

4 Walking in Circles: Bodily Constraints in *Ritual of the Moon*

In *Ritual of the Moon*, the PC has been banished from the entire Earth and constrained to move within a tiny space. She walks and rewalks this space daily. She also conducts an identical ritual each day—ordering mystical objects, connecting stars into a constellation, and deciding whether to protect Earth from an apocalyptic comet. Every day the player must remember to play, but only for five minutes at a time (the length of a single day in-game). When such constraints are placed around movement—when one is denied the chance to exert agency over space, to wander freely—what is left?

This chapter considers *Ritual of the Moon* as a queer, feminist take on wandering under constraints—constraints on space, on time, and on bodies. In each case, I'm interested in how a wanderer's intersectional identity affects the way they are situated (and situate themselves) within spatial, temporal, and bodily systems. Mythologically, witches tend to be outsiders (by choice or by force), living on the margins of societies and feared for their magical powers. Historically, that fear inspired horrific crimes against (mostly) women whose power challenged the establishment. The witch of *Ritual* commands massive astrophysical power and suffers mightily at the hands of the societally powerful, who have placed punishing constraints on her space, time, and body. How does she try to evade them?

I draw from Sarah Jane Cervenak's *Wandering: Philosophical Performances of Racial and Sexual Freedom* to construct wandering as a metaphorical concept, not a physical one, the practice of which emancipates those to whom society gives no spatial outlet. Internal wandering, Cervenak argues, rebels against an external order dedicated to the immobilization of Black and female bodies. Following Denise Ferreira da Silva and Gayatri Spivak,

Cervenak points out how wandering took on its Enlightenment-informed connotation of freedom only by defining itself in relation to the unfreedom of others, freeing itself only through the subjugation of others into nonwandering immobility. I explicate *Ritual of the Moon* through this lens, showing how theorists in feminist game studies, queer game studies, disability studies, and Black and White feminisms help us to conceptualize repetitive steps, in circles, as a powerful and alternative mode of wandering.

Women in Space

Each day of *Ritual* begins with the PC facing the vast emptiness of space. An Earth-like planet, gently swirled with clouds, occupies the far left of the screen. As designer and writer Kara Stone summarizes, the game tells “a story about a witch who has been exiled to the moon, left there to die by the people on earth who fear her power. When comets start hitting the earth, she realizes she has the ability to protect the earth—or let it burn.”¹ Her space is small. She can walk approximately two body lengths to her left and approximately one body length to her right before she triggers the doorway to a capsule (presumably the same spaceship in which she’s traveled here).² Once inside, she can move about three body lengths to the right, where there’s a window, a stool, and a dashboard with buttons the player cannot press. The left side of the capsule features the space in which she completes her ritual, which contains several ritual objects. Clicking on these objects triggers a black screen, in which the witch inhabits a different spatiality from the rest of the scene. She touches the objects in a specific order, then connects a glowing field of stars into a single line, forming a constellation. The words of her daily mantra appear (different each day), and the music swells. Then suddenly, a glowing penumbra grows from the right side of the screen. Clicking on that light will return you from this alternate, ritual space to the regular, capsule space. The comet enters from the right. The player can then walk back outside to make their daily decision—avert the comet and offer protection, or let the comet crash. Afterward, the game shows a circular record of the previous days’ decisions. In sum, the PC inhabits a playing space of approximately seven body lengths.

In comparison with the vast landscapes of adventurous possibility proffered to the (mostly) male protagonists of video games, this woman’s tiny arena of life provides a stark contrast, as well as a reminder of the

millennia-long history of constraint placed on women's wandering bodies. Rebecca Solnit points out that whereas a wandering man is seen as bold and audacious, the same activities in a woman have more often been taken as evidence of sexual promiscuity. We can see this distinction in language: "A woman who has violated sexual convention can be said to be strolling, roaming, wandering, straying—all terms that imply that women's travel is inevitably sexual or that their sexuality is transgressive when it travels."³ Suggestive connotations surround the wandering woman and encourage her to stay home, such that "travel . . . has remained a largely masculine prerogative . . . with women often the destination, the prize, or keepers of the hearth."⁴ These gendered roles have remained one of the most fundamental tropes in video games as well, ever since Mario traveled across world after world only to learn at the end of each level that the evil Bowser had secured Princess Peach in yet another castle. Solnit calls the regulation of public space that keeps women at home "a sort of masonry veil,"⁵ which—whether through unexamined custom, street harassment, or justifications of sexual violence—ensures "that women will not feel at ease, that we will remember our role as sexual beings, available to, accessible to men. It is a reminder that we are not to consider ourselves equals, participating in public life with our own right to go where we like when we like, to pursue our own projects with a sense of security."⁶

