Title: Armchair travel through video games: Stories from elsewheres and elsewhens

Author: Serkan Uzunogullari

Department of Tourism, University of Sunderland, Sunderland, UK

ORCID: 0000-0003-2866-3132

Abstract

COVID-19 has caused stress, negative emotions, and a reduction in physical and social activity due to the lockdown measures that were necessary for public health. During this period, many had to negotiate professional and familial responsibilities and were challenged to carve out time for leisure indoors. Using autoethnography as a method of inquiry, this research explores 'armchair travel' through video games as a leisure activity. Therefore, the article discusses memories and feelings of escaping the confines of domestic space from the perspective of self. Armchair travel via video games may provide an endless array of sights and sensations, bringing up feelings of leisure and contentment when real-world isolation and restriction are the norms.

Keywords: armchair travel, video games, autoethnography, lockdown, leisure

Word Count: 8943

Introduction

Lockdown, shutdown, and self-isolation were the primary responses to COVID-19
worldwide. While restrictions were aimed at protecting people's biological health, their
consequential behavioural, emotional, and social impact did not go unnoticed (Brooks *et al.*,
2020; Zhang *et al.*, 2020). From a psychological perspective, confinement, loss of routine,
and diminished social contact contributed to feelings of depression, irritation, insomnia, anger
or emotional tiredness (Brooks *et al.*, 2020). Lockdown measures have also increased time
spent in-home leisure activities, which generally entail watching television in the living room
(Beck and Arnold, 2009). However, recent research on the pandemic's impact on leisure
highlighted other in-home activities such as gaming (Deloitte, 2021)

Some people consider video gaming a simple pastime, but for others, it is an integral part of
contemporary cultural, commercial, social, and personal life (Bryce and Rutter, 2003; Mills,
2019). Even before the Covid-19, virtual, spatial and perceptual experiences were hot topics
(Verhoeff, 2012). According to Kavanagh, Jones and Sheppard-Marks (2016), virtual worlds
and new technologies have altered contemporary leisure time and offered vast alternatives for
leisure. Consequently, there is an increasing interest in virtual experiences in the tourism and
leisure industry (tom Dieck *et al.*, 2018). Lawrence (2003) stated that many of us are
becoming 'virtual leisurists' by getting used to spending our leisure time in confined
cyberspace rather than getting out and mingling with others physically. Hence, video gaming
can fulfil various personal, social and emotional needs by providing enjoyment, escape, a
form of social contact, or a stress relief mechanism (Calleja, 2010; Granic, Lobel and Engels,
2014; Muriel and Crawford, 2018; Mills, 2019; Wardyga, 2019; Barr and Copeland-Stewart,
2021).

This paper aims to analyse lockdown leisure in single-player sandbox video games and how they become a tool for armchair travel, permitting a getaway from cosy but restricted domestic space. The paper will share personal reflections of the author's spatial, social, and emotional encounters as an armchair traveller during the lockdown. Therefore, the paper will discuss video gaming as lockdown leisure from the perspective of the self, which is a common method for autoethnography (Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis, 2015). Consequently, this study is novel, as no previous research has examined video games in relation to armchair travel, and there has been little research on video games using autoethnography (Rapp, 2017b, 2017a).

Literature Review

Intricacies of Armchair Travel: Narrative and Aesthetics

Armchair travel is an umbrella term explaining the mediated experience of locations and landscapes through a variety of forms of media, including literature, arts, paintings, panoramas, photographs, moving pictures, and sound (Hornstein, 2011; Byerly, 2012; Stiegler, 2013; Jørgensen, 2014; Wolf, 2018). In other words, the experience of a journey through the power of verbal or visual representations is referred to as armchair travel (Byerly, 2012). Therefore, armchair travel is integrating the two key antecedent concepts, narrative and aesthetics, into a relational meaning to explain what is experienced by a partaker.

The concept of narrative as a journey is ingrained in literary tradition (Byerly, 2012). Wolf (2018) suggests that early attempts at virtual travel began with Aristophanes's The Birds (414 B.C.) or Shakespeare's The Tempest (1611), to the more familiar Alice in Wonderland (1865). Famously, in the Theory of the Literary Chronotope, Bakthin (1981) discusses the fundamental unity of narrative time and space in literary representations and emphasises the importance of shifting spatial and temporal awareness from physical to fictional worlds

through narrative. Consequently, the experience of cognitive, emotional and perceptual captivation in a narrative is often known as 'narrative transportation (Gerrig, 1993; Green and Brock, 2002; Green, Brock and Kaufman, 2004; Greenwood, 2008).

The act of travelling is also employed as a metaphor for aesthetic engagement, which encompasses the absorption of aesthetics as an experience, temporary sensory activity (Byerly, 2012). Perspective-based or ceiling paintings of the 16th and 17th centuries (Wolf, 2018), mass printing and early photography of the 19th century (Stiegler, 2013), or visual devices of the early 20th-century including the magic lantern, phantasmagoria, panorama, and diorama facilitated 'motionless trips' (Clarke and Doel, 2005) or 'travelling without travelling' (Stiegler, 2013). Indeed, *'armchair travel'* has become a common term describing qualities of the aesthetic experience of seeing the world through the mediation of art and literature (Byerly, 2012; Stiegler, 2013).

