Exploring travel in videogames

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INTRODUCTION

Videogames are a spatial medium (Aarseth, 1997; Wolf, 2001; Newman, 2004; Lammes, 2008; Nitzsche, 2008). As such, they enact travel and play out travel narratives—especially since the spatial structure of games has expanded beyond elemental "contained" spaces to include two-dimensional "scrolling" planes and, of course, the third dimension. With games becoming more graphically realistic and mechanically sophisticated, the phenomenological boundaries between terrestrial and virtual travel become harder to detect. This transference occurs in both directions, as contact between people increasingly runs via algorithmic and procedural systems (Manovich, 2013). As a result, the types of online games we play—and the stances and behaviors that those games engender towards those we encounter—should be related to how we think about our terrestrial trips. Players and travelers, in other words, are interrelated within networked and algorithmic culture.

In this context, the ExTraVid project (Exploring Travel in Videogames) collects travel experiences and memories in the realms of video games. Currently in its first stage, the project has led to a series of unstructured interviews, as well as a questionnaire, in which participants are asked about their favorite virtual place. The explorative findings point to a number of dominant themes in such descriptions of virtual place. The first of these pertains to a type of game in which the traversing of space is endowed with a strong sense of empowerment, as well as a focus on flow (Csíkszentmihályi, 2009) and game feel (Swink, 2009), (e.g. *Mirror's Edge* and *Assassin's Creed*). In these games, free running and parkour are central activities. Game scholar Ian Bogost notes about such free-running mechanics: "like the skate-boarder, the free runner sees the world differently, as a set of affordances for previously unintended means of locomotion" (Bogost, 2015, p. 74). This alternative locomotion through the city involves an effortless continuity, Bogost notes, and its successful operation produces a sense of physical mastery for the player.

There is also an inversion of this sense of space and locomotion, however, and it informs another dominant theme in the recounting of travel stories by players. It relates to a type of teleological travel in which a uniform end goal is made fully explicit, and the player continuously moves towards it (Van Nuenen, 2016). Players express the same sentiment of spatial possibility—but here it is accompanied by a feeling of purpose and teleology (e.g. *Journey,* reaching the Hyrule Field castle in *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*).

The singular direction and the constriction of control possibilities lead to an experience of travel that is akin to that of the Romantics, in its emphasis on the feebleness of the traveler and the vastness of the natural environment. The experience in *Journey* is further augmented by the presence of a limited number of other players, with whom the trip and memorable and desolate vistas are shared.

Another recurrent theme, and one that does not necessarily refer to intrinsic elements of the game itself, pertains to the connection between space and nostalgia. Many players take note of games played in formative years of their childhood, and when they were relatively unexperienced with the kind of exploration that new technologies started to offer around the mid 90's (e.g. *Super Mario 64*, *Tomb Raider*). The sentiments expressed about these games, again, center around the notion of spatial accessibility: as one participant put it, "It was this unprecedented feeling of 'you can *go* there'". These notions of an "unlocked" space and of unprecedented opportunity are of course also central experiences in terrestrial travel, and these experiences of players will, in a later stage, be connected to embodied travel experiences in a tourism context—for instance, by comparing favorite virtual destinations to respondents' favorite type of vacationing.

OPTIONAL BIO

Dr. Tom van Nuenen is Assistant Professor in Online Culture at the Department of Culture Studies at Tilburg University. He teaches popular culture and digital methods, and performs research into forms of reading and writing travel in online ecologies. He has held a Visiting Fellowship at the University of Western Sydney (2016) and the Shanghai International Studies University (2017). His articles have appeared in *Tourist Studies, Games and Culture* and *The Journal of Popular Culture,* and he is currently co-writing a chapter in *the Cambridge History of Travel Writing*.

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