

# Atmospheres



# Introduction: Slow Play

## Notes on Enveloping Ambience in Video Games<sup>1</sup>

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### INTRODUCING PLAYABLE ATMOSPHERES

In its foundational years, the field of game studies preoccupied itself predominantly with questions of operability and computability. We were looking for the heart of gameness,<sup>2</sup> devising methodological toolkits and approaches to game analysis, and juxtaposing narration against rules and mechanics.<sup>3,4</sup>

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- 1 This text is based on a chapter “Ambient Play”, originally written by the author as part of a monograph *Playing at a Distance. Borderlands of Video Game Aesthetic* (forthcoming from the MIT Press in 2022).
  - 2 Juul, Jesper: “The Game, the Player, the World: Looking for a Heart of Gameness”, In: Marinka Copier and Joost Raessens (eds.), *Proceedings of the 2003 DiGRA International Conference*, pp. 30-45.
  - 3 Eskelinen, Markku: “The Gaming Situation. Game Studies”, In: *The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, 1(1) (2005).
  - 4 Aarseth, Espen: “Playing Research: Methodological Approaches to Game Analysis.” Paper presented at the *5th International DAC Conference*. RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia, May 19-23, 2003; Konzack, Lars: “Computer Game Criticism: A Method for Computer Game Analysis”, In: Frans Mäyrä (ed.), *Proceedings of Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference*, Tampere: Tampere University Press 2002; Consalvo, Mia, Dutton, Nathan: “Game analysis: Developing a methodological toolkit for the qualitative study of games”, In: *Game Studies* 6/1 (2006); Zagal, José P.: „Towards an Ontological Language for Game Analysis“. Paper presented at the

Perhaps it is fair to say that there was a need in the scholarly community to develop methods and perspectives able to capture the essence of computer play. In the last few years, the affective, bodily, and performative dimensions of video gaming have gained considerable attention.<sup>5</sup> This anthology then may be read as a symptom of its time and an attempt to pin down one of the most volatile aspects of video games and video gaming.

Thinking about video games in terms of playable atmospheres opens diverse interpretational pathways. The term ‘atmosphere’ itself remains highly ambivalent. A short etymological excursion lays bare its meteorological origins (from Latin *atmosfera*, composed of Greek *atmós* “vapor, steam” and *sphaira* “ball, globe, terrestrial or planetary sphere”).<sup>6</sup> In her exploration of ludic wind in this volume, **Magdalena Leichter** notices how in the eighteenth century the literal weather-related meaning of atmosphere extended toward a more figurative dimension, referring to social moods and ambiances. Philosopher Gernot Böhme, whose work is central to this publication, conceptualizes atmospheres as affective spaces. Despite their high subjectivity or “quasi-objectivity,”<sup>7</sup> atmospheres in Böhme’s sense are reproduced by different agents as “sound, illumination, or the geometry of the room.”<sup>8</sup>

Although the majority of contributions on the pages to follow link the concept of atmosphere to the question of aesthetic posed by Böhme, they all remain diverse in their theoretical approaches and examples. And so, Magdalena Leichter looks at atmospheres predominantly as simulated meteorological phenomena, which have the capacity to immerse players in the gameworld. **Katja Aller** seeks to understand uncanny atmospheres in the walking simulator genre. **Anh-Thu Nguyen** gives the readers a glimpse into a futuristic noir atmosphere of *CYBERPUNK 2077* (2020) and the 13<sup>th</sup> century war-driven gameworld of *GHOST OF TSUSHIMA* (2020),

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*Changing Views: Worlds in Play: Digital Games Research Conference*, Vancouver, USA 2005.