Although aesthetic contemplation is typically emphasised in the visual arts, when the item remains still and the viewer's experience evolves over time (Atkinson and Parsayi, 2021), films can deliver a noticeably richer and more satisfying aesthetic experience by abandoning such fixed points of view (Byerly, 2012). Appraising the idea of armchair travel in films through the lenses of narrative and aesthetics invites us to consider Deleuze's (2005, 2013) reflections on the construction of perceptive worlds in cinema through movement and time. Deleuze (2005) argues that films can create images that illustrate and perform, which ultimately results in new aesthetics.

Moreover, cinema's sensory power allows a journey into the fabric of space and time, which is independent of real-time and space (Arnheim, 1957; Clarke and Doel, 2005). Hence, Leonard (1996) charmingly proposed that films are space-and-time transports that allow spectators to travel 'elsewheres and elsewhens'. However, armchair travel can be about

presence just as well as virtual transportation. Indeed, Deleuze (2013) goes further to suggest that cinema could induce an immersive state in which a spectator coexists in a fluid reality between physical and imaginary. Not surprisingly, this discussion reminds readers of Bergson's Mind-Energy (1975), which also highlights the duality of an individual in narrative theory or literary experiences. Byerly (2012) has suggested a similar thesis in armchair travel and adds that aesthetic absorption allows users to interact with two places simultaneously, being both a spectator and an actual traveller. Moreover, in video games, the player is aware of and experiencing both their non-game and in-game identities at the same time (Mukherjee, 2015).

In this context, as a narrative and aesthetic experience, armchair travel has evolved with the media. In contemporary society, video games are commonly associated with escapism (Calleja, 2010; Newman, 2017; Muriel and Crawford, 2018; Wardyga, 2019). Escapism is defined as the way we temporarily get away from mundane parts of our everyday lives (Muriel and Crawford, 2018). While video games offer an escape from the mundanity and limited possibilities of reality (Muriel and Crawford, 2018), they can also be regarded as forms of art (Niedenthal, 2009; Tavinor, 2009; Atkinson and Parsayi, 2021; Kim, 2022). Due to their narrative, they are a form of minor literature (Mukherjee, 2015). Like the traditional forms of art, video games engage with themes concerning aesthetics, representation, narrative, emotional engagement, and even morality (Tavinor, 2009). Therefore, they might also be suitable for analysed from an aesthetic perspective, even though the historical aesthetic values and classifications developed for static art forms might not be entirely appropriate for evaluating video games due to their immersive and interactive aspects (Atkinson and Parsayi, 2021; Kim, 2022).

In traditional media, the focus is on replicability and static representations that can be thoroughly analysed and positioned in relation to their unique timeframes (Wessely, 2013). A

video game, on the other hand, allows for a wide variety of gaming paths (Wessely, 2013).

As a form of art, video games are not only able to illustrate imaginative worlds and

narratives, but they can also depict worlds that change based on how the player interacts with

them (Tavinor, 2009). While a moviegoer has no effect on the portrayed fictional world, a

player has an active part in creating it (Tavinor, 2009). Therefore, a video game player is

often identified as a flaneur (Dalal, 2014; Pelurson, 2019). Discussing the virtual mobility in

video games, Dalal (2014) concludes that the player becomes a new kind of virtual flânerie

who engages in a virtual form of mobility infused with the pleasures of exploring through the

viewing and playing experience. It is thus possible to imagine a virtual travel experience in

many quest-based or fictional world games (Byerly, 2012).

In sum, an armchair traveller is someone who explores the world from home, discovering

cultures, meanings, narratives, and connections (Jørgensen, 2014; Bayard, 2016). Similarly,

many modern video games can offer an opportunity for armchair travel to a new reproduced

space and time, which is virtual, temporal and ephemeral. While the academic backgrounds

for armchair travel are derived from different theoretical perspectives, they often complement

each other to offer a fuller discourse on the phenomenon.

The Interplay of Flow and Rule-Breaking

The research in armchair travel through video games has followed other research into the

forests of flow and rule-breaking. Flow refers to a state in which a person is engaged and very

focused, to the point of losing any sense of self-awareness or of time as a result of immersion

(Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 2000). In video games, flow often refers to a condition of focused,

engaged happiness and enjoyment (Salen Tekinbaş and Zimmerman, 2003; Schell, 2008).

