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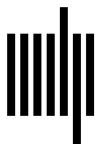

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7 After Life: *Death Stranding* and *The Last of Us Part II*

This final chapter juxtaposes two AAA, critically acclaimed, past-oriented, postapocalyptic video games: *Death Stranding* and *The Last of Us Part II*. In both games, the player wanders around a posthuman, postapocalyptic, postdeath world. In *Death Stranding*, Sam roams the devastated landscape of what was once the United States, delivering packages to a bunkered-down populace and connecting each city to a network in the hope that the fragmentary country can once again become a unified whole. In *The Last of Us Part II* (*TLOU2*), Ellie and Abby each set out on a destructive revenge quest against the person who killed their respective father figures, in a morally gray, zombie-infested, postapocalyptic American Northwest. Both games are concerned with what kind of future humans can forge by wandering around a vast world in the aftermath of a massive biological and cultural extinction. Both games answer that desperate (and increasingly relevant) question ambiguously, ending on a mix of hope, despair, and only one certainty: that the wandering continues.

This last chapter considers what wandering looks like as a feature of a AAA title; more precisely, What does it mean to consider an AAA title as a wandering game? Both *TLOU2* and *DS* were produced by major studios, created by teams of hundreds, and designed to provide dozens of hours of narrative gameplay—a far cry from the one- to five-person teams that made the much smaller (and shorter) games considered so far. Beyond differences in size, AAA games also tend to be more commercial, more responsive to player wants and expectations, more socially conservative, and more boundary pushing in terms of technology.

Throughout the previous chapters, I've discussed how wandering in games can push back against the ludic conventions that have developed

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around capitalism, colonialism, death, and gender. In order to wander, you must be wandering away *from* something—some path, some story, some norm, some expectation. The player is invited to consider what it would be like to live and play postwork, postcolonialism, postcapitalism, or post-death. As Stuart Hall theorizes, " 'Post' means, for me, going on thinking on the ground of a set of established problems, a problematic. It doesn't mean deserting that terrain but rather, using it as one's reference point."[1] In this sense, wandering games are postgames; they begin with a certain problematic, a certain set of conventions and agreed-on norms; then they diverge.

In considering the different valences of "post" in this study so far, I have avoided focusing on one of the most common ways that virtual wandering takes place in action/adventure games, especially at the AAA level: harrowed survivors wandering in a postapocalyptic world. In this case, the "post" is both chronological and referential (in Hall's sense). Postapocalypses give us a space to rehearse the end of all the old systems and imagine how we might navigate or inhabit them differently. By setting a story in a temporal moment after the end of intransigent contemporary structures, designers and players have the opportunity to critique those structures from a distance. After all, another way to enable critical play against capitalism is to set your game in a time when capital has no meaning, when picking up coins functions as nothing but a nostalgic affectation, and the only economy that matters is that of bullets and scavenged supplies (as in *The Last of Us Part II*). And what better way to play back against patriarchy than to set your game far after our own time and imagine that a powerful matriarchy has reemerged, upending today's construction of gender norms (as in the Nora of *Horizon Zero Dawn*)?

This final chapter discusses how AAA games can and do play back against these structures too, albeit usually in subtle ways. Reading these games through the wandering lens primarily means returning to the question of death and its aftermath. Both of these games feature a postdeath PC making sense of a postdeath world, and both find their answers in the ways they enable players to walk through space. I return to the questions I asked at the beginning of this book: What does it mean to be a wandering body in a game world? What does it say about the game? The world? The body? What can the act of wandering do?

This chapter consequently breaks into two sections—world and body. In the first section, I consider these game worlds as postapocalyptic pastorals:

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beautiful naturalistic environments that juxtapose wistfully against the ruined wreckage of human civilization. Traversing these virtual landscapes puts us squarely in conversation with Alenda Chang when she attempts "a secular eschatology of environmental end-times as seen through the popular culture of games."[2] In the second section, I focus on the bodies that travel these worlds, considering PCs as the kind of cursed eternal wanderers who populate mythic traditions from Cain to La Llorona to the Wandering Jew. Doomed legendary wanderers have long roamed far and wide, serving as cultural symbols for everything from original sin to modern diaspora.[3] PCs in these games thus enter into this mythic tradition (intentionally or not), offering a corporeal site on which to project, enact, and exorcise the player's fears and dreams of eternal movement.