This lack of public access results not only in the tendency of female-coded artistic practices to be smaller-scoped and circumscribed, but as a broader justification for misogyny in its most basic form: the general exclusion of women. The threat of rape, and its many *ex post facto* justifications, has historically worked to exclude women from much of the human experience of living and traveling in the world—excluding them, among other things, from the experience of wandering. Solnit quotes a realization from a nineteen-year-old Sylvia Plath, who wrote in her journal, "My consuming desire to mingle . . . to be part of a scene, anonymous, listening, recording—all is spoiled by the fact that I am a girl, a female always in danger of assault and battery. . . . I want to be able to sleep in an open field, to travel west, to walk freely at night."⁷ In the famous essay "A Room of One's Own," Virginia Woolf argues that limitations on women's travels and time spent in public substantially hamper the creation of women's art and the richness of female life. Woolf opens the piece by describing a moment at Oxbridge when she deviated from a gravel path onto the grass and was

intercepted by a beadle whose “face expressed horror and indignation . . . he was a Beadle; I was a woman. This was the turf; there was the path. Only the Fellows and Scholars are allowed here; the gravel is the place for me.”⁸

Kate Manne begins *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* by quoting this moment, analyzing it from the perspective of the beadle, who “may have little insight into the causal triggers for his hostility . . . he is still rankled by the sight of one straying from the path. He reaches for spurious grounds, or seizes on near universal missteps, to justify his resentment toward her.”⁹ Misogyny, Manne argues, is not about individual men “who are prone to feel hatred, hostility, or other similar emotions toward any and every woman, or at least women generally, *simply because they are women*”; rather, misogyny “ought to be understood as the system that operates within a patriarchal social order to police and enforce women’s subordination and to uphold male dominance.”¹⁰ That first definition, which Manne calls “the naïve conception,” would serve to define misogyny out of existence in a truly patriarchal society in which all women stayed within their circumscribed space (both literally and metaphorically).¹¹ In such a perfectly patriarchal society, hating women would be irrational and even “highly *peculiar*, as a matter of basic moral psychology”: “When it comes to the women who are not only dutifully but lovingly catering to his desires, what’s to hate, exactly?”¹² This definition, then, is completely inadequate in defining contemporary misogyny, which is not about the (rare, pathological) hatred toward obedient women but rather about *space*—who controls it, who assumes they are entitled to control it, who feels affronted when others assume the space is also theirs, and who (in extreme cases) commits violence to ensure their continuing control. If video games partly function as a practice ground for physical fantasies, then Walking Simulators could be read as the ultimate female fantasy of walking unencumbered in a world where no one will attack them or refuse them access.

But faced with millennia of this, female walkers have often responded by turning inward. In *Wandering: Philosophical Performances of Racial and Sexual Freedom*, Sarah Jane Cervenak theorizes that internal wandering serves as a response and alternative to oppression and external constraint, exposing the transgressive nature of internal wandering within a racially and sexually repressive cultural context.¹³ For Cervenak, wandering is primarily a metaphorical concept, not a physical one, and its practice emancipates those to whom society gives no other outlet. She writes that

“wandering—daydreaming, mental and rhetorical ramblings—offers new pathways for the enactment of Black female philosophical desire.”¹⁴ Internal wandering rebels against an external order dedicated to the immobilization of Black bodies (male and female) and female bodies more generally. Cervenak, following Denise Ferreira da Silva and Gayatri Spivak, points to the ways that wandering took on its Enlightenment-informed connotation of freedom only by defining itself in relation to the unfreedom of others. In Cervenak’s words, “The Enlightenment’s supposedly straight text or choreographic script—where *straight* refers to the putatively disinterested investments in reason, morality, and justice—was frequently written through wandering: sidesteps into Otherness that forged the Enlightenment’s racialized, gendered, and sexualized energetic conditions of possibility.”¹⁵

Not only did the so-called rational wandering of Immanuel Kant’s “Philosopher’s Path” demand “sidesteps into Otherness” against which to define itself, “the endless roaming of the purportedly enlightened emissaries of imperialism, and with it a promiscuous and increasingly narrow understanding of the human, required the energetic hijacking of someone else’s will.”¹⁶ Kant and his philosophical rambles could not have happened, physically or metaphysically, outside of their eighteenth-century colonizer context. The European post-Enlightenment wanderer, by benefiting from the material luxuries of physically violent imperialism, freed himself to wander metaphysically by creating philosophical structures to subjugate others into nonwandering immobility.

Cervenak makes the important point that wandering continues to be a privilege, inaccessible to all and often still defined against an Other who is not accorded that freedom. She writes that “even while the idealized post-Enlightenment subject can move errantly—along the crooked grooves of false things—in the interest of its definition, the bodies figured as the disposable ground of such wandering endure immobilization and trespass.”¹⁷ The inequitable access to physical pathways (and certain bodies’ vulnerability to retroactive narrativizing) makes the kind of interior wanderings Cervenak highlights all the more imperative. Although for certain bodies, “physical wandering is often subject to external policing and arrest . . . there are other modalities of wandering and unrestrained rumination possible even if the state decides you don’t get to walk freely.”¹⁸

