The Wanderer in the Wilderness: Being in the virtual landscape in *Minecraft* and *Proteus*

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Introduction

Let us picture a scene: I am standing on the summit of a hill, looking out over a forested valley as the sun sets on the distant sea. I climbed the hill, straying from my intended path, specifically in order to attain a good viewpoint from which to take in the sunset. From this vantage point, I can look out in all directions. All around, what meets my eye is only the wilderness, extending towards the hazy distance. I am unfamiliar with this landscape, and at first, as I survey the scene, I am unable to make sense of it, or decide where I should go next. In the immensity and seemingly infinite extent of the landscape, I feel small, insignificant.

To the south - I am orienting myself by the setting sun – lie the meadows where, moments previously, I unexpectedly came across a flock of chickens in the tall grass. To the north, at the end of the valley, a peak towers over the landscape. It would offer an excellent view down into the next valley; perhaps there might be something interesting there. I can trace out a path along the valley floor that would lead me straight to the peak, and so I decide to make my way there before nightfall. My newfound purpose and orientation and my capacity to act meaningfully within the landscape grant me a newfound confidence as I set off on my journey.

This brief account would undoubtedly be readily taken as a description of my experience of, and within, an actual, physical landscape. If, however, I were to offer the clarification that what I was relating was in fact a narrative of my experience in the virtual landscape of *Minecraft* (Mojang 2011) or *Proteus* (Key & Kanaga 2013), it would require surprisingly little effort from the reader – assuming a basic familiarity with digital games – in order for her understanding to be redrawn to adhere to a virtual rather than an actual frame of reference.

This remarkable congruence between our experience of real and virtual environments is perhaps the primary reason why the notion that "computer games are essentially concerned with spatial representation and negotiation" (Aarseth 2000) has proven to be such an enduring one. Indeed, as Stephan Günzel notes, "space is the one category that has come to be accepted as the central issue of game studies" (2008: 171).

It is the intention of this paper to build on existing research into the question of virtual game space, in order to arrive at a more nuanced and fully-developed understanding of what it means, from the phenomenological perspective of the player, to inhabit a

virtual environment. To this end, *Minecraft* and *Proteus* – both games which locate the player as a wanderer in an unspoilt wilderness, hence enacting one of the most prominent cultural tropes dealing with the relationship between the individual and the landscape –shall be examined.

It shall be my argument that, despite this similar initial premise, *Minecraft* and *Proteus* frame the player's understanding of the gameworld in radically different ways, with their respective frames bearing the mark of divergent philosophical perspectives on the relation of the human individual to space, the world and nature. This, I will go on to argue, can serve as a demonstration of the capacity of games to enact, through their formal structure – and, hence, through the experience of play they set in motion within that structure - a particular mode of being-in-the-world.

From space to place

So central is the question of spatiality to the activity of play that Salen and Zimmerman even understand the very concept in spatial terms, defining play as "free movement within a more rigid structure" (2004: 304). Of course, as soon as we admit to an interest in space in games, it becomes necessary to offer a clarification as to what, precisely, we are referring to by the word 'space' – a term that, in itself, is too vague and diffuse to provide us with a solid concept to work with. Examining the numerous definitions for the term offered by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), the closest we come to a concept of 'pure' space in itself is "continuous, unbounded, or unlimited extent in every direction, without reference to any matter that may be present".

This is rarely what we mean when we talk about lived space. It is more often the case that we intend to define the spatial relations between a set of objects, a point captured by another of the OED's definitions: "linear distance; interval between two or more points, objects, etc." Alternatively, we might be thinking of space in the sense of a container: space *for* an object or an activity – "extent or area sufficient for a purpose, action, etc.; room to contain or do something".

We might then begin to think of space not as an abstract quality, but to think instead of objects in space, of spatial arrangements, and of movement in (and through) space. This invites us to make the move from thinking not of space, but of *a* space, a specific, limited location, the objects it contains and the actions it allows: to borrow one last OED definition, "an area or extent delimited in some way".

With this understanding, we are edging close to the perilous, much-maligned concept of the 'magic circle'. The locus of play, Huizinga argued, is "a playground marked off beforehand, either materially or ideally" (1950: 10): it is only their taking place within such a defined space that grants ludic objects and actions their special meaning. Play, then, is something which is defined by the space it inhabits: we can go one step further and envision this as a two-way process: at the same time, the space it inhabits is also defined – or, more accurately, is only revealed in its specificity as *a* space – through its becoming a space for the actions of play.