Postapocalyptic Pastorals

Anxieties about the future ruination of our current world have been obsessively mobilized in video games to give players a chance to roam the aftermath of civilization. Both *Death Stranding* and *The Last of Us Part II* fall better into the category of action/adventure than Walking Simulator, but when we treat them as wandering games, focusing on the roaming instead of the ravaging, we start to wonder what all this movement is meant to convey or able to compensate for. When playing, we spend most of our time traversing beautiful, desolate, haunted landscapes, looking for something or someone. There's always an ostensible reason, a narrative MacGuffin that inspires our movement. Sam must connect survivalist bunkers to the Chiral Network, and Ellie and Abby each have a series of enemies to exterminate and friends to aid across the reaches of what was formerly the western United States. These are the explicit, plot-based reasons for the characters' movements. But there's a deeper, more spiritual meaning behind all of their wandering (and ours, by extension). In the postdeath world these players inhabit, traversing the world is a pilgrimage, an attempt to knit broken space back together through the means of the feet.

When I call these worlds "postapocalyptic pastorals," I am indexing how they juxtapose a failed modern civilization with nature's powerful, victorious reclamation of the places once controlled by human technology. Greg Garrard calls this "disanthropy"—the fantasy of an environment without any humans at all.[4] Visual media forms like TV, film, and video games often

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represent the postapocalyptic world as a return to Eden, marrying the nostalgic longing for nature with the exciting frisson of crisis.[5] In the apocalypse, characters flee collapsing cities and suburbs for the apparent safety (and beauty) of the wilderness.[6]

In *The Last of Us Part II*, a quarter of a century has passed since an outbreak of zombies transformed the landscape of what was formerly the United States, enough time that this story's heroines have no memory of that previous world. For the two playable characters, nature is a place of peace and nostalgia. From the perspective of each young woman, the player returns in flashbacks to teenage experiences each had in nature alongside their beloved father figures. With Joel, Ellie explores the overgrown Wyoming Museum of Science & History for Ellie's birthday (where the jump scare isn't the appearance of a zombie or a murderous human but a loud boar that simply runs away). Abby runs through the woods to find her father, a medical doctor, who turns out to be assisting a postpartum zebra living in the ruins of a local zoo. When Abby's storyline flashes back to happier times with her boyfriend at the time, Owen, those memories are similarly set in the Seattle Aquarium (which Owen names a "fish zoo"). The aquarium building features throughout the second half of the game as a place of refuge until Ellie arrives, hell-bent on revenge, to murder everyone there. In *TLOU2*, the spaces that evidence the old world's reverence for nature—the ruins of a science museum, a zoo, and an aquarium—have become havens in this postapocalyptic one.

Nature itself, however, has continued on in its amoral way, illustrated viscerally by the infected humans whose brains have been overtaken by the cordyceps fungus and transformed over time into increasingly violent and dangerous creatures—evolving from "runners" to "stalkers" to "clickers" to "bloaters" to the newly discovered "shamblers." When Ellie and her girlfriend encounter this new stage in zombie evolution, Dina comments, "Guess that's nature for you," and Ellie responds, "Yeah, well, nature's an asshole." As in the postapocalyptic pastorals depicted in films like *28 Days Later*, *I Am Legend*, or *The Walking Dead*, infection in the cities drives characters to the relative safety of the country and its natural bounty, which inevitably fails to save them. As Sarah Juliet Lauro has argued, "We might say that the zombie is inherently an ecological avenger . . . whether the sin is man's enslavement of his brother as in the original myths of Haitian

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folklore or humanity's development of technology, weapons, and chemicals that pollute and poison the planet."[7] As if an object lesson in Alan Weisman's *The World without Us*, natural processes have taken hold across the posthuman landscape of Seattle, offering players fascinating platforming challenges inside the exposed pipes and inner guts of what were previously functional skyscrapers or subway tunnels.[8] The downtown streets of the city have become a river of whitewater rapids. Nature has overtaken Seattle and made the crumbling concrete remains of human civilization into a unique type of geologic feature, one that's in the process of disappearing.