To consider the extent to which the identity and physical characteristics of the wanderer shape the way movement is perceived, let’s momentarily

consider a text in which a White, cis, male, Enlightenment-era body is placed under spatial constraint. In 1790, twenty-seven-year-old army officer Xavier de Maistre was confined to forty-two days of house arrest in Turin after a duel. During his confinement, de Maistre wrote and later published “A Journey Round My Room,” a humorous travelogue inspired by contemporary accounts of the “Grand Tour” and Laurence Sterne’s digressive descriptions of travel in *Tristram Shandy* three decades earlier.¹⁹ De Maistre raves about the benefits of “the new mode of travelling I introduce into the world,”²⁰ before describing in full detail the way he perambulates his room during his ‘journey’ (“I shall traverse my room up and down and across, without rule or plan. I shall even zig-zag about, following, if needs be, every possible geometrical line. . . . I seldom keep to a straight line. From my table I go towards a picture which is placed in a corner; thence I set out in an oblique direction for the door”).²¹

Beyond critiquing the long-winded travel narratives of the time, De Maistre’s tongue-in-cheek journal of his travels presents the reader with a clear example of class, race, and gender privilege when it comes to wandering. De Maistre’s days are filled with contemplating artworks and books as his servant, Joanetti, runs his errands out of doors. The total comfort that accompanies his imprisonment differentiates him from any of the narratives Cervenak considers in her book. At no point does he seem concerned about money, and at no point is his future freedom in doubt (and to his credit, he does acknowledge this luxury and compares his happy situation to that of people suffering homelessness elsewhere in the city). The text reads as precisely what it is: the errant thoughts of a young, cheerful man placed under a temporary constraint. Its stakes bear no resemblance to those of someone enslaved, imprisoned for a lifetime, or under threat of serious violence. When his sentence ends, he writes defiantly, and with the ring of revolutionaries everywhere, that this short imprisonment held no real power over his mental ramblings anyway.²² This is, to put it mildly, easy for him to say, as it lasted barely long enough for him to write this playful travelogue. But even after such a brief and bounded loss of freedom, de Maistre comes to a similar conclusion to those who face substantial trauma and oppression—that internal, mental wandering can stand in for outdoor exploration in times of physical constraint.

To include another context—another way in which internal wandering serves as a response to constraints of physical space—compare the witch of

Ritual with the ascetic Christian tradition her lifestyle mimics. In medieval Europe, religious extremists known as anchorites “sought to withdraw so radically from the world that they had themselves sealed into cells for life.”²³ Ann Warren finds records of 414 women, 201 men, and 165 persons of indeterminate gender who, in the years between 1100 and 1539, decided to be entombed and live (sometimes for decades) within one small room.²⁴ The enclosure ceremony included last rites. Through a lengthy schedule of daily prayers, the anchorite crafted a rich internal landscape to supplement for the external one their devotions made unavailable. The *Ancrene Wisse*, a guide written for anchorites, writes of “the inner rule of the heart, which is the far more important goal of the anchoritic life. In fact, the outer rule should be a mere servant to the lady of the inner rule.”²⁵

We can clearly see such a turn inward in *Ritual of the Moon*. Constrained to a minuscule physical space in which to move, the witch creates an alternative, spiritual space in practicing her daily ritual. She constructs it through three actions, each of which deepens her focus and reestablishes the alternate space she builds through her practice. First, she touches small objects in an order that the player tries to remember from day to day. These objects seem to exist in her capsule as well as in her spiritual space, thus serving as transitional objects. Second, the screen blackens further to a constellation of stars, which she then connects. Third, a written mantra appears and the music swells. When the comet begins to glow from the right and the music changes, it reads as an intrusion of real-world space on the internal space the witch painstakingly crafts with her daily ritual.

In creating this internal space through ritual, the witch (and the player) provide one answer to the question Stone asks in their writing on the game: When confronted by this level of oppression, how “could she possibly heal from all this?” Stone writes that “*Ritual of the Moon* takes place in the mundane” and “suspect[s] that if healing through and with videogame technology is at all possible, it exists at this level.”²⁶ Spatially, the witch’s movement is repetitive, ritualistic; she walks inside, she walks outside, repeated ad infinitum. She wanders by crafting an internal, spiritual space while physically she walks in circles. But *Ritual of the Moon* is also durational; it is designed to be experienced once every day in a ritualized performance that could perhaps offer the player something like healing. The next section turns from constraints in space to constraints in time—looking more carefully at

the many kinds of temporality at play (and under limitation) in *Ritual of the Moon*.

Temporalities under Constraint

One of the more arresting qualities of *Ritual* is the way in which it anticipates and subverts the conventions surrounding time in video games. As Stone notes, “Videogames are a time-based medium. The playtimes of videogames are precisely calculated: 60 hours, 240 hours, 1 hour, 15 minutes a day over 3 years. The production time is measured as well, though often with less precision.”²⁷ Players expect that time and timing will matter greatly when they try out a new game. Many of the most beloved video game genres are predicated on the player developing the skills to protect a character from danger by executing split-second manipulations at a precisely correct moment. And many genres now assume that it will take months (if not years) for a player to get good enough to play successfully—expecting, in short, that players will devote significant amounts of time to a game’s completion. *Ritual* both demands a high level of time commitment (a month of attentive play) and subverts it (only 5 minutes of attention per day), creating a complicated commentary on temporality.

