

Editorial

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Guest Editors for the Special Issue

Sarah Stang, Erin Maclean, Mahli-Ann Butt, Landon Berry, Gabe Cohen, KT Wong, Samuel Poirier-Poulin, Holly Blockley, Ashley P. Jones, Rhys Jones, Kyla Allison, Madeleine Antonellos, Bertan Buyukozturk, Azul Romo Flores, Alexandra Cata

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Walking simulators—or, rather, the idea of them—have received much critical attention in recent years (e.g. Campbell, 2016; Clark, 2017; Gerardi, 2017; Gohardani, 2017; Kill Screen Staff, 2017; Mason, 2016). In both popular and critical discussion, we see the assumption that video games categorized under the walking simulator label represent something “different” in the broader landscape of the games industry or, more bluntly, are just not really “games.”

There is a general consensus within critical discourse that what these games offer (in terms of actual gameplay) is a focus on exploration and finding, collecting, and piecing together fragments of information to create a story (see also Kagen, 2019). Because of this centralization of atmosphere, exploration, and narrative discovery, the experience of playing a walking simulator is heavily informed by the player’s own subjective interpretation.

Certain titles always reappear in discussions of the walking simulator, especially *Dear Esther* (2012), *Gone Home* (2015), *Everybody’s Gone to the Rapture* (2015), *Firewatch* (2015), *Tacoma* (2017), and *What Remains of Edith Finch* (2017). While *Dear Esther* is often cited as the point of emergence of this new genre, earlier scholarly work explored video games in relation to the concept of the *flâneur* (Bogost, 2005) and other literary and philosophical traditions of walking or wandering through space (Carbo-Mascarell, 2016). These titles appear to pose particular challenges to cultural and scholarly understandings of not only

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what makes a “game,” but also the player’s relationship to them, the role they play, and the kind of experiences they may have. Perhaps walking simulators, more than other ludic genres, position “the gamer as a tourist, an observer, a witness” (Muriel & Crawford, 2018, p. 40).

Other work by scholars such as Melissa Kagen (2017) has explored how walking simulators allow us to investigate the gendered hierarchies of game culture. More recently, Bo Ruberg (2019) has explored the ways in which certain video game playing practices like speedrunning “straighten”—and thereby limit—the potential queerness and queer meanings of certain walking simulators. A number of the articles in this special issue build upon and contribute to these ongoing discussions within game studies by engaging in new readings, interpretations, and applications of games understood as or designated (intentionally or not) as walking simulators. This special issue is therefore intended to add to these discussions, point them in new directions, and rethink our understandings of the walking simulator genre.

Broadly speaking, the purpose of this special issue was to continue generating conversation and debate on the meaning and significance of walking simulators across and outside of the conventional disciplinary boundaries of game studies. Articles in this issue engage with games that have or could be termed “walking simulator” to interrogate popular and critical discourses around them as a way of disrupting or challenging existing game studies hegemonies and binaries, as well as dominant ideas about what games and game culture are or could be. They explore the concept of play, the role of the player, how game designers might guide the player through the worlds they create, and how walking simulators can offer alternative ways to understand and teach games.

The special issue has been divided into three broad thematic sections: “The Particularities of the Walking Simulator,” in which the authors attempt to understand and highlight the aspects that make walking simulators and their gameplay experiences unique; “Walking Simulators in Practice,” which focuses on more practical analyses of walking simulators in terms of pedagogy and game design; and “Challenging Assumptions,” in which the authors question fundamental ideas about what walking simulators are and what they could be.

The Particularities of the Walking Simulator

The special issue begins with “The Walking Simulator’s Generic Experiences,” in which authors Hugo Montembeault and Maxime Deslongchamps-Gagnon take a genre theory approach to consider the experiences, resources, and effects that—through common cultural consensus—have broadly come to define the walking simulator genre. The authors examine this crystallization of the genre through a discourse analysis of gaming communities and then use exemplar video games to map the common effects that characterize, in their words, “the shared horizon of expectations of the walking simulator.”

