

Concentration, Distraction, Immersion: Attentiveness in the Age of Digital Games

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Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility," is probably among the most important works of media theory and culture studies. In the age of mass media, Benjamin argues, we no longer perceive artworks in concentrated, contemplative manners, but absent-mindedly. The distracted masses should not be blamed for their lack of attention; instead, this new form of perception and participation has the potential to offer new, and revolutionary, possibilities. Now, almost a century later, do motion pictures still over-stimulate the consciousness of the audience, resulting in what Benjamin calls a "shock effect"? As we gradually become accustomed to robotically scrolling down a phone screen and catching "pocket-monsters" on the way to work, does distraction still promise to be perceptually and politically effective? Has there been new forms of perception that arose from the cultural and aesthetic transformations of the digital age?

Whether it has been formally considered as a type of artwork or not, digital game is a form of media that delivers an aesthetic experience. They allow the player to engage actively in the scenarios presented, creating an illusion of being temporarily transported from life's problems to the game environment. In game studies, the experience of being transported to an elaborately simulated place and surrounded by a completely different reality is often referred to as "immersion," a metaphorical term derived from the physical experience of being submerged in water. Like the film in Benjamin's time, digital game is only another "pastime for helots, a diversion for uneducated, wretched, worn out creatures who are consumed by their worries," an entertainment that distracts the player from everyday life. Yet the player does not perceive the game in a state of distraction; instead, she intensely concentrates on the game, to the point that she "enters" the game world, in the same way Benjamin tells of the Chinese painter who entered his finished painting. Dialectically linked to both states of

distraction and attention, immersion consists of both the feeling of being part of an alternative environment, and a constant awareness of the fictionality of such experience. To analyze the concept of immersion, I will primarily use examples from open world role playing games (RPG), a genre of games that provides a simulated reality and allows players to freely explore the world and develop their character and its behavior. In these games, the player “enters” the game through the character, who functions as the site of both the player’s identification with and alienation from the game world. This character, comparable to Romantic painter Casper David Friedrich’s famous “*Rückenfigur*” (turned figure), allows the player to be fully immersed in the game while maintaining a heightened self-consciousness and awareness of her environment.

Concentration and Distraction

In her paper “Between Contemplation and Distraction: Configuration of Attention in Walter Benjamin,” Carolin Duttlinger traces Benjamin’s dialectical interplay of attention [*Aufmerksamkeit*] and distraction [*Zerstreuung*] back to an early fragment “On Horror” [*Über das Grauen*] (1920-22), where Benjamin contrasts two forms of contemplation [*Versunkenheit*]—religious and secular—as well as their effects to the subject:

There are conditions of concentration, especially in their depths, that do not make men absent-minded, but highly attentive [*geistesgegenwärtig*]. The only kind of presence of mind [*Geistesgegenwart*], which has continued existence and cannot be undermined, is that of holy immersion, for example, of prayer. (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 6, 75; hereafter cited as GS)

The form of holy contemplation enables the subject to fully concentrate [*versunken*] not only in God, but also in herself. This argument, which Benjamin did not explicate, seems rather self-evident. Omnipotent and ubiquitous, God is always present, even within an individual’s own self. A praying individual’s self-consciousness does not dissolve and become an extension of God, because she already is within God. Therefore, in prayer, the individual’s contemplative focus on the divine does not conflict with her awareness of herself.

It is not religious contemplation that causes the “horror,” as the title of this fragment suggests, but its secular counterpart. Non-religious forms of concentration and contemplation, such as listening to music or sleep, threaten to undermine the subject’s presence of mind, because she is unable to be fully immersed. The individual is “in the unknown and therefore only incompletely absorbed” (GS 6, 76), and her “absent-minded contemplation” [*geistesabwesende Versunkensein*] leads to the disintegration of mind [*Seele*], lived-body [*Leib*], and physical body [*Körper*]. Unlike in religious prayer, in which the devotion to the divine is compatible with self-consciousness, contemplation in secular matters risks the danger of wearing away the subject’s awareness of herself. Benjamin writes, “the mind forms a maelstrom in which all limbs and parts of the body are drawn in the spiritual moment, and now, in the absence of the mind, the lived body [*Leib*] is de-potentialized [*depotenziert*] and actually removed, leaving behind only the physical body [*Körper*]” (76). In the state of mindlessness, the physical body without either mind or lived-body knows no border [*der menschliche Körper im Zustande der Geistesabwesenheit keine bestimmte Grenze hat*]. Therefore, the individual’s sense perception fails to distinguish the border between someone else and herself. This is what causes the horror: upon seeing someone else, she mistakenly perceives that person as her “double” [*Doppel*]. As the boundaries of self and other are dissolved, familiar appearances suddenly become alien and horrifying.