The game’s notion of temporality is deepened by the several theorizations of time that it brings into conversation with one another. Multiple oppressions intersect in *Ritual of the Moon*, both diegetically and extradiegetically. The PC is a non-White, queer woman who has been exiled from her home and effectively imprisoned in a barely habitable location. In addition to the PC’s complex identity, the developers’ own identities overlap in some ways with the PC’s (and in other ways do not). Stone has written about how mental illness and disability affected and inflected the process of the game’s creation.²⁸ The challenges the design team faced lengthened the game’s development and partly inspired the mix of temporalities at play in the game. *Ritual* thus becomes an increasingly complex meditation when seen as a game about multiple temporalities and existing at the node of multiple identity positionalities—a game in which female time, queer time, and “crip time” intersect. This section outlines those intersecting temporalities, drawing primarily from Shira Chess’s discussion of women and time in *Ready Player Two*, Bonnie Ruberg’s application of queer time to the pace of video games in *Video Games Have Always Been*

Queer, Audre Lorde's writings on womanism and disability, and discussions of "crip time" in conjunction with Johanna Hedva's "Sick Woman Theory."

For Chess in *Ready Player Two*, constraints on women's time and space have resulted in the creation of certain modes of play and the construction of a female "Player Two" identity to match. Chess both critiques and assumes this identity, writing, "I play with the keen understanding that I am part of an idealized audience constructed by the video game industry." Players' feelings about productivity, leisure, and guilt are exacerbated and manipulated by the style of play assumed of female players.²⁹ Though the development of games for (and the marketing toward) "Player Two" presents itself as empowering and feminist—a way for girls and women to enjoy and excel in video games—Chess finds it unconvincing and patronizing: "The system suggests a condescending solution to the complex problem of leisure and diversification. It manages the potential of gender diversity by reaffirming common stereotypes about how women and girls are expected to play."³⁰ These are not necessarily the ways that women *want* to play, Chess argues, but the identity construction is insidiously circular; because Player Two is expected to play a certain way, the game industry designs that type of game for her, so society writ large thinks that's how she *should* want to play, so over time she *just happens to want to play that way*, ad infinitum.

In part because female wandering and wanderers have suffered under misogynistic constraints in the domain of space—where worlds exist, both physical and digital, in which feminized bodies have been sexualized or excluded or both—female gaming has become increasingly associated with time rather than space. Chess argues provocatively that "issues of women and play have been inextricably linked to issues of time: what a woman considers play or leisure is not necessarily defined only by the activities she enjoys, but by the activities that fit neatly and cheaply into her fragmented schedule."³¹ The game industry designs quick, casual games for women players because they are assumed to have only small bits of time to devote to leisure. As she writes, "Video games designed for and marketed to women tended to treat all women players as though they were mothers. . . . As presumed mothers their play was meant to be necessarily productive, filling holes of time or functioning as a backdrop to emotional labor."³² Durational games, mobile games, and casual games that demand only a few minutes at a time to play are marketed to a stereotypical supermom who

can afford only a brief break from the all-encompassing demands of work and family.

“Time positive” is therefore one of the ten characteristics that Chess charts to identify “whether a game has been designed for perceived woman audiences.”³³ A score of 5 or below on her chart suggests it was not designed for Player Two, while a score of 6 or above indicates that it was. Evaluating *Ritual of the Moon* by these ten characteristics, however, yields the interesting score of 5: thematic congruence, low risk, nonsexualized characters, low harassment potential, and low violence. Of these five attributes, “non-violent” and “low risk” are true only in a certain light. While avoiding the gory graphics of typical video game violence, the violence of *Ritual* exists on a planetary and omnicidal scale. The smoking, gaping scars visible from each comet’s contact with the planet suggest that a single contact (much less twenty-eight in a row) would be an extinction event for humanity and many other species. In one of the game’s endings, the Earth completely explodes and disappears. Considering this planetary destruction as violence also puts the “low-risk” categorization into question. Chess defines “low-risk games” as those in which a loss “doesn’t have negative ramifications in game play—it just prevents them from moving forward to the next level.”³⁴ While the player can technically move on to the next day (that is, the next level) after a missed day, the game doesn’t clearly script the comet hitting the Earth as failure or loss, but rather a choice the player might or might not make. Moreover, the hit certainly has lasting ramifications for the entirety of the game (that is, in determining the endings the player can reach and the texts they are shown). Should you miss a day, one comet will crash into the Earth. But only that catastrophic day will pass, even if you return to the game months later. One cannot play day 1, wait twenty-seven days, and then return to see the Earth annihilated; one must actively take part in its annihilation. Finally, the element one might most expect to describe *Ritual* (“time positive”), also does not really fit under Chess’s definition.³⁵ Though each session is only five minutes long, suggesting affinity with casual gaming, the player actually must remember to play *Ritual* for twenty-eight days in a row—a much larger than usual commitment than most casual (or many noncasual) games in terms of attention and attachment.

