The Walking Simulator's Generic Experiences

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Abstract

This article examines walking simulators through the lens of video game genre study. Following Arsenault's (2011) thesis which theorized genre as the "temporary crystallization of a common cultural consensus" (pp. 333–334), it maps the shared horizon of expectations of the walking simulator. The first section presents an overview of genre theory in the field of game studies. The second part assembles a corpus of five iconic walking simulators based on a discourse analysis conducted in four gaming communities: scholars, journalists, designers, and Steam users. The third portion builds on this discourse analysis to conceptualize five clusters of "generic resources" (Gregersen, 2014) that synthesize the collective understanding of the walking simulator's generic experiences, which are then analyzed in the final segment with reference to one exemplar game of the corpus. Each analysis introduces a specific "generic effect" (Arsenault, 2011)—peacefulness, secretiveness, fatalism, everydayness, and self-reflexive distanciation—that contributes to ongoing efforts to outline the experiences of this genre. The conclusion ends with a brief discussion about the importance of transgeneric studies.

Keywords

Walking simulator; video game genre; generic experience; generic resource; generic effect; discourse; reception theory.

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Crystallizing an Emerging Genre

In light of recent research on walking simulators, several experiential effects stand out with relative consensus: poetic ambiguity (Juul, 2018; Muscat et al., 2016), a sense of incompletion (Ensslin, 2013; Frelik, 2015), enlightened boredom (Juul, 2018; Kagen, 2017; Leino 2018), self-realization and authenticity (Carbo-Mascarell, 2016; Leino, 2018), self-reflexivity (Carbo-Mascarell, 2016; Ensslin, 2013), and emancipation or openness (Carbo-Mascarell, 2016; Kagen, 2018), among others. To refine and enrich this recent mapping of the walking simulator's generic experiences, this paper situates itself in the tradition of video game genre studies. The notion of genre serves as a theoretical ground to reflect on games that are culturally labeled as "walking simulators" and to analyze the interplay between discourse, interactive components, narrative elements, and generic effects. In doing so, this article contributes to ongoing efforts to overcome "genre blindness" (Klevjer, 2006) and explores how walking simulators are collectively apprehended.

To engage those epistemological gaps, the argumentation is fourfold. First, a brief overview of genre theory is presented to problematize the walking simulator as a generic experience. The second section determines a corpus of games culturally tagged as "walking simulator" following the idea that genre is a discursive phenomenon. The next part builds on this discourse analysis to conceptualize five clusters of "generic resources" (Gregersen, 2014). Finally, each cluster is analyzed in reference to one exemplar walking simulator.

Video Game Genre as Discursive and Experiential Phenomenon

One of the most extensive studies on video game genre was done by Arsenault (2011). In his thesis, Arsenault claims that genre is inherently fuzzy, constantly evolving, and thus cannot be circumscribed by impermeable and rigid structuralist categories. This is because genre is a product of discourse rather than theory. It is generated and transformed from exchanges between and inside relevant communities, such as journalists, critics, users, and artists.[1] Following film theorist Tudor (1974), Arsenault conceives genre as the "temporary crystallization of a common cultural consensus" (pp. 333–334; freely translated). This means researchers cannot invent genres or retrospectively associate genres of their era with objects that predate them (see Moine, 2008). In other words, popular discourse gives birth to genres; works do not.

For example, Deslongchamps-Gagnon (2019) demonstrates that when *Dear Esther* was officially released in 2012,[2] reviewers compared it to an

[1] This emphasis on the discursive constitution of genre breaks with the ludological concerns of previous studies on the subject, which attempted to determine the ludic characteristics specific to video game genres, such as interactivity (Apperley, 2006; Wolf, 2001), mechanics (Järvinen, 2008), style of gameplay (Carr, Buckingham, Burn & Schott, 2006), or criteria of success (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith & Tosca, 2008).

[2] To alleviate the reading, only game titles are cited in the body of text. Please see the reference list for full ludographical information.

"experimental work" (Hoggins, 2012), an "interactive experience" (Jeremy, 2012), and a "piece of art" (Turi, 2012). In contrast, the first instances of the expression "walking simulator" were used derogatorily to describe objects of various genres, most notably the multiplayer survival game *DayZ*. Gradually, the existing label was appropriated and its meaning shifted to denominate a new, growing number of games that more closely followed the formula of *Dear Esther*. When reviews (e.g. Bailey, 2016; Croft, 2016; Kalista, 2016) of the later *Dear Esther: Landmark Edition* described the original *Dear Esther* as a "precursor" of the walking simulator, they were actually denoting and contributing to the formation of a common cultural consensus. This discursive evolution between the two versions of the game signifies the crystallization of the genre, now acknowledged as such.

