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WALKING SIMULATORS, #GAMERGATE, AND THE GENDER OF WANDERING 11

MELISSA KAGEN

This chapter examines a new kind of video game, the walking simulator, and how it stages a conflict between old "hardcore gamer" culture and a newer perception of gaming as fundamentally mainstream, artistic, and diverse. This conflict is exemplified by the #GamerGate controversy, which exploded in the gamer community in August 2014, either in response to a lack of journalistic ethics or because of an undercurrent of vicious misogyny in gaming, depending on whom you ask. Among other things, it was an attempt to police the borders of gamer identity in the face of changing demographics and complementary erosions of white, male, nerd culture, of which the classic "hardcore gamer" is stereotypically a key member (although, obviously, plenty of women and people of color enjoy games and consider themselves hardcore gamers). While the people who play walking simulators are not necessarily "hardcore gamers," nor are they necessarily casual gamers who occasionally play, but rather a combination of players: indie, casual, hardcore, and mainstream.

These categories (hardcore, casual, indie) break down into meaninglessness in the face of developing trends in the way people play. As Adrienne Shaw points out, there is "nothing casual about playing *Farmville* on Facebook for hours on end, just as there is nothing inherently hardcore about playing an hour of *Halo* with friends at a gaming party."¹

The dissolution of the “hardcore gamer” as an identity was presaged by Reggie Fils-Aimé, the president and chief operations officer of Nintendo of America, who asked rhetorically in 2006, “Do you know anyone who’s never watched TV, never seen a movie, never read a book? Of course not. . . . Do you know someone, maybe even in your own family, who’s never played a video game? I bet you do. How can this be? If we want to consider ourselves a true mass medium, if we want to grow as an industry, this has to change.”² As gaming grows increasingly mainstream, the previously stable identity of “hardcore gamer” (read: male and nerdy) finds itself attacked from all sides. Feeling besieged, the “hardcore gamer” (represented by many in the pro-#GamerGate faction) rejects certain games as not *real* games and derides them as politically correct nonsense. For the “hardcore gamer,” it does not sit well that critics rave about strange, disconcerting anti-games like walking sims, while disparaging gamer favorites like *Grand Theft Auto* and *Mortal Kombat* for their uberviolence and misogyny. At the same time, many in the gaming community (hardcore and otherwise) welcome the influx of new titles, since, except for the increased marginalization of the “hardcore gamer” identity, little is lost and much gained by greater diversity in games and players.

To explore this conflict, we first need a working definition of “walking sims” and their superset, “anti-games.” Anti-games are works that subvert, expand, or otherwise comment on traditional video game tropes, using game conventions to make metacommentaries, offer an alternative way to play, and explore the artistry inherent in gaming. The difference between games and anti-games, Erik Fredner explains, is that “traditional games give you goals and achievements and ways to win. Anti-games suggest, they afford opportunities, but they never demand. You can’t fail an anti-game, but you can fail yourself in it.”³ In 2011, Michaël Samyn’s Notgames initiative promised to “explore the potential of

videogames as a creative medium, beyond the confines of conventional game design.”⁴ Jenova Chen’s studio, thatgamecompany, has created beloved games like *Flow*, *Flower*, and *Journey*, which focus more on experiences, atmosphere, and emotion than the kinds of fun accessible in most games (although these are less anti-games than art games). In *The Stanley Parable*, released by Davey Wreden in 2011, players interact with the narrative voiceover to make a series of choices, each of which leads to a different ending. It plays around with narrative structure and the deterministic conclusions coded into play, despite the appearance of free choice given to the player. In *Mountain*, developed by David O’Reilly in 2014, you can “FULFILL YOUR DREAMS OF BEING A MOUNTAIN,” as you experience the evolution of a procedurally generated mountain while it slowly spins against a beautifully changing sky.⁵ On its website, *Mountain* claims to be in the genre “Mountain Simulator, Relax em’ up, Art Horror,” all plays on established genres (simulators, shoot ‘em ups, and horror).⁶ Whether jesting send-ups or serious artistic endeavors that test the limits of what gaming can be, the genre has gained a foothold on the market and received critical acclaim.

One subgenre of anti-game focuses on walking. Gameplay is largely spent wandering around a surreal landscape, exploring and collecting items, and having an aesthetic experience without achieving goals or racking up points. Nicknamed “walking simulators” derogatorily by some hardcore gamers and complimentarily by others, these games, including critically acclaimed gems like *Dear Esther*, *Gone Home*, *Proteus*, and *Ether One*, shed light on what games are and can be—and what gamer culture currently is. This chapter will put walking sims in context—of literary scholarship, gamer trends, and historical concepts—and examine a few of the games themselves in detail.

We begin with wandering texts and digressive literature, the literary forerunners of walking simulators. By foregrounding the discussion

with this genre, we can observe how the rise of walking sims is part of a long tradition of gendered wandering, of coding certain kinds of exploration as manly and others as (unacceptably) feminine. This leads into an examination of the #GamerGate controversy as a dramatic reaction to the rise of the walking sim. During the debacle, walking sims are painted as particularly feminine. By comparing this rhetoric with historical conceptions of female walkers, we can see how a gendered value distinction between passivity and activity has been imported to walking sim reception. We'll look closely at several games and consider how the slur of feminization affects boredom, art, and the nerd culture surrounding gaming, the borders of which have grown increasingly porous. As nerdiness itself goes mainstream, games and gamer identity get pulled in that direction as well. This chapter explores the ramifications of that shift.