Through this analysis, it becomes clear that *Ritual of the Moon* is not a game that has been designed precisely for Chess’s female-identified player. While the game explores a complex of themes relevant to female experience,

it is not exactly designed for Player Two, but it is also not exactly uninterested in (or unaware of) Player Two's expectations. Intersectionality is a crucial reason for this muddled explanation; as all identities are intersectional, including that of the witch, understanding her solely as "female" limits the complexity of her personhood and the possibilities gleaned by seeing her through multiple lenses.³⁶ In order to untangle further what's happening in this game, we need to bring in theoretical work on time from several other scholarly positionalities: queer studies and disability studies.

Queer temporality, as conceptualized by theorists ranging from Lee Edelman to Jose Esteban Muñoz, Jack Halberstam, and Elizabeth Freeman, understands queer time as chronoatypical in some way—asynchronous with a heteronormative script of life events like marriage and reproduction, utopian in its visions of possible futures, or out of step with traditional norms of productivity and pace.³⁷ For Bonnie Ruberg, this question of timing is fundamental to a queer understanding of Walking Simulators. They write, "What divides Walking Simulators from other games . . . is a matter of pace."³⁸ Ruberg contrasts the slowness of Walking Simulators with the frantic rush of speedrunning (completing a game as quickly as possible), putting these atypical temporalities in conversation with Elizabeth Freeman's temporality mechanics. If straight time moves forward in a seamless, unified line, then one could read as queer any kind of gameplay mechanic—designed or emergent—that disrupts this ordered temporal progression.³⁹ Ruberg summarizes, "Together, the resistance to chrononormativity found in speedrunning and Walking Simulators represents two possible approaches for discovering queer space and time in video games: the former as an emergent player practice and the latter as a designed experience."⁴⁰

The witch walks very slowly. *Ritual of the Moon* is a "slow game," both in-game and in meta-game.⁴¹ We've noted how the game forces an awareness of time on the player—five minutes every day for a month—but it bears mentioning as well how effectively the pace of the game queers the experience of play. I read this pace as important in at least four ways. First, the witch's labored pace draws the player's attention to the details of her world—her swirling cloak, her facial expression, the clouds on the faraway Earth, the swell of the music, the crafted nature of the on-screen text. In such a stark and colorless game, with its minimalist but carefully crafted aesthetic, this pace offers the player the time to take notice. Second, her

pace emphasizes the tininess of her space, suggesting that the slow movement is an intentional attempt to make the most of the area afforded to her. If she can walk only within this space, then at least she can elongate the walk by covering the ground as slowly as possible. Third, the limitation to her speed causes frustration, an effect that Ruberg has elsewhere read as queer.⁴² As the player, you want her to move more quickly so you can effect change, do something, exert your agency over this world (as one expects to be able to do in video games). Her pace, and your inability to change it, holds you back, constraining your agency and reminding you that some things cannot be altered. In this way, the game offers you the chance to grapple with your power, affording you very particular empowerments (like the strength to move comets) and limitations (like a maddeningly slow walking speed). Finally, the pace of her movement reflects and reinforces her grief. She moves at the speed of a dirge, a funeral march that reminds the player with every step that this woman has suffered terrible, inalterable, and ongoing trauma.

In this sense, her slowness reads not solely as a queering of temporality, but also as a literal and physical manifestation of trauma—and a representation of the unpredictable pace of healing from that trauma. Three months after Audre Lorde's first breast cancer biopsy, she writes in her journal, "I seem to move so much more slowly now these days. It is as if I cannot do the simplest thing, as if nothing at all is done without a decision, and every decision is so crucial."⁴³ Lorde's careful, contemplative, slow temporality in the wake of trauma reminds us, through Ellen Samuels, that "*crip time is grief time*."⁴⁴ Samuels cites Dana Luciano, who theorized "grief time" as an emergent nineteenth-century temporality that juxtaposed the clanging productivity of industrialized time with the slow stillness of grief. As Luciano writes, "Grief was aligned with a sensibility that sought to provide time with a 'human' dimension, one that would be collective rather than productive, repetitive rather than linear, reflective rather than forward-moving."⁴⁵ The witch is grieving many losses at once. Her slowness makes sense as a reaction to both the trauma of her exile and to the weight of her daily decision. Her experience has debilitated her, and both the superficial ease and the metaphorical weight of her daily ritual echo Lorde's "simplest thing"—a technically simple decision that, diegetically, has planetary consequences.

