologically indoctrinated laborer (in Simone de Beauvoir's iconic phrasing) "chooses to want her enslavement so ardently that it will seem to her to be the expression of her freedom."<sup>35</sup> Weeks asks,

Who would not want to achieve more love and happiness in their life at work, particularly when they have no choice but to work for wages? Cultivating a deep love for work comparable to the stereotypical feminine attachment to romantic love may be an ambitious undertaking, but it is also only one in a long line of capitalist structure-subject-infrastructure-adjustment programs throughout its history. In this case, too, the goal is purportedly to help individuals express their freedom while also creating, as Tokumitsu explains the disciplinary functions of the "do what you love" evangelism, "a labor force that embraces its own exploitation."<sup>36</sup>

In *Eastshade*, the PC romanticizes their wandering and loves their work, which merges seamlessly with the rest of their emotional life. The PC's mother fondly remembered four vistas, and the player must complete paintings in those four places to win the game, but the process and experience of completing paintings for anonymous commissioners are identical to completing the paintings in remembrance of a beloved parent. Work is love; work is life. While *Eastshade* presents itself as fundamentally subversive and critical of conventional gameplay—which it is, in terms of its nonviolent mechanics—it remains within a loving relationship with late capitalism: completely dependent on it and uncritical of the parts of it that make its players feel more comfortable. As a fairy tale of late capitalist precarity, *Eastshade* works beautifully.



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# Wandering Games

By: Melissa Kagen

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