Seattle within the game thus becomes a subversive Situationist playground. Areas of (real, current) Seattle that would be unavailable to actual pedestrians become, within the game, accessible to any player willing to negotiate its many virtual dangers. Emma Fraser has written on the meanings and uses of ruins in contemporary video games, focusing on precisely the kind of postapocalyptic playscape we traverse in *TLOU2*. She cites a developer on the practical reasons for designing levels with this narrative frame: "Modern ruins are easy landscapes to work with—they give the player freedom, a sense of atmosphere, and the chance to experience spaces that they otherwise don't have access to. Their incomplete or fragmentary forms make for far more believable play than a realistically modelled functioning city, with traffic, doorways, pedestrians, and so on (anon. 2015)."[9] Playing in the collapsed fragments of fictionalized real cities, Fraser argues, functions as both a kind of disaster tourism and an opportunity for Situationist-inflected subversive rambles across a cityscape.

Wandering through the postapocalyptic pastoral of a future modern ruin thus enables the player to reckon with the end of a whole variety of systems and ideologies, to imagine future scripts beyond those laid out by our current governing ideologies. While playing as Abby in *TLOU2* you maneuver your way down several dozen floors of a former high-rise hotel that has become a teeming nest of zombies. Basic architectural conventions like elevators and stairs have disappeared, forcing you to think creatively about what leaps you can safely make from one decaying floor to another. In this kind of play, there is potential for critique of those conventions of contemporary life that seem so permanent and intransigent outside game worlds. In a landscape at once recognizable and defamiliarized, the player can access intriguing parts of it, experiment with it, and reimagine its possibilities.

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When construed as playable future environments, "Games turn out to be fit vehicles for envisioning the 'rambunctious gardens' of a 'post-wild' future, marked by multispecies entanglements and obligations."[10]

Which is not to suggest that wandering the postapocalyptic pastoral necessarily encourages progressive experimentation or ideological utopias. Indeed, in the example just mentioned, playing experimentally within the ruin of a hotel isn't a free choice at all; it's a narrative imperative. What was to the Situationists an experimental way of engaging with cityscape becomes a mandate here, born of desperate necessity in the postapocalyptic world of *TLOU2*'s Seattle. In this sense, the gameworld does not evade the constraints and dictums presented by the city. Constraints remain, just different ones. The cityscape of the gameworld and the cityscape of reality might differ from one another, but the wanderer in each world is still compelled to move through the space in certain ways and prevented (by law, by physics, by computer code) from moving through it in others.[11]

Plenty of ideological holdovers also seem to remain after the apocalypse, and they grow more powerful in much of postapocalyptic fiction. If contemporary structures have disappeared in the postapocalyptic collapse, there's no guarantee that better structures would necessarily arise to take advantage of the blank slate, to fix what currently seems intractable. In fact, As Barbara Gurr observes, US postapocalyptic stories often feature a return to conservative norms and standards, implying that progressive ideologies are precarious luxuries, the first to be sacrificed when a catastrophe occurs. Or, more insidious, the return to conservatism in these stories argues "that our safety and ability to survive as a human collective rely upon the strength of these conservative ideologies; heteropatriarchal gender and race hierarchies survive after the apocalypse not because we are too afraid or too exhausted to create something different, but because they are our best hope, our best strength."[12] In the current world, in which we make and consume these stories, such lurking fears can pull us toward an imaginary and nostalgic past such that we wind up reproducing our cultural preoccupations and projecting them onto the future. These fictions then become co-constitutive of our current norms, such that our storytelling becomes a self-reproducing circle of fictitious history, constructed present, and apprehensive future.

