

# Mainzer Studien zur Amerikanistik

Begründet von Prof. Dr. Hans Galinsky (Mainz)

Herausgegeben von  
Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Renate von Bardleben  
und Prof. Dr. Winfried Herget

Band 73



**PETER LANG**

Winfried Herget (ed.)

## Revisiting Walt Whitman

On the Occasion of his 200th Birthday



**PETER LANG**

### Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Cover art work: Bror Hjorth, "Kärleken, freden och arbetet" / "Love, peace and work". Reliefs based on a poem by Walt Whitman (1965). ABF-huset, Stockholm. With kind permission of Bror Hjorths Hus, Uppsala, and copyright owners.

Gedruckt auf alterungsbeständigem, säurefreiem Papier.  
Druck und Bindung: CPI books GmbH, Leck

ISSN 0170-9135  
ISBN 978-3-631-78206-4 (Print)  
E-ISBN 978-3-631-78234-7 (E-PDF)  
E-ISBN 978-3-631-78235-4 (EPUB)  
E-ISBN 978-3-631-78236-1 (MOBI)  
DOI 10.3726/b15310

© Peter Lang GmbH  
Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften  
Berlin 2019  
Alle Rechte vorbehalten.

Peter Lang – Berlin · Bern · Bruxelles · New York ·  
Oxford · Warszawa · Wien

Das Werk einschließlich aller seiner Teile ist urheberrechtlich geschützt. Jede Verwertung außerhalb der engen Grenzen des Urheberrechtsgesetzes ist ohne Zustimmung des Verlages unzulässig und strafbar. Das gilt insbesondere für Vervielfältigungen, Übersetzungen, Mikroverfilmungen und die Einspeicherung und Verarbeitung in elektronischen Systemen.

Diese Publikation wurde begutachtet.

[www.peterlang.com](http://www.peterlang.com)

## Table of Contents

<i>Winfried Herget</i> Introduction.....	7
<i>Nassim Winnie Balestrini</i> Matthew Aucoin's <i>Opera Crossing</i> (2015): Reinventing Walt Whitman for the Twenty-First Century.....	13
<i>Lawrence Kramer</i> Walt Whitman in Music: Cosmos, Eros, Mourning.....	25
<i>Margit Peterfy</i> Walt Whitman and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: The Hieroglyphics of Expression.....	39
<i>Sascha Pöhlmann</i> Whitman and Everything: Playing with the Poetics of Scale.....	55
<i>Walter Grünzweig</i> Saluting Lumumba: The Global Whitman Network and Intermedia.....	81
<i>Iris-Aya Laemmerhirt</i> Oceanic Poetics: Walt Whitman across Pacific Currents.....	95
<i>Alfred Hornung</i> Life Writing and Diversity: Walt Whitman's <i>Song of Myself</i> .....	111
<i>Winfried Herget</i> Visions of a Democratic Poetry: Tocqueville – Emerson – Whitman.....	121
<i>Thomas Claviez</i> Walt Whitman: Metonymy, Contingency, and the Democracy of it All.....	139
<i>Sebastian M. Herrmann</i> "Songs" and "Inventories": Democratic Literature, the 19 <sup>th</sup> -Century Data Imaginary, and the Narrative Liminality of the Poetic Catalog.....	163

Sascha Pöhlmann

## Whitman and Everything: Playing with the Poetics of Scale

**Abstract:** This essay analyzes the video game *Everything* (2017) by David O'Reilly alongside the 1855 version of "Song of Myself" as two works that share an ambition to be all-inclusive as well as an aesthetic method to achieve this impossible goal, despite their fundamental difference in medium. I argue that both employ a poetics of scale that confronts the recipient with the very small, the very large, and everything in between in order to convey a sense of universal connectedness. The means of conveying this sense are on the one hand similar in that they are non-narrative, as poem and game are formally independent of that category; on the other hand, they are also very different, as the reader reads and the player plays. I first analyze "Song of Myself" in its use of catalogs and synecdoche to describe a poetics of scale, which combines the broad scope of variety on one categorical level with a sense of multiplicity regarding the number of such levels themselves. I then trace how this Whitmanian poetics of scale is adapted and expanded as a ludics of scale in *Everything*.

### 1. An Intermedial Look at the Aesthetics of Everything

The most daunting aesthetic ambition is the one that is possibly also the most persistent across the deep time of human artistic production: the desire to include everything, to tell a story about it all, to (literally or figuratively) paint a picture of the whole universe, to convey all that exists, or, to make it even more complicated, all that has been, will be, or *could* be. This ambition has found its most natural home in creation myths, which employ the strategy of including everything by deriving it all from a singular origin or a particularly poignant beginning in a cycle of beginnings. But even outside this distinctly mystical realm with its own particular rules, purposes, and goals of representation, there have been notable attempts in many art forms to be just as inclusive, and they are all particularly symptomatic of the constraints and possibilities of each medium and genre. In the present essay, I want to compare two of those attempts with the particular goal of exploring how two works that are fundamentally dissimilar in many ways engage the issue by different means but with a shared philosophical outlook. I will analyze the video game *Everything* (2017) by David O'Reilly<sup>1</sup> alongside the poem "Song of

---

1 The game was developed by David O'Reilly and programmed by Damien Di Fede; the score was composed by Ben Lukas Boysen, the sound designed by Eduardo Ortiz Frau.

Myself" (1855) by Walt Whitman to argue that both employ an aesthetics of scale that confronts the recipient with the very small, the very large, and everything in between in order to convey a sense of universal connectedness. The second, more abstract goal of my intermedial analysis is to find potential similarities between poem and game as fundamentally non-narrative art forms, while at the same time being mindful of their equally fundamental difference in medium and engagement with readers or players in terms of agency and embodiment. Despite their differences, poetry and video games have in common that they *may* have a strong narrative element to them – consider epic poetry or ‘walking simulators’ such as *Gone Home* – but may also eschew narrative altogether and still function perfectly and recognizably as poetry or video game – consider concrete poetry or *Tetris*. In short, there are narrative games just like there are narrative poems, but neither art form is defined by narrative, and one might rather ask if they both “*need* to produce stories, while acknowledging that they might be able to do so” (Bogost, *Unit 70*). In analyzing their respective non-narrative aesthetics, I will be especially interested in the difference in participation of reader and player, and how poem and video game involve and embed their active ‘recipients’ in their environments.

## 2. Everything in “Song of Myself”

In the following, then, I will analyze how two works of art in different media pick up the challenge of including everything without telling a story about everything. I will first proffer a reading of “Song of Myself” to provide a poetic model for *Everything*, not in the sense of constructing any direct influence, but rather in the sense that the video game employs poetic elements in addition to its ludic ones, and that those elements are best described in terms of a Whitmanian aesthetic. In my opinion, this aesthetic finds its most elaborate expression in “Song of Myself” (and especially in the 1855 version that I will use here), although Whitman’s whole oeuvre is marked by it to differing degrees, and there are numerous other poems that aspire to all-inclusiveness in their own way, but never quite as complexly. This complexity is best described in terms of a two-fold strategy that pertains to Whitman’s signature catalog rhetoric, and which I will call the poetics of scale. “Song of Myself” – as I hope to show – operates on both a horizontal and vertical axis that combines the broad scope of variety on one categorical level with a sense of multiplicity regarding the number of such levels themselves. In contrast, “Poem of Salutation” (1856, later “Salut au Monde!”) makes the most of the technique of the catalog in an attempt to hail *all* the world in a poem that does its best to be as global as possible, but its enumerative style lacks the element of different scales as it remains mostly on a geographical and ethnographical level. It is only

noteworthy for its wonderful rhetorical trick of including everything by explicitly addressing what it omits in a generalizing apostrophic flourish that actually draws attention to its omissions instead of filling them: “And you everywhere whom I specify not, but include just the same!” (Whitman 295).

