Playing as Travelling: At the Border of Leisure and Learning

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to develop an interpretive framework based on the concept of travel, exploring the limits of play as a meaningful activity. By comparing how the concept of travel has been applied to literature and cinema, it becomes possible to discern how the interest of gameplay and travel can be said to align in novel ways, reconceptualising relatively immobile players as moving travellers and assigning them stake in the transformative properties often attributed to travel. It will be held that modern perspectives on travel share an affinity with the medium of games as a venue for action and that this element of games, in turn, generates a sense of presence relative to travel. Examining this intersection, situates the study of games at the borders of leisure and learning, challenging traditional divisions between leisure and self-cultivation, all the while engaging with games as a part of wide-ranging cultural phenomena.

Keywords

travel, play, presence, framework, leisure, learning

INTRODUCTION

The question about the meaning of games and gameplay has been a foundational issue within game studies, originally brought to the fore in the infamous ludology vs narratology debate, resulting in a dichotomy between framing games as either something unique, in need of its own set of analytical tools, or something that can be understood in conjuncture with culture in a broader context. As the fields tolerance for interdisciplinary scholarship has increased, scholars have been invited to explore the ways in which games share an affinity with wide-ranging cultural phenomena, ranging from anthropological concerns to the political implications of games. Further expanding the interdisciplinary literature relating to the medium, the aim of this paper is to develop an interpretive framework based on the concept of travel, exploring the possibilities and limitations of play as a meaningful activity, all the while challenging traditional divisions between leisure and self-cultivation by reframing immobile players as moving travellers, assigning them stake in the transformative properties often attributed to travel.

The study of travel and games has previously intersected via the concept of gamification and its applicability to tourism, exploring how game mechanics and design can enrich travel by motivating travellers and adding a layer of entertainment (Bulencea and Egger 2015). What follows is, however, the opposite, examining how the concept of travel can inform the study of games, adding to the cultural capital of gameplay and the character of players. This is mainly accomplished by applying the study of travel literature and tourism studies to the study of games, ascertaining to what extent their interests can be said to align in novel and interesting ways. By employing

the concept of travel, it becomes possible to examine a mode of engagement, along with types of experiences of play, that is difficult to address while relying on more traditional frameworks. The article focuses on how players might engage with digital realities in ways that mirror various travelling traditions, presuming that players can create meaningful connections between themselves and game worlds in the same way travel is expected to shape the experiences of travellers.

In order to apply the concept of travel to the study of games, travel must first be defined. However, with a surge in travel-centric research as well as a long history of travel, the study of travel is diverse in both form and formulation, consisting of diverse activities as well as diverse perspectives. It is necessary to explore this diversity although the type of travel most relevant to the study at hand is the kind that can be said to transform travellers for the better, educating them about the world and developing their character. Admittedly, attributing the values of such travel to relatively stationary players might appear odd. Examining the ways in which the concept of travel has already been applied to the study of literature and cinema, however, reveals the legitimacy of what might otherwise be construed as an exercise in eccentricity by contextualising the study at hand, situating it in a broader context of intersecting cultural phenomena. The implications of players as travellers will similarly be examined, the concept of presence being proposed as the optimal mode of engagement for play as travel, partly made alluring by promises of technological innovations such as virtual reality, but by no means dependent on it. It will be held that modern perspectives on travel share an affinity with the medium of games as a venue for action and that this element of games, in turn, creates a sense of presence relative to travel. Lastly, the article explores digital travel destinations available to players in relation to the concept of travel and the experiences they afford players.

It is worth noting, the argument being made here is not that games are inherently travel-centric, but instead that they might display properties that can be understood meaningfully in conjuncture with the concept of travel. These properties are sometimes foregrounded by developers, as in the case of games such as *Journey* (Thatgamecompany 2012) and *Final Fantasy X* (Square 2001), both dealing with the concept of the pilgrimage, yet at other times seemingly inconsequential, as in the case of *Tetris* (Pajitnov 1984). The purpose of this article is therefore not to establish a travel game genre per se, wherein a dominant framework is established based on shared and prevalent features (Chandler, 1997, 1), but rather to develop an alternative interpretive framework that would be applicable to such a genre – although not exclusively. By steering the interpretation of games down this path, it becomes possible to explore an underdeveloped forum for meaningful player experiences, at least to the degree it does not intersect with formerly established frameworks.