- 5 Anable, Aubrey.: *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect*, Minneapolis: Minnesota Press 2018; Jayemanne, Darshana: *Performativity in Art, Literature and Video Games*, London: Palgrave MacMillan 2017; Keogh, Brendan.: *A Play of Bodies: How We Perceive Videogames*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2018; Bösel, Bernd, Möring, Sebastian: “Affekt“, In: *Philosophie des Computerspiels: Theorie – Praxis – Ästhetik*, Daniel Martin Feige, Sebastian. Ostritsch, and Markus Rautzenberg (eds.), Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler 2018, pp. 193-204.
- 6 See: <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/atmosphere>.
- 7 Böhme, Gernot: *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, London, New York: Routledge 2017.
- 8 Ibid., p. 3.

and discusses the political dimension of deploying Japanese visual aesthetic in pop culture. **Jonathan Jung Johansen** brings a systemic dimension to light. He sees atmospheres in video games as predominantly generated by circular player/game reciprocity and game mechanics. **Vadim Nickel** and **Björn Redecker** shift the attention towards the auditive character of atmospheric gameplay. While Redecker develops a theoretical framework of the interrelationship between sound, music, and atmosphere, Nickel looks at ambient modes of experiencing video games, departing from the concept of ambient music.

In this short opening text, I would like to contribute to the above-mentioned diverse body of work on playable atmospheres by sketching the emerging practice of *slow play*, which is regarded as a reaction to the ever more present bombardment of digital stimuli and a way to carve out spaces to think and contemplate within the oversaturated digital sphere.

Slow play is embedded here within an ambience—rather than atmosphere—centered discourse. Although the two terms, especially in their colloquial meaning, may be used interchangeably, they open different analytical horizons.<sup>9</sup> Working with ambience allows me to integrate both the affective dimension as well as the computational character of digital media and video games. And so, I would like to differentiate here between two different and yet interconnected types of ambience: *affective* and *operational*. While affective ambience is framed within the concepts of atmosphere and mood, its operational counterpart is understood as a media function. Affective ambience points towards a relaxing practice of slow play manifested by aimless wandering in the gameworld or contemplating its surroundings rather than engaging in the challenges of structured and/or competitive gameplay (as opposed to hard core gaming, speed running, or highly rhythmized professional gaming). It also characterizes sensory engagement with soothing software (self-care, meditation, and ambient music game applications). Operational ambience, on the other hand, relies on background operations, which are to a large degree executed automatically by the gaming algorithms rather than the human player. Here, we are dealing with ambience as a quality of computational media. Ambience, then, seems much more capacious a term than atmosphere.

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9 See also Felix Zimmermann's conclusion in this volume, p. 243-254.

## AMBIENCE ACROSS MEDIA

The conceptual origin of ambience is difficult to pinpoint. Eric Satie's looped piano music of the 1890s and Furniture Music of the Muzak Corporation of the 1920s tend to be mentioned as the precursors of ambience in the domain of sounds. It was, however, with Brian Eno's album *AMBIENT 1: MUSIC FOR AIRPORTS* (1978) that the concept entered popular discourse.<sup>10,11</sup> Ambient music was supposed to be "as ignorable as it is interesting," accommodating many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular, as well as inducing "calm and a space to think," to put it in the words of Eno himself.<sup>12</sup> The genre was also practiced outside of Europe. For instance, in Japan in the 1980s Hiroshi Yoshimura released his first ambient album *GREEN*. In recent years, sound ambience has been ever more influenced by algorithms. The popular music platform Spotify, for instance, quantifies the listener's taste by collecting data regarding their music choices and in effect suggesting suitable music lists and artists. This pattern-driven content optimization has transformed the music listening, from reaching out for concrete albums, artists, or songs to content streaming.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the strong ambient predisposition toward sound, vision-driven ambient forms also pervade the media landscape. Visual arts, film, television, even literature often "act" as surrounding media, fading in and out while we are busy doing something else. In her monograph *AMBIENT TELEVISION*, Anna McCarthy explores the pervasive dimension of television, going beyond the household fixture it is historically associated with. TV screens are all around us: in bars, shops, waiting rooms, at airports, sport events, and in a variety of workspaces.<sup>14</sup>

The Ambient Literature project poses a similar question regarding how the aesthetics of reading changed through pervasive and ubiquitous computing.<sup>15</sup> The project's website curates literary works that manifest alongside our daily routines between the ethereal and the magical, oscillating between foreground and

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10 See also Vadim Nickel's paper in this volume on this topic, p. 193-206.

11 *AMBIENT 1: MUSIC FOR AIRPORTS* (Eno, Brian. Polydor, 1978. Vinyl LP).

