Shifting Borders: Walking Simulators, Artgames, and the Categorical Compulsions of Gaming Discourse

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Abstract

This paper looks at how the walking simulator and artgame categories intersect, before comparatively analyzing two game designers whose work functions to disrupt the notions of genre these terms exemplify. The first work is Bill Viola's *The Night Journey* (Game Innovation Lab & Viola, 2007), a gallery installation that many early game studies scholars used to help them first define how videogames could function as art. Following this, the paper compares Viola's work to Connor Sherlock's (2015) cheekily titled "Walking Simulator A Month Club." With this project, Sherlock uses the itch.io and Patreon platforms to release a new experimental walking simulator game every month. Like *The Night Journey*, each of Sherlock's games are ambiguously rendered and non-goal oriented. To conclude, this paper uses these two examples to investigate the potentially useful relations that can be uncovered between the experiences of traversing gallery and game space.

Keywords

Artgames; walking simulators; Connor Sherlock; The Night Journey; Bill Viola; surrealism

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Introduction

Over the course of their interwoven histories, game studies and gaming criticism have struggled to establish an accepted lexicon for examining their objects of study. This struggle is partly due to the waning newness of the medium and an all-too-common defensive compulsion to make legitimizing comparisons with older media, like cinema, literature, and visual art. In both scholarly and popular discourse, this urge to formally categorize and name has led to the construction of unproductively restrictive rules, used to subdivide videogames based on a number of aesthetic, ludic, and narrative qualities. Two of the most controversial examples of this urge to formally categorize are the artgame and the walking simulator, both terms which are meant to refer to videogames that do not connect easily with ludic definitions rooted in the much longer histories of board games, gambling, or sports. In this paper, I work to disorient the categorical impulse that permeates much of the history of videogame culture by comparatively analyzing two games that move fluidly between these categories, resisting formal definition.

The first of these games is Viola's *The Night Journey* (Game Innovation Lab & Viola, 2007), a work that initially began as a walking simulator-esque gallery installation. Many game studies scholars and game art historians have used *The Night Journey* to help them define how videogames function as art. I then compare Viola's work to Connor Sherlock's (2015) cheekily titled "Walking Simulator A Month Club." With this ongoing project, Sherlock uses the itch.io and Patreon platforms to release a short, new experimental walking simulator game every month. Although Sherlock is continually releasing new walking simulators through this project, for the purposes of a salient comparison with *The Night Journey*, I am only analyzing *Marginalia* (Sherlock & Kunzelman, 2018), a work created in collaboration with games critic and scholar Cameron Kunzelman. Moving beyond their mechanical similarities, in my comparative analysis I focus on how both *The Night Journey* and *Marginalia* present nocturnal and mostly empty landscapes that have been deliberately imbued with themes of transcendence, mysticism, and the sublime.

Building on Laine Nooney (2013) and Aubrey Anable's (2018) metaphorical use of "spelunking" as a method to critically reorient game studies and videogame history, I aim to provide a comparative model for looking at artgames and walking simulators; more broadly, this model also allows comparisons between other videogame genres and any other work of visual art. Through Anable's speleological method, there is an excitingly disorientating and dark pathway that bypasses the ontologically focused discussions of medium, form, and category prevalent throughout much of early game studies. This, in turn, allows ample room for an alternative focus on points of subjectivity, disorientation, abstraction, and hybridity—qualities I argue become lost through the use of overly formal or structuralist modes of analysis.

Disorienting the Categorical Compulsion

As mentioned above, both the walking simulator and the artgame are categorical terms within videogame discourse that, since their inception, have been the source of much heated debate. At the time of *The Night Journey*'s initial development and exhibition, the walking simulator term had yet to reach the level of common use that it has today. Through its more recent commercial release on the PlayStation Network and itch.io platforms, however, Viola's game has explicitly positioned itself within this context of the walking simulator genre. With the use of author-selected product tags, as well as the purchase and review-based recommendation systems that come with digital storefronts, both *Marginalia* and *The Night Journey* are placed in direct relation to many of the titles that inspired the, initially pejorative, term to be first created. In a historical survey of the term's controversial connections with #GamerGate, as well as its eventual neutralization, Nicole Clark (2017) interviewed a number of game developers about their opinions on the walking simulator, ultimately concluding that the phrase was created to define these kinds of games by what they are supposedly missing, rather than what they are capable of. Although the term is now used far less often as an insult—on Steam and itch.io it is an easily searchable and standardized product category—Clark still argues that the walking simulator is an example of the reductive pitfalls that can come along with excessive genre classification.