It would be more accurate, then, to define the essential quality of computer games as being not space, in its somewhat abstract generality, but *place,* in its specificity. We

might suggest that games, as spatial experiences, are in fact defined by the movement they structure from space to place - a movement that is, inseparably, both an actual, physical traversal and an exploratory cognitive shift.

This distinction between space and place is one that has been articulated in great detail within phenomenological approaches to the question of what it means, as a human, to be located in space. A new landscape appears to us initially as undifferentiated space: unable to orient ourselves within it or translate it into a venue for action, we find ourselves displaced, alienated and – literally – out of place. Through inhabiting this space, familiarizing ourselves with it by working out paths of traversal and testing out the possibilities for action it allows, we translate it into a meaningful place – a process which necessarily involves the drawing of boundaries that delimit it, as a defined locus, from the infinite extent of space. Yi-Fu Tuan suggests that "all people undertake to change amorphous space into articulated geography," and it is precisely the process of interpretative familiarization that leads us from space to place: "what begins as undifferentiated space ends as a single object-situation or place […] when space feels thoroughly familiar to us, it has become place" (1977: 72-73). It is this observation that Edward S. Casey builds on when he argues that the process of inhabiting a landscape is that of "transmuting an initially aimless and endless space into a place of concerted action, thereby constituting a dense placescape" (1993: 29). The movement from space to place, then, is literally a movement, a process of exploration and experimentation with the possibilities of the given space: "places […] are something we experience - where *experience* stays true to its etymological origin of 'trying out', 'making a trial out of'" (30).

This process is an inherently embodied one. Our understanding of the landscape is dependent upon our being embodied within it, and it is through the possibilities of bodily action that a place can be revealed to us as such against the background of space. "If I am to get oriented in a landscape," Casey argues, "I must bring my body into conformity with the configurations of the land" - by, for instance, placing oneself in specific relations to landmarks, or working out paths determined by the contours of the landscape. Once this has been achieved, "then I am able to find my way in a placescape that to a significant degree is marked and measured, as well as perceived and remembered, by my own actions" (28).

According to Casey, then, "place is what takes place between the body and landscape" (29): moreover – to circle back to our outline of the relation of play to its given space – this is inherently a two-way process. The motion of the body through the landscape, Casey says, "provides us with oriented and orienting placescapes" (ibid.): just as surely as it is our embodied subjectivity within a space that is the key for its being translated into a defined, oriented place, it is also the nature of the place we are in that grants our embodied subjectivity its orientation. "To be somewhere is to be in place and therefore to be subject to its power, to be part of its action, acting on its scene" - when attempting to answer questions of identity, of the nature of individual subjectivity and its being-in-the-world, "the 'how' and the 'who' are intimately tied to the 'where'" (23).

To a great extent, these discussions on embodied engagement with space and place can be considered to be following the path laid out by Martin Heidegger in his elaborations on the nature of the human mode of being as *Dasein,* or 'being-there'. It

is the basic quality of Dasein, Heidegger suggests, that it is dependent upon a literal grounding in place, inextricably bound in relations to the entities alongside which it exists, and which, in their being gathered into a particular topographical association, constitute the place within which Dasein finds itself:

> When Dasein directs itself towards something and grasps it, it does not somehow first get out of an inner sphere in which it has been proximally encapsulated, but its primary kind of Being is such that it is always 'outside' alongside entities which it encounters and which belong to a world already discovered. (2008[1927]: 89)

It is revealing that the term Heidegger uses to refer to this spatial quality of Dasein's existence – the way in which it establishes a space of openness in which it can encounter objects it finds itself alongside - is *Spielraum* ('leeway', but also, translated literally, 'room for play'): here again the notion of play is intimately related to that of free movement within defined bounds that determine a particular locus.

It is in encountering (might we even say *playing-with*?) the objects it finds ready-to-hand that Dasein engages in spatial practice, and it is through this spatial practice that it establishes place: in Heidegger's words, Dasein "determines its own location in such a manner that it comes back from the space it has made room for to the 'place' which it has reserved" (419). But Heidegger takes a further step here: it is through this process, he suggests, that a *world* is made available to consciousness – an ordered, significant sphere of meaning and possibility within which Dasein exists, set against the ground of *earth* as the mute substrate from which (and against which) the world emerges.

