

“The Fantasy that Never Takes Place”: Nostalgic Travel in Videogames

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Abstract

This article explores the correspondence between a pensive mode of play and the nostalgic address of 1990s and early 2000s adventure videogames. It explores the porous boundaries of the videogame text by conceiving of the wish to dwell within the game as a longing for radical difference (something only found elsewhere). The article discusses three ‘nostalgic gestures’ that stall the game’s action: the glance from foreground to background, the shift from the game to paratextual materials, and the drift of attention out the window or away from the gaming context altogether. Gaming’s promise of exotic transport activates a “fervor of the possible,” a melancholic identification with the world beyond which invests game spaces with the capacity for hopeful discovery, verging on a wish to remove oneself from the flow of time altogether.

Author Keywords

Nostalgia; Nintendo; Videogames; Barthes; Pensiveness; Melancholia; Imperialism; Daydream; Fantasy; Psychoanalysis; Rhythmanalysis

Introduction: Time to Think and No Place to Go

The isolated villages on the horizon become homelands for the eyes. Distance disperses nothing but, on the contrary, composes a miniature of a country in which we should like to live.¹

In the many hours devoted to scouring every inch of side-scrolling Super Nintendo games like *Super Mario World 2: Yoshi’s Island* (1995) and *Donkey Kong Country 2: Diddy’s Kong Quest* (1995), mastering and exhausting their diegetic contents, I would often catch myself lapsing in my duty as player to push toward that “frontier” of new worlds, the right side of the screen. Similar to Roland Barthes’ (1977; 1981) desire to pull still images out of a film’s “continuum of image”—a constant unspooling that he thought destroyed the capacity for “pensiveness” (p. 65-68; p. 55)—in these games, I would stop playing, halt the scrolling of the screen, watch the game’s geographic backdrop and imagine being *there* instead. In such moments, the game’s

unifying structures would unravel: foreground (plane of geometric action) would yield to background (inaccessible signifier of setting); linear advancement would stall at the intersection of multiple temporal and spatial planes; play's constant kinetic activity would reveal an underlying stillness; and goal-directed progress would give way to wanderlust, as if the game's clear path forward had become, like the z-depth space beyond, impassable, and all one could do was look on.

This solitary stalling of play comprises my most meaningful interactions with the medium—interactions which also “outplay meaning,” to borrow Barthes' (1977) phrasing (p. 62). That is, like Barthes' “obtuse meaning,” they constitute a “drifting” beyond the text's “informational” and “symbolic” levels.² And yet, the adventure game's goals do matter during this drift, at least insofar as they include the impetus to travel, to seek out the strange and unfamiliar. In other words, unlike Bernard Suit's (1978) irreverent “trifler,” who “recognize[s] rules but not goals,” (p. 47) – and unlike games with lax, open-ended goal systems like *The Sims* (to which McKenzie Wark applies Suit's trifler) – nostalgic drifting in adventure games entails a collapse of rule-bound systems under the weighty freight of the ever-expanding *goal* of travel. For the pensive player, the game has likely already been completed; the impulse to depart on the journey has since only grown.

This essay argues that such a pensive state could be productively understood as a mode of videogame engagement that, though likely pervasive, tends to resist signification and is difficult to articulate within communications frameworks.³ As an alternative, this essay employs the notion of *correspondence*, a term which originates in the study of travel writing and describes the intersection of an affective state and an object of contemplation. Fred Inglis (2000) describes the experience of gazing upon a natural landscape as a “correspondence between attributes of the landscape” and “the inarticulate but expectant feelings we bring to it” (p. 31).⁴ Correspondence de-emphasizes meaning transmission in favor of the metaphor of “drifting” off the beaten path, both in the sense intended by Barthes' pensive spectator *and* in view of the important fact that, for adventure videogames, travel is a major thematic concern and pervasive activity in play.⁵ However, rather than importing travel writing wholesale, the study of adventure videogames calls for the compounded concept of *nostalgic travel*, a journey we yearn for because embarking is impossible. That is, videogames inaugurate a dialectic of embodied, sensory immediacy and impossible distance—the promise of exotic alterity delivered in a carefully disguised, narrow circumscription (of space, of action, of “otherness”).

The analytical task of tracking nostalgic travel's complex, dialectical relationship between player and game benefits from a multidisciplinary, transmedial set of theoretical frameworks. Beginning with “reflective nostalgia” (Boym, 2001) as a rubric for the creative potential of dwelling on object loss, this paper considers the vertical reading of a narrative text (Bachelard, 1994), pensiveness (and verticality again) before a photographic image (Barthes, 1977), reverie before a well-lit fire (Bachelard, 1964), and daydreaming before the Imperial Panorama (Benjamin, 2006). Each framework shares in common a moment of pause with an object of contemplation, as well as bittersweet longing for impossible spatiotemporal relations: a being elsewhere or otherwise that the object itself somehow catalyzes. Since this “object” is never a game, these frames highlight affinities between videogames and non-digital media—affinities that, in turn, cast new light on questions of videogame medium specificity.

Though its eclectic and multidisciplinary approach to theorizing videogame textuality prevents this essay from settling too comfortably into a specific, ongoing scholarly conversation within game studies, its interest in videogame identification, medium specificity, and player subjectivity impinges upon concerns central to the field as a whole. Its methodological openness is also meant to address the fact that the quality of cross-disciplinary conversations about games influences academia's estimation of the medium. How related disciplines (economics, sociology, film studies, etc.) position games culturally and intellectually matters a great deal *for* game studies. This essay is meant as both an argument for, and a demonstration of, the notion that game studies benefits from engaging with wider disciplines in the production of critical research that privileges *games* as the object of study. Along these lines, and at its base, this essay exists in order to address a non-specialist, intellectual audience that (having once developed strong affective bonds with the medium) has since sought a path through this inarticulate domain of experience.

Moreover, it is those with strong emotional ties to videogames (regardless of disciplinary training) who will most readily recognize, in an anecdote about drifting off the beaten path in *Yoshi's Island* or *Diddy's Kong Quest*, their own past experiences with videogames. Likely, these readers associate a certain game with certain memories, seasons, or life epochs. Though mass produced, home videogames (in their duration, repetition, and capacity to absorb) foster an intimate imbrication of textual interactions and the rhythms of daily life. Apperley (2010) draws on Lefebvre's notion of "rhythmanalysis" to describe this imbrication as "situated gaming." Similarly, Stevens, Satwicz, and McCarthy's (2008) ethnographic approach looks to "how 'in-game' activity is tangled up with activity 'in-room'" and beyond, with "the wider worlds of activity that young people inhabit" (p. 43). Stevens et al. assume that the boundaries separating game and non-game are "more permeable and blurred" than is suggested by the prevailing mentality about games as "separate worlds" (i.e. the notion that "game play is a world apart of people's other activities in everyday life") (p. 43). More recently, Boluk and LeMieux (2017) have used the notion of "metagame" to drastically expand the traditionally understood boundaries of the videogame text. Though not a focus of these works, nostalgia is a fruitful approach to thinking about how the "in-game" is situated with both the "in-room" (and beyond). In their embodied (sensory) repetition, videogames can strongly evoke the past in which they were once heavily played. Returning to such games can lead to a contemplative mode—play drifts off course in a Proustian flood of memory.

