Otium and Walking Simulators

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

There are no sustained attempts to make the term productive for advancing our understanding of the experiences that videogames afford their players yet, but *otium* certainly is "a contested concept" (Fludernik and Nandi 2014, 4) with a conceptual history that spans from antiquity to the present and that the following can hence only hint at (Eickhoff 2021; Kirchner 2018; and the contributions in Fludernik and Jürgasch 2021 provide more detailed semantic reconstructions). While *otium* should thus not be directly equated with either the English *leisure* or the German *Muße*, this extended abstract will follow Fludernik (2020; 2021) in foregrounding the similarities between those terms rather than those aspects of *otium* that refer to, say, the absence of (military) threats or (civil) unrest (Eickhoff 2021, 37–55). As a (positively connotated) counter-term to the (negatively connotated) *negotium* (broadly meaning "business"), *otium* was used in ancient Rome to "privilege[ ] aristocratic relaxation from civic duties or war over the peasant's, artisan's or slave's rest from toil" (Fludernik and Nandi 2014, 4), which at least partially corresponds to some of the possible distinctions between *free time* and *leisure* in English, or between *Freizeit* and *Muße* in German.

As Fludernik has repeatedly argued, *otium* (or *otiose leisure*, or *Muße*) refers to "moments or segments of leisure that are *bounded* and therefore acquire an experimental quality of enhanced freedom, heightened enjoyment, and an intensification of ongoing mental activity" (2020, 16; original emphasis). Fludernik further describes experiences of *otium* as the result of an interplay between two forms of freedom, namely "freedom from" externally imposed constraints (i.e., "things we have to do") and "freedom for" the kinds of activities that afford experiences of *otium* (i.e., "things we want to do"). It is interesting to note the kinds of activities that Fludernik identifies as *otium*-affording here, when she suggests that "[w]e can use our *Muße* time to meditate or to listen to music" as well as "to relax while hiking, dancing, or swimming," and that "one can also engage in a burst of musical composition or in a work flow of concentrated reading or writing" (2020, 17). While it seems plausible enough that not only "relaxing" physical activities such as hiking but also "focused" mental activities such as "reading and writing" are "[a]mong the key activities of *otium*" (Fludernik and Nandi 2014, 4), it is still striking that Fludernik includes listening to (as well as composing) music in her list, but does not mention other forms of mediated experiences that are not primarily language-based, such as watching films and television series or, indeed, playing videogames.

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At least at first glance, it would seem that not only films and television series but also videogames tend to incentivize their spectators, viewers, and players to focus their attention on the film, television series, or videogame in question (rather than their real-world surroundings) in ways that are not too dissimilar to the more "traditional" experiences of *otium* analyzed by Fludernik. While such "focused" engagement is thus not a videogame-specific phenomenon (Grau 2003; Ryan 2001; Stiegler 2021; as well as the contributions in Liptay and Dogramaci 2015), the term "immersion" is perhaps most commonly used to describe the "absorbing" quality of the experiences that videogames afford their players (Calleja 2011; Ermi and Mäyrä 2005; Murray 1997; Thon 2008; but see also Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 450–455; as well as Beil 2010, 58–62; Jørgensen 2013, 19–54; Klevjer 2022, 73–76 for pointed criticism). In any case, when exploring videogames' potential to afford their players experiences of *otium*, the question is not only how videogames supposedly capture the "whole perceptual apparatus" (Murray 1997, 98) of their respective players, or which (usually fictional) storyworlds the players may imaginatively "recenter" or "relocate" themselves to, but also which affordances and constraints videogames offer in terms of their players' actions, which is often connected to the concept of agency in game studies (Bódi 2023; Domsch 2013; Habel and Kooyman 2014; Nguyen 2020; Murray 1997; Stang 2019).

A more detailed exploration of the different (and variously interrelated) dimensions of immersion and agency would likely be productive, but for our present purpose the most important observation is that, just as certain forms of ludic immersion seem unlikely to lead to intense experiences of *otium* as they lack the contemplative and reflective qualities usually associated with the latter, so does the question of videogame-specific agency at least complicate our view of the playing of videogames as a potentially *otium*-affording activity. While it seems clear that playing videogames is more often considered to be a leisure activity than a work activity, the question to what extent and in which ways videogames may afford their players experiences of *otium* does not invite simple generalized answers. Still, the often demanding nature of the challenges offered by many videogames' gameplay and the (varying, yet often comparatively low) degree to which they provide their players with opportunities for contemplation and reflection seem to set the activity of playing videogames apart from the *otium*-affording activities listed by Fludernik. Players will need "freedom from" externally imposed constraints in order to have the "freedom for" playing videogames, yet most videogames' game mechanics and game goals establish what could be described as "second-order constraints," with a lack of the "freedom from" having to engage with the challenges of the gameplay leading to a lack of the "freedom for" the kind of contemplation and reflection associated with experiences of *otium*. There are, however, interesting counterexamples to this general expectation regarding the "second-order constraints" characterizing most videogames' conventionalized design, with the by now well-established "indie" videogame genre of the walking simulator (Consalvo and Paul 2019, 109–130; Juul 2019, 187–210; Montembeault and Deslongchamps-Gagnon 2019; Zimmerman and Huberts 2019), positioned as it is at the intersection of "wandering games" (Kagen 2022) and "literary games" (Ensslin 2014; as well as Bohunicky and Milligan 2019; Bozdog and Galloway 2020; Mészáros 2022), arguably providing a particularly interesting case in point. Indeed, walking simulators' prioritization of focused narrative exploration within evocative 3D game spaces as opposed to challenging game mechanics, complex game goals, or sprawling nonlinear storyworlds would seem to make them likely (albeit not *singular*) candidates for videogames that afford their players the "freedom from/freedom for" dynamic identified by Fludernik as a core requirement for experiencing *otium* not just *in order to* play them but also *while* playing them.

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