Ludic space and place

It is through acting in space, as embodied beings, that it becomes available to us as a place, the locus around which a world of meaning is formed; simultaneously, through the possibilities for action it affords, this place determines the nature of our embodied being. The question we need to ask, then, is how does this double movement play out in the context of our inhabiting the virtual environment of a computer game?

While discussions of ludic space and virtual environments on the one hand, and of the figure of the avatar on the other, have become established elements in the field of game studies, the intersection between the two has remained comparatively unexamined. Often, one will be present as an unavoidable implication in a consideration of the other: as, for instance, Michael Nitsche's extended consideration of video game space implies the figure of the avatar in its discussion of ludic space as being defined by its navigability, as well as in the claim that the player "enters the game worlds" (2007: 31).

It is evident that – at least if we are referring exclusively to games that formally structure an embodied subject-position for the player within the gameworld - the two subjects are fundamentally interlinked: game environments can only be experienced through the focalizing structures that arrange themselves around the figure of the avatar, and, similarly, it makes little sense to speak of the avatar without firmly contextualizing it as an entity within the game environment in which it is entrenched.

One approach we might take towards a formal theory that could account for both would be an application of Gordon Calleja's concept of *incorporation,* defined as "*the absorption of a virtual environment into consciousness, yielding a sense of habitation, which is supported by the systemically upheld embodiment of the player in a single location, as represented by the avatar*" (2011: 169). There is a double movement here that, crucially, shares much with that outlined in the relation between place and the body. The first part of Calleja's statement argues that the virtual environment becomes available to consciousness – becomes, in other words, a meaningful place, upholding a world towards which our being can be directed, and within which actions can gain significance – by means of a sense of inhabitation, of being-there. The subject-position that the player inhabits, then, is internal to the virtual environment, and, in this sense, it constitutes what Marie-Laure Ryan would term a *recentering* of consciousness in such a way that it looks out at the textual world from an internal perspective (2003: 103).

The second part of the definition goes on to specify that the systemic foundation for this sense of inhabitation is the capacity of the avatar to act as the player's embodiment within the virtual environment. In other words, to paraphrase Calleja, the process by which the gameworld becomes intelligible to the player, as an object towards which thought (and, inseparably, action) can be oriented – and hence precisely as a *world* - is precisely the same process by which the player is virtually embodied in the gameworld.

It might be useful, at this point, to recall the close similarities we noted between the experience of bodily engagement in a physical landscape and that of inhabiting a virtual environment. The notion of incorporation suggests that this is precisely because the avatar as a formal mechanism operates by means of a cognitive structure that reflects our embodied sense of being in the physical world. What is being hinted at here is Rune Klevjer's suggestion that "one of the reasons why avatar-based games appeal to us is precisely because the principle of the avatar is grounded in, and plays with, the general phenomenology of the body" (2006: 90).

The next step, then, would be to develop an understanding of the manner in which the relationship between the avatar and the virtual environment is structured. In an earlier paper (Vella 2013), I have suggested that the embodied subject-position the game structure establishes for the player to inhabit can be understood as a 'frame' through which the player perceives the gameworld, bringing distinct entities within the environment to the fore as figures against the general ground of the landscape, while excluding other entities that fall outside the frame. In line with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology (2002[1945]), I argue that it is the possibilities for action by means of which the avatar can encounter the entities in the virtual environment, and the goals towards which these actions can be directed, that determine the nature of this world.

The movement from space to place, and hence the nature of the meaningful world of possibility and action that engagement with the virtual environment brings to light, is therefore determined to a great extent by the nature of the player's embodiment through the avatar: though, as we have already pointed out, this is a relation of mutual, interlinked influence, with the nature of the player's embodied being-in-the-world also being determined by the nature of the world's qualities as a place. In

Nitsche's words, "If "*I am there*," then there has to be a *there*, which means that place has to exist in the virtual universe because "*I*" exist there. In return, the specific identity that "*I*" has attained in this space is an indicator for its placeness" (193).

The wanderer in the landscape

If this is the case, then we would be justified in concluding that games in virtual environments can serve as facilitators for the exploration of different modes of being-in-the-world. As we have already suggested, *Minecraft* and *Proteus* present themselves as particularly rich case studies in this regard. In both cases, the player starting a new game finds herself alone in the midst of an open, natural landscape, and is initially given no indication as to what direction to head towards, or what to do. The fact that, from this nominally identical starting-point, they arrive at such radically different understandings of the interrelation of the individual and the landscape can only serve to make a comparative analysis of the two more fruitful.