“Song of Myself,” however, is the poem that truly strives for universality in its most extreme form, not just in terms of including every human being or culture, or every potential future reader, but really and literally *everything*, across all of time and space. Even within Whitman’s vast oeuvre that certainly does not lack in ambitious poems, “Song of Myself” is unique in taking “the universe and all of time as its setting” (Zweig 248), and the speaker of the poem even explicitly makes this scope the very measure of how meaningful his message is:

These are the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands, they are not original with me,  
If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing or next to nothing,  
If they do not enclose everything they are next to nothing ... (43)

Enclosing everything is thus an essential goal of the poem as it tries to convey a sense of universal connectedness that is at the heart of its philosophical outlook. “Song of Myself” is not just about everything but rather about *everything connected to everything else*;<sup>2</sup> it is not merely a list of all entities, and especially not when it employs the catalog form and actually does list things. It is instructive to review Lawrence Buell’s well-known reading of one of Whitman’s catalogs again here, as it also exemplifies Whitman’s poetics of scale. This is the passage Buell discusses (here in the original 1855 version):

I find I incorporate gneiss and coal and long-threaded moss and fruits and grains and  
esculent roots,  
And am stucco’d with quadrupeds and birds all over,  
And have distanced what is behind me for good reasons,  
And call any thing close again when I desire it. (57)

Buell argues that these lines “show in miniature how, in the midst of apparent randomness, Whitman may structure his lists in a second and more subtle way,

2 This corresponds to Barry Commoner’s First Law of Ecology, “Everything is connected to everything else,” which is a major reason why Whitman’s poetry lends itself to ecocritical readings, as M. Jimmie Killingsworth and Christine Gerhardt have demonstrated so fruitfully in *Walt Whitman & the Earth: A Study in Ecopoetics* (2004) and *A Place for Humility* (2014), respectively. Killingsworth’s study is especially interesting in that it works out – in a compelling reading of “This Compost” – a dialectic of Whitman’s compost poetry in which the relation between self and nature is a more troubled one than the overwhelmingly positive speaker in “Song of Myself” would suggest.



so as to express something more than mere plenitude" (329), and part of this 'something more' is the sense of coherence that is not established narratively but by juxtaposition. Presenting readers with such catalogs is always an invitation for them to participate in the meaning-making process of the poem, and to understand how everything is connected by drawing these connections themselves. Buell interprets this enumeration in evolutionary terms; in the context of the present essay, I would rather read this as a condensed example of how easily and eagerly Whitman switches scale and moves between small and large, between sentient and non-sentient entities, in order to imply that the universal connectedness transcends any such conventional<sup>3</sup> differences and truly applies to everything, whatever its size or mode of being.

Using this indicative method of enumeration and juxtaposition allows the poem to avoid the problem of having to offer a complete inventory of all there is even in its most extensive lists, since it can use its necessarily finite textual space to convey a sense of everything by pointing out connectedness itself: not actual connections, which are potentially infinite in number, but the abstract concept, which is representable and yet *implies* infinity. As Carmine Sarracino has it, "the catalog is finite in its elemental composition but infinite in its structure" (7). Yet since this abstract concept of connectedness must be conveyed in at least somewhat concrete terms, the poem uses its first-person speaker as the central node of this network that includes everything, so that the song of everything is also the "Song of Myself." As critics have by now well established to the point of commonplace, this self, the poetic persona 'Walt Whitman,' is an individual and yet transcends his own time, space, body, and identity, so that the poem can be specific and general at the same time as it conveys a sense of universal connectedness while retaining diversity.<sup>4</sup> In writing about the self as an individual and also "a kosmos" (50) that "contain[s] multitudes" (87), Whitman implies that connectedness is not sameness. In this view, there is both "always a knit of identity" and "always distinction" (28), and these are the axes that make up the larger structure of everything in the poem. All this is already implied by the first three lines of the poem:

3 The word 'conventional' is used here in the sense of "a matter of social agreement" (Watts 4).

4 Two differing positions on the speaking subject in "Song of Myself" may serve as representative examples of this discussion here: on the one hand, Philip Fisher argues that Whitman's representation is marked by "the strong, violent act of interposition and replacement" (84) in which the speaker appropriates everything; on the other hand, Charles Altieri sees the speaker as a "purely functional 'I [that] floats freely so that its working can be attached to the self-reflexive activity of both author and readers" (36).

I celebrate myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. (27)

In these lines, the first-person speaker and the second-person 'you' are connected (but not merged) by reference to the universality of the smallest (pre-quantum physics) constitutive unit of existence. These individuals are individuals, and yet they share in a common existential realm that connects even distinct entities. Addressing the reader in such a direct way serves not only to point this out to her, but also to directly *involve* her and embed her both in the poem and in the network of universal connections it points out. This combined reference to humans and atoms is the first indication of Whitman's poetics of scale in the poem: the *I* and the *you* are separate on the macrolevel of human life and personhood, but they are connected on the atomic microlevel. The speaker continues this movement between connected scales of size only a few lines later in discussing "[t]he smoke of my own breath" (27), enumerating various aspects that relate to it without subjecting them to narrative coherence:

Echos, ripples, and buzzed whispers .... loveroot, silkthread, crotch and vine,  
My respiration and inspiration .... the beating of my heart .... the passing of blood and  
air through my lungs,  
The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore and darkcolored sea-rocks, and  
of hay in the barn (27)

Here, the poem seamlessly moves between different scales of existence by using the speaker's breath as a connecting element between them. Tracing the movement of breathing in and breathing out, the poem both focuses on the speaker's body and at the same time shows that this body is embedded in its environment, or rather that the body *is* its environment in the sense that the distinction between the two is implied to be purely conventional. Breathing here means partaking of and participating in the world, and "respiration and inspiration" connects the lungs to the leaves, the shore, the rocks, the hay, and the barn while leaving each of them a distinct entity.

It is a crucial element of its poetics of scale to insist that entities are not merely connected on a similar plane of existence but across such planes as well, since the distinction between such scales is arbitrary anyway – after all, scale is as much a matter of perception and convention as any categorical distinction in general, and accordingly the speaker seeks to show "that size is only development [sic]" (Whitman 47). This is the ecological point made so compellingly (and in somewhat Whitmanian terms) by Neal Evernden in "Beyond Ecology: Self, Place, and the Pathetic Fallacy" when he insists that we understand interrelatedness

quite literally, not simply as an indication of causal connectedness. Where do you draw the line between one creature and another? Where does one organism stop and another begin? Is there even a boundary between you and the non-living world, or will the atoms in this page be a part of your body tomorrow? How, in short, can you make any sense out of the concept of man as a discrete entity? (95)

This understanding of the “individual-in-environment, the individual as a component of, not something distinct from, the rest of the environment” (Evernden 97) is of course not just central to ecology but also to Zen Buddhism and Transcendentalism (which clearly owes an intellectual debt to the former). The speaker of “Song of Myself” expresses this embedded but differentiated individuality when he states that he is “not contained between my hat and boots” (32) but also asserts “I am not an earth nor an adjunct of an earth” (33); the self is absorbed in the not-self without vanishing completely, and especially the “expansive catalogues dissolve the subject-object division as the persona merges with the phenomenal world” (Egan 1).<sup>5</sup> This is not merely a philosophical issue but also a poetic one, as the poem thus retains a distinct speaker while at the same time using him to express the sense of universal connectedness *through* him even as it *transcends* him. In short, this is a “metempsychotic self” (Corrigan 109) whose “selfhood involves the construction, destruction, and reconstruction of identity, pointing to a greater unity that encompasses all these disparate forms of experience into one flowing, fluctuating system” (Corrigan 121).<sup>6</sup> The following passage is one of the most direct expressions of this method, and it is also a particularly important example of Whitman’s poetics of scale:

Through me many long dumb voices,  
Voices of the interminable generations of slaves,  
Voices of prostitutes and of deformed persons,  
Voices of the diseased and despairing, and of thieves and dwarfs,  
Voices of cycles of preparation and accretion,  
And of the threads that connect the stars—and of wombs, and of the fatherstuff,  
And of the rights of them the others are down upon,  
Of the trivial and flat and foolish and despised,  
Of fog in the air and beetles rolling balls of dung. (50)

5 This retention of individuality and selfhood is a major point of difference between Whitman’s poetry and the philosophy of Zen Buddhism, as Yoshinubo Hakutani points out along with many noteworthy affinities in his recommended essay “Emerson, Whitman, and Zen Buddhism.”

