ALTERNATIVE WILDERNESSES
FINDING WILDNESS IN 21ST CENTURY AMERICA

By

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of BEN S. BUNTING, JR. find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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that was worth reading (and some things that weren't) since I was in the first grade.
This dissertation is a critique of the American concept of wilderness. Traditionally, this concept has assumed the necessity of a geographic *locus* that embodies the qualities of “the natural,” but I challenge this assumption, positing that what we value most in our interactions with wilderness places is not the physical location, but instead a quality of experience that we find at that location. By theorizing how this quality can be transplanted to contexts beyond the wilderness place in the first two chapters, I argue for a new concept of wilderness that is not constrained by geography, that allows us access to experiential *wildness* nearly anytime and anywhere. The remaining three chapters provide practical examples of how this wildness can be deterritorialized.

First, I examine literature dealing with the practice of urban exploration – including L.B. Deyo and David Leibowitz's *Invisible Frontier: Exploring the Tunnels, Ruins, and Rooftops of New York* and Julia Solis' *New York Underground: The Anatomy of a City* – to show how it functions as a method for bringing wildness to city space. Second, I discuss the recent video game *Minecraft*, arguing that it intentionally presents a gameworld to the player that encourages meaningful experiences of wildness not unlike those afforded to the urban explorer. Third and last, I investigate the possibilities for wildness represented by mobile gaming and the integration
of the location-aware interface with “real life”. Here I draw on the examples of *Foursquare* and geocaching to illustrate how these games can encourage a reinscribing of walked space by the player through the mobile interface's superimposition of a virtual layer of place-information onto the physical world.

Ultimately, in addition to constructing a new theory of “wilding” space from a synthesis of previous space/place theorists' works, my dissertation argues for the relevance of three different-but-related spatial practices that I believe are all deserving of more serious critical attention. Weaving these practices together theoretically, I make a case for a more inclusive “wilderness,” one that could productively alter what it means to read literature, video games, and the very spaces that we inhabit ecocritically.
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There it was, word for word,  
The poem that took the place of a mountain.

He breathed its oxygen,  
Even when the book lay turned in the dust of his table.

It reminded him how he had needed  
A place to go to in his own direction,

How he had recomposed the pines,  
Shifted the rocks and picked his way among clouds,

For the outlook that would be right,  
Where he would be complete in an unexplained completion:

The exact rock where his inexactnesses  
Would discover, at last, the view toward which they had edged,

Where he could lie and, gazing down at the sea,  
Recognize his unique and solitary home.

Wallace Stevens, “The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain”
AN INTRODUCTION TO WILDERNESS

KENT, OHIO, APRIL 2001 AND PULLMAN, WASHINGTON, SEPTEMBER 2011

My first real encounter with what I would later come to think of as “wildness” occurred in April of 2001. I was a sophomore at Kent State University at the time, working towards a degree in computer science, it was the week of Spring Break, and I was about to embark on what I was sure would be my greatest adventure yet in twenty years of life.

In truth, my roommates and I hardly needed an excuse like Spring Break to take a trip out of town. Like many college students post-Kerouac, the road trip was our preferred method of weekend relaxation. Tracing impromptu routes across Ohio and its neighbor states, we drove to see new places, to meet new people, and to have any and all experiences that were novel to us then, so recently freed from high schools and parents’ rules, and hometowns. We would pour over atlases for hours, looking for an interesting place name, a confluence of rivers, or the all-important green splotch that marked the boundaries of a State or National Park and, extrapolating from that two-dimensional map, we'd spend the following days or weeks imagining what those places must look like in reality. Then, as soon as it was feasible, we would drive to them and find out for ourselves. Usually my trusty Dodge Intrepid would roll back into the Harbort Hall dormitory parking lot by Sunday night, but sometimes it was more like Monday night, or even Tuesday night. We were all good students, and we all intended to remain good students, but we were constantly juggling the practical need for scholastic success and the instinctual need to replace the abstract symbols on our maps with the experiential reality of the places that they represented.

This Spring Break, though, was going to be special. With nine consecutive days of freedom from classes before us, such juggling was unnecessary. We were fully, wondrously free
– albeit briefly – and we intended to take full advantage of that freedom. To us, our road tripping was high adventure, and during this Spring Break we were going to elevate that adventure to a whole new level. With so many possibilities open before us, we had decided to try something new: backpacking in the Appalachians. Not only would the drive to the trailhead be our longest yet – the distance from Kent to Asheville, North Carolina was a then-astounding 500 miles – at the end of our road stood the summit of Mount Sterling, 5,842 feet up in the misty roof of the Great Smoky Mountains. Significantly, only one of the four of us had any backcountry experience at all, and yet our underpreparation only added to the excitement and to our anticipation of the unknown wonders that surely awaited us. After all, we all agreed, backpacking was just walking while wearing an oversized bookbag – how hard could it be?

*   *   *

I found out exactly how hard it could be almost immediately. I had come down with laryngitis the night before our trip, but we had left the next morning anyway, banking everything on the hope that the illness wouldn't migrate beyond my throat if I took care of myself during the drive. Instead, the pain intensified during the long trip south, and after an arduous first afternoon of hiking, I was also suffering from gouges on the skin of my hips and collarbone from the frame of my ill-fitting, borrowed, top-heavy backpack. By the time we reached our first camp, I had a full-blown fever; unfortunately, my substandard sleeping gear wasn't at all up to the task of regulating my fluctuating body temperature at 4,000 feet during an Appalachian April. Sleeping only in short spurts punctuated by nightmares that featured frostbitten fingers and toes falling off and dissolving into the dirt, I spent most of that first night crouched within the vestibule of my tent, curled into a tight ball and watching the waning moon crawl across the sky.

I had done a lot of camping with my family when I was younger, but it had always been car camping of one kind or another, and much of that “outdoor” life had taken place within the
safe, comfortable confines of a fully furnished camping trailer. Now, miles of walking away from a car that would take another hour still to drive to anything remotely resembling civilization, barely able to see my hand in front of my face without the aid of a meager headlamp beam in the dead of night, facing total silence only broken occasionally by sounds that were just as likely to be the footsteps of a bear as the whispering of the wind to my untrained ear and overactive imagination, I was absolutely terrified. When dawn finally came, I couldn't remember ever having been so happy to see the sun before.

Throughout the course of a fever-addled, wearying march to the summit of Mount Sterling that second morning, however, the odd claustrophobia that had struck me overnight only intensified. Drawn to my own idealization of the Appalachians by a desire to experience the beauty and solitude of the wilderness, I instead found the reality – the space and the silence – overwhelming, suffocating. It certainly didn't help matters that by the end of the second day's hike, three of the four of us were feverish to some degree, and we spent that night – stupidly – on the summit of the mountain, nearly freezing in Kmart-quality sleeping bags, our bodies partially exposed to a driving wind thanks to a set of broken tentpoles. In retrospect, this confluence of small disasters might read as darkly comic; however, at the time our situation was no less dire for the fact that we'd ended up in it by being underprepared idiots. Over a decade later, after many subsequent backpacking trips, summit ascents, and other assorted outdoor adventures undertaken in far more dangerous places under more difficult circumstances, I still look back on the Mount Sterling trip as the closest I've ever come to being in mortal danger. And yet, that danger was precisely what forced an important change in my perspective with regard to nature.

Toward the end of that second night, it slowly became clear to me that, amazingly, we weren't going to die. We had been and would continue to be uncomfortable, certainly, but the air was warming with the coming of the sun and we had a downhill hike all the way back to the
trailhead and the car. We had passed through the eye of the storm, so to speak, and recognizing that odd brand of success gave me enough confidence in my own abilities to finally feel that I could meet and navigate this strange natural world on its own terms. In a painful, roundabout, humbling, but ultimately effective way, I had learned my place in the wilderness.

Once the sun had fully risen, the others awoke and we found that during the night all of our water – both for drinking and for cooking the food we so desperately needed to eat – had frozen solid. Solid enough, we soon learned, that while the paltry fire we were able to get going in the snow and wind might have been fit for singeing fingers and burning gloves, it wasn't going to melt the thick ice tubes our water bottles had become. There was nothing for it but to skip breakfast, pack up all of our gear in a hurry, and scramble back down the mountain, hoping the warming daytime temperatures would eventually thaw our only hope for sustenance.

By then, though, none of this mattered much to me. I awoke on that third day to the chirping of winter birds and to the sun slanting through the tall conifers to the east. I awoke with the earth below my feet and the sky above my head, and the mountains of the Appalachian range marching along the horizon before my eyes. I smiled and it cracked my windburned lips, so I smiled some more, wiping the blood off my chin with the back of my glove. That morning, I realized something profound about my relationship with a world far more fundamental to the human experience than the one that we call “civilization,” and I've spent the last decade trying to find the best way to articulate what that lesson was.

*   *   *

Unfortunately for my Introduction To Creative Writing professor, this meant that upon my return from Spring Break, I began writing the most cliché nature poetry imaginable at a prodigious rate. Fortunately, the man had a great sense of humor and took my sudden self-importance at face value, encouraging me to focus on my enthusiasm while helping me to slowly
develop my highly derivative style into something more unique. By the next fall, I had changed my major to English Literature, and since then I've been fortunate to have fallen into a career where I can continue my studies in a professional capacity during a time when “ecocriticism” has become an interdisciplinary buzzword. For the last decade, my achievements in writing generally and in my chosen field of study specifically have both been closely tied to my theoretical exploration of man's relationship to the natural world. The downside to spending the majority of ten years as a student of English Literature, however, is that opportunities for the physical exploration of man's relationship to the natural world can be few and far between, even when you live in the Pacific Northwest.

As my college years passed, I found myself yearning more and more strongly for an echo of the feeling I had experienced on the summit of Mount Sterling. Sometimes I found it – the Appalachians and the Catskills became my playgrounds during brief summer breaks – but more often I didn't. Frequently spending seven days a week on my studies while pulling in just enough money to feed, clothe, and house myself meant that I couldn't take the long trips and spend the money necessary to get to the wilderness. These limitations were ultimately constructive, though, as they eventually drove me to another important realization: that what I was really seeking was not a certain type of place, but a certain type of experience. This truth hit me – appropriately – like a train on a winter night in 2003 when my roommate Matt invited me to take a walk with him across an old train trestle hidden in plain sight just outside downtown Kent.

The remnants of derelict train lines can be seen all across the city of Kent, and forays to the outskirts of town often reward the urban wanderer with views of elegantly rusting railroad infrastructure. One particular trestle, sporting a rarely-used single set of tracks, spans the Cuyahoga River at a height of about fifty feet. The trestle runs roughly north-to-south, with three more lines of track running underneath it east-to-west, paralleling the river. To the east, these
lower tracks twist around the sagging corpse of an abandoned pre-1940s factory; to the west, they curl behind a thick wall of deciduous trees, quickly disappearing from sight en route to an old bus graveyard and other assorted, decaying delights. Fifty years ago, this would have been a bustling intersection, trains crisscrossing above and below multiple times a day, feeding the industrial and manufacturing centers of Ohio and Pennsylvania, unaware that even then they were in the process of being rendered obsolete by the construction of the The Dwight D. Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways. Today, standing on the trestle at night, footsteps lit by the moonlight and ears full of the sway of trees in the wind, one could be forgiven for thinking they were walking in a wilderness instead of a city.

After Matt showed me the trick to accessing this striking place that first night – it involves a quick rock scramble up a 20-foot stone-carved bridge support while keeping an eye out for police cars, water treatment plant employees, and nosy pedestrians – I made many return trips that winter. I would sometimes lay alongside or even directly on the tracks for hours, watching the stars wheel in the sky, wondering how many other semi-hidden seams there were in the fabric of civilization and how I could find them. It wasn't until nearly two years later, after spending much of my free time exploring, photographing, and writing about every abandoned, decaying, and forgotten space that I could find in the city of Kent, that I first heard the term “urban exploration.” That there were other people who shared my fascination with these lost spaces was initially less interesting to me than the fact that they were often willing to share the locations of sites that I never would have found on my own, both in Kent and elsewhere. I mined their websites like ore veins, learning all the wheres and eschewing the whys – at least at first. Once the initial excitement of my discovery had passed, however, I became fascinated with what was clearly better described as a subculture or a way of life than as a hobby. In studying the writings of these so-called “explorers,” I began to recognize a connection between my nights
spent crossing trestles, climbing water towers and exploring steam tunnels and my yearning for the wilderness. Put simply, urban exploration was the wilderness; or, at least, the two had something in common that addressed the same fundamental desire in my psyche.

*   *   *

Since my days in Kent, I have looked for and found this commonality in many experiences that might seem unrelated at first glance. I've hiked through forests, wandered through deserts, and climbed mountains, but I've also hiked through abandoned train yards, wandered through condemned hotels, and climbed dormitories. I've followed GPS signals to places I never knew existed in the hearts of cities I thought I knew like the back of my hand, and I've “stood” overlooking virtual vistas in gameworlds that despite their virtuality still manage to evoke a feeling akin to the one I felt while looking out over the Appalachians from the summit of Mount Sterling. Through all of these experiences, I've come to realize that this quality of experience, this wilderness, is not bound to a particular place, that it can be found nearly anywhere if you know how to look for it.

“Wilderness” is almost always defined by what it is not: a lack of constructedness, a lack of human presence, a lack of “civilized” order. My experiences have led me to wonder what it might mean to instead define wilderness by what it is. In this dissertation I explore the possibilities afforded by an inclusive understanding of wilderness as opposed to an exclusive one. I believe that there is a quality to the human relationship with wilderness that resonates with us on a fundamental level. Moreover, I believe that this quality can be found not just in the locations we have traditionally associated with the word “wilderness,” but through many other experiences that have rarely – if ever – been considered under that particular aegis. Whether I'm camping along the Selway River next to a pack of coyotes, scrambling up a rusty fire escape into a broken-out window, digging a geocache out of the bole of a tree in the middle of a city park or
even dropping into a dark crevasse in the virtual world of Minecraft, my experiences tell me that all of these activities share an essential quality, a quality that I believe sits at the heart of our culture's reverence for wilderness places. Defining what this quality is and describing how it can be found beyond the boundaries of such places is the goal of my project.

* * *

In this dissertation, I utilize a combination of ecocriticism and space/place theory to critique the contemporary American perception of wilderness. Traditionally, this perception has been place-based; that is, the term “wilderness” assumes the existence of a geographic location that embodies the qualities of “nature” or “the natural.” My critique challenges this assumption, positing that what we truly value in our interactions with wilderness is not its location, but instead a certain type of experience that we can find at that location, an experience that is qualitatively different from the ones that make up our day-to-day lives. By theorizing how the quality of this experience – this wildness – can be transplanted to contexts beyond the wilderness place, I argue for a new perception of wilderness that is not constrained by geography, a perception that allows us to have “wild” experiences nearly anytime and anywhere. In addition to the value of wildness to the individual's quality of life, deterritorializing such experiences not only makes them more accessible to those who can't afford cross-country drives and National Park entry fees, it also lessens the human impact on traditional wilderness places by encouraging us to seek the wildness we desire elsewhere.

I begin, then, by making a distinction between “wilderness” as a geographically specific, culturally constructed commodity and wildness as a quality of experience that we typically – but unnecessarily – associate with wilderness places. To illustrate the artificiality of this association, I present the historical example of the confrontation over land usage rights that arose in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness in the early 1960s as a result of the passage of the Wilderness Act.
Though largely viewed sympathetically by environmentalists and ecocritics, the passage of the Act resulted in many homesteaders and private landowners being forced to forfeit their livelihoods and even their homes in the name of making all the land within newly-drawn “wilderness” borders seem “untrammeled” and “primeval” for the sake of potential tourists and other temporary visitors. Though it was considered a landmark piece of national legislation when it was passed in 1964, I argue that the Act actually served to reinforce the belief that wildness can be delineated by borders on a map while also institutionalizing a reductive man/nature dichotomy.

To deconstruct this dichotomy, then, I look to Paul Shepard, who argues that the supposed divide between man and nature has colored how we view our relationship with the wilderness for millennia. In his book *Coming Home to the Pleistocene*, Shepard traces the ancient root of man’s view of nature as Other, suggesting that our insistence upon this binary has slowly rendered us incapable of addressing our “genomic need” for wildness and that it is the pull of our still-active “Pleistocene instincts” that today impel us to flock to the few wilderness places that remain. Historically speaking, this response is a recent development: up until the Industrial Revolution, the natural world – and, by extension, the wilderness – was something dangerous to be avoided, and something to be transcended if possible. As Harold Fromm argues, though, once Americans achieved a shallow sort of transcendence through the improvements to their standard of living made possible by the onset of the Industrial Age, the natural world became a curiosity, then a cause, and then a commodity. That we now invest such interest in the wilderness places we have left illustrates the reality of our genomic need; yet, I believe that it is wildness we crave, not the wilderness that is preserved like a museum artifact for our aesthetic appreciation.

In my second chapter, I describe how to go about separating wildness and wilderness in theory and practice. To show the feasibility of separating the experience of wildness from its
geographic locus while preserving its experiential value, I employ a variation of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of deterritorialization as it is presented in Ursula K. Heise's ecocritical text *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. Heise's reading of deterritorialization deals specifically with the process of separating the value of a local experience – a “sense of place” in her terms – from the geographic location from which it originated. Thus, her text provides a foundation for my theorization of the separation of wildness and wilderness.

Having established the viability of a deterritorialized experience of wildness through my look at Heise's work, my next step is to repurpose Michel de Certeau's work on “spatial practice,” positing that the concept as he describes it can serve as a starting point for showing how wildness can be generated in new contexts through physical action. In his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau describes spatial practice as a method of metaphorically “writing” by walking the space of the modern city. In this way, he suggests that such “writing” is intrinsically subversive, since the walker is “writing over” traditional, established place-values with new, individualized experiences. Expanding the utility of de Certeau's original concept, I recast “spatial practice” as a two-part process made up of physical walking and imaginative unmapping that I argue can serve as a container for deterritorialized experiences of wildness. Using spatial practice as my theoretical framework, then, I focus each of the remaining three chapters on providing a particular example of a spatial practice that enables wildness to exist outside of wilderness places. Specifically, I show how wildness can be relocated to three different spaces: the city, the virtual gameworld, and the physical/virtual hybrid space generated by the use of location-aware mobile technologies.

In each of these three chapters, I present analyses of texts – both traditional and otherwise – that I believe exemplify the successful “wilding” of each of these spaces. In my third chapter I
perform close readings of a series of books dealing with the subculture of urban exploration and its relationship to city space. Through each of these works, I argue, urban exploration can be seen as a spatial practice with its roots in rebellion against the homogenizing, alienating space of the (post)modern city. Urban exploration's appeal lies in the way it utilizes imaginative unmapping – as adapted from earlier spatial practices such as flanerie and the Situationists' dérive – as a method for bringing wildness to urban spaces. This process of wilding the city is described at length in Alan S. North's *The Urban Adventure Handbook*, the subject of my first close reading.

Each of the remaining texts I study in Chapter Three engages in some way with the conventions of the nature writing genre. As such, the second purpose of these close readings is to highlight the connections between urban exploration writing and traditional nature writing, in order to show that urban explorers readily indicate the inherent relationship between their practice and the exploration of traditional wilderness places. While serving as a narration of the urban exploration group Jinx's experiences within the hidden spaces of New York City, L.B. Deyo and David Leibowitz's *Invisible Frontier: Exploring the Tunnels, Ruins, and Rooftops of Hidden New York* models itself stylistically after nature writing texts like Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* and Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*. Ninjalicious' *Access All Areas: A User's Guide to the Art of Urban Exploration* serves as an urban exploration guidebook of sorts, providing advice on practical matters like orienteering and how to stay safe when exploring deteriorating buildings. In this it shows a clear parallel between the physical dimension of urban exploration and more traditional wilderness pursuits like hiking and backpacking. Lastly, Julia Solis' *New York Underground: The Anatomy of a City* investigates histories of the abandoned and forgotten corners of New York City to show how urban exploration can overwrite and even extend such histories.

In my fourth chapter, I look at the “sandbox” and “open-world” genres of video games
through the lens of game studies to see how the virtual spaces presented by these games facilitate experiences of wildness. Though I believe that in theory a case could be made that any virtual gameworld offers the potential for wildness, I find sandbox and open-world games, with their inherent focus on exploration and discovery, to be particularly compelling genres in this regard. Such games minimize their use of the more typical ludic elements found in most video games while maximizing the player's agency to simply move about a gameworld, motivating further gameplay with the promise of discovery than with a ludic goal or narrative storyline. Tadhg Kelly, game designer and author of the forthcoming game studies text *What Games Are*, argues that this is in fact the central appeal of games: not their narratives, not their ludic challenges, but simply their ability to enable players to lose themselves in the experience of interacting with the gameworld. Kelly calls this process “worldmaking,” and I believe that the value he sees in the player's interaction with the gameworld is actually a species of wildness. In order to more specifically show how sandbox and open-world games engender this wildness through the player's experience of worldmaking, I look at the game that is perhaps most responsible for the genres' current popularity: *Minecraft*.

I argue that *Minecraft*'s wide appeal lies in the fact that it intentionally presents the player with a gameworld that not only enables but encourages the creation of meaningful experiences of deterritorialized wildness not unlike those afforded to, for example, the *flâneur* or the urban explorer. In *Minecraft*'s gameworld, these experiences of wildness are the core motivation for gameplay as opposed to being a “sidequest” or “bonus” content. In this way, *Minecraft* generates a compelling gameworld devoid of narrative-driven goals or ludic challenges, and this focus on worldmaking makes it the ideal game through which to explore the potential for wildness in virtual gameworlds. In addition to discussing the curious collection of player-written “travel narratives” that have sprung up within the online *Minecraft* community, I analyze the game itself
in detail, explicating how it utilizes a minimal user interface, a survival mechanic, a day/night system, a complex “crafting” hierarchy, and “retro” visual aesthetics to provide the player with an experience of wildness in virtual space. Finally, I argue that Minecraft’s location in virtual space makes it possible for the player to write their own place-values onto that space – something that is not possible in the physical world of the urban explorer for a variety of legal, moral, and sociocultural reasons. Such virtual place-construction is expressed in-game primarily through the player’s building of shelters, and thus I end Chapter Four by characterizing Minecraft’s building mechanic as a virtual instantiation of Heideggerian dwelling.

In a sense, my final chapter synthesizes the theoretical moves made in Chapters Three and Four to present a third and final example of deterritorialized wildness. This chapter deals with the intersection of the physical and the virtual – what I call “hybrid space” – and in it I discuss the possibility for wildness represented by location-aware mobile technology and the ever-increasing integration of mobile interfaces into the physical world. The first half of the chapter deals with the implications of an ongoing “gamification” of our day-to-day lives. Moving beyond the traditional video gaming interface, which still today upholds a distinct separation between virtual gameworlds and the physical world, I investigate the medium of mobile gaming – and, more specifically, the genre of location-based mobile games (LBMGs) – which creates hybrid gameworlds that not only exist on our mobile phone screens but extend into the physical world, blurring the line between game and reality. It is my contention that such hybrid gameworlds represent an extremely pervasive manifestation of deterritorialized wildness while also extending the place-construction functionality of Minecraft into hybrid space.

As in the previous two chapters, I draw on a number of examples to show how LBMGs expedite the process of unmapping by making a palimpsest of virtual worlds and the physical one. The types of experiences afforded by the mobile gaming interface vary greatly, and that
variation has only increased as mobile gaming becomes exponentially more popular; however, I posit *Foursquare* and geocaching as two particularly illustrative examples of spatially hybrid gameworlds that enable player place-construction. In particular, by adding a “treasure hunt” dynamic to any walk or hike, geocaching encourages imaginative unmapping and then a subsequent reinscribing of walked space by the player through the superimposition of a virtual world of information onto the “real world” via a technological interface. Certainly more pervasive than video gaming and more socially acceptable than urban exploration, LBMGs such as geocaching can imbue something as simple as a walk to the grocery with an element of wildness – and often the only requirement to “play” is a mobile phone or other GPS device.

Though many ecocritics have already spoken to the complicated relationship between humans and the wilderness, much of this work calls for a reevaluation of our relationship to the presumably static and unchanging wilderness place. My dissertation instead asks how this relationship might improve if we are willing to recognize “wilderness” for what it is: a cultural construction built upon our unshakeable desire for wildness. By synthesizing the work of various well-known thinkers on space and place and the environment, I construct a theoretical model for the enactment of wildness in spaces outside of the traditional wilderness place. Utilizing three examples of such deterritorialized wildness, my dissertation ultimately argues for the ecocritical relevance of three different but related spatial practices that are each deserving of more serious critical attention. Weaving these practices together theoretically, I ultimately make a case for a more inclusive “wilderness,” one that could productively alter what it means to read literature, video games, and the very spaces we inhabit ecocritically.
CHAPTER ONE

WILD(ER)NESS: PLACE AND PRACTICE

To speak of wilderness is to speak of wholeness. Human beings came out of that wholeness, and to consider the possibility of reactivating membership in the Assembly of All Beings is in no way regressive. - Gary Snyder

There is not as much wilderness out there as I wish there were. There is more inside than you think. - David Brower

“Ecocriticism.” Widely believed to have originated from William H. Rueckert's 1976 essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism,”1 the term has since come to refer to a rapidly expanding field of interdisciplinary study, the scope of which has by now outstripped Rueckert's original vision for a new branch of literary theory. Driven by the belief that “science and poetry [can] be persuaded to lie down together and be generative after all” (107), he first suggested a melding of literature and ecology to address a very practical concern, namely that:

If we continue to teach, write, and write about poetry without acknowledging and trying to act upon the fact that – to cite a single example – all the oceans of our home are slowly being contaminated by all the pollutants disposed of in modern communities – even what we try to send up in smoke – then we will soon lose the environment in which we write and teach. (112)

Rueckert's purpose, then, was to advocate for an ecocriticism that began in academia, but could

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1 Among others, Harold Fromm suggests this genealogy for the term in his foreword to The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology, an early (1996) collection on ecocriticism of which Rueckert's essay is a part.
then be extended beyond it. His essay was a call for a new way to read and write, but it was also a call to action.

Just as literature and the study of same have been utilized in the past to agitate for human rights, gender equality and the elimination of racial segregation, Rueckert asked that we next apply literary criticism to an even more fundamental issue: nothing less than the quality of our relationship with the global ecosystem within which we all live and upon which we all depend for our very survival. The importance of such an ecocriticism is self-evident, yet in his original essay, Rueckert stopped “halfway between literature and ecology,” admitting that there were questions he could not yet answer, chief among them: “How can we translate literature into purgative-redemptive biospheric action; how can we resolve the fundamental paradox of this profession and get out of our heads?” (121). Even more importantly, he hoped that this new ecocriticism could “do something more than recycle words” (121).

In the three and a half decades since Rueckert's essay, ecocritics have searched for and found a variety of innovative ways to meld literature and ecology, though of course the relative merit of any particular (eco)critical approach depends on who you ask, as is the case in any branch of literary studies. That all of this searching has generated many constructive methods of reading literature “environmentally,” though, and that these new ways of reading have, in turn, helped propagate a greater critical awareness of what it might mean to live environmentally in both academic and popular circles is something that most – if not all – ecocritics would agree with. In this sense, at the very least, Rueckert's vision for ecocriticism has been realized.

One way in which the field still falls short of that vision, though, is in its general lack of concern with the physicality of living environmentally. That is to say, in many ways ecocritics are still just recycling words. Linking literature to ecology necessarily imbues the former with a practical – and arguably a political – dimension, and yet ecocriticism continues to be less
interested in our physical, embodied experiences of the environment around us than it is in analyzing the literature that results from those experiences. To be fair, this imbalance is being increasingly addressed by recent scholarship, but there is still a gap between “words and actions, vision and action, the verbal domain and the non-verbal domain, between literature and the biosphere” (121), brought on in large part by ecocriticism's relative ignorance of the spaces and places within which our relationship to our environment is constantly being enacted, expressed, interpreted, and redefined.

As a step toward addressing this neglect, my dissertation engages in a quite literal form of “ecocriticism”; that is, my argument is built upon a critique of our culture's perception of wilderness. I believe that Americans' insistence on separating “wilderness” from “civilization” – not only ideologically but geospatially – is the root of our often schizophrenic relationship with our environment. Significantly, this nonsensical separation is actually frequently reinforced by ecocritical scholarship eager to venerate and preserve “the natural” over “the artificial” when that scholarship should instead be challenging such a reductive – and often destructive – dichotomy. Throughout the course of this project, then, I will deconstruct said dichotomy, primarily by presenting examples of imaginative and physical practices that successfully meld “wilderness” and “civilization” both ideologically and geospatially, ultimately making each indistinguishable from the other. While my work here might not be as baldly political as Rueckert believed an ecocritic's should be, it is nonetheless intended to forward an appreciation for a new type of ecologically-aware relationship with our environment, a relationship that expresses through physical and mental practice a more productive way of living with “the natural,” rather than beside or against it.

Much of this dissertation is dedicated to the explication of what such a relationship might

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2 See, as a recent example of such attention, Ursula K. Heise's Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global.
look like in practice; yet, to illustrate the viability of a practical unification of “wilderness” and “civilization,” I must first engage in that aforementioned literal ecocriticism to show why our understanding of “wilderness” as a concept is in such dire need of reassessment on a theoretical level. I believe that our cultural baggage has overcomplicated our relationship with wilderness – a relationship that actually predates said culture and that is immensely important to us for reasons that we have, in the course of time, largely forgotten. Thus, it is only by remembering what wilderness contributes to our humanity that we can in turn begin to reestablish what it is about wilderness that we truly value.

The Trouble With Wilderness (Places)

In 1964, Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Wilderness Act into law. Written by Howard Zahniser, the Act's primary purpose was to demarcate and then maintain and protect selected tracts of government-designated “wilderness” land throughout America in accordance with the now-famous assertion that “A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain” (Wilderness Act, Sec. 2c). The Act, coming as it did during the heyday of American environmentalism, was a landmark piece of legislation that signified a fundamental shift in how one of the most powerful countries in the world perceived the value of its remaining “wild” places. The establishment of Wilderness Areas across America was an ideological victory for environmentalists, a promise that at least some of our vast forests and cloud-robed peaks would be recognized by our government as something other than potential resources to be harvested in the name of Progress. A noble goal, to be certain, but almost immediately conflicts over how best to implement the Act on a local level would illustrate the naivete and the reductionism inherent
in the assumptions about “wilderness” that Zahniser's creation perpetuated.

As just one example of these conflicts, consider the struggle over land usage rights that took place as a result of the passage of the Act in what's now known as the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness in Idaho and Montana. Established in 1964, the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness (SBW) is still one of the largest contiguous Wilderness Areas in America; however, much of the land within its borders was far from “untrammeled by man” before it was designated as a wilderness. The SBW has a history of independent trapping and homesteading that dates all the way back to its time as a part of the Oregon Country, and such practices flourished well into the 20th century, even after the area came under the jurisdiction of the then-newly-formed Forest Service. When a dramatic decrease in trapping finally did come in the early 1960s, a few homesteaders remained in the area, living off the fruits of their privately-owned land and any supplemental income that they could generate.

Opportunities for such income often came to the SBW in the form of tourism. Tourists needed guides, horses and pack mules, a place to sleep, and a means of moving their equipment from their point of arrival at a backcountry airstrip to a location inside the wilderness proper, where they could begin a hunting or hiking trip. As such, most of these remaining SBW landowners' livelihoods were closely tied to their ability to develop and maintain an infrastructure that allowed them to provide these services to visitors. The passage of the Wilderness Act, which sought to retroactively convert the area encircling these privately-owned lands and the businesses that operated on them to a “primeval” state, put that infrastructure in jeopardy with its simplistic insistence on geography as the foremost means of delineating what was and wasn't “wilderness.”

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The area that became the SBW in 1964 has had many different names over time. For the sake of simplicity, though, throughout this section I will refer to said area as “the SBW” both before and after its designation as a wilderness.
The Forest Service began a push to acquire these homesteaders' lands in 1961, three years before the passing of the Act. According to a letter from February of that year, sent to Regional Forester Charles L. Tebbe from the local law office of Swayne and McNichols, a number of the “responsible citizens” that the firm represented were concerned “that the tracts of fee [sic] land held in the Selway Forest by private individuals would be purchased by the government” as a result of “the proposal to establish a Wilderness Area covering the locale in which their land exists” (McNichols). These landowners, concerned that “if [they] were unwilling to sell an attempt would be made to exercise the right of eminent domain and condemn the property” (McNichols), were hesitant to make further improvements to their properties if their ownership of those properties would soon be rendered forfeit as part of the Selway Forest's pending wilderness designation. Internal Forest Service memos from that year show no indication of such a plan to utilize eminent domain to forcibly claim these privately-owned lands, but neither did any of the homesteaders indicate an inclination to sell, despite much subtler overtures from the Forest Service.

Later in the same year, in a memo to Forest Supervisor John R. Milodragovich, District Ranger William Magnuson described meetings with four of the six remaining private landowners. During these meetings, Magnuson found that the landowners “are dubious of our stated intentions to purchase their lands as finances permit. They feel that some sort of condemnation procedure will be used to force them to sell” (Magnuson). The four homesteaders with whom Magnuson spoke directly were all in the process of upgrading hunting lodge facilities on their lands and clearly intended to continue to run those businesses. Innocuous though they may have been, these overtures on the part of the Forest Service obviously raised the suspicions of the SBW's private landowners, who simply wanted to be left alone to make their living.

While the homesteaders were ultimately allowed to keep their properties, by 1963 they
were facing a new kind of encroachment from the Forest Service. Because they lived within a soon-to-be Wilderness Area, they found themselves suddenly subject to new regulations dictating in part that “in Wilderness areas, there shall be no roads or other provisions for motorized transportation, no commercial timber cutting, and no occupancy under special use permits for hotels, stores, resorts, summer homes, organization camps, hunting and fishing lodges” (Milodragovich). Thus, the passage of the Wilderness Act ultimately put the homesteaders in a situation where they were allowed to keep their lands but were required to forfeit the infrastructure that provided them with the ability to survive on those same lands.

As per a Forest Service memo dated August 21st, 1963, the landowners were given a year – until a deadline of August 31st, 1964, mere days before the signing of the Wilderness Act into law – to cease activities that violated these new regulations (Blackmer). The author of this memo, Forester F.H. Blackmer, was especially concerned with the landowners' use of jeeps, both as personal transportation and as a way to ferry clients around the soon-to-be Wilderness Area (Blackmer). Blackmer suggests that each landowner be met with on an individual basis so that the situation can be explained to him directly, and he can be presented with alternate – though less effective, the Forester admits – means of maintaining his livelihood. For most of the homesteaders, Blackmer believes that simply replacing their motorized vehicles with horses and wagons can eliminate the problem, though he recognizes that such a substitution will be less than ideal from the landowners' perspective (Blackmer). Ominously, he ends the memo by cautioning that after the 1964 deadline, “the Forest will take whatever administrative action is necessary to assure that the order is complied with” (Blackmer). The second round of meetings that Blackmer suggests in this memo was ultimately undertaken by Forest Supervisor Milodragovich himself.

The meetings took place with four of the six homesteaders, and the results are recounted

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4 It appears that the other two homesteaders, George Case and Fae Smith, owned property within the wilderness boundary but did not operate any businesses on that land, nor did they utilize motorized transport. After not
in an “administratively confidential” memo later written by Milodragovich. The first meeting was with a man named Jim Renshaw, who was less than happy with the new regulations, but agreed to them, on the condition that “if he used a horse and wagon then all the other landowners should refrain from using motor vehicles” (Milodragovich 1). Dave Christensen, owner of Moose Creek Ranches, Inc., was similarly assured that he could keep his business if he was able to build a new access road outside the boundaries of national forest land – thus making it possible to utilize a jeep but only outside of the wilderness boundary – by November 15th, 1963 (1). Joe Richardson's business was also put in danger by the requirement that he switch his mode of transportation from jeep to horse-drawn wagon, as he explained to Milodragovich that “there was a long period of the year when he could not ford Moose Creek with a team and a wagon” (3). Richardson went on to state that “he thought prohibition of motorized vehicles within the wilderness was a ridiculous matter” (3), but that he would acquiesce if absolutely necessary, though at great damage to his business prospects. Both Richardson and Renshaw expressed interest in selling their property to the Forest Service – after having turned down better offers in 1961 – and moving elsewhere, rather than trying to navigate these new regulations. The last homesteader, Sid Hinkle, refused to even hear Milodragovich's proposal, instead shouting at the ranger over “past abuses he had suffered from the Forest Service” (2). When Milodragovich finally got Hinkle to listen, he “informed me that he had the right of ingress or egress to his property. He further stated that he wanted me to know that he was going to use the jeep […] He was absolutely not going to conform” (2). Hinkle then threatened to use his local political “connections” to get Milodragovich into trouble (2). The account of this final meeting goes on for quite some time, but never reaches a satisfactory conclusion.

expressing interest in selling their land to the Forest Service in 1961, they appear to have been largely left alone by the Forest Service for these reasons. Therefore, the conflict of 1963-64 centered entirely on the other four homesteaders, who each operated hunting lodges on their land and thus violated the regulations of the Wilderness Act in various ways as a result.
Part of the problem here is hypocrisy on the part of the Forest Service, as they had originally set the precedent for using motorized vehicles in the area (pre-1963), prompting many to later echo the question Jim Renshaw put forth in a May 3rd, 1964 editorial published in the *Lewiston Morning Tribune*: “If they could use motorized vehicles, why not us?” (Renshaw). Another article published in the *Tribune* a few days earlier noted that “The Forest Service now realizes that it erred in permitting [the use of motorized vehicles] then, when the area still was in primitive status” (“An Unfortunate Dispute in the Wilderness”), but such an error had by 1964 created the belief among the SBW homesteaders that “proper and modern access” (Renshaw) was an unalienable right of theirs, and it had become the basis upon which their livelihoods depended over the course of the previous years. Of course, though, as the *Tribune* explained, “The dispute is a needless one because the regulations are plain and they are not likely to be relaxed” (“An Unfortunate Dispute in the Wilderness”). In the end, the homesteaders really only had two choices: live by the Forest Service's new rules or give up their land within the Wilderness Area entirely.

I cite this example not to characterize these landowners as helpless victims of government oppression, nor do I necessarily mean to imply that the Wilderness Act is overly strict in its censure of motorized transportation within wilderness borders. This dispute should not be so easily simplified, and there is no clear “right” answer, since the differences between two groups' ultimately subjective constructions of place-values lie at the heart of the matter. What this example *is* meant to do, however, is to throw into relief the absurdity of establishing a wilderness “area” based on the assumption that geographic borders – and by association human technology – can somehow dictate, and then maintain and contain a certain quality of the human experience of a place.\(^5\) The assumption that wilderness derives its human value from its geographical

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\(^5\) My focus in this dissertation is on the experiential connection of humans to wilderness. The “absurdity” that I argue against, then, lies in the belief that the *human* experience of a place necessarily changes when a
location might not seem absurd at first glance, as this is a well-established and rarely questioned idea in our culture. That we believe putting up a sign or changing the lines on a map can make a place “wilderness,” though, actually belies the artificiality of the very concept. That wilderness is an arbitrary cultural construction, its utility dictated by those in power, was a lesson the Selway homesteaders – and likely many others who found themselves in similar positions throughout the country in 1964 – learned to their detriment, while so many others cheered the government's efforts to “preserve” places they perceived as “natural” and “untrammeled.”

This more general positive response to the Wilderness Act and other pro-environmentalist legislation like it suggests that underlying the absurdity of the idea of containing wilderness via mapping lies a deep-seated cultural belief that “wilderness” is worth caring about. But why? For Americans, wilderness – the place “out there” – is the opposite of what we value in many ways, and yet we also believe that it is able to offer us something that can be found nowhere else. But what? The Wilderness Act, of course, is only a recent institutionalization of this ages-old classification of wilderness as Other. To me, the persistence of this belief over millennia is evidence enough of our recognition of an important quality of experience found in wilderness, and I contend that it is this quality that we now attempt to generate and then control through our rhetoric of “the natural” and our government-enforced creation of Wilderness Areas and other similar places. In pursuit of this quality, we posit cyclical nature as the opposite of progressive, rational man and we have set wilderness places apart from “civilized” ones in order to reflect this opposition. Within this paradigm, “wilderness” serves as the geospatial expression of “nature.” It is nature's “where,” just as “civilization” is man's. Therefore, the wilderness place is dependent on our concept of “nature”; or, put more exactly, our understanding of “wilderness” is rooted in

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geographical border is crossed. I see discussion of the ability of such borders to protect certain areas from human impact entirely – such as our National Wildlife Refuges or Russian zapovedniki as a distinctly different topic. That discussion is no less important, nor less complicated than mine, but it is beyond the scope of this work.
Western culture's long-held belief that nature and man should be defined by their opposition to one another.

**On the Origin of “Nature”**

Eschewing the common theory that the beginnings of the man/nature dichotomy lie in the invention of agriculture, ecologist Paul Shepard instead hypothesizes that its roots reach all the way back to the advent of written history itself. As he tells it in his 1998 book *Coming Home to the Pleistocene*, it was Hebrew “demythologizers” who “created a reality outside the rhythmic cosmos of the gentiles who surrounded them and who were grounded in prehistoric, mythical consciousness with rituals of eternal return” (8). Ecocritic and geographer William Cronon agrees in his essay “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” asserting that there is a connection between written history, linear time, and monotheism: “Nature in Western culture is the product of a monotheistic religious tradition; it is often unrecognizable for people whose cultures have not taught them to worship a lone deity” (35). It is basically impossible to overstate the impact that the development of monotheism has had on Western culture in general, and the impact it has had on our view of man's relationship to the world ecosystem specifically has been especially negative.

In replacing oral tradition with written history, the ancient Hebrews quite literally changed our understanding of time. Prehistorically conceptualized as a circle, a cycle, time was suddenly made linear (Shepard, *Coming Home to the Pleistocene* 9). This development

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6 Cronon's claim is borne out by recent anthropological research performed on existing polytheistic and animistic hunter-gatherer cultures like the !Kung San, to whom Westerners' very concept of time is unintelligible, and vice versa.

7 Obviously an at-length discussion is beyond the scope of this work; consider as a starting point Karen Armstrong's *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*. 
encouraged a belief in man's lordship over nature's workings by enabling the “logical”
hallucination of “progress.” Historian Lynn White, Jr. explains that “the intellectuals of the
ancient West denied that the visible world had had a beginning. Indeed, the idea of a beginning
was impossible in the framework of their cyclical notion of time. In sharp contrast, Christianity
inherited from Judaism not only a concept of time as nonrepetitive and linear but also a striking
story of creation” (9). Of course, that creation story included the injunction from God Himself
that man should “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the
fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (The
Bible, Gen. 1.28, emphasis added). As Judaism flourished, this concept of linear time also
spread, bringing a new prejudice to the way man viewed other life on earth.

Our severance from mythic time has had far-reaching consequences for us as a people
trying to find our way in a world in which we now see ourselves as being apart from “the
natural,” and to make matters worse, linear time also supplies the idea that we cannot “go back.”
“The nature of the primitive world is at the center of our modern anxiety about [change],” claims
Shepard, “because history cannot resolve for us the problem of change, which was mythically
assured for many thousands of years as a form of renewal” (Coming Home to the Pleistocene 11).
History – linear time – has thus forced us to lose touch with our natural, biological heritage
because we have come to believe that we “are not now what we once were – bacteria or
quadruped mammals or apish hominids” and since our understanding of history interprets the
time in which we were once those things as “past,” “other forms of life are irrelevant” (11) to us
due to their perceived inferiority. This ideological break from nature caused by our adoption of
linear time is ultimately a cycle of self-reinforcement: the further in time we move from the

8 For a lengthier discussion of the effect of the Bible on Western culture at large, I recommend starting with
Herbert Schneidau's The Sacred Discontent: The Bible and Western Tradition.
original crisis point, the harder it is to resist equating “the prehistoric” with “the primitive.”

Perhaps inevitably, this metaphysical severance eventually began to manifest in physical ways, perhaps the most significant of which was the invention and then widespread implementation of settled agriculture.

Archeology and anthropology tell us that the Fall of Man – the human movement from a hunting and gathering lifestyle to settled agriculture\(^9\) that is symbolized by Christianity's Eden myth\(^11\) – took place between eight and twelve thousand years ago. This historical moment was a significant one in the development of the man/nature dichotomy, as both permanent settlements and sustained agriculture are cultural manifestations of the post-Lapsarian idea that the natural world can be – and should be – consumed as a resource and that the world ecosystem can be fully understood and controlled by human technology.\(^12\) Settled agriculture, in turn, led to the more recently developed concept of land ownership thanks to the invention of a particularly useful piece of medieval-age technology. It was in Western Europe during the seventh century that this technology allowed man to make the leap from basic farming to the first forms of truly industrialized agriculture, a leap that would eventually lead to today's massive monocultures and factory farms.

\(^9\) Much has been written about the evidence that prehistoric society was no more “primitive” than our own, and I won't list a survey of sources here. Consider instead this quote from Max Oelschlager's *The Idea of Wilderness* that sums up the argument: “The claim that Paleolithic life was short is problematic and controversial. Modern medicine has increased the survival rate of infants and has made major strides in dealing with trauma, thus creating an appearance, resting on statistical artifact, that the human life span has been increased […] The modern mind is oblivious to the reality that starvation, malnutrition, warfare, and pestilence are post-Neolithic phenomena and therefore probably a consequence of urbanization, explosive population growth, and the socioeconomics of *agri*-culture […] Further, we have no reason to think that we have surpassed our prehistoric kin in cognitive powers and achievements. The intellectual life of hunter-gatherers was as rich as that of modern people, and the rate of intellectual innovation, as well as technological and artistic creativity, also appears to be roughly equivalent. Civilized people do have the legacy of the past to augment their efforts, but there is no evidence that the neocortex has evolved” (15).

\(^10\) For the rest of this chapter, unless otherwise stated, “agriculture” will mean specifically “settled agriculture,” as there are of course nomadic forms of agriculture as well, but those practices don't necessitate the same set of values in relation to the land that settled agriculture does.

\(^11\) Also, among others, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

\(^12\) For the sake of brevity, I will refrain from giving too thorough a survey of the effects of agriculture on the land. For further detail, consider, among others, Charles A. Reed's essay collection *Origins of Agriculture*. 
White provides a compelling argument that this change was both a technological and a sociocultural one in his essay “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis.” As he tells it, towards the end of the seventh century, certain northern European peasants started to employ a new plow in their farming. This new plow was much more efficient than older-style plows, but as a function of this increased efficiency, it needed eight oxen to pull it instead of the usual two. This required families to pool their oxen and, as a result, land was no longer divvied up on a per-family basis – as had been the case previously – but instead on the basis of one or another plow-team's capacity for production (8). This caused a dramatic change in the way that people related to the land by encouraging communities to allot more land to more productive plow-teams.

White goes on to explain that this type of plow and the new landowning system that was ushered in as a result of its invention were unique to the world at that time, and he closes by posing the question: “Is it coincidence that modern technology, with its ruthlessness toward nature, has so largely been produced by descendants of these peasants from northern Europe?” (8). With this early form of industrialized agriculture, Westerners formalized a break with nature in physical practice that had been executed in theory long before, and that break was later perpetuated around the globe along with its Western European progenitors. In the resulting early centuries of industrialized agriculture, our relationship with nature changed from one in which we perceived ourselves as a small cog in a larger machine to one in which we perceived the natural world as the opposite of our own: primitive, regressive, and entirely antagonistic. As time passed, though, this relationship would change again: as our technology improved yet further, our hubris grew with it, and so also grew our belief that nature existed not in spite of us, but for us.