The trope of the lone individual in the untamed wilderness is a recurrent image that, in its various manifestations, remains inevitably inscribed with the mark of divergent assumptions regarding the manner of the individual's engagement with space, place and nature. In the age of the Enlightenment, Robinson Crusoe wastes no time in exerting his rational mastery over his island, bending the landscape to his will and playing out, as it were, the first moves of colonization and industrialization (Defoe 2007[1719]). With the advent of Romanticism, a different relationship between nature and the individual rose to prominence, one in which nature and the mind face each other as object and subject, and the resulting "direct transaction between that mind and nature", as M.H. Abrams notes, set in motion the processes that "bring into being the phenomenal world and constitute all individual experience" (1971: 91). In William Wordsworth's "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" (1798), for instance, "the interchange between his mind and nature constitutes the entire poem" (Abrams 1971: 92): here, nature and the landscape are aestheticized, becoming objects of perception for the Imagination to work upon.

The manifestations of the trope change along with cultural perspectives on the wilderness itself. If the eighteenth century had *Robinson Crusoe,* the twentieth century had *Robinson Crusoe on Mars* (Haskin 1964): and, if *Minecraft* and *Proteus* are anything to go by, now that space exploration, the dream of a technological optimism that no longer seems to hold, appears to have receded into history, the twenty-first century is forced to venture into fantasy or impressionistic generality in order to locate fresh wildernesses to subject to the explorer's gaze. The landscapes of *Minecraft* and *Proteus* do not point towards any specific, recognizable wilderness – instead, they represent the *idea* of the unspoilt landscape, offering a new procedurally-generated landscape for every new game, pristine and unseen.

Starting off from this identical initial premise, *Minecraft* and *Proteus* both employ open landscape topographies, "the spatial structures which afford players the most freedom for navigation" (Calleja: 82). Moreover, both present themselves as identical in terms of the visual perspective through which they frame the player's point-of-view on their respective landscapes. Applying the typology suggested by Elverdam and Aarseth (2007), we can understand both games as adopting a vagrant perspective, where the entirety of the gameworld is not available to view at any given time:

instead, "the ego has to wander through game space in order to apprehend the spatial setting of the game space" (Günzel: 174).

Moreover, this is the special category of the vagrant perspective that Alexander Galloway identifies as the "subjective perspective", where visual point-of-view is equated with an individual subjectivity that is doing the perceiving. In light of our concerns regarding space, it is interesting to note Galloway's suggestion that what sets apart the use of this visual perspective in games from the usage of similar techniques in cinema is that, with games, "the subjective shot is not just about seeing […] but rather primarily about motion through space" (2006: 62), and, as such, "it is the affective, active, mobile quality of the first-person perspective that is key for gaming" (69).

The first-person perspective both games adopt, then, instantly links them to considerations of spatiality and movement. Moreover, it would, at least initially, raise expectations of a generic alignment with the first-person shooter (FPS). And yet, for both *Minecraft* and *Proteus,* this is where the similarities stop – both games, *Proteus* perhaps somewhat more radically – position themselves in opposition to the expectations engendered by the FPS genre. Galloway notes that "two elements alone – a subjective camera perspective, coupled with a weapon in the foreground – constitute the kernel of the image in the FPS genre" (57). Though, as we have just pointed out, *Minecraft* and *Proteus* both adopt the first of these two elements, they both jettison the second.

This is more than a mere surface-level visual difference. In the FPS genre, the weapon pointing into the screen, with the player on one side of it and the various entities populating the gameworld on the other, constitutes the primary affordance the player is granted in relation to the virtual environment. Its absence in these two games – in *Minecraft,* to be replaced by other affordances that are occasionally represented in the screen position where a gun would be expected to be, and in *Proteus* seemingly to mark the absence of any affordance at all – reveals the operation of a different frame through which the virtual environment is presented, and hence the enactment of a different mode of being-in-the-gameworld for the player to inhabit.

