Travel from the Comfort of the Office Chair

In October of 1958, William Higinbothan created a precursor to 'Pong,' a simple tennis simulation that was reportedly a fan favorite at the Brookhaven National Laboratory open house[1]. By 1972, Magnavox released the first video game console, the Magnavox Odyssey, with its own Pong precursor. Atari followed close behind, with the first widely successful video game in 'Pong', a rip-off of Higinbotham and Magnavox's table tennis simulators for which they later got sued, but the ball had been set in motion.

Today, video games are played by over 3 billion people worldwide, or approximately 40% of the world population – and this number is steadily rising; up from ~2.81b in 2020 and expected to reach 3.3b by 2024. Over a billion of these video game aficionados find themselves firmly entrenched in the world of online gaming, a number that rose sharply during the pandemic and is expected to continue its rapid growth. In the U.S, 74% of households contain a gamer; 76% of Americans under 18 and 67% of adults can be found spending some time in the world of video games.[2]

So, the critical question – what promotes this popularity?

I draw our attention to travel. Travel is undeniably a critical tool in the arsenal of advancing human cognition; its ability to grant fresh perspective to those who undertake it is essential to our development as individuals. The misconception of travel, however, is that one may only receive its benefits when they *physically* undertake a voyage, when they find themselves somewhere truly new. Yet, I would argue instead that travel can be many things, and that it does not at all need a component of physical relocation to maintain its relevance.

Let us first approach the marvelous monolith of media – the book. The book began its journey early in human history with the popularization of the scroll, but it was Gutenberg's 1436 invention of the printing press that truly put the written word into the hands of the masses. Once the glory of the story had been revealed to the globe, the evocation of imagination began en masse from the medium that Gutenberg had helped ascend. Books have evolved into film and television as media technology took leaps and bounds from Gutenberg's pivotal invention; the power of the story, however, underwent a less vigorous change. From fiction to fantasy to horror, stories transport those who consume them to a vibrant world concocted from the annals of our imaginations. Sometimes, such as in the case of the written word, imagination shoulders much of the load, whereas in film and television you get more sensory assistance in the form of audio and visuals. Regardless, however, the ability of storytelling to transport us to its worlds is undeniable

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[1] See APS:
https://www.aps.org/publications/apsnews/200810/physicshistory.cfm#:~:text=In%20October%201958%2C%20Phy
sicist%20William,Brookhaven%20National%20Laboratory%20open%20house.
[2] https://truelist.co/blog/gaming-statistics/

and a critical foundation for the feeling of travel, of 'being somewhere new' while not moving around at all.

Video Games depart from film and other media mostly at the point of interface, that is to say you 'watch a movie' or 'read a book', but you *play* a video game. The core element here is the concept of interaction, of being able to have a tangible impact on the world of the game through the use of a controller or mouse and keyboard or any other of the innumerable number of control schemes. The scope of video games as a media phenomenon is colossal and only growing, and you can find games from goat simulator – yes, exactly what it sounds like and with over 4 million sales – to first person shooter games, to long form animated stories that are part game, part movie. The point is that there exists an innumerable number of video game genres, and within each genre, an innumerable number of games. This is important because it is naturally difficult for us as humans to extend ourselves beyond the realm of *our* world to the realm of *the* world – the world is a big place; our consciousness is a small place. Travel serves as the essential bridge between the world which we perceive and the world which truly exists, and for video games to serve as a travel analogue they must as an industry emulate this vastness of the real world. In conjunction with their vastness, video games emulate travel through interaction with a new world. Just as with travel, we're forced to see a game's world devoid of the rigid culture of our daily lives. While we may not think it, we are all indoctrinated into the frameworks of those around us, be it our jobs or classes or friends or families; they define our thought and behavior in more ways than we can possibly consciously process. Just like travel, video games can free us of these shackles, force us to view a new reality separate from the one we know back home.

Let us clarify with some case studies. Take Minecraft, the gleaming monument of the last decade of video games with over 230 million sales across almost every imaginable platform since its 2011 release. Minecraft is a sandbox game with both singleplayer and multiplayer game modes, and it's the perfect representation of the connection between video games and travel. Minecraft is unbelievably simple, and it's a game with, to many who play, no 'goal'. For those among us who have yet to make its acquaintance, it is a 3 dimensional infinite sandbox survival game based on voxels, pixel-like cubes that make up the minecraft world. From tree-dotted, snow capped mountains to vine-wreathed jungles to murky, ominous caves, Minecraft has a world as ecologically and audio-visually diverse as the real world – it can be explored to infinity, yet the gameplay is as simple as the name: mine what you need to craft what you want. The connection to travel is apparent in a game like Minecraft, where traveling is almost the point. Exploration and creation serve as the core gameplay patterns, and it potently stimulates the imagination and truly transports the player to a new world, free from the contexts of the real one. Though I could delve into the details of Minecraft for hours – a far-reaching cultural phenomenon that has had impacts on the lives of many who have explored its blocky landscapes – it is not just Minecraft that exemplifies the power of 'eTravel'. Nestled just under Minecraft on the all-time videogame bestseller list is Grand Theft Auto V, an action-adventure game where again, the name speaks for itself. The game is a true open world role-playing game, where you