DEFINING TRAVEL

Although the history of travel can be traced back to prehistoric times, it was not until relatively recently that the concept emerged as a serious subject of study within the humanities and social sciences (Hulme 2002, 1). This development is closely related to the mounting relevance of globalisation and mobility, coupled with social and economic incentives for the study of the tourism industry. Regardless of the prolonged lack of academic backing, travel and its poetics have, nevertheless, played a vital role in the history of humankind and culture as it relates to exploration, pilgrimages, tourism, and migration, to name a few of its incarnations (Andraş 2006, 159). As such, the study of travel encompasses subjects such as the convergence of different cultures and power relations, contributing to a general understanding of the world and its dynamics.

Travel is also a common motif in relation to self-betterment, having been conceived of as character-building by various cultures. This perspective enjoys a long tradition, early examples being observable in the ancient Homeric epics, wherein Telemachus, the son of Odysseus, departs from Ithaca in search of his father, returning from his trials a full-fledged individual akin to his progenitor (Roberson 2001, xii). Another example of the perceived value of travel can be witnessed via the institution of the so-called Grand Tour in the 17th and 18th century, a venture undertaken by upper-class European youths as a part of their education, the aim being to expose them to the legacy of classical antiquity and the Renaissance, ennobling them and preparing them for their duties back home (Buzard 2002, 38). In these cases, travel has been endowed with educational qualities and in turn, endorsed for the sake of its transformative properties.

However, as the etymological roots of the word "travel" can attest to; originally meaning "to toil, or "to labour" in Old French, the connotations are not strictly positive as Odysseus's own journey demonstrates, his homecoming itself and the end of his tumultuous journey being the ultimate reward. Secondly, alongside increased mobility and leisure time, a new form of travel has emerged, often disparagingly referred to as mass tourism, equating travel with modern consumer culture, positioning the traveller as a passive recipient of contrived experiences (Sharpley 2012, 54). These manifestations of travel betray the otherwise lofty ambitions of travel as a rite of passage while at the same time comprising a significant bulk of travel activity that cannot be overlooked. Regarding the viability of travel as an interpretive framework for the study of games and their meaning, this diversity of travel must, therefore, be explored and contended with.

In his book, *The Tourist Gaze* (1990), the British sociologist John Urry describes a particular framework for travel that he associates with the emergence of mass tourism, the tourist gaze being inspired by the Foucauldian notion of the medical gaze, wherein Foucault argues that the modern clinical outlook seeks to make the human body visible and known in its entirety (Foucault, 2003, 162). What these two distinct gazes have in common, however, is not merely the acknowledgement of a particular subject, the intricacies of travel and the relative sanctity of the human body respectively, but rather the construction of the knower as a meaningful entity that situates the epistemological boundaries of that which is to be known. In the case of Urry, the tourist gaze dictates the way in which tourists engage with travel, momentarily escaping their mundane existence in order to gaze upon something new and exciting (Urry 1990, 3). Travel, in this sense, constructs travellers and transports them outside the confines of their ordinary lives and into contact with the exotic, letting them experience the juxtaposition of the familiar and the alien, albeit from a safe distance.

However, as the culture critic Dean MacCannell points out, not everyone is plagued by banal mundanity, noting that Urry's gaze is too limiting even as it applies to the study of tourism. According to MacCannell, Urry has rightfully discerned a widespread perspective concerning travelling and tourism. However, MacCannell supposes the need for a second gaze, one that is prepared to look past the façade and is not satisfied with what has been put on display. Contrary to Urry's perspective, such a gaze actively searches for the hidden, not only in relation to the exotic but also the familiar and mundane (MacCannell 2001, 35-36). MacCannell's gaze is, therefore, not limited to extended trips but rather implies that a traveller can sightsee within the bounds of their own locality. In this sense, the scope of travel can vary greatly depending on its definition, most commonly referring to extended trips that break up everyday life, as in the case of Urry, but also as something that explores the brief and mundane, as in the case of MacCannell, inviting travellers to deeply engage with their destination.