Transcending Transcendence and the Commodification of the Natural

The agricultural “fall” discussed in the previous section happened in various times and in
various places for various reasons (Shepard, *Coming Home to the Pleistocene* 81), and though its ultimate effect might have been to reinforce an already-existing man/nature dichotomy, there is no anthropological or archeological evidence to suggest that hunter-gatherer societies intentionally switched to settled agriculture as an escape from a life in what they perceived as a cruel and capricious natural world. In fact, such a characterization of nature seems to actually have intensified as a result of the practice of settled agriculture, and not the other way around. For early farmers, the world was clearly delineated: beyond the borders of their farms lay the domain of forces that threatened their survival, while the farm itself meant human community and safety. As the man/nature dichotomy was further perpetuated over time, this idea of nature-as-enemy was endorsed more willfully, and one of the most historically significant ways that this endorsement manifested was in the popularity of the concept of the mind/body split, which came into being, according to literary critic Harold Fromm's essay “From Transcendence to Obsolescence: A Road Map,” as a direct response to a nature man perceived as antagonistic.

Part of Western culture for millennia but most effectively popularized by Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*, the idea that man should be considered as a combination of two discrete elements – soul and body – reinforced our severance from the natural world on a metaphysical level as effectively as agriculture did on a physical one. In his essay, Fromm investigates the effect of the mind/body split on man ecocritically, arguing that Westerners' obsession with man-as-rational-mind has always “been the product of man's sense of his own physical weakness, his knowledge that Nature could not be tamed or bent to his own will” (30). Note the two parallel motivations here: one, that man believes it is his role to control nature; two, that man realizes that his body is tied to nature in at least one insurmountable way: death. To mitigate this tension, the mind/body split was contrived. As Fromm explains:

[T]here was never any serious likelihood that man could win the body-mind
battle on the field of the body. If one found that it was necessary to produce ten children in order to insure the survival of five, if one could be swept away by plagues that killed hundreds of thousands, if one lost one's teeth by thirty, could not be certain of a food supply for more than a few days, carted one's own excrements out to the fields or emptied chamberpots out the window, one could hardly come to believe (despite man's fantastic ability to believe almost anything) that one's ideal self would ever stand forth on the field of the body, in the natural world. (30-1)

Therefore, man chose to jettison the body in a sense, quitting the field where the battle was already lost and instead seeking transcendence through a life of the mind. Apparent in the mind/body split is man's desire “to extol and mythify that side of his being that seemed to transcend Nature by inhabiting universes of thought that Nature could not naysay” (30). From the medieval period until quite recently, the popularity of this bipartite model of man shouted of our need to believe that at least some part of us was on a level “beyond” nature, despite all physical evidence to the contrary. That popular interest in this mind/body model waned in Western culture during the twentieth century should not by any means be taken as a condemnation; rather, it is simply more evidence of the continuing appeal of a life of the mind.

In fact, we have been so successful of late at achieving a supposed transcendence of the body – still short though, of course, of overcoming death permanently – that the “body” half of the mind/body split can often be ignored entirely by the typical middle-class American. Or as Fromm explains, we have reached a point where “[man's] relation to the other animals and to the vegetable creation appears thickly veiled – by air conditioning, frozen foods, washing machines, detergents, automobiles, electric blankets, and power lawnmowers, [our] need for transcendence seems to fade away” (32). Today, our bodily needs are so completely addressed that it leads
Fromm to archly wonder “[what] is so dreadfully unpleasant about contemporary Western middle-class life that it needs to be transcended?” and to then answer, in effect, “nothing” (32). This inversely proportional relationship between physical comfort and spiritual need can be seen at work on a larger scale as well, in the decline of religion in the West, which began – uncoincidentally – simultaneously with European industrialism and continues today (31).

For Fromm, the logical endpoint of our need for transcendence is a reemphasizing of physicality, of place. Today, we are so physically comfortable that we no longer feel any need to metaphorically comfort ourselves against the ravages that capricious nature would wreak on our hapless bodies, and so we instead feel a need “based on satiety and not on deprivation, and it does not seek a haven in another world but rather a more beautiful version of this one” (33). Our bodily needs are readily dispensed with through the intercession of technology, and perhaps predictably, this has led to nostalgia for the physical world, the playground of the body. As industrial society has long enabled us to be “mostly unaware of a connection with Nature that has been artfully concealed by modern technology,” we have had the luxury to long for “the way things used to be” (33). This longing has often taken the form of a rose-colored view of a “historical,” more “natural” way of life that never actually existed: that mythological time during which we lived “in tune with nature.” Present in numerous guises throughout the Industrial Age, this nostalgia has given rise in turn to the commodification of nature, a process which first manifested in the form of the literary pastoral and much later evolved to become the ideological motivation behind the establishment of places like the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness via the Wilderness Act.

In Ecocriticism, his survey of the field, Greg Garrard dates the modern pastoral back to the British Romantics’ “poetic responses” to the Industrial Revolution (33).\textsuperscript{13} Interestingly, in

\textsuperscript{13} Garrard, among others, traces this literary trope all the way back to Virgil and Theocritus, but for the sake of brevity I will pick up discussing it here as it takes shape in the American frontier, as the specifically American
these “poetic responses” the man/nature dichotomy is still at work, but the Romantics – in a move shocking for their time – chose to side with nature over man. Garrard characterizes this inversion as central to the modern pastoral, which he defines as any literature that contrasts the rural and the urban while ultimately choosing to venerate the former over the latter (33). Thus, the Romantics not only continued to set man apart from nature, but they also cast nature as having some value to man. This revolutionary change of attitude set the stage for the American pastoral tradition, through which nature would come to be seen as an asset instead of an enemy.

The literary pastoral became immensely popular in colonial and then frontier America, due to a sort of cultural perfect storm that philosopher Leo Marx describes in *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. According to Marx, eighteenth-century Europeans enraptured by the pastoral ideal characterized by “The ruling motive of the good shepherd, leading figure of the classic, Virgilian mode” whose mission “was to withdraw from the great world and begin a new life in a fresh, green landscape” came upon a “virgin continent” in the form of what would become the United States (3). The timing ensured that the pastoral tradition was catapulted out of its literary frame and enacted physically upon the face of this “new” continent. Here lie the beginnings of the assumption that some locations express the quality of “the natural” more fully than others and, more importantly, the belief that those places should be appreciated, visited, and preserved rather than feared and avoided. And yet, this motive of preservation was fated to be expressed only through direct human intercession, as nearly coincident with the American fascination with the pastoral came a fascination with steam power – hence, the machine in the garden.

Marx muses: “Consider how the spectacle of the machine in a virgin land must have struck the mind. Like nothing ever seen under the sun, it appears when needed most: when the

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form of the pastoral is more germane to my larger discussion.
great west finally is open to massive settlement, when democracy is triumphant and gold is discovered [...] here – as if by design – comes a new power commensurate with the golden opportunity of all history” (206). Is it any wonder that by the early 1900s the middle of the country would be quite literally farmed to death? Ultimately, the pastoral taken beyond the literary realm was no more free from the influence of industry than nature is free from the influence of man. In the overuse of the land lay the demise of the pastoral tradition.

As Johnathan Bate puts it in The Song of the Earth, “You only need Arcadia when your reality is Rome” (74); but where do you go when there is no Arcadia left? Marx wryly points out that today “An inchoate longing for a more 'natural' environment enters into the contemptuous attitude that many Americans adopt toward urban life (with the result that we neglect our cities and desert them for the suburbs)” (5). What happens to the pastoral when there is no land left to work, when all the remaining arable land is owned by faceless corporations instead of local families sharing a plow-team? Marx has no answers, opining that “American writers seldom, if ever, have designed satisfactory resolutions for their pastoral fables” (364). This is our current “nature,” then: what the pastoral became when there was no physical utility left to the land, when either ease or overuse – or both – had made cultivation either unnecessary or impossible.

The motivation behind the American pastoral – the mythification of pre-industrial natural space meant to enable experiences of physical and aesthetic transcendence – has more recently emerged in a new guise through the creation of America's network of Wildlife Refuges, National Forests, National and State Parks, and Wilderness Areas. This latest mutation fails to address any of Marx's criticisms of the original, literary pastoral, and yet it looks different enough on the surface – nature as recreation rather than as resource – that it passes muster in the popular imagination. These newly “protected” wildernesses aspire to conveniently remove the self-interested human element that became so troubling in the American pastoral through an
ideological slight of hand that is written directly into the legislation that brings them into existence. By eschewing roads, structures and other civilized trappings, these places mean to present an argument for our ability to “get back to nature,” albeit briefly. They seek to remove all traces of the human within their boundaries for the benefit of the human outside their boundaries, unintentionally exemplifying the paradox at the heart of “wilderness” in the process.

Wilderness

It is no coincidence that the concept of “wilderness” as we now know it began to emerge during the time of White's eight-oxen plow-teams: the first recorded instance of the word from which our contemporary version derives occurred in the early eleventh century, in what would later become England. In Ælfric of Eynsham's Old English translation of the Book of Genesis, Satan is banished for his part in the fall of man, cursed above all “wilddēorum” and sent into exile. This fundamental distinction between Here and There, Home and Exile expressed the idea that the opposition between man and nature could be described geospatially. The land shared by peasant families and cultivated to provide them with sustenance was “owned” land. Beyond the borders of that land, then, was the “wild” place. Today, by contrast, the word “wilderness” describes a geographical location constructed precisely to recreate the qualities we ascribe to that which we no longer see reason to fear: nature. In the wilderness, so the belief goes, we can look with awe upon the remains of the natural world that we have conquered. As evidenced in the above section, however, today's human-managed wilderness areas are no longer encouraging us to confront our fundamental and damaging estrangement from nature; they are, in fact, reifying the same ancient man/nature dichotomy by their very obvious, intentional geospatial separation.

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14 Consider again the wording of the Wilderness Act, as quoted above.
15 The word used here means, essentially, “the kingdom of wild animals,” and it is from this term that our word “wilderness” evolved.
from the places where our day-to-day lives are lived. So then why do we create such
ewildernesses in the first place? What is so important about such places that we insist on
regulating access to them, on preserving them for future use?

To answer these questions, it is necessary for me to make a distinction between
wilderness and wildness: I define “wildness” as the practice we have traditionally married to the
place of wilderness. I contend that the practice and the place are not intrinsically related, and that
by conflating the two we have long reinforced the fallacious belief that wildness as a quality of
human experience is bound to a specific type of location. This belief has severely limited our
understanding of what wildness can be. Through an investigation of our culture's troubled
relationship with wilderness, it becomes clear that what we value most from these protected
places is not actually the places at all, but instead the wildness that is incorrectly assumed to be
tied to those places. As such, I argue that by recognizing the artificiality of the wilderness
concept, we can take a step toward separating experiential wildness from wilderness places,
remaking that wild experience into something more accessible and effective, something with
both physical and spiritual utility: a wildness for both body and mind.

On one hand, wilderness places are something that we have long revered and fought to
preserve, but at the same time their most important function seems to often be a nostalgic one: to
remind us of the “primeval” world from which we've supposedly “progressed.” In this way,
野生is actually serve to reify a civilization/wilderness dichotomy – a sort of place-
based version of the previously-discussed man/nature opposition. This civilization/wilderness
dichotomy currently serves to justify mass urbanization and industrialization while
simultaneously providing the rallying cry of the weekend vacationers who create the demand for
more suburbia by living in it. As discussed previously, the roots of this paradox run very deep.

For example, Greg Garrard begins a summation of perspectives on wilderness in
Ecocriticism by defining the term as “signifying nature in a state uncontaminated by civilization” (59). Thus, even Garrard's well-intentioned definition supports the oft-assumed dichotomy between wilderness and civilization. As seen in my earlier example of the SBW homesteaders, this ideological binary is even reified by the legal foundation of contemporary America's perception of wilderness: the Wilderness Act of 1964. The Act not only institutionalizes the civilization/wilderness dichotomy, it does so by excluding humanity from the earth’s “community of life.” Even legally, in its terms, wilderness is a place where we humans are strangers, where we don’t belong, where we are, at best, passing visitors, threatening corruption by our very presence. And yet, paradoxically, it seems that we must need wilderness places. Why else pass the Wilderness Act in the first place, an act that is as much about preserving wilderness for the sake of our peace of mind and our leisure as it is about protecting natural places from our roads, axes, and stomping boots?

This civilization/wilderness dichotomy does two contradictory things. First, it suggests that by evolving – socially, culturally and technologically – beyond the supposedly primeval, natural world, we humans are a special case that exist outside of said place by virtue of living in a different place: in constructed, man-made locations of our own creation that are demarcated by geographically-instituted – and often visually obvious – boundaries. Simultaneously, the idea of wilderness is a human creation wielded as the anodyne to the parts of our otherwise grand civilization that we deem distasteful: if we grow tired of the stresses of our home place, we simply go to the woods for a few days. The fact that this idea of wilderness is welded to the wilderness place in our cultural imagination generates this contradictory tension. But what if the wilderness idea and the wilderness place could be separated? Cronon claims that “far from being the one place on earth that stands apart from humanity, [wilderness] is quite profoundly a human

\footnotesize{16} For an excellent summary of American culture's relationship with wilderness, see Max Oelschlager's *The Idea of Wilderness*.}
creation – indeed, the creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history” (69), and it is the very constructedness of this idea that makes an advantageous reshaping possible. It would certainly not be the first time that our idea of wilderness has been reshaped to suit our needs.

During the medieval period, for example, wilderness was “a place to which one came only against one's will, and always in fear and trembling”; it was the darkness beyond the walls of the city, “it had little or nothing to offer civilized men and women” (71, emphasis added). This has only not been the case for perhaps the last two centuries; it is this very change that we have wrought in the idea of wilderness over time that speaks plainly of the idea's constructed nature. Cronon also writes about a “sea change” (71) that took place around the onset of the Industrial Revolution, and it wasn't by chance that as humanity surged ahead into the world of skyscrapers, trains, factories, and cars, the wilderness that was once “Satan's home” became “God's own temple” (72). As the formerly-feared wilderness places shrunk, what wilderness remained was suddenly revered as secularly sacred. Wilderness places became numinous because they had to be sought out. In thrall to a cultural manifestation of the law of supply and demand, wilderness places became romanticized simply because so few of them remained, and it was assumed that our experience of “the natural” could only occur in such places.

This numinous quality set the stage in turn for the commodification of these wilderness places. Once wilderness became “a place you go for a while, an escape to or from” (Shepard, *Traces of an Omnivore* 193), it was only a matter of time before too many people gained access to this secular temple and the masses diluted its holiness. According to James A. Papa, Jr., this latest change has recently made wilderness places less about reconnecting with a perceived primeval past – as was the case with the pastoral – and more about simple consumption: “Since the latter half of the nineteenth century, America's national parks and Wilderness Areas have
played an important role in American culture. There is, perhaps, no greater symbol of American leisure than the national park system” (317). Thus, our cultural perception of “wilderness” has moved from fear and trembling, to Burke's sublime, to a diluted, easily-digested, reproduced, and purchased version of Gilpin's picturesque, a victim of what Alan Liska and George Ritzer call “McDisneyization” (96).

It is telling that today the wilderness experience is often a package vacation of less danger and more ostentation than the old British Grand Tour. A trip to a government-designated National Park or Wilderness Area is often, according to Shepard, “a departure into a kind of therapeutic land management, a release from our crowded and overbuilt environment [...] healing to those who sense the presence of the disease but who may have confused its cause with the absence of the therapy” (Traces of An Omnivore 193). In this context, labeling certain places as wildernesses can actually be a death sentence of sorts, in the sense that such labeling perpetuates the attitude that these places exist to be consumed to restore our pre-industrial vitality, to serve as a pressure-release valve for the deadening effect of our urbanized lives, and to be loved to death by us in the bargain.

Wildness

Despite the constructed nature of these wilderness places, though, there is something within the idea of wilderness that appeals to us: we construct, constrain, and commodify wilderness places ultimately because we need something that we think we can only find there. In Coming Home To the Pleistocene, Shepard suggests that this “something” might well be best described as a genetically unbreakable connection to our Pleistocene ancestry. Perhaps our need for wilderness places, so often presumed to be existential or aesthetic, is instead biological? Shepard argues that “because of our evolutionary past and the extraordinary way life has shaped
our mind and bodies, we are required by the genome to proceed along a path of roles, perceptions, performances, understandings, and needs” (39). Over the last three million years the context for and the ways of addressing these needs have changed through our expressions of culture, but the needs themselves have remained largely unaltered. “The catch,” says Shepard, “is that, given a natural world and a human nature, not all cultures work equally well” (78). Herein lies the rub: while our genome still dictates the guidance we need, our chosen culture dictates the guidance we receive, and the separation between the two has only grown with time.

For Shepard, many of our contemporary problems with physical and mental health emerge from our ignorance – sometimes willful, sometimes not – of our genomic needs: “The various crises in modern society – schooling, adolescent gangs, divorce or enmity, midlife changes, the 'care of the elderly' – may be only pathological expressions of normal ontogeny when the culture is so stressed and bent that it cannot guide the new person emerging at each stage” (46). I believe that we are aware – unconsciously if not otherwise – of the anxiety caused by this separation between the needs of our genome and our culture's failure to address those needs. The search for a cure to that anxiety is what motivates our lust for wilderness places: idolizing what wilderness remains is one way that we attempt to address the unmet needs of our Pleistocene heritage.

Unfortunately, the need for wilderness is generally represented in our culture not as a biological need, but as a spiritual one that can be satisfactorily addressed only through our temporary relocation to an appropriately “natural” place. Edward Abbey famously warned that “wilderness is not a luxury but a necessity of the human spirit, and as vital to our lives as water and good bread. A civilization which destroys what little remains of the wild, the spare, the

17 This type of argument for wilderness brings Fromm's discussion of transcendence full circle: where we once needed to escape the oppression of the natural world through the comforts offered by civilization, now we seek to transcend the discomforts of civilization by escaping to the wilderness.
original, is cutting itself off from its origins and betraying the principle of civilization itself” (169), and this well-meaning sentiment is a perfect example of this idea of wilderness-place-as-transcendence that I believe we must eschew. As Fromm argued above, what we need now is not a place in which we can achieve transcendence, but a practice through which we can learn coexistence.

 Abbey's ends are correct – addressing the needs of our genome – but the means – transcendence via location – play into the same tired civilization/wilderness dichotomy. The idea that the wilderness place offers a form of transcendence, popular as it might be, is absurd in a society where our actions “in civilization” have direct consequences for the wilderness we ostensibly value so much. Instead of a spiritualized wilderness place, with its value determined aesthetically, Shepard offers instead a practical wilderness experience, with its value determined genonomically. Imagining our need for wilderness in biological terms may not be as Romantic, but Shepard's perspective enables methods of addressing this need that are more pragmatic than poesis. Or, as Shepard himself says: “that all human traits are ultimately genetic […] is becoming evident” (Traces of An Omnivore 215), and the ecological result of this recent scientific revelation is that “if we follow the definition of domestic as a type created by controlled breeding with conscious objectives by humans, then we ourselves are genetically wild” (216). The connection we seek is thus somewhere inside of us, not beyond the admission gates of a National Park. Yet, Shepard stresses repeatedly that we cannot “go back” – we cannot reset the clock and undo the sundering of our modern culture and our the needs of our Pleistocene genome.

 So what is the antidote if not Thoreauvian whimsy or Abbey-esque cynicism? “We will not,” Shepard says, “in some magic time warp that denies duration, join those prehistoric dead in

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18 Consider Bill McKibben's assertion in The End of Nature that due to industry's effects on the atmosphere “We have changed the atmosphere, and thus we are changing the weather. By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial” (54).
their well-honed ecology. But that is irrelevant. Having never left our genome and its authority, we have never left the past, which is part of ourselves, and have only to bring the Pleistocene to us” (220). We can do this by making a distinction between the idea of an aesthetic, transcendent place – a wilderness – and a quality of experience capable of satisfying our genome: wildness. Cronon and poet Gary Snyder both make mention of the accessibility of the “wild” experience in their work, with Cronon stating that “wildness (as opposed to wilderness) can be found anywhere: in the seemingly tame fields and woodlots of Massachusetts, in the cracks of a Manhattan sidewalk, even in the cells of our own bodies” (89). Snyder, meanwhile, revises Thoreau's famous quote: “Wildness is not just 'the preservation of the world', it is the world” (6), suggesting the potential omnipresence of wildness in our lives, visible if only we learn how to look.

Wildness, then, is the connection – which Shepherd posits is genetic – between us and the world beyond the borders of civilization. Shepherd describes the unbreakable nature of this fundamental connection thus: “We are free to create culture as we wish, but the prototype to which the genome is accustomed is Pleistocene society. As a culture we may choose or invent any language or set of gods we like. But that we must make up a language and choose gods is what it means to be human” (Coming Home to the Pleistocene 38), implying that wildness is a fact of life that we can attempt to ignore if we so choose, but can never be rid of entirely. I believe that it is this unbreakable, genetic connection to wildness that we fitfully, half-heartedly seek with our RVs and our Travel Channel and our pay-for-parking national parks. It is this connection that will continue to haunt us as our cities become bigger and bigger and our wildernesses become smaller and smaller. In order to healthily acknowledge and maintain this connection, we must disconnect our need for wildness from a “wilderness” that is interested only in certain, supposedly “natural” geographic places. Instead we must learn to think of wildness as
the essential quality of any “wild” space that, as Cronon says, might be found in a multitude of places, from a forest to the boulevard to the shopping mall and beyond. It is this eminently accessible wildness that will allow us to maintain a connection to our genesis: not the heritage of technology or civilization or Progress, but the heritage of the wildēorum.

In the next chapter, I will further describe how the “wilding” of space allows wildness to be separated from wilderness places with its experiential value intact. In constructing an opposition between wilderness place and this “wild space,” then, I am not only suggesting that wilderness and wildness should be different vis-a-vis our cultural perception of each, but I will show how they are different in the very physicality of their enactment. By ridding ourselves of the assumed necessity of a wilderness location – a national park, a campground, a bird sanctuary – I believe that we can create new, location-unspecific experiences of wildness. I will begin theorizing how such a deterritorialization of wildness can be enacted by explaining how the spatial practices that enable it function.
Sitting on the hood of my silver Dodge Intrepid, I watched the near-horizontal rays of the westering sun slant through the beginnings of what would be, in a few hours, a thick evening fog. The car's bullet-like, neo-Modernist lines clashed offensively with its lush, organic surroundings, yet the hood gave me a place to safely recline for a moment above the ants and larger bugs that swarmed in the dirt below. The Intrepid was pressed up against dense Appalachian foliage on the passenger's side, and as I unlaced my dirt-laden boots, I watched my friend and hiking companion Andrea clamber into the car from the driver's side and then awkwardly make her way into the passenger seat. Across the road from us, a trail snaked off into the woods to the north.

Three days earlier, I had parked the car here, at the end of a Forest Service road on the border of Tennessee and North Carolina, so that we could walk that same trail into the Joyce Kilmer-Slickrock Wilderness. Andrea and I – along with John, the third member of our group – had started off at the trailhead together, and had then spent the next two days tracing a lazy loop through the foothills of the Smoky Mountains. Our ultimate destination, though, was the Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest itself, a protected stand of old-growth hemlock, poplar and oak which lay to the south of the trailhead. So, when our loop had led us back to our starting point, John had opted to continue south along a fork in the trail which would take him directly to the Memorial Forest on foot and, rather than following directly, Andrea and I had been forced to retrieve my car so as to avoid any backtracking later.

The ensuing bit of driving involved in moving the car to the Memorial Forest proper – a few miles on the Forest Service road, a bit of one-lane, cliff-edge driving along local byways –
turned out to be both physically and existentially jarring, coming right after a days-long hike. Reincorporation into “real life” is always disorienting for me after a few days of wildness, and the process is never more uncomfortable than when it involves immediately taking a car out onto a heavily traveled road. Silence is suddenly sound, peace is suddenly conflict, beauty becomes artifice, relative freedom becomes a distinctly human set of rules. Turning the key, starting the engine, hurrying to turn down the volume on the CD player as the guitar solo from “New Year’s Day” by U2 suddenly roared to life, I found myself envious of John’s extended hike, which would take him through the heart of an old-growth forest that Andrea and I could instead reach only through a circuitous and disenchanting drive.

* * *

Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest is named for he of “I think that I shall never see/A poem lovely as a tree” fame, and it stands inside the Nantahala National Forest near Robbinsville, North Carolina, about six hundred miles from Akron. That distance had appealed to us, as it had guaranteed that simply getting there would be an adventure in and of itself. In addition, the forest’s association with a famous American environmentalist had given our trip an air of pagan pilgrimage. We had been looking for something pristine, something as close to real, virgin wilderness as we could find, and a forest named by the Cherokee for the fact that the sun’s rays often failed to reach the forest floor except when it shone directly overhead seemed about as “primeval” as one could expect to get without investing more than a day's worth of driving. Of particular interest to us had been a stretch of hardwood trees in a cove along the Little Santeetlah Creek: some of these trees, we had been told by a friend, were at least one hundred feet tall and over four hundred years old: as virgin as you could get in the Appalachians.

Unfortunately, though, there is no map to wildness – despite what the green spaces on the road atlas might intimate. A week before we parted ways with John, I had been standing in the
middle of Casterton Avenue in Akron, Ohio, thinking that hitting the road for a weekend in the wilderness seemed like the most relaxing thing in the world. Hands jammed into my jeans pockets to guard exposed flesh from the early-morning cold, waiting for the Intrepid’s ailing heater to start kicking out something other than dust as my compatriots stuffed their backpacks into the trunk, I had been sure that this trip to the Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest would be all the adventure I needed. As it turned out, though, an hour later I would be in my car alone, speeding back across town to my job at Kent State University's Parking Services office.

That turned out to be the first of three consecutive mornings on which our attempt to leave town was thwarted by outside circumstances. Getting to the wilderness, for better or worse, is a process that requires a transaction with society, and that truth had never before been as clear to me as it became that particular weekend. This transaction is necessitated by the fact that wilderness is a place, somewhere you have to get to from where you are, and though Edward Abbey claims that “wilderness is a necessary part of civilization,” for three straight mornings I had harbored serious doubts regarding civilization's willingness to acknowledge such a supposed necessity. If wilderness was in fact so necessary, then why was it so damn difficult to get to?

I had wanted nothing more, on that mild summer weekend, than to disappear into the woods for a few days of freedom from the pressures of “real life,” but that very same “real life” needed to be negotiated with before it would let me go. For one, there had been the matter of money – for gas, for food, for ensuring transportation to a place set aside to enable the very kind of wild experience we were hoping to have – which was provided by employment, and so my employer had to be appeased in turn before I would be allowed to just disappear for a few days. In this way, the romanticism of a walk in the woods can quickly be eroded by enforced pragmatism.

On the fourth morning, I had finally given that pragmatism the finger by calling my boss
and telling him that I had broken two of my toes in a “sporting accident” and that I would be missing work for a few days. I had checked my bank statement online and decided that there was just enough room on my credit card for gas to get us to and back from Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest, assuming that we took no detours and that I wasn’t fired from my job upon our return. By that point, most of our packing had been done for days, and we hadn’t gotten around to undoing any of it yet. So it had happened that minutes after my “sporting accident” we finally left for the Smoky Mountains.

* * *

It was early in the evening of our third day in the forest, and after a disorienting drive that ended in a proper asphalt-and-concrete parking lot, Andrea, John, and I were finally reunited in the Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest. As I clambered out of the car and looked around, though, my heart sank: immediately, the place struck me, oddly, as a boundary or a buffer zone between the wild and the civilized, a mess of conflicting expectations and motivations. While the Memorial Forest boasted some of the oldest, most pristine trees in the entire United States – some well older than the United States itself – those trees were lined by guardrails and boardwalks (made out of other trees), and those boardwalks were lined with people who certainly would not have been receptive to the wildness that John, Andrea, and I had experienced over the previous three days. Technically speaking, virgin trees abounded, but in truth everything seemed to have been deflowered long ago.

We spent most of the evening in this boundary space anyway, dodging in and out of other people’s camera frames as they tried to snap pictures and getting odd looks presumably related to the fact that we were covered in dirt and smelled less than good – a condition I had wrongly assumed would be understood in this “Wilderness.” I was bleeding a bit from the forehead, from a scratch I had picked up on the way down out of the hilltops earlier that morning, and this drew
a lot of attention from concerned passers-by. Occasionally someone worriedly pointed it out to me, as if a flesh wound was somehow a major aberration even in the forest, and that rubbed me the wrong way. After the first of many such encounters, I was inclined to keep the blood oddly smudged, like a badge of honor, an insistence of authenticity.

As the sky began to darken in earnest, we found ourselves being chastised by a park ranger for resting off the trail against the back of a broad, ancient tree. It seemed that a few miles down the trail from where we had camped freely the night before, across a rather arbitrary, invisible border, some trees needed to be “protected” while others were free to be converted into guardrails. I politely pointed out the absurdity of this to the ranger. His response was that “We mark the trails for a reason, and that reason is so that we can preserve this area for the enjoyment of visitors.” He went on to ask me what would happen if people were allowed to just wander around freely in the park. What did I think would happen to the old-growth trees? I shrugged and replied that “They seem to have done pretty well for themselves for the last four hundred years.” I wasn't trying to be confrontational; I certainly didn't want an argument. It simply seemed to me that there were more effective ways of “protecting” the wilderness areas than limiting their accessibility using the same system that had legalized the activities that had put them in danger in the first place.

I wasn't really sure what we had expected out of Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest, but I came away disappointed. But disappointed for what reason? Simply because this place had been given over for use by people who hadn’t “earned” their right to be here by hiking through the woods, like we had? I wanted to think that my outrage was less petty than that. No, my frustration with the ranger at Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest was born from a realization: the realization that this Wilderness was actually more of a nature museum – or maybe a nature mausoleum – than anything else. Ultimately, wilderness places like this one were being
preserved so that they could be consumed by those who preferred the drive to the hike, those who saw nothing contradictory in the combination of centuries-old trees and asphalt parking lots. The purpose of such a Wilderness was to grotesquely marry civilization with wildness, to create a Frankensteinian carnival attraction where people could stand, straddling the chasm between both modes of existence with one foot planted firmly on each side.

Clearly, this was not the place we had been hoping it would be. In an attempt to make a Wilderness out of the old-growth forest – presumably in an attempt to preserve it for future generations – the Forest Service had instead done the opposite, at least in our minds. And so, while we had expected all of the wildness we'd experienced over the previous days' hiking to climax satisfactorily with our exploration of the Memorial Forest's old-growth stands, we instead found ourselves walking a paved path back to the Intrepid, heads down to avoid the other visitors' uncomfortable stares.

During this rush to get back to the parking lot and out of the mess of people, we crossed a wooden bridge stretching over a small, winding creek. I stopped for a moment, looking at where the creek turned to the north, back towards where we had camped the previous night. Trying to salvage some last echo of wildness before I got in the car, I was instead brought up short by “Animal-Food” vending machines that had been installed along the rail of the bridge, so that people could pay with quarters to feed the nearby ducks. I briefly wondered, incredulously, how putting processed “Animal-Food” into the groundwater that these supposedly venerated old-growth trees drew from made any sense at all in light of the ranger's earlier comments. Then, knowing that there was no good answer to be had, I stormed off.

Minutes later we were back on a well-paved, safe road that had been perfectly designed to maximize the impression that we were still in the wilderness. It’s hard to fall for this artifice once you’ve seen the real thing, though. It just seemed silly, and a little sad. We Americans have an
obsession with looking at wildness from a distance and then trying to synthesize the experience of it, and the futility of that enterprise was on full display here. Our transition from the heart of the Smoky Mountains to the Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest had shown me just how hollow such a reproduction really was, and the trip back out was just making things worse. Clearly, such Wilderness did not necessitate wildness. “Animal-Food,” indeed. There was nowhere to go next but out.

Boomeranging back towards the “real world” after our trip through the Joyce Kilmer-Slickrock Wilderness, this contrived, half-and-half space was actually less appealing than just finishing the transition back to the land of jobs, rent, and credit card bills. At least back in civilization the artifice was honest about its intentions. As the road led us up into the mountains to the north, we plunged headlights-first into a sudden curtain of fog, and even the sight of the little tin-shack communities down in the valleys – visible in the early evening only as a string of yellow candle flames and weak lightbulbs – was finally obscured. All that was left in view, perhaps appropriately, was the road unspooling in front of us. I wondered, then, if the only function wildness still serves in our lives is to be an occasional respite from the world we have built to combat it. I wondered if, in a world of capital-“W” Wilderneses, wildness is kept alive in our minds now more than anywhere else.
CHAPTER TWO

DETERITORIALIZING WILDNESS AND A GENEALOGY OF URBAN SPATIAL PRACTICES

The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space. - Italo Calvino

The map is not the territory. - Alfred Korzybski

The majority of this chapter is dedicated to a discussion of how the space outside of wilderness places can be wilded through the conscious enactment of a particular type of physical and mental practice. Of course, the very possibility of such a deterritorialized wildness relies on the assumption that the quality of the human experience of wilderness can be separated from the place of that wilderness. Therefore, I will begin by briefly arguing for the plausibility of deterritorializing wildness in theory before moving on to illustrate how certain subversive spatial practices that arose in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in response to the modern city's assault on individuality later evolved into generators of the “alternative wilderneses” that now make wildness so available to us. My theorization rests heavily on Ursula K. Heise's characterization of deterritorialization as a necessary part of living environmentally in today's globalized world, a characterization she presents in her book Sense of Place and Sense of Planet:
Though the concept of deterritorialization originated in Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* puts a distinctly ecocritical twist on the idea. Where Deleuze and Guattari use the term in support of a decidedly neo-Marxist ideology in both *Anti-Oedipus* and the later *A Thousand Plateaus*, Heise adapts deterritorialization specifically to critique the American environmentalist discourse that I characterized as “schizophrenic” in the previous chapter. She begins by situating her critique within the context of a century of globalization and its deleterious effect on the idea of the nation by suggesting that we are slowly but surely coming to accept the validity of communities that are not dependent on a shared location of origin but rather on shared experiences.

Echoing Benedict Anderson's work on “imagined communities” twenty-five years previous, Heise describes how, from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, “In search of countermodels to [nation-based concepts of identity], a wide range of theorists instead presented identities shaped by hybridity, creolization *mestizaje*, migration, borderlands, diaspora, nomadism, exile, and deterritorialization […] as potential grounds for resistance to national hegemonies” (5). Across all of these new models, a very important characteristic was shared: “the assumption that there is nothing natural or self-evident about attachments to the nation” (6). Though many of these models posited a sense of communal identity powered by shared culture and experience, gone was the assumption that such an identity needed to *necessarily* arise originally from a shared physical location.

Having thus provided examples of communities that have successfully subverted nationalism through deterritorialization, Heise next turns this line of globalized, placeless thinking to ecocriticism, taking an important step towards Rueckert's ideal when she writes that “ecologically oriented thinking has yet to come to terms with one of the central insights of
current theories of globalization: namely, that the increasing connectedness of societies around the globe entails the emergence of new forms of culture that are no longer anchored in place” (10). Though I mean to “come to terms” with this reality specifically by showing how wildness can exist independent of wilderness, Heise's challenge to ecocriticism here is more general and provides a foundation for my work over the remaining chapters of this dissertation by suggesting that a global awareness need not be detrimental to the quality of experience we associate with “the local.” She goes on to challenge “the environmental imagination” to “envision how ecologically based advocacy on behalf of the nonhuman world as well as on behalf of greater socioenvironmental justice might be formulated in terms that are premised no longer primarily on ties to local places but on ties to territories and systems that are understood to encompass the planet as a whole” (10), but one might well question the quality of a globalized environmentalism, one without any local places of resistance.

At first, Heise's challenge might seem counterintuitive, both specifically as applied to ecocriticism and generally as applied to the globalized world at large. Certainly, deterritorialization – especially how Deleuze and Guattari define it – can lead to disenfranchisement, the displacement of local culture, loss of identity, or worse. As it is conventionally understood, deterritorialization seems to fundamentally threaten place, and as such it is easy to see how it might also threaten the typical environmentalist or ecocritical agenda; after all, what is environmentalism without (local) place? Significantly, Heise addresses this concern not by critiquing deterritorialization directly, but instead by questioning the value of “sense of place” as it is frequently understood within ecocritical discourse. What arises from this inquiry is the suggestion that dissociating environmentalism from location actually forces a broader and necessarily more democratic perspective.

The concept of a “sense of place,” Heise explains, is shorthand for an oft-repeated idea in
ecocritical discourse: that “in order to reconnect with the natural world, individuals need to develop a 'sense of place' by getting to know the details of the ecosystems that immediately surround them” (28). As such, there is often an assumption made that “The basis for genuine ecological understanding […] lies in the local” (28). This assumption, though “becomes a visionary dead end if it is understood as a founding ideological principle or a principal didactic means of guiding individuals and communities back to nature” (21) for much the same reasons that nationalism does not function as an equitable, effective means of characterizing human communities, as a cursory examination of the history of the twentieth century illustrates. Heise's alternative to a sense of place – “sense of planet” – presages my project of deterritorializing wildness, even if it is less about going “back to nature” than it is about bringing nature to us.

Constructively, Heise suggests that “Rather than focusing on the recuperation of a sense of place, environmentalism needs to foster an understanding of how a wide variety of both natural and cultural places and processes are connected and shape each other around the world, and how the human impact affects and changes this connectedness” (21). This, then, is a “sense of planet.” It is powered by deterritorialization, which functions by pointing “to the conceptual impasses of environmentalist considerations of the local, as well as to a different understanding of inhabitation” (21). Heise adapts deterritorialization from Deleuze and Guattari's original usage, applying it here in a way that “refers to the detachment of social and cultural practices from their ties to place that have been described in detail in theories of modernization and postmodernization” (51). Thus, she not only seeks to revolutionize a dimension of environmentalist thought by insisting that the discourse consider the deterritorialization of culture as it is powered by globalization, but she also implies that this revolution of thought can be extended to the creation of a planet-sized awareness of ecology, a deterritorialized environmentalism.
Heise believes that this drastically broadened perspective is not only constructive, but necessary. For one eminently practical reason, maintaining an emphasis on the local is becoming more and more difficult for people around the globe, and so an alternative needs to be found. “global connectedness makes an in-depth experience of place more difficult to attain for more people” Heise explains, because “remaining in one place for many decades, taking care of a house or farm, intimately knowing the local environment, cultivating local relationships, being as self-sufficient as possible, resisting new technologies that do not improve human life spiritually as well as materially are options no longer available to many” (54). This is the case even in less privileged parts of the world, where populations “who are forced to follow the flows of capital experience [deterritorialization], as do farmers whose choices of products to cultivate are dictated by the needs of First World markets or whose agricultural success has become dependent on seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides sold by transnational corporations” (52). These networks of exchange make a “reterritorialization” of place all but impossible due to the interdependency of spatially distant populations on one another for their cultural – and literal – existence. The result does not refute “the desirability of reestablishing a sense of place, but it does limit its viability as a model for thinking about the future of significant portions of the population” (54).

Ultimately, “The problem with environmentalist advocacies of place […] lies in that most of them assume that individuals' existential encounters with nature and engagements with intimately known local places can be recuperated intact from the distortions of modernization. Analyses of media and studies of globalization, by contrast, suggest that the essence of such encounters and engagements itself has changed” (54). In the process of dealing with this change, our society has reached the point where “A sense of place and the knowledge that comes with it […] is something that most people quite rightly perceive as a kind of hobby” (55), and this loss of the local demands something to replace the hole its absence leaves in our psyches. As Shepard
would put it, it is part of our genomic heritage to need to function as part of a larger network of cultural meaning, and if “the local” is in fact being stretched beyond recognition by the intensification of globality, then where do we look instead for such connectedness, such belonging? The answer seems to be, in a sense, “everywhere.”

Heise believes that “deterritorialization of local knowledge does not necessarily have to be detrimental for an environmentalist perspective, but on the contrary opens up new avenues into ecological consciousness” (55). The suggestion here is that while the local place might be lost, the quality of experiencing the local thus deterritorialized actually becomes more accessible and thus more effective than ever before. This generation of “local meaning” outside of the local place might be nontraditional, but it certainly isn't unreasonable. As Heise points out:

If studying local plants is valuable because it can lead one to questions of global connectivity, so is exploring where the bananas one buys come from and under what conditions they were grown; under what circumstances and with what waste products one's TV set was put together; or how the shipping out of waste from one's own city might affect the community where it will be deposited. All of these inquiries open the local out into a network of ecological links that span a region, a continent, or the world. (56)

With the application of Heise's perspective to the concept of wilderness, it becomes possible to imagine a deterritorialized wildness that maintains its experiential quality. Within a broader perspective like the one Heise describes, wildness can be deterritorialized. The place of wilderness functioned as the origin point for the concept, but now that concept has moved beyond the location that has — as was shown in the previous chapter — lost much of its wildness due to its being refigured as a commodity in an increasingly globalized world. This change has by no means negatively affected the efficacy of wildness, however, and in fact throughout the
past two centuries a peculiar strand of urban wildness can be seen as emerging in protest against
the stultifying influence of the modern city. The genealogy that follows describes a series of
spatial practices that made the wilding of city space possible, before explaining how those
practices eventually evolved into urban exploration, with its particular desire to generate an
alternative urban wilderness.

Spatial Practice and Escaping the Modern City

For early writers on the modern city, there was no separating the city-as-place from the
crowd that inhabited that place, imbuing it with a hectic sussurus of meaning. “Fear, revulsion,
and horror were the emotions which the big-city crowd aroused in those who first observed it”
(174), writes Walter Benjamin in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.” Benjamin goes on to describe
the effect that the city wrought on its inhabitants via Paul Valéry, who writes that “the inhabitant
of the great urban centers reverts to a state of savagery – that is, of isolation. The feeling of being
dependent on others, which used to be kept alive by need, is gradually blunted in the smooth
functioning of the social mechanism. Any improvement of this mechanism eliminates certain
modes of behavior and emotions” (qtd. in Benjamin 174). “Comfort isolates,” Benjamin
concludes, “on the other hand, it brings those enjoying it closer to mechanization” (174). By
engendering isolation and encouraging a lifestyle based around mimicking the repetitious and
emotionally empty efficiency of the factory line, the modern city channeled the energy of the
crowd into powering a mechanism of alienation. Thus, the crowd was both cause and effect of
the blasé attitude that Georg Simmel argues is endemic to city life in his seminal 1903 essay
“The Metropolis and Mental Life.”

19 By “modern city,” here, I mean the type of city space that came about as a result of the Second Industrial
Revolution in America and Western Europe the middle of the 19th century. This new form of urbanism forced
people into the kind of lifestyle that Georg Simmel – among others – criticized, and laid the groundwork for the
sort of alienation that I believe the practices of flanerie, the dérive, and urban exploration are all responses to.
At the start of said essay, Simmel posits that “the deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of the historical heritage and external culture and technique of life” (11). Simmel's language echoes Benjamin's – and others' – concern over the press of the crowd and its effect on the individual not only physically, but mentally, existentially, and culturally. However, Simmel, a sociologist, goes beyond blind terror and condemnation in his response to this new urban way of living, analyzing exactly why it has a deadening effect on the city-dweller's mental life. Thus Simmel's work is useful here in two ways: first, it shows the historically in-context response of a sociologist to the rise of the modern city; second, it addresses many of the same complaints about city life's effect on the individual and individualism that are still heard today. Simmel's analysis is thus a perfect point of departure for taking about the motivations behind the 19th and 20th century spatial practices that served as the first conduits for urban wildness.

For Simmel, “there is perhaps no psychic phenomenon which is so unconditionally reserved to the city as the blasé outlook” (14), and he argues that this outlook – even today so stereotypically attributed to city-dwellers – emerges from a mixture of day-to-day sensory experience and historically-reinforced cultural expectation. Simmel suggests the advent of the modern city is a turning point in our society's relationship with individualism, claiming that up until the last years of the nineteenth century we were concerned with championing “the resistance of the individual to being levelled, swallowed up in the socio-technological mechanism” (11). Upon our moving into the modern city, however, he sees our priority changing from resistance to adaptation. This adaptation entails “investigation of the relationship which such a social structure promotes between the individual aspects of life and those which transcend the existence of single individuals” (11): a tactical retreat, as it were, from the battle for
This call for adaptation over resistance is a capitulation to the inexhaustible waves of external stimuli that Simmel saw as suffusing the sensory dimension of city life. “The psychological foundation, upon which the metropolitan individuality is erected,” he says, “is the intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli” (11). We are biologically programmed to respond to such stimuli and cannot turn off that response. Instead, when overstimulated, we burn out like overloaded fuses. “Man is a creature whose existence is dependent on differences” (12), Simmel posits, and it is the overwhelming amount of fluctuations that the second-by-second stimuli of city life impresses upon the individual that ultimately deadens the city-dweller's emotional response. “Thereby,” Simmel reasons, “the essentially intellectualistic character of the mental life of the metropolis becomes intelligible as over against that of the small town which rests more on feelings and emotional relationships” (12). The blasé attitude begins to emerge, then, as “the metropolitan type […] creates a protective organ for itself against the profound disruption with which the fluctuations and discontinuities of the external milieu threaten it” (12). The effect of this is not only a lack of emotional expression and receptivity, but also a tendency towards conservatism and rationalization, both barriers against the sort of primal receptivity encouraged by – and necessary for – any experience of wildness.

That the living situation in the modern city engenders Simmel's blasé attitude is to be expected according to Shepard, who discusses this very problem in *Coming Home To the Pleistocene*. Shepard argues that one of the things our genomic heritage programs us for is life in a social group of at most fifty people, though this number should be closer to thirty (45). That we live in cities of millions today is, in his view, a reason unto itself for “the modern sense of loneliness and lack of true community” (44). In a large community that far exceeds our genomic
limit, “counselors see 'separateness' as a major problem of the individual” (44), and abandoning one's individuality and personal boundaries is encouraged as a way of dealing with the alienation of the city. Shepard agrees with Simmel that this approach is less than ideal, stating that genomically “maturity does not consist of the loss of one's body boundaries, a subjective prenatal universality. Normal development consists, rather, of sharpening the distinctions between the self and the other to clarify one's identity” (44-5). The Pleistocene solution is “a healthy personal development [that] proceeds through a corresponding process that emphasizes relationships to others, so that intensified separateness does not maroon but establishes the self as ever more unique and yet more fully bonded to nonselves by chains of interaction, kinship, dependence, cooperation, and compliance” (45). That the city cannot enable such a lifestyle is, on a very fundamental level, simply a matter of numbers. Due in part to its sheer scale, then, the 19th century city constituted a new, potent threat to individuality, creating a situation in which “the reaction of the metropolitan person to [events] is moved to a sphere of mental activity which is least sensitive and which is furthest removed from the depths of the personality” (Simmel 12). But, through Shepard's analysis, this assault on individuality can be seen to work by ultimately denying our genomic need for wildness.

Much of the value of an experience of wildness comes from the challenge such an experience can pose to a person, both physically and mentally. As Simmel argues, humans need to be challenged, to establish unique identities for themselves through the exercise of their abilities, and when the metropolis stifles our ability to differentiate ourselves from one another on the basis of our accomplishments we become obsessed with a shallow sort of over-specialization to compensate (17). This, in turn, causes us to turn against one another for lack of more constructive challenges, as “in the life of a city, struggle with nature for the means of life is transformed into a conflict with human beings, and the gain which is fought for is granted, not by

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nature, but by man” (17). The search for wildness is motivated by a desire to get away from this man-versus-man form of gratification and validation, to find instead a less cannibalistic method of giving value to the individual city-dweller's life. “Life is composed more and more of the impersonal cultural elements and existing goods and values which seek to suppress peculiar personal interests and incomparabilities,” according to Simmel, and “as a result, in order that this most personal element be saved, extremities and peculiarities and individualizations must be produced and they must be over-exaggerated merely to be brought into the awareness even of the individual himself” (19).