Moreover, flow occurs when an experience meets eight criteria: 'a challenging activity that

requires skills, the merging of action and awareness clear goals and feedback, concentration

on the task at hand, the paradox of control, the loss of self-consciousness, the transformation of time' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p.49). It is precisely those properties of games that make them fertile ground for a flow experience (Salen Tekinbaş and Zimmerman, 2003). Therefore, flow is extensively discussed in the field of video game studies (Salen Tekinbaş and Zimmerman, 2003; Nah *et al.*, 2014). For example, challenges and skills are an integral part of gaming. To avoid frustration or boredom, a video game cannot be too hard or too easy (Schell, 2008; Siitonen, 2014). Likewise, players receive positive feedback from successful performance in a game, enhancing their perception of competence through flow (Nah *et al.*, 2014). Indeed, the goal of game designers is to get their players into a state of flow (Salen Tekinbaş and Zimmerman, 2003).

However, viewing armchair travel through video games from the perspective of flow, which typically considers the player's flow state as a response to proportionate challenges, may be limited, given that not pressuring the player to constantly engage with challenges and achieve objectives are more likely to encourage contemplation and attention to the aesthetics (Atkinson and Parsayi, 2021). Therefore, armchair travel through video games invites us to consider players' behaviours that contend with the game designers' anticipations, structures, rules and choices. Subsequently, this kind of gaming behaviour may be linked to violating the designed and anticipated rules of the video game. Rule-breaking means having a different connection with the games than what those games are designed to imply and endorse (Salen Tekinbaş and Zimmerman, 2003). Therefore, rule-breaking ranges from being only slightly transgressive to being completely contrary to the law, and it can include examples of easter eggs (secrets hidden in a game), cheats, gaming guides, walkthroughs, workarounds, and forms of hacking (Salen Tekinbaş and Zimmerman, 2003). Rule-breaking is not exceptional; many theories of gaming are concerned with disobeying behaviours.

The concepts of countergaming (Galloway, 2006), counterplay (Meades, 2015) or queer gaming (Pelurson, 2019, 2021) have similar approaches in their consideration of challenges for the predetermined order, structure, and guidelines of video games. Galloway's (2006) concept of countergaming primarily focuses on modifying games to disrupt their natural flow of gameplay, their visual design, the laws of the game and even software technology. Most importantly, it emphasises aesthetics instead of interactive play. Galloway (2006) states that countergaming is not intended to enhance the gameplay in any way but rather to impede it. On the other hand, "counterplay" is defined as a kind of gaming in which players actively work against the rules and against each other in order to find new methods to have fun and experience new kinds of pleasures (Meades, 2015). Taking a broader approach, cheating, modding (the process of alteration of game aspects by players or other users), hacking and griefing (deliberately irritating other players inside the game) are among Meades's (2015) counterplay concept. Queer game studies also challenge and examine traditional gaming culture and its identities, values, and structures by highlighting unusual video games, breaking their rules, and experiencing and playing them differently (Pelurson, 2021). Most importantly, it finely complements the previous theories of countergaming and counterplay, as well as draws attention to ideas of exploration, orientation and embodiment (Pelurson, 2021).

In sum, the flow theory explains the holistic sensation, complete immersion in games, what a player feels when they act with total involvement and development and the distinction between flow-state and non-flow state. In contrast, theories that consider breaking the rules make room for aesthetic experiences and new kinds of pleasures, even if this is simply against the gameplay.

Embodiment and Avatar

As the digital culture grows, leisure has become more complex and intertwined with physical and virtual lives (Lawrence, 2003; Kavanagh, Jones and Sheppard-Marks, 2016; Silk *et al.*, 2016). Consequently, the notion of technology as a separate entity has shifted to one of embodiment (Kavanagh, Jones and Sheppard-Marks, 2016). Likewise, an individual's embodiment in a virtual world is an avatar, and it is through this extension that one sees the virtual world (Behm-Morawitz, 2013).

In terms of armchair travel, the avatar is not a new concept, as many forms of art and literature use a proxy figure, a surrogate that transports audiences, readers, or spectators into a world of imagination to captivate them (Byerly, 2012). Although these approaches have their differences, the concept of an avatar links the virtual and physical body (Behm-Morawitz, 2013). Thus, a person's digital identity becomes an extension of their physical identity and self (Behm-Morawitz, 2013; Kavanagh, Jones and Sheppard-Marks, 2016) or even more (Silk *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, avatar identification, a temporary merging of characteristics of the avatar with concepts of the self, has the potential to magnify some of the effects and consequences of gaming (Allen and Anderson, 2021). Indeed, instead of the third-person protagonist of a novel or film, players speak about their characters in a game using their own first-person pronouns, such as "I," rather than using the third-person narrator (Bernal-Merino, 2015).

According to Salen Tekinbaş and Zimmerman (2003), a gaming avatar is both a mask to wear and a tool to view and manipulate. Subsequently, players can choose their avatar's gender, race, or occupation in certain games, and this information can have a profound impact on the virtual world (Bernal-Merino, 2015). The only method to perceive a game's environment is via immersive perception and movement of the avatar (Kim, 2022).

In sum, Muriel and Crawford (2018) purport that playing video games is an embodied experience. A game is played by seeing, feeling, hearing, smelling, and tasting it; by moving the body, feeling the unfolding of events, communicating with others and changing thought patterns (Salen Tekinbaş and Zimmerman, 2003). The players inhabit the virtual world and the bodies of their avatars and adopt the persona of the characters for as long as they choose (Bernal-Merino, 2015).