There is also a pragmatic dimension to genre that is developed in Arsenault's (2011, pp. 263–332) thesis. A genre is interpreted as such depending on an individual's horizon of expectations (Jauss, 1982)—that is, their generic competences and encyclopedic knowledge acquired from cultural discourses and past mediatic experiences. According to Arsenault, "generic markers" are encoded in the object's string of signs and must be decoded with the corresponding expectations for a "generic effect" to emerge in the pragmatic experience. In the science fiction genre, these generic markers include laser pistols or sophisticated AI that may produce a "high-tech effect" and "extra-terrestrial-effect" (p. 287). Therefore, reception actualizes the genre inscribed in the work. When achieving cultural consensus, genre can succeed in structuring the experience it offers at a social level. As Gregersen (2014) formulates, "genre brings human participants into a shared understanding of the kind of activity taking place" (p. 163). This is only possible when the gap between discourses and personal experiences is bridged.

In Gregersen's (2014) cognitive experientialist approach, video gaming acquires a generic quality when actional, semiotic, and semantic units become formulaic or typified resources, and recognized as such. For instance, the walking simulator genre uses repeated actions such as walking, scrutinizing, and reading; themes like a lone playable character reconstructing a story of disappearance; and forms including first-person view, environmental storytelling, and voice-over. Comparing genre frameworks to a "pick-and-choose model," Gregersen stresses that "generic resources" are not inherent properties of genres as "unified wholes"; rather, they are parts of a genre system made of "fragmented connections" (p. 166). Thus, resources are always available for works to use, which explains the flexibility, hybridity, and openness of genre. Games associated with walking simulators are often a generic mixture, especially with adventure (e.g. *Ether One*, *HomeSick*), horror (e.g. *The Park, Layers of Fear*), and platformer (e.g. *NaissanceE*, *Fibrillation HD*) genres. Even moments of relaxed exploration between intense conflict sequences in action games can be envisioned as a design influence (see Grabarczyk, 2016, pp. 251–253; Juul, 2018). On a broader cultural level, Frelik (2018)

retraces alternative genealogies through other media forms like art installations, planetarium shows, visual novels, archeological simulations, and museum apps. Today, the walking simulator's hybridization of generic and mediatic resources has gained enough cultural attention to achieve institutionalization and be studied as a genre.

Assembling a Body of Work[3]

To study walking simulators as a genre, one major challenge is to determine a culturally representative body of work in a context where the generic label is used differently depending on the community. We used the online tool *Steam Spy* for this task, as it allows the filtering of search inquiries by the various tags applied by Steam users.[4] This meant we could observe how many times each tag was ascribed to a given game. In January 2019, an in-depth survey of the database for the "walking simulator" was conducted. This survey provided 36 games where "walking simulator" appears in the top three tags. To narrow the list to the most iconic games of the genre, strong hybrid titles were excluded. It was then possible to identify 10 games where the label "walking simulator" was applied more than 50 times by Steam users: *Gone Home* (3314 occurrences), *Firewatch* (1074), *Dear Esther* (973), *Proteus* (209), *The Beginner's Guide* (206), *What Remains of Edith Finch* (163), *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* (152), *Tacoma* (74), *Sunset* (60), and *Virginia* (55).

Those results were compared with the textual productions of academics, journalists, and designers. Textual productions were collected in the dataset either when "walking simulator" was discussed as a genre or when they focused on the extended list of games from the *Steam Spy* survey. This process guided the gathering of 30 walking simulators' Steam pages, 32 news articles, nine academic papers, and 106 players' reviews written in English on Steam.[5] For each text, generic labels and game titles were coded in spreadsheets since they play a crucial role in the crystallization of a genre.

Detailed presentation of the results is beyond the scope of this article. In summary, the following key labels can be abstracted from the compiled data of the four communities: "walking simulator," "adventure game," "experimental/art game," "exploration game," and "narrative game." Those discursive recurrences clearly speak of the common generic ground of the

[3] The following discourse analysis is derived from the methodology of the *Video Games Observation and Documentation University Lab* of the Université of Montréal (https://ludov.ca/), which was developed during a project led by Perron, Arsenault, and Therrien on video game genre and discourse communities (2013–2016).