Walking Sims and Digression

Video game characters spend a lot of time walking. In open world games, avatars travel across vast landscapes to complete quests, achieve goals, and explore environments, discovering intermediate goals along the way. Because quantitative achievements can often be earned only by exploring, some open world designs demand that characters walk around randomly in an effort to find the storyline. Walking is thus ostensibly pointless but made productive and useful, since exploration and aimlessness are written into gameplay. Still, traditionally, walking is not the main activity involved in playing a game (as, for example, fighting or solving puzzles would be). Walking is the means to an end, a way to render character movement unobtrusive and get from one place to another.

Game studies scholars have noted the ubiquity of walking in video games, most clearly in Ian Bogost's *Unit Operations*.⁷ Elsewhere, Bogost explains how "in-videogame transit recreates a world in which reality had not yet been dissolved into bits but had to be traversed deliberately."⁸ In games that exploit this deliberate relationship between the character and the landscape, transit makes the player more conscious of her steps and how they connect her to this digital world. By responding to open-ended, nonlinear gameplay, Bogost writes, "the player develops an intuitive and continuous relationship with the [gameworld's] landscape."⁹ Focusing the player's attention on a background activity affords an alternative experience.¹⁰ Walking sims take this to an extreme, focusing the majority of time and effort on a character's experience walking around.

In literary studies, the analogue to walking sims is digressive literature: texts that wander, to the point where the digressions themselves become the text (Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* is the premier example). In *Loiterature*, a seminal examination of digressive lit, Ross Chambers highlights the three-way crossing as a metaphor for digressive texts; the choice is not whether to digress or not, but only which way to swerve.¹¹ In such a text, the question is not what the plot might be, but how to grapple with a work so utterly unconcerned with having a plot at all. Claudia Albes differentiates literature that is narratively about walking from literature that uses walking as a storytelling model: texts like *Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years* follows wandering characters and the difficulties of travel, but is written with a conventional emphasis on plot, character development, and style. The text does not wander; the characters do. Conversely, texts like Montaigne's *Essais* wander stylistically, but don't focus on wandering as a theme.¹² More recently, scholars such as Samuel Frederick, Rhian Atkin, Alexis Grohmann, and Caragh

Wells have explored narrative digression as an alternate storytelling method.¹³

Like digressive literature, ergodic literature (which requires active effort to traverse) presents the text as a kind of space the reader must cross; the difference is that this traversal is metaphorical for a digressive text and nonmetaphorical for an ergodic one. Unlike the powerless reader of a traditional narrative, who can do nothing but voyeuristically observe, a piece of ergodic literature "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."¹⁴ In video games, most of which are ergodic texts, a player must make active choices with unknown consequences in order to cocreate his experience. This is built into most definitions of games, although defining what a game must contain and exclude remains a dicey proposition.¹⁵ Walking sims are often designed to retard activity and promote meandering, in a similar way that a wandering text works against quick reading. If the text of *Tristram Shandy* is digressive, the reader is still guided through it, one line after another. But if a game is made entirely of digressions (if there is no plot to return to), something more complicated is at play. The game remains ergodic (if, in some instances, barely), not something one can passively follow, turning the pages, letting the words flow by. To play a game is to be active, engaged, participating. So the player of a wandering game must *actively* loiter, must press the right sequence of buttons to propel an avatar along a digression to nowhere. While almost all computer games are ergodic texts in Espen Aarseth's sense (the player must *do* something), walking simulators are pushing back toward something that might be called barely ergodic gaming, games that become a practice, a spiritual exploration, a piece of interactive fiction, but perhaps not, as has been asserted with increasing levels of aggressiveness, a game; a "real game" requires nontrivial effort to play

à la Aarseth. Some players in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (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 enjoyed by a novice lacks the challenge that these players see as definitional.

Despite these complaints, the walking sim is gaining steam. Although progenitors abound, contemporary walking sims grew popular with the release of *Dear Esther* in 2012. Since then, a diverse set of games has attracted the label (often amid heated debate).¹⁶ *Wander*, a "collaborative, non-combat, non-competitive MMO," released in June 2015, and the main activities in the game are exploring a massive fantasy environment and transforming between avatars such as a walking tree, a human, a fish, and a flying griffin. As the website promises, *Wander* "is focused on narrative, exploration and joy," rather than doing anything in particular, an experimental MMO without combat, chats, or quests.¹⁷ The early reviews of *Wander* are overwhelmingly negative (partly because of bugs) and highlight the crucial difficulty of walking sims: they provoke anxiety because there's nothing obvious to do. Without tasks to accomplish, plot to follow, fights to win, or skills to acquire, the activity of playing can seem a little too much like regular life. One *Wander* critic complains, "Do not play this game unless you think you have TOO MUCH TIME in the real world and want to waste some in this one."¹⁸