Methodology

Ellis (2004, p. 37) defines autoethnography as 'writing about the personal and its relationship to culture.' Autoethnography also allow a researcher to share their reflections and understandings with others (Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis, 2015). It requires an author to display multiple layers of consciousness (Ellis, 2004). The significance of autoethnographic research lies in giving an insight to the reader about how we perceived the situation and why we did what we did (Adams and Ellis, 2012). Indeed, autoethnography revolves around acknowledgement, confrontation and integration of subjective experiences, beliefs and values (Trussell, 2010). It is a cultural analysis through personal narrative (Ellis, 2004), which allows readers to see the world from the autoethnographer's eyes (Denzin, 2006; Trussell, 2010). Consequently, the lived experience is drawn a great deal of attention in leisure auto-ethnographies (Anderson and Austin, 2012).

According to Adams et al. (2015), self-examination of our own identity, experiences, relationships, and communities represent the core aspects of autoethnography. It requires authors to critically interrogate their personal relationships and take the front stage by using an active voice while disclosing their understandings (Markwell, 2019). Consequently, it is an intimate activity with significant personal risks (Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis, 2015).

On the other hand, it also offers a unique and useful perspective on social life, one that may lead to compelling discoveries for researchers and readers (Anderson and Austin, 2012). Considering that leisure in isolation is something unique to each person, who was vis à vis with lockdown measures and lacked access to typical leisure activities with increased social barriers, a reflexive discourse through auto-ethnography where one questions, analyses, and reveals their personal, social or cultural experiences appears to be appropriate.

Ultimately, the study comprises personal reflections and meaning-making (Miles, 2019). It is a form of storytelling based on the lived experience of one's own past (Bochner and Ellis, 2016), where the 'story is theory and theory is story' (Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis, 2015, p.90). Therefore, this autoethnographic study came to life as a by-product of COVID-19 lockdown and my interest in video games. It became clear to me that there were recurring themes in my experiences as I wrote down my emotions, thoughts and epiphanies and chronicled my play during the lockdown. The discovery of these patterns caused me to critically reflect on my life of confinement and the ways in which I sought solace in virtual worlds. An important caveat concerning this article is 'where my story cannot be your story, and where your story cannot be mine' (Gannon, 2013, p.21). In other words, the stories of the author and reader might only resonate or ripple with each other, but they are never quite unified nor universal (Gannon, 2013).

Research Context

I live in the North East of England, and my life revolves around my nuclear family, which consists of my wife, two children, and a hamster. Other than one or two annual short-haul trips, our family leisure time was usually spent visiting local restaurants, pubs, cinemas, or national parks. Society's biggest change in terms of family life challenges came when the entire population of the United Kingdom was sentenced to house arrest on March 26, 2020. I got caught up in my own health concerns, working from home, family chores and homeschooling. Suddenly, my life has filled with an array of intense emotions alternating between; denial, shock, fear, anxiety, loneliness, gratitude and appreciation on a daily basis. Even though we had looked at the different ways to pass the time and stay entertained, I realised that spending time as a family forms better memories than being in a lockdown together. I realised that home-based leisure activities for a transnational (British-Turkish), dual-earner family are hard. There is already evidence suggesting that indoor family leisure is scarce, fragmented, time-limited, relatively passive, and rather dissatisfying (Beck and Arnold, 2009).

As time passed, the bizarre novelty of lockdown quickly evolved into something grimmer and depressing. With each day, I became hazy, fatigued and conflicted between my duties as a lecturer, researcher, father, homeschooling teacher and husband, each interacting with or interrupting each other. Ultimately, I must wake up, feed and set the homeschooling tasks for my kids, work, research, tidy each day and begin the next day all over again. Consequently, my principles of what makes a 'good' person, employee, father or husband blurred. I felt like an actor who was cast for multiple plays and had to play them simultaneously. It was a hard, mind-boggling, conflicted experience. Due to the sheer lack of time, I got into a routine ritual of video gaming at night. It is not unusual for a parent to carve out personal leisure time when

the other people in the house are not around (Beck and Arnold, 2009). Therefore, when everybody in the house was in bed, I launched video games where I could travel and explore without my wallet, passport or fear of infection.

Thus, I utilised autoethnography to analyse my own leisure and armchair travel during lockdown when I often lost myself in the virtual worlds of single-player, narrative-driven and sandbox games, including Horizon Zero Dawn (Guerrilla Games, 2017), Red Dead Redemption 2 (Rockstar Studios, 2018), Hitman 2 (IO Interactive, 2018), Mafia 3 (Hangar 13, 2016) and Assassins Creed Valhalla (Ubisoft Montreal, 2020). In these games, there are little to no constraints put on how a player might achieve their objectives. Therefore, with every playthrough, I decide how quickly or slowly space-time, narrative and characters unfold. This has proven to be the most gratifying, memorable, and interesting for me.