[4] *Steam Spy* interacts with Steam's application programming interface (API) to gather extra data from Steam pages. See https://steamspy.com/

[5] The discourse analysis stemming from this corpus of text was initiated in the context of the authors' French academic podcast, *Profil Ludique* (2017–), which is dedicated to the study of the walking simulator genre. These textual productions are not referenced here, but can be retrieved at http://vectis.ca/2017/10/05/profil-ludique-s01e02-panique-generique-reception-dun-genre-controverse/

games under scrutiny, even if they are not always labeled as "walking simulator" in each community. From this cultural consensus, five of the genre's most representative creations were selected for further analysis:[6]

- *Firewatch*
- *Proteus*
- *What Remains of Edith Finch* (hereafter *WROEF*)
- *Tacoma*
- *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* (hereafter *EGTTR*)

To map with finer detail the walking simulator's "finite provinces of generic meaningful experiences" (Gregersen, 2014, p. 265) outlined in those games, the qualitative part of the discourse analysis needs attention.

Fragmenting the Walking Simulator's Generic Resources

Analyzing the 10 games from the aforementioned *Steam Spy* survey, we compiled a list of the 15 most applied Steam tags. This quali-quantitative dataset helps make sense of the common cultural consensus about the genre among Steam's community (Table 1). We studied the tags voted by Steam users in relation to qualitative statements from the body of text, which led to the conceptualization of 10 categories: "slow pace," "minimalist gameplay," "boredom," "ambiguity," "contemplation," "rich narrative," "calm exploration," "solitude," "short experience," and "non-violent."[7]

[6] Since *Dear Esther* and *Gone Home* have already received a lot of attention, those games are disregarded so as to bring analytical diversity in the study of the genre, even if they are the most agreed upon walking simulators.

[7] Those experiential abstractions and the 15 tags from *Steam Spy* directly shaped the qualitative vocabulary of the following cluster analysis. This is one way to mirror the common cultural consensus in the discourse of this paper.

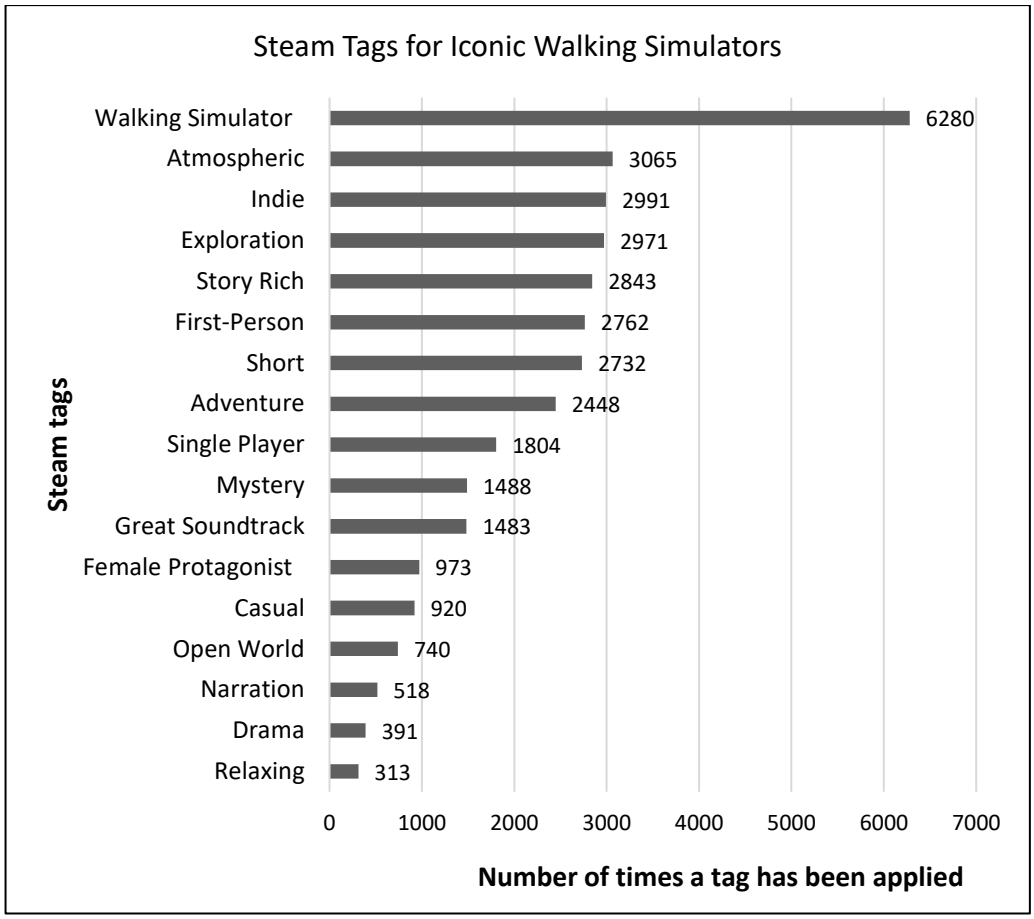

Table 1. Most used Steam tags to describe the 10 most representative walking simulators, via *Steam Spy* (January 2019). Tags applied to only one game were left aside (e.g. "Comedy" [403 votes] and "Colorful" [341] for *Firewatch*).