In his introductory text to travel writing, Carl Thompson, a specialist in travel culture, defines travel loosely as movement through space. This is an extensive definition; no doubt intended to encompass a wide variety of activities that might constitute travel. According to Thompson, travel can take place, whether it be a cruise around the world or an everyday trip to the store, starting with one step, or something comparable, wherein the traveller moves from one place to another (Thompson 2011, 9). A similar perspective can be found in the works of the French philosopher Michel de Certeau as he states that all stories are in fact stories of travel, as far as they convey the notion of movement in space (de Certeau 1988, 115). Conceptualising travel in such a way makes travel an inevitable byproduct of moving around and implies that people can travel without being particularly mindful of it as an activity. However, by making travel almost synonymous with movement, it might be argued that the term loses its impact and practical application. For the study at hand, it should, therefore, be considered a loose or minimal definition, intended to allow for diverse perspectives to emerge, not being limited to games that might otherwise be assigned to a hypothetical travel game genre.

Thompson, however, follows up by noting that travel often causes friction between the familiar and the alien, the "same" and the "other". Seeing as travellers hail from a certain somewhere their travels inevitably lead them to somewhere else, generating a clash between the self and the other, as they leave their comfort zones and venture out into the unknown. Therefore, it might be argued that travelling is not only a question of movement in space but rather a conversation between "here" and "there" (Thompson 2011, 9). With this addition, Thompsons touches upon one of the key themes of travel studies, i.e., how travel reconciles and exposes ideological boundaries. This theme is exemplified by the relevance of Edward Said's influential book, *Orientalism* (1978), in which he analyses the cultural communication between the East and the West, criticising the way in which the East has historically been depicted as the other, since this approach has not only been influential in relation to post-colonial studies but also the study of travel, redefining how scholars conceive of cultural flows and travel in between different cultures (Melman 2002, 107).

When it comes to traversing these boundaries, these differences become more prominent, possibly resulting in culture shock, a concept initially proposed by the Finnish anthropologist Kalervo Oberg, describing mental fatigue associated with engaging with an unfamiliar culture. Generally conceived of in a negative light, subsequent scholars have nevertheless put a more positive spin on the phenomena, describing a period of maturity wherein travellers grow accustomed to the workings of a different culture while re-evaluating their own cultural background (Pedersen 1996, 1–2). These boundaries are, however, not always as extreme or seemingly self-evident as they can be established and traversed even within the confines of the home, the most intimately familiar of places. In his book, *Voyage autour de ma chamber* (1794), or "A journey around my room," the French novelist Xavier de Maistre delivered what the title of his book promised (de Maistre 1871, 3). De Maistre thereby demonstrated how seemingly self-evident boundaries, that are only justified to the extent that they are imposed, can be re-evaluated in order to differentiate between places. To travel involves a recognition of such differences, be they big or small, and the recognition of places, as opposed to merely spaces, as meaningful entities.

The concepts of space and place have often been intertwined. One way to differentiate between the two has been to state that space is objective and unlimited while the concept of place deals with the subjective and limited – points within space that is possible to travel between (Casey 1998, ix–x) The proposed properties of space have nevertheless be varied as in the case of the philosopher Henri Lefèbvre who differentiated between natural, abstract and social spaces, with all spaces having a

social dimension due to the function of space being inevitably tied to its construction (Lefèbvre 1991, 229–230). The application of Lefèbvrian spatial analysis within game studies has previously been criticised due to the limited integration of his work as a whole (Crawford 2015). For the purposes of this study, such intricacies are, however, not the issue at hand but rather the interpretive dimension; what the general concept introduces to the concept of space, throwing a wrench in an otherwise clean segregation between spaces and places.

Regarding game studies, the concept of objective space has seemingly dominated the discourse, exploring how space is implemented in games (Aarseth 2001), how objects relate to one another in space, as well as how players are able to manipulate spaces (Wood 2012). The study of places, on the other hand, exploring meaningful engagement with subjective locales, has not been as prominent, at least not on its own terms. Examining how the concept of not only space but also and perhaps, more importantly, place relates to the medium of games will, therefore, help shed light on the concept of play as travel. Space as a prerequisite of place, nevertheless, remains relevant, even though this framework challenges its centrality, persisting as an indispensable gateway into the discussion about games and travel.