In this early fragment, Benjamin examines only two types of attention, religious and secular, the latter of which easily risks the danger of losing presence-of-mind and thus oblivion. In her analysis of this fragment, Duttlinger concludes that Benjamin rejects secular contemplation in favor of a “more dialectical model of attention that combines contemplative reflection with outward-looking-alertness” (36), a model that she relates to Benjamin’s theory of distraction. In “On Horror,” external distractions become a disruptive threat to the subject’s self-consciousness, but once attention and distraction reunite and form a

dialectical process in which constant distraction prepares the individual for an alternative mode of attentive engagement, distraction becomes a “practice instrument” [*Übungsinstrument*], teaching the audience to casually engage with the stimuli of modern life in a detached state of distraction. This new form of attentive engagement is possible because, even distracted people form habits. In an essay entitled “Habit and Attention” [*Gewohnheit und Aufmerksamkeit*], written in the early 1930s, Benjamin discusses the example of a person, who is in constant but stable physical pain or mental anguish. If she concentrates on her pain and nothing else, she would be able to capture even the most inconspicuous sounds, because “the mind, it is believed, is more easily distracted, the more concentrated it is” (GS 4.1, 408). But when she is exposed to a constant stimulus, in this case her pain, she gradually grows used to it, and this habit [*Gewohnheit*] allows her to be pay attention to something else, even when she is constantly distracted. The coexistence of attention and habit prevents the experience of horror, allowing the individual to engage with her environment in a detached yet alert way.

How to Enter a Picture, or the Theory of Immersion

Benjamin wrote in his artwork essay, “A person who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it; enters into this work, just as, according to legend, a Chinese painter entered his completed painting while beholding it. By contrast, the distracted masses absorb the work of art into themselves. Their waves [*Wellenschlag*] lap around it; they encompass it with their tide [*Flut*]” (GS 1, 465; *Work of Art* 40). The figure of the Chinese painter appears to be the quintessential example of aesthetic contemplation. A longer version of this story—Benjamin has written about this legend in three different occasions—is recorded in Benjamin’s *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*:

...As if I already knew the story which, after so many years, leads me back again to the work of the Mummerehlen. The story comes from China, and tells of an old painter who invited friends to see his newest picture. This picture showed a park and a narrow footpath that ran along a stream and through a grove of trees, culminating at

the door of a little cottage in the background. When the painter's friends, however, looked around for the painter, they saw that he was gone—that he was in the picture. There, he followed the little path that led to the door, paused before it quite still, turned, smiled, and disappeared through his narrow opening. In the same way, I too, when occupied with my paintpots and brushes, would be suddenly displaced into the picture. I would resemble the porcelain which I had entered in a cloud of colors. (GS 4, 262-3, *Berlin Childhood* 134)

This legend, which is often attributed to Tang Dynasty painter Wu Daozi, describes the brief moment between the painter's entrance to the image and his disappearance. Let us consider this curious image of a painter inside his own painting: is he a part of the painting, or an external element? Does the painter remain himself, or does he "dissolve" into the picture? In a sense, by entering a landscape painting which is already completed, he renders himself redundant: he is not an essential part of the picture, but something extra, something protruding. Furthermore, he is seen "wandering" in the picture: walking through the narrow road, he eventually arrived at the door, stood still, turned around, before he finally disappeared. As a passer-by, the painter obviously does not belong to the landscape, and his presence in the image is only temporary. As we have seen earlier, the acts of secular contemplation, such as sleeping and listening to music, risks the danger of oblivion, because the individual's mind and living-body are transported somewhere else, while his physical body remains where he was, exposed to potential external stimulus that results in the experience of horror. But the person who has entered a picture does not risk such danger, because he is physically in the picture, and therefore does not have to separate his mind and lived-body from his physical body. Therefore, he does not collapse into oblivion once he enters the image. The painter still recognizes and smiles at his friends, who are no longer in the same dimension as him. He appears to be well aware of his surroundings, including both the real world that he just left, and the picture-world that he is now a part of. He is now both himself and something else (that is, a part of an image), a state that Benjamin did not see as possible by the time he drafted "On Horror."

Of course, the story of the Chinese painter is nothing more than a legend. First recorded in a Taoist hagiography, it depicts the painter Wu Daozi as a Taoist “Xian,” a spiritually transcendent person who possesses super-human powers, such as metamorphic abilities and the mastery of time and space.¹ Conjoining the features of exorcists, magicians, and immortals, a “Xian” can travel freely in both human and divine worlds. Therefore, it is not a surprise that Wu Daozi could freely enter a painting. But the fact that Benjamin uses an ancient Chinese legend as the example par excellence of aesthetic contemplation is nevertheless curious: absorbed by a work of art, the concentrated person enters the work of art in same way that the Chinese painter enters his painting—as if he, the viewer, also possessed superhuman powers. (GS1, 465) Aesthetic contemplation appears to be something other than secular or religious concentration, something almost beyond human-all-too-human capacities and incapacities. There seems to be yet another type of attentiveness besides concentration and distraction that, although impossible to be physically achieved during Benjamin’s time, remains a conceptual potentiality: something that, if made possible, would allow us to be transported into pictures.