6 John Michael Corrigan’s monograph *American Metempsychosis* offers an extensive reading of “Song of Myself” in these terms while providing a useful contextual overview of how critics have discussed selfhood in the poem.

Here, the speaker not only presumes – arrogantly or benevolently or both – to speak for those who cannot represent themselves for various reasons, but he also moves away from the level of human beings to give voice to the very large and the very small while connecting all these scales within his ventriloquist persona. This is about the “threads that connect the stars,” but also about the threads that connect everything else, including that which is neglected, since “[t]he insignificant is as big to me as any” (56). Whitman employs this method of contrast time and again in “Song of Myself” as if to offer a framework of the small and the large to indicate the limits of everything so as not to have to represent everything itself, since the atomic and the cosmic bracket all that exists between those two levels.

Whitman’s poetics of scale is largely defined by extremes rather than by increments of scale, since the potentially infinite number of these differences by degrees would once again pose the problem of having to represent everything within the limits of a finite text. In order to avoid this issue, Whitman focuses on what, to the scale of human existence, seems very small or very large, and bases his poetics of scale on movement between these poles that is as effortless as it is surprising to readers in its contrast and juxtaposition of elements that seem very different. Notably, both these extremes have received important critical attention. The two texts I would consider the most thorough and compelling discussions of their respective subjects are Christine Gerhardt’s *A Place for Humility: Whitman, Dickinson, and the Natural World*, whose second chapter deals with Whitman’s concern with “nature’s minutest aspects” (59), but especially Ed Folsom’s “Counting from One to a Million: Whitman’s Engagement with Large Numbers,” which convincingly shows “how vital large numbers were to Whitman’s articulation of his composting faith” (150), since his philosophic vision depends on “a universe of countless atoms going through countless re-formations over countless eons of time” (151).<sup>7</sup> Whitman can move so easily through the “dizzying array of other bacteria and plants and insects and humans and posthumans to come” (Folsom 151) because he has delimited it quite clearly to provide the reader with the necessary sense of the extremes of scale. In other words, this could be called the synecdoche of scale that Whitman employs as a way of including everything without having to represent everything. “Song of Myself” is full of passages that respectively deal with the small and the large, yet its most important elements are those stanzas that move *between* scales instead of indicating a particular scale and

7 While this is the essay that pertains most directly to my argument about Whitman’s poetics of scale in “Song of Myself,” the other contributions to the special issue (34.2) of the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* on “Walt Whitman and Mathematics” are at least also indirectly relevant to a more general consideration of scale in Whitman’s poetry.

the diversity and plenitude on that level. This is where Whitman's method of non-narrative juxtaposition is really most effective to indicate universal connectedness across *all* levels of existence without having to include every connected item, for example when the speaker moves from the tiny to the planetary from one line to the next: "The moth and the fisheggs are in their place, / The suns I see and the suns I cannot see are in their place" (43).

Whitman's inclusiveness in these sections connects not just humans, animals,<sup>8</sup> and plants, but also goes beyond a deep-ecological consideration of all life by connecting sentient and non-sentient entities, and literally anything and any thing: "the April rain ... and the mica on the side of a rock" as well as "the daylight ... or the early redstart twittering through the woods" (45). "Song of Myself" is truly a poem of *things* as much as of human beings, and it therefore invites a reading inspired by the object-oriented ontology pioneered by Graham Harman.<sup>9</sup> The poem addresses "the puzzle of puzzles ... that we call Being" by asking "To be in any form, what is that?" (Whitman 55), and it thereby parallels the philosophical explorations of this brand of speculative realism that, in a critique of Heidegger's tool analysis, "puts *things* at the center of being" and "contends that nothing has special status, but that everything exists equally" while "drawing attention to things at all scales (from atoms to alpacas, bits to blinis) and pondering their nature and relation with one another as much as with ourselves" (Bogost, *Alien* 6). In "Song of Myself," "[a]ll truths wait in all things" (Whitman 56), "there is no object so soft but it makes a hub for the wheeled universe" (85), and the speaker explicitly includes non-sentient man-made things in his transcendent identity – "I am the clock myself" (65) – as he examines the relation of every thing to everything by way of himself:

Mine is no callous shell,  
I have instant conductors all over me whether I pass or stop,  
They seize every object and lead it harmlessly through me. (55)

This, then, is how Whitman in "Song of Myself" has "pried through the strata and analyzed to a hair" (45), and this is what defines his poetics of scale: first of all,

8 Nevertheless, within the universal scope of this inclusiveness, especially the human-animal relation is of particular significance, as Aaron M. Moe and M. Jimmie Killingsworth show in *Zoopoetics: Animals and the Making of Poetry* and "As if the beasts spoke: The Animal/Animist/Animated Walt Whitman," respectively.

9 Killingsworth's *Walt Whitman and the Earth* prefigures such a reading as it deals with the "unspeakableness of things" (16) and Whitman's "dramatizations of thingish incapacity" (19), only that he cannot make these correspondences explicit as his monograph was published almost at the same time as Harman's *Tool-Being*.

he truly understands everything as *every thing* and strives to include not just subsets of particular importance but really attempts to transcend these conventions along with the ideologies of ontology that go with them (simply put, he does not just consider human life to be the only form of existence worth speaking of). Second, Whitman knows he must be selective in a finite text anyway, and thus opts to convey an abstract sense of universal connectedness instead of countless actual connections by employing the catalog form in which items can be juxtaposed without having to make their coherence explicit. Third, Whitman uses the speaker and his transcendent but also concrete identity as the central node in this universal network to literally bring everything under control, poetically speaking. Fourth, and finally, Whitman conveys everything by indicating not simply diversity and plenitude on a similar scale of existence – conventional and arbitrary as such scales may be – but indicating also a diversity of scales, which he conveys in terms of a bracket of extremes in order to imply but not represent everything in between them. All this means that everything in "Song of Myself" is prepared for the reader, and "[a]ll things are in place ... because the poet puts them there" (Reynolds 520). At the same time, however, the poem could not be all-inclusive if it failed to include the reader in a direct way, and so it explicitly invites – even forces – her to participate in the meaning-making process, for example by making sense of catalogs that seem random at first. For all its focus on the speaker's self, then, the poem could not function without an active reader who truly makes its scales and its diversity cohere. Even more importantly, it needs the reader to really complete it, to add the one thing that the poem could not include by itself, and the one thing that will then really make the poem about every thing and everything.

### 3. Playing with Everything in *Everything*

What happens if such a poetics of scale changes medium and becomes a ludics of scale? What happens to it if it involves a player instead of a reader? How is the ambition of including everything different or similar, and how may such a contrast help understand each work better? In the following, I want to show how *Everything* (version 1.06) uses its unique qualities as a video game to pursue a project that is philosophically and aesthetically similar to that of "Song of Myself." In describing this in terms of a Whitmanian poetics of scale, I am not implying that *Everything* is some kind of intermedial adaptation of the poem, or that there is any distinctly traceable sense of influence here. I consider a Whitmanian poetics of scale the most useful model to understand *Everything*, but even this statement should not imply a strict linearity. Instead, my conceptualization of this Whitmanian poetics of scale is already based on my gameplay experience of *Everything*, so that I am as



much playing *Everything* through “Song of Myself” as I have been reading “Song of Myself” through *Everything* already (which I hope will become clear in the following). In my analysis, I will once again focus on catalogs and their ontological scope, on different and extreme scales, on connectedness instead of connections, and on the involvement of the subject that has changed from reader to player.