MEDIATING TRAVEL
The implications of travel are not solely reliant on departures and destinations but also modes of transportation. In this regard, the culture scholar Wolfgang Schivelbusch has argued that the advent of trains altered people's conceptions of time and space and paved the way for the industrial revolution (Schivelbusch 1980) If games are to be framed as venues for travel it is therefore worth noting the implications of such a venture and how it applies to media and culture in general. The concept of travel can and has been extended to include interactions with printed media, wherein readers find themselves exposed to foreign locals via the works of various authors (Butor 2001, 70). The same can be said for the relationship between travel and cinema, as images transport viewer across time and space (Ruoff 2006). Travel literature and cinema has, in this sense, enabled readers to experience a form of travel without the explicit need to journey in person.

By reading, it becomes possible to undertake a journey of the mind and familiarise oneself with foreign customs and cultures. In colonial times, such travel literature became a popular literary genre that served the purpose of not only entertaining but also enlightening readers about circumstances abroad (Sherman 2002, 20). Traditionally, travel literature has been limited to tales of actual travel, expeditions that the author preferably participated in first-hand. This added authority was considered favourable seeing as the readership of such tales was often very critical, scrutinising the veracity of claims of adventure. This scrutiny is the reason why it has been argued that fictional travel literature should be excluded from the study of travel literature, seeing as the rhetorical function of travel literature is dependent on the willingness and the ability of the reader to ascertain the truthfulness of the text. (Edwards 1988. 8–12) Regardless of the reluctance of academia to acknowledge fictional travel literature as on par with biographical travel writing such literature is, nevertheless, prominent within the literary canon in general. Notable examples are *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) by Daniel Defoe and *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1864) by Jules Verne, literary works that whilst not claiming to describe authentic events, nonetheless, engage with the concept of travel in meaningful ways.

With the advent of photography and cinema, yet another way to travel emerged as people were invited to look at imagery from faraway places, with special screenings being held to introduce them to foreign lands. So-called "magic lantern" shows were quite popular, treating viewers to an ensemble of imagery and oration. Among these

magic lanterns shows, those that depicted imagery from foreign locales were particularly well-sought. (Barber 1993, 1). By this logic, our ideas about travel do not have to be limited to physical travel since the concept of travel has already been associated with various media. With this in mind, the concept of gameplay as travel begins to look less eccentric and more as a logical step, in line with the processing of cultural phenomena in a broader context.

If space, along with the ability to move within it, is made out to be a prerequisite for travel as Thompson states, it should be possible to discern differences regarding travel across media. The manifestation of space in literary texts, such as those that Thompson deals with, is radically different from real space. While real space is an inevitability of existence, literary space only exists insofar as it can be imagined by the reader, unless one accounts for the physical presence of the letters on the page. The text may include certain cues but what matters in this regard is how the mental space is constructed in the act of reading as it is only through the act of reading that the text is manifested (Iser 1972, 279). In her book, *Narrative as Virtual Reality* (2001), the game scholar Marie-Laure Ryan argues that literary texts are able to evoke such spaces even though they are non-existent in the text itself, however noting the differences between space in text and computer games, emphasising how space in games is not strictly mental but exists regardless of how it is conceived of (Ryan 2001, 5–6).

Cinematic space also differs from physical space in the sense that it is strictly visual. However, it differs from literary space in the sense that it is built into the medium as something that is presented identically to all those who enjoy the same piece of cinema, even though the images might evoke different responses. It has been argued that cinematic space conveys a richness of information available for interpretation (Heath 1981). Regardless of this semantic function, the audience can, however, not move within the confines of cinematic space, even though the actors had at one point stood in front of the camera and moved around. Even if a film was fully three-dimensional, the audience would not be active spatial agents unless they were able to affect the drama or the angle in a meaningful way. Such alterations to the cinematic tradition would, however, undoubtedly blur the line between film and games, interactive cinema currently being a niche market at best.