Through my experiences, I visited cities of the Early Middle Ages (Assassins Creed Valhalla) or post-apocalyptic civilizations (Horizon Zero Dawn) and crossed majestic mountains, rivers and plateaus. I enjoyed walks by the houses with verandas in fictional New Orleans (Mafia 3), or sipping coffee in the western frontier (Red Dead Redemption 2). The journey put me in the crossover of technology, embodiment, memory and inspiration, where I became an armchair traveller. The selected fragments of my notes and epiphanies are utilised in the findings and discussion chapter. After thematic analysis, I organised my findings under the following subheadings; the precarity of armchair travel, escapism and alternative gaming: elsewheres and elsewhens, and becoming the avatar.

Findings and Discussion

The Precarity of Armchair Travel

'It is 11:16 pm. The television in the family room is turned off. I told my wife that I would stay awake longer. She is never particularly pleased when I say that. She said: 'don't stay up too late'. She knows that I will be probably tired tomorrow. After I put on my pyjamas, I came back into the room and lay down on the floor facing the television. I turned the TV and Playstation on and flicked through the games until I found something that I wanted to play.' (April 2020)

'[Same night] I climb slowly up into the Meridian city, which is sitting on a mesa. The sun is shining from the light blue sky. The climate feels arid and hot. Orangey-red walls surround the city[…] (Game: Horizon Zero Dawn)'(April 2020)

'I could hear the hamster running on her wheel from where I sit. I got up and gave the hamster a treat. She has been making too much noise. Then lied down on the floor and unpaused my game. A few minutes later, the hamster continued to run on her wheel.' (May 2020)

The aforementioned vignettes provide the impression that armchair travel has its own ritual, in addition to demonstrating the many ways in which such experiences might potentially flourish or fail. Pre-travel moments often include one's typical routine; maybe finishing off my work, having dinner, putting the kids to bed or feeding our pet. Then the armchair travel

moments directly involved me in exploring the unknown or the familiar places and communities and carving my own story. As Salen Tekinbaş and Zimmerman (2003) stated, flow is a sensation of control and mastery over one's own destiny and performance.

The quiet withdrawal of single players who are in a state of flow is a common occurrence (Schell, 2008). Similarly, I was filled with happiness within a few minutes of video gaming when I settled on my sofa in the dark. After all, the optimal happiness that someone feels is something that is shared across all types of flow states (Salen Tekinbaş and Zimmerman, 2003). It is also known that there is a significant link between happiness and one's satisfaction with leisure and recreational activities (Lyubomirsky, King and Diener, 2005). Early days of the lockdown, I also noted; 'For many travellers, a station or a terminal is the starting point of their journey. For me, a two-seater sofa across my tv screen. It is leisurely and effortless.'

Early on, I pointed out in the vignettes the colour of the sky and climate in a video game session which was played and recorded in the middle of the night. Thus, armchair travel includes a wide variety of emotional and sensory experiences, many of which would not be explained merely with the flow. The relationship between players and the gameplay environment has also been explored in aesthetics. Niedenthal (2009) recognizes that visual, aural and tactile pleasures can be derived from the play experience. Consequently, the development of aesthetics occurs as the result of our own physiological enjoyment of the game's mechanics (Niedenthal, 2009). In spite of Atkinson and Parsayi's (2021) assertion that the connection between video games and their players may be incompatible with aesthetic contemplation because of the immersion, interaction, and speed of gameplay; Kim (2022) claims that the audio-visual stimuli of video games do indeed broaden the manner in which aesthetic values are absorbed and experienced. In point of fact, a player's total immersion and engagement in a game are prerequisites for a sublime experience (Kim, 2022). Furthermore,

Wolf (2013) asserts that, apart from engagement and emotional involvement, the mental experience of an imaginary world offered by an artefact is the most important aspect of experiencing an aesthetic illusion.

However, not every video gaming session can create the same mental state of armchair travel, same emotions, or the same involvement with the same intensity. Similarly, Wolf (2013) considers that aesthetic illusion is gradable and unstable. As in the early vignette, extraneous distractions such as an unexpected noise may interfere with armchair travel and disturb the journey. Furthermore, aesthetic illusion can be suspended, broken, or destroyed by various external factors, such as a lack of concentration or the emergence of a subconscious knowledge of representation (Wolf, 2013). Likewise, the flow state requires that other thoughts are removed, and distractions are ignored while focusing on the task (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Salen Tekinbaş and Zimmerman, 2003; Schell, 2008; Nah *et al.*, 2014). In addition to that, solo gamers in a flow state may be reluctant to interact with others or even frustrated by external distractions (Schell, 2008). From this viewpoint, the aesthetic illusion and state of flow in video games are wrapped up with armchair travel. Simply, armchair travel is fragile and vulnerable. Whenever a change in the external environment or background events occur, they put the armchair traveller into a new dynamic, perhaps a more stranded one.

