

# Wandering in Video Games

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Video Game characters spend a lot of time walking. In fact, walking in video games is nearly ubiquitous. Sometimes there's another mode of transportation, like a vehicle or a character with wings, but for the most part, characters traverse an imaginary landscape with their feet. Video game studies has picked up on this ubiquity of walking, specifically in Ian Bogost's *Unit Operations*[1], in which he discusses the concept of Flanerie with reference to video games. But beyond the desultory apathy of the flaneur, there is a wider constellation of ideas surrounding walking and wandering in video games. Taking as a reference recent discussions of wandering in literary, this paper will apply these parallel discussions from alternate disciplines to video game studies, to shed light on the function of wandering in contemporary video games.

My interest in this topic started with the simple questions, what is the function of Wandering in video games? How does it relate to the figure of the Wanderer in German Literature, or other traditions of walking (the pilgrim, the streetwalker, the philosopher, the flaneur, the psychogeographer)? What is a wandering game?

In this presentation, I'll start with a brief summary of scholarship on digression in literature, explaining digression as a fundamental building block of narrative rather than a distraction from the text. This discussion leads directly into a definition of formally wandering texts, as distinguished from texts that are *\*about\** wandering. If we can have a text that formally wanders, it follows that there can be a game that formally wanders. What would that game look like? I'll go through three components of what would need to go into a wandering game: historical context of the Wanderer, the "Walking Simulator" as a new indie game phenomenon, and the unscarequoted Walking Simulator as a deconstructive analysis of the wandering body. Using these components, I'll then compile a list of characteristics for the ultimate wandering game.

## 1 Loiterature and the Wandering Text

Ross Chambers' concept "Loiterature" identifies the kind of digressive literature which has no narrative center and is made up instead of digressions, in a constantly shifting context impossible to pin down. Chambers highlights the three-way crossing as a metaphor for digressive texts, in which the choice is not to digress or not, but only which way to swerve. More recently, Samuel Frederick has updated this idea with reference to 19th and 20th century German literature, citing Robert Walser, Thomas Bernhard, and Adalbert Stifter as

authors whose textual digressions offer a refreshing disruption to traditional narrative unity. In 2011, Alexis Grohmann and Caragh Wells edited a vast series of essays on digressive texts in European literature, ranging from Cervantes to Sebald. Beyond the potential applications of Chambers' theories on the decision-trees which make up many games, *Loiterature*, with its constant shifts and diversions, theoretically undergirds the concept of a Wandering Text.

In *Der Spaziergang als Erzhlmodell*, Claudia Albes differentiates literature that is narratively about walking from literature that uses walking as a storytelling model (what i'm calling a wandering text what Chambers would call *Loiterature*). Texts like Anton Reiser or *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* follow wanderer characters and discuss the difficulties of traveling, but they are written with a conventional focus on plot and character development and conventional narrative style. The text does not wander; the characters do. Conversely, texts like Montaigne's *Essais* or Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* wander stylistically, but don't focus on wandering as a theme. Albes gives the following list of characteristics which define a wandering or digressive text:

- Detailed - thorough, sometimes redundant
- Discontinuous - jumping between ideas without any sort of methodical working through
- Circles - thematically or literally returning to its origins by the end of the piece
- Circumscribed - takes place within a bounded region
- Ritualistic - it repeats lists of things or places always in the same order, or there is an obsessive quality to the descriptions
- Auto-reflexive - considers the process of being written and often mentions the walking body. [2, pp. 14-15]

A wandering text doesn't need to fulfill all six requirements, but, with these characteristics as a metric, it becomes easier to compare texts which wander. My goal in the remainder of this paper is to consider what the equivalent ludological characteristics would be. Digression scholarship is largely concerned about narrative, which is either an important component of game studies (see Frasca) or completely secondary to it (see Eskelin), and either way, as Espen Aarseth wrote in the inaugural article of *Game Studies* in 2001, "Games are both object and process; they can't be read as texts or listened to as music, they must be played." So the question is, how can play wander?

## 2 Historical context

Even though I've just invoked Aarseth and the importance of evaluating games as their own art form rather than an offshoot of a more established discipline, the first step to finding the rules of playable wandering is to look at the historical Wanderer, specifically in the 19th century, which is largely responsible for our conception of the modern Wanderer. This

doesn't take us far out of the video game realm, of course; many video games use Romantic imagery as a safe go-to for game design - examples abound of the supernatural, the uncanny, a veritable forest of invented fairy tales, a deep appreciation for (and sometimes fear of) nature, the power of the individual genius, and, last but not least, the lonely, striving wanderer.