A particularly virulent strain of this conservative nostalgia in postapocalyptic stories concerns the cowboy, a uniquely American mythic figure whose "brand of masculinity provides the hope (and shape) of the future,

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echoing, reproducing, and validating the mytho-history of nineteenth-century manifest destiny doctrine."[13] Cowboys shoot guns and gallop their horses into the sunset all over the postapocalyptic pastoral, and Ellie takes over this mantle from Joel in *TLOU2*. Pérez-Latorre describes the postapocalyptic video game cowboy as "a pioneer galloping through the wilderness in austere or precarious conditions yet at the same time towards a wide-open horizon of individual freedom and the conquest of new frontiers."[14] Culturally, some of us seem convinced (or inescapably reminded) that the values of hypermasculinity, prized in male and female characters alike, will return after the apocalypse with a literal bang.[15]

Beyond his authoritative fulfillment of hypermasculine norms, the cowboy figure suggests a particularly White and colonialist narrative of the US West—namely, that it belongs to (indeed, is the manifest destiny of) the White settler. In the wake of postcolonial discourses that have rightfully supplanted the heroic supremacy of the nineteenth-century cowboy, Gurr argues, the postapocalyptic cowboy narrative "open[s] the frontier once again for White, heterosexual, able-bodied men to carve out the future of the human race."[16] Gurr reads the absence (and the carefully constructed shadow presence) of Native Americans in postapocalyptic twenty-first-century stories as indicative of "the settler colonialist logic embedded in the mytho-history of the American frontier," which "requires not only that Native Americans be relegated to a shadow narrative via their absence from the land (and the stories told about the nation), but that they be kept there by the cowboy's dominance."[17]

Postapocalyptic landscapes in video games thus provide the White cowboy with yet another chance to conquer the frontier and "protect" it from any number of dangers that threaten its security (Native American stand-ins, outer-space aliens, ecological devastation, roving bands of cannibals), while promulgating the narrative that straight White men are the truly heroic victims of aggressive adversaries. This perspective shift, as Salter and Blogett note, occurs quite frequently in science-fiction games where such men "are often presented as marginalized . . . literally, [they inhabit] game worlds where white men are a persecuted 'minority.'"[18] To give a classic example from a much-beloved game, when everyman hero of *Half-Life* Gordon Freeman fights back against the aliens attacking his homeland, his violence reads as righteous and defensive. This tradition can be traced back to the early days of European science fiction, when the genre partially

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emerged as a reframing of the colonial violence that European powers were actively perpetrating, imagining it instead as violence that White people were suffering in fantasy worlds.[19] H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* (1897) features a Martian invasion of Britain and casts the British in the position of the colonized, explicitly equating the fictive murder of vulnerable Earthlings to the actual, horrifically nonfictional genocide of Tasmanians perpetrated by European colonists earlier in the nineteenth century.[20]

Thus, by keeping the White cowboy narratively front and center, postapocalyptic cowboy stories obfuscate the actual historical apocalypses that occurred for native peoples around the globe after the invasion of White Europeans. As Native American studies professor Cutcha Risling Baldy writes, *The Walking Dead* has come to serve as entry point for discussions in her classroom about violence against native populations and the postapocalyptic survival strategies they've adopted in the aftermath of the apocalypses of colonization.[21] Anishinaabe scholar Laurence William Gross has coined the term "Post Apocalypse Stress Syndrome" to describe Native American experience in the current era: "Along with many other Native American peoples, the Anishinaabe have seen the end of our world, which has created tremendous social stresses."[22] To shift perspective away from Eurocentrism is to honor those cultures that have been living postapocalyptically for a very long time.

TLOU2 is built on such a series of perspective shifts, in a way that attracted significant criticism upon the game's release. The heroic cowboy figure of *Part I*, Joel, ended that story by committing a crime against humanity: he murdered a hospital full of scientists working on a cure for the infection. Joel did so for a relatable reason—the scientists would have sacrificed his adopted daughter, Ellie, in their pursuit of a vaccine—but his action effectively ended any hope for a noninfected future. In *Part II*, we play first as an adult Ellie seeking vengeance against the woman who murdered Joel, only to switch perspectives halfway through and replay the same several days of events as Abby, the daughter of the surgeon Joel murdered at the end of *Part I*. Abby in turn befriends a pair of runaway Seraphite children and comes to love them as family, despite the fact that Abby belongs to the WLF, a military establishment bent on eradicating the Seraphites. When her former WLF friends burn down the wooden Seraphite town in a blaze of hellish, genocidal aggression, Abby barely escapes with her life. Justice depends on perspective; so does apocalypse. Each time the narrative twists,

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the player rewalks the same streets in the opposite direction, from the enemy's perspective.