12 The words appear as liner notes on the cover of Brian Eno's 1978 *Ambient 1: Music for Airports / Ambient 1* album.

13 An in-depth critical analysis of Spotify and the transformation from music files into streamed experience can be found in the monograph *Spotify Teardown: Inside the Black Box of Streaming Music* by Maria Eriksson et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019).

14 McCarthy, Anna: *Ambient Television: Visual Culture and Public Sphere*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2001.

15 For details, see <https://research.ambientlit.com>.

background experience. To paraphrase the authors of the project, it engages within a wider paratextual world, extending beyond the materiality of the written word.

The resurgence of interest in ambience covers many fields, theoretical and applied alike. Even hardware manufacturers have responded to the ambient “hype.” Ambient mode is a feature supposed to merge Samsung television sets organically with living spaces, blending the TV screen with its environment. Amazon’s voiced-controlled “smart” speaker Alexa is perhaps the most tangible commercial manifestation of the enveloping aesthetic. Placed in our living rooms, bathrooms, and bedrooms, it constantly operates in the background, listening for potential commands to play favorite tunes, browse the Internet, or read emails. It is seamless and seeming; harmoniously blending within its surroundings and creating an illusion of absence, or rather presence on demand.

Ambience then, can denote varying phenomena depending on the specificity of the medium. In optical media (television and graphic displays), it is often concomitant with being physically surrounded by screens and imagery, which have the capacity to create a certain atmosphere (e.g., through the relaxing influence of smoothly changing lighting in the sauna or an airplane cabin). In literary texts, ambience may manifest itself in terms of intertextuality, a huge network of associations and references a given text can generate outside of itself or in its background.

Computational media are different. They not only can produce representational affect-inducing ambience (by imagery, association, or physical presence) but more importantly they trigger what I have already mentioned in the opening paragraphs as *operational ambience* (by algorithmic background operations). Alexander Galloway’s *ambient act*, one of the first interpretations of ambience within the context of video games, serves as a fitting example here. This act depicts the operability of the machine and its state of “waiting” for the player to come back to the system and engage with it as an agent. Galloway differentiates between a game pause and an ambient act, which is usually accompanied by visible micromovements, signaling that a game software is “running” although no gameplay is happening: “The ambience act is the machine’s act. The user is on hold, but the machine keeps on working.”<sup>16</sup> In Galloway’s interpretation, ambience expresses a visual representation of the operability of software.

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16 Galloway, Alexander R, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

## VIDEO GAMES AS AMBIENT MEDIA

Even though video games are a native ambient medium, relying on background computer operations, constantly processing data necessary for sustaining gameplay, they have remained relatively underexplored and underrepresented within the ambience discourse. The few previous attempts to pin down ambience at play have predominantly looked at pervasive gaming practices like transmedia and augmented reality, which combine the virtual with the real creating a dispersed experience and pervading into spaces typically devoid of play.<sup>17</sup> In many ways, the concepts of gamification,<sup>18</sup> ludification of culture,<sup>19</sup> or the interference of work and play<sup>20</sup>—extensively discussed in media and game studies—connect to an ambient character of digital play. Also, Paolo Rufino’s attempt to see self-optimization applications as “games to live with” exemplifies their ever present and surrounding dimension.<sup>21</sup> More recently, Larissa Hjorth and Ingrid Richardson have studied ambient play within the context of mobile gaming, grounding their research in ethnographic analysis of play practices of selected media users.<sup>22</sup> For Hjorth and Richardson, ambient play expresses the all-pervasive character of games and playful media, which become an inherent part of our everyday media routines. Ambience captures the constant movement between the digital, material, and social worlds.

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17 Hjorth, Larissa, Richardson, Ingrid: “Ambient Play”, In: *Gaming in Social, Locative and Mobile Media*, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2014, pp. 59-75.

18 Deterding, Sebastian. et al.: “Gamification: Toward a Definition”, In: *The ACM CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, Vancouver, BC, Canada, May 7-12 2011: <http://gamification-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/02-Deterding-Khaled-Nacke-Dixon.pdf>.

19 Dippel, Anne, Fizek, Sonia: “Ludification of Culture: The Significance of Play and Games in Everyday Practices of the Digital Era”, In: Gertraud Koch (ed.), *Digitalisation: Theories and Concepts for Empirical Cultural Research*, London: Routledge 2017, pp. 276-92.