In other words, the fundamental problem that gamers have with walking sims is that they're boring. As one online commenter fumes, "Trip-Wire-Narrative Walking Simulators are not games. There is no storytelling, no plot, nada. Just pretty environments (if you get even that) and some schlepy schmutzy shit about feels."¹⁹ Although walking sims may fail to entertain, the mistake could be in assuming that games are supposed to entertain at all. Boredom has long been coded as generative, and gendered. In Victorian novels, boredom is feminine

and beautiful, becoming “sometimes the sole avenue for female characters to experience freedom, creativity, profound productivity, self-knowledge, and power,” because it allows the mental space for creative productivity.²⁰ Patricia Spacks, quoting Nietzsche, asserts that thinkers “actually require a lot of boredom if their work is to succeed. . . . All ‘cultural advance’ derives from the need to withstand boredom.”²¹ Most provocatively, Spacks claims the certainty of feminine boredom as an impetus for narrative to begin at all.²² For Spacks, boredom provides the perpetual deferral that J. J. Long identifies as one of two central narrative impulses: “the one oriented towards the end [and] the other oriented towards a retardation of the end.”²³ Digression (and boredom as a particular kind of digression) extends the pleasurable suspense of reading and thought, becoming itself the object, rather than a diversion away from the driving force of a narrative teleology. In walking sims, the boredom is the point. Wandering is not wandering “away” from the plot of the game; wandering *is* the game.

This mindful boredom, provoked by the experience of playing the game, introduces a similar sort of embodiment to that invoked by Jesper Juul, who points out that all narrative games exist in a half-real space, in which the narrative is fictional and the action is only half-fictional.²⁴ The player is actually completing actions (like pressing buttons), but their representation within the action of the narrative is fictional. If I press a key and an avatar walks one step forward, have I walked? Is button-pressing a kind of wandering, just because it represents wandering? Alice O’Connor, in November 2014, lamented on Rock, Paper, Shotgun 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.”²⁵

For that kind of consideration, we turn to “Walking Simulators,” games in which the mechanics of walking are taken apart and then

reconfigured to be humorously difficult, simulating walking if you were an alien who had no idea how to walk. The best known of these is *QWOP*, a browser game in which the player must manipulate Q and W keys to control a runner’s thighs and O and P to control his calves, to a humorously impossible effect. *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* features you as an octopus trying to hide your true nature from your human family. 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.²⁶ “Walking Sims,” however, are very much not walking sims, the wandering texts I’ve been describing: the former are easily recognizable as games, if jokey in conception, with rules, challenges, and metrics for success. The latter are doing something different, presenting a version of embodiment that highlights the mind as part of the body. Pressing W over and over can bring a player to a Zen-like state of simplicity and awareness, making her more attuned to the physical act of walking by watching an avatar perform it, precisely because she lacks another distracting focus.

For example, *Dear Esther*. Arguably the most famous walking sim, *Dear Esther* was released in 2012 as a mod for *Half-Life 2*, itself an important and award-winning dystopian shooter from 2004. *Dear Esther* describes itself as “a poetic ghost story told using game technologies.”²⁷ You press a single button to negotiate your way around a stunningly beautiful island, interrupted every so often by blocks of text read in a voiceover by a grieving narrator. As you go, you learn the vague outlines of the tragedy he endured, but are never given specifics. Each chunk of text is a piece of a letter he’s written, and the experience is like engaging with an interactive epistolary novel, contemplative and sad. At the end, we climb to the top of a lighthouse and jump, but we never hit the water. Instead, the camera swoops safely upward just as we’re about to crash, and the shadow of a bird is visible on the waves beneath us. The

mechanic of the game is such that we have to direct the avatar (it's first person, so we never see him) to jump off the lighthouse, at which point the cutscene takes over. As the bird rises, we see it fly over the many letters to Esther, folded into paper boats, drifting out to sea. The sense of embodiment evoked by *Dear Esther* is that of a penitent treading a church labyrinth; walking is so simple in *Dear Esther* that pressing the button realistically mirrors the simplicity of walking, the two activities functioning as alternate but effective ways to find grace. The final, fantastical transformation into a bird is beyond our control; the practice of walking is the only activity we're allowed, and yet it's enough.

A hardcore game sees embodiment as a way to try on different modes and roles, a practice ground for physical fantasies.²⁸ But walking sims are too close to life to afford that kind of imaginative exercise. In some ways, the growth of walking sims is a long-overdue gesture toward a different kind of game and gamer. In 2005, Chris Bateman and Richard Boon in their book *21st Century Game Design* analyzed four types of game players, associated with Meyers-Briggs personality categories. Their third category, the Wanderer, corresponded 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."²⁹ Atmosphere, setting, and story are very important to this type of players, a group once called "casual" that now has simply become one of many strands of mainstream gaming. Bateman and Boon noted that traditional games cater more to gamers in the other categories and the third-category "Wanderer" players, though numerous, were poorly served by the current offerings. The development of walking sims could be seen as a reaction. The following section will examine the #GamerGate controversy

as a reaction to that reaction: an over-the-top response by old-school "hardcore gamers" who found their identity as ostracized nerds being overtaken by the mainstream.