In this series of perspective shifts—in the traversal of this landscape in one direction by one character and then in the other direction by the enemy character—we can see the landscape of the game turning from generic *space* into lived-in *place*, as our sense of this world deepens with each experience and counterexperience in a given location. The Seattle aquarium first appears in the game as nothing more than the rumored location of Ellie's primary target, Abby. When we (as Ellie) first arrive there, Abby is missing, but we still slaughter her two friends. Later, after our perspective has shifted to Abby, we reexperience the aquarium as the delightful site of Abby's playful dates with Owen, then as the homey nest Owen decorates and uses as a safe zone. The player's final scene in the aquarium is the devastating moment that we, as Abby, return from a battle to find the corpses of Owen and Mel, close friends that we (as Ellie) murdered earlier. In these shifts of perspective, the meaning of the place shifts as well, but too late. We learn its joyful history only after we, in another guise, have destroyed it. But despite the violence of each interaction—a violence that worsens and grows more desperate as we progress through the game—a powerful spatial reworking takes place. Like the pattern of a churchyard labyrinth, we walk this world in one direction and then another, deepening our understanding with each turn.

In other words, the postapocalyptic pastoral of *The Last of Us Part II* becomes the site of a strange sort of pilgrimage, one in which the final destination keeps changing. If it seems odd to read Ellie's and Abby's respective revenge quests as something so graceful as pilgrimage, consider how both young women wrestle with their inner demons by journeying—by telling themselves that a faraway act will bring them peace and then having to reckon with the fact that it doesn't. Solnit writes that "pilgrimage is one of the basic modes of walking, walking in search of something intangible . . . a spiritual journey" in which "asceticism and physical exertion" lead to "spiritual development."[23] After Ellie has returned from her first homicidal trip to Seattle, she lives peacefully on a farm with her wife and daughter but still cannot find peace. She leaves again, journeying even farther this time to chase after an intangible sense of closure. She thinks she'll achieve it if she finally kills Abby, but in her journal and her eventual decision to spare Abby after all, it becomes clear that her physical journey, rife with the

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asceticism and physical exertion Solnit notes, has indeed led to a hard-won spiritual development. For her part, Abby's journey takes her to the heart of her former enemy's home island, where she finds herself defending it against the attacks of her former allies. For both characters, the landscape serves as the ground on which a literal and spiritual journey leads to something like redemption—a narrative arc that would read much more clearly as a pilgrimage in another context.

The journey, and especially its difficulties, confers meaning on the pilgrim who eventually arrives at their end goal. "To walk there is to earn it," Solnit writes, "through laboriousness and through the transformation that comes during a journey."[24] In *Death Stranding*, Sam Porter Bridges learns this lesson quite well, and the game focuses exquisitely on the sheer laboriousness of his travel. The weight of his parcels must be carefully balanced on a body that reminds the player constantly of its materiality—in the utilization of his various excretions and in the way the player's fingers must try to keep Sam from lurching and falling as he overbalances and trips across rough terrain, physically struggling to carry this weight. The physical challenge is so overwrought that it approximates fumblecore, a game genre that uses unintuitive controls to make the execution of basic physical movements difficult. It's a genre known for physical, slapstick comedy. In *Death Stranding*, the similarity creates a strange juxtaposition between the dramatic seriousness of Sam's work and the ridiculousness his frequent skids and falls. His spiritual struggle, and the struggle of this particular postapocalyptic America, is to reconnect the isolated pockets of people—through both Sam (with his one-man-delivery-service of important packages, internet hookups, and chunks of narrative progression) and through the more meta, multiplayer aspects of the game (in which disparate players can each contribute to huge infrastructure projects like road and bridge building). The player can deposit small amounts of critical materials to different sites while traveling on foot and eventually can enjoy how the desolate, natural landscape has been transformed by paved highways, mailboxes, ropes, and bridges after many unseen other players have added their efforts. These constructions lighten and speed travel, but they also lift the player's spiritual *travail* (the etymological root from which "travel" derives), offering the player the solace of community engagement and the promise that whatever is broken about a place can be mended if we work (and walk) together.

