

From Walter Benjamin to the Walking Sim: Flânerie in the Age of the metaverse

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Contemporary open world games offer players the opportunity to explore fully realized digital cityscapes, such as Ubisoft's rendering of 18th Century Paris in *Assassin's Creed: Unity* (2014) or Rockstar North's digital reimagining of the greater Los Angeles area (renamed Los Santos) in *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013). It is here in the digital metropolis where gamers might stroll along bustling boulevards, meander down incidental alleyways, observe the faces in the crowd, and immerse themselves in the rhythms of the street. Players can do all of this at their leisure, free from the obligation of engaging with the game's central storyline, and free to explore as they like within the predetermined boundaries of the digital cityscape. For game developers, the openness of their open world games translates to widespread appeal and extended player engagement; two characteristics that make open world games such a lucrative endeavor.

While open spaces have always existed in videogames, the open world genre has embraced the non-space of level design, as exemplified by numerous AAA developers striving to feature ever more expansive and ever more detailed environments where rule-bound play is meant to unfold, but not as a matter of course. Though digital flânerie first flourished on account of player (in)activity, the architects of gameworlds have responded in turn, offering truly open environments and implementing design principles that allow for—and even promote—aimless exploration.

Striving to deepen player engagement, developers have already begun to 'gamify' open world exploration as demonstrated by the "Discovery Tour" in *Assassin's Creed: Origins* (Ubisoft Quebec, 2018) and the "Photo Mode" in Insomniac Games' *Spider-Man* (2018). As player-designer symbiosis has shaped digital flânerie in mainstream game development, the indie design scene has responded with the walking simulator. Titles such as *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2012), *Proteus* (Ed Key & David Kanaga, 2013), and *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* (The Chinese Room, 2015) populate this genre known for elevating the acts of walking and looking around, while removing elements of challenge typically associated with win- and lose-states. Whereas the expansiveness of open world games gives way to player-initiated flânerie, walking simulators oblige the player to become a flâneuse or flâneur, as the acts of watching and walking constitute the narrow spectrum of available player input.

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Just as Walter Benjamin noted a return of the 19th century flâneur to the streets—and the movie palaces—of the 20th century metropolis, I claim that the flâneur has returned yet again, this time to the pixelated passageways of open world games and the pastoral pathways of the walking simulator. Digital flânerie embodies trends in gameplay and game design that constitute (oftentimes) aimless forms of interaction, including observation, strolling, wandering, and getting lost, among others. With its sensitivity to haptic modes of reception and the intersection of technology and the human sensorium, Walter Benjamin's (1999, 2003, 2008) conception of flânerie—which preoccupies a decade of his theoretical output, including the Artwork essay and his writing on Baudelaire—provides an essential theoretical framework to illuminate the implications of today's digital flâneur. Drawing from case studies of contemporary open world games and walking simulators, as well as interviews with game developers, I will examine the instability present in digital flânerie as design principle, which wavers between expansiveness and enclosure, hesitancy and frenzy, interior and exterior, private and public, between subjective observation and ubiquitous surveillance. Furthermore, I will address the ascendance of the walking simulator genre within the context of open world digital flânerie.

And if Benjamin's flânerie can draw attention to the fissures in today's digital enclosure, perhaps it can offer guidance as the next techno-perceptual threshold approaches—the metaverse. Dependent on technology and strategies from the world of gaming, the metaverse will not only follow the logic of game mechanics, but it will also look like a gameworld—which, of course, looks back, as seeing surveillantly becomes an everyday aesthetic. Benjamin's flâneur—a product of layered, liminal realities—will be needed once again as the metaverse fundamentally alters the human perceptual apparatus and the (online) crowds are confronted with learning to see, and to navigate, a novel symbiosis of the physical and the virtual.

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