#GamerGate: Misogynistic Troglodytes or Cruelly Bullied Nerds?

In August 2014, a cultural battle called #GamerGate exploded online. The spark was a blog post by Eron Gjoni, detailing his relationship with his ex-girlfriend Zoë Quinn, an indie game developer. Gjoni claims that Quinn cheated on him multiple times, including with Nathan Grayson, a game journalist who writes for the gaming websites Kotaku and Rock, Paper, Shotgun. Gjoni's "ZoePost" immediately provoked a huge outpouring of vitriol online alleging a breach of journalistic ethics. Over the next several days, accusations escalated, particularly on Reddit and 4chan; one YouTuber uploaded a video alleging that Quinn slept with five men in the video game industry in return for better reviews and wider influence, and claimed that she was now "portraying herself as a victim to receive donations and support."³⁰ Kotaku editor in chief Stephen Totilo responded on August 20th, assuring readers that Grayson had never even reviewed Quinn's game *Depression Quest*, much less given it a good review under ethically questionable circumstances.³¹

Nonetheless, #GamerGate took off, with both sides claiming the status of righteous victims. Pro-GamerGaters asserted that the incestuous tangle of game developers and game reviewers polluted the nature of reviews on sites like Polygon, Gamasutra, Kotaku, and Rock, Paper, Shotgun. Anti-GamerGaters furiously responded that the whole controversy was an antifeminist attack by gamers who didn't want to share game culture with anyone else. This opinion was buttressed by the vicious online abuse, harassment, and death and rape threats experienced by many women in the industry (particularly Zoë Quinn, Anita

Sarkeesian, and Brianna Wu) by anonymous online bullies. Leigh Alexander declared “gamer culture” over, patronizingly dismissing gamers as a cohort of embarrassing, socially inept losers, a move that further polarized the conflict and was seen by many as an unwarranted wholesale defamation.³²

Many game journalists analyzed the conflict as highlighting a tension between traditional “gamer”/nerd culture and the increasing mainstream population now playing games. Mike Diver elegantly lays out this viewpoint in a December 22nd Vice essay titled “Merry Christmas GamerGate.”³³ Although the rhetoric is nicer, Diver’s post echoes Alexander’s Gamasutra piece, as well as the *New York Times* article on the controversy in October.³⁴ Gamers’ fears of being outgrown by their own cultural niche is backed up by demographic shifts that, conveniently, were widely publicized in August 2014. A Flurry poll published August 7th asserted that the audience for mobile games had changed and that women spend both more time and more money on mobile gaming than men. Flurry divvies up game categories and reports that, while women dominate nine categories as opposed to men’s six, men won strategy, sport, and action/RPG, among others; “that should give some hardcore game reviewers, irked by the overnight success of the Kardashian game, a sigh of relief,” the report asserted.³⁵

The myth of the primarily male gamer was fundamentally eroded by an Entertainment Software Association report on August 21, 2014. They reported that women over 18 encompass a much larger percentage of players (36%) than boys under 18 (17%), who traditionally have been the core gamer demographic. Self-identified gamers have responded to these shifts by claiming that playing a mobile game like *Candy Crush Saga* (or a walking sim) doesn’t make you a gamer; it’s not a *real* game. But a Nielsen survey, also conducted in 2014, concluded that “women

gamers in the US are most likely to play games on personal computers, mobile devices and Nintendo’s Wii console. In fact, US women are more likely than US men to play on the Nintendo Wii . . . while they are equally likely as men to play games on Apple devices.”³⁶ When angry commenters claim that games played on Nintendo Wii aren’t *real*, or that the data were skewed by mothers buying consoles for their children, dismissal of female gaming starts to look suspiciously like policing the boundaries of gamer identity against the growing female demographic. So it’s unsurprising that Nick Wingfield attributes #GamerGate more to fears over demographic shifts than outrage at dishonest journalism.³⁷ At the same time, the pro-GamerGate camp has disowned the misogynistic harassers as extremists and maintained that the conflict is about corruption and “the injection of politics into gaming. . . . [We] would like to see games evaluated for their merit as games—not for their politics.”³⁸ This position presupposes that games aren’t inherently political, an opinion harder to maintain as the genre moves more mainstream and contends with contemporary awareness of subtle political messaging in media.

With its battle lines drawn between irate, hardcore gaming nerds and a more mainstream gamer attuned (perhaps overly) to social justice issues, #GamerGate taps into the phenomenon of the male nerd blind to the privilege afforded him by his maleness. MIT professor Scott Aaronson touched off a related controversy in a December 2014 blog post. Aaronson details his struggle to be a feminist while society at large and women in particular made it clear that he and his sexuality were disgusting and unwanted.³⁹ Online responses castigated him, accusing him of entitlement to female attention and a misunderstanding of intersectionality.⁴⁰ Empathetic though several of them were, the “plight of the bitter nerd” divided people who’d suffered a nerdy male adolescence

from others who contended that there are far worse things to suffer. Despite these criticisms, Aaronson makes some compelling points and represents a sympathetic voice among bitter nerds.