However, rather than just any heavily played game, this paper is primarily about games that, by design and in practice, correspond to a nostalgic experience the *first* time they are played—games that are nostalgic in their very address to the player. Such games offer especially clear, even self-reflexive, examples of gaming's power to affectively "situate" us in the world when we play. And there are several ways games can be nostalgic in their mode of address.

Most scholarship on nostalgia and videogames emphasizes temporal aspects of a game's setting and employs what Boym (2001) describes as "restorative nostalgia" (the retrospective desire to reconstitute a lost past).⁶ Whalen and Taylor's (2008) important edited volume, for example, asserts that "nostalgia is best understood as a process of looking back to an unattainable past and trying to bring that past into the present," (p. 3). Games oriented around restorative nostalgia

tend to evoke and romanticize the historical past (e.g., the 1940s newsreel aesthetic of *Call of Duty* (2003), or the mimesis of “classical” film noir in *L.A. Noire* (2011)). Such an approach is immediately intelligible, though it emphasizes “pastness” (nostalgia’s conservative⁷ temporal dimension) in place of more radical possibilities.⁸

I argue that, as a highly spatial (even atemporal) medium, gaming’s most prevalent nostalgic mode is less a wish to return to the past, and more a wish to return to a *place*, a place one has never visited and could never visit. This thesis relies on a second sort of nostalgia, which Boym (2001) terms “reflective nostalgia” (and others call “critical nostalgia”),⁹ a mode of thinking that draws productively on the avowed sadness of loss, rather than a specific image of the past, to imagine new relations in the present and future. While restorative nostalgia emphasizes “nostos” or the return home, reflective nostalgia emphasizes “algia,” the sense of longing (pp. xv, 41). One must partially let go of gaming’s power to immerse—including its ability to perfectly reconstruct the past—and embrace its *limit* as a medium, its artificial restrictions, its hidden walls, in order to think of gaming’s potential for reflective nostalgia. Reflective nostalgia’s “dreams of another place and another time” (p. 41) emerge at the outer boundaries of a game’s virtual world, where illusory geographic fullness begins to show its seams. Gaming’s nostalgic address to the player relies on a disavowal of the game’s spatial, diegetic, and technological limits. The oversold promise to transport players to spaces of exotic alterity establishes an idealized “elsewhere” towards which play bends.

This mode of address corresponds to (aids with indifference) at least three gestures in play, all of which cause the game’s progression to swerve off course: the shift of attention from foreground to background imagery; the shift from the videogame as such to “paratextual”¹⁰ materials outside the game that extend its diegetic scope; and the glance away from game materials altogether and out the window (or analogous frame) of the room where games are played. The wish to “dwell” within the game—when marked as an impossible or foreclosed desire—is distinct from the wish for cyberspace, for a fully substitutive virtual reality where “anything is possible” (e.g., travelling without leaving home).¹¹ In its mnemonic imbrication of game with surrounding space and daily ritual, and in its embrace of limit and loss, reflective nostalgia complicates the argument that games are simply escape from reality. If restorative nostalgia represents flight from the present (entrenchment in the past), then reflective nostalgia flips the games-as-escape script by emphasizing the potential for new connections through loss.

Crucially, nostalgia is distinct from the conventionally understood “empowerment fantasy” or core loop of gratifying gameplay repeated over many hours. Rather, it represents a stalling of fantasy, a “fantasy that never takes place”—the safeguarding of desire that psychoanalyst David Werman (1977) describes in his essay on nostalgia and mourning:

While fantasy seeks to fulfill a desire, nostalgia repetitively tends toward a fantasy that never takes place. In this way the desire is ‘fulfilled’ by not being realized, and so the subject is safe from the loss of the object, and the object is guarded by being kept in the nostalgic relationship.

p. 391 (1977)

From the psychoanalytic perspective, nostalgia finds meaning *in itself*, not instrumentally like fantasy, which seeks gratification and then “diminishes or disappears” (p. 393). The following sections consider the dynamics of nostalgia’s non-instrumentality in each of the three proposed nostalgic gestures, gaming’s nostalgic (pre)positions: into the background, beside the screen, and out the window.

Into the Background

Though the first nostalgic gesture applies to adventure games writ large, it is most clearly courted by side-scrolling and pseudo-3D adventure and platforming games whose background images at once support and render impossible the wish to venture into exotic, virtual spaces. In side-scrolling games, z-depth is constructed upon a no-man’s land: there is no actual “distance” between foreground and background images; depth is an illusion and travel a foreclosed possibility. Alenda Chang (2011) identifies an ontological divide and ensuing spatial hierarchy in a *Mario* platformer’s “series of obstacles set against a simple, side-scrolling backdrop,” the latter of which is “less interface than canvas, a static representation that shifts only in parallax as the player hurtles forward” (p. 59). The bracketing of a game’s environment within a “static backdrop” is tied, for Chang, to the lamentable lack of scholarly attention paid to environment and setting in games. But this bracketing also holds a nostalgic value. While the foreground or plane of action in side-scrolling platformer videogames such as *Yoshi’s Island* serves as the domain of embodied control and mastery, it is the inaccessible in-game background spaces, and the depth techniques used to depict them, that situate play within the context of grand exotic transport into jungles, deserts, and snowy mountains. In this sense, the very device which stimulates the urge to travel simultaneously frustrates it, helping to trigger the nostalgic posture in play.

Yoshi’s Island sometimes forces players to watch the background *while* navigating dangerous spatial challenges in the foreground, such as in the early stage, Watch Out Below, where large enemies (chomps) appear to leap from the background and then descend on (and decimate) the plane of action. The illusion is also clearly an effort to cue players into the background setting’s iridescent tropical imagery (Figure 1). It is easy to lose oneself in *Yoshi’s* background images, which stretch across the entire screen in bold color and rich detail, sometimes with animation: distant gulls flying over the ocean, mountains poking through clouds, misty waterfalls behind jungle vines. The images are tactile (colored as if by felt-tipped markers), both apparently far off and yet available to touch. As Yoshi toils on, background settings scroll horizontally and vertically, parallel spaces seemingly without limit. And when Yoshi waits, as player attention drifts, these settings bend us toward the other side of the screen, to nostalgia’s “St. Elsewhere”: “another time, a better life” (Boym: 2001: xiv).

