

Look Before You Warp: Teleportation and the Fragmentation of Environmental Presence in Videogame Worlds

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Abstract

Warping – the practice of instantaneous travel between virtual environments or “levels” – stands out as one of the most familiar conventions of videogames and navigation through videogame worlds. In the logic of traditional game design, teleportation allows players to shortcut unnecessary and tedious spatial navigation in favor of fast-paced action and goal-oriented gameplay. Yet many modern videogames are no longer simple games, but complex three-dimensional virtual worlds. As such, warping increasingly seems like an anachronistic artifact of the 8-bit age.

In this paper, I use *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker* as a case study to suggest that the shift from “game” to “virtual world” has problematized old design principles. Though the convenience of instantaneous travel may seem gratifying in the short-term, we lose something valuable in the process. Namely, teleportation fragments our experience of space, preventing a deeper understanding of the total environment.

I draw an analogy between this devaluation of space and journey and the advent of railway travel in the early nineteenth century. Much like the act of warping, railroad travel heralded what Wolfgang Schivelbusch calls an “annihilation of space and time.” Appropriating the wisdom of Michel de Certeau, I argue that the resulting map-like, “panoptic” model of space is fundamentally at odds with the protean character of everyday spatial experience. By emphasizing destination over journey, teleportation encourages a “quick visit, move-on-to-the-next-place” mentality that frames virtual space as consumable and disposable. In short, instantaneous travel facilitates a kind of escapist virtual tourism that is pleasant, but ultimately shallow.