Ludic space, markedly, offers players the opportunity to move, thereby reenacting properties of physical space, even though one should be careful to equate the two (Leirfall 1997) Unlike mental space, priorly associated with literary texts, and cinematic space, ludic space offers players firm ground for simulated movement. The game studies scholar Espen Aarseth has argued that this characteristic of ludic space is at the core of most games, even to the extent that it would be possible to propose a taxonomy of games based on spatial representations (Aarseth 2001, 169). Space in games is akin to the void represented in the work attributed to ancient Chinese philosopher Laozi who argued that it was the void between the wheel and axle that allowed it to spin (Laozi, 2001, 51). In much the same way, ludic space makes it possible for players to manoeuvre their avatars within the confines of space as it has been incorporated by individual games. However, with the avatar being what is actually moving, the question remains, who is travelling, the player or the avatar.

THE DIGITAL TRAVELER

With the player largely immobile, only controlling certain aspects of any given game, often in the guise of a character in the game world, it comes into question who or what can be said to be travelling. Since it is not the players themselves that are moving, it might be argued that they, in fact, have little to do with the happenings of the digital world. Edward Castronova, however, argues that the avatar should primarily be viewed as an extension of the player and therefore a part of them (Castronova 2005, 45)

However, even though this theory recognises the player's part in the game world it might overlook the ways in which the interest of the fictive game world could potentially conflict with that of the players. In this regard, the game studies scholar Rune Klevjer has argued that it is imperative to differentiate between the avatar as a personified icon and impersonal one, only the former being designated as an avatar. He further argues that personified play differs significantly from impersonal variants as it has less to do with the expression of the self and more to do with fictional relations and the indirect embodiment of the player within the world of the game (Klevjer 2006, 9).

Concerning players as travellers, they are always foreign to the game world, at least to the extent they do not compose its building blocks. This spoiling of the foreign by the self is one of the fundamental problems of anthropological inquiries, as the presence of researchers alters the very societies they have come study (Clifford 1997, 20). Much like tourists that try to escape their troubles or dredging mundanity by vacationing in a tropical paradise, only to realise that they have brought themselves along for the ride (de Botton 2003, 20). In this sense, the avatar functions as a receptacle for players while at the same time retaining its fictive properties, informing the journey to the extent players are willing and required to heed this digital travelling companion. In contrasts, games as a venue for role-play encourages a much more synergistic form of engagement, ideally finding ways to merge the interests of the player and the avatar.

Different frameworks dictate different options for optimal play experiences. For those that choose to focus on games as a narrative, such as Janet Murray in her influential book *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997), the concept of immersion has reigned supreme, describing the state of players as their real-life senses are overtaken by those of the fictional realities they have come to inhabit (Murray 1997, 97-9). As such the player inhabits the avatar, becoming one with the game and its fictional setting. In regard to more ludocentric approaches, the concept of "flow" has been employed to describe optimal experiences, originating from the writings of psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi who states that people are at their most content when they are engaged with what they are doing, being simultaneously challenged and in control (Csikszentmihalyi 1991, 3). Although there might be significant overlap, it could be argued that the concept of flow composes a more neutral or objective outlook, whilst the term immersion evokes a more traditional narratological viewpoint through its association within academia.

For the purposes of this study, this paper proposes the adoption of the term "presence" to describe optimal play as travel. Presence has been described as the perception of non-mediation or the perceptual illusion of non-mediation (Lombard & Ditton 1997), in practice allowing players to feel as if they are present in the game world. Presence might be said to overlap with the concept of immersion although it seemingly has less narratological baggage making it preferable. Stimulating the feeling of presence in players largely follows two distinct tracks: the first being technological enhancements that offer vivid representations, helping players blur the line between their incarnation in the real world and the game world, and secondly, the interactive nature of games that allows players to engage with the game world (Tamborini 2010, 89) Control schemes that imitate real-life interactions, such as motion controls, are among those that could potentially induce a sense of presence through play due to their familiarity (Biocca 1992). Similarly, the promise of engaging VR and haptic feedback could potentially revolutionise this feeling of presence, allowing players to experience virtual worlds to an even higher degree with their own bodies. However, in his article " 'Doing there' vs. 'being there': performing presence in interactive fiction", Alf Seegert claims that it is, in fact, interactivity that is the primary inducer of presence, as opposed to graphical fidelity, since presence can even be induced in text-based games without engaging the senses in a more lifelike context (Seegert 2009, 23) New promises of embodied

interactions with games might, therefore, hint at new experiences. However, even though the concept of play as travel might be enriched by them, it is not reliant on them due to players active participation.