Life in the metropolis not only quashed individuality by dismissing it in favor of the lifestyle equivalent of an assembly line – Simmel specifies that “the essence of the blasé attitude is an indifference toward the distinctions between things” (14) – it also sapped the emotional energy necessary to mount any defense of individuality in the first place. It is hard to imagine a Ruskin or a Nietzsche emerging from the “protective organ” that Simmel describes. What can be seen rising instead from out of the individual's necessary “adaptation” to this new mental life, however, is a series of smaller, less obvious rebellions, spatial practices that seek to reinstitute individualism by playing with perception, utilizing spatial imagination, and encouraging the development of subcultures based in a praxis of wilding city space.

The cultural situation from which Michel de Certeau describes “spatial practices” arising in The Practice of Everyday Life sounds strikingly similar to that of the early metropolis that Simmel wrestled with.20 Looking down on a crowded sidewalk from the top floor of New York City's World Trade Center, de Certeau muses: “Must one finally fall back into the dark space where crowds move back and forth, crowds that, though visible from on high, are themselves unable to see down below? An Icarian fall” (92). He metaphorizes city space as a text, where

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20 Significantly, Simmel was writing in 1903 and de Certeau in 1980.
verticality “transforms the bewitching world by which one [is] 'possessed' into a text that lies before one's eyes” (92). His rare perch allows him to “read” the city below, unlike those who mill about in the streets, under his gaze. De Certeau suggests that we are all seduced by the idea of achieving this viewpoint, of experiencing this “fiction of knowledge” that would make each of us a “voyeur-god” (93). This desire, he believes, is evinced by our obsession with creating and utilizing maps.

Such an obsession with abstract “fact,” however, may be ultimately destructive: de Certeau continues by arguing that this perspective of verticality only shows us a “panorama-city” which is “a 'theoretical' (that is, visual) simulacrum, in short a picture, whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and a misunderstanding of practices” (93). What really matters here is not perspective, but praxis: the condition of fixation on the panorama-city requires the voyeur-god to “disentangle himself from the murky intertwining daily behaviors and make himself alien to them” (93), which results in an intellectual/emotion stance not unlike Simmel's blasé. To avoid such a fate, de Certeau argues that this obsession with reading the urban text must instead be transformed into an awareness of how we can (and do) write the urban text. This difference is the difference between the map and the tour, the place and the practice – the wilderness and wildness. Those who de Certeau calls “the ordinary practitioners of the city,” who live “down below” (93) are the originators of the practices that allow us to write, reinscribing the urban text with our own meanings through the very act of walking. Such walkers – de Certeau labels them Wandersmänner21 – “make use of spaces that cannot be seen” (93), and within these spaces, the Wandersmänner utilize imagination to make meaning that overrides the prominent cultural signification – the placeness – of the city through their walking/writing.

Such behaviors, which reconfigure the meaning of urban places through a combination of

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21 Translates loosely as “journey men.”
physical movement and imagination, are spatial practices. These practices are simultaneously constructive – in that they help practitioners overcome the press of the crowd/city – and subversive in that they often rebel against culturally-dominant place-definitions. De Certeau describes such practices thus:

Rather than remaining with the field of a discourse that upholds its privilege by inverting its content […] one can try another path: one can analyze the microbe-like, singular and plural practices which an urbanistic system was supposed to administer or suppress, but which have outlived its decay; one can follow the swarming activity of these procedures that, far from being regulated or eliminated by panoptic administration, have reinforced themselves into the networks of surveillance, and combined in accord with unreadable but stable tactics to the point of constituting everyday regulations and surreptitious creativities that are merely concealed by the frantic mechanisms and discourses of the observational organization. (96)

In this way, spatial practices allow one to reintroduce individualism, personal expression and authentic experience – and, in our case, wildness – to city life within the city-system through a combination of the physical act of walking and the imaginative act of unmapping.

Unmapping and Cartophilia

Walking expresses the more obvious, physical dimension of a spatial practice, but there is another necessary dimension to the process of changing place to space. De Certeau comments on the limiting effect a focus on physical walking alone can have on one's perspective when he writes that “it is true that the operations of walking on can be traced on city maps in such a way as to transcribe their paths (here well-trodden, there very faint) and their trajectories (going this
way and not that)” (97). But, these tracings “only refer, like words, to the absence of what has passed by” (97). The ultimate result of such detached observation of pedestrian movement is that “the trace left behind is substituted for the practice. It exhibits the (voracious) property that the geographical system has of being able to transform action into legibility, but in doing so causes a way of being in the world to be forgotten” (97). So how can this “way of being in the world” – this Dasein – be expressed? How exactly can one generate a space within which to walk/write from out of a place that is already entrenched in cultural and local meaning?22

This happens through an intentional imaginative process that I will call “unmapping,” wherein placeness is erased and supplanted by writeable space. In *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Yi-Fu Tuan describes place-construction thus: “what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value” (6); in order to rewrite the city, unmapping carries out this same process, but in reverse, supplanting culturally-dominant definitions of places with the space necessary to make one's unique experience valid once again. Appropriately echoing Thoreau in *Walking*, de Certeau asserts that “to walk is to lack a place” (103), and that “space is a practiced place” (117). Through the physical act of walking, then, “the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers” (117). But this is only half of what makes up a spatial practice: the other half is an imaginative denunciation of our culture's obsession with maps and mapping and the strict placeness that maps insist upon.

Geographer P.F. Lewis calls it “cartophilia” (467): Western culture's fascination with maps. Not long after the invention of the moveable type machine, rough maps of the world’s coastlines created between 1400 and 1550 were widely reproduced and became available to the

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22 My uses of “space” and “place” here are indebted to Yi-Fu Tuan's text *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. In it, Tuan writes that “place is security, space is freedom” (3), suggesting that the generation of space – the erasure of an established place-value – can be a subversive act. This subversion of culturally established place-value is at the heart of urban exploration and its antecedents, as I will discuss further below.
non-geographer (Phillips 6). The maps from this time still contained large amounts of blank space, but these were quickly and efficiently explored, described, categorized, mapped, and eventually colonized. By the time that Joseph Conrad was writing *Heart of Darkness* at the end of the nineteenth century, much of the world had been mapped to exacting detail, and – not coincidentally – much of it was under the control of various colonial powers. As Marlowe laments in Conrad's novel: “[Africa] had got filled since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and names. It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery-a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over” (Conrad 5). Not only were the maps turning space into place, those place-definitions were readily available to many people for the first time in a format that concealed the political realities of their establishment. As colonial culture gobbled up mass-produced maps, then, space was converted to place at an unprecedented rate. Simultaneous with this colonization of place-construction, though, a popular backlash was occurring. The less mystery that was left on the map in an empirically geographic sense, the more our cultural imagination insisted on imposing mystery on already defined places. Much like the Romantics' earlier idealization of the ever-shrinking wilderness, colonial peoples began to see wide open space where there wasn't any. Americans' search for authenticity via unmapping is perhaps best exemplified by the persistence of the myth of the American frontier.

In a sense, this myth is built into the very foundation of America itself. Historian Richard Slotkin believes that our belief in “the frontier” came into being specifically due to an “American exceptionalism” that “rests in the fact that American society originated in a set of colonies, abstracted and selected out of the nations of Europe, and established in a ‘wilderness’ far removed from the home countries” (34). The enterprise of colonizing America’s eastern coast was the first iteration of Americans’ cyclical utilization of the concept of “the frontier,” a cycle that would repeat itself many times over the ensuing centuries. This first iteration required the
existence of a willing, constructed ignorance of the to-be-colonized environment and the cultures and peoples already living in that environment. Willfully conceptualizing the geographical Thirteen Colonies as space instead of place – in this case, space that could be inscribed with new meaning against the wishes of indigenous cultures which were, in a way, simply “not there” in the American imagination – allowed for many well-documented atrocities, both environmental and human in scope. There was little attempt to assimilate or compromise with already-present peoples; instead, there was a belief that by escaping from the mainland of Europe – the “Metropolis” in Slotkin’s terms – Americans were free to write their destinies on the supposedly “blank” face of the “Frontier” (35). This process relied on a species of unmapping for its justification, and later on, once the idea of an American frontier became geographically and logically absurd, this unmapping was nonetheless repeated, motivated next by economic greed instead of political ambitions.

In postcolonial times, insistence on the existence of a space to be explored where there is really only a spot on the map now assists in the repackaging and reselling of an imagined wilderness. Patricia Limerick points out in “Seeing and Being Seen” that much of the American “frontier” has now been thoroughly developed and thus tourism has become the primary – and in some cases only – source of income for the locals (28). Many American Westerners’ love/hate relationship with tourism can be easily understood in this light. In the service of a steady income, the land itself is now shaped according to the expectations people bring with them. Visitors expect “the frontier,” and the people whose livelihood depends on the tourists’ satisfaction give them what they want through both physical and imaginative reshaping. “From the beginnings of the National Park Service in 1916,” Limerick explains, “its officials knew that they had to sell the parks. Unless they could get significant numbers of Americans to visit the parks, the parks would be without a political constituency” (23). Making what natural places were left palatable
to tourists was mandatory for economic survival. At the same time, this process co-opted what could otherwise be empty space for the purposes of the institution.

The repeated unmapping behind the persistence of the American frontier ideal serves as an example of the effectiveness of this imaginative process, but it also showcases a use of that process by the prevailing power structure, for the benefit of that prevailing power structure. Henri Lefebvre responds to this use of unmapping when he argues that “The more a space partakes of nature, the less it enters into the social relations of production […] Take national or regional ‘nature parks’, for instance: it is not at all easy to decide whether such places are natural or artificial” (83). It is this very ambiguity that today makes “the frontier” a (literally) lucrative illusion. An insistence on the existence of a land of cowboys and Indians, open vistas, and endless possibility might seem logically ridiculous in our current time, but at the same time, this institutionally-sanctioned myth needs support on an individual level to survive and to continue to be perpetuated, and clearly that support continues to exist. That unmapping can be appropriated in such a way is a convincing testament to its efficacy and its allure.

As I argued above, we individuals also need unmapped space: unmapping begets possibility, which in turn begets wildness. Why else do contemporary tourists still drive to the Grand Canyon in RV convoys with visions of “untrammeled” wilderness in their imaginations, discounting the absurdity of their air conditioning units, microwaves, and DVD players? We find the idea that we can still get lost fascinating, and this fascination motivates the imaginative dimension of spatial practice. For Rebecca Solnit, “to be lost is to be fully present, and to be fully present is to be capable of being in uncertainty and mystery” (6). She continues: “[one] does not get lost but loses oneself, with the implication that it is a conscious choice, a chosen surrender; a psychic state achievable through geography” (6, emphasis added). For Solnit, only in this state is it possible to see past your own illusions of control and expectation and see what
there is to see, to learn what there is to learn. When engaging in spatial practice, the journey is just as much an inner one as it is an outer one, and it is energized by the creation – through unmapping – of new space in which one can make their own meaning. If that space doesn’t yet exist – or doesn't exist anymore – it is (re)created by erasing a place’s present definition. If the unknown, the wild, is no longer available, we can recreate it via unmapping to address our need for it. Lefebvre presents the idea that “walls, enclosures and facades serve to define both a scene (where something takes place) and an obscene area to which everything that cannot or may not happen on the scene is relegated: whatever is inadmissible, be it malefic or forbidden, thus has its own hidden space on the near or the far side of a frontier” (36), and the need to generate such an area in which “inadmissible” actions can take place is necessary for individuality. For Freud, the unconscious is a blank geography; to the Wandersmänner, blank geography helps one come into closer contact with their unconscious, their genomic heritage, by enabling access to wildness.

Obviously, unmapping need not always be put to such malevolent use as in the example I provided above. As the imaginative component of small, subversive spatial practices, it can instead provide the individual with a method of rebelling against institutionalized definitions of place rather than serving as the means by which those definitions are perpetuated. De Certeau characterizes such use of unmapping as a recognition of the difference between what he calls the “map” and the “tour” (120). By way of explanation, he presents a history of mapping in which the tour, or a way of impressing meaning on space through “going (spatializing actions)” is eliminated by an interest in the map, or in “seeing (the knowledge of an order of places)” (119). To de Certeau, our contemporary idea of a map has become “a totalizing stage on which elements of diverse origin are brought together to form the tableau of a 'state' of geographical knowledge, [that] pushes away into its prehistory or into its posterity, as if into the wings, the operations of which it is the result or the necessary condition. It remains alone on the stage. The
tour describers have disappeared” (121). Reinstating these meaning-laden “tour describers” is the project of the spatial practices I will discuss in the remaining three chapters of this dissertation.

Such spatial practices allow the practitioner to “[condemn] certain places to inertia or disappearance and [compose] with others spatial 'turns of phrase' that are 'rare,' 'accidental' or illegitimate” (99). The walker him/herself chooses what forms of expression are legitimate. In an urban story as constrictive as the one that Simmel describes, it becomes necessary that “things extra and other (details and excesses coming from elsewhere) insert themselves into the accepted framework, the imposed order” (107). Within this tension, “one thus has the very relationship between spatial practices and the constructed order,” says de Certeau, “the surface of this order is everywhere punched and torn open by ellipses, drifts, and leaks of meaning: it is a sieve-order” (107). It is my contention that spatial practices that perforate this “sieve-order” have evolved throughout the last century so as to be particularly suited to enabling the generation of wild space in the city.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will look specifically at two such practices: flanerie, popular in France from the mid-19th century to the early 20th, and the dérive, popularized by the Situationists in the 1960s. It is my belief that this genealogy-of sorts of spatial practices illuminates a chronology of practitioners becoming less and less interested in place and the acknowledgment of the city crowd, and more and more interested in creating deterritorialized wilderness via unmapping that parallels the experiential quality of those wilderness adventures recounted by the likes of Thoreau and his nature-writing cohorts. By charting this evolution of values among early spatial practitioners, I will show how today's spatial practices are uniquely suited for popularizing the project of deterritorializing wilderness.
A Genealogy of Spatial Practice: Flanerie

In keeping with de Certeau's model of the city as a text, Roland Barthes states that “the user of a city picks out certain fragments of the statement in order to actualize them in secret” (qtd. in de Certeau, 98), and one of the first widely written-on methods of such covert actualization was flanerie. The struggle against the blasé attitude that Simmel described was the same struggle that produced the flâneur, the Urform – to use Susan Buck-Morss's term – from which the urban explorer later emerges. Restricting flanerie to one coherent definition is complicated, and potentially reductive; perhaps a synthesis is best. In her essay “The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity,” Janet Wolff takes a short survey of flâneur-figures in the work of Charles Baudelaire, Benjamin, and Simmel,23 describing these shared characteristics: “These heroes of modernity [share] the possibility and the prospect of lone travel, of voluntary up-rooting, of anonymous arrival at a new place” (40). These “heroic” traits are indeed qualities that again emerge in the urban exploration community a century after the heyday of the flâneur. However, the flâneur has an important characteristic that his subsequent incarnations do not: though he is interested in repurposing city space, his spatial practice is not yet deterritorialized; the larger institutional definitions of urban places are still imbricated in his experience of city space to a degree. In important ways, flânerie as described by both Baudelaire and Benjamin is intimately connected to geographical place. So, while the flâneur certainly gives rise to more fully deterritorialized practices, flanerie itself struggles between rejecting the proscribed definitions of city places and still being dependent on those definitions for recognition. Walking and unmapping are both present in flanerie, but it struggles to accept deterritorialization. That said, flanerie's reliance on place declined as it and the urban milieu that it functioned within both evolved.

23 The flâneur was primarily theorized originally by Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin.
Deborah L. Parsons suggests an historical beginning for the flâneur by tracing the concept of flânerie back to its linguistic roots. She cites the Encyclopedia Larousse, which lists the entry “flâneur/flâneuse” in the nineteenth century, and this entry, Parsons explains: “describes a figure who loiters in the city, shopping and watching the crowd. Although predominantly an idler, this flâneur can also be an artist” (17). This characterization comes in turn from an 1806 pamphlet which describes the day-to-day life of a flâneur named M. Bonhomme. Parsons summarizes the pamphlet thus: “The life of M. Bonhomme is characterized by freedom from financial/familial responsibility, by membership of the aesthetic circles of café life, by interest in sartorial codes of society, by a fascination with womanhood but detachment from sexual relationships, and by a position of isolated marginality” (17, emphasis added). For being removed by over a century from Baudelaire's and Benjamin's writings on the flâneur, this characterization is surprisingly compatible with their visions, and is quite possibly the basis for them.

Baudelaire himself saw the flâneur as a response to the onset of modernity, which he described as “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable” (13). On the edge of this ephemerality, Baudelaire posited the existence of the flâneur and the dandy, both types of intent urban observers who kept themselves removed from the crowd of the city, but whose primary difference from one another was the fact that the latter had a “blasé and insensitive attitude” (Wolff 40), while the former did not. The practice of the flâneur protected him from Simmel's new mental life, whereas the practice of the dandy did not. Baudelaire's flâneur was at home in the city streets, but at the same time remained invisible to the crowd and was not invested in the former “half of art” that Baudelaire speaks of. The dandy, on the other hand, thrived on the crowd's attention.24

24 Baudelaire would regularly redefine these two types of urban spectator against one another in his writings, but their inclinations concerning the crowd always differentiated one from the other. I would argue that Baudelaire's
Benjamin's *flâneur* was even more culturally and geographically dependent than Baudelaire's, and in this sense Baudelaire's *flâneur* can be seen as the more progressive of the two for our purposes. In “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” Benjamin observes that “Baudelaire saw fit to equate the man of the crowd […] with the *flâneur*. It is hard to accept this view. The man of the crowd is no *flâneur*” (172). Later on, Benjamin posits a class difference between the man of the crowd and the *flâneur* when he contrasts their responses to the crowd. According to Benjamin, the man of the crowd “succumbs to the fascination of the scene” (much like the dandy), whereas the *flâneur* “is immobilized as a paralytic; he would not be able to follow the crowd even if he were in the midst of it. His attitude toward the crowd is, rather, one of superiority” (173). Despite his criticism of Baudelaire's *flâneur*, however, on the matter of their disdain for the usual uses of city space the Benjaminian and Baudelairian *flâneurs* seem inclined to agree.

Another way in which *flanerie* foreshadows deterritorialized spatial practice is in its relatively democratic, classless view of urban space. Parsons makes an important distinction between Baudelaire's “dandy” – which has much in common with Benjamin's “man of the crowd” – and his *flâneur* along class divisions. She suggests that both Baudelairian and Benjaminian *flanerie* are, as differentiated from dandyism, lower-class pursuits. While *flanerie* might have been dependent on a certain type of urban place as a locus, Parsons' characterization suggests that it was also more democratic than other types of urban strolling engaged in at the time by upper-class individuals. Due to the *flâneur's* disdain for the crowd, class was less important to this particular type of stroller than it was to the dandy, who actively sought the crowd's approving gaze. Where dandyism was a pose, Parsons' reading of *flanerie* suggests that

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*flâneur* had an interest in the opinion of the crowd, though that interest might have been of a different species than the dandy's. That “it was briefly fashionable to take turtles for a walk in the arcades” (“On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” 197), according to Benjamin, illustrates the degree to which the *flâneur's* antics were at least occasionally dependent on the attention of the crowd. The *flâneur* “knew how to display his nonchalance provocatively on certain occasions” (197), and so his relationship with the crowd was never entirely one of superior remove.
in the *flâneur* we can see the beginnings of a spatial practice that could democratize the unmapping of urban space.

Yet for all this, the *flâneur* remained solidly reliant on a certain geophysical place. For Benjamin the “man of the crowd” was actually a devolution of the *flâneur* once his original milieu – the Parisian arcade – had been taken away. The Benjaminian *flâneur* could only exist in Baudelaire-era Paris: “In the year of Baudelaire’s death it was still possible for some entrepreneur to cater to the comfort of the well-to-do with a fleet of five hundred sedan chairs circulating about the city. Arcades where the *flâneur* would not be exposed to the sight of carriages that did not recognized pedestrians as rivals were enjoying undiminished popularity” (“On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” 172). The eventual destruction of this environment meant a loss of the *flâneur’s* all-important invisibility, and thus, for Benjamin, the loss of the *flâneur* himself. *Flanerie* could not be deterritorialized without suffering a decrease in cultural value. Upon the disappearance of “the milieu to which [the *flâneur*] belonged” (172) – the Parisian arcade – his identity was fractured. This illustrates the deep connection of the Benjaminian *flâneur* with a particular place: no more Parisian arcade, no more Benjaminian *flâneur*.

Different in details though they may have been, then, both Baudelaire’s and Benjamin’s conceptions of *flânerie* were ultimately place-based: generally, in the city, and specifically in Paris. However, the underlying motivation of *flânerie* – an evolving, sort-of unmapping engendered by a then-uniquely class-neutral repurposing of city space – persisted and spread beyond Paris. Whatever the reason(s) for the disintegration of the *flâneur’s* milieu, whether sociocultural or the result of shifting priorities in urban planning – for example, Susan Buck-Morss suggests that car traffic was his death knell (102) – *flanerie* eventually ceased to exist as an effective method of coping with the modern city. However, as evidenced by the practices of the Situationists and later by the subculture of urban exploration, the spirit of *flanerie* as a
productive way of repurposing and negotiating urban space lived on.

As Buck-Morss puts it, “the flâneur [became] extinct only by exploding into a myriad of forms, the phenomenological characteristics of which, no matter how new they may appear, continue to bear his traces, as Urform” (105). This Urform, birthed in the very beginning of the nineteenth-century city, has ultimately survived even to today as a method by which one can reconcile the inescapable press of the crowd with the need for individualism that Simmel posits we all need to retain our humanity during life in the city. The most important of this Urform's evolutions, the severance of the quality of the stroller's experience from a particular physical place, is a severance that is completed through the theorizing of the Situationists. More specifically, Guy Debord's theory of the dérive, with its focus on “psychogeography” and its acute disinterest in physical place, is the second important step towards deterritorializing spatial practice within the city, a progression necessary to bring us yet closer to a true praxis of urban wildness.

A Genealogy of Spatial Practice: The Situationists

Debord's writing on the dérive comes from within a larger project of sociocultural critique known as the Situationist International. This group of extreme leftist, avant-garde Europeans came into being from an amalgamation of smaller, like-minded groups in 1957 and agitated for a new way of experiencing the urban landscape – among other, more political goals – until the group was dissolved in 1972. As per the group's name, the central process through which they hoped to achieve all of their goals was the “construction of situations” (Debord, “Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action” 38). This situation-building is very similar to the process of unmapping as I described it above: in his “Report on the Construction of Situations and on the
International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action,” Debord defines situation-building as “the concrete construction of momentary ambiences of life and their transformation into a superior passional quality” (38). He goes on to suggest that “we must develop a systematic intervention based on the complex factors of two components in perpetual interaction: the material environment of life and the behaviors which that environment gives rise to and which radically transform it’ (38). The Situationists, then, are perhaps the first to expound a detailed doctrine of experiential, intentional unmapping.

If the construction of situations is the imaginative dimension of this particular spatial practice, then the random movement via one's own feet prescribed by the dérive is the corresponding physical dimension. Translating literally as “drifting” (Debord, “Theory of the Dérive” 62), the term “dérive” itself implies a process in which one is being pushed and pulled by currents, not directed and moved by intentional footsteps: significantly, Debord always refers only to “the” dérive; there is no “dérive-er.” One who carries out a dérive does not take on the characteristics of a “dérive-er”; instead, the dérive is a tool that anyone can use, making the practice, in theory at least, entirely democratic.

In “Theory of the Dérive,” Debord describes the dérive in greater detail as “a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances” (62). “In a dérive,” he continues, “one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work, and their leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there” (62). Interestingly, this practice is

25 I avoid using the term “situationism” throughout at the behest of the Situationists themselves. Debord writes of the word “situationism”: “a meaningless term Improperly derived from [situationist]. There is no such thing as situationism, which would mean a doctrine for interpreting existing conditions. The notion of situationism is obviously devised by antisituationists” (“Definitions” 51).

26 Debord’s description here brings to mind Thoreau’s injunction in Walking, when he writes that “If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again, – if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man, then you are ready for a walk” (73).
not quite as random as it sounds; Debord urges practitioners to navigate according to their sensitivity to “psychogeographical contours” of the surrounding city that will “strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones” (62). Psychogeography, then, replaces traditional place-dependent navigation markers and map-marked borders. On a dérive, one navigates by emotional currents, by sensing the “domination of psychogeographical variations” (62). In this way, spatial practice becomes successfully deterritorialized from dependence on place.

Debord himself notes this important difference between Situationist spatial practice and what has come before, providing and then refuting the counterexample of a study in which his colleague Chombart de Lauwe traced the movements of one student in Paris over the course of a year. That “[the student's] itinerary forms a small triangle with no significant deviations, the three apexes of which are the School of Political Sciences, her residence, and that of her piano teacher” (62) is a source of outrage to Debord, resulting from his incredulity that “anyone's life can be so pathetically limited” (63). The intent of the dérive to avoid such “pathetic” limitations is achieved through a randomness of movement that sets it apart from what Debord calls “the stroll” (63), his umbrella term for those “classic” spatial practices popular at the beginning of the 20th century, of which flanerie is one. The gesture here is obvious: Debord himself sees the dérive as a turn away from self-importance of flanerie and its place-concerned heritage. Flanerie is limited in his eyes by its dependence on landmarks and placeness for its significance. Debord wants a physical movement that is less concerned with placeness and more concerned with the value of the unexpected experiences that random movement combined with imaginative unmapping can engender.

27 Elsewhere, Debord defines psychogeography as “The study of the specific effects of the geographical environment (whether consciously organized or not) on the emotions and behavior of individuals” (“Definitions” 52).
The motivation behind this new, more random philosophy of movement is what the Situationists call “playful-constructive behavior” (62). According to Debord, “the need to play with architecture, time and space” will be “one of the fundamental desires on which the next civilization will be founded” (Chtcheglov 4). Far from flanerie's blasé-countering attitude of disdain and superiority which, in a sense, encourages the creation of a opposing but yet oddly similar anti-blasé – a proto-hipsterism, if you will – the dérive encourages unmapping for the sake of psychogeographical play with space. This play is unserious, but it also retains its subversive quality through that very lack of seriousness. By refusing to idolize placeness, the Situationists encourage a rebellion of sorts, but one motivated by the desire to enjoy moving through the city.

Of course, all this talk of play should not discount the importance of the Situationists' subversive intent, as their anarchic political leanings still flavor the rhetoric of today's urban explorers. Debord sees the construction of situations – or unmapping, for our purposes – as an overtly political act, one that “begins beyond the ruins of the modern spectacle” (“Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action” 40). Thus, his motivation for the creation of unmapped space would be the opposite, in a sense, of the institutional unmapping which supposedly makes Yellowstone National Park and other such places “wild.” According to Debord, such places lose their connection to wildness through their desire to generate and/or perpetuate spectacle. The Situationists make an important step towards the encouragement of generating wildness by their rejection of same. Debord insists that “it is easy to see how much the very principle of the spectacle – nonintervention – is linked to the alienation of the old world” (40), and his answer to this alienation is to “draw the [spectators] into activity by provoking their capacities to revolutionize their own lives” (41). Through their encouragement of an active rejection of the
city/spectacle, Situationists set their practice apart from that of flanerie in another important way: through the creation of their own individual milieux, the Situationists not only divorced their practice from place, they also divorced their practice from the gaze of the crowd, the gaze with which the flâneur had such a troubled relationship. For Debord, those who do not partake in the creation of situations remove themselves from the sphere of significance, by necessity: “the role played by a passive or merely bit-part playing 'public' must constantly diminish, while that played by those who cannot be called actors, but rather, in a new sense of the term, 'livers', must steadily increase” (41).

Continuing to constructively evolve spatial practice beyond flanerie, the Situationists address Simmel's concern regarding the overabundance of urban stimuli with an attitude of hope and promise, rather than one of fear and avoidance. Where flanerie unmapped the city in order to help keep the flâneur's head above water, so to speak, the dérive encourages its practitioners to dive deeply into that same water, and, in so doing, remake what they find in a way that is supportive of a playful-but-subversive individuality. According to the Situationists, the manic workings of the urban landscape can actually be turned to the individual's advantage. Debord remarks that “the primary urban character of the dérive, in its element in the great industrially transformed cities that are such rich centers of possibilities and meanings, could be expressed in Marx's phrase: 'Men can see nothing around them that is not their own image; everything speaks to them of themselves. Their very landscape is alive” (“Theory of the Dérive” 63). One can start to hear in Marx's words hints of what true urban wildness might look like.

What emerges from such an optimistic interpretation of the “concrete jungle” is an experience that “gives rise to new objective conditions of behavior, which bring about the disappearance of a good number of the old ones” (64). From here, it only takes the appropriation of a particular ethos – that of the wilderness explorer – to turn the dérive and its construction of
situations into a spatial practice capable of wilding the city. In the Situationist text “Another City for Another Life,” author Constant argues that “we demand adventure […] we intend to create situations, new situations, breaking the laws that prevent the development of meaningful ventures in life and culture. We are at the dawn of a new era, and we are already attempting to sketch out the image of a happier life, of a unitary urbanism – an urbanism designed for pleasure” (71). Where this same pleasure is derived via the appropriation of wildness, we today find the practice of urban exploration.

The Situationists contribute much to the theory of a placeless, playful-subversive spatial practice capable of imbuing city space with wildness. In fact, at one point Debord champions a practice that sounds suspiciously like modern-day urban exploration when he says that:

Our rather anarchic lifestyle and even certain amusements considered dubious that have always been enjoyed among our entourage – slipping by night into houses undergoing demolition, hitchhiking nonstop and without destination through Paris during a transportation strike in the name of adding to the confusion, wandering in subterranean catacombs forbidden to the public, etc. – are expressions of a more general sensibility which is no different from that of the dérive. (“Theory of the Dérive” 65)

Ultimately, though, the Situationists' project of urban unmapping serves a purpose at odds with any ecologically-interested project of wilding the city. Debord's spatial practice is certainly interested in adventure – an important aspect of urban exploration – but for the Situationists, “the human appropriation of nature is the real adventure we have embarked on” (“Ideologies, Classes, and the Dominion of Nature” 131). Like a sort-of neo-Futurism, the Situationists' doctrine is not at all interested in introducing wildness to the city per se; rather, they want to improve the mental lives of the city's inhabitants in order to continue to propagate the civilization/wilderness binary.
This is ultimately why the Situationists do not provide the final answer for our city-wilding project, though they are the final springboard from which we will leap to reach the necessary next evolution of spatial practice represented by the urban explorer.
INTERLUDE TWO

KENT, OHIO, AUGUST 2005

There was no way around it. Because of the shallow angle of the hill as it sloped away from the fire escape on the south face of the building, the first twenty or so feet of our ascent would have to be done in plain sight of anyone who might be happening by on the road to the east. Higher up, we'd have an unobstructed view of the street, and would be able to see any oncoming traffic before it saw us, but the buildings at our back would make the first few seconds of the climb nerve-wracking at best. At worst, the cops who rabidly patrolled this block between one and four in the morning while babysitting the frat-boy crowds spilling out of the bars would notice and take exception to two idiots scaling the back of the abandoned Franklin Hotel building, the tallest structure in town. And then, for us, there would be running and hiding. And maybe capture and questioning. And then maybe some going-to-jail. That last thing seemed unlikely enough to me though, that when Ernie – standing on top of a dug-up old concrete foundation block that served as our lookout point – waved his right arm in a “go” motion like a general sending his men to battle, I sprinted the thirty yards to where the rusty fire-escape ladder dangled eight feet above the ground, and I jumped.

 Fortunately, I made it over the three-foot high thornbushes growing directly under the ladder. My feet, out in front of me in case I hadn't jumped high enough, hit the hotel's brick wall at the same time that my hands grabbed the lowest rung of the ladder. I would have gladly hung here for a few moments, catching my breath and getting a better grip, but I knew that my time window was small, that breaks in traffic were rare this time of night, that I was currently in plain sight for anyone driving up the road, and that the footfalls I heard in the gravel behind me were the sounds of Ernie winding himself up to jump up to where I was currently hanging. So I
heaved my body up until my shoulders were level with the bottom rung of the ladder, and then grabbed the second rung with my right hand and the third rung with my left. From there it was easy enough to swing my feet up onto the bottom rung and start scaling in earnest.

A few seconds and a few rungs later Ernie hit the bottom of the ladder and the whole fire escape shook under the impact, sending the cringe-inducing rattle of metal on brick out into the night. I was in the middle of reaching up to a rung when he hit, and I quickly reached back down and secured a hold instead to wait out the reverberations. It was probably fifteen rungs up from the ground until the ladder emptied out onto the first-story landing, a metal grille about six feet long by six feet wide, and when the ladder stopped shaking I scrambled up the rest of the distance to it in seconds. After pulling myself up onto the grille, I immediately rolled over onto my stomach, facing the street to the south. Ernie did the same, flopping down on the cold metal next to me, moments later.

We laid there on the grille for a few minutes, in the watchful silence that makes up so much of urban exploration. A few cars slid by on the road now. One was a police cruiser, but the officer driving it was more interested in the crowd milling about outside Euro Gyro on the east side of the road than in the usually abandoned lot and buildings on the west side. For a moment, this made me feel like maybe my paranoia was unjustified: it wasn't as if Kent had a Creepy Abandoned Building Investigation SWAT team whose mandate was to hunt down urban explorers. On the other hand, I'd gotten in serious trouble before by exploring with people who walked into an abandoned building like they were crashing a frat party. Ultimately, I decided that I preferred to err on the side of paranoia. Keeping my eyes on the street, I settled in for what might have turned out to be a long wait.

I needn't have worried: from our new vantage point, the suddenly empty road rolled out into the distance like a gray lolling tongue, devoid of cars for at least the next thirty seconds even
if a cruiser happened to turn onto it from the closest side street while moving at fifty miles an hour. Seizing the opportunity, we wound up three of the remaining four stories of the fire escape and then stopped again, crouching just behind the cone of acrid glare cast by the yellow-orange floodlights on the roof of Euro Gyro. We were becoming more and more visible as we ascended, but it also became less and less likely that anyone would bother looking up high enough to see us. We waited out a beat-up Geo Metro, proceeded up the last few rungs of the ladder, and then began searching for the makeshift entrance to the hotel proper that we had found during a previous outing.

The fire escape dead-ended under a window blocked off with thick wooden planks. In fact, just about every window on all four faces of the building was blocked off with thick wooden planks – except one, of course, or else we wouldn't have been there in the first place. Since our interpretation of urban exploration ethics didn’t allow breaking when entering, we were effectively constrained to using this particular already-broken window to enter the guts of the Franklin Hotel. Fortunately, the window wasn't terribly difficult to get to. A short leap from the fire escape – made only slightly terrifying by the five-story drop below your feet as you make it – to a small ledge where the building juts out a bit – creating a landing a two stories below where the rest of the building stops – and then a little tiptoeing across two-by-fours laid across rotted-out parts of said landing, and we'd reached the window.

The “door” was a little smaller than I would have preferred. The next window over to our right still had a huge plastic hose shoved through a broken pane, a remnant of the city's last futile attempt at cleaning out the inside of the building a year or so ago. One pane in our entry-window was similarly broken, but there wasn't a hose filling the opening. So, in we went. For me, there was a lot of twisting and yelping and straining and trying hard not to cut oneself on broken glass involved in entering. I get claustrophobic easily, so this was the toughest part of the night yet for
me. The lure of what we might find inside overrode my fear, though, and slowly I wormed my way through. Ernie, who is shorter, thinner, and braver than I am, came through quite quickly after.

Inside, it was dark. The kind of dark you would associate with a cave, not a building, and the transition was momentarily shocking. We stood still for a few minutes while our eyes slowly adjusted, and once they did, I found that I could pick out spots in the wall in front of me where the sulfur light from outside was weaseling its way in through tiny cracks in the wood-blocked windows. This wan yellow glow slowly revealed the inside of a building that could have easily been lifted directly from some post-apocalyptic future. About ten feet in front of me there was something that once may have resembled a counter; otherwise, everything in the vicinity was crumbled, broken, and laying in jagged piles on the floor. Wires hung from the ceiling, occasionally sparking. Exposed pipes ended in cracked, nasty-looking tips halfway down the wall. There was no way to traverse the floor silently, as plaster and God-knows-what-else cracked and popped under our footsteps. We gave up any hope of silent passage immediately. If there was anyone else in the building – homeless people and squatters are a constant concern in urban exploration – they would hear us before long no matter what we did. Crunching through the debris, surveying the old bones of the building up close using the too-bright light given off by my cell phone's display, I honestly couldn’t begin to understand how this place could have fallen into such disrepair a mere thirty years since its heyday.

After a few minutes of exploration, we finally found something intact: stairs, on the far side of the building from where we had entered. As I stumbled in the darkness and almost fell down into the concrete stairwell, Ernie's phone-light revealed a proper staircase that led both up and down. We then spent the next hour or so exploring the bottom four floors of the building by phone-light, eventually finding a basement as well and thoroughly winding around its mazes of
rusted pipes and dead-end corridors. All the floors were pretty spectacularly destroyed, but things were worst on the ground floor, which had apparently served as the main dance floor of a club at some point. We could still make out bits and pieces of late-90s-era music posters and related paraphernalia as they rotted on the walls and sort-of countertops. Parts of what appeared to be the main bar were still intact, and there was an oddly pristine mini-fridge behind one such bar-chunk with cans of Diet Pepsi featuring the early-90s Pepsi logo on them. The randomness of actual, undirected decay made it feel a bit like looking into a time capsule from beyond the apocalypse.

Eventually, we climbed back up the staircase until it abruptly ended a floor above where we had originally entered the building. It took a good amount of searching this top floor with our now nearly-depleted phone-lights before we found a maintenance ladder that led up through a hole in the ceiling. Climbing up to the next floor was easy enough, and there wasn’t much worth examining there that we hadn’t already seen below. Climbing up yet further was another matter entirely. The access ladder continued up, but it passed through a hole that would have been barely wide enough for my shoulders to fit through even if there hadn’t been a ladder going through the hole at the same time. Partway up, I had a moment that combined claustrophobia with the plain fact that there just wasn’t enough room between the ladder and the wall behind me to reach my arms up to the next rung. Then, belatedly, I realized that I could climb using just my legs: wedged into the ladder-chute as I was, it wasn't as if I was going to fall backward or down. I more-or-less chimney-climbed the rest of my way up, and then, of course, Ernie scrambled quickly and easily up behind me.

At the top of the ladder was a small room with what looked like the heating or the cooling apparatus for the building in it. There were a number of tools scattered around on the floor. Then my light illuminated a sleeping pad and bag, and a half-empty bag of groceries. I started for a
moment until I realized that the pile of belongings had been abandoned, or at least the room's occupant had stepped out for the moment. Either way, good news for us.

Based on what the hotel looked like from the outside, we guessed that we were now in the small maintenance room actually built onto the roof. Which was, of course, our ultimate goal. What’s the point of going into a really tall building you’re not supposed to be in if you don’t go on the roof? There isn't one. So, after a few minutes of work, we managed to prop open an extremely heavy window using a chair as a wedge, and then we slithered underneath the sill. I was the first one through the window and, unfortunately, there was a drop of at least five feet from the sill to the surface of the roof itself. I took that drop headfirst, splashing down into a deep puddle. I advised Ernie to come out feet first. He obliged, as I sputtered and wiped cold, stagnant rainwater from my face.

The entire rooftop, not unlike the landing we had traversed earlier, was pockmarked by holes, some of which were covered by tarps. You could tell where the covered holes were by looking for an accumulation of rainwater on a sagging bit of tarp. Over the larger holes there were more two-by-fours, forming walkways of a sort. Over the ensuing minutes, we found that many of these walkways lead to small earthenware planters containing various herbs and flowers. It occurred to me that the complex system of improvised walkways must have been the work of our resident squatter.

The view from the highest hill in town, crowned by the tallest building in town, was fantastic. At four o'clock in the morning, everything on the ground was painted in a sulfur-light haze, which faded slowly into the crystal clarity of a star-filled sky that seemed to stretch forever. I decided to take a few pictures of the skyline, but I was a little skittish about using the flash, not knowing how visible it might be to people on the ground. The first few pictures, by and large, came out very dark. Then, as I moved about on the roof trying to find better lighting, I learned a
valuable lesson, one that tourists learn by the thousands every year, and which I just happened to learn instead while walking on a rotting rooftop, trespassing at four in the morning: do not try to walk and use your camera’s viewfinder at the same time. It is not the same as walking and using your own eyes. It makes you do things like misjudge where you’re putting your feet. And then you put them where they aren’t supposed to be. Like on an obviously rotted, exposed, and unsafe ceiling beam, for instance.

Quicker than thought, a section of ceiling about three feet by three feet collapsed underneath my weight with a resounding crack, and down I went. I fell through the ceiling, dropping through a floor that I recognized from earlier for what seemed like ten seconds in the agonizing slow-motion of adrenaline. Then I hit something hard that crunched sickeningly upon impact with my body. Or maybe the crunching sound was my body. My left side exploded in pain, and everything went black.
CHAPTER THREE
URBAN EXPLORATION AND THE HIDDEN CITY

As a remedy to life in society I would suggest the big city. Nowadays, it is the only desert within our means. - Albert Camus

The life of our city is rich in poetic and marvelous subjects. We are enveloped and steeped as though in an atmosphere of the marvelous; but we do not notice it. - Charles Baudelaire

The team has planned meticulously for this climb and all is going according to plan until suddenly, six hundred feet above the ground, they begin to encounter unexpected complications. They are forced to squeeze through near-impassable cracks, to swing out onto ledges barely wide enough to support their feet, and to rely on tenuous handholds to keep them from falling backward into the abyss. They carry packs full of advanced equipment, but in the end their success relies more on physical strength, courage, and a bit of luck than on gadgetry. One wrong step, a second's lapse in concentration, and they will plunge to their deaths. Yet, after a harrowing ascent, this ragtag band of intrepid explorers finally plant their flag at the summit, and stand upright against a stiff wind, looking out across the sublime landscape below as it stretches for miles in all directions.

While this might sound like a familiar narrative, in this particular case the details are importantly different. This is the story of the summiting of New York City's George Washington Bridge by a group of urban explorers who call themselves “Jinx” as it is told in the urban exploration (UE) text Invisible Frontier: Exploring the Tunnels, Ruins, and Rooftops of Hidden New York. Here, the explorers are not highly-trained mountaineers, but instead a group of city-
dwelling Americans united by their love of repurposing urban space. Jinx's ascent takes place not atop rocks and along cliffsides, but between girders and across catwalks. The vista that stretches out below them is the artificially illuminated panorama of New York City, rendered alien by a perspective that few will ever see it from.

Like Debord, Cronon, and Snyder before them, L.B. Deyo and David Leibowitz – Jinx members and co-authors of Invisible Frontier – believe that wildness can exist within any space that is crafted from a combination of mental perspective and physical practice. In his book's introduction, Deyo describes New York City as a “system” that is “alive, adapting,” and within this system he believes that “a wilderness is born, shaped by the very drive that compels us to explore it, too vast and promiscuous ever to be fully known, but always rewarding further searches” (28, emphasis added). To urban explorers like the Jinx team, UE is not just a substitute for more “natural” wild experiences, to be utilized when “the real thing” is unavailable: it is the real thing.

Viewed from Deyo and Leibowitz's perspective, then, the practice of urban exploration raises important questions about the nature of wilderness. Can it be found beyond the quiet forest trails and awesome mountain peaks protected specifically to preserve our access to wilderness? Is Jinx's ascent of the George Washington Bridge, by virtue of its geographic location, any less “wild” than, say, Thoreau's ascent of Katahdin? In this chapter, I will argue that urban explorers successfully construct wild space – in which experiences like Jinx's or Thoreau's can take place – within urban settings, and that the human-constructed environment of the city does not rob such experiences of their authenticity. Through my analysis of four essential urban exploration texts,
I will describe the benefits of the relationship between wildness and the city that UE enables.

Within the imaginatively-constructed wild space generated by their spatial practice, urban explorers have access to experiences typically understood to only be available in “natural” wildernesses, “natural” places. I believe that this quality makes UE a theoretical and practical evolution of flanerie and the dérive, and that by infusing a deterritorialized experience of wildness with the rhetoric and ethos of the wilderness explorer, it can generate wild space in urban settings even more effectively than its forebears. The experiences offered by the practice of UE, then, can serve to supplement or replace those that rely on location in traditional wilderness places. In our increasingly urbanized world, I believe that this supplementation/replacement is not just academically interesting, but absolutely necessary.

As I discussed at length above, the wildness that we treasure has traditionally been associated with geographically-specific, physical locations – products of a sort, which are based on our culturally-constructed idea of what “the wild” or “the natural” should look like. This artificiality is often well-concealed – allowing, for example, over 4 million visitors a year (“NPS Stats”) to experience the spectacle of the Grand Canyon while successfully providing most of those visitors with the illusion that they are experiencing something wild and natural. But I believe that moving beyond this assumption that wildness must be anchored to a specific location – again, making “wild” not a place, but a practice – can provide both a more authentic and a more democratized wildness.

By using my textual analyses to explicate the relationship between urban exploration writing and traditional nature writing, I will situate UE as a reaction to our ever-diminishing

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29 In 1919, Grand Canyon National Park had 37,745 visitors. Since then, visitor numbers increased every year, on average, until 1993’s high-water mark of 4,575,602 visitors (“NPS Stats”). That attendance figures have more or less plateaued in the last 20 years may well indicate a saturation point of sorts: perhaps beyond 4.5 million yearly visitors, the Grand Canyon National Park’s constructedness becomes uncomfortably obvious?

30 A wilderness experience that is not place-specific cannot put up gates, cannot charge admission and thus cannot limit engagement on a financial basis (and thus often on a class- and race-related basis).
wilderness places that is nonetheless still in conversation with those places. I will also describe how UE allows its practitioners to unmap oversignified city places, generating space that allows for experiences of wildness and mitigating the psychological effects of the modern city as they are described by Simmel and de Certeau. By deterritorializing wildness, UE enacts a more constructively malleable interpretation of “wild” than is possible when we consider only geographically-specific wilderness places as they are traditionally defined. In so doing it not only increases human access to wildness, but also helps to legitimately protect what wilderness places remain in the process by encouraging us to look for our wildness elsewhere.

**An Introduction to Urban Exploration**

Urban exploration can be seen as a descendant of *flanerie* and the Situationists' *dérive*, but it should also be considered an evolution: a spatial practice that successfully deterritorializes wildness, allowing a wilding of city space. To show exactly how urban exploration progresses beyond its predecessors in this regard, I will be examining four of UE's most popular texts. In its own way, each of these works illustrates how UE moves de Certeau's idea of the spatial practice forward while simultaneously reaching back to address the needs of our pre-urban, wild roots as they are articulated by Shepard. These texts all use the theoretical and practical dimensions of UE's predecessors as a foundation for the development of a new spatial practice intentionally devised to be a deterritorialized conduit for wildness: Alan North's *The Urban Adventure Handbook* serves as a great example of UE's metaphysical placelessness; Ninjalicious's *Access All Areas: A User's Guide to the Art of Urban Exploration* addresses the physical realities of traversing UE's urban wilderness in a format akin to a traditional guidebook; Deyo and Leibowitz's *Invisible Frontier* shows how UE draws on conventions of the nature writing genre to emphasize the city's potential for wildness, and Julia Solis's *New York Underground: The Anatomy of a City*
exemplifies UE culture's interest in the histories of the places explorers seek to unmap. Before examining these texts directly, however, it is important to understand exactly what UE is, and what it is not.