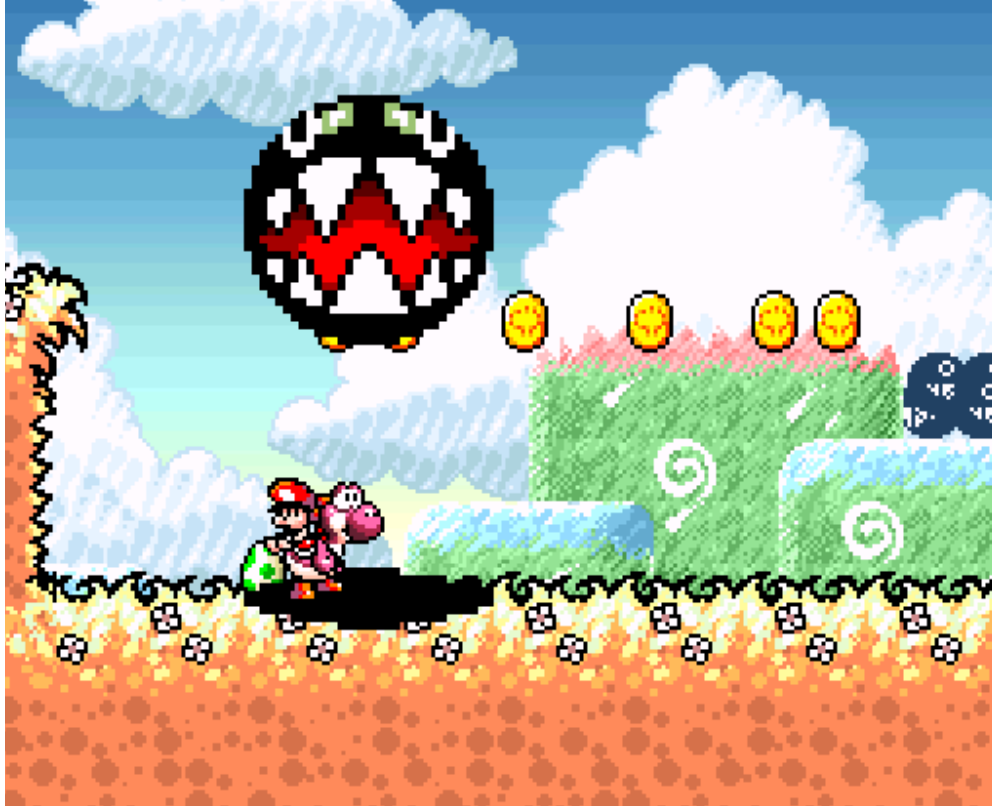


Figure 1: Yoshi's Island's "Watch Out Below" (and beyond)

Documentation of the wish to enter the videogame's background can be traced at least as far back as 1980, to Atari's *Battlezone* (1980). Halter (2006) relays a then-popular rumor about *Battlezone*'s distant geography, alleging that:

If a player's tank kept moving forward for at least an hour, it would finally reach those crystalline peaks and within them find a fabled factory that was busy at work producing all those enemy tanks.

p. 122 (2006)

To an extent, the urge to dwell within a game's inaccessible reaches seems like the (much older) wish for immersive art.¹² In his study of the 19th-Century immersive technology, panoramic paintings (a technology ripe for transhistorical comparison with side-scrolling videogames¹³), Erkki Huhtamo (2013) frames this wish within the context of the "Romantic's desire to peek beyond the horizon" (p. 6). Today, wish-fulfilling adventure videogames regularly tout (to the point of cliché¹⁴) the feature that their virtual spaces are indeed fully explorable, that distant markers of setting are no longer just part of the "scenery," as *Kotaku* says in a review of Nintendo's recent *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017): "those mountains and ruins... you can walk across every inch" (Schreier, 2017, para. 13).

Rather than "realizing" and satisfying the wish to reach a game's distant geography, side-scrollers *preserve* the wish, introducing a moment of pause to the medium's teleological "upgrade path" (Harpold, 2007, p. 3). In Boym's (2001) terms, one could say the side-scroller does not directly oppose "the straight road of progress" (gaming's "deterministic narrative" of

unencumbered, three-dimensional exploration); rather, it represents a “sideshadow” or “back alley”—it “allows us to take a detour” (p. xvii). Put otherwise, side-scrollers forestall the disappointment of arrival, or what Werman (1977) calls the “demythologization” of *elsewhere*: the sense, given nostalgia’s resistance to direct representation, that the attained object “is not what it promised to be” (p. 391). The nostalgic posture finds liberation within confinement: the parallax effect may be a sham illusion for depth, but it poetically joins the side-scrolling game’s digital beyond with the inaccessible world glimpsed from the backseat of a moving car—one of childhood’s iconic spaces of boredom and constraint. The side-scroller’s world of far-off things absorbs and dissolves the dreamer who enters it. For Gaston Bachelard (1994), the miniature world glimpsed on the horizon (or underfoot) is not “*exactly the same thing*” as what it represents; if a “geometrician” would view a scale drawing or miniature model of a house as equivalent with the life-size dwelling, the “unhurried reader”—the “man with the magnifying glass”—would instead see an opportunity in the spatial barrier to daydream an “entrance into the world,” to “[take] the world as though it were quite new to him” (pp. 155, 161).

Put simply, if open-world games are about steadily trekking to far-off places (managing inventories and stamina meters along the way), then side-scrollers and pseudo-3D games figure a shift of attention to what is distant—to the background—as a *disruption* to the journey. In this sense, the preserved wish to enter the background of a side-scroller is like the daydream that, for Bachelard, leads to “vertical reading,” or ruminating on accumulated details during “pauses in the narrative,” (p. 162). Barthes (1997) employs a similar notion in his discussion of cinematic images which can only be read *vertically* when movement (a film’s “natural state”) is interrupted (p. 65). Significantly, however, whereas Bachelard describes a posture in the reader, Barthes also wrangles with cinema as a resistant object of contemplation (a time-based art). Raymond Bellour (1984) modifies Barthes’ claim by suggesting that photograms (photographs which appear during a film and therefore introduce a moment of stillness) can, for a “pensive spectator,” suffice to “open up another time: a past of the past, a second, different time. Thus, they freeze for one instant the time of the film, and uprooting us from the film’s unfolding, situate us in relation to it” (p. 120). This “uprooting” produces distance (“the photo subtracts me from the fiction of the cinema”), a space for reflection that permits “precious leisure to ‘add to’ the film,” (p. 120). Laura Mulvey (2003) extends these arithmetic operations to digital media, arguing that “technological change,” specifically “electronic media’s inter-activity,” “has given a new kind of visibility to stillness,” permitting “the spectator time to stop and look and think” (p. 113-114).

The nostalgic pause during videogame play could, for a *pensive player*, be figured analogously as an uprooting that provides “precious leisure to ‘add to’” the game. As with Barthes’ stilled image, when we pause in a side-scroller, the “causal” relations of what came before (on the left) and what comes next (on the right) both diminish, while the background waxes in significance. However, unlike with cinematic images, a moment of stillness during videogame play does not radically transform the game, which plastically accommodates even resistant play. Games do generally offer a “pause” function akin to that on a DVD remote—when the image is lost (usually dimmed, blurred, or otherwise occluded) and the flow of play is broken. However, beyond the literal pause, and as a necessary correlate to gaming’s logic of constant player involvement, stillness looms as a baseline state that returns anytime players simply stop pressing buttons. Galloway (2006) calls these playerless moments “ambient acts” and “pure process”.