20 Kücklich, Julian: “Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Gaming Industry”, In: *Fibreculture Journal* 5 (2005), <https://five.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-025-precarious-playbour-modders-and-the-digital-games-industry>.

21 Ruffino, Paolo: “Games to Live With: Speculations Regarding NikeFuel”, In: *Digital Culture & Society* 2 (1): “Quantified Selves and Statistical Bodies”, March 2016), pp. 153-60.

22 L. Hjorth, I. Richardson: *Ambient Play*.

Many video games, like other ambient media, neither sit in the forefront asking for our full attention, nor blur out recede completely into the background. They float “between irrelevance and relevance,”<sup>23</sup> allowing perception to be dispersed, distributed, or nondirected. This dispersion questions traditional views of video game aesthetics, which assume that the player is supposed to pay close attention to an aesthetic object and its surroundings. Ambient play seems to have little to do with a fully immersive gaming experience. It does not require an intense and deep focus from its players, who plunge into the gameworld just to be out of it the next minute if need be. We could go even further by assuming that ambient media produce a very different type of aesthetic, what Jens Schröter and others call “background aesthetic.”<sup>24</sup> It remains in contrast with a traditional aesthetic experience. While the latter requires the audience’s undivided attention towards the aesthetic object, background aesthetic relies on experiences of dispersion, distribution, and distraction. Surprisingly, many gameplay sessions are enjoyed at a slow pace, from a distance, indirectly or intermittently; on an on-and-off basis, while other activities are taking place. Think of such ludic practices as aimless wandering in walking simulators, observing others at play, or letting the game run in the background like a Tamagotchi.

By now, we can observe that ambience relates to a variety of play styles and ludic phenomena, some depicting in-game actions, others pointing towards adjacent practices. I do not necessarily perceive this diversity as problematic, but rather see it as a media symptom of its time. Ambience envelops play and players in many complex ways. Most of the examples, however, can be subsumed under the two broad categories I introduced at the beginning of this text: *affective* and *operational* ambience.

For instance, the intermittent play rhythms in idle games (semi-automated games, which do not require the player’s constant attention and action) are a manifestation of the operational aspect of digital games. Because they can “run” without human input, their ambience (similar to Galloway’s *ambience act*) becomes a media function. Moreover, the pervasive character of mobile games (as mentioned with reference to research on ambient play by Hjorth and Richardson) relies on the capacity of digital media to continue operating in the background.

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23 Ernst, Christoph: “Achtsames Ambient: Über Ambient-Ästhetik, Medienökologie und Medienpraktiken der Achtsamkeitsmeditation”, In: Jens Schröter, Gregor Schwering, Dominik Maeder and Till A. Heilman (eds.), *Ambient: Ästhetik des Hintergrunds*, Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien 2018, p. 221.

24 Schröter, Jens, Schwering, Gregor, Maeder, Dominik, Heilmann, Till. A. (eds.): *Ambient: Ästhetik des Hintergrunds*, Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien 2018.

The in-game practices of meditative slow walking in game spaces in the next section may seem very different from semi-automated idling or pervasive mobile gaming. However, all are depictions of ambience; the first two of operational ambience, while the latter of its affective counterpart. And although in this text I focus primarily on slowness and the affective side of ambient play (or the atmospheric side, to make a bow towards the research presented in this volume), I see it as crucial to grasp ambience at play in its entirety. Only then are we able to embed and understand all the diverse practices (in-game and peripheral to gameplay) within the contexts of ambience or atmosphere.