The lack of an agreed-upon definition of UE speaks volumes about its practice: urban explorers make up a subculture that is fragmented both by the misconceptions of outsiders and the misconduct of many would-be explorers. Urban explorers can be found all over the world, yet they primarily communicate with one another on the internet – on the forum sections of websites like Infiltration, for example – for the sake of maintaining personal anonymity. When face-to-face meetings do occur, they are often clandestine affairs. UE conferences take place undercover, in hotel ballrooms reserved under the auspices of more mundane gatherings – take, for example, “Office Products Expo 95,” an urban exploration gathering in Montreal in July of 2005 (Ninjalicous, “Urban Exploration Timeline”). The reason for all of this skulduggery is that urban exploration-related meetings, websites, and publications frequently find themselves censored or shut down by local or national governments, since the practice of UE often requires practitioners to break the law.

That is to say that even though engaging in UE is not by necessity illegal, gaining access to many satisfyingly explorable – and thus satisfyingly unmappable – places in a given city – whether they be sewer pipes, skyscraper rooftops, crumbling factories, or what-have-you – can often involve criminal trespassing. Although actual prosecution for trespassing is very rarely a consequence for urban explorers, the possibility of arrest and how best to avoid it is addressed at length in many UE texts, as we will see in the next section. In the UE community, this threat of arrest is not a motivation for thrillseekers and ne'er-do-wells, but instead only an unfortunate circumstance of the desire to explore hidden and forgotten places that remain off-limits because of often archaic and byzantine property laws. Yet, because of UE's potential illegality – and
because of the disagreement amongst urban explorers over how to best address it – the culture has no coherent hub that its spokes can be traced back to, which leads to popular confusion about what exactly an urban explorer does.

With no single, agreed-upon definition of their practice to present to outsiders, urban explorers have often found themselves vilified, lumped together with vandals, anarchists, thieves, and even terrorists in the public eye. Adding to this confusion, those who apply the label of “urban explorer” to themselves can run the gamut from harmless but well-known parkour enthusiasts with thousands of views on YouTube to politically-minded groups like Jinx – who once infiltrated New York's UN Headquarters to run their signature pennant up one of the building's flagpoles as a form of protest – to paramilitary hobbyists who forcibly break into active buildings using invasive technology just to prove that they can. Obviously, the details of how one chooses to “explore” urban space can differ dramatically depending on the ethics and expectations of each individual. For the purposes of this essay, though, I make a distinction between “traditional” urban exploration as the practice is understood by its core base of practitioners – people like L.B. Deyo, David Leibowitz, Julia Solis, Ninjalicious and Alan S. North – and the less respectful so-called “explorers” who would be shunned by the community that these writers are a part of for violating their strict ethical code.

Though urban exploration can only really be thoroughly understood by examining the practice of those who engage in it, it can be described, broadly, as the practice of exploring urban places that are legally off-limits or that regularly go unseen except by those who are authorized to access them. Implicit in this definition is that urban exploration serves as a way of reconceptualizing such urban places as something able to be explored, as wild space instead of a place, or a label on a map. UE's repurposing of urban space is not tied to a particular place – as can be seen in many of its texts, and most clearly in North's The Urban Adventure Handbook –
but is instead instigated by a general, intentional shift in one's way of thinking not unlike what is required by Debord's *dérive*. Deterritorialized, this act of mental and physical exploration allows one to see oversignified urban places through new eyes, eyes interested in the wildness a forgotten layer of the city can spawn: an abandoned warehouse can become a dark cave, devoid of its previous industrial connotations; the roof of a skyscraper can become the summit of a mountain overlooking a forest of artificially lit office buildings; a sewer outfall can provide a subterranean river cruise.

Perhaps the best example of an attempt to explicate a standardized practice of this type of experience is Ninjalicious' *Access All Areas*. Since its release in 2005, this book has done much to mitigate the fractiousness of UE culture, and it starts by suggesting a formal history of UE. According to this UE “bible,” the first act of urban exploration took place in the Paris catacombs – now a Holy Grail of sorts in the UE community – and was undertaken by Philibert Aspait. Aspait disappeared into the Paris underground in 1793 and never came back out. The catacombs would be mapped a year later after a street collapse, but Aspait's body would not be found until 1804, keys in hand, feet from the catacomb exit (Solis, “Paris's Urban Underground”). Despite such a grisly beginning, UE would continue to be of interest to a peculiar strain of *Wandersmänner* throughout the next two centuries, especially in areas where cities and their associated underground infrastructures grew larger, more complex, and thus less comprehensively surveilled. Given these qualities, it should be no surprise that New York City has been a center for urban exploration for nearly 150 years now. Walt Whitman wrote in 1861 about his exploration of the Atlantic Avenue subway tunnel, and it wasn't until 1904, when Leidschmudel Dreispul was killed exploring that same subway system, that “No Trespassing” signs were deemed necessary throughout the tunnels.\(^{31}\) In the present day, the UE books *Invisible*
Frontier and New York Underground are interested in the intimate details of this particular city's hidden spaces.

According to popular UE zine Infiltration's “Urban Exploration Timeline,” the first group-organized urban exploration was carried out – appropriately enough – by Dadaists in 1921 (Ninjalicious, “Urban Exploration Timeline”), but it wasn't until the 1970s that UE would simultaneously become more popular and geographically widespread, in part because of easier popular access to filming and photographing technologies. Portable cameras and videocameras allowed urban explorers to record and share their exploits while retaining some level of anonymity, but they also made prosecution of extralegal activities via surveillance cameras more widespread and efficient. As a result of the back-and-forth of this technological arms race, since the 1970s UE has existed largely in small, semi-covert communities that share photographs, essays, and videos of their exploits, all the while being wary of drawing too much attention to themselves – a desire notably at odds with the flâneur, whose exploits relied on an acknowledgment of his standing vis-a-vis the crowd.

The San Francisco Suicide Club, which among other things engaged in “fringe exploration” came into existence in 1977, and still exists under the moniker of the Cacophony Society (Ninjalicious, “Urban Exploration Timeline”), though more recently the Society's activities have more in common with flash mobs and groups like Improv Everywhere than with urban exploration. In 1986, a group called the Cave Clan formed in Australia for “drainers” –

“building” has been another important dimension of the practice.
32 In a nod to the Situationists, Ninjalicious lists the publication of Debord's Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography on the Infiltration timeline as well (“Urban Exploration Timeline”).
33 The philosophical connection between Dadaism and UE implied here by the timeline is interesting, since the Situationist movement emerged in a sense from Dadaist ideals in the late 1950s.
34 As yet further evidence of a direct Situationist/UE connection, in the late 1960s, cataphiles – a slang term for those who frequent the ancient Paris catacomb system – distributed their revolutionary messages using the catacombs, modeling their operations in turn after the French Resistance in World War Two.
35 While not an inherently negative association, these activities are part of what Jane McGonigal calls “the avant-garde of an emerging constellation of network practices that are both ludic, or game-like, and spectacular – that is, intended to generate an audience” (476); they are interesting in their own right, but diametrically opposed to UE in its desire to avoid an audience, and thus they are not part of this particular discussion.
explorers of drains, sewers, and man-made caves – and would go on to serve as the blueprint for many other such groups. The Cave Clan would develop a significant internet presence in the 1990s, absorbing many other draining and caving communities as it grew. The number of UE communities in general exploded with the rising popularity of the internet in the early 1990s, and many of these new internet-based communities traced their philosophical roots to “building hacking,” an approach to urban exploration derived from the practice of computer hacking being espoused at the time. Indeed, Eric Bagai’s essay on building hacking might well be the earliest coherent articulation of a philosophy of urban exploration.

In 1990 Bagai published the essay “The First Hackers” in his book *What I Did With My Trash: Ten Years With a TRS-80*. Though the term “hacking” was first used in 1959 by members of the MIT Tech Model Railroad Club's Signals and Power subcommittee to refer to their exploration of the university's steam tunnel system (Ninjalicious, “Urban Exploration Timeline”), Bagai adapted the term to encompass a wider range of activities. He defines his term “building hacker” in part through a rather appropriate comparison to the older idea of a computer hacker, explaining that “computer hackers devote themselves to programming beyond the apparent limits of a given computer, or to gathering comprehensive software libraries, or sometimes to the surreptitious entry and exploration of other computer systems. This last is what building hackers do – they explore buildings surreptitiously” (Bagai). He is quick to qualify that building hackers are expected to comport themselves in such a way so as to avoid activities that would encourage comparison to the darker aspects of computer hacking, noting that “a hacker touches nothing, takes nothing, and leaves no sign of his presence” (Bagai), echoing the LNT ethic popularized by the Sierra Club.36

Exploring the origin of the building hacker mindset, Bagai muses that:

36 “Leave No Trace.” Often explained by the saying “Take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints,” this backwoods ethic is described in greater detail at the LNT website.
[M]any older cultures had rituals that included passage through a tunnel or maze. If those rites were based on real psychological or spiritual needs, then perhaps hacking offers a resolution to something our own culture no longer recognizes or understands. Carl Jung thought that houses or buildings in dreams were sometimes images or representations of the self; and perhaps what hackers do is an attempt to explore or understand that self. (Bagai)

Drawing a connection between Bagai's practical definition of building hacking with his mystical justification for the practice, I would suggest that the first quality of a computer hacker that he mentions can also be applied to the building hacker/urban explorer. That is to say, the intent of Bagai's building hacking is – in part – to devote oneself to thinking of urban places beyond the apparent limits of the accepted social definition(s) of said places, putting building hacking/urban exploration firmly in the tradition of the dérive and flânerie in its desire to subvert traditional place-values for experiential gain.

Espousing a philosophy not unlike Bagai's, Alan North's *The Urban Adventure Handbook* was published on the heels of “The First Hackers” in 1990, marking the beginning of the “modern” age of UE. Since the publication of these two flagship texts, there has been a concerted attempt by much of the UE community to unite under a common code of ethics, in order to make clear to outsiders that urban explorers are first and foremost connoisseurs of the wilderness found in the forgotten layers of the urban world, as opposed to vandals or anarchists.\(^{37}\) This solidarity engendered by the work of Bagai and North – and later Ninjalicious – can be seen most clearly in the acceptance and publication of more recent works such as the aforementioned *Invisible Frontier* and Julia Solis' *New York Underground*, texts that intentionally and unabashedly locate

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\(^{37}\) Perhaps the most extreme case of this dedication was the disbanding of Jinx in the wake of the September 11th, 2001 terror attacks. The motivation behind this decision, as Jinx describes in the foreword of *Invisible Frontier*, was that though their explorations were “neither odious nor evil, the activities of urban exploration create the hazard of false alarms and could potentially divert police resources from serious matters” (Foreword).
themselves within a long tradition of American explorer-narratives. With such strong voices speaking on its behalf, the urban exploration community has lately found more widespread acceptance: there have been a number of widely-viewed “travel”-style documentaries made dealing with acts of UE such as the critically-acclaimed *Man On Wire*, which was released in 2008. In addition, there have been a number of television series produced for major “travel” networks that deal with the exploration of abandoned urban space.

That urban exploration has recently been popularized by drawing attention to its assumed connection to more traditional “wild” experiences is no accident. Urban explorers accept UE texts that indulge in the conventions of the nature writing genre – such as *Invisible Frontier* and *New York Underground* – and television series that feature an Indiana Jones analogue wandering around abandoned hospitals and jails – see Don Wildman, once host of The History Channel's *Cities of the Underworld* and now the host of The Travel Channel's *Off Limits* – because they recognize the seed of wildness that these experiences share with their better-understood, wilderness-located brethren. That mass audiences seem to feel the same suggests that perhaps our civilized culture has not buried that seed too deeply after all. This popularly assumed connection between traditional wilderness and urban wildness serves as convincing evidence that detrerritorialized wildness provides an accessible, authentic, and – to many – enticingly novel experience within the city. Compared to even a decade ago, it has become much clearer in the public consciousness that what ultimately draws explorers to UE is not the thrill of petty lawbreaking, but instead an appreciation of and desire for two things: placelessness – which allows for an urban exploration to take place anywhere, and at anytime – and the direct, intentional link between the practice of an urban explorer and the exploring ethos that has made the wilderness alluring to humanity for centuries, if not millennia. The exact methods by which UE attains these qualities become clearer upon examination of its canon texts.
The Universality of Wildness: Alan S. North's *The Urban Adventure Handbook*

At the same time that Eric Bagai was espousing the benefits of building hacking, Alan S. North's *The Urban Adventure Handbook* was suggesting “urban adventures” as a balm for the physical and existential woes of urban life.  

North's book is interesting in that it presents a mix of philosophical pontification and practical advice that runs the gamut from how to climb a brick building's face to how to walk across a slack chain without falling off. Much of the practical side of North's book, however, was later covered in deeper and more satisfying detail by Ninjalicious's *Access All Areas*, and so it is that book which will instead function as my example of a UE “guidebook” later on in this chapter. What is unique about North's book is how he situates the practice of UE within a placeless, metaphysical context. In one of the first widely read texts on UE, North provides potential urban explorers with the idea that adventure can happen anywhere – the explorer need only bring their imagination and their desire for wildness.

North opens his book with two definitions of “adventure” taken from *Webster's Ninth New College Dictionary*: “adventure” is thus defined for the sake of the Handbook as “an

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38 Though I characterize the activities described in North's book as urban exploration, North himself uses the term “urban adventures” instead. Such nonstandardized nomenclature within the UE community was the norm until recently, when a few authors including Ninjalicious took it upon themselves to decide what should and shouldn't be categorized as “urban exploration.” Indeed, nearly fifteen years after North's book, Ninjalicious would specifically make a distinction between “urban adventure” and “urban exploration,” explaining that “with urban adventure-type activities, the challenges (if there are challenges beyond having a good time) are usually self-imposed, rather than being simply the price one must pay in order to view a particular location. They're often more stunt-oriented and focussed on the fantastic final picture or story of the adventurer's achievement” (*Access All Areas* 6). In other words, in Ninjalicious's eyes, “urban adventuring” has more in common with the tourist mentality of “been there, done that” than with urban exploration, which is interested in the journey over the destination. Ninjalicious' distinction is important to keep in mind when reading North, as there is often a desire among urban explorers to actively avoid association with the type of “adventurer” that is caricatured in this passage. Many goal- or achievement-oriented “adventurers” have a tendency to violate urban explorers' LNT ethics as a result of their desire to achieve certain of their adventuring goals, and intentionally damaging sites and/or purposely putting oneself in danger for the thrill of it are practices generally frowned upon by urban explorers, in much the same way that those practices would be frowned upon by most — if not all — trained backpackers and mountaineers in a wilderness setting. Ultimately, though, I believe that the fundamental motivation behind both North's “urban adventures” and urban exploration is the search for wildness in urban space, and in being one of the first to articulate the genesis of that need North is an important jumping-off point in any discussion of placeless urban wildness, regardless of whether you are an “adventurer” or an “explorer” in name.
undertaking involving danger and unknown risks,” but also as “an exciting and remarkable experience” (1). Urban explorers might not be in it primarily for the thrill, but their practice certainly has these qualities of adventure. North could just as well be describing the experiential dimension of the traditional wilderness experience – wildness – here, and in fact, shortly into the book's first chapter, he makes the connection between the traditional wilderness experience and “urban adventure” even more explicit.

In the book's opening section – entitled, appropriately enough, “Call of the Wild,” North begins with a set of rhetorical questions that directly posit “urban adventures” as the equal of traditional wilderness experiences:

Have you ever needed to go on a big adventure, but been stuck in the city? Have you ever seen those pictures of people climbing sheer rock walls, skiing down deep mountain couloirs, exploring deep underground caverns, or leaping into the air with a mile of sky below and a view of seven counties – and wished they were of you? Have you ever wished that you lived two hundred years ago when the country was young and the West called people like you to come and test their fiber? Have you ever felt like going out to find some excitement, but the art museums, pool halls, rollerskating rinks, movie theaters, and coffeehouses just wouldn't do? Have you ever wanted exhilaration that jogging in the park and a game of racquetball wouldn't deliver? Have you ever felt that the concrete-and-asphalt-covered world that you are spending your life in keeps you from your true essential nature as an adventurer? Then maybe it is time to explore urban adventures. (3)

Clearly, in a comparison to traditional wilderness experiences, North finds urban adventure different only in terms of location; the quality of the experience is the same regardless of where
that experience takes place.

Such adventures are not only the qualitative equal of being in the wilderness for North, though: in some senses, they are actually an improvement. He states that compared to the wilderness experiences he describes above, “it is easy to start off on an urban adventure” (3). Such adventures require “very little time and, usually, no money” and “can be had during the day or night, weekday or weekend, rain or shine, any season” (3). All he asks is that you have “a creative view toward the sculpture that is all around you, a few free hours, and the will to be an adventurer” (3). Thus, for North, urban wildness is not only of equal quality experientially, it is more accessible than natural wildness, more democratic. His criteria for an urban adventure is that it should “make your hands sweat, eyes open wide, heart pound, blood rush through your veins, hair stand on end, teeth chatter, knees knock, and throat tighten” (4). The desire for this quality of experience could certainly encourage adventurers of the type that Ninjalicious, et al. would prefer not be associated with urban exploration, yet at the same time being “uncomfortable yet exhilarated, with a sense of wow” (4) is part of the fundamental allure of wildness, is it not?

Besides, North admits that “although adventure is a body-oriented experience, it is not just body oriented. Adventure happens when you push your body to the known limit, take one step beyond that, and then use all of your focused mental capacity in an attempt to recover” (4). For his next move, North bridges the aforementioned gap between the physical aspect of a spatial practice – walking – and the mental aspect of imaginative unmapping. One who takes on the mindset of an urban adventurer, he argues, will find that the city becomes a “wilderness playground,” that “An old brick building will become a choreographer and teach you to dance in a vertical world. The blacktopped, potholed pavement will become a rapids-filled river enticing and challenging the deft navigator. A commuter-choking bridge will become a sculpture to climb.
The smelly sewers beneath the city will become a Minoan labyrinth” (5). This transformation happens because “when confronted straight on with imminent, life-threatening danger, we […] open our eyes, see the beauty of the day, marvel at the insignificant, rejoice in the mundane, and allow every moment to be full of meaning” (6). Here, North's description echoes Shepard's assertion of the still-present needs of our Pleistocene genome.

Later on in the Handbook, this echo gets even stronger when North directly suggests that our drive toward urban adventure is rooted in our (pre)history:

Our ancestors were wild beings who lived by their instincts under the sun and stars with occasional hunger and cold to sharpen their wits and will. However, they were also social beings who banded together for mutual safety and comfort. Today, as urban and suburban dwellers, we are estranged from our natural habitat. We live in climate-controlled electric caves and no longer see the stars. Cold and hunger have been replaced by wonderful amenities that dull our instincts. Our will to survive has lost connection with its foundation, has been distorted, and is expressed through excessive behaviors. (51)

The transformation that North describes here allows us to constructively reach back towards this heritage. The quasi-Zen state North believes is necessary for this reaching-back is characterized throughout the rest of the book in the form of the “Bodivoodoo,” an alter-ego that incites North to exhilarating acts of urban exploration and which is clearly modeled after the Buddhist Bodhisattva.39 Obviously, North sees urban adventure as not just a physical but also a philosophical/spiritual pursuit.

In an even more explicit break from place, North later explains – in a section entitled

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39 The Bodhisattva is an enlightened being who has achieved Buddhahood. It seems that North's particular use of the term appears to come from the Jack Kerouac novel The Dharma Bums, wherein Kerouac's character Ray Smith is referred to as a Bodhisattva a number of times.
“How to Find Adventure in an Urban Environment” – that location has nothing to do with the quality of an adventure. “Exotic locations enhance adventures,” he reasons, “they offer rare beauty and enchanting surprises that enrich life. These surprises may even compensate for all the discomfort that tends to accompany adventurous journeys. But adventure is not about scenery” (11). This is true for all adventures, whether they be of the traditional wilderness or the urban variety: “Urban adventures offer challenges similar to those of adventures found in wild places,” North warns, “Urban and wilderness adventures require use of the same skills and present the same deadly risks. Urban adventures provide moments of fear and exhilaration in situations within, but beyond the control of, our highly structured world” (11). Indeed, much of the rest of North's book deals with methods for the attainment and then the application of these skills, whether they be the basic tenets of route planning, climbing, balancing, or what North calls “committed maneuver execution” (11). Importantly, none of these techniques are presented as a method of exploring or traversing a particular place; instead, they are general tools, a set of brushes that allow the application of paints on whatever canvas the practitioner chooses.

Beginning the last section of his book, North writes that “Adventures are as numerous and varied as the crystal patterns for snowflakes. Unconceived urban adventures are waiting to be born. That spark of madness that lucidly reveals our essential human nature seeks expression. It is not enough to hunt the wooly mammoth once you dream that you can ride it” (143).

Ultimately, North's doctrine of “urban adventures” is not at all unlike Ninjalicious' “urban exploration” in its description of a practice by which urban place can become wild space anytime, anywhere. That North ties the need for such adventures to our background as hunter-gatherers only strengthens the connections between his work and later UE texts such as Invisible Frontier and Access All Areas, which also characterize the urge to explore as a basic human need. The process of addressing this need, however, is not just theoretical, it also requires a specific set
of skills to match the mindset suggested by North, skills explicated at length by Ninjalicious fifteen years after The Urban Adventure Handbook in his Access All Areas.

**This Way to Wildness: Ninjalicious' Access All Areas**

Whereas North's Handbook is mainly concerned with the practice of exploration by way of a philosophical doctrine of deterritorialization, Access All Areas, Ninjalicious' UE “bible,” takes practical instruction in UE to the extreme. The book was published in 2005, shortly before Ninjalicious’ – real name Jeff Chapman – death from cancer; however, for years before his book's publication he had served as the author of the online and print zine Infiltration, and it is from the Infiltration series that much of the collected knowledge in Access All Areas comes. That knowledge takes the form of instruction in the minutiae of the physical dimension of the spatial practice of UE, and through Ninjalicious' descriptions, it becomes clear that the skills necessary for UE mirror many of those required for wilderness survival more than a little. Before describing those skills in earnest, however, Ninjalicious begins by providing his own brief definition of and justification for UE. His philosophizing has much in common with North's yet it is worth a brief look as it forms a touchstone of ethics for the physical practice he later describes.

Focus on the ethical dimension of UE is sharper in Access All Areas than in North's book. Ninjalicious begins the book with a statement explaining that UE “is intended to enhance and enlighten the reader's appreciation of his or her landscape, and is written with great respect for the sites described herein. We are staunch defenders of these sites and will battle for their conservation. Our tourism is not one of exploitation, but rather of reverence” (1). Such concern for conservation echoes Bagai nearly fifteen years earlier, but also the sentiment of “traditional” preservationists like John Muir in their reverence for wildernesses places. Ninjalicious continues
this thread of ethical proscription through the book's introduction. In addition, he encourages would-be explorers with justifications that mirror North's, claiming that “Urban exploration inspires people to create their own adventures, like when they were kids, instead of buying the pre-packaged adventures too many of us settle for” (3). Rather than “settling for” a constructed, picturesque-by-design environment or a carefully controlled “wilderness” experience, “urban explorers strive to actually create authentic experiences, by making discoveries that allow them to participate in the secret workings of cities and structures, and to appreciate fantastic, obscure spaces that might otherwise go completely neglected” (3). Exactly how a would-be explorer goes about doing this is covered by the book's remaining two hundred pages.

*Access All Areas'* first section is preparatory: entitled “Training,” it encourages would-be explorers to practice climbing trees, as the basics of climbing safely are “the same whether you're climbing a tree, a rock wall, a mountain, or a building” (11). It also suggests a series of hide-and-seek-like games in order to improve one's stealthiness and offers the practical advice that would-be explorers consider quitting smoking (10). Overall, this section presents helpful advice about how to hone basic skills like climbing, running, jumping, moving without being noticed, and the like: all skills that would benefit a backcountry hiker just as much as an urban explorer.

From “Training,” the book moves on to “Recruitment,” a section that navigates the abovementioned difficulty of choosing UE partners who are more likely to be of the LNT mindset and less likely to be of the sinister “man of the crowd” or vandal mindset. Ninjalicious explains in this section exactly why UE party sizes should be kept small (15), as well as why it's useful to have at least one female along, because “women generally come under much less suspicion than men” (16). Also discussed is how your appearance can effect your chances of being let off lightly if caught trespassing: basically, if you have a Unabomber beard and a bag full of high-tech paramilitary gadgets, expect to be given more of a hassle than if you bear a
striking resemblance to Archie Bunker. The conclusion of this section sees Ninjalicious directly linking UE to its wilderness-located cousin, likening the ethical code of urban explorers to the Sierra Club's. “When you take a cool relic from a site,” he reckons, “you diminish the experience for all future explorers” (21). Instead of imagining an exploration as your own personal process of staking a claim, a sort of mini-colonization, Ninjalicious suggests that you look at it this way:

You share a [collection] of relics scattered all around the buildings of the world, and you won't make them any more yours just by depriving anyone else. You'll reduce yourselves into mere robbers in the eyes of anyone who catches you. So, make sure both you and the people you're with remember that ethics don't disappear on the far side of the 'do not enter' sign – if anything, they become more important. (21)

This lesson on LNT ethics is followed by sections on “Sneaking,” “Social Engineering” – which intentionally paraphrases Dale Carnegie's *How To Win Friends and Influence People* – and “Equipping.” The last of these three sections is most thoroughly reminiscent of a traditional wilderness guidebook as it explains the difference between what equipment is necessary and what is merely extraneous, as well as providing a few useful bits of general advice like “Take at least two flashlights with trustworthy batteries when you're touring storm drains or other locations where you could be stranded in the darkness if your primary flashlight breaks” (52). The “Clothing” subsection in particular reads exactly like a backpacking manual: Ninjalicious informs the reader that “If you're wearing a jacket, it's really not pulling its weight unless it has at least eight pockets,” and “Dressing in layers, as you may have heard before, is a very good idea” (54).

The next section, entitled “Preparing,” provides some interesting insight on the type of awareness an urban explorer should have. Much of the “Preparing” section covers practical
considerations such as reading up on local laws, looking up background information on the history of specific sites, and other such research that is analogous to reading topography squares and Forest Service regulations in preparation for a backcountry trip. However, there is also a more philosophical dimension at work in scouting sites for urban exploration: Ninjalicious says that “Part of finding exploration sites involves casting off a certain restrained mindset […] and realizing that many of your boundaries are self-imposed, voluntary, and, ultimately, illusory” (75). He goes on to explain that “Once you're constantly on the lookout for places to explore, you'll find them. I've seen it happen to people – they go from having no idea that a secret world exists to having no time to check out all their leads” (76).

The next section, “Abandoned Sites,” goes right back to the practical, admonishing the reader that “Soggy, old, wooden buildings will eventually collapse, and they're most likely to do it when someone is inside” (90) in a tone reminiscent of an experienced mountaineer warning an amateur to watch out for rockfalls at midday, when the ice is most likely to melt. Similarly practical, “Active Sites” gives page after page of advice on bypassing alarmed doors, checking to make sure that those doors won't lock behind you, avoiding and confusing security cameras, and using manufacturers' codes to get elevators to do whatever you want. “Construction Sites” is more of the same, with the advice adapted to suit these particularly tricky-to-navigate, often-incomplete buildings.

The section on “Drains” is another point at which the book has much in common with traditional wilderness guidebooks, as Ninjalicious notes – much as many other urban explorers have – that for many cavers, drains are “an accessible substitute for natural caves” (163). In these artificial caves, the threat of drowning due to a sudden rise in the level of sewer water is ever-present, and the possibility of succumbing to deoxygenated air in a confined space also exists; teaching the reader how to avoid such an end is Ninjalicious' primary goal here. However, he
also adapts a bit of advice that has been important for the purpose of orienteering for thousands of years when he explains that:

> While most drains are relatively straight, or only slightly curved, some are more pleasantly labyrinthine, splitting apart or coming together at junctions and sometimes spanning several levels. Bringing along a rough map and a compass can be fun and useful for mapping purposes, but even in the more complex drain systems it's difficult to get truly lost. In most cases you can just follow the water flow upstream or downstream, as appropriate. Even when this isn't possible, as in a patch of drain that's dry or filled with stagnant water, it's not usually difficult to find the main pipe and determine which way is which. If you do find yourself in a real maze, scribbling a few chalk markings on the walls will probably enable you to sort it out by dinnertime. (175)

Much of the advice that Ninjalicious doles out in this section returns in a similar guise in the last few sections of the book – “Transit Tunnels,” “Utility Tunnels,” and “Other Fun Stuff” – as each covers a different but rather similar milieu to “Drains.”

Ninjalicious' *Access All Areas*, in combination with North's *Handbook*, provides an excellent introduction to both the practical and the philosophical/spiritual dimensions of the spatial practice of urban exploration. Each clearly hints at the relationship between UE and America's wilderness exploration tradition – a relationship that validates UE as a conduit to wildness in an urban setting – and yet each also makes clear how UE advances and improves upon the experience of traditional wilderness.

The second pair of texts I will examine eschew discussion of UE from a methodological standpoint, instead describing it at the level of direct experience. Though they each have their own unique approaches, both *Invisible Frontier* and *New York Underground* further explicate
how wildness can exist not only in traditional wildnesses but also in urban wild space. Each of these texts illustrate this universality of wildness by telling tales of 21st century urban exploration via the conventions of traditional nature writing.

The Urban Trail Report: Jinx and Invisible Frontier

In a way, L.B. Deyo and David Leibowitz's book Invisible Frontier tells you all you need to know about its intentions with its title. Unlike The Urban Adventure Handbook, Jinx's text doesn't bother describing its methods, and spends little time explaining its motivations. Instead, Invisible Frontier takes a narrative format, telling of its authors' sort-of colonization of the forgotten spaces of New York City, the abandoned corners of the city that only urban explorers would reconceptualize as an “invisible frontier” in the first place. At times, Jinx's sense of entitlement towards this unmapped urban frontier can be abrasive, and yet Invisible Frontier is a fascinating document for its structural and stylistic choices, which – intentionally or not – connect it to the literary genre of nature writing. Invisible Frontier – and by extension the Jinx team – may seem presumptuous, but that presumption belies a connection to a literary tradition that helps legitimate UE as an effective path to wildness through dramatic retellings of urban explorations.

If Bagai and North described how urban exploration worked in the early 1990s, in 2003 Jinx described what urban exploration looked like in action. Invisible Frontier takes place in New York City, and the journey the authors describe comprises explorations of twelve different sites, each a “badlands outpost” ranging from “the intestine labyrinths of the aqueducts and subway lines, through condemned buildings and landmarks, up into the bridges and rooftops” (7). The group's first site is the Old Croton Aqueduct deep in the guts of the city, and the series of

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40 Deyo and Leibowitz are the de facto leaders of the Jinx organization.
subsequent targets describes a Dantian ascent from “Hell” – as the first section of the book is entitled – to “Paradise”: the final section, in which Jinx comes up short of their goal of reaching the roof of the World Trade Center towers when they are destroyed by terrorists mere days before a planned ascent. This quest-style narrative and the adjective-laden prose the authors use to describe its execution are perhaps the most immediately obvious ties Invisible Frontier has to nature writing.

Though Jinx's goal-oriented vertical ascent through New York City might seem contrary to Ninjalicious' insistence that urban exploration be about the journey and not the destination, it becomes clear in reading Invisible Frontier that what is most important about Jinx's quest is not the completion of each and every mission. In some cases – and in fact, during the very first mission – the team retreats midway through a mission for the sake of comfort and safety, failing to reach their ultimate goal in exchange for some donuts and coffee. What is important for our purposes here is that Invisible Frontier's mission-based structure indirectly describes specific points of interest in the urban wilderness of New York.

Much like a nature writing text, Invisible Frontier thus highlights particular places worth exploring. Here, though, instead of describing the sandstone monoliths of Arches National Park, or the rapids of the Colorado River as they run through the Grand Canyon, Jinx describes the geometry of the City Hall Subway Tunnels, the surreal artistry of the Freedom Tunnel, and the vertiginous arch of the George Washington Bridge. Such description is written in a tone quite different from that of North's Handbook or Ninjalicious' Access All Areas. Even Solis' New York Underground, in love in its own way with the passages beneath New York City, fails to capture the beauty and excitement of the experience of urban exploration in the same way as Invisible Frontier.

As an example, consider Deyo's description of a descent into the Old Croton Aqueduct, a
passage that, but for its context, could have been lifted from any number of nature-writing texts:

The farther we push into this long grave, the more evidence of contamination confronts us. The outside pushes its way in. Engineering succumbs to environment, the walls oxidize, the trespasser leaves his trash. Wild grass roots grow thicker as we proceed, hanging down from the mortar in jeweled webs. How long did it take them to bore down through the soil, to trace the microscopic pores of the brick? Mindless, each tendril has solved the maze and found the vapor, clung and crawled into the tunnel, down into the current to drink. (21)

Of course, not all of Jinx's explorations reveal such a sublime pairing of the constructed and the wild. Yet, even in environments that most would find less than picturesque, *Invisible Frontier* maintains a tone of aesthetic appreciation. Later on in the book, as Jinx is exploring an abandoned row house in Harlem, Deyo describes a room thus:

There's a bathtub sitting against the eastern wall. It's a heavy one, solidly built. It's filled with pulverized Sheetrock and white dust. Against the western wall, the track of a dumbwaiter stretches all the way to the roof. The dumbwaiter itself is shredded, hanging limp from its housing. Near the back of the building, a *Hustler* magazine lies on the floor. A methadone bottle stands near the corner, its label still legible, still containing a trace quantity of the drug. Beside it, a Polaroid shows three men posing before a brick wall. One of the men wears a Newport cigarette T-shirt that reads, “Alive with Pleasure.” (103)

Deyo may not be describing a beautiful natural cave here, but quite clearly even such a room in Harlem represents a discovery of sorts for Jinx, a chance to unmap previous place-values and find something that is new at least to them.

Of course, neither nature writing nor urban exploration are entirely about aesthetic
appreciation, and, appropriately, *Invisible Frontier* also shares some gripping accounts of Jinx's explorations ending in less-than-ideal ways. For example, during an attempt to gain the roof of Grand Central Station, the team is found out by security guards – an incident that Leibowitz describes in breathless fashion:

Flashlight beams shoot across our faces and the shouts of the distant figures echo through the tunnel. The figures move toward us, and for a moment we freeze in fear. Eyes glance in every direction until suddenly, as if moved by a hidden force, we break into a run at once. We gallop north at full sprint, feet pounding against the ground, our heads pounding with fear of capture. But the figures behind us recede into the distance. Why aren't they following? Regardless, we know we've been spotted now: It's only a matter of time before we're booted out of here. I can practically hear the radio calls going out to the police officers who patrol the grand concourse. We have to head to the surface. (69)

The team eventually escapes, but this sudden break for freedom highlights both the legal danger of UE and how that danger helps connect it to a deeper, more primordial wild experience of the type that often forms the center of nature writing texts.

Another quality *Invisible Frontier* shares with the nature writing genre is Jinx's frequent references to place histories and historical events. Like many urban explorers, the Jinx team is deeply interested in the history of the places they have chosen to unmap. The connection between urban exploration and place history is more deeply explored in Solis' *New York Underground* – as I will show in the next section – but Jinx's interest in and respect for the history of their chosen “frontier” is just as obvious in its own way as Solis'. Though at first glance such an interest might seem like an endorsement of place-value, contradictory to the execution of a deterritorialized spatial practice, Jinx instead manages to use the historical
backgrounds of the lost places of New York City as a canvas for their walking/writing. In this way, Jinx's explorations can be seen as simply adding another layer to the palimpsest of histories that have been written on these places previously. Ultimately, Jinx's use of historical context adds a degree of gravitas to their explorations appropriate to an experience of wildness.

For example, when Deyo opens the first chapter of Invisible Frontier by describing the New York City underground as “a labyrinth 780 miles in area, and over eight hundred feet deep,” where “four hundred forty-three miles of train tracks carry the subways and commuter trains beneath New York,” “three hundred forty-six miles of aqueducts and six thousand miles of water mains and tunnels carry 1.5 billion gallons of water beneath the city each day,” “seven hundred and fifty thousand manholes access the utility grid,” “power runs through 83,043 miles of underground cable, enough to encircle the globe three and a half times,” and “one hundred six million telephone calls connect each day [through] one hundred million miles of telephone cables, which, if stretched end to end, could reach the sun” (1), these details add to the mystery of the city's underground rather than subtracting from it. More knowledge about a place you intend to unmap can give potentially fascinating context to that unmapping rather than invalidating it. And what better urban space to get lost in than New York City, a city so large that the scale itself dictates that the line between known and unknown be blurred down every alley and on every rooftop?

Threads of historical detail similar to the example above are woven throughout the book. A chapter on the Old Croton Aqueduct is peppered with asides on ancient Roman engineers and their development of many of the architectural techniques New York's water system relied on in its infancy, almost two millennia later. While describing an exploration of the West Side Amtrack Tunnel, Leibowitz gives a brief history of graffiti before explaining how that particular subculture came to take an interest in what later became known colloquially as the Freedom
Tunnel. Much of a chapter ostensibly devoted to the exploration of an abandoned smallpox hospital on Roosevelt Island instead deals with the history of smallpox epidemics in 19th century New York. In fact, nearly every chapter of *Invisible Frontier* fleshes out its explorations with tangentially related history lessons, showing a similarity to more traditional nature writing texts such as *Land of Little Rain* or *A Sand County Almanac*. Leibowitz notes the length of the root system of a surface-growing tree as it snakes down through the roof of the Old Croton Aqueduct in much the same way that Aldo Leopold counts tree rings in his beloved forest.

Also like Leopold and many other nature writers, Jinx has an interest in social critique. For Deyo especially, this critique is rooted in the fact that Jinx understands New York City on a level that the “squares” do not, as:

> They don't know the river that snakes beneath them toward Manhattan. Or the pipes that branch off from that river in every direction, narrowing in a Renard series: each pipe's diameter derived from the previous one's multiplied by the $n$th route of ten. The pipe routes are uncharted, cloaking mystery. Our streets conceal a Gordian knot of wires, chutes, conduits, water mains, and power lines. The jungle grows always denser, geometrically more complex, as new pipes are sewn into old gaps, new lines are born and old ones die [...] This is our frontier, and we've begun. (28)

This perceived distance between Jinx and the “normal” city-dwellers drives Deyo to pontificate on a number of societal ills, suggesting a sort-of proto-politics for urban exploration. Deyo's style brings to mind an urban Ed Abbey, and though he holds forth on various topics, overall he describes America in general – and New York specifically – as a decadent but failing civilization, in decline morally and aesthetically.

For example, one section of the book – Part II, “Purgatory” – begins with Deyo declaring
Art is dead. Conceptual art functions as editorial cartoon, lacking only punch-line captions. In architecture, postmodern attempts to retreat from austere modernism have been busier, but no less ugly, than their monolithic forebears. Confusion and inexpert fabrication are equally evident in the fashion industry. In 1950, the meanest laborer would scarcely consider leaving home without a jacket, tie, and hat. Today, attorneys and businessmen slouch into their high-rent offices dressed for the beach (75).

He later goes on to rant about hipsters – “I mean, they rock their faded Smiths T-shirts and cutoff shorts. The go to the same beauty parlors as their girlfriends and walk out with Gabe Kaplan afros. And you think I'm crazy, but they all cultivate this kind of socialist mystique, carrying a copy of Manufacturing Consent in one hand and an iced coffee in the other, talking on a cell phone. Most of them are petty traitors” (83) – but perhaps the most egregious instance of his polemic is that which comprises almost an entire chapter ostensibly dedicated to describing Jinx's infiltration of New York's UN Headquarters.

Deyo starts the chapter off by sarcastically noting that “Today's peaceful, lawful, progressive world, where violence and poverty exist only in history books, is largely the result of the United Nations' efforts. How many take the time to let them know how grateful they are? We couldn't wait to let them know” (108). Later in the chapter, when another Jinx agent – “Bleach” – questions the reasoning behind Jinx's colonization of the United Nations Headquarters, Deyo explains that he had originally thought that “Bleach had simply not known our position, and had inadvertently opposed it”; however, now he suspects that “the right of any agent, at any time, to ask his own questions” might well “be the end of the Jinx Project” (115), and that Bleach might be a “traitor.”
Ultimately, after successfully raising the Jinx flag over the United Nations building, Deyo writes that he “[looks] forward to a future for the United Nations, as a forum for discussion and debate, embracing a modest role as advisor, eschewing the pretense of sovereignty, encouraging universal liberty and democracy” (122). How exactly the raising of the flag is meant to precipitate such an outcome remains unexpressed. Unless Deyo is somewhat inarticulately advocating for the urban equivalent of a green anarchist movement, the purpose of such polemic in the text never becomes clear. However, the presumed difference between Jinx and the “squares” that is at the heart of these rants is important in another sense. Perhaps the way in which Invisible Frontier most directly confronts its kinship with the nature writing genre is through the authors' metacommentary on what the practice of urban exploration means to them and how they perceive themselves in the context of the long history of human exploration.

The Jinx team certainly fancies themselves part of a grand tradition of explorers with a fervency that surpasses anything in the other UE texts. In case the Dantean pretensions of their quest don't immediately make this clear, consider that as the team descends into the muddy waters of the Old Croton Aqueduct for their first mission, “the men wear suits and ties; the two women wear cocktail dresses” (4). After sludging through the sewers for a few hours, they emerge, with Deyo explaining that “the Jinx uniform is sacrosanct, and permits no modification whether at cocktails or in dank sewers. It's the line we draw between the squares and us” (11). For Jinx, the suit and tie replaces the safari hat and boots as a visual signifier of their explorer- hood. In addition to the uniforms, Jinx requires that each exploration mission be completed by the raising of their organization's flag – an actual flag bearing the tri-bladed icon traditionally understood to denote the presence of radiation – over the “conquered” area. This gesture is obviously meant to represent a colonization of New York's “invisible frontier”; however, while such an act might seem ostentatious, it is also an acknowledgment of the very real dangers that
urban exploration can present and the very real sense of accomplishment that comes with a successful exploration, whether it be in the jungle, in the desert, or in the Old Croton Aqueduct.

These descriptions of Jinx's actions in *Invisible Frontier* may give the impression of a group of modern-day flâneurs posturing in their chosen milieu, but many of these men and women have the same motivations and abilities one would expect from a more traditional explorer, and they are quite aware of the potential danger of their practice. For instance, one of the Jinx members to sound the depths of the Old Croton Aqueduct is a man named “Salamander.”\(^\text{41}\) Deyo explains that “Salamander's never really at home unless he's crawling through the frigid blackness under ninety feet of rock. His free time is for tearing off to the Northeast's toughest caves, most of them uncharted. He's linked up with a network of kindred souls and holds rank and title in the local Caver hierarchy” (10). And yet, “Salamander” also makes time for this less understood, but no less challenging form of exploration.

Accompanying Jinx on a few of their later explorations are Brad Wieners and Kiké Arenal from *Outside*, a respected “adventure magazine” that covers topics like mountaineering, backpacking, and rock climbing. Interestingly, during an exploration of the abandoned Roosevelt Island smallpox hospital, Deyo seems to think Jinx's exertions are beneath the pair, “who ten days from now will be chasing down guerillas in the Colombian jungle” (77). The interactions between Wieners and Jinx comprise one of the more interesting parts of *Invisible Frontier*, as they illustrate an ideological clash over the legitimacy of traversing traditional wildernesses as compared to urban exploration, a subtext that runs parallel to the group's series of missions. Deyo compares Jinx's activities unfavorably to those of Wieners and Arenal a number of times throughout the book, implying that urban exploration should be beneath these two “real” adventurers. In the article Wieners wrote of his experience with Jinx – entitled “Wild in the

\(^{41}\) With the exception of Deyo and Leibowitz, the Jinx team members are all identified throughout the book by code names, for the sake of anonymity.
Streets” – Deyo even claims that “we'd love to do National Geographic adventures through Borneo, but we can't afford that. So we've taken to exploring the frontier right out our door” (“Wild in the Streets”), a tip of the hat to UE's increased accessibility, and yet also an implication that it is a stopgap until one can afford Borneo.

On the other hand, although Wieners believes that “[Jinx] could use a few days in a climbing gym,” he also admits by the end of the article that “Looking up at the Chrysler Building, all the while afraid of falling or being caught – it feels like the final moments of Blade Runner. Like I'm 12 years old. Which is to say, I'm having a blast” (“Wild in the Streets”). Though on a cultural level Wieners' “usual” practice is valued while the posturing of Jinx can seem a bit silly, the quality of the urban exploration experience clearly connects with something in Wieners' adventurer mentality that runs deeper than culture: the thrill of the unknown, of wildness. Likewise, as Jinx explores the City Hall subway station, Leibowitz describes a moment of confusion: “I squint at the map. There is no compass in it, no way to tell which way is up. Nobody is quite sure what to do. This decision is not a trivial one. If we go the wrong way we will be far more likely to have a run-in with a train. The day's exploration would come to a bloody close” (52). This disorientation and the potential consequence of deadly danger is a combination familiar to any explorer, urban or otherwise. Does the fact that this disorientation and danger is intentionally self-inflicted, willfully conjured in an environment designed specifically to minimize such situations somehow make it less authentic? That's the question Jinx wrestles with throughout Invisible Frontier.

Though the uniforms, the flag, and the “frontier” rhetoric may at times provide an overdose of gravitas, this is countered by Deyo's and Leibowitz's playful(?) depreciation of urban exploration in the face of its supposedly more legitimate forebears. Before the descent into the Old Croton Aqueduct, Deyo muses:
Were we ready? I harbored grave self-doubts. Captain Sir Richard Francis Burton, by the time he found the source of the Nile in 1858, spoken twenty-seven languages, had been ordained in the Islamic and Hindu faiths, and was the finest swordsman in Europe. I didn't even have a library card. The Age of Exploration was gone; we of Jinx had never breathed its vigorous air. Ours was not the compass, the machete, or the duel, but the mouse, the flipflop and the Casual Friday. We sprang from a whited epoch of online chat rooms, grade inflation, and psychic friends; years of Thinking Globally while Acting Locally, of asking What Would Jesus Do?; it was a time of Lollapaloozas, Promise Keepers, and vegan airline meals. Instead of virtue we had correctness; instead of fighting we signed petitions. We had no love affairs, only relationships; no safari, only Earth Day; no death, only recycling. Where were honor, courage, guts, and style? Consigned to the classics section of the video store. An anemic generation cowed through faddish decades, growing softer and more churlish, waiting for a battle cry. The cry, when it came, was “Mean People Suck.” How could we be ready? (8)

Deyo doubts the validity of Jinx's practice in a larger, sociohistorical context, though this isn't the case for some of the other members of Jinx. This internal schism becomes more and more obvious as other team members strike up arguments with their leaders throughout the text, and Invisible Frontier's ideological battle later comes to a head in a chapter that recounts the happenings at one of Jinx's “Athenaeum” meetings, a monthly sort-of academic conference dealing with all things UE. While the purpose of this particular chapter is ostensibly to showcase the inner workings of the Jinx hierarchy, the centerpiece of the conference itself is a staged debate between Deyo and an agent named “Brain” entitled “The Age of Discovery Is not dead: It lives on through the urban explorers” (150).
Deyo begins the debate by reiterating his earlier stance, claiming that “During [the Age of Exploration], explorers were engaged in discovering places that were completely unknown to the western world. They were unmapped and unheard of. They dealt with cultures that had never seen a European before” (152). By contrast, Deyo argues that “Urban explorers spend their time poking around in cities that are completely mapped, that are completely inhabited, and that are completely known” (152). In his rebuttal, Brain relies on an argument not unlike the one that I used to assert the value of urban exploration as a spatial practice above. “While it is true that the continents have been mapped in this modern age,” he says:

It is also true that there is much knowledge of the modern city that has been lost. Our cities have become so complex, so overwrought with layer after layer of complexity, that there is really no one person who understands how all of these layers work together. It is true that New York is an inhabited city, but so was Mexico before Cortez. So was Harare before Burton. The history of exploration is the history of the discovery of inhabited places in which there is information to be gained or uncovered by the explorer. Our modern-day cities are a perfect example of such lost knowledge, and why it is imperative upon us that we urban explorers take the attitude of the classical explorers in our travels. And it is imperative that we gather knowledge and hard empirical facts to share with our communities.