Constraints on time are an unassailable fact of life most explicitly for those whose disabilities (invisible or visible) prevent them from accessing and using time in the same way that nondisabled people do. As Christine Miserandino's "spoon theory" articulates viscerally, those living with disabilities can find time and energy sparse resources that they must manage and marshal carefully.⁴⁶ In *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, Alison Kafer suggests recentring temporality around the possibilities of the disabled body instead of around the impossible expectations of neoliberal late capitalism: "Rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds."⁴⁷ While Kafer's conception defines "crip time" as a generally nonnormative temporality, Samuels notes that many different relationships toward temporality can fall into this category. In one of them, she writes, "*Crip time is time travel*. Disability and illness have the power to extract us from linear, progressive time with its normative life stages and cast us into a wormhole of backward and forward acceleration, jerky stops and starts, tedious intervals and abrupt endings."⁴⁸ "Crip time" is nonlinear, nonnormative, subjective, multifaceted, as is queer time, albeit in different ways. For the witch in *Ritual*, time is both slowed and looping: every slow day, the same (once-in-a-million-years) catastrophe threatens, and the witch must struggle to avert it. Her time travel—unlike the usual science-fiction connotations of the phrase—is less flashy and more repetitive, purgatorial, unending.

The witch in *Ritual* is a "Sick Woman"—not because the game foregrounds a physical disability or chronic illness as such (although she experiences severe depression and suicidal ideation), but because a patriarchal counsel has judged her "dangerous" and "chronic" and sentenced her to permanent exile and isolation. Johanna Hedva's "Sick Woman Theory," calls the Sick Woman "an identity and body that can belong to anyone denied the privileged existence—or the cruelly optimistic *promise* of such an existence—of the white, straight, healthy, neurotypical, upper and middle-class, cis- and able-bodied man. . . . The Sick Woman is told that, to this society, her care, even her survival, does not matter."⁴⁹ Even the *Ritual* witch's ex-lover Malinda enables her exile. To understand the witch as a "Sick Woman" is to recognize that Hedva's concept of "Sickness" is about difference, not illness. The witch, after all, commands astrophysical powers on the level of a deity, but her superhuman powers cannot save her from

suffering. Crucially, she suffers because her strength and power incite fear from those who can neither match nor control it. The site of her difference is the seat of her strength. As Audre Lorde writes famously in *Sister, Outsider* (from which Hedva is clearly drawing), “Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society’s definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference—those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older—know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths.”⁵⁰ The witch of *Ritual* has taken her differences and made them strengths, been cast in the role of the “Sick Woman,” and made to suffer accordingly.

It can all begin to feel pretty hopeless.⁵¹ What if, as Jasbir Puar argues, it does not and will not ‘get better’ for some of the queer teenagers who have been offered that optimistic promise?⁵² What if one accepts that survival is premised on the ability to develop one’s differences into strengths and then this very strength is used as a pretext for exile? “How,” asks Kara Stone, “does a non-white queer woman like the witch from *Ritual of the Moon*, who cannot move to an urban homonationalist hub, whose life will not ‘get better,’ relate to suicide, to the impossibility of a normatively happy future, to a possible eternity of negative feelings? How could she possibly heal from all this?”⁵³

Stone’s answer—and the game’s answer—is that ritual and repetition offer at least the possibility of reparation.⁵⁴ Rituals order time amid uncertainty, chaos, and doubt. By ordering her time in this way, by practicing her ritual with discipline, the witch can find something like peace. Of the game’s six endings, one of the easiest to reach is the suicidal ending, in which the witch chooses to crash the comet into her own moon on the final day (without any control from the player). This ending occurs if the player has missed days of the ritual and overall been uncommitted to a decision either way: sometimes crashing the comet, sometimes averting it, sometimes skipping days of play. But if the player commits to the ritual every single day, the ending can be different. Completing the ritual every day thus offers a different kind of promise to the potentially mendacious optimism of Dan Savage’s “It gets better” movement.⁵⁵ Things will not necessarily get better, but practicing a ritual can create an ongoing temporality and provide the structure, purpose, and comfort of habit.

The final section of this chapter looks closely at the witch's body as a body under constraint. We've noted how *Ritual of the Moon* constrains the witch spatially and within several interlocking temporalities. She slowly circles her limited landscape, fantasizing into existence Cervenak's limitless internal space for wandering. These slow circles create a temporality for the player (scripting the player to repeat the same acts everyday), just as the many aspects of her identity inflect her personal temporality. She is also, finally, constrained within a body marked by many strengths and vulnerabilities. How does the witch's body serve as an additional constraint? And how is wandering coded within a corporeal body?

Wandering Wombs

The game draws significant attention to the witch's body as a body. In a relatively minimalist black-and-white animation style, the designers take care to depict her clothing and the shapes of her physical form. She wears an astronaut's helmet in order to breathe, and as she breathes, her breath appears in the animation, increasing and decreasing within her mask, as the sounds of inhaling and exhaling accompany the visuals. It's also a body, as we've noted, with various identity markers (and reflective of certain cultural positionalities based on those identity markers). Stone writes that the character's racial and religious identity evolved through the design process, describing how "[Rekha] Ramachandran designed a face that shifted colours, flickering and fading, that spoke to her own body of work about mixed race identity. The witch's veil developed new meaning over time. We started with the intention of it being a classic witch's cape, but it has become cemented as a hijab."⁵⁶ The witch's body is depicted and positioned such that the character's embodiment comes to the fore.

