

On Pilgrimage: Post-Apocalyptic Wandering in *Death Stranding* and *The Last of Us Part II*

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INTRODUCTION

In both *Death Stranding* and *The Last of Us Part II*, the player wanders around a post-human, post-apocalyptic, post-death world. In *Death Stranding*, Sam roams the devastated landscape of what was once the USA, delivering packages to a bunkered-down populace and connecting each city to a network, in the hopes that the fragmentary country can once again become a unified whole. In *The Last of Us Part II*, Ellie and Abby each set out on a destructive revenge quest against the person who killed their respective father figures, in a morally grey, zombie-infested, post-apocalyptic American Northwest. Both games are concerned with what kind of future humans can forge by wandering around a vast world in the aftermath of a massive biological and cultural extinction. Both games answer that desperate question ambiguously, ending on a mix of hope, despair, and only one certainty: that the wandering continues.

I argue that when we look at these Action-Adventure games from the perspective of a wandering body, the underlying structure is fundamentally that of a pilgrimage. The player character has some reason to walk from one corner of a landscape to another, and they hold on to the hope that doing so will bring some kind of spiritual fulfilment. They stop to rest and take stock, they leave some mark of their passage, they come into frequent contact with the divine or the sublime (i.e. fantastical, ineffable creatures that cause them to question their beliefs and reaffirm their commitment), and they keep putting one step in front of the other, however much they might be losing their faith. They also do so in digital conversation with other pilgrims. In both *Death Stranding* and *The Last of Us Part II*, walking together-but-separately re-shapes the landscape—testifying, in videogame form, to how pilgrimage can reconnect a disconnected world.

This presentation grows out of a broader project studying the way that digital bodies wander through virtual worlds. Throughout that project, I argue that continuous, post-apocalyptic walking demonstrates unending faith, the promise of salvation, and the fundamental belief that what is broken can be mended. This is one answer to the clarion call in the last chapter of *Playing Nature*, in which Alenda Chang writes, “[w]e hardly need another book about catastrophe. What we do need is a way to carry on and find productive modes of being even in a compromised situation...how we make a start in the face of looming or already elapsed calamities” (2019, 188–190). Wandering in post-apocalyptic games offers us the chance to make a start, to find a productive mode of being in the face of calamity, to take a first step in a spiritual journey. Wandering across a digital post-apocalyptic pastoral is a pilgrimage towards the ineffable. It’s not an answer, but it’s a start—a literal positive step that semi-secretly exists in most AAA

open worlds (or semi-open worlds), howsoever concealed under the full force and fury of conventional Action-Adventure mechanics.

This paper breaks into two sections—world and body. In the first section, I consider these game worlds as post-apocalyptic pastorals: beautiful naturalistic environments that juxtapose wistfully against the ruined wreckage of human civilization. Traversing these virtual landscapes puts us squarely in conversation with Chang when she attempts “a secular eschatology of environmental end-times as seen through the popular culture of games” (2019, 190). In the second section, I focus on the bodies that travel these worlds, considering player characters as the kind of cursed eternal wanderers who populate mythic traditions from Cain to La Llorona to the Wandering Jew—doomed legendary wanderers who have roamed far and wide, serving as cultural symbols for everything from original sin to modern-day diaspora. PCs in these games thus enter into this mythic tradition (intentionally or not), offering a corporeal site on which to project, enact, and exorcise the player’s fears and dreams of eternal movement.

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