At the time of this paper's writing, *The Night Journey* and all of Sherlock's games use the artgame categorization tag on their itch.io pages, although only Sherlock uses the walking simulator label (GameInnovationLab, n.d.; Sherlock, n.d.). An obvious portmanteau of the words art and game, *artgame* is typically used to describe any game with experimental or artistic intent. It was first defined by Tiffany Holmes (2003) at the International Digital Arts & Culture Conference to help her discuss the then "emerging relationship between videogames and art" (p. 46). In the following years, the artgame has been rearranged, redefined, and expanded to form a new taxonomic spectrum, with additional categories such as artist's games, game art, avant garde games, serious games, empathy games, and altgames—to name but a few.

Although attaching the artgame (or walking simulator) tag to their work may make it easier for the videogames to be found on itch.io's digital storefront, there is room to question how the use and conceptualization of the category affects the broader games-as-art debate that has been going on sporadically since the mid-2000s. In an essay for *Gamasutra*, game designer Matthew Seiji Burns (2018) reviews the common practice within game art history and games criticism, where a select few games are championed and declared worthy of being called art. He criticizes this binary mentality, stating, "In the end all we've done here is created two large plastic bins, one labelled Art, one Not Art, and we're tossing our cartridges and compact discs into them" (para. 15).

The rationalism that fuels the binary classification systems Burns (2018) critiques is not only restricted to the games-as-art debate. The artgame and walking simulator are just two examples of videogame culture's longstanding urge to name, categorize, classify, and measure. In *How To Do Things With Videogames*, Ian Bogost (2011) seems to revel in this categorical impulse, calling for readers to take what he refers to as a "media microecological approach" when analyzing videogames, arguing that, "Just as an entomologist might create a collection that thoroughly characterizes the types, roles, and effects of insects on an environment, so a media microecologist might do the same for a medium" (p. 6).

As if in direct response to Bogost's (2011) call for game studies to begin producing bug collections from their objects of study, many other scholars have produced texts with heavily taxonomic methodologies that seem primarily concerned with classifying videogames by form, genre, and type. In his book *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*, Jesper Juul (2011) provides a circular diagram that communicates what he would formally define as games, not games, and borderline cases, as well as the qualities that constitute each category (p. 44). Building on Juul's diagram, game art historian Brian Schrank (2014) crafts a similar series of charts within his book *Avant-Garde Videogames: Playing With Technology*, where he instead creates categorical combinations of what he sees as the five qualities (narrative, radicality, formalism, politics, and radicality) of avant-garde videogames (pp. 20–25). Although Schrank makes the claim early on that "each avant-garde game presents its own definition of the medium that challenges the status quo" (p. 12), throughout the rest of his book, he works to slot large groupings of videogames into each of the five categories he has constructed. In their methodological reliance on graphs, charts, and diagrams, both Juul and Schrank work to formally define their objects of study within a taxonomy that, in effect, is not that far from the reductively binary mentality that Burns (2018) is weary of.

In addition to his reliance on diagrammatic structuralism, Schrank's (2014) art historical focus is also a reminder that—although Bogost (2011) may be calling for media microecology—as videogames continue to age and become a part of technological history, media archaeological methods have become an increasingly common tool for the game studies scholar. In her introduction to *New Media, Old Media: A History and Theory Reader*, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (2006) outlines the connection between media archaeology and the history of rationalism (p. 5). Relying on Foucauldian theories of the archive and systems of power, Chun argues that any archaeological mode of analysis of a discourse or media object inherently works to privilege regularities, hierarchies, and rules; accordingly, such modes of analysis resonate strongly with those who work with computers (which, in this case, is those who design and those who write about videogames). Returning to Nicole Clark's (2017) arguments on walking simulators and how genre

classification is more often interested in exclusionary rather than inclusionary definitions, it is easy to see within the context of videogame culture how collection-based or taxonomic methods can skew or even damage their objects of study.

Echoing Chun (2006) and Clark (2017), games historian Laine Nooney (2013) critiques what she calls the "materialist and archaeological turns" within games studies that give "strong attention to technological materiality and medium specificity (rather than a representational or screen-based focus)" (para. 4). Here, instead of an archaeology (or microecology) of videogames, Nooney calls for a speleology of them and encourages readers to go spelunking within, under, and through videogames in order to prompt what she calls a "phenomenologically imprecise encounter" (para. 8)—one that allows room for the body as an integral component of analysis.