The game (in addition to its character design) draws inspiration from an assigned female at birth (AFAB) body, most explicitly in the reference to a lunar cycle/menstrual cycle over the course of its twenty-eight-day narrative arc. This too is an obvious temporality at play in the game—a circular and repetitive cycle centered in the biology of the female body. In Alice Bell's twenty-eight-day review of the game for *Rock, Paper, Shotgun*, she compares remembering to play each day with remembering to take a contraceptive pill at the same time each day, noting the value of a phone alarm to aid

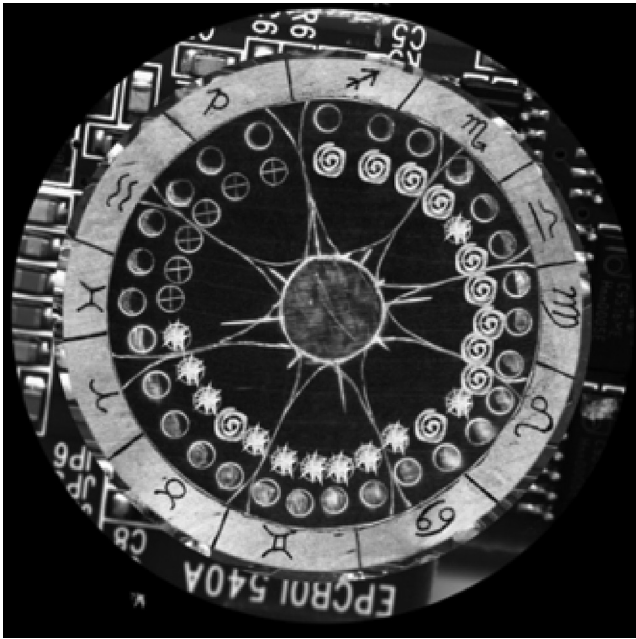


Figure 4.1

Circular record of the days in *Ritual*, reminiscent of contraceptive pill packaging. Author screenshot.

in both cases.⁵⁷ The record of the player's crash/miss record (displayed at the end of each game day) bears a striking visual resemblance to a circular contraceptive pill container (figure 4.1). Furthermore, the progression of the comet toward the Earth abstractly references a dark mirror of fertilization: comet as sperm, Earth as egg, catastrophic crash as violent impregnation (figure 4.2). While the narrative vocabulary of the game frames this as a story about outer space, exile, and planetary destruction, one could easily read it as a parable of a female reproductive system under attack. The vastness of outer space superimposes the intimate, internal space of the female body. Like the brilliance of Carmen Maria Machado's mash-up of horror films, fairy tales, and feminist rage in *Her Body and Other Parties*, *Ritual of the Moon* combines supernatural and science-fictional tropes with the casual horror of the reproductive-age, cisgender female body.

Relatedly, *Ritual of the Moon* reframes the myth of the wandering womb, the misogynistic medical theory dating back millennia, positing that women



Figure 4.2

Comet approaching the Earth in *Ritual*. Author screenshot.

are made ill by their uteruses moving around uncontrollably within their bodies. This fictional movement inside female bodies has served historically as a pretext for constraining real female movement outside, serving as a pretext for pathologizing the bodies of all women and justifying the punishment of those who refused to conform. Terri Kapsalis writes, “The uterus was believed to wander around the body like an animal, hungry for semen. . . . Most any symptom that belonged to a female body could be attributed to that wandering uterus.”⁵⁸ In *Ritual*, like a space-age “Yellow Wallpaper,” the witch’s exile and imprisonment is justified by the supposed flaws of her body rather than by acknowledging the flaws of her society.⁵⁹ A diagnosis of hysteria, of a “wandering womb,” is an implied threat, a patriarchal promise that “transgressing prescribed roles would make women sick.”⁶⁰ This threat, writes Shira Chess, still lurks at the heart of (typically feminine-coded) time management games of the twenty-first century. By managing increasingly chaotic events in ludic worlds, women can ease the patriarchal fear that women’s time (like their bodies), if unregulated, might fall into hysteria.⁶¹

Interrelated questions of emotional stability and time management come slowly to the fore in *Ritual*. The witch wrestles with her responsibility and her feelings, as does the player. Her rage is valid, but is it sufficiently valid?

Is it legitimate enough to justify destroying the planet Earth and all who live there? By killing them all, does she become the hysterical monster they already judged her (and sentenced her) to be? Can her rage be sustained (controlled, disciplined, engaged) for the entire month it takes to continue the game, to keep deciding to destroy?⁶² Or, alternately, can her forgiveness extend an entire month? Can her principled dispensation of active peace and goodwill continue, day after day, as her exile lengthens?