## **SLOWNESS AT PLAY**

We are living in an era of “dromocracy,” of acceleration, notes Paul Virilio.<sup>25</sup> The world around us is speeding up: faster cars, faster broadband, faster lifestyles. Companies are overtaking one another in delivering new versions of the same old smartphone or laptop. Gaming consoles are marketed based on their ever more efficient computational capacities. However, as technology accelerates, many players feel the need to decelerate. This trend is, for instance, reflected in a slow approach to design, one that would limit the player’s or user’s agency in ways that promote a more contemplative mode of engagement.<sup>26</sup> In their work on *Slow Technology*, for instance, Hallnäs and Redström argue that the increasing availability of technology in environments outside of the workplace requires the expansion of interaction design practice from creating tools to make people’s lives more efficient to “creating technology that surrounds us and therefore is part of our activities for long periods of time.”<sup>27</sup> Slow technology incorporates a design agenda aimed at inverting the values of efficient performance and emphasizing the creation of technologies that support moments of reflection, mental rest, slowness, and solitude. As computers are becoming more ubiquitous, they turn from tools being used in specific situations to continuously present assistants enveloping their users in their everyday rhythms, such as speech recognition algorithms built into our

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25 Virilio, Paul: *Speed and Politics*, trans. Mark Polizzotti, new ed. 1977; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2006.

26 Hallnäs, Lars: “On the Philosophy of Slow Technology”, *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae-Social Analysis* 5 (1) (2015), pp. 29-39, <http://www.acta.sapientia.ro/acta-social/C5-1/social51-03.pdf>

27 Hallnäs, Lars, Redström, Johan: “Slow Technology – Designing for Reflection”, In: *Personal and Ubiquitous Computing* 5, no. 3 (August 2001), p. 201.

smartphones or meditation apps like HEADSPACE.<sup>28</sup> Envelopment allows for a deeper understanding of technology design, going beyond its immediate use to solve a concrete problem or meet an objective. Enveloping design is more holistic because it allows for mapping of an expressional landscape.<sup>29</sup>

Another way to grasp slowness in technology is to focus on its ubiquitous calmness or what Paul Roquet names the “aesthetics of calm.”<sup>30</sup> Roquet’s work is embedded within the context of Japanese culture and its use of technologies of mood-regulation as modes of self-care and healing strategies. He looks at ambient music, film, video installations, and, as paradoxical as it may seem, literature. He writes: “like ambient music, ambient literature is an artistic response to the demand for transposable calm. Ambient literature rethinks the novel as a mood-regulating device.”<sup>31</sup> An ambient novel is supposed to exert a calming effect on its readers by building an enveloping space around them and providing a nurturing, safe, and predictable space to think while guarding its “drifting readers” from the intense seriousness of their everyday lives.<sup>32</sup> Ambient media in general provides deep affective experiences with the ability to induce calmness amidst the instability and uncertainty of contemporary life.

Roquet claims that the ambient aesthetics of calm extends beyond the borders of any single national culture or region and beyond the borders of any single medium.<sup>33</sup> Although video games are traditionally associated with the military-entertainment complex or management-like optimization strategies, they can also feature calming environments with soothing and mood-inducing qualities.<sup>34</sup> This imaginary, however, fails to acknowledge video games as deeply affective spaces or what Aubrey Anable calls “affective systems.”<sup>35</sup> Their architecture exerts as calming and enveloping an effect on players as ambient literature has on its readers. While ambient and calming literature often manifests itself via an easy-to-read style or safe everyday world settings known to its readers,<sup>36</sup> comfort and safety

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28 HEADSPACE (Headspace Inc. 2010).

29 L. Hallnäs, *Philosophy of Slow Technology*.

30 Roquet, Paul: *Ambient Media: Japanese Atmospheres of Self*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2016.

31 Ibid., 89.

32 Ibid., 106.

33 Ibid., 92.

34 Pias, Claus: *Computer Game Worlds*, translated by Valentine A. Pakis, Berlin: Diaphanes 2017.

35 A. Anable, *Playing with Feelings*.

36 P. Roquet, *Ambient Media*, p. 99.

within ludic spaces may be achieved by limiting the player's agency, using calming and ambient soundscapes, or making use of the enveloping character of computation, letting the game play in the background, assisting the player seamlessly in their everyday rhythms.

Many video games and play styles speak to this vision of slow and calm digital technology. The gameworlds of ABZU, DEAR ESTHER, THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD, RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2 or TINY BOOKSHOP all address the slow turn in different ways.<sup>37, 38, 39, 40, 41</sup> The first two examples are especially interesting as they remove the element of direct challenge, metaphorical death, or the well-known game over. By doing this, they present players with gameworlds devoid of simulated uncertainty, a quality that usually defines the core of video games.<sup>42</sup> The easy-to-play style of walking simulators, affective games, or the so-called "non-games" is a fitting ludic illustration of Paul Roquet's argument regarding the ambient style of Haruki Murakami's novels characterized by an easy-to-read style.

