

Automobile manufacturers and airlines sometimes try to hawk their wares by suggesting “the journey is half the fun.” In today’s world of low-frills, high-speed transportation, it’s a tough pill to swallow. But there was a time when one had no choice but to think of the journey as part of the trip, simply because it took so long to get anywhere.

In the mid-eighteenth century, for example, it would have taken ten days to travel from London to Edinburgh by horse and carriage under the best conditions.¹ By the 1830s the trip took less than two days by railroad. The convenience, speed, and economy of rail travel were immediately apparent for both freight and transit purposes, and the early days of rail made it clear that the new technology had fundamentally changed the very experience of travel.

While the railroad introduced many changes, two stand out from the perspective of tourism. First, by removing the majority of time from a journey, the railroad also removed much of the experience of the space traversed. Even though travelers covered the same distance, the new speed by which one would pass that expanse made it impossible to experience space in the same way. In his history of the railway journey, Wolfgang Schivelbusch describes it as follows:

On the one hand, the railroad opened up new spaces that were not as easily accessible before; on the other, it did so by destroying space, namely the space between points. That in-between, or travel space, which it was possible to

“savor” while using the slow, work-intensive eotechnical form of transport, disappeared on the railroads.²

Schivelbusch compares this change with the “loss of aura” in mechanically produced works of art, as famously theorized by Walter Benjamin.³ While waypoints along a route had once been connected to one another continuously through the slow traversal of foot, horse, or carriage, the railroad disrupted this uninterrupted flow. As Schivelbusch explains, “What was experienced as being annihilated was the traditional space-time continuum which characterized the old transportation technology. Organically embedded in nature as it was, that technology, in its mimetic relationship to the space traversed, permitted the traveler to perceive that space as a living entity.”⁴

Second, the railroad changed the traveler’s experience of the countryside as it was seen from the railcar. The carriage or horseback had provided a relatively unmediated view of the passing landscape. If the traveler so wished, he or she could interrupt a journey and step down from the coach to inspect a vista or to meander into a meadow. But even from his or her seat, the traveler experienced a more deliberate revealing of scenes along the route. That changed with the railroad, which bombarded ever forward, along the single path afforded by the iron road, each particular scene visible through the railcar’s window for only a brief moment. If the carriage functioned more like a landscape painting, the railway functioned like a cinema camera. Schivelbusch explains:

The empirical reality that made the landscape seen from the train window appear to be “another world” was the railroad itself, with its excavations, tunnels, etc. Yet the railroad was merely an expression of the rail’s technological requirements, and the rail itself was a constituent part of the machine ensemble that was the system. It was, in other words, that machine ensemble that interjected itself between the traveler and the landscape. The traveler

perceived the landscape as it was filtered through the machine ensemble.⁵

Schivelbusch's thoughts about the railroad remind us that travel is not a universal experience but one mediated by the particular forms that give rise to it. A continuous, sensory voyage through slowly transforming countryside characterized travel by carriage. In the age of rail, the train produced a staccato vista through its single view. And of course today, in the era of the airplane, the vistas of travel have been removed entirely, replaced by the white blanket of clouds or the vague pattern of farmland five miles below. In a practice begun thanks to the railway, travelers now replace the landscape traveled with the "imaginary, surrogate landscape" of the book—a form that enjoyed considerable success when sold or loaned in rail stations.⁶

In the century preceding the rise of the rail, media had already begun to offer a kind of practice run for the travel experience to come. In "panorama" shows, audiences viewed paintings of distant destinations without requiring the massive time and expense necessary for a journey abroad. Schivelbusch recounts such a scene:

A newspaper of the year 1843 describes the Parisian public "reclining on well-upholstered seats and letting the five continents roll by at its pleasure without having to leave the city and without having to risk bad weather, thirst, hunger, cold, heat, or any danger whatsoever."⁷

The railroad soon offered a real implementation of the panorama, a summary view of the countryside. But the panorama show foreshadowed the coming railroad age, offering an early taste of something that was still impossible at the time.

If the panorama anticipated a kind of travel yet to come, the videogame looks back on one that's already passed. Games restore the experience of resistance and adventure that the rail (and the

airplane after it) had removed from travel, even if only through simulation.

For one part, a videogame constantly asks its players to *act*. The seemingly passive experience of piloting a car around *Grand Theft Auto*'s Liberty City becomes a task in the game's larger mobster fiction. And in many games, including the characteristically forgettable ones that adapt motion pictures, a story's plot is mapped to the physical traversal of a landscape, such that solving a problem amounts to moving successfully through the obstacles of an environment.

But for another part, videogames tend to offer continuous rather than discontinuous space that must be traversed deliberately and actively, the opposite of the panorama show and the railway. Even the earliest 2-D games rely on patient traversal as fundamentals: the spaceship of *Asteroids* moving through its field of rocks, Pac-Man moving through his maze collecting pellets. But it's 3-D games that make continuous transit a fundamental part of the experience of play.

Crazy Taxi was first created for coin-op play, but was popularized with its release on the Sega Dreamcast in 2000. The game plays just like its title suggests: the player takes the role of a cabbie who must pick up and drop off fares at locations throughout a city. A large, green arrow at the top of the screen points the player in the general direction of the destination, but the challenge comes in navigating the winding streets of the city and countryside to reach it before the fare grows impatient.