That is the only way for knowledge to grow. (153)

The Athenaeum's resolution is ultimately passed in Brain's favor by a slim margin, but that isn't what makes this moment important in the overall scheme of Invisible Frontier. Instead, this scene serves as evidence that Jinx's text is willing to dedicate a significant amount of space to discussion of the basic validity of the practice of UE. This is perhaps the most important way in which Jinx's text harkens to the nature writing genre: its willingness to be constructively self-
critical.

Through her book *New York Underground*, Julia Solis constructively extends this discussion, actively employing the urban explorer's ability to uncover the lost knowledge of New York City, so that it can be shared with the community. By interweaving recountings of her own urban explorations beneath the city with the known history of those places which are now “lost,” Solis not only expands on the relationship between UE and place history that Jinx began to explore in *Invisible Frontier*, she also suggests a way in which that relationship can be developed for the benefit of the city's community at large. In this way, Solis sheds light on another very important tie between nature writing and UE: the potential for activism in the name of the places being explored.

**Exhuming History: Julia Solis' *New York Underground***

Though it deals with urban exploration and is set in New York City, Julia Solis' *New York Underground* takes a much different tack than *Invisible Frontier*. In fact, it would more rightly be called a history book than a narrative. In a sort-of inversion of Jinx's text, Solis' explorations of the city seem to inform her interest in its history rather than the other way around. Yet in its own way, *New York Underground* strives to represent UE as a descendant of a more austere exploring tradition by stressing the practice's potential for exhuming places that have been resigned to history despite the fact that those places still exist, and still have stories to tell. The seeking of such places can be as wild as any experience that North or Jinx represent in their texts, but in addition to this appeal of wildness, Solis suggests an archival function for UE, a move unique to her work and one that adds an archeological dimension to the practice of UE.

In her first chapter, Solis sets the stage for the history lesson to come: “New Yorkers have long been fascinated by the underground,” she claims, and “The city's history is filled with
attempts to harness the world below its streets” (3). Once the “communal Main Street [was] superseded by the subway […] New York was described as a city of cave dwellers” (3). Solis acknowledges that much of the city's history is bound up in nearly two centuries of amazing engineering projects, which has resulted most obviously in its “formidable collection of skyscrapers” (3). Beneath, the city, though, is where “the real adventure” lies, hidden amongst a series of tunnels and pipes, artificial “canyons and chasms,” the creation of which is no less impressive from an engineering standpoint than the raising of the Empire State Building or the World Trade Center towers (3). However, because of their relative lack of visibility, these underground labyrinths have been forgotten, and Solis makes it her dual goal to reeducate New York Underground's readers on the spectacular feats of subterranean engineering that brought New York City into existence in the first place and to update the history of that underground by documenting her own explorations.

Before delving into the history of the underground proper, though, Solis gives the reader a brief explanation of her thoughts on urban exploration, a reasoning that reaches back to and resonates with Simmel's thoughts on the modern city: “the hidden areas beneath the streets can be strangely peaceful and welcoming,” she explains, “it is specifically in its subterranean realms that this often chaotic metropolis becomes approachable” (3). In the underground, she asserts, the city space becomes more personal than the streets above, where “New York treats its abandoned structures like seeds stuck between its teeth; well-meaning forces jab at them, hoping to reintegrate them into usefulness, yet eventually they are crushed or absorbed” (3). Solis' complaint here brings to mind statements from traditional preservationists: the loss of yet another wilderness area is more than just the loss of a picturesque forest. Likewise, “In losing its ruins, the city is giving up a part of its soul” (3). Underground, fortunately, this loss proceeds much more slowly, both for aesthetic and logistical reasons.
When Solis first began exploring this underground, this skeleton of New York City, she found that “The subterranean environment was wild, unpredictable, not subject to the societal rules that reigned topside” (3), but in addition to the thrill inherent in exploration, she became aware that “there were interesting things going on down here, and in the solitude and expanse of these underground spaces, every detail was magnified; there was space and time for them to make an impression” (4). Elucidating the stories behind those details became her mission.

Solis' second chapter, entitled “A City Built on Treacherous Rock,” delves into the history of New York's literal foundations, meshing a geology lesson with descriptions of a number of the herculean engineering efforts that led to a city of such size being able to exist on what is essential a series of islands without lacking fresh water or being stifled by its own waste. This discussion segues into the completion of the Croton Aqueduct – the same one Jinx explores in Invisible Frontier – in 1842 and a suggestion that the New York underground wasn't always as far from the public imagination as it is today. Solis tells the stories of a few tunnel-travelers: one group who piloted a small skiff down the Croton Aqueduct with its inaugural flow of water, and another group who in 1914 attempted to hike the newly expanded tunnel system from the Catskills to Brooklyn. Her description of this second group's foray is positively otherworldly:

To the great amusement of the sandhogs who had worked on the tunnel, a group of seven journalists and two photographers set out on a hundred-mile hike through the aqueduct on January 19, 1914, accompanied by one of the tunnel engineers. Although they were warned about alpine drops of more than 1,000 feet, the group entered the tunnel near Kingston, expecting to cover 13 miles on their first day. They did not make it very far. After encountering a 500-foot siphon filled with water, they gave up within a few miles of their starting point. (23)

These hikers were not Jinx team members and Outside magazine correspondents by any means;
indeed, at the beginning of the 20th century, such exploration was a matter of keen, general public interest. As another example, Solis states that the arrival of the Old Croton Aqueduct's first flow at the end of its route at City Hall “was greeted with much cheer and excitement in the greatest public celebration the city had ever experienced” (21).

With the city's water needs more or less successfully addressed today, the situation has of course changed. Now, Solis calls the aqueduct “New York’s most extravagant ruin” (29). “When it was still accessible,” she writes, “it was possible to walk on foot from the Bronx into Manhattan. Yet the narrow entrance that allowed such a journey, discovered by cavers long ago, has since been barricaded by a landslide of leaves and branches. This once vital artery, burrowing through the skin of the city, has been claimed by nature as its own” (29). As Solis and her explorer friends travel the length of the same tunnel over 150 years after its opening and 50 years since its official closing, they find much of the infrastructure in the process of being reclaimed by the natural environment. There is little evidence of any human presence, and at one point Solis finds “an animal skeleton, presumably of a small dog, which had fallen apart completely undisturbed – evidence of how destitute the interior of [the High Bridge, a section of the aqueduct] had been” (34). Her exploration sheds light on the current condition of a part of New York that was once integral to the city's survival and is now not only no longer in use, but is all but inaccessible even to those who would take any further interest in its fate.

Such underground spaces may be off-limits to most would-be explorers today – legally, if not logistically – yet the slow submission of the guts of New York City to nature makes its exploration even more fascinating now than it was a century ago when the New York Times declared that “automobiling through sewers is the very latest thing” (qtd. in Solis 45). The next section of Solis' book highlights some of the best-kept secrets of the New York underground, well-preserved treasures left over from an age when then-Mayor Seth Low and his friends
indulged in an automobile race through 300 miles of tunnel, prompting the above observation on the part of the *Times*.

A few of the other forgotten wonders uncovered by Solis include an abandoned pneumatic mail system used to transport packages across the city (56), an entire “secret” subway line financed and built privately by Alfred Beach in defiance of corrupt politician “Boss” Tweed (61), and four “ghost stations,” old subway stations rendered obsolete in 1956 by the changing length of New York's subway trains (81). The discussion of these ghost stations serves as a transition point for Solis, as she moves from talking about the original purposes of these spaces to what they have become, and how badly this process of (un)becoming demands attention.

Though many of these spaces no longer serve a purpose in the city's community-at-large, a few men and women like Solis, Deyo, and Leibowitz have explored them in detail, leaving behind a bit of their own history in the process. Solis provides a number of examples of this. The first, located in the abandoned Myrtle Avenue Station, is a project entitled *Masstransiscope*, a mural designed to function as a zoetrope when viewed by passengers of passing trains (84). First conceived of and then created by artist Bill Blass in 1980, *Masstransiscope* was restored in 2008 by a team of volunteers under Blass's direction to the delight of subway passengers across the city who had grown to enjoy watching the work unfold before their eyes during their daily commute. However, much of the culture that has sprung up around these ghost stations does not bridge the gap between the underground and the city proper so neatly.

Solis spends much of *New York Underground*’s middle section describing the underground's second type of reterritorialization: the culture of homeless and “mole people” that has sprung up in the abandoned spaces she frequents. It is in these spaces that she first encounters the work of Revs, a poet and graffiti artist who once used the subway tunnel walls as a medium for telling his life story. Solis relates that “On large, light-colored panels, he would
write dated entries on subjects ranging from childhood episodes to personal commentaries” (88-9); these entries comprised Revs' “book,” entitled I'M FUCKIN ALIVE. Though Revs had originally intended to write an entry on every single subway tunnel in the city, he only completed 235 entries before his arrest in 2000 (89). The method of his composition was methodical, as Solis describes it: “Two or three times a week he would descend into the subway, sometimes alone, carrying a custom-made ladder, a roller, and a five-gallon bucket of paint. He would set the ladder in the middle of the tracks or on the wood cover of the third rail, watching for trains as he wrote, and when he saw approaching headlights, he quickly stashed the ladder and stepped aside” (89). The trials and tribulations of underground life that Revs recorded in I'M FUCKIN ALIVE read like the travelogue of an early explorer as Solis follows in his footsteps through the labyrinth of subway tunnels.

Perhaps the pinnacle of this underground culture is the Freedom Tunnel, which is also mentioned in Invisible Frontier. A tunnel-dweller named Freedom, often working alongside another man named Smith, began recreating many of painting's greatest masterpieces using spraypaint within a tunnel once abandoned and more recently reopened by Amtrak. Since the 1970s, Freedom has used this tunnel as a canvas for recreations of the Mona Lisa, various works by Dali, and perhaps most impressively, an enormous version of Goya's Third of May (146).

Solis estimates that up to 700 people used the abandoned stations and surrounding areas as shelter at the peak of such activity in the early 90s (119). Of special interest to these “mole people” was an area known colloquially as “Burma Road,” a 60-mile confluence of steam pipes that provided residual heat during the winter (119). A renovation of Grand Central Station has since made Burma Road more difficult to access, however, indirectly forcing the tunnel-dwellers who once frequented the area to disperse. However, through the tenuous continued existence of works from artists like Blass, Revs, and Freedom, Solis articulates a “post-history” for the ghost
stations and related areas of New York's underground grounded in the lives of the tunnel-dwellers. Well after the original place-values of these spaces were abandoned, and the spaces themselves were lost from public memory – save for in the imaginations of urban explorers and a few others, like subway train aficionados – the continue to have relevance for those few who are aware of their existence. For those who aren't, the underground can be as much of a wilderness as the deepest natural cave or the highest mountain.

One telling example of exactly how far the underground has fallen from the typical New Yorker's ken is the matter of how many below-ground floors there are in Grand Central Station. Solis summarizes the “answers” she has received to this question, explaining that:

This apparently simple question has been a continuous subject of debate. There are only two track levels – which themselves run at various depths – but how far down do the maintenance areas stretch? In the station's descriptions in their books on subterranean New York, authors Pamela Jones and Jennifer Toth mention seven levels. A former terminal employee claims there are only six – two for the trains and four for utilities. The authors of Grand Central: Gateway to a Million Lives, however, speak of a power supply room eight stories down, and the formerly homeless Tina S., who lived in these catacombs for four years, speaks of a labyrinth of eerie caves and crawlspace far beneath the lowest track level (112).

When Solis' explorer group is accosted by a Grand Central maintenance worker – who turns out to be accepting of their curiosity rather than compelled to handcuff them for trespassing – Solis asks him the same question, and he replies “fifteen” (112). According to the anonymous employee, “He had descended several stories and encountered many things down there, from giant rats to drug addicts,” but as he says himself: “I would never go down 15 stories. Who knows what the hell is down there?” (112). Apparently no one does. Solis closes the section by
noting that “the remarkable fact remains that even people who come in continuous intimate contact with this terminal resort to devising their own theories as to its layout” (113).

She tells a similar story about “The Lost Tunnel of Atlantic Avenue” – as she titles the chapter – “the first subway tunnel in America” (133). According to Solis, a subway tunnel below Atlantic Avenue was known to have existed as early as 1832, but by the summer of 1911, it had been so lost to history that “the Brooklyn newspaper, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, challenged a group of 75 men to find the location of [the] mysterious abandoned tunnel” (133). The men failed, and the location of the tunnel remained a mystery until over a century after its closure in 1861, when it was found by a young man named Bob Diamond in 1980. Though Diamond has since been allowed by the city to lease part of the tunnel as an exhibition space, the remainder of the tunnel – sealed off and needing excavation work to be uncovered – has remained below the interest of city officials and thus its contents still remain a mystery.

How could the history of a building as well-known as Grand Central Station have such glaring omissions? How could the contents of its lower levels, constructed less than a century ago, be apparently as unknown to us as the contents of the Great Pyramid? How could a mile-long subway tunnel completely disappear from the historical record? Solis offers no answer to these questions, perhaps because there are none. Maybe a better question would be “why does the existence of such urban wildernesses surprise us in the first place?”. Not just New York City, but every major city – and many of the smaller ones – in America are now comprised of layer upon layer of history. That some of those older layers and their corresponding place-values are buried under the newer layers – both literally and figuratively – should really come as no surprise. It is only our cultural assumption that wild space can only exist in a specific location – outside of the city, outside of civilization – that keeps the explorations of writers like Solis from appealing to and informing a much larger audience. Generally speaking, it is comforting to think
that we know what is beneath the pavement, what is down the alley, and what is in the attic; and yet, to an urban explorer in search of accessible wildness, that comfort is the enemy. Solis' book ultimately suggests that those in search of urban wildness will not only readily find it in the city's underground, they may also exhume forgotten place history that might otherwise go ignored.

Near the end of New York Underground, Solis tells the tale of her own exploration of the abandoned Fort Totten, built in 1860 as part of the largest military complex in New York. While traveling down “one of the oldest surviving pedestrian tunnels” in the city, she comes upon graffiti etched into the rock walls by soldiers over a century ago (180). Part of the graffiti features the iconic slogan “Remember the Maine!” and this sudden intersection of history and post-history strikes Solis, prompting her to write that the graffiti “brings the history of the fort to life, imparting vitality to the narrow tunnel by the seawall” (180). Much like Deyo's intensely descriptive introduction to Jinx's “Hell,” such historical connections lend to the wildness of Solis' explorations rather than subtracting from it. In closing, she states that “Although for most people the leap from simple curiosity to an actual exploration is a large one, it is a means of transforming the anonymous city into a personal space. Taking a risk in accessing particular underground areas tends to help form a meaningful bond to the location” (223), and here seems to be suggesting a potential function for UE that goes unmentioned by her colleagues: the provision of an opportunity for the urban explorer to form a personal bond with an unmapped space once it has been freed from its previous place-value, a chance to reterritorialize that space.

Though UE's effectiveness as a spatial practice centers primarily on its ability to serve as an unmapping tool, the importance of the potential for spatial practitioners to reterritorialize – to instate their own place-value as a replacement for that which has been unmapped – should not be understated, and will not go entirely unexplored in the remainder of this dissertation. However, I believe – for reasons that will be described in greater detail in the next chapter – that city space is
not the ideal venue for such reterritorialization. Therefore, I will now move away from discussing city space, to look instead at computer-generated virtual space as another possible starting point for wildness. Rather than framing the unmapping and exploration of virtual places as simply another same-but-different iteration of the wilding that UE makes possible in the city, however, I will instead argue that virtual wild space can offer a freedom of personal expression in addition to an access to wildness, a freedom that city space – even at its wildest – cannot offer. In addition to enabling experiences of wildness, then, I believe that virtual space – by virtue of its lack of trespassing restrictions, complex property laws, and, more generally, any physical boundaries at all – also enables a species of place-construction for spatial practitioners. In particular, through a “close reading” of the popular sandbox/open-world video game Minecraft, I will show how exploration in virtual space can allow video game players to both unmap traditional place-values – safely and legally – and then institute their own definitions of place in the space that they've explored as a form of individual and communal expression. In this way, I will position the exploration of virtual space via video games like Minecraft as a further evolution of the type of spatial practice that I began discussing in Chapter Two.
INTERLUDE THREE

WORLD #5, DAY 31

The first rays of the day's sunlight suffuse my bedroom, drawing me out of a deep sleep. I open my eyes slowly and for a moment I simply take in my surroundings. I am lying in my bed – rickety wooden bedframe, rough wool sheets – in a small, but solidly built room comprised of grey stone walls and a roof made of overlapping slate tiles. The bed takes up almost the entirety of one wall, while the opposite wall is lined with a series of shelves supporting nine chests made from polished wood. A few of the chests have been left open and old tools and worn-out clothes are barely visible beneath their lids. Near the bedroom door – a hinged, wooden affair that is currently closed and locked – a single, failing torch gutters, its wan light overwhelmed now by the warm glow of the rising sun. Outside the room's one window, a cow lumbers by, mooing. It's time to start the day.

I slide out of bed to a standing position. The floor beneath my feet is more hard stone, but it is cushioned and warmed somewhat by a layer of soft-colored rugs, weakly dyed a cloudy white. I pad over to the door, which yields with a creak, and then I proceed into the house's main hallway. Straight ahead of me is the door to the bathroom, where a porcelain washtub dominates an otherwise sparsely-filled space of roughly the same dimensions as the bedroom. To my left, the hall opens up into the house's main living area. Here, the rugs are a bit more vibrantly colored – a muted blue – and the walls are lined with earth-toned hangings that catch and soften the sunlight as it angles in through the windows. Against the far wall of the room, a furnace smolders dully, and beside it a few bars of shaped iron – last night's work – are cooling. On a wooden table near the furnace lay a crust of stale bread and an apple. I grab them and put them in the pocket of my trousers. They won't make for a spectacular breakfast, but I'm in a hurry to be
on my way this morning and I don't want to take the time to prepare something else. I reach into another wooden chest that sits on the floor beside the table and pull out an old leather rucksack. Into it goes food for later: some smoked meat from the pantry and a skin of water taken from the river yesterday, along with a half-loaf of fresher bread. Back at the front door, I round up the usual equipment: pickaxe, handaxe, bow and arrow, and my notched, rusting sword. Then it's out into the world.

As I step outside, I check the two torches that hang below the house's eaves, framing the door. I fully intend to be back before dark, but it never hurts to be safe, and at night these torches will be visible from a long distance. With my back to the front door, I am facing south, and directly ahead the gentle plain on which my house rests continues for a hundred or so feet before terminating in a cliff; it's a fifty-foot drop into the lake that spreads to the horizon. To the east, the land thrusts up almost immediately into a hill that stands, at its highest point, nearly two hundred feet above my roof. As I do most mornings, I turn this way and begin to climb. On my way around the corner of the house, I pass the cow I saw earlier, and as I do he looks up from grazing, mooing again in what I suspect is a cow-greeting of some kind.

Climbing the hill is tough going, and, as usual, I don't bother walking all the way to the summit. Instead, I climb just high enough so that I can see out across the flatland to the west and north of my house until it butts up against the smaller, less spectacular hills in the distance. From this vantage, I can see the first sliver of the sun as it inches its way into the sky to the north, and as it does, its light spills out across the entirety of my work at surviving in this place. Waves of golden wheat sway in the wind to the west; they are arranged in precise rows, fed by narrow irrigation channels and protected from roving wildlife by a sturdy wooden fence. To the north is a similarly arranged but less impressive patch of wheat – I culled this one only a few days ago, and what few stalks remain are short and green yet. Along the edges of the lake to the south,
papyrus shoots grow taller than a man, and cows and pigs dot the landscape in all directions, numerous enough that I've deemed fencing them in unnecessary. As I scan my environs contentedly, one particularly enterprising pig snorts at me from the hill's summit, startling me and then prompting me to wonder what in the world inspired him to make the journey all the way up there.

_All is well this morning_, I think to myself; yet, even as I do, my eyes are drawn to the foot of the hill below me, where a few human-sized bones rest in a pile and the corner of the house nearest them looks somehow burnt, blasted, the grey stone charred black. But now is not the time to dwell on such things. Now it is a sunny summer morning, and there will be plenty of time for such darker concerns later. With some difficulty, I avert my eyes and turn away to face the day's demands.

There are only two tasks on today's agenda, but those two tasks could easily take me the remaining balance of daylight to complete: I need to find iron ore and wood. The iron ore will be used eventually for the forging of a new sword to replace the brittle, misshapen thing that currently hangs at my hip, and the wood will be shaped into more fenceposts to encircle a third, larger wheat field that I am currently in the process of planting. Because of the flatness of the land immediately surrounding the house, it has been hard to keep the fields properly irrigated and the wheat in the first two fields hasn't been growing as fast as I'd like. Getting more seeds in the ground is easy; making sure that the resulting stalks aren't destroyed by any number of wild creatures is much more difficult and requires some forethought.

Fortunately, finding wood should only require a short walk. I've long since cleared the flatland below of trees whose wood went toward my earlier projects, and though I've replanted some saplings in their place, they haven't had nearly enough time to grow to any sort of size yet. So I strike out to the east, skirting the large hill and following a gentler ridge up and up until my
house is lost to sight behind me. I've never been logging in this direction before and so I know it's only a matter of time before I come upon some suitable trees. Eventually, the ridge leads me up into the first foothills of the eastern mountains. On a clear morning like this one, I can often see these snow-dressed hinterlands from the top of the hill near my house. They loom in the far distance, gauzy-looking, like something out of a dream, tugging at my curiosity. But for now I have more pressing concerns.

From my current elevation, I can see that along the flanks of the foothills, the trees grow thick and large, and I will have my choice of trunks to cut. I spend much of the rest of the morning chopping down a few of the closer, smaller trees, stripping the trunks to fencepost-sized poles, and eventually plowing through my nearly-forgotten breakfast. By the time I judge that I've cut enough wood, the sun is directly overhead. Rather than spending the rest of the day hauling logs back home on already-tired shoulders, though, I decide to leave the logs where they are until tomorrow and take a circuitous route back to the house while keeping an eye open for potential iron veins.

I head back down out of the hills and circle around the house to the north, where the land is rough and uneven. Here, rocks jut out of the dirt, forming odd-looking plinths. Occasionally, the ground under a bluff has given way completely, revealing a tunnel or shallow chasm that twists down and down into the stony guts of the world. These tunnels could lead anywhere, and if they ran deep enough they would almost certainly lead me to iron ore. But just looking into their depths from a distance fills me with foreboding – I don't yet need the ore that badly.

After an hour or so of walking through this strange land and another few bites of smoked meat, I am surprised to see a tunnel entrance bracketed by two of my old torches. I know that I haven't ranged far north of home recently, so this place must be one of the first caves I ever dug, lost to my memory in the confusion and darkness of those first days. Regardless, I know that if
I've been here already, this particular cavern is at least relatively safe. Checking the position of the sun one last time, I light a fresh torch and disappear down the tunnel's throat.

The cavern opening leads into a labyrinth of stone. Some of the tunnel's arteries are very clearly my own work – they are neatly head-height, squared-off, and run straight into the earth – while others are more angular, twisting, and disorienting – likely formed naturally by running water. I follow a number of these paths in succession, leaving more torches behind me as I go so that I can retrace my steps if necessary. The deeper the tunnels go, the greater my chances of finding iron ore become, and yet the crushing darkness at those depths is intimidating, and so I ultimately choose to stay just barely belowground. It is only purely by chance, then, that I find an iron vein in short order.

The hard work of chipping through the surrounding stone with my iron pickaxe prompts me to eat through the rest of my lunch as I work, and so by the time I've finally collected what I judge to be enough of the ore, I'm quite ready to be out from under the ground and en route to home and dinner. I follow the trail of torches back to the tunnel exit easily enough, but as I reach the surface, I'm struck by a sudden, all-consuming fear. While I was underground, I must have lost track of the time! The sun is long gone, and it has been replaced by the apologetic silver light of a waning moon. It is night, and I am still miles from home.

At first, I panic. The world seems to tilt on its axis under my feet and I find it hard to breathe. Reflexively, I use the moon to take a bearing and still firmly in the grip of terror, I start running. Remembering the pile of bones and the charred stone, I keep running. I run for nearly a mile and then, neither seeing nor hearing anything out of the ordinary, I come to a panting stop. Suddenly my spine hurts where the mined hunks of rock in my pack must have slammed against it over and over while I ran on, unaware. Scanning the area, I recognize the grasslands around me and the gentle slope of the ground to the north as it moves toward the edge of another, smaller
lake. I am still far from home, but I'm headed in the right direction. At least there's no–

My thoughts and blood are frozen as a piercing shriek cuts the air. In its wake, I hear the rattle of bones. I know these bones too well: they live somehow without skin, without organs, powered only, it seems, by malice. I turn towards the sound and in the moonlight, silhouetted against the hills to the east, I see the skeleton, already nocking an arrow and drawing its bow. It's still too far away, I think to myself as rationality wars with terror for command over my thoughts. It can't hit me from this distance. Sure enough, it fires an arrow – the twang of the bowstring mixing with a gleeful murder's hiss – and I watch the shaft arc gracefully through the night sky before it thunks into the ground twenty feet in front of me.

Suddenly, a snarl from behind me yanks my attention away from the skeleton. So there are enemies on at least two sides of me, now. I need to get to high ground, ascertain the situation, and decide how to fight my way home. There is a rise to the southwest; I jog toward it, putting the skeleton at my back but moving at a pace that makes it certain it won't gain ground on me while my attention is diverted.

The zombie, of course, is waiting for me at the top of the rise. By the time I see him, I don't have room to check my momentum, so I dive and roll under his first swing, ending up behind him. He turns slowly, but it takes me a moment to shrug off my rucksack and yank my old sword from its scabbard. By the time I've drawn my weapon, he's shambling forward to rake his claws across my face. I don't let him, obviously. I take one step back to put myself out of his range and then I follow behind his swing with a descending cut of my sword, hacking off the offending limb.

Zombies cannot feel pain. Once I did not know this, and that ignorance nearly cost me my life. Now, though, when the zombie responds to losing his arm by immediately swinging the other one at my chest, I'm ready. Snapping my sword back up, I step inside this second swing
and cut the arm off before it gets to me. It slaps wetly against my chest as it falls away, and I take a few quick steps back, putting distance between myself and the zombie's teeth, which are his last remaining weapon. He comes at me immediately, as I knew he would. As he does, I hear an arrow *wizz* by both of our heads, but there's no time to worry about that yet. Instead, I set my feet, grit my teeth, and let the zombie impale himself on my sword. Then I quickly plant my foot against his chest and kick, sliding my blade free as he crumples to the ground with a last wet, sucking sound.

Thanks to the time I've wasted on this skirmish, I know that there's no point in trying to develop a plan now. From atop the rise, I can see the countryside swarming with dark shapes in all directions, and the skeleton is almost on top of me. By the time I shoulder my rucksack and slide my sword back into its scabbard, it's already nocked and drawn another arrow, so I take off as fast as I can to the southwest, running in a zigzag pattern and hoping it's less of a distance to my house than I suspect.

The next two miles are a blur of desperation tinged with fear as I slowly become aware that I am being hunted, herded by a large group of skeletons who are – unfortunately – not nearly as stupid as their zombie allies. Over flat land, though, I can outrun them on foot, and as the light of torches comes into view slowly but certainly to the south, I actually begin to think that I'm going to make it home safely. Then, I top the final rise and see how thoroughly I've been outmaneuvered. Quite literally at the door of my house wait two enormous, red-eyed spiders and one of the grotesque, limbless, mottled-green creatures I've come to think of as “creepers.”

With who-knows-how-many skeletons closing in from behind me, I don't even have time to be scared. Leaving my pack on this time, I unlimber my bow and nock an arrow. The spiders have begun to move toward me, but seem torn between holding their position and attacking outright. I make the decision for them by burying my first shot in the nearest one's hide. It hisses
and comes at me, oozing a brown-black liquid from the wound. The creeper follows, deliberately, behind it. I hold my ground, patiently placing a second arrow right next to the first and slowing the spider down a bit more. It is almost upon me, however, before I can draw a third arrow. I drop the bow and draw my sword instead, slicing off the spider's first questing limb as I do so. It retreats back a few steps, and I do too. Behind the spider, the creeper is circling to my left, so I move to the right to keep it in view. This odd dance goes on for a few moments, the spider and I taking testing swings at one another while the creeper attempts to flank me. As I hack off a third spider leg, I begin to wonder what exactly is going on. Then a hiss from behind me makes my mistake painfully clear: in turning to keep from being flanked by the creeper, I allowed the second spider to come up behind me unnoticed. And now, I'm trapped and quite probably dead.

Seeing the creeper closing, though, I remember the charred corner of my house and the scattered pile of skeleton's bones, and I know that I have one last chance. Going for the weakest enemy first, I charge the wounded spider, bringing my sword down in a two-handed, overhead blow that nearly cuts the thing in half. I try to pull my sword free as my enemy dies beneath me, but the rusty blade has been thoroughly mangled by this last, desperate blow and I realize after a moment that even if I manage to free my weapon, it will be worthless to me. This is unfortunate, but really doesn't change my quite-possibly-suicidal plan in any meaningful way. The spider behind me hisses again – much too close this time – as I go for the only other thing I have that could be construed as a close-quarters weapon: my pickaxe.

I manage to raise it in a two-handed grip and take a step over the spider corpse at my feet, which seems to surprise the creeper who was lurching forward on its four mottled-green legs, perhaps sensing victory. Before it can recover, I swing the pickaxe laterally, scoring its hide and driving it back a step. I keep moving toward it, aggressively. As I bring the pickaxe up for
another strike, the creeper begins to close again, hissing loudly. Throwing a look over my shoulder, I take a step back – against all of my instincts – and feel the spider's forelegs begin to close around my waist. With the creeper coming down on me from the front and the spider's hungry mouth lurching toward me from behind, I will myself to wait until the last possible second...and then I hurl myself aside as the creeper's hiss reaches its highest pitch.

The creeper explodes – as creepers are wont to do – and the explosion hits me in the chest, seeming to unhinge my bones from my muscles. I'm thrown across the front lawn of my house and I land in a bed of dirt, crushing a row of decorative flowers that I planted last week. The spider, closer to the center of the explosion, is completely vaporized. I try to stand, but the ground jumps down away from my feet and I stagger sideways. For a moment, I simply stand staring at my front door, struck dumb by the explosion. Then the sizzle of another arrow passing near to my head enables me to focus. The skeletons that had been chasing me over the northern plains have finally caught up. I grab my rucksack and make a run for the door.

I fumble with the door lock, and as a result, I almost don't make it. But the skeletons are consistently poor shots and I finally hurl myself inside, locking the door behind me as they growl in frustration, fired arrows zikking off the stone walls of my home. The torches and the stone walls will keep them out for the night, and in the morning, if they aren't smart enough to disappear underground, the sun will melt them where they stand, leaving little sign of their passing except, perhaps, an incomplete pile of charred, human-looking bones.

I pant heavily for a few minutes with my back against the door, knowing that the hisses and growls I hear outside will continue for most of the night and that, at some point, I'm simply going to have to just ignore them and go about my usual business of cooking and preparing the furnace for smelting another pile of iron ore.

Today, this world has shown me both of its faces: joy, in the exploration of a bounteous
wilderness and in the feeling of hard work well done, and terror, in the persistent threat the night creatures pose to my life and all that I've built. Ultimately, I am free to make my own life here, but it is a life that is earned, not given.

    Survival is hardly a game, after all.
CHAPTER FOUR

WILDERNESS AND DWELLING IN THE VIRTUAL GAMEWORLD OF MINECRAFT

However hard and bitter, however hampering and threatening the lack of houses remains, the real plight of dwelling does not lie merely in a lack of houses. The real plight of dwelling is indeed older than the world wars with their destruction, older also than the increase of the earth's population and the condition of the industrial workers. The real dwelling plight lies in this, that mortals ever search anew for the nature of dwelling, that they must ever learn to dwell.

- Martin Heidegger

Place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to one and long for the other. - Yi-Fu Tuan

In May of 2009, Swedish independent video game developer Markus Persson released the first playable, “public alpha” version of the video game Minecraft through his website. As is the case with most independently-developed games, no organized marketing campaign accompanied Minecraft's release, and yet Persson's creation skyrocketed in popularity almost immediately thanks to near-fanatical internet word-of-mouth and ecstatic “pre-reviews” posted by critically respected online gaming publications such as Rock, Paper, Shotgun and IGN PC. By

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42 A video game’s progress through its development cycle is described within the industry by a particular nomenclature. A game that is “in alpha” is typically playable and all of its primary features are functional, though secondary features and less essential in-game assets might still be introduced at a later stage, while a game that is “in beta” is typically “feature-complete” aside from the occasional bug or other errant detail that needs fixing or adjusting. The finalized version of the game's code that is deemed ready for public consumption is known as the “gold” version. Traditionally, studios have only released a game publicly after it reaches the gold stage; however, recently independent games – such as Minecraft – have begun a new trend of releasing alpha and beta versions of their games, either for free or for a reduced price to interested players. In this way, those players get to try out the game before the “official” release and submit feedback to the developers, who can then incorporate that feedback into further revisions. Often, the players who purchase the alpha or beta version of a game receive the final version for free or for a reduced price.

43 Unless otherwise specified, “games” should be understood as shorthand for “video games” in this chapter.
the time the game reached “final release” status in November of 2011, Persson had used his unexpectedly large profits to hire assistants and create an entire game studio – Mojang Specifications – dedicated to evolving his original creation well beyond the scope of that first alpha version. The resulting evolution was based in large part on input from the game's fans, and by early 2012, the game that had begun as a one-man project had sold five million copies at twenty-seven dollars apiece, making it significantly more profitable than most “triple A” game projects and Hollywood “blockbusters” could ever hope to be. Still the sales continue to pile up, while the popular and critical fervor shows no signs of abating. What makes Minecraft such a compelling success story from the viewpoint of the game industry is related to what makes it of interest to my project of wilding space, so I will briefly touch on the former here as a way of contextualizing my impending discussion of the latter.

In an industry that is becoming increasingly obsessed with coupling high-definition audiovisual bombast with oversimplified point-and-shoot mechanics, Minecraft has succeeded not by upping the explosion-filled ante yet further, but by minimizing, by distilling the allure of “play” down to its most basic elements. Persson's no-frills approach to game design has achieved the rare feat of resonating with both popular audiences and game critics at once, and thus Minecraft has emerged as a nearly unprecedented watershed moment in gaming, singlehandedly reframing the priorities of the industry from a gameplay standpoint as well as a business one. The game's impact has been felt so broadly in just three years that when Eurogamer and Rock, Paper, Shotgun critic Alec Meer wrote an article attempting to review its November 2011 release version, he began by musing on the seeming impossibility of his task:

How would you review Tetris, if you were reviewing it today? The puzzling is

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44 Minor changes and additions are still being made to the game as of February 2012.
45 The game sells for twenty-seven dollars in its current state; however, the original alpha version was priced at ten and later fifteen dollars.
very tight, and the soundtrack is catchy.' That’s the thing – Tetris is so much more than that by now, but it’s almost impossible to disassociate it from its cultural resonance. Minecraft, the free-form building and survival game, hasn’t yet seeped into the global consciousness to the same degree, but it has become something far more than a mere game. (Meer)

Underscoring Meer's point, Minecraft was recently chosen to be a part of the Smithsonian American Art Museum's upcoming exhibit entitled “The Art of Video Games.” It is the rare game that has transcended and thus redefined the expectations of its medium to such a degree that it has become a bona fide cultural artifact. This wider relevance, combined with the game's uniquely, intentionally “wild” style of gameplay make it the perfect example through which to funnel a discussion of the possibilities of virtual space as a generator of wildness.

So, what type of game is Minecraft and how does it create a virtual wilderness? As is likely evident by now, it is a bit difficult to situate this game within the genre paradigm that has dominated the industry for much of the last twenty-odd years.46 Traditionally, games are more-or-less sorted into five genres – action, adventure, strategy, simulation, and role-playing – and yet Minecraft doesn't fit neatly into any of these.47 Instead, it is perhaps best described as a “process-oriented game,” a term introduced by Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca in their book Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction. Egenfeldt-Nielsen, et al. differentiate

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46 This is a popular paradigm for classifying games, but I am presenting it here specifically as an adaptation of the classification system presented in Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca's text Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction.

47 Very briefly, each genre's qualities are as follows: action games focus primarily on fast-paced combat and the player's ability – through fast reflexes and quick on-the-spot thinking – to triumph over enemies; adventure games test the player's grasp of logic and problem-solving skills by requiring them to find the solution to various in-game puzzles, often while progressing through a narrative of some sort; strategy games often require the player to create and maintain communities of in-game entities by balancing various economic, military, and other variables in games that often play like more complicated versions of chess; simulation games seek to replicate “real-life” situations for the player, often casting them as, say, the pilot of an airplane or the quarterback of an NFL football team, and role-playing games (RPGs) require the player to manage an in-game persona, often through interactions with other characters, combat with enemies, and statistics management systems that have often evolved from older “tabletop” RPGs such as Dungeons and Dragons.
process-oriented games from the more traditional game genres by explaining that “Instead of
giving the player one or more goals, process-oriented games provide the player with a system to
play with” (44). Rather than motivating gameplay by presenting the player with typical ludic
challenges – unlocking the next “level,” beating the “boss,” rescuing the princess, and so on – in
process-oriented games “the player is a character exploring and manipulating a dynamic and
ever-changing world” (44). As game consoles and personal computer hardware have become
more capable of rendering larger and often more detailed gameworlds, demand has increased for
these process-oriented games, where exploring and mapping virtual space is presented by
gamemakers and perceived by players as a meaningful end in and of itself. *Minecraft* is such a
game, which is often described in more popular terms as an “open-world” or “sandbox” game.

Though they are used interchangeably in popular discourse, the terms “open-world” and
“sandbox” actually describe qualities that can be present in two different aspects of a game. One
does not necessarily imply the other, though both are present in *Minecraft*. Differentiating
between the two terms is important here, though, because the former quality is what serves to
make *Minecraft*’s gameworld a venue for wild space, while the latter quality enables the player to
inscribe their own place-values onto that space. I will discuss both qualities in detail in this
chapter, as together they are what make playing *Minecraft* a virtual instantiation of a spatial
practice – as I defined it in chapter two – that evolves such practices beyond what is possible for
the practitioner in the more physically-limited space of the city.

First, “open-world” is a way of describing a gameworld as free – or at least relatively free
– of the artificial ludic barriers that partition most gameworlds in each of the five traditional
genres. As a comparative example, first consider the Nintendo classic *Super Mario Bros*. That
game divides its world into a number of “levels.” Each level is a bounded, finite virtual space,
and the player can only move on to the next level – the next part of the gameworld – after
completing a certain number of gameplay challenges. If those challenges aren't completed, there is no moving on. Progression through the world is dictated by the player's ability to successfully jump, stomp, and smash their way past obstacles. In contrast, from the instant that a player loads up *Minecraft* they instantly have access to a procedurally-generated gameworld, with dimensions that are, in theory at least, infinite. All that is required to explore anywhere in the gameworld is the ability to walk – virtually, of course – from Point A to Point B. There is nothing to stop the player from simply wandering off in a random direction for as long as they choose.

“Sandbox gaming,” on the other hand, describes the application of the open-world philosophy to a game's mechanics rather than to its geography. Much like its namesake, a sandbox game's mechanics generally revolve around setting a player loose in a container-like gameworld with few if any specific gameplay goals. The player is then provided with gameplay “tools” that allow for a sort of “free-play” much like a child might engage in inside a sandbox. Consider as an example one of the best-known sandbox games, *Grand Theft Auto 3*, a game in which the player is cast in the role of a small-time criminal and set loose on the streets of a fictional city. While *Grand Theft Auto 3* provides a main story arc with a series of “missions” for the player, those missions can easily be ignored if the player chooses to ignore them. Tellingly, the game has in fact become better known for the way in which it provides the player with the tools – weapons, cars, tanks, helicopters, etc. – to do nearly whatever they choose within the

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48 Each new gameworld a player creates in *Minecraft* is created algorithmically rather than manually; that is, the world's terrain, geographical features, and other content is generated randomly through lines of code at the moment of creation. In this way, each *Minecraft* world is “random”: unlike the worlds most other games present, *Minecraft*'s world is completely geographically different at the beginning of each new game, requiring new exploration rather than simple memorization of a “set” topography, a manually-designed world. *Minecraft*'s use of procedural generation will be discussed in greater detail below, as it is an important component of the game's/player's unmapping process.

49 Addressing the question of whether or not *Minecraft* worlds are infinitely large, Markus Persson explains in a blog post that the only real limits on the worlds' sizes are imposed by the amount of computer memory available. Persson states that if a player walks far enough in one direction in the gameworld, the game's code will eventually start to deteriorate on a purely mathematical level. However, he has calculated that such coding errors would only begin to arise after the player had walked a distance equivalent to “25% of the distance from where you are now to the sun,” or about twenty-three million in-game miles (“Terrain Generation, Part 1”).
game's virtual “living, breathing city” than for its missions or its storytelling.

As I mentioned above, an open-world game can lack the qualities of a sandbox game, and vice versa. For example, though Grand Theft Auto 3 is a sandbox game, it is not, by definition, an open-world one. Certain parts of its gameworld are artificially walled-off until certain ludic conditions are met by the player, and though it is not necessary for the player to complete all the game's missions in order to play in certain parts of the game's sandbox, so to speak, if they want to explore all of the gameworld's virtual space, finishing the missions is a must, as this is the only thing that will “unlock” certain parts of the world. In this sense, Grand Theft Auto 3 is limited as an example of the type of game that can offer virtual wild space, as I believe that only games that merge both open-world and sandbox qualities can effectively generate such space for the player. Interestingly – but perhaps expectedly – many such games have flooded the market since the success of Minecraft, and of this new trend, author and game critic Jim Rossignol explains that: “Essentially, open worlds are those games whose entire game is contained within a wider, freely-explorable container-world, while sandboxes are simply games that provide you with the tools you need in a certain place, and let you get on with things. Where the lines blur between these two modes of doing things, we get (I would argue) the most interesting games” (Rossignol). Minecraft successfully locates itself in the middle of this conceptual Venn diagram, in large part by splitting its gameplay between two elements: exploration/survival and construction.

Minecraft is most fundamentally a game about exploration. The player is dropped into a geographically randomized, procedurally-generated world with no explanation of what they should do first, neither through in-game prompting nor the game's barely-existent

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50 For example, one of the bridges that connects the gameworld's island cities is conveniently closed “for construction” until the player completes a particular series of missions, at which time the construction is completed and the bridge is traversable.
documentation. Even more importantly, players are not given any in-game incentives to perform any particular actions. They are, in a sense, turned loose in a virtual wilderness and allowed to do as they please up to and until the point where their actions result in their avatar's death. The result – as I will discuss in greater detail below – is that exploring the gameworld becomes a worthy end in itself, encouraging the player to appreciate the aesthetic appeal of the landscape, to feel a sense of achievement in having climbed high mountains and discovered deep caverns, and to relate to the details of “their” virtual land in much the same way that a backpacker might relate to the details of an oft-returned-to trail. The open-world quality of *Minecraft* enables the player to experience unmapped virtual space, while the game's requirement that the player interact with that space primarily by walking defines the other half of its gameplay-as-spatial-practice. This spatial practice then enables the experience of wildness by merging with the game's survival mechanic.

When played in “Survival Mode,”* Minecraft* introduces various barriers to the player's ability to explore virtual space and discover interesting landscape features. Unlike the ludic barriers that exist in games like the aforementioned *Grand Theft Auto 3*, however, these complications enhance the game's presentation of wildness rather than revealing the artificiality of “levels” or other such closed-world limitations. For example, when night falls in the game's world dangerous creatures spawn and roam the land, restricting the player's ability to safely explore until the sun rises again; if the player wanders too long without food, they may begin to starve, and if they delve too deeply into the world's underground caverns, they risk awakening more monsters. Importantly, all of these challenges arise as a result of the player's exploration.

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51 The current version of *Minecraft*, and most, though not all previous versions can be played in both “Creative” and “Survival” modes. Creative Mode allows the player to explore their world and create structures without having to concern themselves with the survival dimension of the game. This is a popular way to play the game, but Survival Mode is the game's main mode and will be the one that I focus on throughout my analysis.

52 The game's day/night cycle lasts twenty “real-world” minutes.
rather than as a means to limit that exploration for the sake of a specific ludic challenge. The game's survival elements exist to add to the wildness of *Minecraft*’s virtual space by casting the player as an explorer in a potentially hostile world, and without these elements the other significant dimension of the gameplay – construction – wouldn't factor as a necessary part of my discussion here.

The game's construction mechanic is what puts the “mine” and the “craft” in *Minecraft*. It is what makes *Minecraft* a sandbox game, and how it functions in the gameworld is representative of the potentiality of virtual wild space to enable a making of space into place – performed, in this case, by the game's player. While exploring *Minecraft*’s world and intermittently dodging monsters – called “mobs” in the game – when necessary, the player is able to use various tools to “mine” the surrounding countryside for resources. These resources can then be used to “craft” various items: better mining tools like pickaxes, an axe to chop wood, a shovel to dig a garden plot, coal and sticks and flint for torches, and so on. Resources can also be quarried – in the case of stone, for example – and used to build structures that can serve as shelter during the gameworld's dangerous nights. Many of the best crafting and building materials can only be found underground, prompting the player to explore subterranean caverns in spite of the danger presented by roving bands of mobs, or to create their own mines by crafting a pickaxe and digging straight down into the earth. Ultimately, to survive more than a few in-game nights, the player is required to build at least a minimal shelter and to learn the lay of the nearby land. I believe that this crafting mechanic, combined with *Minecraft*’s other emphases on exploration and survival, provides a compelling virtual simulation of quite literally carving one's own place out of unmapped space. In so doing, *Minecraft* not only provides the player with an experience of wildness, it allows the player to construct place through building, a building that takes on the value of a sort of virtual dwelling that would be nearly impossible to
achieve in the physical world, where almost all of the places are already spoken for.