Isaiah Berlin goes so far as to call perpetual movement the fundamental romantic image ("effort is action, action is movement, movement is unfinishable - perpetual movement. That is the fundamental romantic image.") In Andrew Cusack's book on the 19th century wanderer in German literature, the wanderer appears in different guises through the century: the young, wealthy man, traveling for education and self-edification (as in Goethe's Wilhelm Meister); to a Romantic yearning for infinity and unsatisfied by stillness (think of Tieck's Franz Sternbald, or Novalis Heinrich von Ofterdingen), to the wanderer as one who politically emancipates himself and his country (for Heine and his Vormärz contemporaries), and finally to the vagabonds and journeymen, artisans left behind by industrialization who are searching for work in the early Biedermeier period (Gotthelf's Jakob and Karl von Holtz's Anton Hahn). According to Cusack, "the wanderer motif derives its potency from its capacity to be embodied...the idea of a dynamic, striving individuality." But in other contexts, it also communicates "ideas of collective striving and progress, of solidarity in the face of adversity" and thereby functions as "the linchpin of both individual and group identity."<sup>3</sup>

If the German Romantic Wanderer is a dynamic individual, striving towards infinity and educating himself through experience with the world, the Wandering Jew presents a perversion of the Romantic Wanderer: endless yearning towards infinity becomes a forced march that won't end until judgment day, and walking becomes a punishment rather than the expression of freedom and individuality.<sup>1</sup> The Wandering Jew laughed at Christ on the cross and was cursed to an eternity of homeless wandering. Characteristically, he speaks every language with a foreigner's accent, seems at home everywhere and nowhere, and wears extremely worn shoes. The restless, eternal Wanderer is mythologically related to several older characters in Germanic myth: the deposed pagan god Wotan, the medieval Wild Huntsman, and the (c.1760) Flying Dutchman.

This history is important for us because wandering in video games is both a way to enact agency and make one's mark on the world, in the way of the Romantic wanderer, and also a site of utter powerlessness that has resonances with the wandering Jew. The immortality offered a player is often more curse than reward. In home console games without permadeath, one walks and walks, and if one dies, it doesn't interrupt the walk for long. Sometimes walking is even used as a punishment - the consequences of death are usually insignificant, but they might require you to return to a previous save point or complete the most recent action or task again until you can complete it without dying. This relative immortality enables the player to take on the characteristics of the Wanderer/Wandering Jew: an independent soul traveling to learn, yearning towards infinity, but in the process the player enters a kind of restless purgatory.

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<sup>1</sup>Cusack also argues that the wandering Jew problematizes progress (92). The unending journey is a modern derivative of the Christian *navigatio vitae*.

### 3 Walking Simulators

The next piece of context to consider is the relatively recent phenomenon of Walking Simulators and their metaphorical cousins, “walking simulators.” To understand the controversy, we need to start with Ergodic literature. In Espen Aarseth’s *Cybertext* (1997)[4], Ergodic Literature is defined as a text which non-trivial effort is required to traverse. Unlike the powerless reader of a traditional narrative, who can do nothing but voyeuristically observe, the reader of a piece of ergodic literature or a cybertext “is not safe...[but rather put at] the risk of rejection...[the text] raises the stakes of interpretation to those of intervention. Trying to know a cybertext is an investment of personal improvisation that can result in either intimacy or failure.” Aarseth makes it clear that the metaphors literary theorists often use (of a text being non-linear and different in every reading, of the reader needing to ‘complete’ the text in a post-Barthian alliance between reader and author), these claims are \*literally\* true of a piece of ergodic literature.

While all computer games are Ergodic texts in Aarseth’s sense, some recent (critically acclaimed) independent games are pushing back towards something that might be called non-Ergodic (or barely ergodic) gaming: so called “Walking Sims” like *Dear Esther*, *The Path*, *Gone Home*, or *Proteus*. These are beautiful art games that often function more like interactive fiction than video games. The player’s main responsibility is to walk, usually by pressing the W key. Some gamers see these as boring non-games, since a ‘real game’ requires “non-trivial effort to play” a la aarseth - players in huge MMORPGS like *World of Warcraft* for example spend an enormous amount of time gaining skills, earning money, and making alliances with other players. A game that can be played through perfectly by a novice lacks the challenge that these players see as definitional. Beyond that, these indie games are anxiety-provoking because there’s nothing obvious to do.