A taxi-style minigame mimicking *Crazy Taxi* appears in *Grand Theft Auto 3*, but that title also makes transit a fundamental part of the gameplay, by situating its challenges throughout a large city that takes considerable time to traverse. *GTA3* and its sequels also offer an important shift away from the arcade-style play of *Crazy Taxi*: since players can complete missions at a time of their choosing, the game's default state is essentially that of transit. Despite popular opinions suggesting that *GTA3* allows a player to "do anything," it actually offers precious little freedom of action,

since indeed only a small number of acts are really supported in the game world. Instead, the game offers freedom of continuous movement, which players sometimes partake of as its own pleasure. While the railroad cuts out the scenery and replaces it with panorama, *Grand Theft Auto* and other open-world games inspired by its design offer scenery worthy of experience in its own right.

One can walk instead of driving in *GTA*, although it's a time-consuming process. But walking also finds more fundamental integration into games in which slow, continuous traversal becomes a fundamental aspect of gameplay. In Nintendo's *Animal Crossing* series, several human players share an idyllic pastoral village with cartoonish animals. It's a strange game with few defined goals. Players can talk to the animals, fish or catch insects, search for buried treasure, buy and sell goods, and tend to the village's gardening needs. Play proceeds over many weeks or months, and the environment changes along with the calendar and the seasons.

In the process, one has to traverse the hills and paths and bridges and riverbanks of the village many, many times. Bitty the hippo might ask the player to deliver a modern table to Aziz across town, requiring the slow, pleasant promenade across the river and up the hill to the peach tree orchard on the opposite end of the village. Once there, as happenstance would often have it, Aziz might be out meandering or shopping or fishing, forcing the player to return another day to complete the errand. In the process, not just once but over many such encounters, the player develops an intuitive and continuous relationship with the village's landscape. *Grand Theft Auto* and *Crazy Taxi* simulate an experience many of us have every day: commuting by car. But *Animal Crossing* offers a surrogate for one that we began replacing first with the railroad and then with the automobile: an experience of the "space between points" that had been reduced or eliminated by the transportation technologies that began with the railroad.

One might observe that a videogame is a strange way to get a sense of the space between points when one could simply find a

local park or just go outside and walk around the neighborhood. Videogames, after all, are often accused of ripping people out of the natural world and placing them into an artificial one. But this objection misses an important feature of the prerailroad transit experience: the necessary unfamiliarity of a space being traversed. Places once felt isolated from one another, and the process of traveling *itself* served to unite them. Before the railroad, the traveler also doubled as adventurer, taming the spaces in between destinations by passing through them, both literally via foot or horse or carriage and figuratively by vision and judgment. The former gets you from place to place, but the latter solidifies the continuous space of transit and the real effort required to get there.

If this distance comprises the aura lost when transportation technologies allow travelers to access a faraway locale without going through the effort of long-distance travel, then it might be tempting to see the rapidly loadable locales of *Grand Theft Auto* and *Animal Crossing* as similarly collapsed, the television and videogame console taking the place of the locomotive or the airplane. But even as these simulated places may not embrace *real* remoteness by remaining so easy to access, once there players experience a new, *simulated* remoteness: how to get from Gerry's place to the Liberty City Ferry terminal or how to find the village museum from the seashore. For these locations to simulate remoteness effectively, they must start out entirely unfamiliar, inviting the player to come to understand them through slow transit rather than the speed of transportation technologies. It helps that the temporal expectations in videogames are distorted. It might take hours to drive from Brooklyn to Hoboken, but since the action in most videogames is expected to be nearly immediate, even a small prolonging of the simulated experience reproduces the extended travel associated with earlier forms of transit.

The result inverts the function of the photograph and the panorama show in the mid-nineteenth century. Instead of looking forward to a future in which the risky, laborious process of traversing space could be lessened, in-videogame transit re-creates a

past in which reality had not yet been dissolved into bits, but had to be traversed deliberately. Like the panorama show, the transit simulation is a kind of replacement therapy for an inaccessible experience of movement. Two centuries ago, that missing experience was able to truncate space. Today, it takes the reverse form, an experience that demands continuity. In this respect, the videogame is to the airplane and automobile what the on-board novel once was to the railroad.

Perhaps the most ironic example of videogame transit comes in the very simulation of the technology that first dissolved reality, the railroad itself. Games like *Microsoft Train Simulator* offer an equivalent of flight simulators for the railways. Popular mostly among railroad hobbyists, they're complex and intricate simulations of the operation of various rail lines all around the world. These titles require players to stop and start a locomotive using simulated control levers, to couple and uncouple wagons, and most of all to follow the signals and schedules necessary to deliver passengers or cargo along real or fictional routes built into the game, or constructed by the player.

From the perspective of transit simulation, perspective becomes the key feature of *Train Simulator*. Rather than being situated in the passenger carriage, where vistas captured like photographs occasionally interrupt the pleasant silence of a book, the player is thrust into the operator's cab. There, he or she not only must negotiate the physics of track curves and locomotive speeds or the symbologies of signal direction but also must embrace a continuous attention to the unfolding scene. In this case, the journey is not just half the fun but the entire experience.