Escapism and Alternative Gaming: Elsewheres and Elsewhens

> 'It is perhaps one of the grandest spectacles in the world, big rivers, lakes, and marshes. I am unanchored. I am about to cross a river and some mountains wondering what was still to be found ahead of me. Deers, ducks, geese, hares or grizzly bears. (Game: Red Dead Redemption 2)'

'[Mumbai] These alleyways feel lively and busy, jammed with people and cluttered with market stalls. Some are selling traditional Indian clothing like choli or dupatta. Others are selling food. It is vibrant […] While the environment might be designed to look exotic to Western eyes, I feel rather familiar with the spectacle. It reminds me overwhelming streets of Istanbul [my home town], the back alleys of Grand Bazaar or Egyptian Market. Thus, I am used to places like this, a fascinating maze, full of people, goods, food, local trinkets and cheap knockoffs.' (Game: Hitman 2)

'I like cities that are imperfect and slightly unpleasant. It just adds it to its character. I like the idea of exploring places where locals outnumber the tourists, where the streets might not be kind. Alternatively, indeed, they might be slightly belligerent. (Game: Mafia 3)'

'Occasionally, I found myself spending quite a bit of time on the virtual campfires and sipping coffee. Brewing the coffee from coffee grounds using a percolator and drinking it black. It is strong yet oddly comforting. I like my coffee black in real life too. It is bitter and unpretentious. No milk, no froth, no fuss.' (Game: Red Dead Redemption 2)

To an observer, an armchair traveller appears 'here and now' while one can be in 'elsewhere and elsewhen'. In this simultaneous event, which is a puzzling aspect of armchair travel that remains unknown to the observer, the observer is stranded in rational space and time while the traveller is experiencing different time, movements or spaces. Multiple sources seem to confirm one another and highlight this phenomenon as a kind of paradigm for aesthetic or narrative absorption (Bergson, 1975; Byerly, 2012; Deleuze, 2013).

Following Bergson (1975), I assert that armchair travel splits the player into two; one who travels, acts and experiences, and one who stays and watches. Simply, this metaphorical concept comes into existence in the subjective and selective mind of an armchair traveller who is experiencing a dream, reverie, or fantasy. Consequently, the human capacity for imagination is intrinsically linked to escapism (Calleja, 2010). Armchair travel is fuelled by one's shifting attention from the physical world to the aesthetic illusion of the virtual world or simply escaping from an undesirable place to a favourable imaginative one (Calleja, 2010). Accordingly, the autonomy provided by open-world and sandbox games (Atkinson and Parsayi, 2021) allowed me to escape from my restricted domestic space in the lockdown and be elsewhere that is more favourable, pleasant and free. My escape to virtual worlds was intensified by navigation, a process that often rewards the curious. I discovered more profound things that reconnected me with the real world, such as my home town, Istanbul, even though Hitman 2 game was based in Mumbai. Similarly, Atkinson and Parsayi (2021) state that navigation can be a precondition of aesthetic engagement.

It is not surprising that my leisurely in-game actions often prevented the video game from progressing and ending my travel experience. The games allow players to occupy the virtual environment and their avatars for as long as they like (Bernal-Merino, 2015). Thus, I continued to engage in leisurely activities. One of these experiences I enjoyed during the lockdown was listening to myths and stories from Jomsvikings (warrior oarsmen and women) in Assassin's Creed Valhalla. Similarly, in Red Dead Redemption 2, I periodically engaged with virtual stargazing, fishing, brewing and drinking coffee. These were unexpected acts, of course, that are contrary to video gaming which demands players to progress by following the established rules. This type of gaming behaviour is commonly associated with rule-breaking (Salen Tekinbaş and Zimmerman, 2003), countergaming (Galloway, 2006), counterplay (Meades, 2015) or queer gaming (Pelurson, 2019, 2021). All of these concepts pose a challenge for the

predetermined order, structure, and guidelines that are typically associated with games. Rule-breaking means having a different connection with the games than what that games are designed to imply and endorse (Salen Tekinbaş and Zimmerman, 2003).

During the lockdown, I was able to return to my favourite virtual places over and over again in favour of directionless but rather fabulous experiences. Pelurson (2019, 2021) discusses this type of player as a gaming flaneur who takes their time, roams aimlessly, or postpones a primary plot for no apparent reason, even though such behaviour can be considered meaningless by ordinary players. From the countergaming perspective, my aesthetic experimentation took precedence over interactive gameplay (Galloway, 2006). This is not to deny that some games can be fundamentally more engaging due to their interactivity. Instead, my experience highlights that some games can offer players discovering their own sense of fulfilment via aimless exploration of elsewheres and elsewhens offered by game worlds.