*Everything* has received considerable critical attention and indeed virtually unanimous praise on its release on PC and consoles in 2017, but it has not been the subject of many academic analyses at the point of writing (Alexander Lehner’s essay on ecocritical metagames and Jonathan Harth’s and David Kempf’s essay on Buddhism and the relation between player and environment are the most noteworthy texts in this regard). *Everything* is not really a game, or at least not in terms of Jesper Juul’s debatable but sound definition:

A game is a rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiable. (36)

*Everything* fits this definition quite well, and I will keep calling it a game, but there is one striking difference in that it does not have a variable and quantifiable outcome, and indeed no outcome at all; although it has rules that “specify *limitations* and *affordances*” (Juul 60) and thus both constrain and constitute the agency of the player, these rules are not associated with any specific goal. *Everything* is not strictly a game but a simulation of the kind that Juul calls a “borderline case”: “Open-ended simulation games such as *The Sims* change the basic game model by removing the goals, or more specifically, by not describing some possible outcome as better than others” (54). *Everything* can be completed but not finished, you cannot win or lose at the game, and according to the in-game tips “you cannot make a mistake,” but you can play it nevertheless and influence the game state. (In parallel, one might say that you can read all of “Song of Myself” without arriving at ‘the correct interpretation’ of it that would mean you never have to read it again.) *Everything* is only a simulation, however, in the sense that it is potentially user-independent; it is not a simulation in the sense of aspiring to any kind of verisimilitude, a point I will return to later.

According to the developer’s website, *Everything*

presents a philosophy in several forms—through its mechanics, narration, text and audio content, structure and design and how all these elements interact. The philosophy of *Everything* is both serious and funny, silly and sincere, rational and absurd. It contradicts and criticizes itself. It doesn’t follow any existing school or canon and isn’t advocating for

any particular way of thinking. *Everything*’s philosophy is designed to be experienced in all of its parts, and above all to be playful, entertaining and helpful. (“Philosophy”)

In the present essay, I cannot do justice to the full scope of how these elements interact, and I will focus on the aspects I consider most relevant in terms of a Whitmanian poetics of scale. This means that I will concentrate on the gameplay mechanics and visual content while neglecting music, soundtrack, achievements, and particularly the narration in the game. The game is not narrated in itself, and yet it “contains narration in the form of recordings of the late great British philosopher Alan Watts,” recordings that the developers’ description notably calls “an optional part of the game” (“Philosophy”). The game also contains textual “thoughts” that

are taken from continental philosophers such as Schopenhauer to the Italian stoics like Marcus Aurelius & Seneca—to the American thinker & poet Emerson. There are hundreds of these thoughts embedded into the game, rewritten and edited for length, and integrated into the game’s thought system. *Everything* seeks to revive many old and even ancient ideas, liberate them from their texts and introduce them to new brains. (“Philosophy”)

Reading these “thoughts” – which are stored in the “Mind” for the player to retrieve later – is as optional as listening to the Alan Watts recordings, which is not to diminish their importance to the experience of the game. Watts’s lectures on Zen Buddhism convey a sense of what he calls elsewhere<sup>10</sup> “nondifference” between oneself and the external world, between the mind and its contents – the various sounds, sights, and other impressions of the surrounding environment” (156). This notion that “I have no other self than the totality of things of which I am aware” (Watts 120) relates to *Everything* as much as to “Song of Myself,” and the various ways in which Watts explores the implications of this breakdown between subject and object in the recordings are as intellectually provocative as they are entertaining. These recordings and the order in which they are made available to the player in the game would merit a deeper analysis on their own in relation to the gameplay experience, yet I must neglect them here as much as the “thoughts” in the game; I can only note that I have not identified a Whitman quote in my ongoing playthrough, although this may be entirely my fault.

10 Watts’s *The Way of Zen*, published in 1957, remains one of the most comprehensive and concise overviews of Zen Buddhism written in English. It makes for an excellent background for both players of *Everything* and readers of Whitman, and I will pragmatically use it as such here to summarily outline the Zen elements in both works, although I am aware that this is a very reductive approach to the complexities of an entire philosophical ‘system.’



Beyond these aspects, then, how may *Everything* be described in terms of a Whitmanian poetics of scale? The game starts with a splash screen that includes the name of the game underneath its central symbol, a hexagon with all corners connected by lines (indicating the theme of the game already). The background image has the sun in its middle in a slightly clouded blue sky, surrounded by a shining corona that resembles an iris. Going outward, the sky gives way to the blackness of outer space, which is full of colorful specks that look like stars and galaxies. This static image implies the Whitmanian scope of the game: a universe full of stuff on different scales, but one with an eye or I at its center, as the background notably exceeds the corona but is also covered by it.

The first user interaction with the game occurs when he or she is asked to press a button to start. The PC version uses the enter key to do this, so the displayed "enter" may be read not only as a request to press that particular key, but literally to enter the manifold web of connections symbolized by the colorful hexagon. After choosing a save slot, the player is asked to enter his or her name with yet another poignant phrase: "This game belongs to..." The game will address the player by that name later on, as will be reflected in my quotations using the name "Walt" as an exemplary player. This frames the relation between player and game by the complex notion of belonging: the player owns the game he has bought, but it also belongs to him and is a part of him, as if the game were saying: "For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (Whitman 27). Appropriately, the first thing the player sees in the center of a black screen is a tiny white dot, a particle among other particles, and he is informed that he can move this particle around. The particle is soon surrounded by a corona like the brilliant light on the splash screen that may not be the sun after all, and as the dot moves, it develops a trail like a meteor, which makes its three-dimensional movement across the black screen perceptible. The user interface – generally minimal and unobtrusive – tells the player that he can "think" by pressing a button, resulting in three questions appearing at the bottom of the screen with each press, questions that may vary with each new game, for example: "Is this me? / Am I controlling this? / How far do I need to get?" or "What happened before now? / How did I get here? / How long has this been going on?" As the player keeps moving the dot and 'thinking,' it transforms into a luminous cluster, and then it changes into something more recognizable, different for each game, although apparently usually an animal of the size of a cow or camel.

Notably, the transformation highlights the game's process of constructing the 3D-world that the player now enters: we do not simply see the animal, but we watch the camera circle and zoom away from it as the world around it comes into being, and the blackness transforms into a desert that also contains other

objects, including a mysterious golden X that will become important later on. In making its world-creation so explicit – and it does so every time when a save game is loaded, with the shining dot of light visible within the respective thing as its surroundings are built from blackness – *Everything* highlights that it is a video game. The player is not simply presented with the game's graphic environment and an apparently complete world, but rather with the *process* of how the graphics are constituted. The game thus insists on its own mediality as a video game, and it will employ such metamedial stratagems time and again to ensure that the player does not mistake it for a 'realistic'<sup>11</sup> simulation or becomes too immersed in it.

The game's progression occurs almost entirely in ludic terms instead of narrative ones. Players will get a sense of moving along in the game as they are given the ability to do other things in it, but not in any way because there is a plot that could develop. The game can best be described in terms of how it expands the player's abilities to interact with it, and what restrictions it first places on and then lifts from his agency. This is not merely technical but also symbolic, as it fundamentally relates to the philosophical 'content' of the game: the player begins by controlling an isolated dot, which then transforms into an animal around which then a world arises out of the blackness to provide this animal with an *environment*. Placed in the center of the screen and the camera perspective, the animal is now recognizably the player's avatar, and he will probably move it around using the controls he was shown when the dot first appeared. After a few seconds of movement, the player is informed in text that "You are now [animal]," a phrase that is repeated whenever the player has "bonded" with something, as the game calls it. Moving the avatar around, the player learns how to interact with the environment as he encounters the "thoughts" of other things, and these bits of texts occasionally tell him about new ways of playing as these modes are unlocked. The player learns how to "sing," which is the only way for the avatar to communicate with other things, and each thing has its own singing sound and/or animation (for example, a car will honk its horn, a flashlight will turn itself on and off). Next, the player is enabled to "ascend" or "descend," to enter bigger or smaller things; holding the corresponding button, in-game time slows down, and things that can be entered are marked by a circle. Choosing one of these circles causes a brief motion-blur shift animation of the camera, and then the player instantly controls

11 The perception of what makes for realism in video game certainly varies over time, but even if the term is highly flexible and contingent on various contexts, its opposite of 'unrealistic' video games can be described much more clearly as soon as a game conveys any sense of abstraction—for example in the use of pixel graphics in contemporary 'retro' games.

the thing he has selected. If it is a thing he has never controlled before (marked by a colorful circle instead of a white one), he needs to sing and move around for a few seconds to “bond” with it; then the message “You are now [that thing]” is displayed, and this turns out to be both a metaphorical description of player control *and* a rather complex ontological claim. The game deliberately forces the player to control a new thing until he has bonded with it, as if to get a feel for its existence and having to walk a distance in its metaphorical shoes before moving on to something else. This temporal limitation on the player’s agency makes for much of the gameplay dynamic, as the player explores both the world and the game mechanics simultaneously. The player does not *achieve* these expansions of possibility in the sense that he overcomes an obstacle and is rewarded for it, but only in the sense that he *spends time* with the game and achieves something of a different kind in a different way.<sup>12</sup>