Ambient games that forego countdown timers—e.g., *Yoshi's Island*, *Diddy's Kong Quest*, *Paper Mario*—issue an invitation to pause, to drift, to daydream, to dwell.

The notion of pensive spectatorship has attributed linear narrative chronology's disruption to the filmic image's underlying photographic indexicality, the intrusion of "pastness" into cinema's present whenever the film becomes still. However, in non-indexical adventure videogames, what is evoked during stillness (when linear progression stalls) is not so much a historical past as an unbridgeable geographic beyond. In this sense, adventure videogames resonate with Walter Benjamin's (2006) account of his childhood visits to the Imperial Panorama's "Distant worlds," which would "sway" in their frames and then "trundle off to the left" as he "looked on":

Thus it was that, one afternoon, while seated before a transparency of the little town of Aix, I tried to persuade myself that, once upon a time, I must have played on the patch of pavement that is guarded by the old plane trees of the Cours Mirabeau. (...) It may have been a defect in the lighting system that suddenly caused the landscape to lose its color. But there it lay, quite silent under its ashen sky. It was as though I could have heard even wind and church bells if only I had been more attentive.

p. 44

The *breaking down* of the transparency's illusion, with a little bell announcing the shift of image, caused the landscape to become "suffused with the ache of departure," a bittersweet emotional correspondence with an exotic elsewhere (p. 43). Along similar lines, adventure videogames would resonate with Barthes' (1981) account of one photographic image—*The Alhambra* (Figure 2)—that orients him towards an impossible elsewhere:

An old house, a shadowy porch, tiles, a crumbling Arab decoration, a man sitting against the wall, a deserted street, a Mediterranean tree...: this old photograph (1854) touches me: it is quite simply *there* that I should like to live.

p. 38

The Alhambra is a document of the past, but it ignites a "kind of second sight which seems to bear me forward to a utopian time, or to carry me back to somewhere in myself... it is as if *I were certain* of having been there or of going there" (p. 40). Like Benjamin, Barthes' wish is nostalgically preserved in simile. And, like Benjamin, Barthes revels in exotic imagery:

This desire affects me at a depth and according to roots which I do not know: warmth of climate? Mediterranean myth? Apollinism? Defection? Withdrawal? Anonymity? Nobility? Whatever the case (with regard to myself, my motives, my fantasy), I want to live there *en finesse*....

p. 38

In all three—the invented childhood memory of Aix before the moving panorama, the impossible wish to dwell within the photograph of the *Alhambra*, and the daydream of entering the videogame's inaccessible geography—there is a shared nostalgic longing related to the promise of exotic transport and an encounter with radical alterity.

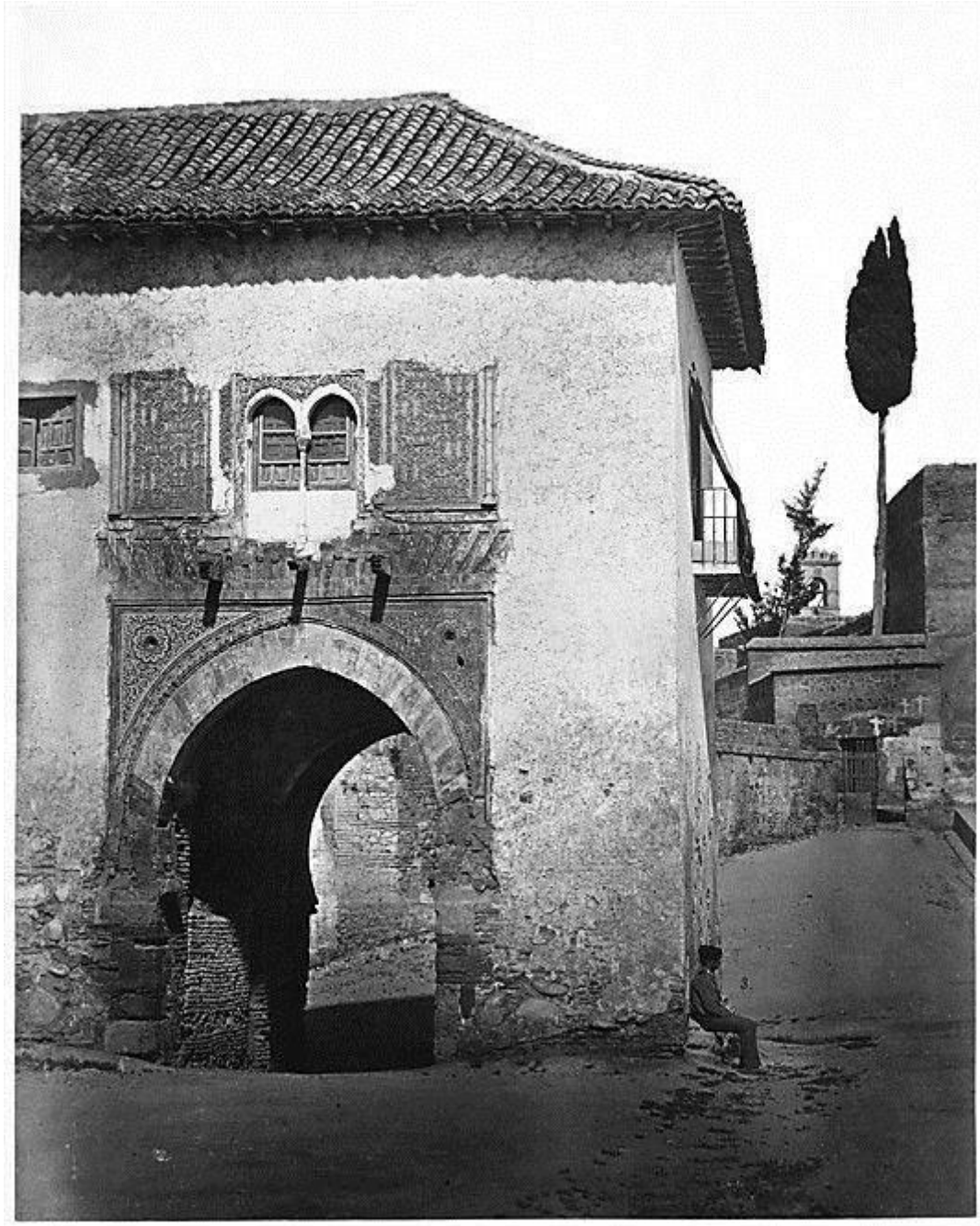


Figure 2: Barthes' Alhambra (*"I want to live there..."*)

Beside the Screen

In the second nostalgic gesture, the wish to dwell within the game is preserved as attention pivots away from the television screen and towards paraphernal materials. Instruction manuals, box and cartridge art, news and strategy magazines, monographic guidebooks, television commercials, and merchandise: these trappings of the videogame help nostalgically sustain the game by evoking a paratextual process extending *beyond* the confines of the software system. Given sharp limitations to software memory at the time, games programmed in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s relied

on such objects to flesh out core visual, instructional, and narrative details. As a result, early adventure gaming's promise of geographic transport was conveyed through an open, mutually constituted, transtextual¹⁵ process.