For the purposes of this chapter, #GamerGate is interesting for how it relates to the phenomenon of walking sims, a category of games that have been squarely placed in the anti-GamerGate camp. At the height of the conflict, a user posted a message on the #GamerGate thread on Encyclopedia Dramatica (a satirical wiki that mocks Internet cultural trends), responding to a tweet: "Why [are you concerned]? Because they're not feminists? Because their game wasn't a 'zomg so progressive' walking simulator?"⁴¹ Between its pleas to keep politics out of gaming and its association of feminist politics with walking sims, the #GamerGate faction tied together the fear that games were becoming unrecognizable to gamers with the fear that women were taking over nerdy male spaces.

The idea that walking sims function as a feminist plot to destroy gaming came to a head with *Gone Home*, a critically acclaimed walking sim developed by Fullbright Company and released in August 2013. The main character is a young woman exploring her family's deserted home and piecing together the clues of her sister's homosexuality. Pervaded with Riot grrrl music, '90s memorabilia, and horror game tropes that convince the player of an impending jump scare that never arrives, *Gone Home* raked in awards and was universally lauded by critics, earning a Metacritic score of 86 percent.⁴² The gamer community was far less enamored, and #GamerGate responded with some of its most fevered conspiracy theorizing by pointing out an extant friendship between the game's developers and the Polygon reviewer who rated the game a perfect 10.⁴³ The community's hatred of *Gone Home* went far enough to redefine the definition of a "walking simulator" on Urban Dictionary. In April 2014, it was defined rather neutrally as "a genre of games where

the walking is a big part of the experience," originating with the zombie survival game *Day Z*, which has notoriously been in alpha testing mode for two years. By December 7, 2014, the definition had become more explicitly negative:

A walking simulator is a type of video game which lacks many of the traditional aspects of a game (such as a goal, win/loss conditions, any kind of game system to interact with) despite taking the form of a video game. The phrase implies that there is basically nothing to do in the game other than walking around.

A: I sent you a new game on Steam, check it out.

B: *Gone Home*? That's not even a game, it's a walking simulator.⁴⁴

A walking sim isn't just a bad game; it's a nongame and, worse, one that duplicitously pretends to be a game. For *Gone Home*'s proponents, the distinction is ridiculous because the mechanism of *Gone Home* is the same as that of any first person shooter (FPS), but "in the case of *Gone Home* 'click' doesn't equal 'gunshot.'"⁴⁵ Since clicking on things to interact with them is a very well accepted convention in a FPS, the difference seems to be the content (which, let's remember, is a story about a queer teenage girl and her sense of estrangement from her family). A humor site made a parody advertisement called *Gun Home*, where the player shoots at various interlopers in his family home, including Hitler in the attic, and features "15 weapons to tear your ennui a new one!"⁴⁶ With a gun in the player's hand and 8-bit Nazis to demolish, the parody implies, *Gone Home* would be a *real* game.

In October 2014, Destructive Creations brilliantly capitalized on the #GamerGate furor (and some gamers' dissatisfaction with the existence of artsy nongames) by announcing *Hatred*, an isometric shooter with a psychopathic main character whose only agenda is to slaughter as many helpless, pleading civilians as possible. The trailers feature bodies

twitching in a gruesomely realistic manner when they're shot, a woman stuttering "please" as she's shot in the head, and another woman shrieking as she's set on fire in a kitchen. Anti-GamerGaters demanded the game be removed from Steam Greenlight, and Steam complied, only to reinstate it the next day with an apology from Steam cofounder Gabe Newell. Destructive Creations saw this as a victory against the runaway forces of political correctness, as they explain on their website: "These days, when a lot of games are heading to be polite, colorful, politically correct and trying to be some kind of higher art, rather than just an entertainment—we wanted to create something against trends. Something different, something that could give the player a pure, gaming pleasure."⁴⁷ By claiming to be a pure, apolitical game, *Hatred* sets itself in opposition to indie games that explicitly explore culturally touchy themes, or reviewers who find underlying meanings in games in general. The message is, stop calling us sexist because we want Lara Croft as scantily clad as possible; this isn't politics, it's just a game. Incredible violence in games isn't nearly as new as they claim (See: *Postal*, or the *Grand Theft Auto* series), but the lack of a frame story or satirical wink to internally justify the violence (as in *GTA*) makes many game critics uncomfortable.⁴⁸ Which is, of course, the point.

Beyond its distaste for art games, *Hatred* obliquely takes on walking sims as well. Destructive Creations' business developer Przemysław Szczepaniak explains the team's motivation as a move away from wandering games: "We were tired of games that always lead you by the hand, where the game becomes so ridiculously simple that you are lacking the fun and participation in game action. . . . Nowadays, it is only about being a great graphical creation without the immersive and entertaining game elements."⁴⁹ Notice how well this type of game would suit the Wanderer gamer described by Bateman and Boon ("a player in search of easy-fun"). What Szczepaniak is assuming are universal game elements

(i.e., immersion, entertainment, interactivity, skills that are difficult to master), Bateman and Boon would call Type-1 oriented play. There are three other types. And notice, too, how what gamers define implicitly as interactivity (immersion, participation, having an effect on one's surroundings) is not a hard and fast definition. A blog post by Pat Ashe illustrates how constraining the idea of interactivity has become:

We need to re-imagine what we mean when we say "interactive." . . . Looking, listening, smelling and being are all interactions. . . . Come here, and see what happens when you walk around this space. See how the world reacts to you. This is the core that exists at most things that get the label of walking simulator because our idea of a game is one of conquest, of beating a system. Existing in and playing with the system is rarely considered a worthwhile goal for a videogame but surely the joy in games is in uncovering and playing with the systems at work.⁵⁰

Just walking around, as Ashe suggests, is not antithetical to interacting with the world or having agency. However, the history of who gets to claim that agency, and how, shines an interesting light on the critiques of walking simulators today.