This emphasis on actions shares a certain affinity with more recent studies in tourism. As epitomised in Urry's notion of the tourist gaze, travel has often revolved around going somewhere and seeing something. The visual element of travel has thereby occupied a certain privileged position, with travellers visiting Paris to see the Eiffel tower or Florence to gaze upon the statue of David by Michelangelo. Sight-seeing often revolves around positioning oneself in relation to something that is deemed worthy of being seen. In this regard, visual media such as picture books, films and magic lantern shows can be said to offer readers and viewers the essence of travel, although it is generally preferred to witness sights in person. This emphasis on the visual side of travel and tourism has however been challenged with an added emphasis on active experiences and alternative use of the senses, for example, tasting exotic food, hiking up a local mountain or otherwise engaging with the destination (Everett 2009). By going somewhere, the body is not only able to see something new but to engage the senses in a much broader context. This physicality is evoked in the article "Landscapes and Narratives: Compositions and the Walking Body," wherein Katrín Anna Lund, a professor of geography and tourism, describes how the physical act of walking unites the traveller and the landscape (Lund 2012, 1), citing de Certeau, who argued that places are constructed in relation to everyday activities such as walking (de Certeau 1988, 93).

In relation to games as travel destinations, it is easy to see that the game world as visual representation does not engage the senses in the same way active travel presupposes. Walking being an embodied activity that has often been favoured by travel scholars with works such as *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (2001) by Rebecca Solnit. Although technological innovations such as virtual reality, motion controls and haptic feedback might alleviate some of these concerns, it is ultimately not necessary due to the fact that less academically privileged forms of travel, such as driving, still constitutes travel, even though it might partly disembody the traveller. In addition, play as travel is not strictly a journey of the senses but perhaps even to a more substantial degree a journey of activities. This fits well with game aesthetics seeing as players most often do not simply go somewhere for its own sake but rather to do something. This is made possible by ludic space, making it possible for players not only to move their avatars in the most basic sense but also to perform a variety of actions depending on the game in question.

DIGITAL DESTINATIONS
As previously stated, there is often a divisive line drawn between retellings of real travel and that of fiction, with the latter enjoying less prestige than the former. In comparison to photographs and cinema, game worlds are constructed environments, created purposefully from the ground up (Jenkins & Squire, 2002, 65), as opposed to being recorded or documented, they have to a large degree reflected fictitious settings, thereby falling outside the traditional scope of travel literature. Some games have nevertheless been developed to meticulously reflect real-world or historical locales, adding to their traditional travel capital. In the case of the Assassin's Creed series, various culturally important places have been depicted. There has even been a special game mode created to capitalise on precisely this relationship to the real, wherein a strictly educational game mode called "Discovery tour" has been released in conjuncture with *Assassin's Creed: Origins* (2017) and *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (2018), showcasing intricately detailed digital recreations of ancient Egypt and ancient Greece. Even without this relatively new addition to the franchise, Assassin's Creed games have educated and informed real-live travel, going as far as to inspire real-world

pilgrimages to visit locations featured in-game (Loomer 2014). This venture echoes the values of the Grand Tour by revisiting and enforcing a certain canon of history as well as appreciating subjective places.

Figure 1: A digital recreation of the Parthenon in Athens as depicted in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*.

Games such as *Persona 5* (Atlus 2016), feature more modern locales, invoking modern Tokyo and leading players around the city to many popular travel destinations. In the same sense, *Infamous: Second Son* (Sucker Punch Productions 2014) depicts a gamified version of the city of Seattle with landmarks such as the Space Needle. These digital recreations are seldom completely faithful, adjusting the scale of the cityscape and optimising it for play as opposed to urban living (Jensen 2018). They can nevertheless be indicative of the locations they draw inspiration from. In the case of *Persona 5*, the game also highly emphasises the inner workings of Japanese high school life. In this regard, games can be considered cultural vehicles as they inform and familiarise players about the workings of foreign cultures they might be interested in (Consalvo 2016, Chen 2013). Games have even been known to propose travel directly, such as in the case of *Monster Hunter X* (Capcom 2015) in Japan and *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End* (Naughty Dog 2016) in Hong Kong, encouraging players to physically visit certain locations as tie-ins with the games (Durango 2016).