Ernst Bloch, a Marxist philosopher and a friend of Benjamin’s, also writes about this legendary painter. He associates the painter’s disappearance with a longing of “take me with you,” or the desire to be brought elsewhere, the impulse to enter a utopia (Bloch, 113). According to Bloch, the Chinese painter’s disappearance, along with many other similar legends, reveals our desire to leave the world that we live in, and be transported into a world of fantasy. One of the stories Bloch tells in his essay collection *Traces* involves a young man Rudolf, who entered an old picture in his parents’ house and lived an alternative life with the woman depicted on the picture, until one day he accidentally returned to world he originally

¹ The story is first recorded in *Liexian quanzhuan, or Youxiang liexian quanzhuan* (Illustrated Comprehensive Biographies of All Immortals), a Taoist hagiography that includes biographies of 581 immortals [Xian 仙], 222 of which are illustrated.

came from, only to realize that time had not passed during the years he lived in that picture. Like Benjamin, Bloch too associates this Chinese painter's story with something almost beyond this world. Unlike Rudolf, who eventually came back to this world, the Chinese painter eventually disappeared in the picture. Bloch interrogates the space where this legend potentially leads to: "who we are, and when we will truly live, no one up to now has ever known. Still darker is how and where we go then; the dying depart, as what?" (116) The legend of the Chinese painter, Bloch believes, is intertwined with the motif of the door [das Tor-Motiv] that leads towards death, and a "beyond" based on mankind's deepest desires. Again, both Benjamin's and Bloch's interpretations of the Chinese painter's legend seem to suggest that there exists another type of attentiveness that allows the audience to become part of an artwork without losing one's selfhood, to be simultaneously "here" and "elsewhere."

The wish of entering a picture, which was impossible during Benjamin and Bloch's time, only existed as a potentiality, a marginal note associated with an ancient legend in both of their writings. But the entertainment industry has since long been exploring such a possibility of "transporting" people into pictures by creating illusions. The earliest type of stereoscope—a device used to create three-dimensional (3-D) imagery and the illusion of physical presence in the image—was created in 1838 by Charles Wheatstone, professor of experimental philosophy at King's College. It used a pair of mirrors at 45-degree angles to the user's eyes, each reflecting an image located off to the side, to create a volume picture with two images superimposed on each other. Arguably the ancestor of 3-D glasses, stereoscopes create the illusion of depth, simulating a real-life viewing experience. During the 1960s, scientists made some serious practical attempts to develop apparatus capable of stimulating multiplex senses including vision, sound, and touch. Since the appearance of the term "virtual reality" in 1987, the world has been seeing some major, rapid advancement in the field, including the development of VR goggles, headsets, and gaming consoles. Since 2016, virtual

reality has become a mainstream option for digital games. Nowadays, the term “virtual reality,” or simply VR, commonly refers to a type of computer technology that uses devices such as head-mounted displays, multi-projected environment, among others, to generate realistic sensations that simulate a real-life experience in a virtual environment.

In game studies terminology, the perception of being physically present in a virtual world is often referred to as “immersion.”² Definition the term varies, but usually a vivid, extensive illusion of reality is necessary.³ In a paper presented at the 2004 conference on human factors in computer system, Emily Brown and Paul Cairns analyze the three degrees of immersion: engagement, engrossment, and total immersion. Engagement describes the player’s interest in engaging with the game; engrossment delineates a deeper level of involvement, usually characterized by emotional attachment; total immersion signifies the most intense form of involvement, often accompanied by a loss of self-awareness and a feeling of being cut off from the world that the player inhabits. Still better accepted is a narrower definition of immersion that is contrasted to the idea of “flow,” which describes the state that an individual is in when she is intensely absorbed in an activity and is experiencing a high level of fulfilment.⁴ This gratifying state makes the individual to be willing to put forth effort to sustain that state, while paying minimum attention to their surroundings. Unlike flow, which delineates an optimal state where the individual is entirely absorbed by the activity—similar to Brown and Cairns’s concept of “total immersion”—immersion is generally used as a term to describe a certain degree of involvement. Less extreme than the

² This term is not a synonym of Benjamin’s “*Versenkung*,” but rather a technical term often used in the context of game design, virtual reality, and immersive technology. Although the term is commonly used in popular and academic discussions of game involvement, there lacks a commonly agreed definition of “immersion.” Another term that describes a similar experience is “presence,” which has been a popular research area since the 1990s with the development of VR technologies, and therefore more clearly defined.

³ Mel Slater and Sylvia Wilbur, for example, define *immersion* as “a description of a technology that describes the extent to which the computer displays are capable of delivering an inclusive, extensive, surrounding and vivid illusion of reality to the sense of a human participant” (606).