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The game's messaging is not subtle, and neither is Hideo Kojima in his public statements about the meaning of one solitary Sam on a pilgrim's quest to reknit a broken land. On Twitter, he writes, "*Death Stranding* is a completely new type of action game, where the player's goal is to reconnect isolated cities and a fragmented society. All elements including the story and gameplay, are bound together by the theme of 'Strand', or a connection."[25] In talks, he's spoken about the player's utter loneliness within this world and how the evidence of others—invisible players passing through the same landscape—can salve that loneliness.[26] Like pilgrims leave rocks or cairns to mark their passage and to give strength to future pilgrims, the players of *Death Stranding* walk with slow, laborious effort and leave the landscape behind them slightly transformed, enmeshing themselves in a fresh network of digital, spiritual connection.

In both *Death Stranding* and *TLOU2*, walking together but separately reshapes the landscape—testifying, in video game form, to how pilgrimage can reconnect a disconnected world. I've argued elsewhere that continuous, postapocalyptic walking demonstrates unending faith, the promise of salvation, and the fundamental belief that what is broken can be mended.[27] This is one answer to the clarion call in the last chapter of *Playing Nature*, in which Chang writes, "We hardly need another book about catastrophe. What we do need is a way to carry on and find productive modes of being even in a compromised situation . . . how we make a start in the face of looming or already elapsed calamities."[28] Wandering in postapocalyptic games offers us the chance to make a start, to find a productive mode of being in the face of calamity, to take a first step in a spiritual journey, even without consciousness or intention. Wandering across a digital postapocalyptic pastoral is a pilgrimage toward the ineffable. It's not an answer, but it's a start—a literal positive step that semisecretly exists in AAA open worlds, howsoever concealed under the full force and fury of conventional action-adventure mechanics.

Finally, consider how *Death Stranding* and *TLO2* don't take place only after the apocalypse; both are set in postdeath universes, worlds in which the meaning of death has fundamentally changed. NPCs and PCs alike in each game suffer from inconvenient, purgatorial forms of immortality and narratively rewrite the meaning of death to fit with the ludological permalife that's become commonplace in video gaming. Sam cannot meaningfully die

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in *Death Stranding*; he merely enters "the Seam" before returning to his body. And Ellie, while not immune from death itself, is immune from the zombie virus that has overtaken the globe and killed so many on it. In the next section, I move from these postdeath worlds to examine some of the undead bodies that are doing this wandering, the better to understand how they fit into the mythos of eternal walkers from time immemorial.

Endless Wandering

One of the reasons players so enjoy open world adventure games is precisely because they offer the prospect of endless wandering. The whole world anticipates you, seeded with both overt storylines and secret byways waiting for the player's discovery. In contemporary open world games, permadeath is rare, and so players primarily experience the pleasanter aspects of immortality—the numberless chances to fix mistakes, claim victory over one's enemies, and discover everything the world can offer. Death functions as nothing more than a metaphor for a momentary setback. PCs usually don't even realize they're immortal. They die and are reborn again and again, conveniently forgetting the repetitive death throes they suffer in the course of the player's improvement and progression.

At the end of a game, the narrative tends to conclude the PC's wandering, even as the player might gain freer access to the entire game space. After Link beats Calamity Ganon in *Breath of the Wild*, a cutscene features Link and Zelda, both filled with a sense of peace and completion. Zelda thanks Link, and the two of them watch the ghosts of the four champions disappear into the bright blue sky.[29] If they wish, the player can then return to the moment immediately before the ending battle in order to complete the various side quests and adventures they might have missed in their push toward the game's narrative conclusion at Ganon's castle.