As Raiford Guins (2014) demonstrates, contemporaneous criticism of the hand-painted Atari 2600 box art (which bore little resemblance to in-game images) constructed a dialectic of *text* and *paratext*: a binary of monochromatic blocks (in action and on-screen) contrasted with richly detailed images (in stasis and elsewhere).¹⁶ This paper follows Guins in suggesting videogame paraphernalia nevertheless once framed videogame play in significant and complex ways. The *elsewhere* that is sought during nostalgic deviations from on-screen action is in large part a product of the perceived gap—material, informational, representational—between text and paratext. The unbridgeable distance between the two animates Boym's (2001) claim that “nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship,” and that “a cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images—of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life,” and when “we try to force it into a single image, it breaks the frame or burns the surface” (pp. xiii-xiv). The paratext, in its organization (and *stilling*) of in-game knowledge, refers to the game as the site of vibrant exploration and action; the game, in its many evocations of elsewhere, refers to the paratext as the site of diegetic completion; in each, the reference to another text, which must be paused—travel deferred—generates a constant “there” to the journey's “here-and-now.”

Does this nostalgic gap still exist in our present historical moment of all-digital downloads and games such as *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End* (2016), which have *absorbed* paraphernal objects (manuals, box and disc art, etc.) into the confines of their application data? Yes, though in subtle ways (e.g., by embedding material alterity within the game, frames within frames, games within games, or by marking loss at a narrative level). But the paratextual dialectics of guidebooks from console generations prior to the popularization of the internet search engine—e.g., Sega-Genesis- and Super-Nintendo-era games, such as *Earthbound*, *Yoshi's Island*, *Super Mario RPG* (see Figure 3)—renders the nostalgic relationship especially visible. Fuller and Jenkins (1994) once argued that Nintendo's side-scrollers were a form of travelogue: if play itself told a story, that story was “locodescriptive” in form. Their analysis could go further in discussing the extent to which instruction manuals and guidebooks are more literal examples of travel writing. These texts certainly satisfy Chard's (1999) definition of travel writing as “imaginative geography”: first, the “imaginative seduction”—the hyperbolic testimony of an encounter with alterity—and then the “ordering knowledge” of this othered space: the practical advice about how to get along there (p. 10).



Figure 3. Earthbound's "Travel & Shopping Guide"

In its "imaginative seduction," *Yoshi's Island's* instruction manual supplements the game's pixelated images with detailed, hand-drawn reimaginings of Yoshi, Mario, and colorful jungle organisms. Compared with the manual (which reproduces verbatim the game's narrative prologue), the separately sold guidebook does more to embellish the diegesis, describing *Yoshi's Island* as "an exotic epic" with special emphasis on alterity (geographic and cultural): "Snowy mountains tower over sweltering jungles. Dark caves plunge deep beneath lush forests. Primitive natives stand guard over the ruins of ancient civilization"—"No passport is necessary, just your *Yoshi's Island* Game Pak!" (Nintendo, 1995, pp. 4, 6, 56). Detailed, hand-drawn figures pepper margins throughout the entire guidebook and manual, including the technical sections, as a reminder that even hardware and play mechanics are defined by their capacity to provide entry to diegetic spaces that are, in turn, understood as open arenas where players *act*.

In terms of volume, the category of "ordering knowledge" predominates both manual and guidebook. *Yoshi's* instruction manual devotes only 4 of its 22 pages exclusively to story. The remainder reference extra-diegetic entities (e.g., ESRB content ratings), game hardware, powerup lists, and modes and basic rules of play. If the manual hints at the game's vastness and geographic variety, *Yoshi's* 100-plus-page guidebook tells all (and then some). Its detailed maps represent every in-game space and the secrets contained there. But the book is also "metatextual" in its tendency to discuss its videogame as hardware (technology), software (game genre), and industry (developer interviews). For example, *Yoshi's* guide extols the "FX2" graphics chip and the "new programming technique called morphmation," which combine to "produce enemies that grow, shrink, rotate and change shape. Some are even bigger than an entire screen!" (p. 1). These moments are not nostalgic per se, but they encourage a certain distance from the game in order to

take pleasure in beholding it; the capacity to take pleasure in this way seems necessary ordering knowledge to the game.

The guide seems to welcome a bittersweet aesthetic appreciation of the game's signifiers of setting both during and *as* a moment of pause. It figures these moments as a merger of technological and natural sublime¹⁷: "A rich palette and subtle shading give the backgrounds a magical effect" and "The amateur geologist in Yoshi would love to study the rocks floating in air, but he has work to do!" (pp. 1, 40). Moreover, to consult the guide is already to pause in a world of glossy preserve, to be outside the time of play. Though the guide introduces a subtle temporal duality to play, its spatial coordinates are simple: "Judging from the lava lakes in Burt's basement, things are getting very hot for Yoshi and Mario! Just keep cool and your Nintendo Power Player's Guide by your side!" (p. 28).

"By your side," the guide provides the chance to alternate between reading about a location and visiting it in the game. Present during moments of pause, parallel to action when read by a collaborator, the book multiplies the possibilities of remaining *in* the game. The guidebook can, for instance, stow away in a backpack or under the covers, transcending console space as well as parental approbations against excessive play. The guidebook is, perhaps, an even more tantalizing read without having on hand the game to which it constantly refers. In a sense, this is true of the game cartridge itself. Recall, if possible, the childhood moment of the car or train ride home following an in-store purchase: the game is at hand but does not yet exist, cannot yet be played; it is an imaginary object of plastic and computer chips. One small printed image of promotional art on the face of the cartridge stitches it all together, a point of legibility, an opaque window, a future held in abeyance by the fact that the cartridge itself is paraphernal to the game you play. If playing the game (entering its world) is the wish, then these moments ahead of the game super-charge its companion materials with anticipation. This anticipatory moment should be seen as a nostalgic end in itself. It may be pursued but can never be recaptured; it may have no affective equal within gameplay.

And this may be true of travel writing more generally. Lévi-Strauss argued that the whole point of travel books is to (in Chard's words):

restore to the reader a sense of otherness—an excitement in encountering cultural difference which has been lost in travel itself, as a result of the distressing seepage of the 'sous-produits malefiques' ('harmful by-products') of Western civilization into the rest of the world.

Chard, p. 1 (1999)

Lévi-Strauss (1974) refers to this harmful by-product as the spread of a capitalistic "monoculture" (p. 38). The notion that otherness is central to the impulse to travel is common in studies of tourism.¹⁸ So too is the idea that the quest for alterity is a form of self-deception, a romantic image projected onto a modern, technological, and polluted world—this is how Lévi-Strauss reads "the mad passion for travel books and their deceptiveness" (p. 38). Likewise, perhaps, the mad passion for videogames and *their* deceptiveness, at least if "deceptiveness" is understood as an unbridgeable gap between virtual and natural spaces, between what is depicted

in a guide book and what the game provides, and between a game's promise of an encounter with alterity and its inevitable delivery of genre clichés and recycled character sprites.