Gendered Wandering

Aimless wandering as cultural statement has a pedigree stretching back to the nineteenth century with Baudelaire and continues into modernism with Benjamin, but let's pick up the story in the mid-twentieth century, when the Situationist International in the 1950s and '60s (led by Guy Debord) defined a twentieth-century practice of *flânerie*. For Debord, the walker creates a certain space of his own by walking, counteracting the established landscape through which he moves. The switch between passive and active is important here: by enunciating an

individual path, counterwalking the established narrative of the city, the flâneur becomes a configurative agent, active in spite of his supposed distance and passivity. If we imagine the city as a procedurally generated text (like a piece of interactive fiction, or a game), the flâneur is the one who delineates the storyline.⁵¹ And by walking from one section to another, he's also the one holding the story together.

This central figure, however, is always male. Prostitution was coded as a female version of flânerie in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; restricted from many areas of public life, women walking in the city at unusual times or in unusual areas were not perceived as aimless dandies like their male counterparts, but as prostitutes at work.⁵² Subjected to a critical male gaze, female walkers did not have the luxury of observing and wandering aimlessly, but were always observed and ascribed some purpose. Deborah L. Parsons and other scholars have attempted to reclaim the female flâneur, however, as the very embodiment of digression.⁵³ A female digressive voice, unlike Tristram Shandy's, "is clearly gendered feminine."⁵⁴ This is arguably insulting, defining "female writing as conversational, epistolary and lacking in style, implicitly to be placed in opposition to male writing, the printed book, and rhetoric." But digressivity, particularly when read today, creates a feminized space: "a sanctuary from the masculine tyranny of plot."⁵⁵ The female flâneur in writing is thus actively passive in the same way as Debord's subversive psychogeographer: she counters the established narrative by digressing.

We see an analogous struggle happening in *The Path*, a walking sim released in 2009, in which the player controls six avatars of Little Red Riding Hood and directs them on their eponymous path to grandmother's house. The girls are aged 9–19, each named some version of red (Ruby, Scarlet, Rose), given a distinct personality, and instructed not to leave the path. But when the player obeys this rule and walks

the girl straight to grandmother's house, the game's final screen chides the player ("Failure!") for having neglected to collect any of the items available in the woods. The only way to win is to guide each girl away from the path and find her wolf somewhere in the forest. Each girl's wolf manifests differently; the 9-year-old gets a growling storybook wolf, the 19-year-old a predatory piano instructor. The game's mechanic requires the player to lead the girl directly to the wolf who eventually kills her (with sexual violence implied), thus forcing the player into a villainous role and challenging her to rethink the metaphors and tensions inherent in the original fairy tale.

The forest is procedurally generated, so finding the wolf (and all the other hidden objects) can require a large amount of slow, sinister trekking. Grandmother's house itself is a nightmare of angles and terrifying images, stringing together what you've found in the forest and killing your character gruesomely. Unless you haven't found the wolf, in which case he just watches from the corner as you fall asleep in grandmother's bed. The game is disturbing, powerful, and not particularly fun, in line with its status as trippy, postmodern fairy tale. With regard to Parsons's argument that the female flâneur is coded as a prostitute, each girl in *The Path* is forced to digress directly into sexual victimization. Besides the vague anxiety of purposelessness common to playing walking sims, *The Path* goes a step further and evokes outright fear, guilt, and distaste as the player must manipulate her charge into danger again and again.

The Path illustrates how old questions of agency, digressiveness, and the vulnerable female body can be recontextualized in light of new concerns, namely, inclusiveness in male spaces and the culture clash between the nerdy hardcore gamer and a newer mainstream gaming population. Walking sims situate this conflict within contemporary disputes like #GamerGate as well as literary and historical considerations of feminine digressiveness, purposelessness, and boredom, reclaiming

those traits (and the walking sims that display them) as expressions of an alternate but valid cultural artifact.