This mirrors the postconclusion condition of *Death Stranding*. The player enjoys the ability to travel the full breadth of the world at will, without the narrative obligations that previously informed their steps and decision making. IGN's Joe Skrebels opines that "Death Stranding Finally Gets Good After Beating It," when he finds himself finally free to deliver whatever packages he likes, challenge himself with his own infrastructure-building goals, and wander the landscape with total abandon. He concludes, "Plucked out of its narrative mire, the game at the centre of Death Stranding does begin

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to feel like quite a special experiment, a surprisingly literal AAA successor to the 'Walking Simulator' popularized in the indie space."[30] The postgame of *Death Stranding* is quite clearly identifiable as a game about wandering, even for players who aren't primed to see it that way. After the narrative end, the player finally has the unconstrained chance to wander an open world forever.

But part of what's interesting about both *Death Stranding* and *TLOU2* is the way that their narrative arcs actually don't conclude with a satisfying end to the player characters' many hours of wandering. The final scene of *TLOU2* features Ellie walking away from the once-happy home (now empty) that she previously shared with her wife and son before her thirst for revenge led her to abandon them. Now she walks away again, her destination unknown and her future unclear. In the final cutscene of *Death Stranding*, Sam stands on a mountain with Lou, the infant he has just saved from annihilation and, in so doing, made enemies with the new government. Neither Sam nor Ellie enjoys a satisfying conclusion to their wandering; neither of them seems to be heading toward rest. So for the *players* of open world games, endless wandering tends not to be a curse; the ending of the game's narrative opens up a freer playground for the player's whims. But for player *characters* like Sam and Ellie, what does it mean when they can never stop wandering? They find themselves trapped in a kind of purgatory, roaming a landscape that never ends. When a narrative suggests that a character should find peace and rest, but instead the character continues to wander, it feels more zombie than superhero, more curse than blessing.

In other words, while a player is given total freedom to wander, learn, and improve in the traditionally adventuresome mode of wandering, the PC more closely resembles a virtual Wandering Jew—doomed to continue walking forever, without any hope of death or rest. An anti-Semitic European legend, the Wandering Jew is the story of a man who sneered as Jesus Christ dragged the crucifix to Calvary. When Christ paused, the Wandering Jew jeered at him to keep moving. Christ (not sounding very much like the Prince of Peace) replied, "I will, but so will you until I come again." This curse condemned the Wandering Jew to roam eternally until Judgment Day, a metaphorical expression of a Jewish people scattered into diaspora after the destruction of the Second Temple. The mythic Wandering Jew is homeless, poorly dressed, and speaks every language (but always with an

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accent). He repents and accepts baptism, but he is never shown the divine mercy of death, and his walking never ceases.[31]

Reading Sam and Ellie as cursed, wandering immortals presents less of a challenge than one might think. Both of them live in incredibly dangerous, postdeath worlds, and both of them harbor some anomalous, organic quality that protects them from the most perilous threat of the new world order. Sam is downright immortal; any death he endures simply sends him to the Seam, a purgatorial underwater space he enters after he has died, from which he can then return to the body he inhabited just before the fatal blow. Ellie *can* die from the biological realities that would kill any human, but her body carries a secret immunity to the zombie infection that has ravaged civilization. Both characters, like most other playable characters in any AAA action game, are also superheroic in their physical strength, skill, and training—qualities that semirealistically enable them to murder the scores of enemies that cross their paths. In both cases, there's significant ambivalence surrounding the ability to cheat death again and again. Ellie's immunity threatened her life (when scientists wanted to kill her to study her), beginning the domino effect of violence that cascades throughout this sequel. Ellie would have preferred to be sacrificed on the lab table; at least then, she says, her life would have had meaning. But she survived *Part I*, she continues to survive at the end of *Part II*, and she's still unhappily wandering when the credits roll.