Building on Nooney's (2013) brief use of cave traversal as rhetorical metaphor, Aubrey Anable (2018) also uses the concept of spelunking to critique what she sees as a critical lack of discussion around the topics of embodiment, subjectivity, and affect within the history of game studies and broader videogame culture. Focusing on reconfiguring the darkness, disorientation, and partiality inherent to cave traversal into a productive starting point for resisting teleology, linearity, and essentialism, Anable defines her speleological method by stating:

> To spelunk is to explore a potentially vast space that can be apprehended only a small section at a time. To spelunk is to risk disorientation in space and time … It takes into account the limitations of historical interpretation and recognizes that, given the subjectivity at the center of every history, imprecision must be foregrounded and analyzed rather than disavowed. This approach makes claims for the value of fragments over any sense of a whole picture. (pp. 3–4)

Through Nooney and Anable's collective utilization of earthbound metaphors of disorientation and imprecision, we can now return to Viola and Sherlock's expansive and mystifying digital landscapes with a mode of analysis that does not rely on either genre-based or formalist classification systems. Instead of seeing the lack of risk, goals, or elaborate mechanics as negative qualifiers—in the same way that those who first conceived of the walking simulator category would argue for—we can look at these works in an intentionally abstract and imprecise manner, acknowledging how they blend the lines previously drawn between and around the categories of videogames and visual art.

One such aesthetic category that applies to the abstraction of *Marginalia* and *The Night Journey*, as well as aligning with the unknowable darkness of Nooney (2013) and Anable's (2018) spelunking, is that of the sublime. Most prominently attributed to the landscape paintings and

ecologically themed literature from the Romantic era, the sublime is a concept meant to signify a kind of horrific beauty or the pleasure that comes with trying to perceive something incomprehensible. Although there is a long history of philosophical work around the sublime, more recently Paul Martin (2012) has written about how the concept functions and, more significantly, ceases to function within videogames. In an essay on the pastoral landscapes of *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (Bethesda Softworks, 2006), Martin tracks how the sublime is often invoked in writing on open world games, but then makes the argument that this feeling will inevitably decline as the player grows familiar with a game's borders, limits, and rules. Martin then explains how this is not just confined to how the sublime specifically functions in videogames, but is an aspect of the concept itself—in that it often unravels when approached through extensive, rationalist analysis. This reference to rationalism ties back to what Chun (2006) is arguing when she connects digital media to rigidly defined systems of knowledge. Through their predictability as programmed objects, videogames are most easily produced and discussed according to the same kind rational borders and limits that work against the sublime. With this in mind, I now make the argument that through their thematic alignment with the sublime, as well as through their relatively short duration (both games can easily be fully experienced with approximately 30 minutes), *Marginalia* and *The Night Journey* manage to largely resist rational interpretation through an assortment of deliberately ambiguous design choices.

By so effectively straddling the perceived borders between walking simulators and artgames, both Viola and Sherlock are spelunking through videogame culture to construct uniquely affective experiences of transcendence and the sublime that defy media archaeological systems of genre classification. Moreover, in their construction of such ambiguous landscapes—ones that disorient the player by skewing the way they perceive time and space—Viola and Sherlock are allowing for what Nooney (2013) call a "phenomenologically imprecise encounter" (para. 8; see also Anable, 2018, pp. 2–3).

The Night Journey

The Night Journey is an experimental artgame that first exhibited in 2007 at the SIGGRAPH art gallery as an interactive video installation. It has most recently taken the form of a commercially available videogame, distributed through the PlayStation Network and itch.io platforms. Produced as a collaboration between the contemporary new media artist Bill Viola and the Game Innovation Lab, a research center dedicated to experimental game design at the University of Southern California, *The Night Journey* places players within an ambient black and white landscape, with no immediately apparent goals or methods of interaction besides slow traversal from a hazy, first-person perspective. Meant to fit within Viola's firmly established video art aesthetic, *The Night Journey* emulates a blended combination of analog and digital

video artifacts that lends the work a sense of ambiguous, archival authenticity. As the player spends time with the work, they may notice that the game's already dim, grey sky is gradually darkening; if they stop to reflect upon certain objects and scenes littered around the landscape, this darkening slows down. To clarify, this manifestation of reflection is an actual mechanic that Viola and the Game Innovation Lab implemented. If the player looks at an object within the game and presses the relevant "reflect" button on their controller or keyboard, several changes occur in the game world. The first, as already outlined, is a minimal slowing down of the game's night-to-day cycle. The second is an equally incremental increase in the player's movement speed, as well as a slight lifting of their vertical perspective. Eventually, as the player reflects on more in-game assets, they are able to speedily glide across the landscape. The final change is a subtle layering of abstract analog and digital video effects across the screen. These effects and reflection points are also used when the player finds each of the four shack-like structures scattered across the landscape. When the player reflects upon these structures, a procedurally generated video sequence is produced based on the reflections already gathered up to this point.