Becoming the Avatar

> 'The game tells a story of who I am alongside what happened to the earth. I am [Aloy is] am determined, and strong-minded. She reminds me of Lara Croft. But somehow, she feels more authentic, less sexualised[…] Leather, hide, and fur combined with robotic dinosaur parts and plates look seriously fashionable.' (Game: Horizon Zero Dawn)

> 'I am [Lincoln is] a Vietnam veteran. He is a complex, emotional and somewhat honourable character. He is a smart talker, direct and straight to the point. You know where you stand with Lincoln. No hidden agendas or what-ifs. It is a simple […]. A three-piece black suit with a tie is my go-to outfit. It gives me a sophisticated, sleek look with its sharp cut. It certainly makes a statement.' (Game: Mafia 3)

'I am a Caucasian male, with a distinctively pale complexion, blue eyes and no

hair, who is trying to blend in the streets of Mumbai. Sadly, I stick out like a

sore thumb. Simply, I am an outsider and unwary traveller who is knocked

every time when passing people.' (Game: Hitman 2)

'[…] I chose to be the lone traveller, with an intent on finding things and

wandering places. […] I have a traditional oval-shape brim hat, ready to salute

a friendly passer-by […] My gang is mostly composed of criminals, robbers

and those who want to live outside of the societal norms. They are a charming

company, yet there is plenty of dust and dirt on them. Old boots or moccasins,

cattleman hats, vests or jackets made from fur or pelt, worn trousers or dresses

are the common looks.' (Game: Red Dead Redemption 2)

This part of the findings draws upon the idea of the avatar in the armchair travel as an agent

of embodiment, perception and action. Armchair travel in video games allowed my physical

body to be submitted to a virtual one who is invulnerable to contamination and the Covid-19

infection from the outside world. A player's avatar and movement around the environment

are the sole means by which they may experience virtual worlds in video games (Kim, 2022).

As Bernal-Merino, (2015) stated, rather than relying on a third-person language to describe

my in-game experiences, the majority of my notes and vignettes were written in the first-

person language, demonstrating my internalisation of the avatars.

As an armchair traveller, my embodiments have surpassed race and gender, which filled me

with complex emotional experiences. My exemplars were included a deeply flawed, a

talkative outlaw who, in the fictionalised American frontier, conducts a series of socially

undesirable actions (Red Dead Redemption 2); a Viking clan leader from Norway who can

alternate between male and female appearance via the game mechanic (Assassin's Creed

Valhalla); a Dominican descent Vietnam veteran in 1960s (Mafia 3); an apathetic and reticent assassin for hire with a noticeably pale complexion (Hitman 2); a Caucasian female with long red hair and freckles in the year 3000s whose curiosity about the world can be infectious (Horizon Zero Dawn).

With a switch of a button, I can be anyone who is a little bit of me and a little bit of an algorithm. Thus, avatars in armchair travel have a dual role in creating and continuing experience. Consequently, the avatar substitutes one within a virtual landscape and allows one to participate in armchair travel (Byerly, 2012). In addition to that, cyberspace grants opportunities for experimenting with self-identity, which generally transcends the physical limits and real-life appearance of one's body (Shilling, 2005). Considering many video games allow one to decide on their gender, race or simply clothing (Bernal-Merino, 2015) within the limits of the game mechanic, or what I call pseudo-societal norms of the game, an armchair traveller as an avatar often fits into the virtual world. For example, in the Red Dead Redemption 2, with my avatar's oval-shape brim hat and boots, I felt like a member of the virtual world and its community. Similarly, I habitually changed my outfit choice in the Horizon Zero Dawn when I interacted with the game's different primary tribes, which have their own distinctive cultures.

In other cases, the armchair traveller experiences the struggle of being an outsider. On the other hand, the Hitman 2 put me in the shoes of a globetrotter assassin who travels to authentically crafted places in order to execute his targets. The game mechanic requires the player to explore locations and blend in with the hundreds of locals. The vignette about Hitman 2 above draws readers' attention to my perception of the embodied avatar as an outsider in terms of race or ethnicity rather than the game mechanics themselves. The

encounter between insider and outsider or traveller and locals is often discussed in the leisure literature (Cohen and Cooper, 1986; Urry and Larsen, 2011).

In terms of avatar customization, Mafia 3 game offers players around twenty different outfits for Lincoln Clay, the main protagonist. Yet, I found myself using the same sharp-looking "three-piece black suit" wherever I went in the game or whatever I did. Perhaps, my choice of outfit reflects my internalisation of the character who was not only seeking revenge but also respect within conflicted, racially segregated American society in the 60s.

Due to their pre-programmed algorithms, video games cannot replicate the complexities of real-world social encounters, neither they are designed to do so. However, explanations of embodied avatar, its customisation or outfit selection within a game as a whole could not be restricted to simple attributes of the game. While representing the player's physical reality, the avatar also serves as something that transcends it (Wessely, 2013). Firstly, an avatar is not a mere copy of the self, but rather it is a simulated extension of the self that may influence one's feelings about the self, views of the world, and behaviours, both in a digital environment and offline (Behm-Morawitz, 2013).