Over time, the player gains various new abilities: he can join other things if they are the same as the one he controls, he can release things from that group, or he can make this group dance. Yet the most important new ability is that of changing scale, and this is literally a game-changer in terms of player experience. Much like with the Whitmanian poetics of scale, this adds a second, vertical axis to the horizontal one, combining a variety of scale with the diversity on a particular scale. By this, both *Everything* and “Song of Myself” employ similar tricks of ludic and poetic synecdoche: free from the constraints of narrative, they represent lots of *something* to imply *everything*, and they use different levels of scale to imply that they include everything from the very small to the very large (without actually having to represent it). On the horizontal axis of diversity, *Everything* includes not everything but 1391 things, and the game keeps its own list of all those things by adding it to one of the following 62 categories whenever the player bonds with a new thing:

1d, 2d, 3d, 3d Structure, Aircraft, Alga, Animal, Arachnid, Atom, Attire, Bacterium, Barrier, Bird, Boat, Book, Building, Building (Home), Cloud, Container, Crustacean, Drink,

12 I would argue that this investment of time is fundamentally different from that which the genre of the ‘idle game’ demands, although they share certain characteristics. These ‘games’ – for example *Tiny Tower* – are simulations in that the game state changes without player input, and the player’s role is only to reap the rewards of what this system produces after a built-in time lag. While one may be tempted to read this as a Marxist critique of the leisure class, these simulations are in fact waiting games, and are accordingly often browser games or apps that do not demand the full concentration of the player. *Everything* is a waiting game as well, but it invests this waiting and the passage of time with meaning instead of simply providing a crude sense of reward for doing nothing.

Fish, Fish (Tropical), Flower, Food, Fungus, Furniture, Galaxy, Insect, Landform, Light, Music, Non Solid, Other, Particle, Planet, Plant, Pollen, Protozoan, Reptile, Rock, Satellite, Sculpture, Shell, Sign, Space Junk, Space Probe, Spacecraft, Sport, SSSB, Star, Stone, Stone (Carved), Tech, Tool, Toy, Trash, Tree, Vehicle, Virus, Water, Weapon.<sup>13</sup>

This is the textual summary of *Everything*’s version of the Whitmanian catalog, but it does not even begin to describe how this diversity is conveyed in the game. Massive as that list may seem in the beginning of the game, especially when blank entries indicate how much there is to discover, it is also obviously finite, and yet, like in “Song of Myself,” the scope it implies still suffices to signify everything, without actually representing it item for item. *Everything* includes only 34 items in the ‘insect’ category instead of millions of insect species, and yet this is sufficient to imply the diversity that allows players to extrapolate beyond that small number. It is sufficient because the game fundamentally relies on abstraction,<sup>14</sup> and this is as integral a part of its *pars-pro-toto* aesthetics as it is of “Song of Myself.” Just like the graphics indicate that *Everything* is not a ‘realistic’ simulation aspiring to any verisimilitude (most obviously, all large land animals in the game lack a ‘realistic’ animation, and so they simply tumble in 90-degree angles), its list of things does not claim to be complete or even representative in its selectivity.<sup>15</sup> Yet, in a Whitmanian way, it allows for and invites extrapolation, so that a crucial aspect of the catalog is that it could always be expanded further, and the juxtaposition of many diverse elements not only connects them with each other but also implies potential connections outside this finite list.

This expansion comes about by adding the vertical axis of scale to the horizontal axis of diversity. Rather than attempting to multiply entities on a single scale in order to include everything, *Everything* – like “Song of Myself” – only presents a

13 I found the best quotable source for these lists and statistics of the game to be the Steam forum contribution “Everything Collects” by user DukeOfDelmar, which includes an in-depth explanation of the game mechanics as well as a complete list of all things on all scales.

14 See Mark J.P. Wolf’s essay “Abstraction in Video Games” for a wide-ranging discussion of this subject.

15 This selectivity, and even more so the descriptions that accompany each respective thing in the catalogue, would merit a critical reading in a separate essay. While some descriptions are Wikipedia quotes, others are quite poignant, humorous, and poetic, for example when the rowboat is described as an “elegant wood vessel designed for one or two. Good for fishing, romantic dates, and getting lost at sea,” a ‘crumpled napkin’ as a “breatharian’s flag of surrender,” a ‘factory smokestack’ as a “mighty chimney, pumping out the sweet air of progress,” or a ‘clasped book’ as “Don’t even THINK about reading this, Mom.” My favorite is the ‘unknown particle,’ which is “a ball of stuff, undeserving of classification.”



selection of items on a particular scale but multiplies the scales themselves, so that vertical and horizontal diversities combine to convey a sense of universality and all-inclusiveness. The vertical axis in *Everything* consists of seven different scales:

- Galaxy – The scale of galaxies and other large astronomical phenomena
- Planet – The scale of the planets and their star
- Landmass – The scale of clouds and continents
- Human – The scale of most mammals and trees
- Tiny – The scale of small, hand-held objects
- Particle – The scale of atoms, bacteria, and pollen
- Collapse – Subatomic particle scale (“Everything Collects”)

Once the player is enabled to change between scales and become a thing on a different level of size, the game moves from being about everything in a place to everything, period. Like the things on the horizontal level in their categories, there is a limited number of ‘levels’ on all scales, 104 in total.<sup>16</sup> The player can move between scales if certain size criteria are met by selecting a triangle pointing up or down that only appears when such movement is possible, and then he moves to a larger or smaller thing with the brief ‘zoom’ animation that is similar to that of moving between things on the same scale. This transition is most striking on the very large and very small levels, and if there is such a thing as the video game sublime, I think it is there. Zooming in from the human to the tiny scale, the game retains the larger scale as a blurry background, so that the mailbox the player has just descended from looms like a skyscraper over the sidewalk on which he now finds himself as a bit of chewed gum. Descending further, that piece of gum may seem positively planetary compared to the bit of pollen the player now controls. Both the transition and visual contrast between scales is highly effective in conveying this sense of different sizes, and ultimately the sense that each scale is a world in itself, and that it contains an infinite number of smaller worlds in turn.

Of all scales, the subatomic one – unknown to Whitman – is the most visually stunning, perhaps best summarized by the term ‘psychedelic,’ and in its most colorful moments reminiscent of the famous “Star Gate” sequence in Stanley Kubrick’s

<sup>16</sup> This limit shows that *Everything* differs fundamentally from procedurally generated games such as *No Man’s Sky*, which contains 18,446,744,073,709,551,616 planets, and thus could be said to potentially include everything by using a very different design strategy. However, it is striking how such vastness actually *fails* to convey a sense of universality. One may speculate that there might be psychological aspects that prevent us humans from grasping such largeness, but I rather think that it shows how important the aspect of making – *poiesis* – is in such attempts to convey everything. It is like comparing Raymond Queneau’s one hundred million poems to “Song of Myself.”

*2001: A Space Odyssey*. This scale is where the game makes the most of its potential for abstraction, and it visualizes things whose being is beyond ‘realist’ representation, and thus the stuff for an art that explores what can be imagined but never observed. In *Everything*, the player can be a “Planck length” or a “Dead Pixel,” one-dimensional things that are not really objects, in a setting that seems to have left the conventions of space itself behind. However, these things move around just like any thing in *Everything*, and as disparate as they all may be, they are connected by the player’s input and in their basic mobility, which is precisely a way of suggesting connectedness as an abstract concept instead of suggesting actual connections.