⁴ The idea of flow was first proposed by Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi to describe a positive experience in which individuals perceive a congruence of skills and challenges.

state of flow, the narrower definition of immersion matches Brown and Cairns's second level or engrossment. It also seems to be a more appropriate term when describing videogame play experience, during which the player is more likely to be still aware of her surroundings. To use Jennett et al.'s example, a person can be highly engaged in a videogame, without forgetting to leave the game to go to a lecture. The player is still immersed in the game, but not to the exclusion of everything else (6).⁵ It appears that immersion is an ideal state of the gaming experience, even supported by game developers. Certain games remind their players to be aware of their surroundings when playing the game. For example, in *The Legend of Zelda: breath of the Wild*, one of the tips that appear while the game is loading reads, "Some items, like bows, allow you to target things by tilting GAMEPAD [the gaming console]. Remember to be aware of your surroundings when doing this."

If we create a model of involvement based on Brown and Cairns's theory of immersion, only narrowing down the definition of immersion by assigning the value of "engrossment" to the term "immersion," we now have three tiers of involvement: engagement, immersion, and total immersion. To make a connection between these game studies terminologies with Benjamin's theories of concentration and distraction, I will briefly return to a group of water tropes that Benjamin used in "Habit and Attention" to describe the dialectical relationship between habit and attention: "attention and habit, to take offense and to accept it are the crest and trough in the sea of mind. But this sea also has its windless moments" (IV.1, 408)⁶. The perpetual oscillation between attention and habit can also reach a balance when the sea is calm. Adopting Benjamin's water tropes, we may say that the contemplating person is *versunken*, or immersed under water; without the aid of deities, she

⁵ The contention that considers immersion to be a suboptimal state is also supported by other studies which refer to immersion as "describing the experience of becoming engaged in the game-playing experience while retaining some awareness of one's surroundings" (Brockmyer, 626)

⁶ „Aufmerken und Gewöhnung, Anstoß nehmen und Hinnehmen sind Wellenberg und Wellental im Meer der Seele. Diese Meer aber hat seine Windstillen.“

risks the danger of drowning herself in the sea. The distracted person, however, is not completely *versunken*, but rather swimming, floating, or flowing with the tide. Partially submerged, she is aware and accustomed to the crests and troughs of the sea, which greatly reduces the danger of drowning, or the dissolution of her self-consciousness. This set of water tropes can also be applied to our discussion the three tiers of involvement in gaming experiences. Engagement can be seen as a kind of “dipping” into water, a brief and casual encounter of little consequence. Complete immersion, however, is comparable to the *Versunkenheit* in “On Horror,” a type of concentration that runs the risk of drowning, or “dissolution.” In our narrow definition of immersion, the individual is highly involved in the game, while still maintaining an awareness of her surroundings. She is neither briefly “dipping” into water, nor completely submerged, but rather, “soaked”: completely saturated, she lets the water permeate her, while at the same time retaining the contour of herself. She becomes a part of water, and yet she remains herself. Unlike Benjamin’s distracted person, who is only partially submerged, the immersed person does not have to “come up for air.” Of course, the immersive experience is based on artificially created illusions: unlike Taoist immortals, humans still cannot *physically* enter pictures. Immersion, therefore, consists of both the feeling of being part of an alternative world, and a constant reminder that this experience is only an illusion. A combination of contemplative reflection and an alertness of the external world, immersion is dialectically linked to both Benjamin’s theory of distraction and attention.

It is important to notice that the concept of immersion defined here is different from identification, the psychological relationship between the spectator and a film character, or between the reader and a character in the book. When specifically applied to media, identification is the spectator’s belief that she shares the same thoughts, feelings, and situations with the character, as if she is experiencing the happenings from the character’s

perspective. The effect of identification in films, just like in novels, is largely the result of good storytelling, of a convincing and coherent portrayal of the character. Murray Smith's theory of structure of sympathy, set forth in his 1994 article "Altered States: Character and Emotional Response in the Cinema," systemically examines the process through which film evoke the feeling of "identification" in spectators. His system of "imaginative engagement" with character includes three distinct levels, namely, recognition, alignment, and allegiance. The first step is that of recognition, which allows spectators to "construct characters" (Smith, 35). To do so, the film needs to portray a coherent character through actions, dialogues, and visual portrayal. The second stage, alignment, is a process which enables the character's subjective qualities to be manifest, allowing the viewer to see and hear as a character does. This effect is achieved by presenting both the objective and the subjective perspectives with the script and the camera, offering the viewer an opportunity to interpret the character's actions through their personal history and emotional life. Allegiance, the third and final stage, requires that the spectator comes to agree with the character's moral code, their actions, and their point of view. The construction of allegiance depends on whether the character has become the vessel for the moral point of the story—such as agents of justice, decency, or retribution. All three stages of identification, as Smith presents to us, are the result of good storytelling. Although new film technology indirectly contributes to the effect of identification by creating better sound effect, capturing more vivid images, and providing a more comprehensive perspective for the story, it is by no means the essential cause of identification.