*Minecraft***: the landscape as standing-reserve**

In his discussion on the effects of modern, industrialized technology, Heidegger suggests that its point of divergence from other forms of technology lies in its mode of revealing. Understanding technology as *techne,* Heidegger defines it as a 'bringing-forth', saying that "every bringing-forth is grounded in revealing [...] the possibility of all productive manufacturing lies in revealing" (2004[1953]: 318). The essence of technology, Heidegger suggests, is that of revealing that which is concealed, bringing forth potential forms into unconcealment.

Industrialized technology, however, operates through a radically different mode of revealing: through a process Heidegger terms *Gestell* ('enframing'), industrial technology – not as a set of equipment or machinery, but as the essential impulse out of which that equipment emerges in the first place – places humanity in a specific relation to the landscape, whose operation is revealed in Heidegger's statement that, through this enframing, "a tract of land is challenged in the hauling out of coal and

ore. The earth now reveals itself as a coal mining district, the soil as a mineral deposit" (320).

Heidegger refers to this enframing as *standing-reserve* – its result is that the things we encounter in the world are no longer perceived as things, but as sources of raw material and reserves that can be stockpiled in order to be put towards some use: "everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately on hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering" (322). The end result of this is that the object stops being perceived as an object at all, and we become aware of it, instead, exclusively as resource - "whatever stands by in the sense of standing-reserve no longer stands over against us as an object" (ibid.).

This certainly rings true when we consider the way in which the landscape comes to be seen in *Minecraft*. Every entity that can be perceived in the world is a potential resource, to be gathered, processed and put to use in crafting. Trees can be chopped down for wood. Rock can be quarried for building material, or mined in search of coal, iron or rarer minerals. Sheep are a source of wool; cows, of leather; pigs, of meat.

This is made possible by the double-layered ontology that applies to the world of *Minecraft.* If we attempt to apply the form of game-ontological analysis whose project it is to understand, and define, the game object as a set of discrete game components (see, for instance, Järvinen (2008)), we soon realize that *Minecraft* presents us with a singular challenge, in that it is possible to ontologically define the set of entities making up its world in two radically incompatible ways.

We can conceive of this as the possibility – indeed, the necessity – of interpreting the landscape through two superimposed frames. Through one frame – the one through which the player is likely to perceive the landscape in her initial attempts at making sense of it - the world of *Minecraft* is precisely a landscape, a topographical arrangement of hills, forests, deserts, mountains, oceans and caves, populated by various kinds of flora and fauna.

However, nothing in *Minecraft* is only what it appears to be on this level. Its idiosyncratic, blocky visual style might provide the first hint, being strongly reminiscent of a toy building-block construction set. And this, in fact, is an apt metaphor for revealing the double-layered ontology of *Minecraft* - a tree is visibly made up of a set number of wood cubes, a rocky outcrop is so many cubes of stone, and so on. Adopting the second ontological frame, then, the world of *Minecraft* is seen, not as a landscape, but as nothing but a spatial arrangement of resource cubes – a particularly extreme case of Paul Martin's assertion that, over the course of engaging with a game's milieu, it gradually loses its evocative and mysterious qualities, becoming "domesticated through exploration and interaction" (2011).

If the frame through which the player is made to perceive and interpret the world can be equated with the figure of the avatar, and it is the range and nature of its affordances that determine the parameters of the frame, then, at this stage in the argument, it would be advisable to determine what capabilities for action *Minecraft* grants the player – and, as such, how it establishes the conditions for the player to frame the landscape as standing-reserve.

Minecraft seems to offer the player an uncommonly wide range of affordances to direct towards the entities of its world. In effect, though – apart from the general capacity for navigation and movement – the affordances that are granted to the player can be considered as two primary impulses, which we might call *deconstruction* and *construction.* Through the avatar, the player has the capacity to break any entity in the game down into its constituent resource cubes (deconstruction); these resources become stockpiled standing-reserve that the player can then recombine into new arrangements (construction). All other affordances that the game provides (such as the capacity to build and deploy tools) are elaborations on these two impulses.

To invoke, once again, Elverdam and Aarseth's typology of games, this means that *Minecraft*'s environmental dynamics are entirely free, to the extent that we might even define the process of engaging with *Minecraft* as being one of reconfiguring its landscape into a new arrangement. *Minecraft,* then, enframes the player in such a way as to lead her towards perceiving the landscape not primarily as distinct entities – barely even a landscape, at all - but as stockpiles of resources standing-reserve. Still, it is not enough to stop here: for we must next ask the question of what function or goal these resources are to be put towards.