In this chapter, then, I will consider Minecraft's gameworld as a venue for both experiential wildness and place-construction through building and dwelling. I believe that the game's virtual space is not only another generator of wildness like urban exploration, but that it can also be made into a place for virtual dwelling. In the next two sections of the chapter, I will explain how this virtual dwelling functions theoretically before establishing why I believe that the most vital function of video games as a medium is their ability to facilitate virtual place-construction. Afterward, and for the remainder of the chapter, I will study Minecraft in detail as an example of a game that requires the player to become a spatial practitioner inside a virtual wilderness in which they can come, eventually, to dwell.

The Limits of Physical Spatial Practice and the Value of Virtual Dwelling

The primary function introduced by the spatial practices discussed in the previous two chapters – flanerie, the dérive, and urban exploration – is unmapping. Though each practice approaches unmapping rather differently, and with varying degrees of success, each is primarily invested in ignoring or erasing established place-values and supplanting them with space. UE is the focus of the previous chapter precisely because it is particularly effective in this regard: in addition to creating space from place, its practitioners wild the resulting space through a combination of rhetoric, imagination and physical practice, bringing the experiential quality of wildness to the city. This – for my project of describing the possibilities of deterritorialized wildness – makes UE a far more interesting and potentially useful iteration of place-subverting spatial practice than its forebears, which were largely interested in unmapping only, as a means of rebellion against the modern city's place-values for its own sake, rather than as a tool for the
generation of a certain kind of experiential space.

Yet, even UE's more-evolved brand of place-subversion is limited in important ways. For all of the practice's interest in wilding space, the benefits of any given urban exploration are – from a physical standpoint at least – largely ephemeral. That is to say, while the practice of UE certainly allows one to experience the quality of wildness, that experience remains primarily a mental one – enabled in part by a physical practice for certain, but by a physical practice that must by necessity remain clandestine, private, and temporary. Unmapping city space – as one of the two components of spatial practice as I defined it previously via de Certeau – allows place to be made into space, but it does not necessarily enable reterritorialization, the creation of new place-values that replace the old ones. Ultimately, practicing UE can erase, but it cannot overwrite.

While the previous chapter closed with Julia Solis's suggestion that a reterritorialization of urban space might be possible through UE, the gap between her theory and actual practice appears to be insurmountable within Solis's milieu, given the inability of urban explorers to effect their unmapped wild spaces beyond the after-the-fact sharing of an occasional photograph, video, or narrative. How can urban explorers inscribe new, lasting place-values in unmapped urban space when those explorers cannot – by the very nature of their practice – alter the physicality of that space even when they are – in their own minds, at least – rediscovering it? Here lies the most significant limitation of UE: it can deliver an experience of deterritorialized

53 Certain, unmapping as I described it previously functions through de Certeau's injunction that we can reimagine walking as a form of *writing over space*; yet, that “writing” – in the case of urban explorers and their forebears – exists only in a subversive moment, an instant of experience. It does not remain through the establishment of new, lasting place-values. De Certeau's walking/writing subverts but does not replace established place-values; or, if it does replace those place-values, it does so only in the imaginations of the explorers, and not beyond. Consider that – as discussed previously – even when UE isn't practiced in violation of specific trespassing laws, members of the UE community are expected to adhere to the Leave No Trace ethical code. So it follows that while UE is strikingly effective at creating deterritorialized wildness, at turning place into wild space in the explorer's mind, it allows little to no opportunity for that explorer to turn that wild space into a new place in any physical sense. It offers no opportunity for reterritorialization.
wildness, but that experience can have little if any lasting experiential or embodied value once the original thrill of discovery has faded.

Significantly, this is a limitation that UE shares with traditional wilderness experiences. In scaling a mountain peak or hiking deep into a thick forest, we experience the wildness that Shepard argues is part of our genomic heritage. And yet, that cure must necessarily be ephemeral. We cannot, for example, legally – or arguably, morally – take up a long-term residence in a wilderness. We cannot, in this day and age, simply choose to settle in such a place and make it our own in a physical sense. “Exploring” a Wilderness Area like the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness might mean imaginatively making place into space, but we are not free to write our own place-values on the face of that wilderness for much the same reason that an urban explorer cannot claim an abandoned warehouse or a forgotten network of steam tunnels as their own. In both cases, we are unable to build upon the satiation of our need for wildness by extending our explorations further, into the realm of place-construction. Yet, I believe that this can become a possibility in virtual space. To clarify exactly how this possibility can be realized I will briefly revisit Ursula K. Heise's suggestion that we challenge the assumption that “place” must equal “geographic location” in order to show how virtual places can have real value.

When Heise questions the value of “a sense of place” in the section of Sense of Place and Sense of Planet that I quoted from at length previously, she does so not as a critique of the value of place itself, but rather as a critique of the idea that place must have a physical, geographic locus in order to have value. Originally, this line of thought was useful in my establishing a case for the effectiveness of a deterritorialized experience of wildness; now, however, I suggest that a sense of place – as the result of successful place-construction – can be developed in the absence of a physical locus without losing its value. Thus far, my dissertation has been interested primarily in the creation and utility of wild space, but the generation of such space does not
supplant or eliminate our desire for *places* of our own – the personally meaningful places that Simmel found to be so elusive in the modern city, and which urban exploration is unable to provide more than a brief moment of access to due to sociocultural and legal restrictions.

Even Paul Shepard, in many ways the instigator of my advocacy for wild space, agrees on the importance of place when he writes that “Knowing who you are is impossible without knowing where you are” (“Place in American Culture” 32). Yet, it is becoming harder and harder to imagine a coherent “where” in a world increasingly affected by what David Harvey calls “time-space compression” in his essay “From Space to Place and Back Again: Reflections On the Condition of Postmodernity.” In what is a particularly appropriate discussion of a now oft-repeated sentiment, he suggests that our postmodern world is ever-shrinking both in terms of space – as the once geographically-distant becomes instantly accessible virtually – and time – as electronic communication eliminates intervals once necessary during long-distance correspondence. For Harvey, time-space compression is the cause of no small amount of existential terror, and he notes that “this terror is ineluctably present in daily life because all mortals 'persist through space by virtue of their stay among things' and are therefore perpetually threatened by changing space relations among things” (10). The practical aspects of carving a place for living out of such a world are not enough by themselves to provide escape from this terror, as “Physical nearness does not necessarily bring with it understanding or an ability to appreciate or even appropriate a thing properly” (10). On top of this, as Heise intimates in *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, we are slowly losing the luxury of a single, physically-located

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Echoing Heise, Mitchell Thomashow explains in *Bringing the Biosphere Home: Learning to Perceive Global Environmental Change* that “We face the prospect of multiple ecological and cultural diasporas, millions of migrants attempting to salvage their ecological and cultural integrity […] in the 21st century, having a homeland will represent a profound privilege. Living-in-place may become a quaint anachronism, reinhabitation a yuppie utopian vision” (123). In the face of such a reality, spatial practices that enable an experience of wildness but cannot enable the practitioner to reterritorialize the resulting wild space are only solving half of a larger problem. Exploration of a wilderness – traditional or alternative – will *always* be of ephemeral, momentary value unless it allows for the possibility of place-construction, reterritorialization. In the case of virtual space, I believe that this possibility can be realized through *Minecraft*’s in-game building, which along with other gameplay elements instantiates a kind of virtual dwelling.

So what does Heidegger have to do with wildness? I believe that Heideggerian dwelling provides a particularly useful answer to the question of how to live “in place” that is especially suited to counteracting the negative effects of living in a 21st-century urbanized, globalized world. Greg Garrard argues that dwelling – in opposition to the traditional wilderness concept – “[suggests] a mode of practical existence as an immediate reality” (108). According to Garrard, where the wilderness is a trope that encourages yearning for the primeval forest or the distant, supposedly-simple past, dwelling insists on the here and now, on *how* one lives where they live. Where “wilderness” reinforces the man/nature dichotomy, dwelling instead “[explores] the possibility of coming to dwell on the earth in a relation of duty and responsibility” (108) wherein man comes to acknowledge and respect nature, and, in so doing, dissolves said dichotomy. Dwelling thus urges a life of awareness, a life of intentionally, consciously navigating complications, rather than reducing or avoiding them. Today, our need for such a method by
which “the long-term imbrication of humans in a landscape of memory, ancestry and death, of ritual, life, and work” (108) can be achieved is at least as important as it was during Heidegger's time, if not more so.

Dwelling as Heidegger and Garrard describe it can serve as a way to address both a person's genomic need for wildness and their need for a “sense of place,” bridging these two dimensions of experience in a way that the spatial practices I described previously cannot. To dwell is to be in touch with something fundamental to the human experience: the discovery of space and the transformation of that space to a personal place. In our current society, however, this process is fraught with complications: as I discussed above, one cannot simply forcefully forge new place-values atop already-existing ones, except perhaps through overwhelming political or physical force. However, moving this process of unmapping-to-dwelling from the physical realm to a virtual one can allow for a more egalitarian – but perhaps no less satisfying – form of place-construction.

It is telling that even Heidegger himself had some difficulty pinning dwelling to a particular physical place, as he describes a place situation that sounds more like a network than a single point of meaning in his essay “Building Dwelling Thinking.” Certainly, he begins the essay by discussing physical building, but shortly thereafter he continues: “Still, not every building is a dwelling […] Even so, these buildings are in the domain of our dwelling. That domain extends over these buildings and yet is not limited to the dwelling place” (145, added emphasis). To my mind, this paragraph raises a few questions. What is the distinction between “domain” and “dwelling” for Heidegger? What are the boundaries of the “domain of our dwelling,” and how is it different than the house in which one actually dwells?

Obviously, the difficulty of pinning dwelling to a specific physical place existed even as Heidegger was writing, as evidenced by his fractured explanation of the “domain of our
dwelling.” He seems to be trying to account for the fact that even if people have a central living place, they have always ranged from that place when necessary, making that specific place responsible for something less than the totality of their dwelling. Gary Snyder, in “The Place, the Region, and the Commons” agrees that single-place-based dwelling has always been complicated while also intimating that it has recently become yet more problematic when he says:

Few today can announce themselves as someone from somewhere. Almost nobody spends a lifetime in the same valley, working alongside the people they knew as children. Native people everywhere and Old World farmers and city people share this experience of living in place. Still – and this is important to remember – being inhabitory, being place-based, has never meant that one didn't travel from time to time. (25-6)

With the exception of a few special cases, then, it seems that dwelling is a useless concept if it is directed only toward defining a single, specific, meaning-laden location for living because that sort of living simply isn't available to most people in our time. It is actually the idea of the domain – the idea that Heidegger tosses away – that is practically valuable to us.

Heidegger provides an example wherein “[the] domain extends over these buildings and yet is not limited to the dwelling place. The truck driver is at home on the highway, but he does not have his shelter there; the working woman is at home in the spinning mill, but does not have her dwelling place there; the chief engineer is at home in the power station, but he does not dwell there” (145), and I would argue that these secondary places that Heidegger dismisses are a significant part of our contemporary experience of dwelling, at least equal in significance to the one physical place that we would call “home.” These places are all part of “the domain of dwelling”: the truck driver's domain, the working woman's domain, and the chief engineer's domain: it is in domain that we dwell, and that domain has become the network of the world.
In this sense, then, the idea of the network has transcended virtual space and become the organizing principle of our culture; as such, it should come as no surprise that virtual places can now have legitimate value in our lives concurrently with physical ones. As Manuel Castells asserts in *The Rise of the Network Society*: “Networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies” (469), specifically because of our increasing reliance on ubiquitous technology and its networked paradigm. According to Eric Gordon and Gene Koos, among many others, “Networks need not degrade, nor merely coexist with, but can augment the capacity of a place to form meaning” (208). Perhaps place-construction can actually better fulfill its vital function when it takes place in both physical and virtual spaces, creating a network of place-values across the two milieux?

I believe that dwelling in virtual space is especially powerfully enabled by the medium of video games. Games like *Minecraft* use the allure of an experience of virtual wildness to motivate the player's emotional, embodied connection to a gameworld, upon which they can then inscribes their own place-values through their spatial practice within that world as a consequence of playing the game. Of course, from within the traditional understanding of place as a purely physically-located construct, any such “exploring” in virtual space may seem a pale shadow of “the real thing”; however, through a closer look at the unique value of video game storytelling in general and a deeper analysis of *Minecraft* in particular, I now intend to show why this is not the case.

**Making Place From Space In-Game: A Narratology of Worldmaking**

Before delving into *Minecraft* specifically, it is perhaps necessary to briefly explain how playing a game in a virtual world can constitute an embodied experience of wildness, let alone a
meaningful act of dwelling. My claims in this regard not only presuppose that play can serve a valuable experiential function, but that video games in particular can have meaning beyond simply entertaining the player—a presupposition potentially in need of a more thorough justification for a “non-gamer” audience. This second concern—that video games can have a “greater” meaning beyond entertainment—has been and remains central to the popular and critical discourses surrounding gaming, with variations on the question “Can games be art?” regularly dominating many online discussion forums, blogs, peer-reviewed journals, and international conferences on video game culture. Overwhelmingly, those who answer this question in the affirmative do so with the intent of legitimizing games as something more than a hobby that involves playing in pretend worlds: as a medium capable of achieving a similar “high culture” relevance to the biggest Oscar-winning films and the most literate of novels.

This oft-assumed “necessity” of comparing games to films and books in order to establish their artistic merit as a medium dictates that attempts at legitimizing those games as art nearly always begin by evoking the quality of a game's so-called “story.” This approach, of course, forces a second question: “Can games tell stories?” The debate over this question—often referred to as “the narratology vs. ludology debate”—was the primary discussion in game studies from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, and while attempting to answer either of these questions directly is beyond the scope of my work here, I find the discussion regarding the value of games'
“stories” in particular to be a useful point of departure for my argument that the real value of games is their functionality as place-construction simulators of a sort.

I believe – as many game studies scholars do – that the idea of “story” as we understand it in terms of films and books cannot exist in the medium of video games; or, rather, it cannot exist in games without being reduced to a grafted-on, awkwardly-wielded expositional tool that clashes directly with those games' otherwise-expected interactivity. Most often when such expositional storytelling is used in games, the result is confusion on the part of the player: are they meant to truly be a player, a participant in the gameworld presented to them, or are they merely a passive observer of events, like an audience member at the theater?58

My position, however does not parallel that of the ludologists, as I do not think that gameplay is all games have to offer. I believe that games can tell stories of a sort; the problem is that these stories are simply unrecognizable as such when viewed through the traditional paradigm of “story” as it is understood with regard to the passive storytelling processes found in films and books.59 This misunderstanding extends to both players – who generally expect their in-game stories to function in the same way as storytelling functions in books and films – as well as gamemakers,60 who often mistakenly attempt to marry passive storytelling with an interactive story environment.

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58 Consider in-game “cutscenes” as a popular example of this disconnect. Cutscenes are film-style “scenes” embedded within a game and presented during enforced breaks in gameplay to present exposition to the player. These scenes suspend the player's agency in the gameworld temporarily in order to communicate audiovisually intense but noninteractive interludes. Perhaps the current pinnacle of games' fascination with this form of noninteractive storytelling is Konami's Metal Gear Solid series, which has received both acclaim and derision for producing games with cutscenes that total a running time much longer than that of a feature film, and that occasionally even run longer than the interactive experience of playing the game itself.

59 Though this nomenclature is not necessarily ideal since it could be argued that watching a film – or reading a book, etc. – is interactive in some small sense, I make this distinction to indicate the difference between more traditional storytelling media in which the audience's agency extends only as far as their subjective sensory interpretations of a static story crafted entirely by an outside author – “passive storytelling” – and various new storytelling media in which the player's agency extends to active alteration of the gameworld in which the story takes place, to the point that the player could arguably be considered a co-author of the game's story – “interactive storytelling.”

60 Most modern video games, like most modern films, are most often made by a large group of people each performing highly specialized roles. To reflect this, I use the term “gamemakers,” evoking the similar “filmmakers.” Both terms may be reductive – conflating many specific roles into one general noun – but they each efficiently encompass the vagaries of any given game's or film's production process.
gameworld. Games can tell stories, but the stories they tell are place-construction stories co-authored through the in-game actions of the player and the design decisions of the gamemakers. Obviously, describing this process requires a bit of rethinking with regard to what exactly a “story” can be.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau writes that stories “carry out a labor that constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places” (118), and though he makes this claim in the context of discussing what he calls “spatial stories” – metaphorical “stories” of a sort that result from one's walking/writing in the physical world – I believe it is germane to my discussion of video games because the interactivity innate in games' storytelling make playing them much more like walking/writing de Certeau's city space and much less like passively watching a film or reading a novel, the media to which playing games is, unfortunately, most often compared. Player interactivity is what gives rise to the question of whether games can tell stories or not in the first place, but the existence of this question simply indicates a misunderstanding – or at least an underestimation – of what a story can be and how it can be told. Game developer and author Tadhg Kelly describes how video games' interactivity – what powers the transformation from audience to player – necessitates a change in the priorities of storytelling on a very fundamental level.

In a blog post titled “Cars, Dolls and Video Games,” Kelly explains that “When asking whether games are an art capable of greatness, the question is often conflated with stories. Games are played on a screen, where films and TV also exist, and have epic moments of tension that seem dramatic (but are actually *thaumatic*)” (“Cars, Dolls and Video Games”). According

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61 In another post titled “Thauma Is...,” Kelly explains that “When a game manages to break through the action-reaction barrier of gameplay and give you a glimpse of depth that you hadn't suspected possible, that's thauma. Thaumaturgy is wonder working. It is the moment of crossing over, when you're not simply impressed or immersed. You connect. You believe. That's thauma. And it is unique to games. It's what games are” (“Thauma Is...”).
to Kelly, interactive storytelling cannot rely on drama as its primary draw. This is because the audience's empathy for a story's characters – what traditional storytelling relies on to function – is more or less impossible to generate in a gameworld where the player is one of two prime movers. “When watching Nicholas Cage act on screen,” Kelly writes, “we feel empathy for his character caught in a dramatic arc that we cannot influence. The inevitability and success of struggle in drama is built on the powerlessness of the audience, and the complete captivation of their attention. Comedy, tragedy and other kinds of drama flow from the empathy of watching things unfold without agency” (“Cars, Dolls and Video Games”). The generation of drama, then, is actually impossible for games because they must, by necessity, allow the player some degree of agency, thus destroying the tension that is the result of being a passive audience member. Rather than emerging from an omniscient author-creator's play on an agency-less audience's empathy, then, the value of interactive storytelling instead emerges from games' provision for player-driven place-construction within the gameworld. The “story” of a game is, ultimately, co-created between the gamemakers and the player, a process that Kelly dubs “worldmaking.”

In another post, Kelly begins to describe this co-creation process by claiming that “The art of game design is all about the place” (“Worldmakers”). The creation of this place – the game's world – is completed through the efforts of both the gamemakers and the player. From the gamemakers' perspective, this worldmaking “is the art of creating a canvass [sic]” (“Worldmakers”). This “canvas” describes the game's rules, its expectations of the player, and the limitations that will define the player's experience in its world. As the player, “the game gives you agency to step into a world. You have control of your agency, which functions as an extension of you and nothing more, but the world is not in your control” (“Cars, Dolls and Video Games”). This agency is often expressed through the manipulation of an avatar, and that avatar allows the player to take an active role in shaping their particular experience within the rule-
based gameworld. What ultimately makes this shared authoring a compelling experience for the player, then, are the ways in which they choose to enact their limited agency within the gameworld's programmed limitations.

Rules are, of course, the foundation of any game, video or otherwise, and therein lies the final piece of the worldmaking puzzle: the player's experience of the gameworld “is pointless without goals, tasks, and things to do – even if those things are self-directed or game-directed. You need structure, learning opportunities and easily interpreted patterns before you can let yourself imagine and become invested” (“Worldmakers”). The friction that arises between the player's enactment of their agency and the limiting force of the gameworld's rules thus creates a tension not entirely unlike – though importantly different from – the traditional notion of drama as it is described above. Ultimately, by conceptualizing “story” as the player's experience of navigating the gameworld, we can arrive at a model of storytelling-through-game that implicates the player as co-author, working within the gameworld to express agency while operating under the constraints of the rules programmed by the gamemakers.

To adapt Kelly's worldmaking theory to my language, then: the gamemakers create the space, and the player inscribes that space with place-values. Julia Solis' sentiment from New York Underground, that “Taking a risk in accessing particular underground areas tends to help form a meaningful bond to the location” (223) applies here in virtual space as well: the quasi-dramatic tension between the player's enactment of their agency and the world's rules help the player form “a meaningful bond” to the world that they are actively helping to create through their gameplay. The worldmaking model of storytelling, then, is not terribly unlike a more traditional understanding of storytelling, aside from the fact that it allows for direct player input to the telling process and then reconfigures the motivation behind that telling – into a drama analogue powered by a compellingly limited agency instead of traditional drama powered by a
total lack of agency – to include this input. Ultimately, Kelly's model describes a game storytelling process that is – save for the difference of interactivity – directly mappable onto more traditional paradigms of narratology. Consider, for example, how the worldmaking process as Kelly describes it can be seen to parallel the system of narratology H. Porter Abbott describes in his essay “Story, Plot, and Narration.”

According to Abbott, “all stories move only in one direction, forward through time. If there is a knowable beginning, that's where they begin. If there is a knowable end, that's where they end. The process of telling is the story's narration” (39). Thus, Abbott separates story and narration in much the same way – and for much the same reason – that Kelly separates gameworld and player: in each case, the former is the space in which the storytelling process occurs, and the latter is the act of making a particular meaning – from a particular point of view – out of that space. For Abbott, a story “can be told in different ways by different narrators” (39), just as different players can have different experiences within the same gameworld while restricted by the same rules of play. This parallel is further reinforced by the fact that Abbott uses the term “storyworld” frequently throughout his discussion of the differences between story, plot, and narration. “Story” describes the fictional world as a whole, while “narrative” is the perception of or the path carved through that world by a particular narrator/player, and plot – as the third element of Abbott's paradigm – relates to the virtual world's other prime mover. Abbott relegates the plot to the domain of the story's author – in his example of Wuthering Heights the literal author, Emily Brontë – and describes it as a series of decisions regarding what parts of the storyworld to present to the audience – and how to present them – and what parts to omit, obfuscate, etc. In this remapping of Kelly's worldmaking model, then, “plot” would fall under the purview of the gamemakers, those who decide how to limit the player's agency in the gameworld. The only major discrepancy here between Abbott's and Kelly's models is – again, of
course – the necessity of player interactivity in a gameworld as compared to the more passive traditional reading audience.

Abbott's model suggests that narrative is character-driven, that it is the novel's narrator who decides how the storyworld is seen by the audience. This narrator is, of course, a fictional construct presented by the author through an arrangement of plotting, and is thus in a sense an extension of the author. Obviously, the same cannot be said of a game's player. The player is constrained by the game's rules and other limits the gamemakers “plot” into the gameworld, but within these constraints, the player's “narration” can work independently of the gamemakers' intentions. Abbott writes that “in seeking to fill the gaps of what happens in the storyworld we must cope not only with what is left out of the narration but also with what is given. This is because the narration is inflected everywhere by our sense of who is narrating” (45). If this is so, then player interactivity affords a relatively new opportunity for the player to be the narrator, to control – to a degree – the process of storytelling and – more importantly – to leave their own mark on the storyworld as they experience it. In this way, a synthesis of Kelly's and Abbott's models best describes the transformation of plotted, gamemaker-generated space to player-narrated place.

In the previous two chapters, I discussed a series of spatial practices and their relative usefulness when it comes to unmapping city space. What ultimately distinguished urban exploration as the most compelling “evolution” of these practices was its intentional engagement with wildness, achieved through rhetorical, mental, and physical parallels between its practice and the exploration of traditional wildernesses, as drawn by its practitioners. Similarly, though this chapter thus far has in large part dealt with the possibility of interactive gameworlds in general functioning as a storytelling medium rooted in the player's construction of place from space, I will now transition to discussing *Minecraft* in particular as a game that intentionally
inflects this construction process with the quality of wildness. Though many games enable the experience of player-as-narrator to some degree or another, Minecraft is of special interest to my project because it does this while immersing the player in an intentionally wild space – through game mechanics, design decisions, and visual rhetoric, which I will discuss in detail below – and requiring that the danger of that wildness be confronted, explored, and ultimately mitigated by the player through building in a way that evokes a virtual manifestation of Heideggerian dwelling.

Minecraft and Wildness

The experience of playing any video game involves some version of the process of the player imparting meaning to the gameworld. This is true for “on-rails shooters” like the currently popular Modern Warfare series, where the player's role in the gameworld is very limited by the gamemakers' constraints but still constitutes a unique narration of in-game events. It is true in puzzle games like Tetris, wherein the entirety of the gameworld is actually a simple game board, and the player is merely an invisible hand, manipulating and stacking blocks, as the player's success or failure at navigating even this relatively simple game's win/loss states can be perceived as a narration of sorts. And it is most certainly true in Minecraft, wherein the gameworld's virtual space is intentionally designed to mimic “real” wilderness, and the player's meaning-making is achieved through a series of place-discoveries and ensuing place-construction. Shooting your way through hordes of enemy soldiers in Modern Warfare 3 might

62 Such games are characterized by their presentation of an audiovisually intense, seemingly-detailed world, but then force players to interact with that world only by proceeding down a series of spatially-limited corridors – alleys, hallways, etc. – and interacting with heavily gamemaker-scripted events that allow for very little spontaneity in the players' experience. In such games, the detailed world is essentially window dressing for a game that limits the player's agency – if the tenor of popular critiques of such games are anything to go by – perhaps too much. In a sense, these are the video gaming equivalent of summer “popcorn” films.
be thrilling, and watching your blocks stack to the top of the screen in Tetris might make your heart start racing, but neither of those experiences are any more wild than the crowd-watching of a bored flâneur. Like flanerie, they are a step in the right direction for certain, but they lack a particular intentionality. On the other hand, the five-million-unit-selling appeal of Minecraft is built on its clear expression of that same intentionality.

Interestingly, the “Help” section of the official Minecraft site describes the game – ironically, rather unhelpfully – as “an open world adventure/building game that you can play by yourself or in multiplayer. Players gather resources to survive the monsters that come out at night, and to build homes and creations. Whatever you put your mind to, you can design and create in this game” (“What Is Minecraft?”). This doesn't sound terribly wild, but in fact it is an interesting textual artifact that illustrates how Markus Persson – and thus Minecraft – came to value the exploration of virtual wild space as a motivation for gaming. This “official” description may make the game sound like a toolkit or a virtual Lego set, but Mojang's definition reflects Minecraft's origins and draws on the once-assumed-greater commercial appeal of its “Creative Mode” – which, as I explained in a footnote previously, eliminates most of the game's challenges and obstacles and does in fact essentially turn Minecraft into a virtual Lego set. However, it was only shortly after the game's original release that its “Survival Mode” began to capture the imaginations of so many players, and Survival has since become the game's de facto “default” mode of play.

Explaining this community-driven change in the game's priorities, Persson wrote on the Minecraft website: “I strongly believe that all good stories have a conflict, and that all good games tell a good story regardless of if it's pre-written or emergent. Free building mode is fine and dandy, but for many people it will ultimately become boring once you've got it figured out” (“About the Game”). Following this post, the majority of Minecraft's future development
centered on its Survival Mode only. This episode not only indicated Persson's willingness to let community opinion direct the development of his game, but also the fact that, by and large, what players found interesting about Minecraft was exploring mixed with the difficulty introduced by the game's survival elements. The community made clear, in no uncertain terms, that free exploration with no potential negative consequences just wasn't compelling enough.

Describing Minecraft's Survival Mode in a 2010 article for prominent gaming website G4TV, critic Stephen Johnson writes a summary that is much more pertinent to my overall discussion: “In survival mode, Minecraft places you, alone, in a hostile virtual environment that is larger than the surface of the earth. You have no items, no weapons, and no knowledge. Your only goal is to survive” (Johnson). The degree to which the game gleefully abandons you to your fate in your unique as-yet-unknown gameworld was – and still is – a rarity in gaming, and has been perceived as an especially refreshing approach amidst a recent generation of games that is often characterized by its unwillingness to challenge the player and/or risk upsetting them by not letting them “win” the game easily. Rather than providing the player with a place to learn, Persson presented them with an unmapped space to explore.

Clicking through Minecraft's rather spartan start screen for the first time, the player is required to wait for a few moments as their world is randomly generated. This random generation includes variations in topography, the contents and location of underground caverns, the presence of various resources – both underground and aboveground – and the locations of various biomes.

So many minor and major geographical aspects of the world are affected by this random generation – and those aspects so greatly affect the player's experience in the world.

Randomly chosen sections of the gameworld take on aspects of different biomes: jungle, snowfield, desert, forest, grassland, etc. These biomes are not dispersed with any sort of geographical logic in mind – for example, one does not only find snow at high elevations, or at the far “north” and “south” of the world. In later versions of the game, players have been given the ability to choose the frequency of certain geographical features in their world as it is being generated, but largely the terrain is still randomized.
in turn – that every *Minecraft* world necessarily results in a much different experience for the player, despite the fact that the game's mechanics remain the same in every world.

After this generation is complete, the player's avatar – referred to colloquially by the *Minecraft* community as “Steve”[^64] – is then “spawned” into the world at a randomly selected point. From this point on, every time the player restarts a game session in that particular world, either by choice or as the result of their avatar's death, they will spawn again at this point.[^65] Thus, each player's unique Spawn Point becomes the first important place in their unique gameworld – and productively navigating the rest of that gameworld will require far more than the usually expected amount of spatial awareness from them as they continue to play.

After their emergence at this Spawn Point, the player is required to do absolutely nothing. And therein lies the uniqueness – and eventually the wildness – of this particular game: *Minecraft* contains no ludic goals or any overarching narrative to drive the action.[^66] The gameworld is presented by default through a first-person perspective[^67] – which means that the player sees the world through their avatar's “eyes” – and the only methods of interacting with that world that are available to the player from the start are looking around the environment, walking, jumping, and punching. Many more actions become available to the player over time, but these are enabled through clever use of natural resources, and before those resources can be used, they must be found. And, like most things in *Minecraft*, finding resources is not something

[^64]: The *Minecraft* community is unable to come to a consensus on how this name emerged. Persson himself has not confirmed that this is the avatar's “official” name, or even if it is meant to have one at all.

[^65]: Except in the instance that the player crafts a bed inside their home. This is a relatively new feature in the game.

[^66]: In later versions of the game, Mojang added both in-game “achievements” – virtual badges awarded to the player when they accomplish certain tasks; for example, chopping down their first tree – and an “endgame” sequence featuring a “boss” character that, when defeated, unlocks the game's credits sequence. These elements were added to reward players because, in Persson's own words: “For survival mode, I'd rather make the game too difficult than too easy. That also means I'm going to have to include some way of winning the game – or some other climax – to prevent it becoming too exhausting” (“About the Game”). These more ludic portions of the game, however, remain completely optional and the player can simply not engage in these challenges if they so choose without being denied access to any of the gameworld or elements of *Minecraft*'s gameplay experience.

[^67]: A third-person view, in which the “camera” is pulled back to be slightly behind the player's avatar, displaying the world from over the avatar's shoulder is also available, though it is less popular, arguably because from this perspective the player's experience of the world is less immediate.
that is built into some ludic infrastructure that overlays the rest of the gameplay; rather, resources—wood, dirt, sand, various rocks, coal, etc.—are simply *out there* somewhere, and you just have to go looking for them. Much of a player's early experience in their world will thus necessarily be a process of learning the lay of the land around their Spawn Point and getting a better idea of where they can find what. Alternatively, the player may very well simply tear off to the first big mountain or deep valley that they see and begin climbing, drawn in by the game's unique visuals.68

Visually speaking, the world of *Minecraft* is perhaps most directly described as “blocky.” Everything is made of blocks: the dirt beneath your feet, the mountains on the horizon, the trees, the desert, and even the clouds and the water. This is in a sense a concession to the game's “game-ness”—nearly all of the elements of the world can be mined and collected by the player to be used as construction materials, and thus they need to be easily reducible to units that can function, essentially, as currency. Making the earth into blocks means that when you mine one block of dirt, the result is rather unambiguous: you now have one block of dirt. And yet, the blocky visual aesthetic that the game presents, combined with the excitement of discovering the unknown that drives the player to wander far afield from their Spawn Point for the first time seems to engender a sort of reverence for the game's landscapes. The game's minimal user interface encourages this interest in admiring the landscape as it unfolds before you. Whereas most games featuring a first-person perspective will overload the borders of the player's screen with status indicators, maps, and other such informational graphics, *Minecraft* displays nothing aside from the status of the player's health and a “hotbar” that allows quick access to the player's ten most-used inventory items. Both of these bars are reduced to tiny strips at the very bottom of

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68 Perhaps “once-unique” is a more fitting descriptor here, since in the wake of *Minecraft*'s success, scores of games have emulated its distinctive visual aesthetic, including *Cube World*, *Voxatron*, *3079*, and *FortressCraft* among many others.
the screen, so as not to distract from the visual aspect of exploring.

As a result of – or perhaps in spite of – Minecraft's distinctively blocky, “retro” visual aesthetic, many players have found the game's landscapes surreally beautiful. Flickr albums featuring hundreds of in-game screenshots taken from perspectives that consciously mimic “real-life” landscape paintings and photography, YouTube videos that seem to exist for no reason other than to silently document the discovery of new vistas, and other such collections of captured game footage abound on the internet, as players seek to share their best sunset “photographs” and their wanderings through pristine, icy forests during a snowfall. Out of the context of gaming culture, though, it is perhaps difficult to appreciate the meaning such images hold for the game's players: without a personal experience of what it is like to be “in space” in Minecraft's virtual world, screenshots of its blocky landscapes likely fail to communicate the import intended by the player who captured them. Inside the gameworld, where the player's fate is tied to that of their avatar, though, things are much different.

Appreciation for Minecraft's landscapes is just one of many ways in which the player's attachment to the places that they are constructing through exploration manifests. Many players have taken self-described “beautiful” screenshots of a series of virtual mountains marching across the horizon of their gameworld. Yet, upon scaling said mountains, those same players also document various experiences of a sort of embodied, virtual sublime, “that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror” (Burke), as they risk their avatars' lives navigating vertiginous cliffs by the gameworld's sparse moonlight. On occasion, the monolithic peaks, deep valleys, endless subterranean caverns, and spectacular waterfalls of

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69 “Screenshots” are captures of the game's screen taken at certain points by players while they play a game. This functionality is often not built directly into a game, but is the process of directly converting the visual contents of the game screen at a given moment to data in the form of a JPG or PNG file.

70 See, as an example, [http://www.flickr.com/groups/minecraftlandscapes](http://www.flickr.com/groups/minecraftlandscapes).

71 Consider this video as a typical example: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QyiOCWeB2Jg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QyiOCWeB2Jg).

72 In Minecraft, as in life, a fall from substantial height will instantly kill the player.
the gameworld create a gameplay situation wherein “the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it” (Burke), as those features of the landscape simultaneously communicate both beauty and potential danger for players in the gameworld.

Due to the sheer scale of the gameworld, even a player who explores for hundreds of hours in the same randomly-generated world will only be able to shape a tiny fraction of that world to their will, and will always be able to find new, awe-inspiring “natural” formations over the next unexplored hill. In this way, the game's world mimics Burke's original formulation of the sublime by invoking a sense of humility and smallness in the player: the gameworld's sheer scale ensures that it can never be “conquered,” that the player will always remain an insignificantly small variable in its randomized topography. At some point, however, the player is likely to become unsatisfied with simply stumbling around being stupefied by the sheer scale of various landscape formations, and will want to put the land's resources to good use. It is in this pursuit of survival where the player begins the process of assigning place-values to more of the gameworld's space than just the first Spawn Point. This is required in part because of Minecraft's refusal to explain to the player exactly how they are supposed to survive.

Perhaps the most significant omission in this regard is Minecraft's refusal to make any provisions for player navigation. If you are, say, on the lookout for wood to chop, or for a particularly large cave stocked with valuable ores, and you find one of these things, it is your responsibility to keep track of where you found it. Unlike many other exploration-based games, Minecraft does not provide any in-game means of “bookmarking” your location for later reference. If you wander too far afield, or are forced to respawn, all that remains to guide you

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73 Minecraft's gameworld's ability to engender such a feeling of awe in its players has even led some more fervent members of the community to suggest that Persson be considered its “god.” One such player, after submitting a number of his landscape screen captures to an online forum, quipped: “Minecraft is by far the best looking game I've ever played...I think God should take some World Gen tips from [Persson]” (LilSumac).
back to the location you found previously are landmarks and what minor, inefficient orienteering you can manage using the gameworld's sun and moon. In this way, the game mimics a form of “real-life,” truly wild exploration that is nearly impossible to engage in today in the “real,” physical world without an intentional unmapping such as that utilized by the Situationists or urban explorers. To deal with this complication, many first-time players will litter the landscape with dirt cairns as they explore away from their Spawn Point, or simply build extremely tall towers of dirt near points of interest, so that they will be able to find their way back easily by scanning the skyline for the only gigantic tower of dirt in the gameworld.

Comical, brute-force solutions aside, though, the player is required from the beginning of a game of Minecraft to engage in complex orienteering, involving consistent situational awareness and likely a fair amount of “real-world” note-taking in order to keep track of where they are at any given time in the gameworld with relation to other important places: their Spawn Point, rich resource areas, any structures they've potentially built, etc. In this insistence on truly providing an unmapped wilderness space to the player, Minecraft is nearly unique in the gaming world. Clever place-awareness and orienteering are rewarded by increased availability of valuable crafting resources, which in turn increase the player's ability to physically alter the landscape of the world.

Digging up dirt can only get you so far in Minecraft: in-game, as in life, there's not a lot that you can build out of blocks of dirt. Once the player has satisfied their urge to explore – at least temporarily – and becomes interested in making something out of the land around them, the

74 After procuring certain hard-to-find resources, the player can craft a compass and a map to better track their location; however, these resources are nearly impossible to find until the player has spent a significant amount of time exploring the world without their aid. Interestingly, rather than pointing north, the compass points toward the player's Spawn Point, reiterating the importance of that place in the player's experience of the gameworld. Similarly, the player can build a bed which, if placed indoors, allows the player to reassign the chosen structure as their new Spawn Point. This also requires advanced building materials, however, and thus still requires the "early-game" player to be largely at the whim of the gameworld's random generation.

75 Since all of the surface ground in Minecraft's world is made of dirt, and that dirt is easy to dig with basic tools or even with one's bare hands, it is the most readily available building substance to all first-time players.
game's crafting system becomes important and, Robinson Crusoe-like, the player can set off in search of better crating items. Once these items are found and procured through punching and, later, the use of a pickaxe, shovel, handaxe, and other tools, the player must physically arrange them in order to construct their chosen product. On-screen, the crafting grid is very visually intuitive. For instance, a torch is made from a piece of coal stacked atop a wooden stick, while a pickaxe is made from the “T” shape of two wooden sticks stacked vertically beneath a horizontal crossbar of three blocks of stone. Many other crafting “recipes” – as they're called within the community – are much more complicated than these basic ones and involve resources that can only be found by exploring dangerous, lava-filled caves far underground.

Importantly, here again Minecraft does not directly provide information on crafting recipes to the player. Instead, any player new to the game must search the internet – or, more directly, navigate to the community-generated Minecraftwiki – in order to learn what they can do with the dirt, stone, wood, and other materials that they gather from the land. This is yet another way in which the game encourages the player to take an active interest in cultivating personal meaning in its world while also requiring an explorer mentality, even if this particular exploration takes place online rather than in-game. As Minecraft has grown in popularity, the community's knowledge base has grown as well, and now it provides many player-made game FAQs – documents answering “frequently asked questions” about the game – lists of craftable items, and YouTube videos with titles like “Let's Play Minecraft!” and “Minecraft: The Basics,” which often receive millions of views apiece.

I will talk in more depth in the next section regarding how Minecraft's online community

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76 When a game of Minecraft begins, the only tool the player has at their disposal is their own hands. This is fine for digging up dirt clods; however, to progress up the “technology tree” and build more advanced tools, the player must eventually procure wood as well. Because this wood must be found and used to form even the most rudimentary of tools, the player has no choice but to punch trees until they begin to produce collectible stacks of wood. Persson's blatant concession to game-ness in this instance has become an in-joke of sorts in the community, with new players often being referred to as “tree-punchers.”
contributes to a sense of place within the gameworld, but for now it is only important to note that this community grew so large in the first place because of Persson's intentional decision to leave much of the explanation of Minecraft's workings up to the players themselves, necessitating the creation of a shared base of knowledge formed from the experiences of millions of players. In addition to the game's lack of ludic goals and appealing landscape aesthetics encouraging spatial exploration, then, this particular design decision also encouraged players to explore the game's very mechanics, a step generally rendered unnecessary in other games by instruction manuals and/or in-game tutorial sessions. The result is a world in which the player must not only survive, but learn how to survive. This layer of meta-exploration significantly adds to the player's connection to their unique Minecraft world, and this connection is perhaps exemplified most strongly by players' shared experience of their first night in-game.

Survival within the gameworld becomes a much more pressing concern with the fall of in-game night. In addition to the orienteering factors I mentioned above, the player also has to keep track of the time of day while exploring, as when night falls, the gameworld becomes a much more hostile place, and it's best to have some sort of shelter. As Johnson explains, “The world seems friendly at first, full of trees, flowers, mountains and sea, but as soon as night falls, monsters come out. I learned very quickly the first goal of Minecraft: Find a way not to die when it gets dark” (Johnson). Most new players will become well acquainted with their Spawn Point because they will die often – surviving the nights is significantly difficult without some preparation.77

Much like coming to recognize the location of your Spawn Point, surviving your first night in the gameworld is a landmark experience for most Minecraft players. It is often a

77 The craftable beds introduced in later versions of the game allow the player to sleep away the night if located in a walled-in shelter. This mitigates the danger of nightfall to a degree, but the player must still be aware of the time of day if they are out ranging about for resources or exploring away from their bed and shelter.
surprisingly emotional and harrowing ordeal that requires players to engage in a quite literal form of place-construction as they scramble to erect some sort of reasonably solvent shelter in the fading daylight to keep them safe from a countryside suddenly full of monsters. That threat of death forms an attachment to the place where they build, and as a result, a player's first shelter is often one of the most important in-game places they will ever create and know, even if their relationship with it is temporary and ultimately ambivalent. This attachment is born out by the pages upon pages of “first night” narratives that can be found all over the internet, wherein players recount their experiences – shared in a sense, but simultaneously unique in details – in breathless fashion.

In the following excerpts, the wildness of Minecraft's virtual space comes across perhaps more clearly than I can describe in more abstract academic language. These first night narratives tell similar stories, but they each end with an assertion of place, given meaning through contact with a virtual wildness, as it is found within a larger, suddenly hostile gameworld. Johnson describes his first not-so-successful night in Minecraft thus:

I was very proud of myself the first time I built a shelter. I walled myself into a cliff face just as the sun set. As soon as I placed the last rock, I realized my mistake. It was now pitch dark, and I had no idea which direction to dig to get to the light. So I began randomly digging in different directions, and when I finally figured out where the sky was, the breaking dawn revealed my cave as a monument to panic and calustrophoiba [sic] – randomly dug holes everywhere, like I had dug my own tomb. (Johnson)

Quintin Smith of Rock, Paper, Shotgun describes a very similar experience, after he finds himself far from proper shelter on the fall of his first in-game night:

I’m stranded, I still have no decent means of defending myself, and the monsters
will spawn any minute. Gritting my teeth in panic, I equip my shovel and start digging straight down. I dig what amounts to a large grave. All is silent. *Do monsters make any noise?* I pack the dirt back in place over my head and jab a torch into the wall. I’m trapped. Buried alive. The island is tiny and I have no idea how deep the water around it is, so I can’t dig in any direction because I’m terrified I’ll flood the chamber. My heart skips a beat as I hear a monstrous groan from directly above me. There’s something up there, and it wants in. Carefully, I equip my sword. The number of hours between now and dawn stretch and recline in front of me. It’s going to be a long wait. (Smith)

Clearly, playing in *Minecraft*’s world can be emotionally significant even to professional game critics such as Johnson and Smith. By encouraging exploration for its own sake, the game causes players to more fully project themselves onto their avatars, to embody their virtual miner to such a degree that being trapped in the dark in-game is an experience that is worth writing about outside the gameworld. Johnson mentions feelings of “panic” and “claustrophobia” when he accidentally traps himself in the virtual darkness. Elsewhere in his own narrative, Smith remarks that “What surprises me most is how claustrophobic this tunnelling feels. You get a genuine sense of being under a thousand tons of rock, and despite my tunnel being a single, long, downward curve, I can’t shake the feeling that I’m perpetually at risk of getting lost in it. It’s excellently creepy” (Smith). Shortly after this, he reveals that he finds the degree to which the game affects him emotionally “embarrassing” (Smith). Yet these emotional connections reinforce a desire to continue playing, to continue exploring a space that has boundaries more lax than those we find in the physical world and consequences that are less dire. Death in-game is, after all, only a minor setback; which is a good thing, since, as in life, it often rears its head when the player least expects it.
Later on in his first night in-game, Johnson digs down into the ground surrounding his shelter, crafts some torches, and generally succeeds at making himself more or less comfortable. He then writes:

I lit the place up, warding off the darkness, and surveyed my new home. As I looked around the earthen and stone walls of my hovel, I saw a future castle – the beginning of an empire – and felt some glimmer of the feeling early man must have had when he took the first steps toward being master of the world as opposed to its slave. The next morning, as the sun rose, I stepped from my home, directly off a cliff and died. (Johnson)

What eventually results for both Smith and Johnson as they become more comfortable in and familiar with their immediate environment, is a sense of place and – eventually – a home. For Smith, “The entirety [sic] of MineCraft [sic] taps directly into that part of your mind that made it so fun to build forts out of sofa cushions as a kid” (Smith). He finds so much pleasure in this virtual manifestation of building that he begins to assign value to particular places in the world and judge his own progress – such as it is – by their aesthetic quality. At one point, he becomes so invested in how the local landscape fails to match his idealization of what it could be that he writes of his shabby shelter-home: “This is the worst thing. It is the apocalypse. Who would live in a house like this? An asshole, that’s who” (Smith) before demolishing it and moving on to a better location.

These narratives – and the many others available online – are an expression of appreciation for Minecraft’s “emergent gameplay.”78 Through a combination of its randomized worlds and lack of enforced goals, the game allows – and perhaps you could say it even requires

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78 “Emergent gameplay” is an increasingly popular buzzword in the games industry, describing games like Minecraft that – as a broad definition – present gameworlds with less gamemaker-programmed constraints, thus allowing the player to narrate the game's story to a greater degree than in more traditional games.
the player to make their own stories. What emerges is a nearly pure distillation of Kelly's worldmaking model: the rules imposed on the gameworld by Persson and Mojang exist only to frame the player's narration, and to provide challenge to the degree that the player finds the process of narrating valuable and exciting. This created value is transferred to the places that the player discovers during their explorations of their Minecraft world, and thus the game's worldmaking can be seen quite literally as it plays out through the “eyes” of one's avatar.

As I've intimated above, though, the exploration aspect of Minecraft is only part of the story. Mapping places adds meaning to the player's experience of the gameworld, but making those places one's own solidifies that meaning. Johnson closes his article by writing that: "Minecraft doesn't care if you die. It doesn't care if your death is an inconvenience [sic]. It doesn't care that you don't know how to survive. That's left to you and your wits. But when you conquer the basics of not dying, the game gets even more fun, because you can build a world of your choosing" (Johnson), and that's when things really get interesting.