The effect of identification requires a vessel who already inhabits the film world, a character who is fundamentally different from the viewer. No matter how much the viewer recognizes, emphasizes, and agrees with the character, she cannot "become" the character, seeing, hearing, and feeling everything they feel, or even controlling their actions. The

immersive experience provides precisely that experience which films cannot provide, where the player *becomes* the character. Such an experience is only made possible by new technology. While films are, in most cases, limited to a two-dimensional screen, games create an interactive space. Spatial presence, one of the prerequisite of an immersive experience, is the psychological state in which the individual forgets that the world she is experiencing is created by technology.⁷ According to a 2007 study, which examines the process by which spatial presence happens, the researchers conclude that presence is achieved after two steps: first, players form a mental representation or map of the virtual space presented to them. Second, Player perceive the world as their primary point of reference of where they are. Games aim at creating a cognitively demanding environment that requires the player to interact with, and, in the gamer's effort to actively understanding and navigating the world, she develops a mental model of the game world that helps her complete various tasks. Once the mental image is created, the player begins to feel that she is present in the game world. To achieve the desired result of spatial presence, digital games provide multiple channels of sensory information, such as vision, sound, and touch. For example, the visual presentation of an ogre lumbering towards the protagonist that the player controls is often accompanied with the sound of its thunderous footsteps and the rumbling movement of the controller with each of the ogre's step.⁸ Virtual reality headsets, in addition to providing immersive visual and auditory effects, track the movement of the player's body to adjust the display of these sensory information, which further convinces the player that the media contents she perceived are "real."

Regardless of a film's narrative structure, the format of a film determines that the viewer could only be at one place at any given time. Even though a film's *mise en scène* has the capacity to create a believable, coherent space, the viewer is confined behind the camera,

⁷ Weibel and Wissmath, 2.

⁸ This example is borrowed from psychologist Jamie Madigan's book *Getting Gamers* (119).

only seeing the things that the film director allows her to see. Film is a fundamentally “temporal” medium, where spatial presentation is subservient to temporal development. The spatial structure at any given moment in time is staged in accordance to the narrative as developed until that point, and is used to serve the narrative going forward from that point. From a technical perspective, a film is consisted of a limited number of frames, each of which captures an individual space. The viewer cannot “go to” a specific space unless she waits until (or scroll the progress bar to) the frame that captures that space. In digital games, the roles of space and time are somewhat reversed. Game is a fundamentally “spatial” medium in that temporal events and plot narratives are triggered by spatial movement. For example, in the *Super Mario Bros* series, each new level is triggered when the main character Mario successfully moves towards the far end of the map. In *The Legend of Zelda*, quests are scattered throughout the landscape of the game, and there is no mandatory temporal order to completing these events. Certain quests are triggered when the character arrives at a certain village, town, or forest, or speaks to a non-player character (NPC) located at a certain location on the world map. In other words, events that the player actively participates in in the interactive game space lead to the continuance of the game plot. As a result of conscious design of cognitively demanding environment, supported by newly-developed immersive technology, this unique temporal-spatial relationship in digital games allows for a new mode of attentiveness that is impossible to be achieve through other media. Through games, one finally “enters the picture.”

Character in Picture: Rückenfigur

In many digital games, the immersive experience is created through an intermediary figure who inhabits the virtual world, since, as I mentioned earlier, we cannot physically transport ourselves into a world of fiction or virtuality. Although digital games and virtual

reality technology are able to simulate an immersive experience, such an experience is still completely different from that of the Chinese painter. Therefore, to ensure a more convincing gaming experience, game developers create an immersive story, told from the perspective of a character. Most games are either presented in a first-person perspective, in which the game displays what the player's avatar would see in his or her own eyes, or a third-person perspective, rendered from a view that is some distance away, usually from the back of the character. First-person games are often used in shooting, driving, or combat games, whereas the third-person perspective is commonly adopted in action, adventure, and role-playing games. First-person immersion relies on a concept of self-transportation from the real world into the game world: since there is no pre-existing, explicitly delineated avatar to identify with, the player-character is only a fictional "shell" that requires the player to inhabit in order to become a full entity. What the player engages with is not a character, but an interface that directly allows the player to act within the game world. Third-person immersion, however, allows the player to identify with a character who inhabits in the game world. The character is not an empty shell, but something like a theatrical role. Player is often allowed to alter the physical appearance and equipment of the character, although the character's personality, actions, and relationship with other game characters remain somewhat consistent. For example, in the popular Polish game series *The Witcher*, the protagonist Geralt of Rivia is a member of the mutant race called "witcher" who possesses magic powers and ultra-human strengths. The player controls Geralt to complete various quests, roaming freely in several regions in a fictional world based on medieval Europe. In the *Witcher* game trilogy, the player can learn about the entire life story of the protagonist, allowing the player to deeply identify with him. But the intimacy created by the player's engagement with Geralt and the absorbing, convincing storyline is again undermined by the third-person perspective, which creates a physical distance between the player and the character. The third-person perspective creates

an illusion that it simultaneously undercuts: it encourages the player to “become the character,” without actually letting her become the character. The player engages with the game through the role of her protagonist, but the distance between the player’s eyes and the protagonist functions as a constant reminder that the player and protagonist are two separate entities.

