With the ubiquity of smartphones and direction-providing applications like Google Maps, wandering has become an uncommon or even nonexistent part of most people's daily lives. But while our time spent wandering in real life has diminished, walking has become an increasingly important part of the player experience in video games. Melissa Kagen's book, *Wandering Games*, analyzes games in and around the genre of “walking simulators” through the lenses of work, gender, colonialism, and death. Though the term originated as a critique and dismissal of the genre, walking simulators and their production of a game experience that is less oriented around violence, task completion, and difficulty are now popular, influencing games from large studios. Looking at three of the games Kagen analyzes can help us to better understand the value of *Wandering Games* for academics from a variety of disciplines.

Kagen begins with *Return of the Obra Dinn* (2018), a game where the player works as an insurance adjuster for the East India Trading Company using a supernatural pocket watch to visualize the deaths of the individuals on board and then identify the cause of death. Here, the tensions of work, play, death, and capitalism catch the player in a tangled net of meaning and value. “The PC [player character] is a professional at work, but the player is at leisure” (p. 39). The player character is not a wandering hero but a person doing an unpleasant and complicated job. Within the game, the ever-present brutality of capitalism is laid bare when, at the end, each death is assigned a monetary value by the East India Trading Company. Each life is tallied and quantified with no regard for or comment on the strange supernatural happenings on the ship. A job is a job, and, as Kagen discusses while drawing on the work of Seth Giddings, late capitalism has made it so that even our time spent in play feels most comfortable when it resembles work.[1] The moral failure ascribed to time spent not working infects people's
play, just as it affects our ability to ramble and roam.

Restrictions on walking are as key to Kagen’s analysis as the ability to freely wander. *Ritual of the Moon* (2019) is a mobile game where players must play for five minutes a day for twenty-eight days as a witch banished to the moon. Every day, the player must choose whether or not to protect the earth from a devastating comet. Wandering and walking are tightly controlled in the game, a sharp reflection on the limits women, and all people who do not fit into the heteronormative white male form, face. Hetero-patriarchy limits the wandering of women not just in real life but also in their play. GamerGate and daily forms of harassment limit marginalized people’s access to digital spaces. “If video games partly function as a practice ground for physical fantasies, then Walking Simulators could be read as the ultimate female fantasy of walking unencumbered in a world where no one will attack them or refuse them access” (p. 68). Kagen takes the time to discuss the queer aspects of wandering and the limits put on queer bodies to wander. Queer temporalities, as well as crip temporalities, shape wandering in *Ritual of the Moon* and highlight how urgency, in all its capitalist glory, demands bodies to walk in particular ways.

While colonialism and its ties to capitalism are discussed tangentially in other chapters, chapters 5 and 6 focus on colonialism, exploration, and walking. In chapter 6, Kagen discusses the game *Heaven’s Vault* (2019). In *Heaven’s Vault* players inhabit the life of Aliya, an archaeologist exploring an ancient nebula trying to find a missing person. Kagen focuses on language and empire in her analysis, two key aspects of the game’s narrative and mechanics. The tensions between the central and the peripheral are key to game play and to Aliya’s story. She is a woman from a peripheral planet educated on the world most central to the colonization of her corner of space. Aliya faces racism and discrimination when in the empire’s center and finds herself feeling like an outsider when in her childhood home on the periphery. Throughout the game, and through learning the language Ancient, which stands in contrast to the mandated Imperial language, Aliya finds herself. “This is one of the many ways the term wandering game could be taken: a game in which a player roams a disconnected world, digressing between stories, places, texts, and contexts until they’ve assembled a self that manifests as a meandering” (p. 119). The world in *Heaven’s Vault* carries on even when the player is not present. It is only through travel, through meandering, that the player/Aliya can see, learn, and understand the larger context and truths of the universe.

Wandering to produce one’s identity is in stark contrast to the capitalist pressures that encourage one to identify as their job. The beauty of games, as with any art, is the ability to allow players to see differently. Games enable the embodiment of new ways of being and moving that facilitate insight into life outside of the game. Kagen’s *Wandering Games* is a lovely and engaging analysis of a less remarked on game mechanic. By drawing on a longer intellectual history in the analysis of walking, Kagen highlights how work, gender, colonialism, and death are unavoidable axes of meaning in not just walking simulators but all games. *Wandering Games* is a perfect book for game studies researchers, but it is also a useful read for anyone whose work intersects with technology, disability, gender, colonialism, mortality, and labor.

Note

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