Other games, such as *Journey* are evocative of the concept of travel without directly referencing real-world locales. As with influential travel literature like *Robinson Crusoe* or *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, it must, however, be asked what purpose this supposed reality is intended to serve. In colonial times, the credibility of travelogues may have been imperative if their purpose was to inform readers about the state and circumference of ever-expanding empires. In relation to travel as an opportunity for growth, these concerns may, however, be suspended, at least to the extent they do not coincide with one another like in the case of travel as informative of real-world locales.

In *Journey*, players traverse a desert landscape in the guise of a mysterious figure cloaked in red, aiming for the summit of a tall mountain visible in the distance. On the way, the player encounters tombstone like artefacts in the desert and the remnants of a seemingly ancient civilisation. By discovering pieces of cloth and adding them to their scarf the player's mobility increases allowing them to traverse this strange landscape in

new ways, ultimately taking flight. After an arduous journey to the snow-covered summit, players must surrender their accumulated wealth, trudging through the snow towards the light until the avatar completely disappears. *Journey* mirrors various life stages, extending from birth to death, As such, it recognises the concept of travel as a powerful metaphor for important facets of human existence, demonstrated by proverbs such as "The road to hell is paved with good intentions" or "life is a journey, not a destination."

The game is also an example of how the limitations imposed by virtual travel are not necessarily limiting in themselves. In *Journey*, players may be joined by another digital traveller, their game worlds interlinked via a randomly established connection. Traditional game chat is non-existent, but rather players are enabled to communicate via strictly wordless cues that in themselves become their own language. For some, limitations of virtual communication such as these pose a problem (Moore et al. 2007, 282-283). In this case, however, the surreal methods of expression have even been celebrated as they are thought to add to the experience (Clements 2012). In this sense, play as travel can help illuminate the implications of alternative modes of travel, not only applicable to the study of games but also to the study of travel in general.

Figure 2: *Journey's* robed figure traversing the desert
with a view of the game's final destination.

Lastly, it is important to verify the limitations of travel as an interpretive framework for the study of games by looking at how it can be said to match up with games that neither incorporate real-world locales nor claim any relation to the spirit of travel. Looking at games like *Tetris*, who have generally not been conceived of as great conveyors of meaning, should, therefore, be enlightening. *Tetris* has generally been a prime example of abstraction and structuralist qualities of games. James Paul Gee has backed this interpretation of *Tetris*, noting that the moving blocks are non-representative, nevertheless arguing that if they were replaced with something else, for example, naked bodies, the game would turn into a narrative about the interlocking of physical shapes (Gee 2006, 59). The blocks in *Tetris* can however also be conceived of as empty containers, or "tabula rasa", wherein the player is invited to project their own interpretations onto the object of study. Janet Murray demonstrated this in actions when

she interpreted *Tetris* as an allegory for the demands of modern life in the United States, wherein accomplishments were simply pushed away to make room for more work (Murray 1997, 144). Markku Eskelinen has criticised Murray's interpretation on the grounds that it seems unlikely that the Russian Pajitnov, living in the Soviet Union, intended for his game to represent the same social values Murray was accustomed to in the States, instead attributing it to Murray's insistence on finding meaning where there was none (Eskelinen 2001). It must, however, be noted that Eskelinens criticism might be said to overlook the interpretive revolution in literary theory connected to what has been called new criticism, where prior insistences on biographical facts and authorial intent were successfully challenged (Bertens 2008, 19).
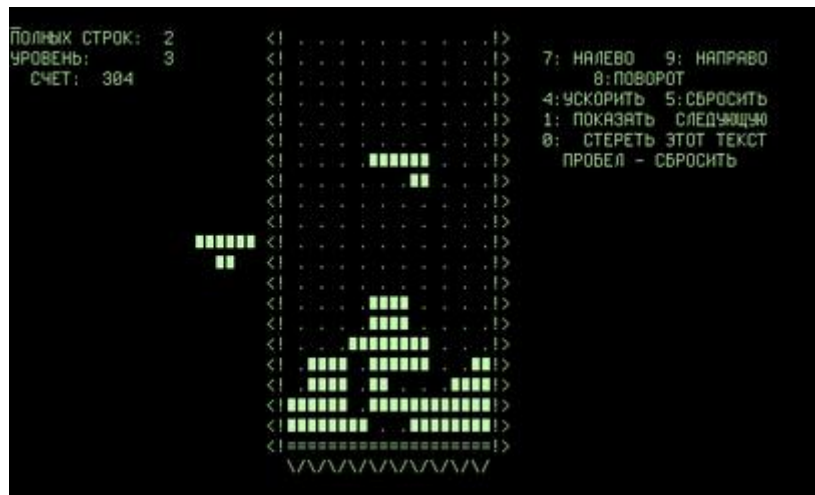
Figure 3: Screenshot from the original *Tetris*, perhaps the most abstract version of the game.