There is one particular genre of digital games that almost exclusively adopts the third-person perspective: open world games. This genre of games usually offers an expansive and diverse map for gamers to explore, allowing the player to freely wander the streets of the virtual world. The map in the *Witcher* series, for example, shares a similar landscape as that of Northern Europe, with forests full of pines, deciduous trees, grassy forests floor featuring low-growing, shade-tolerant plants. and mountainous areas resemble, among others, Bohemian Switzerland and the Alps.⁹ The portrayal of landscapes in these games share certain features with Romanticist landscape paintings, such as their faithful depiction of the atmosphere, weather, and nature’s unpredictability, aiming to evoke a feeling of the sublime, even horror. The ever-changing weather also plays a crucial role in the gaming experience: weather conditions change depending on the region; days and nights go in full circles; rain and fog significantly reduce visibility. Like Romanticist painters, the landscape design both games share a passion for the obscure and the faraway, such as foggy mountains and deep forest that disappear in the darkness. Melancholy or sentimental longing also appears to be one of the central themes for the *Witcher* series, with its mutant protagonist being an eternally wandering swordsman alienated by the human society, and this nostalgia for lost memories is also reflected in the game’s landscapes.

⁹ For more about landscape design in the *Witcher* series, see landscape designer Rob Dwiar’s interview with *Eurogamer*: <http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2017-06-07-a-landscape-designers-take-on-the-witcher-3-mass-effect-and-dishonored>.

More importantly, the main character, depicted from a third-person perspective, resembles a *Rückenfigur*, a visual master-trope often used in German Romanticist painter David Casper Friedrich's paintings. For example, Link, the main character of Nintendo's 2017 *The Legend of Zelda* game, is presented as a *Rückenfigur* in its box art (illus. 1). Possibly a tribute to Friedrich's 1818 *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (illus. 2), the box art presents Link as a turned traveler standing over rocks contemplating the fog-covered mountainside, just like the wanderer in Friedrich's painting. At first glance, the compositions of both images are strikingly similar. With the vertical and horizontal axis intersecting right in the middle of the human figure, both images seem to suggest that the landscape is an extension of the traveler's person.

By turning the subject away from the viewers, Friedrich rendered him anonymous, while at the same time made him all the more identifiable: we cannot see his face, but we



1 *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (box art), Nintendo, 3. Mar. 2017.
<https://www.nintendo.com/games/detail/the-legend-of-zelda-breath-of-the-wild-switch>.



2 Friedrich, David Casper. *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, 1818. Kunsthalle, Hamburg.

could share in the substance of his vision. In his book *Casper David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, art historian Joseph Koerner points out that the *Rückenfigur* functions to infuse the image with a “heightened subjectivity” (17, 36). He comments, “[the *Rückenfigur*] emblemizes the subject of landscape as the subject in landscape... he is a mirror of myself, who is at once forced and unable to constitute the picture’s true subject” (249). In other words, the *Rückenfigur* infuses a landscape painting from an empirical, objective artwork with subjective significances, turning the mere appearances of objects in space and time into an expression of the relationship between humanity and nature.

The *Rückenfigur* is not Friedrich’s invention, but rather has a long history in European painting before the nineteenth century. The motif has appeared in instances including in Renaissance painter Giotto’s works, early Netherlandish painter Jan van Eyck’s *Madonna of Chancellor Rolin* (c.1435), Dutch painter Allaert van Everdingen’s 1640 *The Draughtsman*, etc. With the further development of landscape paintings in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, the *Rückenfigur* begins to appear frequently as part of the “stock repertoire of staffage” that ornament the foreground of a scene, or as a figure sitting at the margin of the scene, marking off the pictorial field as something worth seeing (Koerner, 193). Friedrich’s *Rückenfiguren* also belong to this tradition: appearing alone or in groups contemplating the scenery, they often dominate the canvas, marking the natural scene as something seen by them. Their appearance defines the landscape with their encounter with it. The Dresden scientist and amateur painter Carl Gustav Carus (1789-1869), who has received informal training from his friend Friedrich, articulates and develops his teacher’s view on art and nature in his *Nine Letters on Landscape Painting*, published in 1831. In the third letter, in which he discusses the relationship among art, science, and truth, Carus enclosed a short essay about the effect of individual landscape objects on the human mind. He suggests that while water, earth and sky convey a sense of infinity and unmeasured perfection, vegetation,

clouds, and worn-away rocks convey a sense of life that induces more intimate feelings. The presence of animate creatures, such as Friedrich's *Rückenfiguren*, could deepen the effect of a natural scene: "a solitary figure, lost in his contemplation of a silent landscape, will excite the viewer to set himself in the figure's place" (95). A beholder in the painting functions as a bridge between the viewer's world and the world in picture, enable us to "enter" the landscape by identifying with the human subject. However, Carus also points out that, despite its significance, the sentient figure should eventually be defined by the landscape, not the other way around: they must "spring from it and must belong to it," so long as the image remains a landscape (95). The human figures partially emerge from the landscape, as if extending a welcoming gesture to the audience outside of the picture, as a form of invitation to enter the landscape with them. But even this invitation is restrained by the frame of the image, since the figures must belong to the landscape painting as a subordinate function.