ABZU is a videogame that follows in the footsteps of FLOW, FLOWER and JOURNEY, all deeply meditative titles whose rewarding experience stems from moments of contemplation combined with calming gameplay rhythms and accompanied by a relaxing sound layer (in the case of JOURNEY, sounds are reduced to the minimum).<sup>43, 44, 45</sup> ABZU starts by inviting the player to dive underneath the blue surface of endless water glittering in the sunrays. A few gentle notes of a bassoon merge with the background sounds of the marine life as the player submerges deep into the sea. Classical music accompanies the player throughout the whole game, setting an emotional tone and a calming rhythm of play. Although ABZU does

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37 ABZU (Giant Squid, 2016: 505 Games).

38 DEAR ESTHER (The Chinese Room/Curve Digital 2012, O: The Chinese Room / Robert Briscoe).

39 THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD (Nintendo Entertainment Planning 2017, O: Nintendo).

40 RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2 (Rockstar Studios, 2018: Rockstar Games)

41 TINY BOOKSHOP (David Abel Wildemann / Raven Rusch 2021, O: Cologne Game Lab)

42 Rautzenberg, Markus: *Framing Uncertainty: Computer Game Epistemologies*, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2020.

43 FLOW (Sony Interactive Entertainment 2006, O: Thatgamecompany / Jenova Chen / SuperVillain Studios).

44 FLOWER (Sony Interactive Entertainment 2009, O: Thatgamecompany).

45 JOURNEY (Sony Interactive Entertainment 2012, O: Thatgamecompany / Santa Monica Studio).

involve faster-paced moments where acceleration and swift turns are necessary to avoid enemy objects, most of its gameplay resembles a meditation session or a cathartic dance. Meditation in this case is not only a metaphor for gameplay. ABZU allows the player to enter twelve meditation modes. Once the meditation statues are discovered in the game, the corresponding meditation zones are unlocked in the menu and may be accessed independently of the main gameplay. In those moments, ABZU morphs into affective meditation technology. While in the mode, we can observe fish schools, while slowly turning the camera around the scene. While playing in the meditation mode it is impossible to actively exert influence upon the surrounding world. Immersed in the audiovisual spectacle, the player may let go following the ambient rhythm of the game. ABZU is a game which could as well be referred to as a mood medium, one that not so much mediates between two states but surrounds the player like air does.<sup>46</sup>

DEAR ESTHER slows the player down by stripping the interactive experience to its minimum-walking. Perhaps that is why the game is said to have given rise to the now common 'walking simulation', a genre that has become part of a long tradition of "gendered wandering", a term introduced by Melissa Kagen.<sup>47</sup> We cannot run, speed up, or jump; even picking up objects, one of the most common interactions in first-person adventures, is not an option. All that can be done is drifting through the atmospheric gameworld, choosing the direction of the stroll, and contemplating the melancholic surroundings while listening to the narrator. Most of the game happens in the player's head as they admire the gameworld or succumb to the stream of thoughts while wandering around the island. Slow walking as a central mode of experience brings back to life the Romantic figure of the *flâneur*. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century many used to stroll the streets of busy modern cities and observe the pace of life from a distance, as if refusing to succumb to its rhythms. Digital wanderers, just like 19<sup>th</sup> century flâneurs, pass through the gameworld at their own pace, leaving no trace of their existence.<sup>48</sup> The deeply contemplative character of moving through gameworlds such as DEAR ESTHER's has also

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46 Media and air have a lot in common. Paul Roquet traces the ambient character of media in Newtonian physics, which sees air as a medium. Media and air took different paths just to reunite conceptually again.

47 Kagen, Melissa: "Walking Simulators, #GamerGate, and the Gender of Wandering", In: Jonathan Eburne and Benjamin Schreier (eds.), *The Year's Work in Nerds, Wonks, and Neocons*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2017, pp. 275-300.

