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## Wandering Games

by Melissa Kagen, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2022, 216 pp., £20.10 (paperback), ISBN 978-0262544245

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Wandering Games**, by Melissa Kagen, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2022, 216 pp., £20.10 (paperback), ISBN 978-0262544245

Computer games continue to suffer from a lack of serious critical engagement in the arts and humanities. Melissa Kagen's thought-provoking investigation into the politics of wandering in virtual environments makes great strides in countering this academic snobbery.

Wandering is a genre of gaming that became popular in the 2010s. Originally used in (overwhelmingly male) online gaming communities to insult games with non-violent mechanics, walking simulators now represent an important alternative mode of gameplay from first-person shooter, strategy, and role-playing games, by inviting players 'to walk our way into a different sort of world' (28). The alt-right backlash to so-called 'feminized' gaming sub-cultures that became known as #GamerGate in defence of a player's right to control space and people is emblematic of the individualized conceptualization of power inherent to late capitalism which these neo-colonialist narratives exemplify.

Framing walking simulators as cultural phenomena bound up with imaginaries of resistances to late capitalism's co-option of social relations between humans, places, histories, and time allows Kagen to craft a compelling analysis of computer games as objects of political and aesthetic significance. Kagen used the four lenses of work, gender, colonialism, and death to argue that purposelessness becomes a subversive act resistant to the voracious monetization of human experience when the line between work and leisure is being erased under neoliberalism.

The introduction takes the reader on a breathless tour of historical antecedents for deploying walking as a liberatory practice. Starting in the early twentieth century with the quintessentially European figure of the *flâneur* as imagined by Walter Benjamin and Charles Baudelaire – a gentleman who moves outside of the bourgeois-capitalist social patterns of movement and behaviour by acquiring mastery of urban topography through the *derive* – Kagen swiftly outlines a radical genealogy of wandering as art encompassing the Situationist Internationale, Marina Abramovic, Punchdrunk, Wrights and Sites, Tehching Hsieh, Augusto Boal, and Blast Theory.

Casting such an eclectic group of performance artists under the same net as the picaresque novels of modernist authors such as Virginia Woolf results in wandering becoming an inflection of digressive restlessness where borders are porous and mutable. Performance scholars and students will note how the theatrical forms of immersive, participatory, site-specific, inter-medial, and durational are elided to the point where their structural affordances are diffused into a single conceptual framework. Drawing a link between the actions of audience-participants in live performance and players in computer game narratives would go some way to explicating the aesthetic relationship they possess beyond their agential potentials and aspirations.

Fortunately, the bulk of the book does not rely on this genealogy to argue for the innate radicalism of walking simulators. To do so would be to diminish the phenomenology of virtual play and its significance as a popular leisure activity yielding a psychically liberatory potential distinct from other art works. Each chapter examines one or two case studies using the four critical lenses listed above. Kagen strikes a wonderful balance between the

description of game-play, in terms of its narrative and the player's role within it, and critical analysis. She paints vivid pictures of environments ranging from a shipwreck to a pastoral utopia, from the globe-trotting adventures of Phileas Fogg to cosmological archaeology, from postapocalyptic cities to a prison on the moon.

The temporality players experience in *Ritual of the Moon* embodies the regimented symbiosis between time and productivity citizens living under late capitalism must endure in order to extract value from their lives. Kagen contends that the strict parameters of capitalist game-play in *Ritual of the Moon* interpellate its opposite: a feminine freedom relating to the expansiveness of the mind and the imagination as a reaction against the hard strictures imposed on the witch's physical body.

Kagen builds on wandering as an epistemic as opposed to geographic exploration in the chapter on *80 Days*, a subtly postcolonial version of the imperialist world contained in the nineteenth century novel *Around the World in Eighty Days*. Having to work within the rules of foreign cultures subverts Eurocentric notions of how space and time can be controlled through the acquisition of wealth and people. Yet Kagen's perceptive observation that walking simulators are built around the player and so (deliberately or unknowingly) replicate the colonialist's perception of the world as ripe for settlement, plunder, and conquest.

The outwardly utopian world of *Eastshade* is reliant on the economic precarity endemic to neoliberalism in order to keep the colonized territory under control. In keeping with the nineteenth century concept of splendour 'as a sanctuary sandwiched between the chaotic danger of wilderness and the dirty terror of industrialization' (50), exploitative labour in the game is considered an idealized form of personal fulfilment that sustains the virtual paradise. In contrast, the postapocalyptic landscapes of *Death Stranding* and *The Last of Us Part II* enjoin players to wander in the ruins of capitalist societies in order to imagine how they might be lived in differently.

The analysis of *Heaven's Vault* presents science fiction as a far more radical genre to refute this colonialist mentality, certainly when compared with the necessary revisionism any adaptation of western fiction entails to proffer such a critique. Kagen draws on Afrofuturist conceptualizations of circular time very effectively to argue that the historicity of knowledge construction is obscured and erased by humanistic hierarchies of knowledge. Wandering in this instance constitutes postcolonial game-play. Similarly, *Return of the Obra Dinn* allows players to engage with hermeneutics of death and the archive by interrogating the dehumanizing effects of logocentric information systems. They gain an attenuated moral perspective from the player character in their empathetic relations with the lives of the non-player characters by wandering through vignettes that reconstruct the times before their deaths.

*Wandering Games* is an intellectually rigorous monograph exemplifying the innovative power of interdisciplinary analysis. Kagen mobilizes an impressive number of theoretical perspectives to make an impassioned case for treating digital wandering as a vital means for imagining new worlds into being, and for not underestimating the potential for outwardly irreverent acts of digression to liberate western societies out of our collective pessimism and cultural stupor. Scholars of XR technologies and new media will gain great use from the theoretical frameworks deployed by Kagen for their own research into the radical politics of gaming, whilst their students will find their application to the analysis of computer games highly invigorating. The book also presents performance scholars and students with further analytical tools to build on decolonial critiques of world-building in immersive theatre.

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