The obvious, initial answer is *building*: the player gathers resources in order to build. This, however, requires further elaboration: why is it that the player builds? The game does not specify any quests or objectives to be met, and does not insist that the player *must* or even *should* build. Initially, of course, the motivation is survival: the player needs shelter in order to hide from the various dangers that come out at night. This is easily achieved, however – in practice, a tiny cubicle with a single door is enough to get through the night. Yet, building projects rarely stop there – as such, we must attribute the drive towards building to some motivation other than that of basic survival.

One possible answer can be found by returning to Heidegger. The question of building is crucial to Dasein, and is an essential aspect of the human mode of *dwelling,* or living in a particular, meaningful place: "we attain to dwelling, so it seems, only by means of building. The latter, building, has the former, dwelling, as its goal" (2004[1951]: 347). The two, in fact, are inseparably linked: "building is really dwelling" (350).

Dwelling is here not understood simply in the sense of houses, or places to stay, but encompasses buildings of all forms, and, through them, the essential core of what it means, as a human, to inhabit a place. What Heidegger understands by 'building' is the sense of the built environment as a whole, as a world in our image that is the world in which we dwell: "man's relation to locales, and through locales to spaces, inheres in his dwelling. The relationship between man and space is none other than dwelling, thought essentially" (359).

For Heidegger, then, building is essentially tied to the question of world-disclosure. We have already discussed the importance of the question of worldness to Heidegger's theorization of Dasein - to be is to be-in-the-world, after all; and to build, Heidegger argues, is to establish a world – to literally set it in stone. His influential example, in "The Origin of the Work of Art", of the Greek temple in the rock-cleft

valley, illustrates this point: it is the temple, he argues, that gathers a locus around itself and makes the landscape a meaningful place in which the community that built the temple can map out the paths of their lives - "the temple-work, standing there, opens up a world" (2004[1937]: 168). As such, "to be a work means to set up a world" (170).

This, then, is ultimately the mode of being-in-the-world that the virtual landscape of *Minecraft* establishes. It locates the player in an initially disorientating, undefined landscape, and, granting her the ability to deconstruct and reconstruct the elements of the landscape as she sees fit, tasks her with establishing (through the act of building) a place of dwelling, and, hence, with the unfolding of a constructed world upon the face of the landscape.

Proteus: the Romantic individual in the landscape

Once its affordances have been grasped, then, *Minecraft* provides the player with the capacity to materially engage with, and reshape, its landscape. By contrast, *Proteus* seems willfully determined to keep the player at a remove from its environment. Before we arrive at this point, however, it might make sense to take a step backwards, and consider the moments of the player's first encounter with its landscape.

Proteus immediately demands motion from the player. The first thing the player sees when starting a new game is the hazy image of an island, barely visible across a short expanse of ocean. The player is driven to move forward towards the island in preference to any of the other directions she might have randomly chosen to move towards; once the player reaches the shore, a line of standing rocks might lead her towards the interior of the island; at which point a tower on a hill might catch her eye and cause her to change her path; and so on.

At first glance, the landscape in which *Proteus* locates its player seems considerably richer than the one in *Minecraft,* where the basic components of the landscape are established rapidly. By contrast, the landscape in *Proteus* can occasionally surprise the player even after she has thoroughly familiarized herself with the relatively limited extent of the virtual environment. This is largely due to the fact that *Proteus'* island milieu is adorned with an excess of what Nitsche calls "evocative narrative elements", referring to any entity or event in a virtual environment "that is structured to support and possibly guide the player's comprehension". As "players encounter and read these elements", they "learn from them as they build contextual connections between elements", making each newly-encountered element fit the bigger picture, and changing this wider understanding if need be in a hermeneutic circle of spatial exploration and interpretation (37).

There are visible signs of human habitation: a cabin, a graveyard, standing stones and stone circle, and a circular arrangement of totem-like statues silhouetted against the sky on the summit of a hill. All of these refer to established - in fact, practically cliché - tropes of the coexistence of humanity in the natural landscape. The log cabin might recall, specifically, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden,* or, more generally, the Romantic, post-Enlightenment impulse of a return to nature viewed as an earthly paradise. The stone circles and the standing stones bear the distinct echo of druidic practices, while the hilltop statues recall nothing as much as Native American totems. However, to all

of these the player seems to be alien: the cabin cannot be entered, and the stones and statues speak in mysterious sounds. The player, here, remains resolutely outside, alone in the wilderness.