Out the Window

In the third gesture, gameplay stalls when attention drifts out the window or doorframe where games are played. As with the first two gestures, the glance out the window is reciprocal and reversible—we carry the game with us and, in a sense, re-encounter it outside. This counterintuitive notion is prefigured in Barthes' (1981) discussion of the paradoxical qualities of the *punctum* in photography, when he suggests that “Ultimately—or at the limit—in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes” (p. 53). In other words, one knows a photograph better by remembering it than by looking at it (“as if direct vision oriented its language wrongly”) (p. 53).¹⁹ Likewise, there is an aspect of the videogame best contemplated during a lapse in direct (or, rather, *goal-directed*) vision.

Contemplating the videogame as one drifts away makes that game an object of reverie. Gaston Bachelard (1964) defines reverie as a special mode of relaxed contemplation “centered upon one object” that then proceeds “in a star pattern,” both leaving and returning “to its center to shoot out new beams” (p. 14). He suggests reverie (whose “first object” was fire: domestic hearth) is distinct in its radial pattern from linear temporal structures and, further, that it involves a form of attention unlike that “involved in watching or observing” (pp. 14-15). Reverie rhymes with nostalgic longing: the pause (“time out of time”), the duality (“home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life”). Both reverie and nostalgia disrupt linear progression in favor of a different temporal order. And though, at the outer reaches of its “beams,” reverie goes quite far, its thoughts still somehow “hold fast to their object” (p. 14).²⁰ This notion is especially useful since, though seemingly occluded from the glance out the window, the nostalgic game itself can initiate this defenestration of attention.

Like other engrossing domestic leisure activities, playing a console videogame excludes the possibility of being *elsewhere* and doing *otherwise*. Since games make prolonged demands for complete attention and ocular engagement while, at the same time, offering embodied experiences of geographic departure, their relationship with that world outside is unique. It could be said that, rather than completely excluding one another, the adventure videogame *nostalgically preserves* the real-world spaces and activities that playing a game precludes—spaces and activities which re-emerge within the game as preoccupations with exotic departure and high-stakes action. In moments of reverie with these videogames, as controllers drop towards the floor and beams shoot out from the space of play, we are met with a latent awareness of our own occlusion from a wider world of possibility.

How games catalyze a wayward glance is sometimes overt and literal, such as when they evoke spaces on the fringes of domesticity. In *Pikmin* (2001) players enter a garden and gaze downward at a busy insect world twisting under the sway of arboreal shadows. Lest an “unhurried reader” drift from the course set by the game's strict objectives (lest reverie set in), the HUD is framed by a countdown to the end of day (and play). The clock is also a reminder to players that the sun is slowly setting on a nearby yard, garden, or park, where, *despite our absence*, a miniature universe carries on under grassy cover. *Chibi-Robo!* (2006, Figure 4) re-enchants a domestic

interior through a similar mechanism: by shrinking the player’s perspective to the scale of a small toy, the game transforms a suburban home into a vast world of spatial resistance and surrealist enlargement (a lamp cord that’s a climbing rope, “a typewriter that’s the horizon of a desk”).²¹ The game opens onto a reverie of domesticity (defamiliarizing home) through the optical point of view of overlooked co-inhabitants (peridomestic insects and animals) which, safely hidden in darkened corners and on high-up, forgotten shelves, enjoy prospection, horizon, and periphery (homes within home).



Figure 4. Chibi-Robo!’s domestic reverie

However, in *Paper Mario* (2001), as in most adventure games, the adventure (and its diversity of spaces) requires departing home early on. These games pull us towards our windows, in part, because their individuation of space by severe ecological variation is like a shotgun blast of signifiers for “elsewhere.” Boym (2001) suggests that “prototypical longing” is epitomized in Heine’s poem, which she reproduces (p. 14):

A spruce is standing lonely
 In the North on a barren height.
 He drowns; ice and snowflakes
 Wrap him in a blanket of white.

He dreams about a palm tree
 In a distant, eastern land,
 That languishes lonely and silent
 Upon the scorching sand.

Whether players near windows glimpse snowy spruces or desert palms, *Paper Mario* will evoke their antipode. The trees in the poem serve as potent signifiers of othered space and yet are also

metaphors for rootedness and the difficulty of transport. No doubt, both qualities contribute to what Boym sees in the poem's prototypicality. Trees also often frame the boundaries of domestic space *and* are a common décor for signaling far-flung destinations in videogame imagery. In this sense, the trees and the geographic distances they signify, nostalgically connect the out-of-window with the on-screen.

Adventure games like *Paper Mario* also pull us towards our windows because drastic atmospheric shifts can fuel a nostalgia for domestic rituals associated with holidays and the cyclical time of seasonal change. Holidays, like the seasonal events they tend to emphasize, represent the return to consciousness of a social and geographic backdrop that encapsulates everyday life in the home. No doubt, part of *Paper Mario's* nostalgic address, part of how playing the game draws us to our windows, involves the sharp contrasts of season implied in its different geographic locales. *Banjo-Kazooie* (1998) is even more explicitly seasonally evocative, populating its worlds with enemies, characters, and objectives that double as holiday motifs. More recently, the *Splatoon* series (2015, 2017) is clearly intended to evoke summertime through an aesthetic amalgam of summer camp, Nickelodeon, pool parties, and Nerf guns.

In a more general sense, the wish to dwell in the background itself could be viewed as a throughway to both the images in the guidebook and the glance out the window: all three comprise a single attentional arc leading away from the action of play. However, consideration of the future (travel to come) seems to open a palpable divide between the motives underlying each gesture's disclosure (and foreclosure) of another place and another time. If the journey into a side-scroller's background space is avowedly impossible, and the adventure promised in companion reading materials is inherently "deceptive" in Lévi-Strauss' sense, then travel out the window in the room where we play is (for some) potentially realizable and merely deferred during play. In this sense, the third gesture seems to model Christopher Lasch's (1991) cynical conception of nostalgia as only "superficially loving in its re-creation of the past" (the idea that nostalgia "evokes the past only to bury it alive") (p. 13). In Lasch's view, nostalgic longing expresses an over-eagerness to eulogize—to create an impossible distance with specific objects from the past (or present) *in order to justify their removal from the future*. The glance out the window seems to make use of a moment away from play to dwell on one's own (ongoing) removal from an elsewhere to play's here-and-now. In this sense, it is one's self that would become "buried alive" in the glance out the window during play.