This is the smallest scale in the game, then, and just like Whitman in “Song of Myself,” *Everything* uses extreme scales – subatomic and galactic – to indicate everything within this framework. However, the game does something the poem cannot do in its textual mediality: it creates an infinite loop that folds the smallest scale onto the largest, so that when the player descends from the subatomic level, he arrives at the galactic level, and ascending from there would take him right back. This loop transcends the apparent linearity of scale that ranges from the smallest to the largest, and it implies that every dead pixel is a galaxy that contains everything, and every galaxy is a dead pixel in another. Through its game mechanics, *Everything* makes a point about unlimited connectedness that “Song of Myself” cannot, although its transcendentalist outlook would surely agree with that notion, and the game manages to convey infinity even though it is itself finite. One might describe this by saying that in *Everything* the vertical axis of scale is really circular, whereas in “Song of Myself” it is linear, and both imply different senses of endlessness.

This is still a Whitmanian poetics of scale, but adapted to a medium that is not solely textual but audiovisual and tactile on top of any textual elements, and it allows for a very different kind of subjective involvement on the part of the player as opposed to the reader. Even though it is tempting to refer to *Everything*’s list of things as a catalog, it is important to note that it is only alphabetic enumeration in its navigable textual form, and it does not have the poetic quality of juxtaposition that the catalogs in “Song of Myself” have. The true expressive power of the catalog in *Everything* does not lie in this list but in the gameplay itself, in the player’s movement of ascending and descending to bond with new things, become things he has been before, and change scales and perspectives. The diversity of the catalog, which implies everything without representing it, is not textual in *Everything*, it is ludic and visual: the catalog only exists as such if we move through it and experience it. Both the catalogs in “Song of Myself” and *Everything* demand the reader’s or player’s participation in the process of meaning-making and creating coherence between its items, but since their participation in these prepared environments depends on a fundamentally different way of engaging with the



respective medium, *Everything* is able to invest the items in its catalog with more particular significance for the player than for the reader. If the catalogs in “Song of Myself” already “demonstrate by plunging the reader into the heightened sensibility of the Transcendental Everyman” (Egan 5–6), then *Everything* has a much more immediate way of demonstrating, of showing instead of telling. *Everything* only includes things in its catalog that the player has bonded with, and it (initially) forces him to *be* that thing for at least a few seconds by controlling it. These game mechanics thus achieve what Whitman is going for in “Song of Myself,” only that player involvement actually works better than reader involvement, as the active role of the player is much more pronounced than the active role of the reader.

Still, *Everything* is trying to strike a balance between immersion<sup>17</sup> and detachment. It does not teach the player, in Ian Bogost’s phrase, “how to be a thing,” and it does not ‘realistically’ simulate thingness or otherness for the subject so that the subject could fully let go of its subjecthood and truly identify with the object. Rather, the game plays with embodiment and disembodiment as much as Whitman in “Song of Myself.” On the one hand, it reminds its player of her bodily presence in the world, and that “[w]e may be toying with the body when we play, but we remain flesh as we become machines” (Lahti 169). It does so for example by offering on-screen textual suggestions about potential player actions and their respective controls, or even more directly by drawing attention to the game’s own mediality and its reliance on hardware, as the player may encounter (or deliberately create) so-called ‘catastrophes’ when the frame rate of the game drops below a certain value and the level resets itself. On the other hand, the game tells and suggests to the player that he *is* the thing he controls, and this duality is necessary for him to be truly included in the network of universal connections the game seeks to convey. The player will never play a *character* but always an *avatar*,<sup>18</sup> so that he will have no sense of merely taking on the role of something that is already well-formed (like playing Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider*), but rather a sense of really being or embodying this thing as an alter ego of himself.

I would argue that the game, through this dichotomy, invites the player to *play*, not ‘just’ to identify, embody, or empathize. It blurs the difference between

17 While there are numerous scholarly articles that approach immersion from a variety of angles, ranging from the psychological to the technological, one study in particular is worth pointing out in the context of the present essay, as it combines approaches to literature and video games in its consideration of what immersion may be: Souvik Mukherjee’s *Video Games and Storytelling: Reading Games and Playing Books* (2015), especially chapter 7 on agency and becoming in video games.

18 On this distinction, see Fullerton.

subject and object but maintains it *as* a blurred difference. There is no simplistic sense that the player somehow vanishes as a playing subject, and the game prevents such an extreme form of immersion (perhaps knowing that it is impossible and probably undesirable to achieve). At the same time, the game strives hard to overcome the conventional difference between player and game, implying that it makes no sense to tell the dancer from the dance, “the thinker from the thought, the knower from the known, the subject from the object” (Watts 53); this is not to say in a reductive way that player, hardware and software ‘become one,’ but rather that they coexist in a complex relation to each other in which there are no boundaries but only interfaces (skin, keyboard, screen, eyes, speakers, ears, and so on). Like the speaker of “Song of Myself,” the player is “[b]oth in and out of the game” (Whitman 30).

While *Everything* may invite the player to embody, empathize or identify with a thing, and while he may even do so for a while in his own way, the game also goes beyond this by granting the player more and more abilities of interaction that allow him to control the game world in more expansive ways. The moment when the player is truly invited to *play* is marked as clearly as no other in the game. It occurs after hours of gameplay, in which the game unlocks abilities such as joining not just “same” but “similar” things, and more importantly transforming into any thing one has already bonded with regardless of the current scale, which heightens the sense of continuity between, and transcendence of, the limited number of scales available in the game. A while after having been enabled to do this, a thing will address the player directly by telling him to go back to and enter the “golden object” he first saw on his arrival. This will probably cause a sense of disorientation in the player, as he will most likely wonder how on earth he should find his way back there after hours of exploration, and without being able to retrace his steps in a relatively fluid game world in which the way back from B to A sometimes leads to C instead. Only being given a direct goal for the first time – “Return to where you began” – leads to this sense of puzzlement as to where one should go and where one *is*, and it adds yet another layer of complexity to the already diffuse relation between player and game.

This distinction is then blurred further in what seems like the endgame of *Everything*, the section that is framed most strictly in terms of player experience. This is also where the game comments most explicitly on the Zen “‘nondifference’ between oneself and the external world” (Watts 156), and on the inability of the self to let go of itself. Once the player finds the golden gate again and descends into it, he finds himself in a level that contains an apparently chaotic selection of objects from various categories and sizes, so that the scale is not immediately obvious, although there are objects in the background that look like capillary

networks that branch out and come together again. This organic imagery suggests that we may have entered the player's mind itself (and it aptly contains a "Broken Brain"). This level violates the relative coherence of the levels outside the golden gate, as it juxtaposes radically different things and even includes weird things such as "UOUOU," described quite uselessly as a "retired death star," that are classified as "space junk." In doing so, it raises the question of what coherence *is*, and how and when we perceive meaning or structure, particularly in a catalog. In poetic terms, one might say that this level pushes the game into the realm of imagism, whose contrasts are as much about the conventions of sense-making as they are about the images and the words themselves. Of course, it is important to note that this chaos, which might be described with Graham Harman's term as a "carnival of things" (253), is as curated as the rest of the catalogs in *Everything*, as the example of an "open notebook" shows, which is placed next to two clusters of black letters so that they seem to have fallen from the book. This strange, surreal space is full of thinking objects, much more so than any other level, and their thoughts fundamentally differ in tone from those encountered so far: instead of philosophical and playful, these are entirely negative thoughts full of regret or pain (e.g. "Nothing is friendly here, everything is hardened, bitter, lonely and sad"). Dissonant sound effects heighten the sense of discordance as the game presents the player with a different catalog to be experienced, a chaotic one that resists meaning-making and coherence, an uncanny place in which everything seems lonely and distant from everything else instead of connected to it. The game mechanics contribute to this sense of the uncanny as the player is prevented from ascending back out from the golden gate and is told: "You cannot leave here" and "You are stuck here forever." Descending further and further through similarly chaotic levels full of weird, sad things, the player finally arrives at the game itself, represented as a screen with hardware attached to it by cables. The screen displays the exact screen the player sees, offering a glimpse of infinity, and descending into it will take the player right back to where he descended from. The game communicates with the player, offering the longest section of text in *Everything*:

Wow, you're here / What a miserable place to find yourself / Everything here is frustrated.  
They all want to go back to the world that created them / but here they are, trapped in  
the world they created instead / This appears to be the one place we can't think ourselves  
out of / the harder we try, the more lost we get / This place isn't outside the Universe,  
just a small corner of it that seems convincing / so much that you can't convince anyone  
out of it / And so I've come to stay quiet, waiting for someone like you to come along  
and listen... / As you have found yourself all the way here / you probably realize I could  
have nothing to say to you that you don't know already know / And you can see that my  
thoughts, and all the other thoughts in the world are your thoughts / and by listening to

me you are listening to yourself / Why hold on to these thoughts then? / There's nothing  
precious about any of them / You can always let go of every single thought in your head /  
Of course, you'll be able to find them out in the world if you ever need reminding / So / If  
you can see away with your thoughts, you can see your way out of here / Good luck, Walt!