In a series of self-reflective conference papers, Tracy Fullerton (2009)—one of the lead designers that Viola collaborated with for the project—recounts both the technical difficulties and conceptual intentions behind the inclusion of these reflection points. She quotes scholar William Judson to explain how Viola's practice is defined by the "pursuit of enlightenment through attention to transcendent experience" (para. 7; see also Fullerton, Furmanski & ValaNejad, 2007), identifying the work's slow layering of visual effects, speed, and mobility as qualities that were conceived of to help achieve this goal. In addition to this slow build-up of kinaesthetic layers, the lack of any easily discernible goal and complete absence of risk within the experience also help to align *The Night Journey* with Viola's oeuvre of ambient, atmospheric, and contemplative artwork. Fullerton recounts that this absence of risk and goals—qualities that, at the time, were standard to most typical first-person videogame experiences—had another desired effect besides prompting transcendental experiences within its audiences. One of the explicit high-level design goals for *The Night Journey*, according to Fullerton, was "the importance of creating an experience that would appeal to (and be accessible to) both art patrons who might play it in a gallery setting, and also game players, who might access it through another from [*sic*] of distribution" (para. 10).

In specifically constructing *The Night Journey* to fluidly traverse both gallery and commercial distribution networks, Viola and the Game Innovation Lab have constructed a work that is not content to rest in either of the game-art buckets that Matthew Seiji Burns (2018) describes in his critique of videogame aesthetic classification systems. Through its simultaneous existence as a gallery installation that players can navigate in an intensely embodied manner through physical space,

as well as its presence across digital storefronts as a more traditionally intimate videogame experience, *The Night Journey* meshes with the disorientation, fragmentation, and phenomenological imprecision of Nooney (2013) and Anable's (2018) spelunking. Not only does this emphasis on spelunking and disorientation apply to how *The Night Journey* exists in material reality within galleries and on websites, but also it connects well with the game's visual and thematic context of a hazy, transcendent landscape to get lost within and explore.

Marginalia

With this notion of disorienting landscapes in mind, I now turn my focus to Connor Sherlock and his game *Marginalia* to establish its connections with *The Night Journey*. Despite the term's tumultuous history, Connor Sherlock has very actively placed the mantle of walking simulator atop his game design practice. On his itch.io storefront page, the term is used liberally in the descriptions, titles, and product tags of many of his games (Sherlock, n.d.). On his Patreon page, the system of rewards for donating to him is described as joining the "Walking Simulator A Month Club" (Sherlock, 2015). In an interview with Jay Allen (2018) for *PC Gamer*, Sherlock explains how he deliberately uses the term for a variety of both practical and ideological reasons, stating he wants to playfully critique the ongoing tension between videogames and art, as well as "screening out people who'd have buyers' remorse paying for games with nothing interactive in them" (para. 5). Sherlock goes on to explain how this screening of buyers fits with his choice to work on the Patreon and itch.io platforms, rather than attempting to launch them through Steam: "I would have worried more about player goals or mechanics as metaphor or how well they'd play on YouTube or be written about or a million other things that would have changed them into something more traditional" (para. 19). This way that Sherlock describes player goals and mechanics as something he would prefer not to consciously engage with during his design process connects strongly with the way that Viola and the Game Innovation Lab deliberately avoided experiences of risk in their construction of *The Night Journey*. In addition to these parallels in design methodology, Viola and Sherlock's works also share a substantial link through their collective presentation of large and moody landscapes for the player to slowly explore.