Self-burial evokes the psychoanalytic view of nostalgia as a "dread of the future," a tendency in some patients to dwell on lost objects or foreclosed possibilities instead of seeking new ones (Nawas & Platt, 1965). Burying the self may reflect what Miller (1956) said of how Proust's work employs nostalgia to pursue a wish for "life outside of time," the fantasy that "death" might be "overcome by escaping from time" (p. 106). This view of nostalgia may also exemplify what D.W. Winnicott (1991) despised about daydreaming, what he saw in his clinical work as the pathological paralysis of "fantasying," which merely "absorb[s] energy" without "contributing... to living" (p. 26). On the other hand, Kracauer (1995) would extoll the "radical boredom" of deliberately staying in and doing nothing. Kracauer's, *blissful*, "unearthly" boredom reaches an ecstatic state in the summer, when one *ought* to be outside:

On a sunny afternoon when everyone is outside, one would do best to hang about in the train station or, better yet, stay at home, draw the curtains, and surrender oneself to one's boredom on the sofa...

p. 334

In each case, whether “normal” or “pathological,” an energy has been saved, rescued by the foreclosure of a possibility (and its attendant responsibilities). Self-burial seems to especially resonate with the kind of reverie encouraged by videogames that involve shrinking down to the size of an insect, such as *Pikmin*, *Chibi-Robo!*, *Mister Mosquito* (2002), or *Army Men: Sarge's Heroes* (1999). These games offer the experience of being overlooked by (and thus the freedom to withdraw from) a wider geographic and social world. This notion is explicitly illustrated in the credits of *Pikmin 2* (2004), when one of its two tiny protagonists, Louie, is unintentionally stranded. Excused from work and its strictures of time and place, Louie wanders, resting on lily pads and disappearing under back-lit grass blades (Figure 5). In these cinematic images, the camera offers an affective reverse-shot to gameplay's constant downward gaze, finally revealing the vegetation and light sources that had presumably cast shadows over play's many hours. During the credits, Louie appears to join the order of abnegated responsibility, time out of time, and reverie, as if the game itself were glancing out a virtual window that had always hovered above and framed play.



Figure 5: *Pikmin 2*'s credits, Louie's escape from work and its strictures of time and place

In truth, psychoanalytic orthodoxy would view nostalgia as the opposite of an over-eagerness to eulogize; nostalgia is often compared to *melancholia* as a way to avoid acknowledging loss, to avoid the work of mourning by incorporating what is lost into the self, thereby providing the lost object a path into the future as a *melancholic identification*.²² In an especially broad application, Judith Butler (1995) discusses gender identity under the rubric of melancholia, arguing for example that a cis-gendered male child has melancholically identified with (incorporated into his self) the foreclosed possibility of pursuing a same-sex object of desire. What has become

impossible is preserved, its limit denied, by introjection. Adopting a gender identity is just one way psychoanalytic theory conceives of growing up as a series of losses, a process of “partitioning” the infant’s original, expansive self into discrete categories. Kaja Silverman (1983) understands this original wholeness as the “‘oceanic self,’ or what Lacan punningly refers to as ‘l’hommelette’ (a human omelette which spreads in all directions)” (p. 155). The subsequent process of dividing the “me” and the “not-me” creates the precondition for what Silverman describes as cultural subjectivity’s general “yearning for something else” (p. 154). French philosopher Henri Lefebvre has even emphasized the role of “natural space” in this process, as a material extension of the oceanic self, and as a subsequent “mirror” or reminder of our “creative capacity” to identify with a wider “socio-spatial landscape”.²³

The notion of socio-spatial landscape as mirror is apt for thinking about complex emotional connections with a genre of videogame play that is less often about mimicking discrete subjectivities (avatar customization) than exploring a virtual geography. On the model of melancholic identification, psychoanalysis’ theorized original state of undifferentiated identification with space reemerges as an affinity for a certain representation of radical alterity—a longing for the most definitely “not-me” in space as well as in person. A time when there was no firm notion of difference becomes manifest in a fixation on radical difference, an accumulation of absence (nostalgia), an emptying of the ego as one dwells on where one is not, when one is not, whom one is not. The glance out the window during a nostalgic pause in videogame play is likely melancholic in this sense. It enacts this experience of loss in a moment of reverie. And by reversing the flow of an identification with spatial alterity in the game, the glance safeguards the potential of visiting elsewhere by acknowledging its distance and preserving it as a possible future deferred.

Elspeth Probyn (1995) calls this future potential “the fervor of the possible,” like a fork in the road that has not yet been passed by (p. 458). Following Probyn, McDermott (2002) situates the fervor of the possible at the heart of critical nostalgia, especially when, as alternative pathways lapse, it begins to reverberate as “a yearning for what might have been rather than what was” (p. 404). In contrast with self-burial, the glance out the window would, in this sense, reflect the nostalgic retention in the self of a lost connectedness with a wider world (a world “rather than what was”). We turn away from this world when we play games in order to better retain it, to protect the wish to be within it by folding it into the fervor of the possible (a future abated). Turning towards an adventure videogame in the first place—having the time, space, and quiet to do so— means turning away from a world in which no pathway has yet lapsed, where no destination is too far.

Conclusion

This essay’s theory of videogame textuality reconsiders how games are situated within everyday life, how they become imbricated with the affective currents that run through the home, and how they retroactively help mark the passage of time for routine videogame players. The notion of a nostalgic wish offers an alternative framework to paradigms that tend to impose on games the logic of an all-encompassing, wish-fulfilling substitutive virtual reality that empties out a game’s everyday domestic environment (recent VR campaigns even suggest removing all furniture from

the game room). Nostalgia doesn't just evoke a "beyond" to the space of play, it necessitates it. It brings the exotic and the endotic into a dialectical relation.

Nostalgia is not hostile to play, but it is indifferent to winning the game. It overtakes play as play drifts off course, and it changes how we think of play's relationship to time and space; it begs the question: How does play resist the flow of time and find perfect expression in miniature worlds? Nostalgia provides a way to think about the outside world (away from which we turn while playing) as an object of loss that we re-encounter in the game as an impossible distance. Further, nostalgia's studied connection to loneliness (Zhou et. al., 2008) and lower socioeconomic status (Nawas & Platt, 1965) colors videogame play's relationship to the "fervor of the possible." That is, how one makes sense of what is possible in that world outside—the value of a present moment set aside for play, a future possibility retained through deferral—is influenced not just by one's age, but also one's sense of social connectedness and future prospects. Gaming draws its strength from not-yet-lapsed potentials, and it slowly consumes the "fervor of the possible," a "here" at the cost of a "there," a "now" at the cost of a "then." This loss fuels the game's power to inculcate us in expanded kinaesthetic identities as virtual explorers. We can feel this in moments of reverie when we turn away from the game and glance out the window, in the bittersweet recognition that games take us on impossible journeys to no-place.

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¹ This passage from Bachelard (1994, p. 172) combines a colonialist fantasy of inhabiting a distant space with the nostalgic notion that this place is a “homeland.”