Both the viewer and the viewed, Friedrich's wanderer, like the third-person game character, mediates our experience of the scene. In *The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, the *Rückenfigur* is installed at the center of the canvas, partially blocking our view. He has already been there by the time we arrived; we have come one moment too late. Positioned behind the wanderer, viewers are left uncertain whether we have solid ground under our feet, since the foreground summit rises so abruptly that there seems to be no clear connection between the inside and outside of the picture's frame. The gaze of the halted traveler does not define his surrounding as the environment to which he belongs to, but rather as something beautiful and sublime. This gaze, therefore, distances him from the landscape. Koerner observes that the painted image "distances us tragically [...] from reality, from the fullness of life and experience" (247) This is what enables the viewer to identify with the *Rückenfigur*, or, in the case of digital games, the third-person character. Standing between the natural world to which he does not belong, and the viewer who is further removed from the landscape, the

Rückenfigur/game character is not an erasure of the boundary between self and world, but rather the establishment of such boundary. The moment of identification becomes the very moment of separation.

The *Rückenfigur*/game character's paradoxical nature as site of both our identification with, and our isolation from, the painted landscape is usefully explicated by Romantic philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte, who, as Friedrich himself, faced the same fundamental problems such as subjectivity, consciousness, and self-reflection. In his *Foundation of the Entire Science of Knowledge*, Fichte proposes a new account of self-consciousness, claiming that previous discussions made by Descartes, Locke, and Kant are still "reflective," that is, they regard the self as taking itself not as subject but already as an object. This awareness of self as an object other than the thinking subject assumes a self-reflective I. "The self exists only insofar as it is conscious of itself" (Fichte, 98). Fichte introduces three fundamental principles: self-positing, counter-positing, and limitation, or a synthesis of the first two principles. The first principle, or "A = A," is another way to say that "I" posits itself [setzt sich selbst] and consider itself as an object of reflection. It logically follows that " $\sim A = A$," or not-I is not equal to I, which is the second principle. But in this principle, we understand that the not-I is posited, and since the not-I and the self nullifies each other, the self is not posited. But the not-I cannot exist unless the self exists: it can be posited only insofar as a self is posited, to which the not-I can be opposed. The second principle is logically correct, but insofar as the self and the not-I exist as two opposite entities that nullify each other, the second principle is not valid. Therefore, the third principle synthesizes both the first two principles, and the antithesis between the self and the not-I. The self both is and is not itself; it is a synthesis of the self and what it is not. In other words, to be self-conscious is to set itself aside [setzt sich], to observe itself as something different from itself, and to realize that this something different is indeed still the self.

Seeing through the eyes of the *Rückenfigur*/game character is, arguably, a way to “set oneself aside,” to be conscious of oneself from the perspective of another “I.” The *Rückenfigur* is and is not the viewer, just as the game character is and is not the player. Both figures function as the location of the reconciliation synthesis between the “I” and the “not-I,” or in Fichte’s words, the principle of mutual limitation (117). The “I,” otherwise infinite, undifferentiated, and unlimited, now becomes an individual and empirical “I,” whereas the “not-I” becomes individual objects that constitutes the rest of the world. Unlike in the example of secular contemplation, which may cause the individual’s sense perception failing to distinguish the border between someone else and herself, the player knows her border. Her identification with the character result in her heightened self-consciousness, which further distinguishes the threshold between herself and the environment. Neither detached as the distracted film-goer, nor fully devoted like the pious prayer, the player perceives the game in a new mode of sense perception that, until recently, has been almost impossible. Before the development of immersive technology and digital games, only the talented few—such as the legendary Chinese painter—can “transport” themselves into pictures without losing a sense of who they are. However, in the age of digital media, when anyone with a gaming console or a smartphone can be instantly transported elsewhere, entering a picture has been easier than ever. The public is still an examiner, but this time, an immersed one.

Epilogue: Constellation

Roaming the virtual streets aimlessly and anonymously, the game character is a 21st century flâneur, who mingles with the crowds without actually becoming part of them. As the result of consumerism, accelerated urbanism, a nascent leisure industry, and most importantly, new urban spaces such as the arcades of Paris, the 19th century flâneur was among the first to embrace the new mode of attentiveness. A new figure in the modern city

space, the 19th century flâneur was also the result of the emergence of modernity and technological reproducibility. The figure is significant for Benjamin's dialectical materialism and his view of history. As Hannah Arendt indicates in her introduction to the first English translation of Benjamin's works, the truth about time and history only reveal their secret meanings to the flâneur, as opposed to the hurried, purposeful crowds (Illuminations, 12). Quoting from Benjamin's 1940 text "On the Concept of History," Arendt continues, "'the true picture of the past *flits* by,' and only he flâneur who idly strolls by receives the message" (12). Like the angel of history that Benjamin saw in Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, who turned away from a linear perspective of history towards fragmented pieces of events, the flâneur rejects progress and turns his eyes towards ruins, debris, and forgotten, unwanted objects. Like the rag-picker [Lumpensammler] or the materialistic historian, the flâneur, too, is aimlessly collecting pieces from "the trash [Abfall] of History," "assembling large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components" (GS5.1, 575, *Arcades* 461). The flâneur, a product of modernity and the development of technological reproducibility, offers us a glimpse of what non-linear time could look like.