Sherlock has released many games through his Walking Simulator A Month Club, but one that has immediate similarities to *The Night Journey* is his collaboration with Cameron Kunzelman, *Marginalia*. This game tells the loose narrative of a character named Eric getting lost in a foggy, mountainside forest at night, whom the player is attempting to find. When the game begins, the player is looking downhill from a first-person perspective at a slope dense with shadowy trees, with the dark blue twilight of the night sky behind them. As the player moves further into the forest, an unidentified red-orange glow becomes visible in the distance. Although there is nothing to stop the player from wandering

into the darkness, if they approach the glow it is revealed to be an antiquated streetlamp that has inexplicably found itself in the deep wilderness. As the player peers out into the darkness from this first lamp, many others are seen scattered around the forest. Like a reimagining of the supernatural will-o'-the-wisp, these lights slowly guide the player down and around the hilly landscape, with each subsequent lamp revealing a snippet of new information via recorded audio on the history of mountain or about the missing Eric character. In this way, the lamps function in a manner similar to the shacks in *The Night Journey*, providing a small amount of structure for the player to orient themselves before venturing out into the darkness. But where *The Night Journey* was primarily based around evoking pleasantly transcendent feelings through its slow monochromatic reflection, *Marginalia* aims for a slightly spookier kind of transcendence—one more aligned with the sublime and all the terrible beauty associated with it.

As the player travels further down the mountain, the lamps are replaced by more starkly lit, neon red crystalline shapes that jut out of the landscape. This shift corresponds with the soundtrack changing from a slow, brooding, ambient drone to an increasingly fast, pulsing electronic beat. As the player follows these crystalline structures, they become interwoven in a root-like matrix that must be navigated and that eventually begin to visually pulse to the beat of the game's increasingly frantic soundtrack. When the player finally reaches the bright, red heart of this network of crystallized roots, they are transported to what appears to be another dimension—full of red, rocky mountains that are rendered in a smeared, blotchy style—that is vaguely reminiscent of an Impressionist painting. Shortly after this cross-dimensional leap, the computer screen slowly appears to crack, carving out large triangular chunks of blackness, before *Marginalia* abruptly ends.

In *The Night Journey,* the player achieves transcendence through a combination of monochrome reflection, gradual acceleration, and increased verticality, whereas with *Marginalia*, the process occurs through stark colour contrasts, rhythmic music, and the use of directional light. Regardless of how this effect is achieved, what unites *The Night Journey* and *Marginalia*—and allows for easy application of Nooney (2013) and Anable's (2018) geologically grounded metaphor of spelunking—is how both games have been designed to encourage their players to start and end in a state of disorientation. Just as Anable described spelunking as a method for exploring vast spaces and for embracing partiality, these games actively push their players into enormous landscapes that have been intentionally designed to get lost within, where you are never completely sure if you are on the right path or just going forever round in circles. Not only do these disorienting experiences thematically track to the dark exploration of spelunking, but in actively resisting easy categorization through their shared blurring of the lines between artgame and walking simulator, *The Night Journey*

and *Marginalia* also productively correspond to Nooney and Anable's call for an acknowledgment of imprecision and subjectivity when critically analyzing videogames and their histories.

Regardless of any professional or disciplinary disparity between how their work is presented, both Viola and Sherlock have currently embedded themselves within the contexts of the artgame and the walking simulator—with all the good and bad that comes with these slippery terms. However, as Sherlock has stated in interviews of how little he thinks of attempting to singularly categorize his work as being either videogames, digital art, or "explorable landscape paintings" (quoted in Allen, 2018, para. 6), it is not productive to assign a definitive genre label to these kinds of artistically motivated, abstract game experiences.

Conclusion

Both games and art are notoriously hard concepts to pin down, having shifted dramatically in meaning over the course of history. Although this process of cultural flux is ongoing, it is still productive and necessary for scholars to attempt to critically analyze both in order to better understand them and the cultural contexts that affect (and are affected by) them. However, the goal of this kind of analysis should not be primarily concerned with creating an essential or universal definition of either games or art. The terms walking simulator and artgame both came from this categorical urge to name and classify, one that is not only prevalent across popular and academic gaming discourse, but also one that extends to media archaeology and the computer sciences. By intentionally blurring the lines between the history of landscape painting and digital art, as well as Romantic notions of the sublime and spiritual transcendence—within the frame of a mechanically simple first-person videogame—Viola and Sherlock, in many ways, resist these categorical impulses. Instead, they produce works that slowly stride across borders, ignoring such lines or distinctions in favour of artistically motivated exploration and discovery.

As other embodied and affective modes of analysis, similar to Nooney (2003) and Anable's (2018) speleology, become more common, we will uncover a greater array of tools with which to examine and break open some of the long-calcified systems of classification and ontology that structure the history of game studies. With this in mind, it is necessary to look outward and consider how other genres or categories might be productively disoriented, blended, transcended, and spelunked.

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