In each character's case, an initial, damning act is missing—or, rather, that single, pivotal act has been replaced with an overarching sense of sinfulness and guilt, the cause of which is not clearly defined. Sam, haunted by pregame events, suffers under an immense weight of guilt and responsibility but without clear justification; his memories have been corrupted, or misremembered in the first place. How can he atone for acts he did not even commit or that occurred as an unavoidable result of his biology? Ellie similarly has discovered that Joel committed this enormous crime against humanity—on her behalf but without her consent—and she spends this entire second game wrestling with her guilt over Joel's act, combined with her grief over his death. Meanwhile, she slaughters hundreds more in this game, acts for which she *is* fully responsible and which she also seems unable to process or atone for. Struggling toward true repentance, both Sam and Ellie trudge forward, hoping that they're going in the right direction

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but misled by their feelings more often than not. They *feel* damned, cursed, inescapably crushed with guilt—sometimes deservedly, sometimes not.

With this sense of damnation weighing them down, both characters continue their labors, hoping their efforts will be rewarded. Solnit writes, "A pilgrimage is work, or rather labor in a spiritual economy in which effort and privation are rewarded."[32] The difference, then, between a religious pilgrimage and the cursed roaming of the Wandering Jew (or Sam or Ellie) is fundamentally a broken economic promise. The bottom has fallen out of the spiritual economy. For these eternal wanderers, there is no reward for their effort and privation; there is only the continuation of that effort and privation, that laboring in the dark.

Ellie is left with an unending pilgrimage and permanent sense of undone labor; when the game ends, she still has not accomplished the act she set out to accomplish in the prologue, and she still cannot find home and rest. But it is Sam, in particular, who evolves from a mythically cursed, damned wanderer into a late capitalist pilgrim, who walks in the service of a job that has monetized and operationalized every inch of his laboring body. He's a male parent who "plays pregnant" in order to use his child as a work improvement tool.[33] Even in his brief moments of sleep, machines remove his blood and transform it into weapons against the undead. His sweat, urine, and feces are taken to be made into bombs and then returned to him. Whenever Sam sits down outside, even for a moment, he castigates himself for resting, muttering to himself, "That's enough sitting around doing nothing." Sam can be read as a fully interpellated gig economy worker who feels immense guilt for every moment he spends at rest. For Sam, original sin in the Christian sense has turned into late capitalist precarity. He's an UberEats deliveryman after the apocalypse, and however hard he's working, it's never enough. In its most extreme articulation, we see Sam in the Seam, swimming around and reclaiming all the cargo he has recently lost. A helpful hint pops up to tell the player that lost cargo sometimes appears in the Seam, and we can grab it before reentering Sam's body if we are quick. Sam's existence is so oriented around his work that he continues working even while he is technically dead.[34]

In Sam, we see most clearly the inevitable intersection of the themes of death and late capitalism, and a response to the questions posed in the Introduction about the ways each of them functions in wandering play. If

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wandering games provoke unproductive, contemplative, anticapitalist play, how can this mode be integrated into the highly commercial paradigm of a AAA game? By presenting this endless meandering as a curse, a damnation to eternal purgatory. Sam wanders endlessly across the postapocalyptic pastoral, unable to die, unable to stop working, beset with an eternity of purgatorial pilgrimages from one end of America to the other.

This is, at core, his function: to stitch America back together, step by step. In this, he again takes on the traditional role of a pilgrim, for embarking on a pilgrimage means putting one's body into spiritual conversation with the ground one covers. In starting this conversation, the pilgrim acknowledges and manifests the physical nature of spiritual things. "Seen theologically," Garnette Cadogan writes, "walking is an act of faith. Walking is, after all, interrupted falling. We see, we listen, we speak, and we trust that each step we take won't be our last, but will lead us into a richer understanding of the self and the world."[35] Using their own spirituality as a conduit, the pilgrim infuses meaning into the ground they traverse. The earth itself becomes holy; a subversive take, as it "suggests that the whole world may potentially be holy and that the sacred can be underfoot rather than above."[36]

This chapter contends that big-budget AAA games can also be analyzed through the lens of wandering. When we do so, what emerges is the notion that these games are, under the surface, digital pilgrimages—attempts to walk our way into a spiritually meaningful experience, ebullient violence be damned.

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