If we take the same approach as we did with *Minecraft,* and examine the manner in which the affordances the player is granted determine the parameters of her framing of the environment, we might initially reach a stark conclusion: apart from freedom of movement within the game space, the player is not granted any affordances. In fact, the game constantly thwarts the expectations of interaction it repeatedly sets up through the introduction of new, promising elements. The island, for instance, is home to a number of creatures that the player encounters at different stages of her exploration of the island: owls, flocks of chickens, a fox that peeks out at the player from behind trees, and so on. Though their patterns of movement vary, their general behavior is basically identical: all these entities will run away when approached, and constantly remain one step ahead of the player's reach.

As such, where *Minecraft*'s environment is entirely dynamic, the landscape in *Proteus* would appear to be entirely fixed. And yet, that is not entirely a correct judgment: for, although there is nothing the player can do to alter the gameworld out of her own active agency, the landscape undergoes repeated, radical change of its own accord. At certain points in the player's explorations of the island, an accumulation of visual and aural cues lead the player towards the stone circle; when the player enters the circle, a change of seasons is triggered. Effectively, this moves the gameworld between four successive states, each one corresponding to one of the four seasons: a new game always starts in spring, and will proceed through summer and autumn, before ending in winter – making *Proteus,* unlike *Minecraft,* finite in its teleology.

This emphasis on change and finitude highlights transience as one of the primary thematic concerns of *Proteus* - the adjective 'protean', after all, ascribes to an object the qualities of mutability, adaptability, change and impermanence. The commencement of the process that triggers the changes in season is heralded by a wind that sets the foliage of the landscape in motion – and wind, as Abrams points out, is a recurrent Romantic image of change (1975). Moreover, this sense of transience is highlighted by means of the fact that every particular scene the game produces can only ever be seen once. Though every procedurally-generated island will possess many of the same features, each individual configuration is unique; the game pointedly has no save option, and once the player plays through to the end of winter, or decides to leave the game before this point, that specific island can never be returned to.

With nothing else to do, perception and exploration take on unusually prominent roles, with the player's forward movement and traversal of the space being driven by no goal other than to see everything the island has to offer. This structuring of the player's engagement with the landscape as a purely aesthetic experience, albeit one defined by the movement inherent in spatial practice, would seem to align *Proteus* with a Romantic aesthetic of nature, which, as Don Gifford notes, was not a static or picturesque approach – instead, it was founded on the idea of being emplaced and engaging in the play of a place by means of its traversal, constituting "an in-touch-with, flow-through experience of landscape" (1993: 131).

In Heidegger's terms, the objects the player encounters in *Proteus* are not ready-to-hand, but present-at-hand, objects to be disinterestedly perceived rather than actively engaged with. For Heidegger, this is a merely secondary mode of being-with objects; however, within the Romantic tradition, it was precisely through disinterested contemplation that the individual mind could most forcefully encounter the natural world. This is the idea expressed by Wordsworth in these lines from the Prospectus to *The Excursion,* which, as Abrams points out, plot out the idea that something approaching a state of grace "can be achieved simply by a union of man's mind with nature" (1971: 75):

> How exquisitely the individual Mind
> (And the progressive powers perhaps no less
> Of the whole species) to the external World
> Is fitted: - and how exquisitely, too,
> Theme this but little heard of among Men,
> The external world is fitted to the Mind;
> And the creation (by no lower name
> Can it be called) which they with blended might
> Accomplish - (1971[1814]: lines 63-70)

Through encountering the objects of the natural world – not as objects that are ready-to-hand, but as objects of disinterested aesthetic perception – the individual mind is driven to the creation of its own meaningful images. This becomes most evident in S.T. Coleridge's elucidation of the role of the primary Imagination, which he understands as "the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" (1949[1817]: 146). The Imagination, in Coleridge's formulation, is the creative process by which the world comes into being for the individual perceiving consciousness, and which constitutes a reflection, within the subjective mind, of the ceaseless coming-into-being of the external world.

If, then, we are to convincingly make the argument that *Proteus* positions the player in a Romantic mode of being in relation to the landscape, we need to locate a formal structure by which this subjective "creation" by the Imagination of an image that reflects, and responds to, the external natural object – an image, then, that is the product of the encounter of Mind and Nature – is accounted for.