This, unchosen, has become the witch's burden. Beyond the injustices she's suffered to reach this point, she now finds herself confronted with the terrible responsibility of saving a world that has caused her so much pain. Either she averts the comet and commits to doing so every day by expending what seems to be a sizable amount of effort, or she doesn't avert the comet and must live with the guilt of having killed all of humanity. Playing thus has less to do with experiencing pleasure than avoiding pain. The burden of care is a heavy constant, a reminder of rejection and permanent alienation. To return to my earlier model of this practice—that of the anchorite—Ann Warren suggests that so many women chose this punishingly difficult path as a counterintuitive way to cement themselves at the center of the community, inspiring respect and admiration from those who would likely disdain them otherwise.⁶³ The anchorite's sacrifice (and the spiritual power accorded her in light of it) elevated her importance and the value of her town, which would be held in higher regard for supporting an anchorite. The anchorite was likened to "an architectural prop or buttress: she holds up the entire parish with her prayers."⁶⁴ The witch of *Ritual* is essentially an unwilling anchorite in a science-fictional context—entombed alive but with the mental power to intercede on behalf of humanity and protect her entire community from death should she so choose.⁶⁵ One can imagine the billions living on this universe's Earth who are blissfully unaware of the sacrifice being made on their behalf every day in space.

It also reframes one of the foundational critiques of Walking Simulators—their purposelessness—as a misunderstanding of the nature of purpose. "Doing nothing is as good as doing it myself," reads *Ritual's* text when the player misses a day, but even when the witch is doing quite a lot (averting the comet), the player does very little. And should the witch choose to do that work every day, it looks like nothing to the observer on Earth. Protecting the innocent from unnoticed catastrophes echoes the thanklessness of purposeful care work. It's only noticeable if or when the carer fails to avert a

catastrophe; when the carer succeeds, it's seamless and invisible. With Sick Woman Theory, Johanna Hedva “wanted to propose a figure with traditionally anti-heroic qualities—namely illness, idleness, and inaction—as capable of being the symbol of a grand Theory.”⁶⁶ That's what happens in *Ritual*: what looks like inaction and idleness results in a different kind of heroism.

This leads us back to the concepts of labor and play so relevant to the previous two chapters. The practice of a daily ritual creates a space and a temporality, yes, but it's also a kind of work—an anticapitalist one. Stone and their colleagues did physical crafting as part of their design work. “All the text in the game,” Stone writes, “was hand-embroidered or wood-burned by me, providing a sort of proof-reading, allowing for personal meditations on time and the affect embodied in the words themselves.”⁶⁷ To make the visuals used in the player's daily ritual, Ramachandran, Gingrich, and Stone crafted or sourced physical objects, scanned them, and digitally altered them. Those original objects included “crystals and runes, clay molds, my hair, broken computer hardware, a crystal, and very creepy bottles I made.”⁶⁸ Elsewhere, Stone writes of crafting objects that would later be scanned from “paint, clay, fabric, paper, dried plants, wool, foam, wire, plastic . . . and a variety of other media. The process was long, meditative, and iterative.”⁶⁹ Craft work has long been recognized as a feminized form of labor and, as Stone concludes, “Craft is laborious, but labour here does not necessitate a negative connotation.”⁷⁰ Labor removed from the context of exploitation can be joyous, meditative, healing. In *The Cancer Journals*, Audre Lorde writes, “My work kept me alive this past year, my work and the love of women. They are inseparable from each other.”⁷¹

This conceptualization of work as passion, calling, lifeline—ritual—has been absent so far in this book because, as the previous chapter illustrated, that discourse is so often co-opted and perverted by late capitalist ideas of work. The rhetoric surrounding meaningful, purposeful work rarely feels in earnest under late capitalism. More often, it's used as an ideological cudgel to coerce laborers with romantic notions of purpose, calling, and love. In-video-game labor can and does eagerly capitalize on this dream of work as calling, offering the player/worker the fantasy of a kind of labor that is meaningful, appreciated, and rewarded.⁷² With *Ritual of the Moon*, we see how such a thing could actually happen and all the attendant emotional ambivalence. The witch's daily practice of averting catastrophe, grounded in an impossibly deep well of resilience and kindness toward an unforgiving

world, can, if she chooses, constitute the reparative and healing work of her life.

Or not! As Stone and their team have made clear, the choice to destroy the Earth is a valid and understandable one. Things do not necessarily “get better,” and the game does not pretend they always will. Should “the work” be to destroy the Earth rather than to save it, then fair enough. In the following two chapters, as we turn toward colonialism and postcolonialism in wandering games, the tension increases between wanting to salvage an imperfect world and recognizing that sometimes it can’t (or shouldn’t) be saved—especially in chapter 6, when we see how a colonialist mind-set can eventually doom its universe. But first, in chapter 5, we consider the idea of exploration in wandering games and video games in general—a bedrock of the art form and a fundamentally problematic construct.

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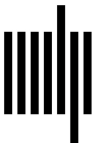
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