The 21st century flâneur no longer idly dwells under the roof of an arcade, but strolls through the Internet, or runs around in the virtual world of digital games. As I mentioned before, open world games such as *The Witcher* offer a vast diverse map that allows the player to engage in all kinds of "side" activities, such as gambling and collecting artifacts. (*The Witcher* series even offer the option of visiting prostitutes.) Simultaneously a *flâneur*, a collector, and a gambler, the protagonist is at home in the game world full of stimuli and shocks, aimlessly looking for new encounters, tasks, and objects. The 19th century *flâneur*, collector, and gambler inhabit the debris of history; these fragmented characters and their mode of distracted absorption can be seen as a conscious protest against the linear, teleological narrative of history. In "On the Concept of History," Benjamin rejects the

conception of history as a continuum of progress. The task of historical materialism, he argues, is to engage with the past from the present perspective. The present, Benjamin writes in thesis XVI, is not a transition, but rather a standstill where time has come to a stop. It is these moments of now-time [*Jetztzeit*], “blasted out of the continuum of history,” that may prefigure the coming end of time and fulfil their messianic potential (Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 253).

But unlike the three nineteenth-century types that Benjamin described in his *Arcades Project*, the protagonist in an open world digital game is not completely intoxicated and distracted as a result of technologization of things as well as a crisis of meaning.¹⁰ The immersed player is as much a flâneur as she is an epic hero: she can spend as much time as she want collecting discarded weapons, playing card games, or simply running around, without her flânerie conflicting with her role in the main plot, in which she is not the alienated observer, but the heroine who will eventually “save the world.” Open world games usually include one main story line that connects a series of “main quest,” and a multitude of “side stories,” each of which contains one or more “side quests.” The main quests are essential to the development of the storyline, so it is mandatory that the player completes these quests in a linear, progressive manner; however, the side quests are merely optional, and oftentimes independent of the main story, so it is up to the player to decide which side quests she would like to do, and the order to complete them. These seemingly insignificant individual stories and events form a “constellation”¹¹ of the present that in one way or another influences the main plot. Sometimes the influence might be reflected in the form of experience points and

¹⁰ See Andrew Benjamin, 11.

¹¹ A material historian, Benjamin says, stops telling the sequence of events “like the beads of a rosary,” but instead “grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one” (263). The metaphor of a constellation, which was first proposed in the prologue of *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* [The Origin of German Mourning Plays], has a visual representation in the design of game world maps. Both main quests and side quests appear on these maps, and as the character arrives at a certain location on the map, it triggers an event that contributes to the temporal narrative. In a sense, these maps translate a temporal relationship into a spatial, or constellational one.

weapon upgrades; other times side quests deepen the protagonist's relationship with companion characters, which becomes useful in the main quests. In *The Witcher*, choices made in side quests often have significant consequences, some of which can even change the main story line completely. The narrative of these games approaches time both as a linear continuum and a constellation of breaks, ruptures, and non-synchronized moments. And as the player is concentrated in the main storyline, she is constantly interrupted and distracted by side quests that are randomly triggered along the way. As unimportant, optional side quests become parts of the main story, abstract dots on a map are gradually transformed into coherent narratives that are weaved into the web of history.

This interactive method of storytelling does not completely abandon linear storylines, but the player is free to interrupt, suspend, and even completely abandon the main story, focusing only on the “irrelevant” side events. For example, in *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, the main quest requires that the protagonist Jacob speaks to Charles Darwin to trigger a main event. Before the player chooses to do so, Darwin will just be standing at a street corner, forever waiting for Jacob's arrival, as if time has stopped for him. In these open world games, linear, teleological time and fragmented, “constellational” time coexist, forming an inclusive historical narrative in which even the smallest action has its own significance. As I have mentioned earlier, unlike films, in which spatial presentation is subservient to temporal development, games reverse the space-time relationship by positioning space as the principal. Temporal continuance is only triggered when the character arrives at a certain place on the game world map. Furthermore, the constellation of “quests” showing in the map translates a (linear) temporal relationship into a spatial one. If the 19th century flâneur allows us to see what a constellation of history looks like, then the 21st century flâneur shows us that the “time-line” and the “time-constellation” not only co-exist, but are mutually translatable. Although time in open world digital games contains little eschatological values, the player of

these games is likely to be instructed to follow the same rule that a Benjaminian chronicler—who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones—applies to his work: “nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history” (*Illuminations*, 254).

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