This corresponds to the Zen philosophy of achieving the kind of selflessness that is not merely self-denial but a fundamental deconstruction of the binary of self and non-self along with any other duality. "[T]he one place we can't think ourselves out of" is consciousness itself, as doing so would have the mind enter a vicious circle of thinking about not thinking. The mind "cannot let go of itself. It feels that it should not do what it is doing, and that it should do what it is not doing. It feels that it should not be what it is, and be what it isn't" (Watts 138–39). The resulting illusion of selfhood as a distinct and separate entity is so convincing that "you can't convince anyone out of it," since such enlightenment, *satori*, cannot be achieved through words but only, if at all, through "direct pointing" (Watts 77). This is why Zen "has nothing to say, nothing to teach" (Watts 163), and why "[t]o elaborate is no avail" (Whitman 28). Poetry is such an appropriate art form for Zen, and not just the *haiku*, because it is "not merely or primarily representational" (Watts 174). In parallel, this makes *Everything* a Zen video game, as it employs abstraction to show the player something rather than tell him something about self and non-self. Of course, it *does* attempt to say something directly and perhaps even teach something, and it would be remiss to consider *Everything* a kind of *satori* simulator that will provide automatic enlightenment for only a few hours of gameplay. Yet its philosophical outlook is evidently that of Zen to a considerable extent, and as such also that of "Song of Myself," only that both *Everything* and the poem cannot quite let go of the self, as they still need both player and reader to complete them in their holistic ambition.

*Everything* struggles with this human presence in many different ways, and they deserve at least a brief discussion here because they are decidedly in contrast to Whitman's poetry. While "Song of Myself" includes many people in its catalogs of everything, *Everything* does not contain a single human being, and this is an absence that must surely be noticed by every player at some point. Players will encounter many human artifacts and traces of humanity, but their houses are uninhabited, nobody is sitting around lit fires, and the planes just seem to fly themselves. *Everything* is absolutely depopulated, and the only human presence in the game is that of the player, and one might argue that the game works toward eradicating the apparent ontological difference between his way of being there and that of the things he controls. The only things in the game that are really human, and not just human artifacts, are human bones, and the only place they appear



is around the game itself at the heart of *Everything*. This tableau lends itself to a variety of interpretations; I would venture that it marks the place and moment where the sole human presence of the player is confronted with the absence (as trace) of humanity as directly as possible, and is therefore compelled to ponder his own presence in the game in terms of the loss of selfhood and indeed disembodiment that the game's words to him suggest.

If the body has already been symbolically destroyed for the player at this point, then this leaves the mind to be destroyed next and last. Groping for a way out of the level, the player is told that "Only the pure of mind can enter," and later more directly that he needs to empty the "Mind" that has stored all the thoughts collected so far. On doing that, the screen turns black, and the player can ascend across scales again. When leaving the golden gate, players see the dot from the beginning of the game again, with its corona and tail, as it ascends from the thing. This is followed by the only cutscene in the game, as players watch the animated dot move across levels and scales, and the celebratory music suggests that this is the concluding scene of the game to mark that the player has somehow won. After flying past a multiplicity of dancing things, the dot descends back into the first thing the player controlled, and then he is presented with the most remarkable and unexpected words he has read so far, and which poignantly express the Zen philosophy of *Everything* in a nutshell: "Congratulations / Tutorial complete." And, in large capital letters: "WELCOME TO EVERYTHING." According to the achievement unlocked at this moment, this is when "Everything finally begins," meaning both the game and everything else. The hours and hours of gameplay were only the lesson on how to play, and only *now* can the player truly engage with everything. Accordingly, the game unlocks further ways for the player to interact with it, and many of them add to its poetics of scale: he can add things at will to create large groups and subtract things the same way; he can increase or decrease the size of the thing he is at the moment; and most importantly, the "flock mode" that so far allowed him to join "same" or "similar" things now allows him to join "everything" instead, so that the categorical differences between things no longer matter. The player is enabled to do more and more in the game and with the game, and the combination of these abilities allows him to identify with things as much as play around with them. Instead of showing or telling, then, *Everything* uses *playing* as a way of communicating what cannot be communicated, and even though it is not a *satori* machine, its approach to blurring the boundaries between self and non-self is surely in tune with the more playful aspects of Zen.

There is a final point to be made about that subject-object relation in the game, and a final point of contrast between *Everything* and "Song of Myself." Even though they both employ similar poetics of scale, their respective mediality

allows for a radical difference in the involvement of the reader and the player. For all its focus on the speaker, "Song of Myself" needs the reader to work as a poem; yet while the poem cannot read itself, *Everything* can play itself. The developers' website states that "Everything requires no player input—it will play automatically if left unattended" ("What is Everything?"). Its "autoplay" mode really turns the game into a simulation, since "[i]f you cannot influence the game state in any way (as opposed to being unable to influence the game state in the *right* way), you are not playing a game" (Juul 60). The game even encourages players to use autoplay by framing it in terms of release, as the in-game tips tell them: "If frustrated, let go of the controller." Notably, the game starts playing itself soon after the player does not move the thing he controls. Much like "Song of Myself," the game ensures that "after we start we never lie by again" (Whitman 82), and one might describe both in terms of an aesthetics of mobility that refers not just to the ease with which they move between scales, but also to how they take the reader and player from one thing to the next. (This is particularly effective in the 1855 version of "Song of Myself," which is not yet divided into numbered sections that give structure to this movement and therefore limit it.)

This movement in autoplay seems to be a surefire way to return to the golden gate eventually, so that the player is likely to find it again as soon as he has stopped looking for it. If "Zen is all that side of life which is completely beyond our control" and at the same time "does not involve an ultimate dualism between the controller and the controlled" (Watts 197), then *Everything* once more appears to be the playful expression of this Zen philosophy, as it literally asks the player to let go of the controller and thus of control and of the controlled (and asking players to let go of the controller means asking them to let go of themselves). The autoplay mode is not just a simple cinematic version of the game but an integral part of its philosophical outlook, and it compromises any sense of control the player may have had in playing the game. It is a more elaborate version of David O'Reilly's first game, *Mountain*, a mountain simulator whose menu contains the usual option of "control," but instead of being able to define any button configuration, the player is just informed of her own inability to control the game, as it reads: "Controls: nothing." *Everything* does not fundamentally take away this control from the player, which makes it *also* a game, but it allows for the possibility of not exerting any control over it once a new game has been started or a save game has been loaded. It turns out that even in the initial sequence that teaches the player how to control the game by listing the buttons for movement and thinking, he does not have to actually press any of them, and the game will simply proceed on its own. This, finally, is the most extreme form of removing the human element from the game, and also the most extreme way of achieving the selflessness that the game



demands from the player while asserting the impossibility of actually attaining it. The greatest significance of the autoplay mode does not lie in anything that happens while it is enabled, and it is quite irrelevant whether someone watches it or not, but it lies in the fact that *it exists*, as it is the most radical instance of 'direct pointing' to the "dualism between the controller and the controlled" (Watts 197) the game seeks to overcome along with the dualism between self and non-self on which it is based. In doing so, it removes the cornerstone of subjectivity that serves as a necessary structural foundation of the Whitmanian poetics of scale, but it still keeps the structure from falling apart.