Notes

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1. Shaw, "Do You Identify as a Gamer?," 30.
2. Fils-Aimé, "Nintendo E3 2006 Press Conference."
3. Fredner, "The Year in Anti-Games."
4. Samyn, "Notgames Releases in 2012."
5. *Steam*, "Mountain."
6. O'Reilly, *Mountain*.
7. Bogost, *Unit Operations*. See ch. 6, "Encounters across Platforms."
8. Bogost, *How to Do Things with Videogames*, 50–51.
9. *Ibid.*, 49.
10. For more on how video game spaces contribute to a player's construction of narrative, see Michael Nitsche, *Video Game Spaces: Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Game Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).
11. Chambers, *Loiterature*.
12. Albes, *Der Spaziergang als Erzählmodell*, 17–18.
13. Atkin, *Textual Wanderings*; Frederick, *Narratives Unsettled*; Grohmann and Wells, *Digressions in European Literature*.
14. Aarseth, *Cybertext*.
15. Usually the definition involves some combination of rules, points, tasks, and end-conditions. For a survey of game definitions, see Salen and Zimmerman, *The Rules of Play*, and Sutton-Smith, "A Syntax for Play and Games."
16. Progenitors include *Myst*, released in 1993, a popular puzzle game that provided some atmospheric inspiration for walking sims. The following have all been called walking sims: *The Graveyard*, *The Path*, *Thirty Flights of Loving*, *Proteus*, *Bientôt l'été*, *Day Z*, *Kairo*, *Dream*, *Gone Home*, *MirrorMoon EP*, *Amnesia: A Machine for Pigs*, *The Stanley Parable*, *9.03m*, *Jazzpunk*, *Year Walk*, *Ether One*, *To the Moon*, *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter*, *Another World*, *Among The Sleep*, *Lifeless Planet*, *Neverending Nightmares*, *Eidolon*, *Dream*, *Flower*, *NaissanceE*, *The Lost Valley*, and *Journey*. List collected in part from lists on NeoGAF and Pat Ashe's blog.

17. *Wander*.
18. *Ibid.*
19. TheRalph, "GamerGate Cheers."
20. Maynard, *Beautiful Boredom*, 3.
21. Spacks, *Boredom*, 2–3.
22. *Ibid.*, 62: "The taken-for-granted probability of boredom in a woman's life provides the starting point for narrative—and perhaps for female anger." See also Toohey, *Boredom*.
23. Long, "'Perfume from a Dress . . .,'" 5.
24. Juul, *Half-Real*.
25. O'Connor, "Longing for Walking Simulators."
26. "Octodad."
27. "Dear Esther."
28. Gee, "Video Games and Embodiment," 3–4.
29. Bateman and Boon, *21st Century Game Design*, 67.
30. "Quinnspiracy."
31. Totilo, August 20, 2014, entry.
32. Alexander, "'Gamers' Don't Have to Be Your Audience."
33. Diver, "Merry Christmas, GamerGate." "There's fear behind a lot of GamerGate rhetoric—fear that the rise of a more varied array of gaming options will in some way marginalize the traditional shooters and sports simulations. But to deny these smaller, more niche productions space to exist beside the big boys is to promote inequality and everything that carries with it, from attitudes on feminism to political persuasions. Nobody that GamerGate has been seen to attack wants to steal away the big-budget blow-up-everything affairs—not even *Feminist Frequency's* Anita Sarkeesian, who has repeatedly stated that games she identifies sexist shortcomings in can be enjoyed despite these factors—but everyone needs to be OK with a growing field of alternatives."
34. Alexander's language is openly insulting: "Traditional 'gaming' is sloughing off, culturally and economically, like the carapace of a bug. . . . This is hard for people who've drunk the kool aid about how their identity depends on the aging cultural signposts of a rapidly-evolving, increasingly broad and complex medium. It's hard for them to hear they don't own anything, anymore, that they aren't the world's most special-est consumer demographic, that they have to share" ("Gamers' Don't Have to Be Your Audience"). See also Garrett Martin, "Why We Didn't Want to Talk about 'GamerGate,'" *Paste Magazine*, September 4, 2014, <http://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2014/09/why-we-didnt-want-to-talk-about-gamergate.html>, and Chris Suellentrop, "Can Video Games Survive?," *New York Times*, October 25, 2014, <http://nyti.ms/1rB7eG2>. For similar language about how gamers are "over" from the

Notgames perspective, see Auriea Harvey and Michaël Samyn, "Over Games," presentation given at the Art History of Games symposium, Atlanta, Georgia, February 6, 2010, <http://tale-of-fores.com/tales/OverGames.html>.

35. Khalaf, "Mobile Gaming." The *Kim Kardashian: Hollywood* mobile game, released June 25, 2014, earned \$1.6 million on its first day.

36. Grundberg and Hansegard, "Women Now Make Up Almost Half of Gamers."

37. Wingfield, "Feminist Critics of Video Games Facing Threats."

38. Otton, "Understanding Pro and Anti-Gamergate."

39. Aaronson, "Comment #171."

40. Chu, "The Plight of the Bitter Nerd"; Marcotte, "MIT Professor Explains"; Penny, "On Nerd Entitlement."

41. Arcticphoenix95, "The #GamerGate Thread."

42. *Metacritic*, Review of *Gone Home*.

43. Kiltmanenator, "More Corruption at Polygon."

44. *Urban Dictionary*, s.v. "Walking Simulator," submitted by Ghost Tartar and 2CleverUsername, December 7, 2014, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=walking+simulator>.