² In Barthes’ three levels of meaning, the first (communication) relates to basic information, including story, style, mise-en-scène, etc. (“everything I can learn from setting, the costumes, the characters, their relations, their insertion in an anecdote...”) (1977, p. 52). The second, symbolic level (“diegetic symbolism”) requires some interpretation on the part of the critic in order to connect textual communication to an external discourse (that of the auteur, history, etc.) (p. 52). Barthes describes the third, “obtuse,” meaning as a subversion of “the whole practice of meaning,” a “blunting of meaning, its drifting” (“a signifier without a signified”) (pp. 59, 61-62). Such drifting would seem to exceed communication models that, though they empower audience interpretation, are still intended to track the transmission of narrative, information, and meaning—e.g., Hall’s (1980) formulation of “encoding” and “decoding” and its extension into game studies in Rouse’s (2004) distinction between “designer’s story” and “player’s story.” The obtuse meaning is less an oppositional decoding than the “break or interruption of the ‘passage of forms’” (the failure to take any meaning whatsoever) that Hall warns is possible between any two moments in articulation (p. 164).

³ See note 2 above.

⁴ Inglis (1977) cites Wordsworth’s 1838 *Guide to the Lakes* (a particularly literary example of travel guidebook writing) to express the irreducible pairing of experience and geography, how by the “aid” of watching a lake’s “unruffled waters [...] the imagination...is carried into recesses of feeling otherwise impenetrable” (p. 47).

⁵ Not without reason have videogames been compared with travel (Bogost, 2011; Jenkins, 1998), travel writing (Fuller & Jenkins, 1994), tourism (Nakamura, 1995) and wanderlust (Elund, 2015). Often in these works games are construed as compensation for a lack of access to natural space. But games are also understood as virtual experiences offering “safe” encounters with the category of the other.

⁶ One notable exception is Gazzard’s (2016) timely work on videogame nostalgias, which explicitly employs Boym’s “reflective nostalgia” and photographs from 1980s videogame play to disrupt the “reconstructive nostalgia” of profit-driven retrogaming trends.

⁷ See McDermott (2002) for an extended discussion of some of the political stakes of nostalgia’s use of the past.

⁸ This observation is not meant to challenge prior work on games and nostalgia. Viewing early videogames as “quotations of our shared past” (Whalen and Taylor, 2008, p. 6) has helped put the relative brevity of the medium’s commercial existence into perspective. And restorative nostalgia provides an approach for thinking about “retrogaming” culture (8-bit aesthetics, the commodification of historical figures, and the availability of old games on virtual platforms) in the context of collective memory (Whalen & Taylor, 2008; Gillespie, 2012; Hodson, 2012; Heineman, 2014). Games have proven especially strong examples of the “search-and-rescue missions against the disposability of consumer capitalism,” which Carl Wilson (2011) suggests nostalgics enact on the pop-cultural products of their past.

⁹ For scholarship engaging “critical nostalgia” see Probyn (1995), Boym (2001), McDermott (2002), or Cashman (2006).

¹⁰ “Paratext” is one of Genette’s (1997) categories of “transtextual” relations (relations between texts). It refers to the “liminal devices and conventions” which frame a text and create a “zone without any hard and fast boundary on either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side (turned toward the world’s discourse about the text)” (p. 2).

¹¹ Geoffrey Rowan’s (1991) contemporary comment on virtual reality discourse is typical: “thanks to the miracle of modern technology, it should soon be possible to climb into a trouble-free new reality, where everyone and

everything is beautiful and anything is possible”. Rather than spur wanderlust, this new technology will supplant the need to travel: “Travel agents will be history. (‘I just flew to Paris and boy is my computer tired.’)” (1991).

¹² Detailed genealogies of the cultural fascination with virtual reality (e.g., Friedberg, 2006; Grau, 2003) track its roots as far back as Renaissance perspective drawing, or even further if murals on walls or ceilings (or painted in caves) are included. Though distinct, videogames have been conflated with this impulse since the popularization of techno-utopian literature about cyberspace from the 1980s and 1990s, such as *Neuromancer* (1984) and *Snow Crash* (1992)—texts often referenced as prophetic of the Internet, and very much inspired by the home-computer and videogame console boom of the 1970s and 1980s.

¹³ The panorama (especially the moving panorama) clearly prefigures videogames: “A long roll painting was moved across a ‘window’ ...by means of a mechanical cranking system... accompanied by a lecturer, music, and occasionally sound and light effects” (Huhtamo, 2013, p. 6).

¹⁴ There is a sizeable list of such games from the last 15 years. To name only a few: *Grand Theft Auto III* (2001), *Dead Island* (2011), *Far Cry* (2004), *Assassin’s Creed* (2007), *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011), *Minecraft* (2011), and *No Man’s Sky* (2016). *Gamezone’s* review of *Breath of the Wild* concedes: “If there is one sentence that has somewhat lost its meaning over time, it’s the ‘You see that mountain in the distance? You can go there!’” (Washington, 2017).

¹⁵ See note 10 above.

¹⁶ Guins (2014) poses the question of whether videogame paraphernalia informed videogame play throughout, or else were quickly discarded as “temporary commercial containers” (p. 180). This question looms for preservationists and museum curators, who must decide what materials were indispensable to the experience of “the game” as such (p. 7).

¹⁷ Distilling some of Burke’s original formulation, Inglis (2000) describes the natural sublime as “bleak, massive, unyielding, enormous,” epitomized in “the Alps, where the mighty rocks and chasms, the torrents and peaks combined the authority of grandeur with the discipline of indifference” (p. 15). *Yoshi* coaxes out “the authority of grandeur” with its new imaging technologies, which render vistas not previously possible, and combines this experience with the player’s “discipline of indifference” (especially when empowered by the guidebook).

¹⁸ See, for example, Van Gorp and Béneker’s (2007) description of “spatially selective geography,” a selection of tourist venues for their ability to strike contrasts with banal, everyday spaces from home life (pp. 294-5).

¹⁹ Though Barthes (1981) does not attribute this to nostalgia, he does refer to the punctum’s “power of expansion” (how it “makes [him] add something to the photograph” of his own experience) as “Proustian” (p. 45). Moreover, the structural similarities with nostalgia are apparent: something in the image that can’t be seen by direct inspection, only in retrospect (in what Boym would characterize as a “long distance relationship”).

²⁰ For instance, Bachelard (1964) argues that “reverie in front of the fire” “magnifies human destiny; it links the small to the great, the hearth to the volcano, the life of a log to the life of a world” (p. 16).

²¹ These words are from Aragon’s surrealist essay, “On Décor” (2000, p.51), about cinema’s power to re-enchant banal, everyday objects.

²² Freud (1917) describes melancholia as a way around mourning a lost object by unconsciously incorporating it into our ego: “By taking flight into the ego love escapes extinction,” but, at the same time, “the shadow of the object [falls] upon the ego, and the latter [can] henceforth be judged by a special agency, as though it were an object, the forsaken object” (p. 257).

²³ See Blum and Nast (1996) for a careful theoretical account of what they describe as the “heterosexualization of alterity” in Lefebvre.