Minecraft and Dwelling

In “Building Dwelling Thinking” Heidegger writes that “We attain to dwelling, so it seems, only by means of building. The latter, building, has the former, dwelling, as its goal” (143). Dwelling is bound up with both building and – more fundamentally – being, as Heidegger demonstrates with an etymological investigation of the Old English buan. Though they have grown apart over time in a linguistic sense, he argues that building and dwelling are still related in an existential one: building enables dwelling, and dwelling “is the manner in which mortals are on the earth” (146). Heidegger is quick to solidify the order of this progression, writing that “We do not dwell because we have built, but we build and have built because we dwell, that is, because we are dwellers” (146). It can be inferred from this that building is an expression of our
essential being. But what does it mean to dwell? What does this essential being look like?

To answer this question, Heidegger returns to etymology; specifically, the Gothic *wunian*, which means “to remain, to stay in a place,” but also means “to be at peace, to be brought to peace, to remain in peace” (147). To dwell, then, means “to remain at peace within the free, the preserve, the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its nature” (147), and the establishment of such a preserve seems to be the project of building. “Building,” in turn, should not be taken only literally: Heidegger appears to be talking about literal building – as his examples of the Heidelberg bridge and the Black Forest farmhouse suggest – but he is also talking about place-construction.

Though he does not make an explicit distinction between the artifact that results from physical building and the experiential value that results from place-construction, Heidegger hints at such a distinction when he writes that “The location is not already there before the bridge is. Before the bridge stands, there are of course many spots along the stream that can be occupied by something. One of them proves to be a location, and does so because of the bridge. Thus the bridge does not first come to a location to stand in it; rather, a location comes into existence only by virtue of the bridge” (152). Clearly, in this example the physical bridge – as a constructed artifact – is distinct from “a location,” and precedes it. The making of a location, or place, results from the construction of the bridge. Or, as Heidegger describes it: “Space is in essence that for which room has been made, that which is let into its bounds. That for which room is made is always granted and hence is joined, that is, gathered, by virtue of a location, that is, by such a thing as the bridge. Accordingly, spaces receive their being from locations and not from 'space’” (152). David Harvey provides some further insight on how this Heideggerian construction might be of use in virtual space.

Harvey characterizes dwelling as “the capacity to achieve a spiritual unity between
humans and things” (11), explaining the link between building and dwelling as he sees it: building allows humans a peaceful, meaningful stay among things through a manipulation of those things. Yet building does not always lead to dwelling, by default – lacking a certain intentionality, building is just building, and only building. Harvey continues, describing the difference between building-as-dwelling and building-without-dwelling:

> Although there is a narrow sense of homelessness which can perhaps be alleviated simply by building shelter, there is a much deeper crisis of homelessness to be found in the modern world; many people have lost their roots, their connection to homeland. Even those who physically stay in place may become homeless (rootless) through the inroads of modern means of communication (such as radio and television) […] If we lose the capacity to dwell, then we lose our roots and find ourselves cut off from all sources of spiritual nourishment. (11)

Perhaps this warning seems to simply echo Heise and Thomashow's discussions regarding a supposed loss of place in the face of globalization and ubiquitous technology as I presented them previously; however, Harvey makes an importantly constructive turn when he writes that “The problem [is] to recover a viable homeland in which meaningful roots can be established. Place construction should be about the recovery of roots, the recovery of the art of dwelling” (11). According to Harvey, such a recovery will require “alternative constructions of place” (12), and ironically today many such alternative constructions are in fact enabled by the very same “modern spread of technology” that Harvey characterizes as the cause of the loss of authenticity in dwelling in the first place. One of the most significant ways that I see these alternative constructions of place being supported rather than undermined by technology is in the arena of games like Minecraft and the online communities that spring up around them.

In the previous section, I outlined a number of ways in which Minecraft presents an
unmapped space to the first-time player, and how the player is initiated into that space through an experience – directed both by the game's mechanics and its visual rhetoric – of wildness. Once the player has mapped at least some semblance of a local area around their Spawn Point, however, *Minecraft* can and often does become less about exploration and survival and more about building. These two halves are symbiotic in a sense – the game's survival mechanic introduces an element of risk that encourages the player to connect emotionally to the place or places that keep them safe from that risk – but building in the gameworld can also come to serve as virtual dwelling, as the primary expression of the player's virtual being. Thus, it takes on a significance that the momentary thrill of seeing over the next hill or around the next bend in the tunnel cannot. The fundamental draw of *Minecraft*, then, emerges from the tension between exploration and construction, wildness and comfort: you must survive in order to build and, ultimately, you must build in order to survive. In this sense, building in *Minecraft* hearkens back to the ancient roots of Heidegger's *buan* more fully than our everyday, “real-life” experience often does. It is perhaps harder to separate building from being when without building, you will be torn to shreds by zombies and giant spiders within minutes.

In practice, the game's building process is relatively easy: you choose the resource or resources you want to use to build something with – all such resources are stored in your inventory in block form – and then you click where exactly you want to place each block. As I mentioned previously, dirt can be found almost anywhere in the gameworld and is relatively easy to mine, and it is feasible to begin building an all-dirt shelter from the instant your avatar spawns into your world for the first time. Like the dirt cairns and beacons beginning players often use to navigate, minor variations on this brute-force solution are often employed by players attempting to survive the first few in-game nights. However, as players gain the ability – through finding better resources and then crafting better tools – to mine “higher-quality” materials like grey
stone, or to build a furnace and use it to fire sand into panes of glass, for example, they are able to create more detailed structures that simultaneously serve as shelter and an expression of their work at surviving in their randomly-generated world.

Certainly, building in *Minecraft* is not “real” in a physical sense, but within its virtual world that building provides the player with the ability to construct their own home places, the key to their survival in the wild world, from materials taken quite literally from the earth. As in-game survival becomes less and less pressing, for many players this act of building also becomes a form of creative expression without sacrificing its original utility. In this way, building in *Minecraft* can become an expression of dwelling, and the dwelling-place that results is the primary expression of how the player is in the gameworld. Thus, the connection between *bauen*, *buan*, and *beo* is perhaps clearer in the virtual world of *Minecraft* than it is in the physical world.

The wealth of *Minecraft* house-building narratives available online – written by gamers and critics alike – speaks to the importance of dwelling to the player's sense of being within the gameworld. This becomes clear in part, for example, through the “first night” narratives that I discussed above – wherein players describe their first encounter with in-game wilderness, but often also their first encounter with the value of a shelter – but the connection between dwelling and being, *buan* and *beo*, becomes even clearer when the player's initial terror subsides and they set about purposely leaving their mark on the terrain of the gameworld. Such narratives serve as players' tacit acknowledgment of the connection between building and being in-game.

Consider, as an example, a later excerpt in Quintin Smith's narrative. After moving from the unsightly cave-home that he described previously as “the apocalypse,” Smith sets about building a new home for himself. Interestingly, he draws inspiration from another video game world that he's familiar with, choosing to model his new *Minecraft* home after a particular gravity-defying structure from the game *Pathologic*. Clearly, the structure is meant to serve two
purposes in his mind: to keep him safe from the mobs that kept killing him and destroying his previous cave-home, but also to serve as an homage and as an expression of his own experiences as a gamer with emotional attachments to structures in other gameworlds, despite its location in a virtual world that no one else will ever actually be a part of.

After spending a few in-game days building the structure's mind-bending main staircase and retreating to his old cave for safety's sake during the nights, Smith begins work on the main body of his new home, where his avatar will “live.” Of this process, he writes that “Finally, I can start work on the house. Rather than a castle I decide on a rustic, two-story structure with windows and a skylight, because I like the double standards involved here. I build my Hero Home on a floating island, because anywhere else would be beneath me. Literally as well as figuratively. But I am also a simple man of simple pleasures and don’t need to show off” (Smith). Despite his jesting tone, the decision of exactly what kind of building to build is obviously important to Smith, as it serves as a manifestation of his presence in the gameworld, and an expression of his progress, as much as such a thing matters in Minecraft. My reading is borne out by Smith's next comments, in which he ruminates on how best to expand upon his dwelling-place:

Course, I’m not actually finished, because it’s very difficult to be finished in Minecraft [sic]. I need to get a Work Table and Forge up here, and then I need reeds to make books, which I can then assemble into a bookcase, and I need a diamond so I can make a record player. I’ve also got a smouldering desire to construct a set of minecart tracks that’ll carry you from my front garden all the way down to the sea. I could even make it a powered minecart so I could get back up. And of course, I’ll need a picket fence. And to have room for that I’ll need to expand the grounds. (Smith)
It is perhaps important to reiterate here that *none of this is required to play the game*. Smith's valuation of such an ornate and detailed dwelling-place is entirely of his own creation, motivated originally by the need for a shelter but then expanded into a form of expressive place-construction. After providing a series of paragraphs and accompanying screenshots meant to detail the building process, Smith provides one last all-encompassing image of his new home, captured from outside, standing on “the grounds.” Below the screenshot, he writes: “God, I *built* that. I’m so proud. This is a videogame, right here” (Smith).

In reaching his ideal combination of form and function, Smith has experienced another feeling that most *Minecraft* players can relate to: the completion of their first home. This moment is importantly different than the one in which the player recognizes the value of shelter for the first time by digging a hole in a wall and hiding there, unmoving, overnight. It is instead the result of purposeful, intentional building and thus it is also about the establishment of an identity in relation to the gameworld. I don't want to underemphasize the importance of the need for shelter as the fundamental motivating factor for this process; however, as important as wildness and the challenge of surviving a hostile world is to the overall experience of playing the game, building a solvent shelter is in fact as easy as throwing up a telephone-booth-sized structure made of dirt and standing in it until the sun comes back up. It is the millions of ways that players have extrapolated from that brute-force solution for their own self-generated reasons that makes building and dwelling in *Minecraft* so fascinating. These extrapolations are generally limited to a particular dwelling-place in the gameworld, or a small number of them. Sometimes, though, players take advantage of the gameworld's elementally destructible nature to make not just a house or a series of houses their own, but to instead fundamentally alter the world on a much larger scale as a form of expression, a way of making their world at large more theirs.

This world-altering manifests in a number of ways. First and most simply, players alter
the appearance of the world on a visual level. Most popularly, such work takes the form of “texture packs” or the in-game recreation of large “real-life” objects. Texture packs are perhaps the most superficial manifestation of this world-changing. The packs are small, downloadable files found on websites like Minecraft Workbench that can be loaded from within the game to change the game's “textures” – the graphics that overlay objects in the gameworld. These files can change the gameworld visually, giving the landscape a smoother, less blocky appearance or making objects look more like their real-world counterparts, for example. They can also make in-game creatures like zombies look “grittier,” turn the game's pigs and cows into dogs and cats, and so on. Players can design such packs – or download packs made by other players – to alter the visual appearance of their own Minecraft world to more closely fit their preferred aesthetic.

If texture packs are too subtle a form of world-editing, players can also take on larger building projects in-game that serve an expressive function to the point of overriding the project’s survival value. Many such projects are viewable online, from recreations of St. Peter's Basilica, the Golden Gate Bridge, the Eiffel Tower, and Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater, to more mundane locations like a generic rural strip mall or a highway rest stop, complete with overpass, to “non-locations” such as Escher's Relativity. These creations are in part simple reproductions of “real-life” locations and objects, but they cannot be created from nothing: rather, they are also the result of the player's prolonged contact with and virtual existence within Minecraft's gameworld, of building-as-dwelling.

The second significant way in which players alter Minecraft's world is by changing the game's mechanics. This manifests primarily in the form of “mods,” in which the very way the game is played is altered, often to reflect or impersonate a different game, to serve as a “cover” of sorts. For example, Zelda Adventure is a Minecraft mod that recreates the mechanics and the ludic challenges of the famous Legend of Zelda video game series within Minecraft. This
includes not only changing the game's visuals, but also what the player is capable of, how tools and items are found and made, how mobs function, and – most significantly – what the goal of the game is. Unlike basic Minecraft with its lack of ludic goals, Zelda Adventure tasks the player with finding and exploring a number of dungeons, while slaying the final monster at the end of each, in the style of the traditional Zelda games. Many other mods do not seek to replicate other games, but express their creators' interests in different ways. For example, Minecraft player James Smith created a mod that calculates players' in-game carbon emissions as they play through the game. Such mods often enact the concept of in-game “building” on a “meta” level that is nearly unprecedented in gaming culture.

Modding, however, is not a particularly egalitarian pursuit, as it requires knowledge of how to read and write computer code. Thus, to achieve similar ends through less technically-complex means, many players “mod” Minecraft by simply choosing to enforce self-imposed rules on the way that they play, in order to manipulate their own relationship to the gameworld to produce an extra layer of meaning. Perhaps the best-known of these experiments is what was called Chain World, a sort-of thought experiment that used Minecraft to provide a fascinating look into how in-game player death can affect the value of that player's place-construction efforts, and exactly how much a gameworld can be worth, both experientially and financially.

Chain World came about as a result of game developer Jason Rohrer's winning entry in the 2011 Game Design Challenge, part of the yearly, national Game Design Conference (GDC). Each year the Challenge requires designers to develop an idea for a new game based on a theme chosen by the Conference's organizers. The 2011 theme was “Bigger Than Jesus: Games as Religion,” and in response Rohrer created a slightly modified version of Minecraft, stored on a single USB stick, that would mimic the functionality of a religion as he saw it. As Wired's Jason Fagone describes Chain World:
The stick would soon hold a videogame unlike any other ever created. It would exist on the memory stick and nowhere else. According to a set of rules defined by Rohrer, only one person on earth could play the game at a time. The player would modify the game’s environment as they moved through it. Then, after the player died in the game, they would pass the memory stick to the next person, who would play in the digital terrain altered by their predecessor—and on and on for years, decades, generations, epochs. In Rohrer’s mind, his game would share many qualities with religion—a holy ark, a set of commandments, a sense of secrecy and mortality and mystical anticipation. (Fagone)

The “commandments” that Rohrer issued were as follows:

1. Run Chain World via one of the included “run_ChainWorld” launchers.
2. Start a single-player game and pick “Chain World.”
3. Play until you die exactly once.
   3a. Erecting wooden signs with text is forbidden
   3b. Suicide is permissible.
4. Immediately after dying and respawning, quit to the menu.
5. Allow the world to save.
6. Exit the game and wait for your launcher to automatically copy Chain World back to the USB stick.
7. Pass the USB stick to someone else who expresses interest.
8. Never discuss what you saw or did in Chain World with anyone.
9. Never play again. (Fagone)

In theory, the idea behind Chain World is fascinating, and speaks to the potential value of a virtual world to a community of players. Each player in the “chain” would make a mark of
their own upon the face of a shared world, and by virtue of the limitations imposed by Rohrer's commandments, each player's in-game death would be rendered as final – and in an odd way as poignant – as a real death. In fact, Rohrer himself, who served as *Chain World*'s first player, commented that in-game “I had one of the most heartbreaking and poignant deaths, way too soon, that I’ve ever experienced in a videogame” (qtd. in Fagone). However, in theory at least, the ways Rohrer had expressed his in-game existence through building would continue on to be experienced by players further down the chain thus rendering him immortal in an Achillean sense.

In practice, *Chain World*'s second player ultimately chose to hold the USB stick hostage, charging for the privilege of being the third player via an Ebay auction that was eventually won for $3,000. Currently, nearly a year later, there is still some question as to whether *Chain World* even made it to that third player at all. Even if Rohrer's experiment ultimately failed in a practical sense, though, the fact that *Chain World* could spark such a bidding war in the first place speaks to the allure of being able to explore a gameworld marked by the passing of other, finite, virtual lives, as well as the desire to be able to add one's own place-construction experiences to that legacy.

Fortunately, such experiments do not necessarily need the infrastructure of a Game Developers Conference or the notoriety of an expensive Ebay auction in order to function. Perhaps just as interesting as *Chain World* is what Tom Francis called “The Minecraft Experiment.” Francis is a writer for well-known gaming publication *PC Gamer*, and in late 2010 he began documenting his experience of learning to play *Minecraft* in the form of a long-running narrative published on *PC Gamer*'s website. Francis played for thirty-one “real” days, and at the end of each day summed up his experiences in-game for his readers. What makes Francis's narrative different than the ones I've quoted previously, however, is one small but significant
self-imposed rule: every time he died in-game, he was required to delete the world he'd begun and generate a new one in its place.

Explaining the basis of his experiment, Francis writes: “Minecraft randomly generates its world when you start the game, a landscape you never need to leave. It’s eight times the size of Earth, so you’re not going to run out of room for Cobblestone Hovel #3. But you can also delete worlds, to free up a slot for a new one. You lose that vast, unique place, along with everything you’ve found, collected and created within it” (Francis). As he sees it, his rather arbitrary extra rule creates the potential for a more meaningful way of playing the game. He explains that “Normally, death just means respawning and a short trip to find where you dropped all your stuff. But since it’s the survival aspect of the game that appeals to me, I wanted to be scared. I wanted a harder death penalty: the end of the world” (Francis). Short of simply quitting the game forever when he died in-game, this approach made virtual death as final as it could possibly be. The resulting narrative is surprisingly poignant in the way that it portrays Francis's growing connection to his various worlds, and how that connection is often suddenly broken due to a small, unexpected misstep that leads to his avatar's death.

Still, for most players, the primary – and perhaps only – way that they will enact building in Minecraft's gameworld is through the construction of their own dwelling-place. This is a formative experience that all players must go through if they play on surviving for any length of time in the gameworld. However, the flexibility of Minecraft and the creativity of its community have allowed for much more abstract versions of place-construction as well, both on a local scale and on a worldwide one. In all of the instances that I've described above, the common factor is how the player expresses their being in the virtual space of the world: rather than through defeating monsters, completing levels, or saving the princess, a Minecraft player becomes in-game ultimately through building, and thus also through dwelling.
Of course, the virtual nature of gameworld like Minecraft's is what makes all of this possible. There need be no shortage of virtual space, except as it is bounded by the limits of the current popular computing hardware and the gamemakers' coding. There's no need for the imaginative unmapping of the type required for urban exploration, as the degree to which the gameworld is mapped simply depends on the whim of the gamemakers. Wildness can serve its necessary function without putting the player's actual life in danger at any point, and the challenges it forces on the player can make exploration a meaningful enterprise in and of itself. When that exploration leads to building, the player is able to build anything, anywhere in the gameworld, if they are willing to put in the work of gathering the materials. There are no laws, no limits aside from the ones that are inherent to the world. And, if a player dislikes a particular gameworld's rules? Well, as games continue to grow in popularity, there will be more and more other worlds to choose from.

Yet, of course, there is a difference between a gameworld's ability to be just as affective as “real life” and that gameworld's ability to replace “real life”; while I argue heartily for the former, I believe that the latter is neither possible nor desirable. Virtual space – and the virtual places that come into being through players' existence in it – can supplement experiences of wildness and place-construction in the physical world, but they cannot replace them any more than we can live as phenomenologically-aware minds disassociated from our bodies. Perhaps someday such a thing will be possible, but to entertain the implications of such a technology is far beyond the scope of my project. What is worth considering, however, is how technology has recently allowed for the hybridization of both physical and virtual spaces, and how that hybridization assists our search for wildness and the opportunity for meaningful reterritorialization.

In my next chapter, I will investigate how mobile gaming is enabled by location-aware
and mobile technologies. After a more general discussion, I will examine the popular mobile games *Foursquare* and geocaching in particular as illustrative examples of the ability of such technologies to power meaningful experiences of wildness and resultant reterritorialization. I believe that through the use of portable, location-aware interfaces, spatial practitioners can now merge many of the advantages of mapping virtual space as a player in a gameworld with the allure of physical embodiment, thus retaining the positives of urban exploration and *Minecraft* while dispelling many of the negatives through a melding of physical walking and a virtual layer of place information united by an overriding ludic framework.
It's a gorgeous, mild, mid-June morning in Pullman when Lindsey and I set out on our first geocaching “marathon.” We've been geocaching off and on for a few years at this point, and it has become one of our favorite fair-weather hobbies. It's particularly fun during the summers, when most of the college students have moved back home, the entire town is a bit emptier and quieter, and it's just plain easier to hike the length of the city for hours at a time with a backpack full of picnic food and water bottles while waving a huge neon green GPSr around in front of your face like you're the crazy metal detector guy at the beach. Admittedly, this last concern has become more a matter of pragmatism for us rather than one of self-consciousness: once you've homed in on the location of a cache, it's much easier to spend twenty minutes nosing around the underbellies of picnic tables to find it if there aren't twenty children and their parents currently having a birthday party atop those tables.

As we've spent more time geocaching, we've found the relationship between geocachers and the public sphere to be a particularly interesting one. With geocachers' nearly flash-mob-esque disregard for social mores on one hand and their oft-disparaging talk of “muggles” – geocacher slang for locals who aren't in on the joke, so to speak – on the other, it might be tempting to perceive geocaching as an antisocial pursuit; however, that would be an inaccurate perception. In fact, without the prodding of a larger, internet-connected geocaching community, Lindsey and I would not be currently attempting to tackle what is, for us, a gargantuan task: finding twenty geocaches in one city, in one day.

Over the past three years, the majority of our geocaching adventures have been, by necessity, rather brief excursions. Without a lot of time to spare because of the varied and often
overwhelming responsibilities of being both graduate students and teaching assistants, we've often been limited to geocaching during breaks between classes, or on the way to the grocery, or during the too-brief window between the completion of the workday and sunset. On the rare occasion that we have had an entire day to ourselves, we've often indulged in wild experiences a bit further afield: swimming in the Snake River, scaling Kamiak Butte or exploring the labyrinth of trails around the base of Moscow Mountain. Geocaching is a great practice in part because it lends itself to such an application – it's an adventure you can squeeze into a free hour – but at the same time we've often felt like we were missing out by not taking on a larger-scale geocaching project.

For years, the logs of caches that we've found have contained entries like “Twenty-third of forty caches found today! Having so much fun!” and “Great cache! Hoping to find one hundred this weekend!”, entries that begged two questions: “How do I get these people's jobs?” and “What would it be like to take geocaching to such an extreme?” The second question seemed more easily answered than the first, and so we finally blocked out an entire weekend day during the summer to see for ourselves. Our goal was perhaps a bit less lofty than others' – find twenty geocaches on foot, in Pullman, between breakfast and dinner – but pursuing it would give me a new appreciation for how much geocaching can teach you about places that you thought you already knew.

* * *

To geocache is to uncover an otherwise invisible layer of place. To close in on a cache only to find another person or group of people surreptitiously looking for it while sneaking covert looks at a GPSr or mobile phone hidden in their coat pocket is, in a sense, to cross paths with other wanderers who understand the language, who can read the signs. Following GPS coordinates to a cache can only get you so close, but within that last fifty feet there are often
subtle signs – ways of placing a cache common to many geocachers – that, with practice, you begin to read in the same way that a hunter reads the tracks of his prey. Your commute to work and your walk to the store are changed in small but irrevocable ways once you know that there is a cache hidden behind the DO NOT ENTER sign or inside the trunk of the biggest tree in the park.

My first-ever cache was hidden in an old, now-defunct public telephone kiosk along Wilson Road on the WSU campus. I, like hundreds if not thousands of other students at the university, walk past this spot nearly every day, and yet I am one of the very few – and perhaps even the only one – who knows that there is a cache there, who stops now and then to make sure that it's still in place, that it hasn't been damaged, vandalized, or taken. I'm sure that there are many more such caches on campus in other well-traveled places that I don't know about, that I walk past cluelessly while someone else who is aware of their existence appreciates them and perhaps even manages them. This hidden layer of knowledge changes the way you relate to a place. My second-ever cache was hidden near the top of the large cougar statue that once stood outside the gates of WSU's Martin Stadium before it was replaced by an even larger cougar statue). This particular cache involved a bit of climbing which was made difficult both by the slipperiness of the statue's “rock” and the confused and uneasy stares of passers-by who had no idea what I was up to. It was an adventure, then, both physically and socially.

Geocaching is perhaps easier in places that you don't know well, like faraway cities or forests, or in liminal places like rest stops and Walmart parking lots. In such places, you don't have to affect the attitude of seeing a place for the first time because you are seeing it for the first time. However, geocaching is more interesting when practiced close to home, when it challenges you to look at familiar places in a new way, to find new value in those old places, and to then use that value to redefine what you thought you knew about, say, an old telephone kiosk or a cougar
statue. Here are a few of the most memorable such challenges that geocaching has presented us with so far:

1. Lindsey and I found our first nanocache in a small public square in Pullman, directly across the street from a bar we'd both been frequenting for years. We'd followed an exceptionally strong GPS signal directly to where the cache was supposed to be, but found nothing initially. It was only after half an hour of searching that I realized that what we had thought to be a metal bolt at the base of an electric pole was in fact a tiny magnetic cache. Beside being indignant that anything so small was considered a legal cache, we were shocked to find such a cache so close to a location that we'd thought we knew so well. Now we often point this cache out to friends when we pass through downtown as their introduction to the hidden place-language of geocachers.

2. Due to improperly-entered coordinates on the part of the cache's creator, we once spent nearly an hour on a playground, in broad daylight, climbing under and over a gigantic, spring-powered, plastic, purple dinosaur, much to the annoyance of all the children who wanted to ride on it. This was easily our most socially uncomfortable geocaching outing, and it wasn't until weeks later that we realized the cache-creator's mistake and returned to find the cache in a much less accessible and unobvious place a hundred or so feet away from the dinosaur.

3. We once found a cache located quite literally fifty feet from the front door of an apartment in which I had lived for three years. Following the GPS signal into what I had always imagined to be a rather unexceptional stand of trees, we instead found the entire rusted chassis and engine block of a 1920s-era automobile, with the cache hidden in the glove compartment. Clearly, the cache's creator had meant to use the geocaching community to draw more popular attention to this generally forgotten but amazing relic, something that I had never
seen before despite having walked within twenty feet of it hundreds of times.

4. During our first ever visit to WSU's Tri-Cities campus, where I had recently been employed to teach for the upcoming academic year, we spent most of the afternoon geocaching. One of the caches we found that day has since become one of my all-time favorites: located in the desert scrub slightly off the campus's main road, it is enclosed in a small wooden box that can only be accessed by uncovering a small trap door in the ground buried under a pile of rocks next to a tree. On that day, finding that particular cache and three others gave me the beginnings of a sense of place in a new city that would have otherwise taken me months to cultivate. The next spring, I tasked my Tri-Cities students with finding the same cache as part of a unit on the value of place.

5. Once, on a walk back home from downtown sans GPSr and any geocaching-related intentions, we were passing one of North Grand Avenue's odd rock walls that seem to exist only to support the houses further up the hill to the north. Suddenly, Lindsey mused out loud that “This looks like a good place for a geocache!” and plunged her hand and arm into a gap between two of the larger rocks. We were both stunned when she actually pulled a geocache out. We had become so comfortable by that point with the logic of cache placement we could pick out good potential cache locations completely, it seemed, on instinct.

6. Geocaching factored so heavily into my research work during the second half of 2009 and the first half of 2010 that I found myself creating a geocache-powered alternate-reality game with two of my colleagues as a final class project. This project resulted in us placing fifteen different caches of our own across the WSU campus and the rest of Pullman. Many of these caches were located in places that I already knew well, and after repeated return trips to repair and otherwise maintain the caches, those places had gained yet another layer of significance in my mind. It felt as if we had built our own secret clubhouse, one that was
simultaneously out in the open but also hidden perfectly from sight.

* * * *

It turns out that in aiming for twenty caches in one day we might well have bitten off more than we can chew. The shadows are slanting, the sun is turning a ruddy orange, and we've only found nine caches. Numerically, the day has been a slight disappointment, but it's also been a fascinating experience in geocaching immersion. As per my GPSr, we've walked nearly ten miles back and forth across Pullman, and the combination of walking through known places that we're remapping as we search for caches and the reality that there's always an ice cream shop at most a mile away makes it feel like we've hit a sweet spot between wildness and comfort. In addition, the more abstract, numbers-based layer of my GPSr's interface adds a pleasing game-like aspect to the proceedings: finding each successive cache is satisfying in its own right, but it's also just the impetus for clicking “FIND NEXT” again and saying “Let's just do one more...” while watching our “Total Caches” counter ratchet up. I can begin to understand now how people can enjoy finding one hundred caches in a single weekend. Though we're almost out of time, we decide to scramble to find one more cache, partially for the joy of exploration and partially for a more ludic reason: ten sounds like a better “final score” than nine does.

Our search leads us to Paradise Street as it runs behind the downtown strip and then up a hill to the south along Spring Street, into a neighborhood that I'm passingly familiar with but haven't spent much time in. Like many of Pullman's more southerly neighborhoods, this one is almost forestlike, the sidewalks choked with old, stout, thick trees and the houses far back from the street, peeking timidly out from the foliage at lot-sized intervals. We follow the street for awhile, at times wandering and at times allowing ourselves to be guided by the arrow on the GPSr. Despite the chill in the air imparted by the setting sun, it's still a pleasant enough evening for a walk that it takes ten minutes before I finally realize that we've been walking around and
around a particular block, circling the cache location displayed on the GPSr but never getting any closer to it.

The northern, southern, and western sides of the block are dotted with houses, and there's no clear point of ingress to be found anywhere. As we circle back around to the east side of the block, the desire to wrap things up before dark – when it becomes legitimately difficult to find well-hidden caches – overwhelms the appeal of freer, less-directed exploration, and I change the GPSr to “Navigation Mode.” The mode locates us as heading south on Spring Street and suggests that we take a right on Jackson Street in five hundred feet. We continue walking south, keeping an eye out for a street on our right. Well before we reach the first such street, though, the GPSr beeps, warning us that we've somehow missed our turn. We double back, and after a bit of walking it beeps again, warning us that we've passed the intersection again, somehow, while moving in the opposite direction. There's a Jackson Street to the east, but it doesn't continue through to the west, like it would have to for the GPSr's directions to be correct. Instead, there's just a wall of trees where the street is supposed to be. It's hard to imagine that maybe the GPSr's topo map is just outdated and maybe there used to be a Jackson Street a few years ago – it couldn't have been replaced by this urban jungle so quickly.

Lindsey is the one who finally spots the path. It looks ancient, and is more the size of a deer trail than a human one. It turns off from the sidewalk and runs uphill into the trees in the exact direction that Jackson “Street” was supposed to run. It's odd: now that we've seen it, it seems obvious, but we'd walked past it twice while looking directly at it. It's not hard to imagine someone living in this neighborhood for years, driving down Spring Street every day on the way to work, and never knowing that this path was there. Of course, we follow it into the trees.

Almost immediately, we're under a thick canopy of deciduous trees in the full height of their summer leafing. It's even darker here and the ground, which isn't paved, is spongy despite
the fact that it hasn't rained in days. Almost immediately, the path curves to the north and the entrance to Spring Street disappears behind the trees. We proceed further up the muddy hill until we're suddenly surrounded on both sides by huge beds of wildflowers. It looks as if these were, at one point, human-planted beds but have since grown wildly out of control, and now they crowd the path so tightly that we have to walk one foot in front of the other, as if we're walking a tightrope, to avoid crushing them. The purples and blues of the flower petals clash strikingly with the greenery that otherwise encloses us, and we stop for a moment to take a few pictures and to admire the view.

As we proceed past the flower beds we are, for a moment, surreally misplaced, thrust into an unexpected wilderness. The trees around us are arranged just so, in a way that blocks our view of the road to the east and of the houses and yards that otherwise surround us. For a moment, the only sounds are birdsong and the wind, and it's almost possible to believe that this new part of Pullman that we've discovered isn't part of Pullman at all. We stand still for a moment, unwilling to break the silence, both grinning like idiots. Then a car whirs by on Spring Street, destroying the illusion, and we continue on up the slope, across what seems like it might be someone's driveway, and along the last bit of a westward-leading path that opens up into a small park.

Later we will use Google Maps to learn that this is called Woodcraft Park, and that it is in fact quite rarely used. It's very small compared to Pullman's other city parks, and nobody else is around, so we spend a few minutes enjoying the peace and quiet, and then easily grab the rather obviously-placed cache that we came for. We may not have reached our original goal of twenty caches in a day, but ten in one day is still a “high score” for us. As night falls, we head back to better-known parts of the city, content in the knowledge that Pullman can still surprise us.
CHAPTER FIVE

PLAYING IN HYBRID SPACE: BRINGING VIRTUAL WILDERNESS TO THE PHYSICAL WORLD

Any game can at any time wholly run away with the players. The contrast between play and seriousness is always fluid. The inferiority of play is continually being offset by the corresponding superiority of its seriousness. Play turns to seriousness and seriousness to play. Play may rise to heights of beauty and sublimity that leave seriousness far beneath.

- Johan Huizinga

There are now more mobile phones on Earth than televisions. Soon the mobile phone will overtake the wristwatch as the most commonly 'worn' personal technology. Despite superficial debates about changing social etiquette, mobile phones (unlike personal computers) have been seamlessly woven into our lives, finding roles across all the spaces for work, home and play that we inhabit on a daily basis. More importantly, the sociological literature on mobile-phone use reveals deep emotional involvement with these devices and a reliance on them for social and economic survival that is rarely seen with desktop PCs. - Anthony Townsend

As can be seen through my previous discussions of flanerie, the dérive, and urban exploration, engaging in spatial practices – syntheses of physical walking and imaginative acts of unmapping – in the modern city can allow the practitioner to unmap their surroundings, making space from place. Urban exploration in particular additionally introduces the quality of wilderness to urban areas by reconceptualizing known places as experientially wild space, reimagining old sewer systems and condemned buildings as uncharted mysteries ready to be “discovered” by any
explorers willing to brave whatever awaits them in the forgotten corners of their city.

I have also discussed how spatial practice can be successfully transposed from physical to virtual space through the medium of video games. In the specific case of *Minecraft*, the game's world is presented to the player by the gamemakers as unmapped, a design-time decision which requires the player to adopt a mentality not unlike the urban explorer's as they walk the gameworld for the first time and through walking make that world known to them. By enabling a virtual instantiation of spatial practice and then melding it with a game mechanic meant to emulate the difficulties of “real-life” wilderness survival, *Minecraft* melds in-game exploration with the quality of wildness. Additionally, the game offers players something that is generally impossible to accomplish through spatial practices located entirely in the physical world: an opportunity for place-construction, for the making of place-based meaning made within the player's own virtual world. Through the presentation of a nearly infinite, unmapped gameworld and the inclusion of a crafting mechanic that makes building the player's primary expression of in-game being, *Minecraft* enables the player to write their own place-values quite literally on the face of the game's earth in the wake of their successful explorations.

However, *Minecraft*'s functionality as a place-construction simulator is necessarily a result of the gameworld's existence in virtual space: limited only by the gamemakers' programmed rules, such virtual gameworlds can empower the player as a placemaker to a degree that simply isn't practically possible in the entirely physical realm of the urban explorer. But what if these physical and virtual worlds could be synthesized into one hybridized space? To answer this question, in this final chapter I will consider the increasingly popular medium of mobile games, as I believe that it best realizes the unique possibilities of spatial practice as they are enacted in hybrid space.

The medium of mobile gaming encompasses a wide variety of experiences within
physical/virtual spaces that are hybridized to varying degrees. As a result, the critical discourse on these games has spent nearly as much time suggesting new taxonomies and classifications of genres and subgenres as it has discussing specific games and their implications for players' experiences of that hybridized space. For my purposes, Adriana de Souza e Silva and Daniel Sutko's definition of mobile gaming is the most salient and blessedly efficient. They write that “There are two common characteristics to all [mobile] games that differentiate them from traditional video games and physical games: (1) they use the city space as the game board, and (2) they use mobile devices as interfaces for game play” (3). From within this model, de Souza e Silva and Larissa Hjorth proceed to define three subclassifications, dividing up the medium of mobile gaming based, essentially, on the degree to which individual games rely on virtual space to function.

First, de Souza e Silva and Hjorth discuss “urban games,” or UGs. These games “transform the everyday cityscape into a playing field by deploying various forms of new and old tactics and media” (614). By utilizing a combination of internet-connected mobile technologies and face-to-face interaction with other players, UGs “reflect and challenge social norms, reminiscent of political movements such as SI [Situationist International] in the 1960s and the more recent phenomenon of the parkour” (612); however, unlike location-based mobile games (LBMGs), they do not utilize location-aware technologies as part of the gameplay experience.

De Souza e Silva and Hjorth differentiate LBMGs from UGs by explaining that “they additionally allow the linking of information to places, and players to each other via location awareness. Although LBMGs might have an online component, the game takes place primarily in the physical space and on the cell phone screen, as players can see each other and/or virtual game elements on their mobile screen” (614). This melding of virtual information and physical
sensory experience allows players to engage in explorations not unlike those found in *Minecraft*'s gameworld while remaining at least partially grounded in the physical world, as the game interface uses location awareness to overlay virtually-expressed place-values atop physical locations. The result is various experiences of “ludic play” in a hybrid virtual/city space. De Souza e Silva and Hjorth explain further that “This movement through the city might be goal driven – that is, when a player goes out specifically to play the game – but it is generally spontaneous – by moving through the city in their usual routes to school or work, players are accessed by the game – a fact that turns their experiences of the city into an unexpected playful adventure” (618).

Hybrid reality games (HRGs) take this spatial hybridity even further, by constructing full online gameworlds much like those found in traditional video games and linking the player's actions in those worlds to their actions in the physical world through the use of location awareness and internet connectivity. According to de Souza e Silva and Hjorth, HRGs thus “define a new gaming spatial logic, since the game takes place simultaneously in physical and digital spaces” (618). This level of spatial hybridity “aims to challenge the role of copresence in everyday life – forging questions around boundaries between digital and physical spaces” (618). Importantly, and unlike UGs and LBMGs, HRGs are necessarily driven by a connected, multiplayer community that cooperatively constructs the game experience. Of the three types of mobile games that de Souza e Silva and Hjorth describe, HRGs most dramatically push the technological boundaries of what gameplay in hybrid space can be; however, my project has always been primarily interested in exploring the possibilities of creating wild spaces outside of their traditional wilderness milieu, and I believe that within the medium of mobile games, it is actually LBMGs that best enable experiences of wildness within hybrid space due to their use of location-aware technologies and their tendency to focus less on the social aspect of mobile...
gaming than HRGs do.

Compared to spatial practices that take place *only* in the physical world – urban exploration – or *only* in a virtual world – *Minecraft* – mobile games in general – and LBMGs in particular – are characterized at least in part by the tension between the physical and virtual spaces they seek to unite.79 As Ingrid Richardson writes in “The Hybrid Ontology of Mobile Gaming,” “the digital and material network ecologies of game-play” that arise from mobile gaming “are inextricable from the patterns and mobilities of daily activity; that is, for many players, it is impossible to say where their online identity or avatar ends and their RL [real-life] persona begins, where social interaction stops and game-play starts, or how game-space can be 'marked off' from urban or city space” (427). I will continue to focus on the generation of deterritorialized wildness through spatial practice and how virtuality allows for player place-construction within gameworlds, while also reconsidering how hybrid spatial practices function productively with the tension that Richardson describes. LBMGs are of particular interest to me, for the ways in which they use this tension-filled, hybrid space to unmap place and generate wildness, but then additionally allow that space to be reterritorialized, not within an entirely virtual world like *Minecraft*'s but in a hybrid gameworld that has its roots in physical space, in the player's phenomenological experience in the “real world” through the use of location awareness. As an introductory example to how such reterritorialization functions in hybrid space, consider the popular LBMG *Foursquare.*

79 Though one could argue that traditional video games are not *entirely* removed from physical space simply because their virtual gameworlds are only mediated by the borders of a screen and thus can be easily superseded by the demands of the “real world” at any time, there is a distinct difference between a video game that seeks to draw the player's attention away from that “real world,” and a mobile game that purposely interfaces directly with the physical world in order to create a hybrid play space. Or, as Michiel de Lange has it in “From Always-On to Always-There: Locative Media as Playful Technologies”: “Digital games used to be largely set apart from the physical domain. Although digital games could be portable (e.g., PSP, Nintendo DS), involve bodily gestures (e.g. Wii), or be played at certain locations (e.g. in arcades), the play element of these games was confined to their own game spaces […] LBMGs are games whose outcome depends not only on the events on the screen but also on the player's positions in the physical world” (56).
Foursquare and Hybrid Place-Construction

Foursquare was launched in March of 2009. Created by Dennis Crowley and Naveen Selvadurai and based on the idea behind its predecessor, the Crowley-designed Dodgeball, it is a LBMG that allows users to log their current physical position online as it is detected by their GPS-enabled phone. Though I consider Foursquare to be a game, the Foursquare website describes it as an “app,” and claims that “foursquare makes the real world easier to use. We build tools that help you keep up with friends, discover what’s nearby, save money and unlock deals. Whether you’re setting off on a trip around the world, coordinating a night out with friends, or trying to pick out the best dish at your local restaurant, foursquare is the perfect companion” (“About foursquare”). The intent behind this description seems to be to downplay the ludic aspect of Foursquare while playing up its usefulness as a social media/event-planning tool. Interestingly, though, this recent revision of the Foursquare website's content clashes with the 2009 version of the site that Alison Gazzard quotes from in her article “Location, Location, Location: Collecting Space and Place in Mobile Media,” which instead explained that: “Foursquare on your phone gives you & your friends new ways of exploring your city. Earn points & unlock badges for discovering new things” (qtd. in Gazzard 407). This discrepancy muddies the waters a bit regarding what Foursquare is intended to be: mobile game or “app”? Fortunately, though the public face that Foursquare's website puts forth may have changed over the last three years, the basic functionality of Foursquare itself hasn't changed in any significant way, and I believe that it is this functionality that qualifies it as a LBMG and makes it an excellent example of how a player's experiences in hybrid space can allow them to write place-values onto that space via location-aware technology.

80 On the game's website, its name has recently been stylized as foursquare.
To begin playing *Foursquare,* the user must create an online profile not unlike that required by social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, or Google+. This first step speaks to the importance of *Foursquare's* social networking dimension: much of any given player's *Foursquare*-related activity is, by default, shared on social networking sites, and players can in fact log in to the game directly using their Facebook ID, further expediting this sharing. Yet such social networking is not necessary for play as it is in an HRG, and it is ultimately secondary to *Foursquare's* more ludic features. The most basic ludic functionality of *Foursquare* is that it allows players to “check in” to their current physical location through their location-aware mobile phone. This location is then uploaded to the game's website, and also shared with the player's social network if they so choose. As hinted at by Gazzard above, the game then leverages these “check-ins” into a ludic currency. The result is what Jason Wilson, Chris Chesher, Larissa Hjorth, and Ingrid Richardson describe as “a style of play that blends social networking, urban *flaneurie,* and elements of questing” (353).

Though *Foursquare* can be played alone, the social networking aspect of the game introduces an element of competition, according to Wilson, et al.: “Players accumulate 'friends' as in other social networking platforms, with whom they compete to accumulate points won by logging their path through the city” (353). Players receive a certain amount of points for each check-in that they record. Interestingly, the game's scoring system further rewards both exploration and constancy. As Wilson, et al. explain, “The game gives more points, and therefore privileges exploring new places, traveling long distances between check-ins, and going to new categories of place. (For example, players might be awarded extra points for their 'first

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81 Much of players' interaction with the hybrid space of LBMGs like *Foursquare* is necessarily fragmented, as they switch their attention between the demands of the gameworld and the purely physical world that they are bodily navigating while playing. Despite the fact that such play is rarely if ever marked by what Hjorth and Richardson call “the dedicated attentiveness” (29-30) that we are able to give to more traditional, screen-bound video games like *Minecraft,* though, I still use the verb “play” to describe the process of intermittently engaging with these hybrid spaces.
restaurant')." (353). At the same time, though, Foursquare also rewards frequency and “loyalty” to certain places. For example, players who check in to the same place frequently can be declared that place's “mayor,” but once that title is bestowed, it can be lost if the player fails to maintain the frequency of their visits.

Foursquare is compelling because it lays a virtually-based ludic framework over the very basic geographic and experiential facts of being “in place” in the physical world. It is certainly not unique in the medium of mobile games in this regard, but at a time when such games are becoming increasingly complex and pervasive, it is a very simple yet powerful manifestation of LBMGs' ability to highlight the truth of Hjorth's claim that “place is more than just physical geographic location […] places are constructed by an ongoing accumulation of stories, memories, and social practices” (358). Through Foursquare's interface – the player's mobile phone – “physical geographic” place gains extra layers of meaning, and while the player's experience of the physical world is being mediated through said interface, they are existing in a meaning-laden hybrid space where materiality and virtuality are combined.

Gazzard writes that with the advent of LBMGs, “It is now possible for the location to become the gameworld” (411), and she discusses at length how Foursquare's ardent affirmation of place not only intensifies any previous place-values the player might have attached to, say, a favorite restaurant, it can also make new places where there once were none. In discussing “non-places” – a term she adopts from Marc Augé's Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity – such as airports, hotels, parks, strip malls, etc., Gazzard argues that Foursquare users “are deliberately marking” these non-places “as places of identity by naming them and sharing them with others” (408). Through Foursquare, then, “The airport becomes placed through the user's recognition of its existence and is in turn given an identity linked to using the check-in system. This identity is then extended through the social network attached to
Foursquare and other users' subsequent check-ins” (408). This “placing” of non-places is only one way that the game empowers its players as placemakers – it also allows for the quite literal creation of new places within the virtual layer of the gameworld. These places are then mapped onto the physical space near the player's location through the game's internet-connected interface.

While the foundational map that Foursquare plays out on is internally generated and is much like Google Maps or Bing Maps in appearance, the locations on that map that players can interact with are in fact created by the players themselves. Gazzard refers to these locations as “the emergent map” (409) of Foursquare, and not unlike Minecraft's “emergent gameplay” this map is always changing, defining and redefining the gameworld its players operate within. The places that become important to the gameplay are made so by the players themselves rather than the gamemakers. “The virtual map of Foursquare creates places that are important to the user as opposed to those landmarks that are used to guide people through unknown spaces,” writes Gazzard, and thus “Foursquare can be seen as the creation of a cultural map, depicting the places seen as relevant to the people experiencing them” (409). This functionality gives Foursquare players the same place-constructing power available to the player-builders of Minecraft while neither requiring their creations to exist entirely in virtual space nor requiring the alteration of physical space, which would often be illegal and/or necessarily ephemeral in nature.

Foursquare is an excellent example of how place-construction in hybrid space is expedited and made more egalitarian by the meshing of the physical and virtual realms; however, it has some shortcomings that make it a less-than-ideal candidate for enacting spatial practice in hybrid space. As Gazzard notes in her article, “The premise of the location-based application (app) is to discover new places whilst on your travels yet the experience of using the app is somewhat different” (407). She goes on to describe how seams in Foursquare's meshing of the
physical and the virtual frequently make the game's mediation of the physical world more distracting than empowering.

First, “The act of opening up the application forces you to stand still and wait for the GPS to update your current location” (407). This delay exposes the virtual layer of the player's hybrid space as a less-than-cohesive merging with the physical world which the player is moving through, destroying the illusion that it is the player and not a network of fallible GPS satellites that ultimately determines success or failure in the ludic dimension of *Foursquare*. Second, “Places around you are listed and you can choose where to check in. Therefore, it is possible to check in to multiple locations whilst remaining in one position. In fact, it is often easier to remember to check in to places when a place is reached, rather than standing still in a place and trying to find a location to log whilst walking around” (407). By allowing players to check in to places that they might only be near and not at, Foursquare implicitly privileges game-ness over an accurate remapping of the player's physical movement in virtual space. The result is a disconnect between what the player does in physical space and how that activity is recorded in virtual space; a player physically seated at a restaurant can, in the gameworld, be “at” every restaurant on the block over a period of a few minutes, in the name of boosting their in-game score. The lack of verisimilitude between the two halves of *Foursquare*'s hybrid space “makes the act of finding places deliberate rather than a process occurring through an act of discovery” (407). The ultimate result is an LBMG that essentially gamifies “real life” to a degree that exploration is reduced to movements between a series of nodes, each imbued with ludic value.