48 For more on digital flânerie in video games, see: Maughan, C. L. *The Return of Flânerie*, 2021.

inspired the emergence of the new term “ambience action game.”<sup>49</sup> Felix Zimmermann and Christian Huberts argue that it makes for a much more fitting depiction of the affective landscape experience, as it leaves behind the purely functional understanding of gameworlds. Ambience, as opposed to walking, allows virtual spaces to exist without succumbing to an array of gameplay functions.

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD offers the player a vast open world to explore and interact with in seemingly endless ways. Cooking illustrates the complexity of the emergent gameplay awaiting the player. Almost anything that can be picked up, hunted, fished, or found may end up in the hot pot. There hardly seems to be a prescriptive way of mixing the ingredients. Despite the highly complex and interactive world, BREATH OF THE WILD provides enough space for calm solitary moments, strolling through the high grass, listening to the wind, or getting lost in the vastness of the world. In “The Rise of the Ambient Video Game,” Lewis Gordon describes BREATH OF THE WILD as sensory soothing software:

“In the evening I sit on the couch, letting the colours and sounds of the digital world wash over me, allowing my brain to slowly decompress. It’s a relaxation activity that slips nebulously into self-care, the video game equivalent of putting an ambient record on.”<sup>50</sup>

Many other games not mentioned in this chapter tap into the ambient slow experience, especially a mobile genre of “cozy” games or self-care and meditation games such as ZEN KOI (2016), rewarding the player’s engagement with soft music and minimalistic relaxing audio background, calm gameplay, and a soothing aesthetic.<sup>51</sup>

The final example I would like to mention within the context of slowness is TINY BOOKSHOP. This wonderful, playful experience was developed as a BA project by two students of the Cologne Game Lab—David Wildemann and Raven Rusch. The game was originally conceptualized as a playful interpretation of an anti-capitalist or post-capitalist bookshop management. Instead of multiplying profits from book sales in the town of Bookstonbury, the player is encouraged to

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49 Zimmermann, Felix, Huberts, Christian: „From Walking Simulator to Ambience Action Game. A Philosophical Approach to a Misunderstood Genre“, In: *Press Start 5* (2019), <https://press-start.gla.ac.uk/index.php/press-start/article/view/126>.

50 Gordon, Lewis: “The Rise of the Ambient Video Game”, Outline (blog). Post published April 17, 2018: <https://theoutline.com/post/4181/ambient-video-game-legend-of-zelda?zd=1&zi=hq33dwfd>.

51 ZEN KOI (Land Shark Games, 2018).

enjoy the ritual of stocking up books and watching as the non-player characters visit the bookshop caravan. Occasionally, we can engage in a dialogue and diversify the slowly progressing gameplay by reading the local “Bookstonbury Review” newspaper or customizing our caravan. The slow-paced gameplay is accompanied by gentle background music, which sets the tone for the relaxing experience.

*Figure 1. A screenshot from TINY BOOKSHOP, a game developed by students of the Cologne Game Lab.*



Credit: David Abel Wildemann and Raven Rusch.

Slow play is a manifestation of the strategy of living/playing in an age of speed. It creates pockets of stillness in an ever more accelerating digital everyday. The desire for slow ambience may be interpreted as a defensive mechanism to stimuli overload; in other words, a “coping mechanism for life under neoliberal capitalism.”<sup>52</sup> Slow technology in general, and slow play in particular, promote moments of reflection, calm, and rest in rapidly changing environments.

<sup>52</sup> Roquet, Ambient Media, 21.

## AMBIENCE AS A NEW AESTHETIC CATEGORY

Ambience is a fertile media-theoretical concept. It provokes many interpretational pathways and allows seeing gaming culture as a vital part of a larger ambient media landscape. Ambience understood within the context of slowness opens a discussion about the sort of play that is characterized by distance rather than close and focused engagement; moments of ludic ambience rather than almost undisturbed, hands-on participation; and perhaps safe enveloping calmness rather than simulated uncertainty. More importantly, ambience complicates the usual story of an aesthetic video gaming experience, which is usually regarded as a foreground activity, requiring undivided attention and almost uninterrupted action from its audience. And yet, as I have demonstrated in this text, alongside highly-focused gaming practices, other digital play formats and habits have emerged. Video games, and by extension digital media, cannot be fully understood without considering their ambient character.

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