45. HobbieK, title post: "Played *Gone Home* for the first time last week. And I for one am excited for our Anita Sarkeesian mandated gaming future consisting entirely of lesbian walking simulators. Because that game is actually really good." See also comment by Baryonyx_walker: "You know what? #GamerGate is right. *Gone Home* is a walking simulator where you just click on stuff to interact with it. You know what else is like that? Every single FPS ever created. The only difference is that in the case of *Gone Home* 'click' doesn't equal 'gunshot.'"

46. "Gun Home."

47. "Hatred."

48. Grayson, "The Kind of Video Game Violence That Disturbs Me."

49. Evans-Thirwell, "Face-Stabbing and Cop-Killing."

50. Ashe, *The Pat Ashe* (blog).

51. Bogost, *Unit Operations*, 75: "The flâneur's role is fundamentally a configurative one. His passage through the city constantly opens up new paths. . . . Because flânerie is fundamentally a passage through a space, it bears much similarity to the configurative structure of procedural texts."

52. Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis*.

53. See Anke Gleber, *The Art of Taking a Walk: Flânerie, Literature, and Film in Weimar Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Celeste Langan, *Romantic Vagrancy: Wordsworth and the Simulation of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Olivia Murphy, "Jane Austen's 'Excellent

Walker': Pride, Prejudice, and Pedestrianism," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 26, no. 1 (2013): 121-42.

54. McMorrin, "I've Started So I'll—," 71.

55. *Ibid.*, 72.

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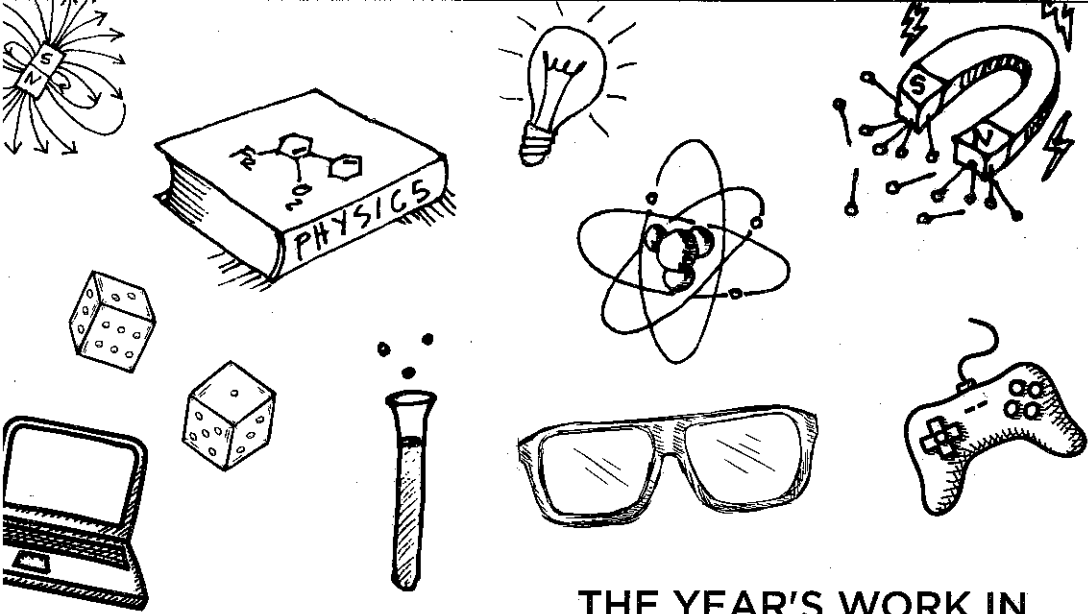
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THE FAN AS PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL 12 IN "RACEFAIL '09"

SIOBHAN CARROLL

"All men are intellectuals," Gramsci famously declared, "but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals."¹ For scholars writing in the wake of Edward Said's influential *Representations of the Intellectual*, that function has mainly been to serve as a "critical commentator addressing a nonspecialist audience on matters of broad public concern."² While writers on public intellectualism acknowledge that university credentials are not a prerequisite for this kind of enterprise, for the most part their discussions describe a "person trained in a particular discipline . . . who is on the faculty of a college or university."³ While such definitions have been useful to academics agitating for administrative support for politically engaged faculty, they are less useful in describing the intellectual roles available in twenty-first-century popular culture. As Noah Berlatsky observes, "the internet and social media have made it easier for people who are not traditional 'public intellectuals' to make their intellectual efforts public"—a boon to people and groups historically excluded from the "hierarchical . . . vision of the public intellectual" as university professor.⁴

This effect has been particularly pronounced in subject areas such as fan studies and science fiction studies, where, for decades, intellectual discussion of texts took place outside a university system unwilling to sully itself with "low" culture. In such areas, the line between fan and scholarly analyses has long been blurred, and scholars legitimized by



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“So this is it,” said Arthur, “we are going to die.”

“Yes,” said Ford, “except . . . no! Wait a minute!”

He suddenly lunged across the chamber at something behind Arthur's line of vision. “What's this switch?” he cried.

“What? Where?” cried Arthur, twisting round.

“No, I was only fooling,” said Ford, “we are going to die after all.”

He slumped against the wall again and carried on the tune from where he had left off.

Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*