Therefore, it is both "me" and "not-me" at the same time (Wessely, 2013). Secondly, the immersion of an avatar in an environment adds to the illusion that one is in a setting that is more real than it actually is (Byerly, 2012). This view has considerable implications. Because the player is represented and so physically present inside the game by an avatar, their experiences are taken to be real (Wessely, 2013). In other words, my embodied avatar's reactions to fictional worlds, their events and characters might have been slightly different from those in real life, but I did have them nevertheless. This can be explained by the fact

that players often value the experience of the aesthetic illusion generated by the games as being more significant and, as a result, more real (Wessely, 2013).

Conclusion

Long before the COVID-19 pandemic and following lockdowns, Lawrence (2003) stated that in the age of cyberspace, the idea of leisure needs to be revisited. Similarly, Jørgensen (2014) argued that armchair travel is about directing our attention to the mediated character of locations, even though the shape and content of this mediation have changed over time. Due to significantly reduced time spent outdoors and ever-changing restrictions on leisure activities and social relationships due to the Covid-19, the concept of armchair travel required attention.

In light of this, the study investigated video games within the context of armchair travel during the lockdown. When many people's lives were characterised by inexorable loneliness and containment due to lockdowns, armchair travel through video games could provide all kinds of sights and experiences, eliciting feelings of leisure and happiness. Thus, the study established a record of the leisure episodes which were carved out during the multitude of struggles, contractions and concerns. Moreover, it demonstrated that armchair travel continues to pertain to dimensions of human experiences, including cognitive, interactive, aesthetic, imaginal, and emotional experiences.

The study analysed how video games deliver the experience of armchair travel through aesthetic and embodied experience in that they provide not only a means of escape from a confined physical space but also produce new pleasures, emotions and associations with one's body, space, and place and time. The study exposed that through interacting with the

different aspects of a video game, a player reaches the point at which one no longer needs to pay conscious attention to the mechanics or the objectives of the video game. Instead, they gradually descend into a new reality where various gaming elements such as observation, exploration, movement or action turn into meaningful aesthetic insights. In contrast, Niedenthal (2009) states that from an aesthetic design standpoint, anticipation, motivation, and creating long-term memories are all important factors to consider while creating a video game. Through this, a player's aesthetic contemplation and pleasures are seen as anticipated response patterns that emerge as a result of programmers' design choices. If aesthetic experiences are simply design-based, they must result in reasonably standard patterns of behaviour and emotions in other players. Consequently, the question, as pointed out by Atkinson and Parsayi (2021, p.524), "whether aesthetic contemplation can be scripted into the game design, or it occurs irrespective of the gameplay", remains. Considering the autoethnographic nature of the study, regardless of the validity of competing arguments, the fact that I participated in the events or was influenced by them makes my experiences unique and meaningful.

Video games often have a set sequence, structure, and rules. However, when a game offers freedom, experimentation, and a sense of being elsewhere and elsewhen, it is easy to get sidetracked, start wandering off to find different in-game pleasures and spend many hours without paying attention to the rules, structures or primary storyline. Interestingly, all theories of rule-breaking (Salen Tekinbaş and Zimmerman, 2003), countergaming (Galloway, 2006), counterplay (Meades, 2015) or queer gaming (Pelurson, 2019, 2021) seem to have a place for players' aimless wandering. While flânerie behaviour can be explained by these theories, they also pack many other aspects of gaming into their consideration, such as cheating, modding, hacking, altering algorithms, playing against other players, or wider matters of gender and

inclusion. Despite the fact that these are important theories, it appears that breaking the rules is a natural element of playing games (Salen Tekinbaş and Zimmerman, 2003).

In terms of the embodied experience of armchair travel, following the Deleuzian perspective, I suspect that the player-armchair traveller is almost always positioned in a fluid reality, oscillating between physical and imaginary. Thus, a thin and fragile threshold distinguishes; mere video gaming from armchair travel, the physical world from the virtual one, real body from the avatar. Taken together, the characteristics of flow as well as other dimensions of experience such as aesthetics, imagination and emotions, the study suggests that video gaming can be classified as armchair travel when one feels deeper about the virtual world rather than the material one. Hence, the findings provide strong support for Byerly (2012), who asserted that the ultimate goal of all virtual environments is immersiveness.

In terms of limitations, it should also be noted that autoethnography has a highly self-centred nature (Bochner and Ellis, 2016). Therefore, the study's findings may not be generalisable. In one sense, that is true. However, autoethnography has always been tested by readers as they take into account whether a story resonates with their life or the others they know (Bochner and Ellis, 2016).

In terms of research implications, video games have never been examined in relation to armchair travel, and the autoethnography of video games has been relatively understudied (Rapp, 2017b, 2017a). Even though the number of studies that investigate video games and game culture as a form of leisure is growing each and every day, they are less concerned with the first-hand lived experiences and rarely, if ever, consider the experience of video games in solitude. In addition to that, the multiplayer video games, due to their popularity and

copresence experience that they provide, also call for scholarly attention using auto-ethnographic or duo-ethnographic methodologies. Thus, the research into armchair travel and video games should be continued, as virtual worlds are proving to be increasingly accessible and comfortable places to enjoy leisure.

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