Perhaps precisely such a formal structure might be identified in one of the more unique aspects of *Proteus*: its deployment of a dynamic soundtrack that is generated by, and is reflective of, the player's exploratory movements through the landscape. Specific musical cues, aural elements and melodies are attached to particular objects in the landscape, emerging onto the horizon of the audible as the objects come into view. Thus, for instance, when approaching the tower-like structures standing on certain hilltops, a high-pitched squeal of discordant, electronic notes makes itself heard, growing increasingly dominant, and finally almost overwhelming, the closer the player approaches to the towers.

Once we understand the philosophical outlook of the game as Romantic, it is easy to consider this synaesthetic quality as constituting an attempt at formalizing – and mediating - a sense of the reflections and images of the external world playing upon

the surface of the Romantic Mind. It is for this reason that the focus in *Proteus* falls squarely on perception and exploration, and why agency – if it is to be found at all – can only be located in the player's capacity to organize the (admittedly, very rich) audiovisual output into pleasing arrangements. The player is, in fact, given a number of possibilities in terms of defining their perception of the gameworld: they can, for instance, intentionally choose to linger near the hilltop statues in order to admire the psychedelic visual effect they produce, or they can choose to seek out and follow the lines of stone circles in order to 'perform' a scale of musical notes.

Having made this interpretative leap, moreover, the occasionally frustrating lack of agency upon the landscape, the detachment this leads to, the alienation from the apparent sites of human dwelling, and even the oddly weightless feeling of the player's embodiment in the game that led Ian Bogost to claim that "there is no 'you' in *Proteus*" (2013), begin to make sense. The post-Kantian Romantic subject, after all, is, as Abrams notes, the victim of "an absolute and unsalvageable division between subject and object, mind and alienated nature" (1971: 269): it is against this background that the striving to reestablish a prelapsarian unity between mind and nature occurs.

Conclusions: towards a poetics of being-in-the-world

It has been my aim with this paper – as a corrective to discussions on game space that all too often neglect the *experience* of these places – to elaborate on the notion of place in games, and, linked to this, to the question of world, in the phenomenological sense. Worldness, in this sense, emerges in the encounter between a landscape and the individual's embodied being: as such, in their capacity to determine both the ontological nature of their virtual environment and the nature of the player's embodiment within it (through structuring the affordances available to the player and the goals towards which they are directed) games present themselves as an aesthetic form by which specific modes of being-in-the-world might be brought into view, adopted and explored.

Minecraft and *Proteus* were chosen for close analysis due to the amenability of their shared initial thematic foundation – the lone wanderer in the unspoilt landscape – to the question at hand. The former, through its granting the player the capacity to deconstruct game entities into resources that could then be used to construct new structures in the landscape, leads the player to frame its landscape in the mode of the Heideggerean standing-reserve; moreover, in allowing the player the capacity to reshape the landscape in her own image, the game invites the building of a constructed world in which to dwell. The latter, by contrast, locates the player in the mode of the Romantic wanderer, perceiving the landscape through an aesthetic frame (and here, of course, it is no coincidence that the game opens with the opening of eyelids, recalling Ralph Waldo Emerson's casting of himself in the face of nature as a "transparent eyeball" (1983[1836]: 10) seeing beauty in the potential correspondences of Mind and Nature, but also feeling detachment due to the unbridgeable gap between subject and object that the split between the two enacts in the first place.

Neither of these is explicitly prescribed to the player – in fact, both games stand out for their refusal to provide the player with any explicit instructions. Instead, the relations that they structure between the player and the virtual landscape emerge

organically through the formal structure by means of which the player is embodied in their respective spaces: the affordances for action (or lack thereof) available to the player, and the goals towards which these affordances are directed determine the manner in which the game space comes to appear to the player as a meaningful world.

This consideration of the relation between the player and the landscape in *Minecraft* and *Proteus,* then, points towards the possibility of founding a poetics of the medium upon a consideration of the mode of being-in-the-world in which the player is located. What such a poetics would bring to light as a fundamental aspect of games in virtual environments would therefore be the double movement we have described – one in which the game space is perceived as a meaningful world through its organization as the phenomenological sphere surrounding the player's subjective position, while, simultaneously, the player's subjective position, and the being-in-the-world through which it is defined, emerges in relation to this meaningful world in which the player is emplaced.

Games

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