Despite the complaints of purists, the “walking sim” is gaining steam. Although progenitors abounded (including *Myst*, the grandfather of all “Walking Sims”, released in 1993), contemporary “Walking Sims” took off with the release of *Dear Esther* in February 2012, followed in the next two years by games like *Gone Home*, *Year Walk*, *Proteus*, and *Eidolon*. *Wander*, a “collaborative, non-combat, non-competitive MMO” is releasing on Steam and PS4 this March, and the main activities in the game seem to be exploring a massive fantasy environment and transforming (via magic flower) between avatars like a walking tree, a human, a fish, and a flying griffin. Reception seems almost entirely positive, with some gamers saying things like “I’ve been waiting 20 years for this game.”

In some ways, the recent surge in “walking sims” is indeed a long-overdue gesture towards a different kind of game and gamer. In 2006, Chris Bateman and Richard Boon in their book *21st Century Game Design* analyzed four types of game-players, according to Meyers-Briggs personality categories. Their third category, the Wanderer, corresponding to those with “Feeling and Perceiving Preferences”: this is “a player in search of Easy-fun (associated with the emotions of wonder, awe, and mystery)...Whereas a Type 1-oriented player enjoys mastering a complex control mechanism...a Type 3-oriented player generally wants to press a single button and have something pleasing happen.” (67) Atmosphere, setting, story are very

important to these types of players. Bateman and Boon noted that traditional games cater more to gamers in the other categories and the 3rd category “Wanderer” players, though numerous, were poorly served by the current offerings. The development of “Walking sims”, with their anti-game characteristics, could be seen as a reaction.

But “walking sims” often don’t consider a crucial factor in the experience of wandering: embodiment. One of the most frequent complaints is that these games of course don’t simulate walking. Alice O’Connor, in November 2014, lamented on RockPaperShotgun how “Walking in a game is nothing like walking on your own feet. We don’t feel the weight and restraint of clothing, the thud reverberating from our ankle up through our leg, or rolling our toes to push off.” For that kind of consideration, we turn to unscarequoted Walking Simulators, the most well-known of which is QWOP. These games in which the mechanics of walking are taken apart and then reconfigured to be humorously difficult. Octodad, one of the few of this type that is a commercially released, features you as an octopus trying to hide your true nature from your human family. Its controls, as you’d expect, are hilariously hard to manipulate. The multiple controls of Octodad, the steam site promises, “can be remapped to any configuration a player may want,” presumably to facilitate walking in a way organic to the player.

With all this in mind, I created a set of characteristics, modeled after Claudia Albes, for the ultimate wandering video game.

- 1. A-linearity, multicursality - environmental/exploration (walksim)
- 2. Ritualistic - has a semi-religious quality to it, talismanic, superstitious, repetitive
- 3. Algorithmically enabled freedom - non-deterministic (walksim)
- 4. Autotelic - no goals or quests, art for art’s sake (walksim)
- 5. Avatar as self-conscious body - elements of embodiment (Walking Sim)
- 6. Endlessness - curse of the Wandering Jew

Of course the question is, whether this ultimate wandering game would be any fun. By my definition, a wandering game must be an anti-game. No goals, no points, open, endless, a game for its own sake. It also remains to be seen whether the walking sim will expand to fulfill these other characteristics. Wander, the non-combat MMO, looks promising in that regard - as you take on different species as avatars, the game could play more with embodiment and the world could be effectively endless, we’ll have to wait til March to see. Thanks very much!

## References

- [1] Ian Bogost. *Unit operations: An approach to videogame criticism*. MIT Press, 2008.

- [2] Claudia Albes. *Der Spaziergang als Erzählmodell: Studien zur Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Adalbert Stifter, Robert Walser und Thomas Bernhard*. Francke, 1999.
- [3] Andrew Cusack. *Wanderer in 19th-century German Literature*, volume 22. Camden House, 2008.
- [4] Espen J Aarseth. *Cybertext: perspectives on ergodic literature*. JHU Press, 1997.