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Beyond Play in one of Yayoi Kusama's Obliteration Room Installations.

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Special Issue

Beyond Play

edited by

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Review of Tom van Nuenen's *Traveling Through Video Games* (2024)

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After an introduction, the second chapter explains the *you can go there* slogan that is the foundation of many games' marketing and gameplay through adapting theories about tourism and myths. The third chapter explores *how you can go there* conveys scope, awe, and accessibility in open world games. The next chapters follow up with discussing games that interact with the dynamics of expansion and compression in

other ways: chapter four with walking simulators and chapter five with life simulators and survival games. The sixth chapter explains how the earth can be made accessible or less so, when presented digitally in the form of mixed realities through augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) experiences.

The book's central argument is the promise that *you can go there* in many games' marketing strategies, *there* being the virtual world with sites to visit, people and creatures to meet and activities to accomplish. This promise

"involves a tension between potential and constraints, between imagination and mediation" and "reveals the extent to which advertisements and descriptions of video games borrow from the language of tourism." (van Nuenen 2024, 5)

This conversation leads to the overarching theme, defamiliarisation, coined by Viktor Shklovsky (1965), which appears throughout, and many other theories from scholars in a variety of fields.

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Throughout the book, readers can gain insight into different theories from varying fields and games from multiple genres, enriching their knowledge and encouraging them to become more creative with game analysis. The second chapter features perhaps the most theorists from the most fields to set the stage. From literary theorists like Roland Barthes to sociologists like John Urry, and media scholars like Henry Jenkins, the myth of tourism and the tourist gaze are analysed in multiple games.

To argue for the adaptability of applying tourism to games, the case studies referenced throughout the book are from different genres. *Assassin's Creed*, a historical action-adventure video game series, especially the games, *Assassin's Creed*

II (2009), *Assassin's Creed Unity* (2014), *Assassin's Creed Origins* (2017) and *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* (2020), whereas analysed extensively to understand both its tourist gaze and anti-tourism through its visuals and environments, showing a nuanced understanding of how the games try to balance player agency and historical accuracy.

Afterwards, *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017), an action-adventure open world game, was analysed to show how its visuals, some gameplay, overarching narrative and box art invokes the sublime, while also subverting it. The case studies range from multiplayer to art games and AR games. This ensures that the theories, which originate from different fields and thus may be unfamiliar to a game studies reader, are accessible to them. As someone from game studies who dabbles with other fields whenever observed in video games, it is certainly eye-opening to see how tourism can be applied to video games.

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The tourist gaze is a significant point of interest. It is identified as:

"the set of expectations, perceptions, and behaviors that tourists adopt when engaging with and interpreting new environments and cultures during their travels." (van Nuenen 2024, 14)

When applied to video games, the player becomes a tourist, trying to interpret the environment around the avatar or player-protagonist. They even arrive with a set of expectations that have been cultivated through either their experience with the genre the game is advertised to be in, other games that the game is related to due to being in the same series or franchise, or the paratextual marketing material that surrounds the game, including the box art, which can almost never be avoided when downloading a game. Their perceptions and behaviours are also adapted according

calls for defamiliarisation and appreciation for the mundane, encouraging “the player to reflect on their touristic intuition to follow a preset experiential script” (van Nuenen 2024, 52). Walking simulators “remove challenge in order for the player to approach the work in a more poetic way” (ibid.). Through the examples of *Gone Home* (2013), *Firewatch* (2016) and *What Remains of Edith Finch* (2017), van Nuenen (2024, 56) argues that

“(i)f slow tourism is opposed to mass tourism ... walking sims are similarly opposed to mass games: they are not about immersion via power fantasy, but about immersion through empathy; by taking in the details of the story when piecing it together.”