The space in-between these nodes has no meaning within *Foursquare*'s hybrid gameworld – unless more nodes are added within it by players – and so the game does not so much extend the player's experience of the physical world through mobile technology as it does

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82 For example, I have occasionally been able to check in to places up to half a mile away from my actual position.
simplify it. “The act of wandering becomes obsolete,” Gazzard says, “as the passing
surroundings are no longer valued in view of the prize of finding a place to check in. The walk
between places is of less importance in comparison to the hunt for new places as the unlocking
of different badges persists” (408). Foursquare's player-generated map of nodes becomes
primary as the map of the “real world” that underlies it quickly becomes obsolete. This lack of
valuation is perhaps best represented by the map functionality that Foursquare doesn't provide
for the player. Of the game's main map, Gazzard writes that it “is not navigational, and it is not
possible to zoom in and out to see the relationship with the logged place and the surrounding
spaces, highlighting the importance of place and location over the routes in between” (408).
Clearly, Foursquare enables player place-construction, but in doing so it overvalues place to the
detriment of space and overvalues ludus to the detriment of exploration.

But what would a more effective utilization of mobile gaming technology – one that
assists the player both in unmapping hybrid space and then reterritorializing that space – look
like? Next, I will theorize how mobile games can most effectively realize their potential as
modes of spatial practice in hybrid space while also empowering practitioners as placemakers.
The remainder of the chapter will then be dedicated to discussing the LBMG of geocaching as a
nearly – though not quite – ideal example of such a realization.

**Spatial Practice in Hybrid Space**

Mobile games' spatial hybridity make them importantly different from the physical and
virtual practices that I've discussed in the previous two chapters. Like urban explorers, mobile
gamers purposely and actively unmap known places as they walk, creating space from place and
allowing for deterritorialized wildness. Unlike urban explorers, this unmapping process is
expedited by mobile gamers' employment of technological interfaces that serve as conduits
between the two halves of a hybrid spatial practice, allowing for the player to exist simultaneously in the physical world and a virtual one. Like *Minecraft*'s players, mobile gamers can assign new meaning to places within their gameworld through their explorations and the utilization of their chosen game's mechanics, which often function as tools – like the check-in mechanic in *Foursquare* – that enable the creation and manipulation of a virtual layer of place-based meaning. Unlike *Minecraft*, mobile games' spatial hybridity allows for these virtual place-values to then be mapped onto physical locations, expanding the gameworld beyond the virtual realm and enabling not only virtual place-construction, but virtual/physical reterritorialization. Here, I will further theorize the importance of these similarities and differences in order to determine exactly how mobile games best function as spatial practices and place-construction tools. Ultimately, I intend to suggest the qualities of the ideal mobile gaming experience for creating wild space and then turning that space into personally-relevant, reterritorialized urban place, a gaming experience that essentially synthesizes the advantages of the spatial practices that I discussed in the previous two chapters.

In describing the LBMG *Bliin*, Michiel de Lange claims that “From the perspective of everyday reality, locative media are augmenting places and movements with additional layers of information and meaning” (59). Importantly, de Lange then questions his own use of “augmenting” when he writes that “The term 'augmentation' may suggest that one type of space is the primary space, which is painted over with a veneer of the secondary type. The question is whether this quantitative (by this I mean additive) property of augmentation – an extra layer, more information, multiplying space – becomes a qualitative change, and if so, how” (59). Similarly, in his article “Hypermediating the Game Interface: The Alienation Effect in Violent Videogames and the Problem of Serious Play,” Jason Farman writes that “The real is a phenomenology, as opposed to a platonic ideal. It is a perception of encountering something
embodied and substantial” (99), implying that mobile gaming in general – and LBMGs in particular – are in fact not “physical-first” or “virtual-first” affairs; rather, both halves of their hybridity are perceived by players as equal parts of one overall “real.” But are these locative-media-powered experiences qualitatively different than their non-hybrid forebears? Do more layers of meaning equal more or deeper meaning?

De Souza e Silva and Hjorth help to answer this question with their essay “Playful Urban Spaces: A Historical Approach to Mobile Games,” in which they situate mobile gaming at the more recent end of a lineage of spatial practices not unlike the one that I began constructing in Chapter Two. Specifically, they discuss mobile gaming as it relates to flanerie, the dérive, and parkour, and in doing so, they suggest that “urban spaces have always had the potential to be playful, even before the ability of navigating them via mobile technologies” (603). This comment seems to imply that mobile gaming as a form of playing within city space is a progression temporally, but not necessarily qualitatively; however, their specific analysis of flanerie as compared to mobile gaming ultimately positions mobile gaming as an egalitarian evolution.

According to de Souza e Silva and Hjorth, the flâneur “merges the 'serious' space of the city with the ludic activity of casual walk” (607) in much the same way that mobile gaming encourages the transformation of city space into a “game board” (603). What most immediately distances the mobile gamer – who de Souza e Silva and Hjorth refer to as the “phoneur,” borrowing a term from Robert Luke – from the flâneur is a decreased interest in the visual. “Unlike the flâneur that was ordered by the visual,” they explain, “the phoneur is structured by the information city's ambience, whereby modes such as haptic and aural override the dominance of the visual” (607). What results is a situation in which “the phoneur shifts from his lineage as a 21st century version of the flâneur's vision and distanced participation in the spectacle, and instead, he partakes in the gestures of locality” (608) in a way that allows for the challenging of
established place-values.

De Souza e Silva and Hjorth's description of the phoneur's purpose thus echoes my own consideration of the urban explorer when they write that “Through [mobile] games, the phoneur is no longer the conduit [for] forms of capital and informational flows but is also able to disrupt the very rules and normalizations” (609). This hints at the subversive, unmapping/reterritorializing potential made available to the player through mobile gaming, a qualitative change from flanerie in addition to a quantitative one. Similarly, mobile gaming can be seen as an improvement of sorts upon the Debordian dérive, as the gaming interface allows a more direct expression of the dérive's already quasi-ludic nature.

With its interest in psychogeography and play with spatial boundaries, the dérive already has more immediate parallels to mobile gaming than flanerie. For example, de Souza e Silva and Hjorth describe one dérive performed in Amsterdam that “used walkie-talkies to connect participants who were spread out through geographically disconnected areas of the city” (609). The motivation behind this dérive “was to link up parts of the city that were separated spatially” (609). Similarly, mobile games motivate players to “wander through the cities without necessarily having the goal of going from place to place, or at the very least, their goal-oriented traversal is altered by game-play” (609). The ludic's insistence on rules might seem to clash with the dérive's interest in “drifting” within city space, and yet de Souza e Silva and Hjorth argue that at least within the medium of mobile games, this is not the case:

As emphasized by Debord […] it is the 'organized spontaneity' of the dérive that connects it to the original concept of ludic. Although there are some rules, the player drifts throughout the city and never knows where the algorithmic behavior is going to take him or her, so the act of moving through space acquires relevance over the rules themselves. Similarly, in a UG, LBMG, or HRG there are rules and
goals that drive the players' movement through the city, but players might also walk randomly as they experience the urban space according to the game narrative. (610)

Mobile gaming's hybrid nature, then, allows for some deviation from the rules of a given game, whether through intentional temporary ignorance of the game's interface or simply through turning one's phone off for awhile. Playing a mobile game – being “in” the game – serves the purpose of unmapping known place, but having supplied this motivation for further exploration, the game can then be turned off and ignored until the player wishes to engage directly with its reterritorializing functionality.

De Souza e Silva and Sutko write of mobile games that “Just like earlier tropes of urbanity, these games encourage players to discover unknown areas of the city. The difference, however, is not just that urban spaces are reconfigured as playful spaces, but that Internet-connected mobile technologies bring a digital layer to the construction of this urban playful space” (8), and clearly, the physical dimension of these hybrid spatial practices is heavily influenced by earlier, physical-only practices like flanerie, the dérive, and urban exploration while the virtual dimension serves as a quantitative improvement: more information, multiplying spaces. However, mobile gaming can also be seen as a qualitative improvement over its physical-only predecessors, both in terms of its ability to enable the subversion of known place-values more effectively than flanerie and its ability to motivate “drifting” through city space by a clearer expression of a ludic framework than Debord's dérive is capable of. But how does mobile gaming address de Lange's concern in the virtual realm? Is it also a qualitative improvement over the experience of, say, being a builder-player in Minecraft? To answer this question, we must first investigate the qualities of a hybrid gameworld as compared to a virtual one to better understand how mobile games change the relationship between the player and the world they
Much of the previous chapter was dedicated to establishing a functional nomenclature and theoretical framework for a discussion of the value of a player's role in the virtual world of a video game. In some ways, that framework helpfully carries over into the virtual dimension of the hybridized space of mobile gaming, and in other ways it must be altered to take into consideration the unique qualities of a hybrid gameworld. Previously, I used a synthesis of Tadhg Kelly's theory of worldmaking and H. Porter Abbott's model of narratology to describe how video games' storytelling can be seen as a worldbuilding enterprise comprised of the combined creative and ludic expressions of the gamemakers and the player. My synthesis defined “story” as the raw material of the gameworld as it is created by the gamemakers, “plot” as the ways in which the gameworld's ludic rules direct and limit the player's experiences within the gameworld, and “narrative” as the ways in which the player expresses their own agency within the gameworld's constraints to tell their story of playing through the game. Transposed to the medium of mobile games, this model helps to describe how a player's movements through a hybrid gameworld function as another, same-but-different storytelling process, one that implicates the physical world as an integral part of the story.

In a hybrid gameworld, the story takes place in a combination of the physical world and a virtual one. Its raw material is dictated in part by the gamemakers, but it is also inflected by the ever-changing, unprogrammable content of the local, “real” world through which the player must move as they play. The unpredictability of the physical world thus dramatically limits the gamemakers' ability to control the player's experience of the game in comparison to a more traditional, virtual-only gameworld. For example, in Foursquare, as described previously, the gameworld is represented virtually as a series of nodes; however, to the player travelling between those nodes, the gameworld is represented *physically* as a continuous space that must be
navigated. This dissonance introduces such game-related flaws as the player's ability to check into locations that they are not physically at.

With this expansion of the storyworld beyond the gamemakers' control comes an increased reliance on the ability of the gameworld's rules to enforce proper plotting. In hybrid gameworlds, plot is primarily dependent on the game's interface, and its ability to mediate the player's experience of the game while enforcing the ludic rules. In this way, the interface serves as the gameworld's gatekeeper, requiring the player who technically has the run of the physical world at all times to nonetheless adhere to the game's ruleset within that world to succeed within the hybrid space of the game. For example, while players may well take advantage of Foursquare's inexact check-in mechanism, the game limits the number of check-ins that they can perform simultaneously, requiring a “cool-down” period that cannot be circumvented. In this way, the gamemakers are able to reassert a necessary degree of control over the player's narration of their game experience.

Finally, in a hybrid gameworld the player remains the narrator. Despite operating in a far different and more multifaceted milieu than the entirely virtual space of the video game, the mobile gamer's choices throughout the process of playing the game ultimately define their unique perspective on the gameworld. The biggest change for the gamer-as-narrator is simply navigating the hybridity of this new gameworld in a way that results in a meaningful experience of exploration and place-construction. Importantly, it is ultimately the player's decision whether or not they want to view the physical world around them through a mobile game's interface; and yet at the same time, the pervasiveness of mobile devices and the degree to which they are already integrated into the everyday lives of many would-be players often means that “turning off” a mobile game is not as simple as switching off a computer or game console, or turning one's attention away from a gameworld that is enclosed within the borders of a computer monitor.
or television screen.

In his article “The Magic Circle and the Mobility of Play,” Christopher Moore discusses how mobile games mark a fundamental change in the relationship between the player and their gameworld. Moore begins by reiterating Huizinga's – and more recently Salen and Zimmerman's – “magic circle” thesis that “play consecrates the temporary world of the play-ground as a hallowed location where specific rules operate beyond the mundane and enable the 'special' duality of the ritual/play performance” (376). Within this traditional model it follows that, “the player cannot 'play' Angry Birds, or Tetris, or World of Warcraft outside of the magic circle” (376), and such games' insistence on said circle is reaffirmed by their physical limitations: video games are gameworlds contained within a video screen, and outside of the borders of that screen there is no more game. On the other hand, regarding mobile gaming, Moore writes that “mobile media, pervasive web access and the participatory elements of popular culture suggest the boundary between the game world and the real world is not only gossamer thin and permeated in both directions, but practically indistinct” (376). This indistinctness can, of course, work both in the favor of a mobile game and against it.

Due to hybrid gameworlds' direct contact with the physical world – the world beyond the screen, so to speak – “dedicated attentiveness” (Hjorth and Richardson 29-30) is a rare if not impossible thing to achieve, as the player's attention necessarily vacillates between the hybrid gameworld and the more mundane but no less pressing needs of the parts of the physical world that aren't directly implicated in that gameworld. The result, as Moore describes it, is that “The 'turning towards' games in these spaces is usually a momentary exchange, and even in the seemingly committed practice of gameplay, this activity is characterized by interruption, and sporadic or split attention in the midst of other activities” (378). Once acknowledged, however, this difference between mobile games and more traditional, more binary modes of play can be
utilized in unique ways.

For one, Moore suggests that the very nature of the mode of play enabled by mobile games – momentary, often furtive play that takes place in the spatial and temporal margins of “real life” – “is used to experience, negotiate and occasionally challenge the social order of given locations” (378) in new ways. Ultimately, Moore characterizes mobile gaming as a constructive challenge to the magic circle model, stating that “The mobility of play is therefore not always a series of border crossings to and from the magic circle, but a contingent process, a mode of play, seized in the movements of experience, that involves a complex relationship between different changes in time, space, social attentiveness and cultural practices that are fundamentally creative” (378). Those who constructively and creatively dissolve the magic circle through their play in the hybrid gameworlds of mobile gaming become what Moore names “gameurs” (384), and “For the gameur there is no magic circle” (384). One important thing that remains largely ignored by Moore, however, is the one boundary between the physical and virtual that remains even in hybrid gameworlds, the portal through which the “real” world becomes a gameworld: the mobile gaming interface.

This interface – whether it be a phone, a GPSr, or another, similar mobile device – necessarily enables the existence of a hybrid gameworld by serving as the mechanism by which virtual space is grafted onto physical space. It is the mediator and – at least in our current technological state – an inescapable part of mobile gaming, always requiring awareness of an intermediary when the player seeks to enter their hybrid gameworld. The degree to which this necessary transaction is made obvious, however, can affect the degree to which the player finds their chosen gameworld immersive, and immersion is central to the qualitative value of play in hybrid gameworlds, even if that play only takes place for minutes or seconds at a time. Therefore, to discuss interface is to also discuss immersion.
Game immersion has been defined in many ways, and here I will be working with two of its more broad definitions to see how they line up with the spatially hybridized play experiences presented by mobile games and their interfaces. In their article “A Grounded Investigation of Game Immersion,” Emily Brown and Paul Cairns describe immersion as “a scale of involvement with a game” rather than as a single binary state. Brown and Cairns' description emerges from their many interviews with experienced video gamers (1300), and they break this “scale of involvement” down into three distinct steps: engagement, engrossment, and total immersion.

The first stage, engagement, “must occur before any other level” and is reached when the player can overcome the barrier of access. This barrier exists in large part as a result of “game controls,” which the player must be able to master in a timely manner so as to retain interest in the game. In the second stage, engrossment, the player begins to form an emotional attachment to the gameworld. This stage is reached when “gamers are involved with more than just the physical aspects of the game and have, in a sense, suspended their disbelief of the game world.” Once this suspension of disbelief has occurred, the player is then able to achieve total immersion, which “is presence.” In this stage, “the game is the only thing that impacts the gamer's thoughts and feelings.” (1298-9)

Yellowlees Douglas and Andrew Hargadon's concept of immersion is similar, but it is dependent on our recognition and appreciation of oft-used schemas. In “The Pleasure Principle: Immersion, Engagement, Flow,” Douglas and Hargadon write that “The pleasures of immersion stem from our being completely absorbed within the ebb and flow of a familiar narrative schema” (154). Immersion, then, seems to be predicated on the ability of the player to accept the conventions of the gameworld to the exclusion of outside distractions. Both articles suggest that this ability is expedited by a gameworld's clever leveraging of familiar narrative tropes and gameplay mechanics to ease the player's imaginative transition from the “real” world to the
world of the game. Within Brown and Cairn's model of immersion, the on-again-off-again nature of mobile gaming would not damage the generation of “total immersion” in the least, as they note that even in traditional video games “presence is only a fleeting experience” (1299). This “presence,” though, is enabled by the player's mastery of the game interface and thus their ability to temporarily reach a state in which they are not at all aware of said interface; or, as Brown and Cairns put it “Essentially there needs to be an invisibility of the controls for total immersion to take place” (1300). It seems, then, that the temporary, marginal nature of mobile play is no bar to immersion, but how can mobile games render the interface – the one thing that enables active participation in a hybrid gameworld in the face of an otherwise overwhelmingly stimulating “real” world – invisible?

The answer lies in what Ingrid Richardson calls “corporealization.” She explains that:

“[W]hen previously discrete media functionalities come together and are mobilized – in newer model mobile phones, for example, this may include the telephone, digital camera, television, internet, and casual gaming – what emerges is not a single all-purpose device but a seemingly endless iteration of handsets with varying capabilities and design features, each prioritizing a specific technosomatic arrangement. This refers literally to the irreducible relation between human bodies and technologies […] our fundamental ontological condition. (421)

Looked at from Richardson's perspective, a mobile interface correctly designed with the intent of becoming invisible to the mobile gamer will necessarily do so, readily becoming an extension of the gamer's bodily existence in what is in some sense an already physical/virtual hybrid world. For example, Richardson argues that “in its deployment of a multi-touch interface, accelerometer, GPS, real-time 3D graphics, and 3D positional audio, the iPhone demands a
unique corporealization of game-play” (421). The mobile gaming interface, then, must be made to both dictate the terms of the gameworld and otherwise remain invisible to the player by becoming an extension of their own body, in a sense.

Unlike in a video game, where the controller strictly mediates the interaction between the player and the gameworld within the screen, this illusion – or is it an illusion? – that the interface is a part of the player's body functions more effectively in the world of mobile games, where both the “controller” and the player exist in some sense within the gameworld. Or, as Richardson puts it “In such games, our embodied proprioception – that is, the awareness of our body's position in relation to the environment enabled by our perception of movement and spatial orientation – must seamlessly accommodate both immediate and mediate being-in-the-world” (426). When our imaginations and the interface enable us to do this, the interface becomes invisible, enabling immersion by working “to seamlessly combine the corporeal schematics of actual and virtual worlds as they are actively negotiated on-the-move, effectively creating a hybrid mode of being where the boundary between game and real life collapses” (426).

Ultimately, there is a fundamental distinction to be made between the immersive potential of the “big screen”-mediated gameworlds of the video game and mobile-interface-driven hybrid gameworlds: the latter allows for a sense of in-game corporealization to a degree that the former is incapable of achieving. According to Richardson:

In a phenomenological sense, our corporeal attachment to the portable and mobile screen is not that of larger televisual screens of console and desktop games; it is intimate, up close, peripatetic, and in-the-world, while the activity of location-based and hybrid reality gaming involves the negotiation and manipulation of a networked game-space across players through both the mobile screen-window and the online computer screen, setting up complex interlacing of co-presence (with
other non-players in the urban space) and distributed presence (with other gamers in the network). (426)

This idea – that the mobile gaming interface serves its medium best when it enables players to involve themselves more bodily in hybrid gameworlds – is best summed up by Jason Farman when he writes that “Often these interfaces are designed to lead to a 'place beyond' by drawing complete attention to the place and drawing attention away from the interface” (98). Perhaps the best example of how such an “invisible” interface can enable unmapping and subsequent place-construction within a hybrid gameworld through the utilization of location-aware technology is the popular game of geocaching.

Geocaching as a Hybrid Spatial Practice

The United States government began allowing unrestricted popular access to the data broadcast by their network of global positioning system (GPS) satellites in the year 2000. Since then, that data – primarily collected first through handheld, dedicated GPS receivers (GPSrs) and more recently through GPS modules embedded in mobile phones, PDAs, tablets and other such portable, internet-connected devices – has been used in a variety of ways to erode distinctions between the physical world and virtual ones, often in the name of creating immersive LBMG and HRG experiences. Geocaching is perhaps the most widely-known result of this endeavor.

The premise of geocaching is even simpler than that of Foursquare. Players are provided with the GPS coordinates of a hidden “cache” and they then use a GPSr or other GPS-enabled mobile device to navigate to those coordinates and locate the cache. Once the player finds a particular cache, their achievement can be “logged,” both physically at the cache site in a pencil-and-paper logbook and virtually on websites such as Geocaching. In this way, a record of the accomplishments of a player's geocaching identity – interestingly, a sort of hybrid avatar – exists
both within the physical caches they have found and online. Much like Foursquare, certain in-game accomplishments are rewarded – for example, on Geocaching, the more caches you find, the more “favorite points” you are given to mark found caches as your favorites – and the game's associated online community naturally sparks competition to see who can find more caches or who can be the “first to find” (FTF) a newly-published cache. There are many slight variations on geocaching's formula; for example, certain cache types require players to solve riddles or interact with online content before being allowed to log a particular cache as “found,” while “multicaches” require players to locate a series of caches before they are finally allowed to log the entire multicache as found. Across such variations, however, the game's basic mechanic stays the same, and thus geocaching is often described as a GPS-powered scavenger hunt. In fact, in a way it is the game's relative simplicity that makes it a particularly immersive example of a hybrid gameworld in which players first unmap their surroundings and then reterritorialize them.

De Souza e Silva and Hjorth classify geocaching as an LBMG, since it has an online dimension, but “the game takes place primarily in the physical space and on the cell phone screen, as players can see each other and/or virtual game elements on their mobile screens” (614). This link to physical space is more explicit in geocaching than it is in HRGs, and even in most other LBMGs, and this contributes to the invisibility of its interface. Consider an illustrative comparison to Foursquare.

In Foursquare's node-based gameworld, the nodes exist entirely within the game's virtual layer, and the interface must be consulted not only to find places to check in, but to also validate those check-ins through the game's website. Thus, the Foursquare player moves through physical space in-between check-in locations, but that physical space is largely incidental to the player's success in the gameworld. In fact, even the check-in locations themselves are largely incidental in a sense, since the player can often check in to them from a distance, without having
to find or visit them directly. Finally, the game is often played passively rather than actively; that is, players generally don't travel to check-in locations in order to succeed at the game, but are instead often checking in to locations – restaurants, movie theaters, gas stations, home, etc. – that they are already at for non-game-related reasons. All of these attributes make Foursquare a game in which the interface is actually emphasized while physical exploration is deemphasized.

When geocaching, on the other hand, the player uses their GPS device more like a compass than a map. The device functions as a location-aware divining rod of sorts, guiding the player through physical space and requiring only the occasional moment of attention when it becomes necessary for the player to take a new bearing on their way to a cache. Such an exercise in orienteering often requires the player to be absolutely aware of the physical space between caches, as – unlike Foursquare – most caches are located in the spatial “seams” between known places. That is to say that where most of Foursquare's check-in locations are restaurants, stores, and other familiar buildings, geocaches are often found in alleys, parks, parking lots, etc., and are even frequently located outside the borders of cities, at Interstate rest stops or State Parks, for example. In fact, it is against the rules of the game to place caches inside buildings due to the difficulty of getting an accurate GPS signal indoors. Thus, a geocacher will rarely know at the onset of a search that they are headed to, for example, Taco Bell or Walmart to find a given cache and so they must constantly be aware of their location in space with regard to the cache they are searching for, especially as they close in on their goal.

Importantly, GPS readings can only bring a player so close to a cache, as most caches will be cleverly hidden from sight and even the most exacting GPS devices can only get the player within ten feet or so of the cache's location. The game thus requires players to put aside the interface at the last, crucial moment of a search and for that pivotal moment they must exist only in the physical world. Unlike Foursquare, the ultimate goal of the player's search is a physical
artifact, a cache usually made up of a small waterproof container or larger ammo box. Once the player finds this cache, the primary means of recording that find is the use of a pencil-and-paper logbook located within. Finally, more often than not, the search for a cache is the reason a player travels to a cache location in the first place; most caches are well-hidden enough that it is rarely possible to find one in a minute or two's time just because you were “in the neighborhood.” Also unlike *Foursquare*, there is little to be gained in a ludic sense from finding the same cache a second time as repeat loggings are discouraged – and are in fact impossible to log on *Geocaching* – so even if there is a cache located near a place that the player would frequent – like a favorite restaurant – such an “in the neighborhood” approach to geocaching would only benefit the player the first time they found any given cache.

This grounding largely – though not entirely – in the physical helps geocaching achieve immersion as Brown and Cairns define it through “invisibility of the controls.” The interface makes occasional appearances during a search to reassert the fact of the player's existence in a hybrid gameworld by helping the player to navigate to a cache that they would likely not know existed in the physical world without the information presented to them through the gameworld's virtual layer. Otherwise, though, the emphasis is on the physical and the player's traversal of the “real world,” which makes the interface recede once the player has a good bearing. With this necessary but simple primary function as a navigation aid, the GPS interface also succeeds in “drawing complete attention to the place and drawing attention away from the interface” by requiring no further attention from the player than what is needed to navigate to the cache. Lastly, the difficulty of and time investment necessary for locating most geocaches constructively challenges Moore's characterization of mobile gameplay as necessarily made up of a series of momentary exchanges. By constructing a ludic framework that requires a greater time investment in moving from cache to cache than simply “checking in” at the press of a
button, geocaching makes a powerful case for player immersion. But how does a game that requires the player to prioritize finding specific geographic locations encourage unmapping?

Alison Gazzard argues that mobile games like geocaching that make ludic goals out of locations in the physical world require the player to value the achievements that occur at the end of their explorations rather than the explorations themselves by describing, as an example, how the ethos of the *dérive* is affected by the application of mobile technology. Gazzard believes that the *dérive* can be “experienced through the real and the virtual” by the physical/virtual layering that exists in hybrid gameworlds (413). However, the result is that “The same places are visited, but with a new meaning, through virtual spaces augmented onto the familiar and bringing a new light to old surroundings. The space is now explored in a new way through this augmentation and the added game element of collecting” (413). Thus, Gazzard believes that games like geocaching encourage what she calls “collecting space” (405), a result of the fact that “The player has a purpose […] and the goals of the game tend to not equate themselves to a leisurely wander through spaces” (413). Gazzard admits that “The quotidian landscape is transformed and has to be walked in order to progress through the game,” but ultimately she believes that “The game screen obscures the real world space and although it is experienced through the act of physical walking and an awareness of the space around us, the game layer becomes the primary focus” (413).

Though Gazzard's idea of “collecting space” is an interesting way to characterize what players are doing when they are playing LBMGs like *Foursquare* and geocaching, her assertion that a spatially hybrid ludic enterprise forestalls player exploration seems centered – perhaps predictably – on the interface, the “game screen,” rather than being an overall condemnation of the game-ness of such endeavors. Can geocaching be a game that is as much about the journey as the destination? De Souza e Silva and Hjorth seem to think so, as they describe a different type
of comparison between the dérive and geocaching, in which geocaching is described as both a game and an unmapping tool whose functionality is “enacted via the use of GPS devices to map territories and find 'treasures,' transforming the physical environment into an unexplored territory” (616). From this perspective, exploring the spaces en route to a given cache is a necessity, as much a part of the game as the final find. De Souza e Silva and Hjorth continue, reinforcing the importance of exploration to geocaching's gameplay:

The transformation of the game/physical space into this unmapped territory is exactly where the playful element of geocaching relates to the earlier activities of the dérive and the parkour. Although Geocachers, unlike the flâneur, have a specific goal in their movement through space (finding a cache), they need to explore the game space (like in the dérive) to play the game. It is this exploration that embeds a playful meaning to the game space, since the player moves around, going to places to where he or she generally would not go. (616)

The result is not unlike the division that I described previously between Minecraft's exploration mechanic and its building mechanic. While the geocacher explores the gameworld en route to and then within the vicinity of a cache, they are “wandering,” dérive-like. Their focus is on the exploration of a physical world unmapped with the help of an interface that displays a virtual one atop it. This is also the stage that creates the potential for wildness. When a player actually locates a cache, the hybrid gameworld then enables place-construction through the GPSr or mobile phone and the pen-and-paper logbook. A successful find causes the player to not only engage in meaning-making in a virtual dimension, but also in the physical one, as their perception of the “real world” changes to accommodate knowledge of found caches and their associated locations, locations that might have previously held other meanings for the player, or simply been unknown to them entirely.

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In geocaching, as in *Minecraft*, the unmapping process is expedited by the player's acceptance of being “in” a gameworld. Unlike urban exploration and other physical-only spatial practices that require the practitioner to initiate the imaginative action of unmapping, here the game presents an unmapped space, and it is simply up to the player whether or not they are willing to suspend their disbelief – a necessary step, according to Brown and Cairns – and become immersed in the gameworld. Of course, unlike *Minecraft*, geocaching does not generate an entirely new world that the player must explore and learn to navigate within. Instead, it unmaps the “real” physical world by turning it into what de Souza e Silva and Sutko call a “game board.” Through the GPS device's imposition of a virtual layer of information, known places lose their typical place-values and unknown or seemingly insignificant spaces – under a footbridge or behind a pile of nondescript rocks – are recast as spaces begging to be explored. This unmapping, in turn, exposes the player to the wildness of “everyday” spaces in a way that resonates with urban exploration, but is more socially acceptable and less dangerous both legally and physically.

If the geocacher's virtual map of caches provides the initial motivation for a *dérive*-like “organized spontaneity” by unmapping known places and populating the resulting space with cache locations, the player's transit through the space between those locations is an opportunity for wildness. First and foremost, this manifests when geocaching requires players to leave familiar places entirely and look far afield for a new cache. Caches may be hidden somewhere in a nearby town that the player has never taken the time to visit or explore, or they may be located just outside of town, behind a road sign or beside an old, abandoned barn. In such cases, the ludic appeal of geocaching is directly responsible for getting to the player to quite literally explore areas that were previously unknown to them. Even caches that are well-hidden in hard-to-find corners of the known parts of a familiar city can be an exercise in wildness, requiring the player
to ascertain new ways of navigating familiar space. Often something as simple as undertaking such searches on foot where one would typically drive instead can alter the experiential quality of navigating known places. Finally, the aforementioned limits to the accuracy of GPS devices and the well-hidden nature of many geocaches means that even if players do drive from cache to cache – a popular practice, to be sure – they must not only discover the right combination of roads to get them to their goal and back, but they will have to, at some point, leave their car and spend at least the last few moments of their search afoot, often in unfamiliar territory. Though many GPS-enabled devices can map a straight line between a player and the next cache, or even give detailed driving directions, rarely, if at all, does the game actually involve such simple paths to success in the end. In essence, what geocaching does is make a rule-bound, ludic, but “open-world”-style gameworld reminiscent of *Minecraft*’s out of the entire world.\(^83\) Thus, the player experiences wildness not only as a result of exploring unmapped, “real world” space, but also through learning how to function, in a sense, as an avatar in geocaching's hybrid gameworld.

In his essay “Locative Life: Geocaching, Mobile Gaming, and Embodiment,” Jason Farman describes in detail how the player's perception of their own body in relation to this hybrid gameworld is essential for success within the game. He writes that “Geocaching blends two distinct genres of locative gaming: augmented landscape gaming (in which data overlays the city) and trace-based gaming (in which the trails or tracks created by the user's movement are utilized as part of the objectives of the game)” (1). This melding creates a situation in which “Movement across the augmented landscape – and the proprioception of the self in relationship to that augmented landscape and the technology that creates the mixed reality space – is how gamers are able to successfully locate geocaches and log their visits” (1). However, simply logging caches as found is not the only metric for in-game success, as “This proprioception also

\(^{83}\) According to *Geocaching*, there are currently 1,680,000 active geocaches on all seven continents, spread over 100 countries. There are over 5 million geocachers worldwide (“Geocaching”).
convenes with an embodied semiotics users must engage to hide in plain sight through performing a sense of alternate purposes. Users embody false purposes in order to keep their agenda hidden from passerby, thus keeping the cache container hidden from non-gamers” (1). According to Farman, “users who enter the augmented landscape of GPS data also enter a realm that requires a different mode of embodiment,” (1) and often geocachers will thus find that “playing with” this new form of embodiment can be just as wild as physically walking the spaces between caches can be.

With any luck at all, of course, the player's explorations – both as a walker in physical space and an avatar-of sorts in a hybrid gameworld – end with the finding of a cache. With this find, the unmapped wild space of the gameworld – populated through the interface's screen by previously ephemeral, unseen points of interest – begins to gain personal meaning. The meaning assigned to these points of interest by the game's virtual layer is ultimately reified by the presence of a physical cache, strengthening the player's immersion in geocaching's hybrid gameworld. The player's signing of the pencil-and-paper logbook and/or their altering of the contents of the cache, as well as their efficacy – or lack thereof – in re-hiding it from the next potential geocacher all become physical manifestations of their personal interaction with a hybrid game-object, fodder for the generation of their own place-values that they will associate with the cache's location as well as alterations of the gameworld that will effect, to varying degrees, the experiences of the players who come after. Similarly, when the player logs their find online, they are not only “leaving their mark” virtually, they also have the opportunity to add to the geocaching community's store of information on that particular cache, which includes player logs, photographs, hints, tips, and details about the cache's size and shape, as well as history about the area around the cache. In this way, geocachers partake in and enable what Eric Gordon calls “network locality.”
In “Redefining the Local: The Distinction Between Located Information and Local Knowledge in Location-Based Games,” Gordon explains that “In the everyday practices of digital networks, there is increasing evidence that users desire to be located or locatable. This can be called network locality – the experience of interacting with located data within the perceived infinity of global access” (22). Gordon goes on to describe how information like that which geocachers post online to supplement their logging of a cache can not only effect the virtual instantiation of a place, but also the physical, “real” one:

[T]he crack in the sidewalk, the local café, the old clapboard houses in one's neighborhood are all immediately apparent when one walks down a street – they are ready-to-hand. This is the raw material of local space. But all that is not immediately apparent, including the hundreds of pictures and blog posts on the web, are merely ready-at-hand. When one becomes conscious of them, they become ready-to-hand and alter one's immediate experience. Both the ready-to-hand and ready-at-hand are near – they are impressions that are immediately accessible. The addition of information-flows into traditional spatial situations doesn't create distance; on the contrary, it heightens the perception that everything is near. (27)

By making their personal experiences of cache locations available – “ready-at-hand” – to other players, geocachers not only have a chance to assign their own place-values to those locations but to also propagate those values through the internet so that they can become an integral part of later players' experiences of the gameworld if those later players choose to make that information “ready-to-hand.”

Gordon's “network locality” is in fact an excellent way of describing how place-construction ultimately functions through geocaching. “The experience of network locality,” he
writes, “is premised upon the individual player's ability to control the relationship between global access and local interaction” (33). In geocaching, this is a decision that is available to the player after the exploration stage of the game, once they have uncovered the cache and are in the midst of leaving their personal mark on the gameworld; as Gordon argues, “Finding an object in physical space and mapping it on a virtual overlay of coordinates and other people is a manifestation of that control” (33). Geocaching's quasi-ludic nature then allows this control to be leveraged as a form of place construction, or, as Gordon puts it: “When this practice is organized into a clearly demarcated game structure, network locality is potentially transformed into a context of local knowledge production” (33).

Perhaps the ultimate expression of a single geocacher's contribution to this project of “local knowledge production” is the creation of their own caches. Any player who is registered on a geocaching website – and thus has the ability to contribute information to the virtual layer of the gameworld – can place a cache at a location of their choosing in the “real world” and then publish that cache's location online. In addition to the cache's coordinates, its creator can also post details about the cache's size and type, photographs of the area around the cache, or historical and/or geographical context for the area in which other players will presumably be searching for the cache. The world's current network of nearly two million geocaches was built entirely from such small, local acts of place-construction.

**A Final Thought**

The structure of the continuum that I've created by the order of my chapters might suggest that I believe geocaching stands as the “best” – the wildest, most accessible, most engaging, most egalitarian, or what-have-you – spatial practice for those in search of alternative wildnesses. That was not my intention. Each of the practices I've discussed has its strengths
and limitations, and if geocaching is the “most” anything within this discussion, it is the most pervasive.

*Flanerie* and the *dérive* are both fascinating early spatial practices, and yet they are both, to varying degrees, responses *to* the city rather than a recreation *of* it. Urban exploration, on the other hand, challenges explorers to reconceptualize the city as a wild while walking its abandoned and forgotten spaces. What urban exploration lacks, however, is a method by which explorers can establish lasting, meaningful place-values through the physical alteration of the spaces that they (re)discover and explore. Such a place-construction functionality is enabled within virtual gameworlds like the one presented by *Minecraft*, in which players must not only explore but also build and dwell to survive. Within these fully-virtual worlds, the only limitations on the player's ability to make meaningful place from unmapped space are provided by the gamemakers. Certainly, geocaching is, in a sense, a synthesis of these previous spatial practices. It melds the physicality of *flanerie*, the *dérive*, and urban exploration with the placemaking freedom of *Minecraft*'s virtual worlds, and it does so in a way that requires the player to enact both exploration of wild space and place-construction in a physical/virtual gameworld. Yet, this hybrid space has its share of problems as well.

Primarily, geocaching, like all other mobile games, falls prey to the fact that hybrid gameworlds necessarily display the seams between the physical and the virtual from time to time. This is a reality created by the necessity of an interface as the mediator between the player and virtual space, and so – at our current level of technology, at least – it is something that can be minimized, but not entirely eliminated. For example, geocaches that are shown to be at a particular location on the *Geocaching* website may not actually exist anymore in the physical world, as a result of vandalism, theft, confiscation by legal authorities, or as a result of natural phenomena such as floods or fires. Online listings of caches rely largely on the goodwill of the
larger geocaching community to alert a cache owner if something has gone awry with the
physical cache. Of course, because caches are often well-hidden in the first place and are often
re-hidden in slightly different places later by geocachers who have found them, policing such
incidents can be extremely difficult even for the cache's original creator, leading to a dissonance
between what the game's virtual layer tells players and what actually exists in the physical world.
Similarly, the inexactness of GPS devices and the reality of human error can result in inaccurate
cache coordinates being published on the website, coordinates that sometimes direct players to
search hundreds of feet or even further away from a cache's real location. Along with these
physical-space problems, the technological side of geocaching can also reveal gaps in its
gameworld's hybridity.

As Farman explains, geocaching is “a game that utilizes the correlation between the
material landscape and digital space and depends on the collaboration between these spaces for a
sense of embodiment” (2). Frequently, though, this collaboration takes less-than-ideal forms. For
example, “Knowing where you are in space and how far away from the cache you are serve as
the first correspondence between body and mixed reality space”; however, “Until [the GPS
signal] is strong, the player remains in a state of detachment from embodiment in the gaming
space: the location on the interface does not match the material landscape and thus the
relationship between the player's body, the cache, and the digital data augmenting the landscape
remains fragmented” (4). Similarly, “While many locative games engage players in simultaneous
space-time movement, in which they can see the other players that are currently playing, where
each player is at, and the distance between players, geocaching displaces the component of time
by making much of the game about asynchronous documentation of presence” (5). The downside
of this asynchronicity is apparent to anyone who has ever geocached using a GPSr instead of a
mobile phone: the disconnect between finding a physical cache and signing a logbook and
remembering to later get online from your home computer and log your cache virtually through Geocaching makes the virtual layer of place-construction seem more deliberate and less an experiential extension of your search for and find of a cache in the moment of a geocaching adventure.

Despite such perhaps-unavoidable flaws, however, geocaching is currently one of the most accessible spatial practices that also succeeds in providing an experience of personal place-construction for the player, and it is only one of many LBMGs and mobile games that seek to make these experiences – exploration of wild space and subsequent placemaking – a more pervasive and immersively ludic experience for anyone with a mobile phone. According to Wilson, et al., LBMGs like Foursquare and geocaching “compel us to disregard any boundaries we may discern as having emerged between Game Studies and studies of mobility and mobile devices. Games like these, their relationship with the devices they inhabit, and the cultures of use emerging around them suggest that we cannot understand contemporary styles of mobility without understanding play, nor understanding changes in gameplay and game culture without understanding mobility” (354). Combined with de Souza e Silva and Hjorth's assertion that city space is inherently playful, where does this leave us with regard to the future of deterritorialized wildness? It seems that the sky is the limit, so to speak, for location-aware technologies and mobile gaming, but might these experiences, with their emphases on pervasiveness and playfulness, ultimately be at cross purposes with a would-be explorer's search for wildness? Could experiences of wildness become so accessible, so ubiquitous that they lose the quality that makes them so valuable to us in the first place?
I am here not only to evade for a while the clamor and filth and confusion of the cultural apparatus but also to confront, immediately and directly if it's possible, the bare bones of existence, the elemental and fundamental, the bedrock which sustains us. I want to be able to look at and into a juniper tree, a piece of quartz, a vulture, a spider, and see it as it is in itself, devoid of all humanly ascribed qualities, anti-Kantian, even the categories of scientific description. To meet God or Medusa face to face, even if it means risking everything human in myself. I dream of a hard and brutal mysticism in which the naked self merges with a non-human world and yet somehow survives intact, individual, separate. Paradox and bedrock.

- Edward Abbey

In a way, my search for wildness began over a decade ago, on the front lawn of Harbourt Hall on the first day of Spring Break 2001. That morning, the world around me tinged by that deep blue light that presages the sunrise, I decided to take my chances on Mount Sterling despite having laryngitis and a fever that was only waiting for an excuse to get worse. I chose as I did because I was an irresponsible college student. I chose as I did because at twenty years of age I still believed, as so many young men do, that when it came down to it, I was quite literally indestructible. I chose as I did because I was afraid to disappoint my friends, to be diminished in their eyes. But I also chose as I did because I knew that I no longer wanted to live a life empty of the challenge inherent in the experience of negotiating directly with the land for my survival.

Succeeding at such a challenge is at once both immensely satisfying and incredibly humbling. Two days after our night on Mount Sterling's summit, watching the Appalachian
ridgeline recede in the rear view mirror as we began the drive back to Ohio, I felt euphoric, like anything was possible, but at the same time I also felt that realm of possibility constricted by bounds that I could – perhaps for the first time – perceive clearly. I knew with certainty that with enough physical conditioning, I could one day return to climb every mountain I’d seen from the top of the Mount Sterling fire tower – but I could never make a mountain. I knew that with enough knowledge, I could survive off the land indefinitely – but, of course, I would still die, someday. It was a paradox that, were I more doctrinally-minded, might have driven me to religion. Instead, it has driven me here.

In another way, my search for wildness began with Paul Shepard's *Coming Home to the Pleistocene*. Shepard's ideas resonated so deeply with me the first time I read them that it didn't occur to me until much later to wonder if they might not be the unassailable, objective truth. Shepard's belief that we “modern” humans find our lives so dissatisfying because of that very modernity helped explain to me my own desire to seek the wilderness. His idea that we are still in thrall to the needs of our Pleistocene genome redefined the paradox that I kept finding in that wilderness as a basic condition of modern life, thus making it more comprehensible to me. My discovery of various, more egalitarian and geographically efficient means of treating that condition – urban exploration, for one – was in turn the impetus for this dissertation. When I began writing back in 2010, I had hoped that by describing and critiquing various spatial practices through which wildness could be deterritorialized, this project could provide a starting point for other people who feel as I did eleven years ago, who suspect that some significant quality of experience is missing from their lives but who might not even be able to articulate what that quality is, let alone figure out where and how to find it. As I write these last few paragraphs now, I still hope this.

Yet, my fervor for wildness – both deterritorialized and otherwise – has also been
tempered somewhat during my work on this project. Through the wild experiences I've had in the
last few years, as well as through the theoretical explorations of wilderness that I've undertaken
via my netbook's keyboard and screen, I've discovered something that forced me to alter my
perspective yet again: the value of a home, of a place or collection of places to call your own. I
have come to believe that the need for such a place or places does not mitigate our genomic need
for wildness, that the two are not mutually exclusive – except perhaps in the very moment of a
particular experience – but in fact reinforce each other. It seems to me now that wildness would
lose its appeal if there was no home to return to at the conclusion of a wild experience, no place
to return to from space. Shepard writes that “Wildness should be experienced in the growing of a
self that incorporates a person's identity in specific places,” going on to provide the example that
“To the indigenous people of the Australian outback the terrain is not a great three-dimensional
space, not a landscape, but a pattern of connections lived out by walking between places and
performing rites that link the individual in critical life stages to sacred places” (Coming Home to
the Pleistocene 145), a point of view that links the value of place with that of wild space by
suggesting that they are actually two sides of the same coin, are dependent on each other's
existence despite their important differences.

Almost more than anything, I enjoy the feeling of walking a new trail in the backcountry
or scrambling across granite blocks en route to a summit. Yet, when night falls and I'm bedding
down in my tent, I often find that all I want is to be at home. In my study of Minecraft's online
community, I found that players' enthusiasm for finding new spaces to explore in-game was only
matched by their enthusiasm for building new places to “live” in-game. Mobile gamers are just
as interested in unmapping place by walking with their GPS as they are in remapping space by
checking in, logging finds, etc., and sharing that activity with friends and family both online and
in the physical world. All of these examples have led me to realize that one cannot rightly argue
for wildness without also arguing for home, cannot rightly venerate space without also valuing place. Though this project has always been, first and foremost, about deterritorializing wildness, making that experiential quality more accessible in a world where wilderness places are ever-shrinking, it also necessarily became, in the end, a tacit argument for place, and a suggestion of how we might begin to construct home and identity as “sense of place” is being replaced by “sense of planet.”

The paradox that Abbey describes in the above epigraph emerges from the attempt to navigate the chasm between wilderness and home, between space and place. My intent has been to try to dissolve this paradox by showing how that chasm is in fact a figment of our cultural imagination, by suggesting that it is not actually a chasm, but a bridge that predates even our most rudimentary steps toward “civilized” society. I believe that even in an age of sprawling metropolises, virtual worlds so compelling that they draw people away from the physical one for hours or days at a time, and technology so pervasive that it makes us question what is “real” in the first place, that bridge's foundations remain just as strong, and to cross it only requires a particular intentionality and a willingness to step outside the boundaries of home, whether it be for a minute, or an hour, or a month at a time.

In my least humble moments, I've conceived of this work as the beginning of a new conversation. It was certainly never meant to be the conclusion of an old one. This new conversation – about the connections between our “contradictory” needs for wildness and home, space and place – is one that I intend to continue to explore both in theory and in practice. Almost exactly two weeks after I write these final sentences, I plan to be on the summit of the Matterhorn in eastern Oregon, looking out across the spine of the Hurwal Divide, and a week after that I will begin drafting a proposal for a new research project that has grown out of my interest in Minecraft’s juxtaposition of exploration, unmapping, and dwelling.
My greatest hope is that this work will serve as the foundation for many more explorations – physical, virtual, historical, philosophical, theoretical, and literary – in the years and decades to come.

- Ben S. Bunting, Jr., 10 April 2012, Pullman, Washington
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