*Everything* thus invites a reevaluation of Whitman's construction and absorption of the subject in "Song of Myself," as its successful attempt to deconstruct the binary between self and non-self through ludic means indicates that Whitman's textual attempt is less successful due to its media form. Whitman uses deixis to incorporate a concrete reader – the material referent of 'you' – while at the same time retaining the openness that enables the poem to address *every* reader, and every reader *as that reader*. Yet while the presence of the reader may complete the poem as an integral part of its universality, it remains secondary to that of the speaker and his strong, transcendent self that dominates the poem despite all assertions to the contrary. In contrast, *Everything* not only allows players to control things but even forces them to do so in order to bond with them as an integral part of its gameplay, and then it transcends this potential for identification and immersion by enabling players to play around with things in many different ways, while at the same time complementing this strong incorporated agency with its utter opposite, autoplay. *Everything* highlights through its graphics how important abstraction is in non-narrative attempts to convey everything, and yet its visual form puts more of a limit to it than the text of Whitman's poem, which can be even less concrete in its juxtaposition of different things on different scales.

Regardless of their differences, however, I hope to have shown at least one thing that relates in particular to my initial question and to the philosophical concern of both poem and game: their non-narrative qualities make them particularly well-suited forms of cultural production to convey a sense of universal connectedness without having to represent it, and "Song of Myself" and *Everything* tackle this combined aesthetic and philosophical problem in particularly effective ways as they explore what it means to say that *every*, really "every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (27).

## Works Cited

- Altieri, Charles. "Spectacular Antispectacle: Ecstasy and Nationality in Whitman and His Heirs." *American Literary History*, vol. 11, no. 1, Spring 1999, pp. 34–62.
- Aspiz, Harold. *So Long! Walt Whitman's Poetry of Death*. U of Alabama P, 2004.
- Bogost, Ian. *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing*. U of Minnesota P, 2012.
- . *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*. The MIT Press, 2006.
- Buell, Lawrence. "Transcendentalist Catalogue Rhetoric: Vision Versus Form." *American Literature*, vol. 40, no. 3, November 1968, pp. 325–39.
- Commoner, Barry. *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man, and Technology*. Bantam Books, 1971.
- Corrigan, John Michael. *American Metempsychosis: Emerson, Whitman, and the New Poetry*. Fordham UP, 2012.
- Egan, Ken Jr. "Periodic Structure in 'Song of Myself.'" *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, vol. 4, Spring 1987, pp. 1–8.
- Evernden, Neil. "Beyond Ecology: Self, Place, and the Pathetic Fallacy." *The Eco-criticism Reader. Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. U of Georgia P, 1996, pp. 92–104.
- "Everything Collects." DukeOfDelmar. *Steam Community*. May 4, 2017. [steamcommunity.com/sharedfiles/filedetails/?id=916602880](http://steamcommunity.com/sharedfiles/filedetails/?id=916602880). Accessed Oct. 17, 2018.
- Fisher, Philip. *Still the New World: American Literature in a Culture of Creative Destruction*. Harvard UP, 1999.
- Folsom, Ed. "Counting from One to a Million: Whitman's Engagement with Large Numbers." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, vol. 34, 2016, pp. 146–68. [dx.doi.org/10.13008/0737-0679.2237](https://doi.org/10.13008/0737-0679.2237).
- Fullerton, Tracy. *Game Design Workshop: A Playcentric Approach to Creating Innovative Games*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Elsevier, 2008.
- Gerhardt, Christine. *A Place for Humility: Whitman, Dickinson, and the Natural World*. Iowa UP, 2014.
- Harman, Graham. *Guerilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*. Open Court, 2005.
- Hakutani, Yoshinubo. "Emerson, Whitman, and Zen Buddhism." *Midwest Quarterly*, vol. 31, Summer 1990, pp. 433–48.
- Harth, Jonathan, and David Kempf. "Alles und ich. Buddhistische Reflexionen zum Verhältnis von Spielenden und Umwelt in *Everything*." *Paidia: Zeitschrift*

- für *Computerspielforschung*. Feb. 28, 2018. [www.paidia.de/?p=11492](http://www.paidia.de/?p=11492). Accessed Oct. 17, 2018.
- Juul, Jesper. *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. The MIT Press, 2005.
- Killingsworth, M. Jimmie. "As if the beasts spoke: The Animal/Animist/Animated Walt Whitman." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, vol. 28, 2010, pp. 19–35.
- . *Walt Whitman & the Earth: A Study in Eco-poetics*. Iowa UP, 2004.
- Lahti, Martti. "As We Become Machines: Corporealized Pleasures in Video Games." Wolf and Perron, pp. 157–70.
- Lehner, Alexander. "A Short Theory of Ecocritical Metagames: *Shadow of the Colossus* and *Everything*." *Paidia: Zeitschrift für Computerspielforschung*. Feb. 28, 2018. [www.paidia.de/?p=11569](http://www.paidia.de/?p=11569). Accessed Oct. 17, 2018.
- Moe, Aaron M. *Zoopoetics: Animals and the Making of Poetry*. Lexington Books, 2014.
- Mukherjee, Souvik. *Video Games and Storytelling: Reading Games and Playing Books*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- O'Reilly, David. *Everything*. Version 1.06. Double Fine Productions, 2017.
- . *Mountain*. Version 1.02. Double Fine Productions, 2014.
- "Philosophy." 2017. [www.everything-game.com/philosophy/](http://www.everything-game.com/philosophy/). Accessed Oct. 17, 2018.
- Reynolds, David S. *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*. Harvard UP, 1989.
- Sarracino, Carmine. "Figures of Transcendence in Whitman's Poetry." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, vol. 5, Summer 1987, pp. 1–11.
- Watts, Alan. *The Way of Zen*. 1957. Vintage Books, 1989.
- Wardrip-Fruin, Noah, and Pat Harrigan, editors. *FirstPerson: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*. MIT Press, 2004.
- "What is Everything?" 2017. [www.everything-game.com/features/](http://www.everything-game.com/features/). Accessed Oct. 17, 2018.
- Whitman, Walt. *Poetry and Prose*. Edited by Justin Kaplan, The Library of America, 1996, pp. 5–145.
- Wolf, Mark J. P. "Abstraction in the Video Game." Wolf and Perron, pp. 47–65.
- , and Bernard Perron, editors. *The Video Game Theory Reader*. Routledge, 2003.
- . *Virtual Morality: Morals, Ethics, and New Media*. Peter Lang, 2003.
- Zweig, Paul. *Walt Whitman: The Making of the Poet*. Basic Books, 1984.

Walter Grünzweig

## Saluting Lumumba: The Global Whitman Network and Intermedia

**Abstract:** The wood relief "Love, Peace and Work" by Swedish sculptor Bror Hjorth shows Walt Whitman next to Jesus Christ and Socrates, holding a Swedish version of the last lines of the poem "The Base of All Metaphysics" translated by Swedish Lesbian poet Karin Boye in the 1920s. The large relief was commissioned by the Workers' Educational Association (ABF) for its new building in Stockholm inaugurated in the 1960s where it is installed until the present. In 1995, the Swedish post office issued two stamps with Hjorth's relief. The essay traces the complex creative reception of this poem by Whitman across languages and genres and interprets it as an innovative example of the Global Whitman Network.

On March 17, 1995, the Swedish post office issued two stamps on the occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the Swedish sculptor and painter Bror Hjorth (1895–1968). The two stamps show two wooden reliefs by Hjorth which are part of one work commissioned by the Swedish Arbetarnas Bildningsförbund (Workers' Educational Association, in short ABF), an adult education organization allied with the Swedish labor movement and the Social Democratic Party. The two reliefs are prominently installed next to each other on the first floor of the building of the ABF, ABF-huset, at Sveavägen 41 in Stockholm, newly constructed in the early 1960s.

The left-hand part of the relief shows three figures. The largest, in the middle, standing and fully dressed, is obviously Jesus. The description of the stamp issued by the Swedish post office identifies the person to the right of Jesus as Socrates. Sitting in front of those two is a person recognizable as Walt Whitman, portrayed in his iconic postbellum representation as the "Good Gray Poet." The Whitman of the relief holds a quill in his left hand and a manuscript in his right showing four lines of a poem in Swedish arranged in a Whitmanesque format and concluding with the name of the author. The lines are part of the Swedish translation of Whitman's poem "The Base of all Metaphysics" by one of Sweden's most famous 20<sup>th</sup>-century poets and translators, Karin Boye (1900–1941). On the right-hand panel, a multi-racial group of people looks towards the trio on the adjacent panel.