act as less-than-upstanding citizens of San Andreas, a state based on southern California, controlling three different underworld gentlemen in the singleplayer campaign and controlling your own customizable character in the multiplayer version. GTA is a freeing experience, where you can feel the thrill of committing six felonies during a police chase or crashing a stolen fighter jet trying to fly it through a donut billboard all from the comfort of your office chair or couch, and the government won't even question you afterwards. GTA represents a form of travel that you *can't* find in the real world, a fantastical double life of action and adventure that comes free of the damage and harm it would inflict on the real world yet still makes you see your commute to work in a different light.

   Minecraft and GTA V, though undeniable bastions of the last decade of video games, are but small subsets of the total range of video games. Any location, any human or, honestly, any other creature, any motivation or story, any type of visuals or gameplay or controls or genre, it can be played in or played as or played with. The technology is only developing further, as graphics and consumer computers with which to render and display those graphics only progress, as sound production and compression improves, as we push the envelope of what is possible in the creation and distribution of games, the far-reaching effects of video games as a means of travel will only grow.

   Even the greater contexts of the real world can be critical in the role of videogames as a source of travel. Let us flash back to late March of 2020, as COVID-19 began its infectious rampage through our woefully ill-prepared globe locking billions inside. Travel in the traditional sense was not an option, and even the daily habits and rituals that had felt so benign and boring in the pre-covid world would have been welcome tastes of travel and adventure had they been allowed. Alas, we instead found ourselves caged, confined to our abodes while pathogens roamed the streets outside. It was natural, then, that many turned to the technological world for an imaginative outlet. Missing friends and missing freedom, we replaced what Covid stole with video games – in 2019, ~164 million people in the U.S. played video games; as Covid wracked us in 2020, that number *shot up* to ~214 million. A critical feature of games popular during the Covid era was multiplayer, as we thirsted for the now devoid human connection that was once chaotically interspersed throughout our lives. Playing against strangers satiated some of that void, but it was the connection with friends that video games offered that truly spurned their popularity. In *Among Us*, you could travel with your friends to a spaceship or a mining plant and get lost in the fantasy of Ridley Scott's 1979 film *Alien,* investigating and fearing your friends as you forget the raging pandemic outside. You could get entrenched in the village of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, fishing or planting trees or buying chairs from Timmy and Tommy, the twin racoons, as you showed off your island to your friends. You could drop into *Call of Duty: Warzone*, fight your way through the 150 other players and the gulag, your squad trapezing through Verdansk with rifle in hand in a battle-royale, last man standing brawl with three of your friends shouting callouts in your ear with a fervence that might only be matched by their presence in an actual warzone. You could play sports games, fighting games, adventure games,

action games, and everything in between and beyond. The world of video games had become the new hub for travel as the real world underwent lockdown, and they helped keep us from the degradation of our sense of imagination and exploration in a psychologically brutal time.

It is clear that video games can serve as a powerful catalyst for travel, for imagination, for socialization, and for much more. They're growing in popularity at a lively pace and growing in capability just as quickly. The age of virtual reality is upon us, with just under 20 million units of VR headsets being sold in 2022. VR embodies the next manifestation of video games as a form of travel, and as graphics improve and the technology becomes more immersive we will only see increasing adoption of virtual reality into everyday life. Eventually, we may see the release of 'the big one', the massively multiplayer virtual reality roleplaying game where you can be anything and do anything in an online space, the 'metaverse' if you will. This is the *Ready Player One* of video games, the 'everyone has a headset and a character and it's a critical part of the convenience of everyday life' of video games. It is not hard to imagine a future where this becomes a reality, especially when you consider the pressing issues of inequality and climate change that will continue to encroach on the positives of modern globalized society. Perhaps VR will emerge as a band-aid fix for our destruction of life on our own planet; and I reiterate that it is but a band-aid fix. As machine learning develops and its appetite for data grows, we may begin to 'solve' the human mind; a future we are already frighteningly close to with the algorithms that run our online world. We humans are weak, and we are easily made victims of synthetic technological addiction; advancements in machine learning and virtual reality mustn't let us forget about the issues that plague the real world.

I hope I have convinced those of you here who have yet to experience the world of video games to potentially give it a try, and I hope those of you who already find yourselves as denizens of online adventure can see video games in a new light. With the right mindset, video games can impart much of the same benefits as physical travel and can even allow our consciousness to extend beyond the confines of what is possible in reality. We can catalyze our imagination, fulfill our fantasies, and explore infinite worlds with infinite freedom; the possibilities of video games are endless, and they await our visits with open arms.