gamevironments

Gamevironments from the perspective of an actant. ChatGPT (prompt: "gamevironments").

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Gamevironments Revisited

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Abstract
A review of Melissa Kagen's book *Wandering Games* (2022).

Keywords: Walking Simulators, *The Last of Us*, *Wandering Games*, Book Review, gamevironments

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Video games are often frantic, energetic, and bombastic. After all, they are a combination of sights, sounds, and constant interactive movements and actions. Each press of a button connects to an animation on the screen that brings joy to the world. Thus, when games are too slow, lack action, or have content devoid of clear goals, they become something out of the ordinary. As a result, gamers came up with the term *walking simulators* to poke fun at these games. Despite its initially insulting origin, the term has slowly evolved into a genre of its own that directly taps into the artistic expression within video games.

They are the subject of analysis in Melissa Kagen's (2022) book *Wandering Games*, in which the primary in-game actions involve walking or traversing expansive landscapes. The book's title is a descriptive conceptualization of the genre and its potential for comprehension. By framing questions around the term *wandering*, the author aims to explore – both literally and metaphorically, in virtual and subversive contexts – how the act of moving through space can symbolize and evoke various

meanings, even within virtual environments. Thus, the theoretical discussions in chapter one extensively examine the philosophical connotations of wandering across four main sections.

The section "Subversive Walks" (2024, 11-15) delves into the origins of philosophical thoughts surrounding walking and its role as a method of protest or its relation to gender issues. "Pedestrian Performance" (2024, 15-19) focuses on the significance of experimental artistic expressions through walking. "Digressive Literature" (2024, 19-23) genealogically explores the evolution of digression as a literary genre, followed by its modern representation in video games. Finally, "Walking in Games" (2024, 23-28) formally introduces the term *wandering games* and outlines Kagen's methodology for understanding walking simulators.

Characterized by the lack of action, according to Kagen, walking simulators reconcile two impulses: countering conventional ideas about playing in video games, and embracing adventure genres that focus on player freedom. Therefore, what she calls a classic understanding of a walking simulator involves the removal of an important familiar element in video games while retaining the overall appeal of the genre. However, as mentioned above, walking simulators have a troubled origin that muddles their understanding as a game genre. Thus, Kagen (2024, 25) coins the term *wandering games* to focus on "how the cultural and intellectual history of wandering inflects that particular game." Consequently, the book relies not only on games that are classically walking simulators, but also on video game titles that might not appear to be wandering games but carry implied wandering thoughts.

Different game titles are explored as case studies for four main aspects about wandering games: work (or capitalism), gender, colonialism, and death. For most

audiences, the discussions of the afterlife in Hideo Kojima's *Death Stranding* (2019) and Sony's commercial juggernaut *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) will spark certain curiosity. These two titles are AAA video games with substantial budgets from renowned developers. However, Kagen provides a unique observation about the games' exploration of life after death. Other titles discussed in the book may be less well-known, but are equally intriguing. The black-and-white puzzle game *Return of the Obra Dinn* (2018) explores the death and meaning of mortality. The subject for chapter three is *Eastshade* (2019), in which players can become an artist, wandering landscapes and recording scenery in each painting. The game *Ritual of the Moon* (2019) is discussed with "a queer, feminist take on wandering under constraints." The comparison of the video game *80 Days* (2014) and an 1884 board game *Reise um die Erde* (*Trip Around the World*) explore how games inspired by Jules Verne's (1872) *Around the World in 80 Days* have updated and reimagined the colonialist ideas about exploration. The reimagination of colonialist ideas is also centered in the discussion of the title *Heaven's Vault* (2019), in which the author explores a correct depiction of archeology and how modern archeologists have explored the past.

Wandering Games is conceptually heavy as different schools of thought are referenced to understand not a single video game genre, but a multitude of various games across different genres, via a particular in-game action. Kagen explores a distinct perspective on an in-game action that might initially seem contrary to traditional gaming. Like many other technologies, video games are often understood primarily by their functions. There is a clear relationship between what is displayed on the screen and the actions expected from users. This is why terms like *walking simulator* might have been considered derogatory. Similarly, we would not expect our smartphones, TVs, or laptops to deviate from their expected functions. The transition from the disparaging term *walking simulators,* to recognizing it as a legitimate game

genre, highlights how culture can reshape our technology. Initially, we view video games as a form of entertainment technology, but eventually, we recognize them as a medium for artistic expression.

Through its careful and in-depth analysis of wandering games, Kagen provides a new understanding of familiar concepts and reveals how these games reflect deeper aspects of ourselves. Even though the first chapter paves a solid foundation for how we can go through subsequent chapters, readers may still feel lost amidst the heavy analysis. The connection between each concept and topic is also not immediately evident, but rather emerges through the analysis of each video game title. While four main topics and six main video games are adequately used to their full potential, another notable topic that I hope could be a real addition to this book is the relationship between wandering games, nature, and the environment, especially the distinction between real-life and virtual environments. There are brief mentions of ideas about video games and virtual environments from scholars like Alenda Y. Chang (e.g., 2019). However, nature or virtual environments are not the focus, but are instead what these designs and elements evoke in the form of play. For instance, wandering through the deserted landscapes in the post-apocalypse worlds in *Death Stranding* and *The Last of Us Part II* are not about reconnecting with nature, but rather they focus on the pilgrimage to find whatever is left of humanity.

Melissa Kagen has provided an interesting theoretical framework for reading video games text. As game worlds are becoming larger and vaster, making traversing interesting has become an important task in developing games. Players are not simply going from A to B anymore, which can be done simply with a button, using fast travel. The traversal mechanics must be as interesting as the core gameplay, and the virtual environments through which the players traverse have to evolve beyond

mere background. The term *wandering games* as well as the analytical tools that this book offers, presented through the analyses of several video game titles, hope to expand our understanding of a simple, yet crucial action in video games: walking.

In a broader context, the book provides a glimpse into how we might act and interact within virtual spaces. Recent advancements in headsets like the Oculus and Apple Vision suggest a future akin to *Ready Player One* (Cline 2011), where virtual reality, augmented reality, and the metaverse become the new norm. This future could shift away from the menu-heavy user interfaces we currently use, towards immersive virtual environments where we walk and engage with our surroundings. What will it be like to navigate these spaces? What are the potential costs and benefits? How might these virtual activities, which could potentially replace real-life experiences, be meaningful?

The design of virtual spaces can draw from traversal mechanics in video games to create engaging movements and environments. Additionally, there is potential for creating unique experiences that bridge the gap between virtual and real life, and between biology and technology. This potential emerges from a deep understanding of seemingly mundane actions, such as walking.

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