Next, Felix Zimmermann and Christian Huberts reflect on such expectations of the genre to instead define the neologism “Ambience Action Game” as an epistemological tool that is more informative than the walking simulator label, which they find reductive. Drawing on a wide philosophical framework to do so, the authors use their new term to discuss how games like *Tacoma* and *Proteus* (2013) offer players particular kinds of affective experiences.

This is followed by Kyle Bohunicky and Caleb A. Milligan’s discussion of the active passivity of players in walking simulators in “Reading, Writing, Lexigraphing.” In their consideration of the experiences offered by video games of this genre, the authors argue for the act of reading as writing in titles such as *What Remains of Edith Finch*, *Gone Home*, and *The Stanley Parable*, where a passive action such as walking through a gamespace can be considered as an active action of writing based on the player’s need for interaction in order to progress within the game, regardless of the small amount of “activity.”

Walking Simulators in Practice

This section begins with Daniel Frank’s “Walking Simulators in the Composition Classroom,” which provides a theoretical and practical discussion of the use of walking simulators in the classroom. Frank uses examples from his own pedagogical practices as well as those published by others. He argues that walking simulators are particularly effective for teaching students how to write interactive fiction and to broaden their writing and world-building skills.

Alexandra Ferland-Beauchemin, Dave Hawey, and Jocelyn Benoit’s game design reflection/post-mortem, entitled “From Walking Simulator to Reflective Simulator,” is the next article in this section. Their project involved designing a tailored reflective game experience theoretically grounded in John Dewey’s concept of aesthetic experience. By adopting a reflective approach, the authors were able to highlight the potentially life-changing potential of what they choose to call “reflective simulators.”

Finally, Mark Tempini’s “Guiding with a Soft Touch” offers a practice-informed reflection on the way level design can direct players without the use of User Interfaces (UI) like maps and Heads Up Displays—the kind of gameplay experience we might otherwise associate with walking simulators. The article explores how semiotics, in-game architecture, and the use of light and color guide player navigation and exploration through game levels, while also accounting for a difference in play styles and variation in player experience.

Challenging Assumptions

The final section of the collection begins with Andrew Bailey’s article on “Shifting Borders,” which explores the relationship between the “walking simulator” and “artgame” categories, and the overlap between

experiences of (virtual) game space and (physical) gallery space. In this way, his article challenges and disrupts preconceived perceptions about and definitions of both the walking simulator and the artgame.

The following article, Hayley McCullough's "From Zelda to Stanley," uses linguistic analysis to unpack the assumption that walking simulators have particularly compelling and complex narratives. Her research demonstrates that, contrary to popular opinion, the level and depth of storytelling is not necessarily tied to genre. In this sense, McCullough encourages us to rethink our assumptions about what walking simulators are and why players are drawn to them.

The special issue ends with Dean Bowman's analysis of the divisive discussion around *Gone Home*—and walking simulators more broadly—which offers a challenge to "orthodox game studies" and orthodoxies in the games industry. His article, "Domesticating the First-Person Shooter," uses M. M. Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope to unpack the "subversive effect" of the domestic environment in *Gone Home* and the player's potential interactions within it. In doing so, Bowman conceives of the walking simulator genre in terms of how it inverts the more conventional first-person shooter genre and, ultimately, its "decentering [of] the hegemonic gamer from the narrative centre."

Although it has been the subject of much debate within games culture, this genre has proven its importance and popularity among designers, critics, scholars, and players. We hope that this excellent collection of student scholarship opens up new ways to think about, design, and teach with walking simulators.

Best wishes from the *Press Start* editorial board,

Sarah Stang, Erin Maclean, Mahli-Ann Butt, Landon Berry, Gabe Cohen, KT Wong, Samuel Poirier-Poulin, Holly Blockley, Ashley P. Jones, Rhys Jones, Kyla Allison, Madeleine Antonellos, Bertan Buyukozturk, Azul Romo Flores, Alexandra Cata

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