Interpreting *Tetris* as a travel venue might however seem to be pushing it, unless one relies on some later incarnations that included noticeably Russian motifs, the Tetris theme song being a repurposed Russian folk song as well as many versions featuring the iconic Saint Basil's cathedral prominently displayed on the box art and in the background of the game. Employing these waypoints, it might be possible to engage with *Tetris* as a form of travel that transports players to the Red Square in Moscow, gazing at the pyres of the cathedral. To attempt to impose the concept of travel onto the game in its most abstract form, however, might devalue the framework by posing implausible interpretations that add little to its worth. What little can be said about the abstract space of *Tetris* as a place, devoid of other signifiers, is that it has distinct borders encasing movement. Like Chess, the space is continually being redefined by moving pieces, letting players regularly reassess the meaning of the space in relation to other objects. In effect, this inability to move past the objectivity of space echoes structuralist interpretations of games. In this sense, the meaning of *Tetris* as a journey is quite limited, what little can be said being attainable via more established frameworks, consigning the concept of travel to a fate of irrelevance.

CONCLUSION

Exploring the way in which the concept of travel has been appropriated by literature and cinema has presented an opportunity to further situate the study of games within a broader context of cultural phenomena, not shying away from contributions made by other fields that are applicable to the study of games. In the case of play as travel, enriched by the study of travel literature and tourism, the medium of games appears to intersect with the concept of travel in novel ways, especially via the incorporation of traversable space, differentiating it from other media. This manifestation of space is

nothing new within the field of game studies itself, although it presents a unique case from the perspective of travel and media in general. Regarding the study of games, however, integration with the concept of travel invites scholars to assess to what degree players can embody the values of travel as an opportunity for learning and self-cultivation, accumulating cultural capital and developing character.

The article proposed the concept of presence, as opposed to terms such as immersion or flow, as an optimal form of engagement, emphasising how players experience themselves as present within various game worlds. Technological innovations such as developments within the field of virtual reality, naturalistic motion controls and haptic feedback might ultimately revolutionise the concept of play as travel, adding to a sense of presence that rivals reality. The notion of play as travel is, however, not reliant on these advancements seeing as a sense of presence can be induced by a more fundamental aspect of the medium of games, i.e. interactivity, even as it is present in games such as text-based adventure games. In this sense, games can be said to share an affinity with tourism studies centred around active participation as opposed to passive sightseeing or mere gazing.

Having established games as a viable venue for travel, the weight of play as travel nevertheless hinges on the existence of viable travel options, offering either engaging places or experiences. At present, games primarily depict fabricated realities, which offer limited cultural capital in the traditional sense, although some games nevertheless depict real-world locales, familiarising players with their layout and even the cultures and history associated with them. In the absence of such places, games can nevertheless grant players opportunities to engage with fictitious locales, offering experiences that are either reminiscent of real-life travel or unique to games. At the fringes of this interpretive framework, the limitations of its applicability nevertheless become clearer. The concept of travel has little to offer to the playing of *Tetris,* for example, that cannot be afforded by more established frameworks. Fortunately, the viability of the framework is not reliant on it being all-encompassing, but rather that its application is able to yield compelling results on a case by case basis.

Moving forward, this framework would benefit from further case studies, exploring how players are able to appreciate subjective locales with more depth and variety, as well as charting to what extent play as travel can truly be said to be an opportunity for growth akin to more traditional travel. As it stands, games have been shown to be possible mediators of travel, situating players at the border of leisure and learning. However, aside from being present as a general opportunity, the real nuances of the educational qualities of plays as travel remain, as of yet, unexplored territory.

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