To argue this, he uses *dérive* by Guy Debord (1956). It is fascinating to see how psychogeography and spatial design in video games can be combined to understand emotional and spatial immersion through the slow gameplay of walking, or at least not running frantically from place to place simply to accomplish a new goal. Speed runs would then be interesting to examine from this perspective especially because speed runners have to practise the same game and the most optimal route over and over again, which could allow them to appreciate the details of the visuals and gameplay through sheer repetition and determination. However, they are still rushing to achieve the next world record. Ultimately, van Nuenen (2024, 57) argues that, "Perhaps it is more accurate to call these walking sims "gazing sims," building on meaning-making through visual cues," so it could be worthwhile to expand this to different types of meaning-making.

I believe that this use of *dérive* to understand immersion through empathy by environmental storytelling could benefit from a conversation with other game theorists like Johansen Quijano and narrative theorists like Marie-Laure Ryan. Quijano (2019, 113-116) discussed how video games should be considered audiovisual

ludonarratives and described how spatial design in video games can be analysed, detailing three types of spatial design: hallway design, divergent space and open space. Meanwhile, Ryan (2009, 53-54) explained the types of immersion induced in video games: ludic immersion and narrative immersion. Within narrative immersion, there is spatial immersion, epistemic immersion, temporal immersion and emotional immersion. In that order, she argues that spatial immersion is the easiest for video games to achieve and emotional immersion is the hardest (ibid.). Van Nuenen's assertion can then be enriched through adding an analysis of his case studies' spatial design and countering Ryan's understanding of spatial immersion and emotional immersion being so segregated and being a part of narrative immersion instead of ludic immersion as well. However, just looking at what is presented in the book itself, van Nuenen has provided much inspiration for further research and will continue to do so as technology advances and video games become more and more creative in providing subverting experiences.

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Another point of critique is that in the sixth chapter, van Nuenen (2024, 88) claims to analyse AR and VR experiences to

"focus on the extent to which our planet can be made accessible, or escape our reach, when presented in ludic and digitized form."

However, while *Pokémon Go* (2016) was examined, no VR game was given the same treatment. Instead, he analyses Google Earth VR, arguing,

"It is not a game in the traditional sense of the word, but you do play it (...) it presents a model of the world we inhabit, and enables a type of imagination that leads from place to place, from memory to travel fantasy." (van Nuenen 2024, 99)

Even though it is important to consider how “It may be a precursor to the inevitable future in the metaverse awaiting us all” (van Nuenen 2024, 100), this small section feels underdeveloped and is an abrupt change from analysing games. If more paragraphs were dedicated to how Google Earth compared to its VR version, it would have been clearer as to why a VR experience, instead of a VR game, was used. VR games that could be analysed include, but are not limited to, *Horizon Call of the Mountain* (2023), which involves exploring and climbing a mountain while engaging in some fights with mechanical creatures and even includes a scenic mode, the so-called Machine Safari, which provides a guided tour of the game's landscape, providing an interesting look into the myth of you can go there and is perhaps a newer version of *Assassin's Creed's* Discovery Tour, which was analysed in a previous chapter. Other VR experiences worth investigating are the short films *TreeSense* (2017) and *Tree* (2017), in which viewers become immersed in a virtual forest and become a tree themselves, which could defamiliarise the world we live in as well, emotionally immersing people in nature subverting a typical tourist experience. While Google Earth VR was a strange choice, it was not a wrong one. It just deserved more attention to show readers how it leads to discussions of future technologies.

Overall, *Traveling Through Video Games* by van Nuenen offers new perspectives into the intersection between video games and tourism, combining old and new theories to examine how video games can defamiliarise the tourist gaze and experience. Its use of multiple video games from different genres not only helps to visualise and illustrate his points, but also motivates readers to find new case studies to which his arguments may be applied. While some of his assertions could be improved, through either more conversation with ludological and narratological theorists, or in rarer cases, more time and space to develop, these will also serve to encourage readers to

build on this important foundation that he has set. I would recommend this book for anyone interested in game studies, especially regarding space and travel.

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