Informed by this quali-quantitative discursive portrait and the close examination of the primary body of games—and the experience of more than 30 walking simulators identified through *Steam Spy* and discussed through the course of previous contributions on the topic[8]—five modular clusters of generic resources have been synthesized:

- Slow, solitary, and peaceful walking through post-traumatic codified space
- Search for secrets among ruined places
- Sense of fatalism and spectrality
- Voyeuristic apprehension of everyday life
- First-person (dis)embodiment and ambiguous sense of identity

In conjunction with the assembled body of work, those clusters represent a sharper way to look at the common cultural consensus about the walking simulator's generic components and experiences. From this point, each

[8] These contributions include our *Profil Ludique* project (2017–), Deslongchamps-Gagnon and Montembeault (2018), and Deslongchamps-Gagnon (2019).

cluster is taken as an analytic starting point to explain more precisely what defines the walking simulator's horizon of expectations.

Cartography of Key Generic Resources

Each cluster is analyzed by focusing on one specific walking simulator. It is important to note that, in many cases, clusters are intertwined and often co-present in games of the corpus. Still, for the sake of clarity, *Firewatch* serves as an example for evaluating the first cluster's introspective and meditative effects, which derive from the casual and relaxing exploration of a dramatic space. *Proteus* is an example which supports the investigation of the mysterious and secretive aspects of the second cluster. The sense of ghostly atmosphere that characterizes the rich narrative of the third set is discussed regarding *WROEF*, while the authentic feeling of social realism and everydayness from the fourth assemblage is found in *Tacoma*. Lastly, *EBGTTR* serves as an example of the last cluster, in that it fosters a state of mindfulness and enlightening intellectual distancing through an appropriation of the first-person modalities of embodiment.

Slow, Solitary, and Peaceful Walking Through Post-Traumatic Codified Space

Slowly walking around an unpopulated game world stripped of physical threats and spatial challenges is one of the core formal dimensions of walking simulators. In the frame of this genre, players "have the right to be there" (Carbo-Mascarell, 2016, p. 6) and are welcome to take the "time and space to stop and smell the roses" (Juul, 2018, p. 16). Embodying an unrushed and lonesome walker, they are invited to navigate calmly through a hospitable post-traumatic or post-disaster space to uncover the events that led to the game world's current state. In this peaceful and touristic situation, the focus shifts from gameplay requirements "towards the audio-visual element, notably the game world and its contents" (Muscat et al., 2016, p. 8). Following that logic, the walking simulator's generic experiences mostly configure "nonkinesthetic challenges with no time pressure" (Karhulahti, 2013). This means the nontrivial effort required to complete a walking simulator and piece together its spatialized narrative puzzle is primarily perceptive-cognitive. In other words, players are mainly asked to scrutinize, memorize, associate, and reason, while their psychomotor effort remains minimal and secondary since reflexes, hand-eye coordination, and timing are of little need.

McGregor's (2007) "patterns of spatial use" help to understand how the realization of those nonkinesthetic challenges may be shaped by the game world of a walking simulator. Extrapolating from McGregor's theory, walking simulators foster the pattern of "codified space" (p. 542). Within this pattern, architecture and landscape are conceived as "informational matrices" or "spatial allegory" (p. 542) that act as a symbolic interface between non-spatial information and architectural objects. Referring to Jenkins's (2004) famous notion of "embedded narrative," McGregor notes that with codified space "narrative elements are read through spatial

detail" (p. 542). The walking simulator genre taps into the pattern of codified space by design as much as by players' involvement.

For instance, *Firewatch* proposes a slow and lonely walk through a codified space that mirrors the "personal apocalypse" (Béguian & Andron, 2018, p. 41; freely translated) of its player-character, Henry, who is an emotionally broken man whose wife was diagnosed with early dementia. Incapable of dealing with the traumatic event and sinking into loneliness and alcoholism, he takes a job as a fire lookout to escape in nature. The catharsis Henry undergoes is mainly spatio-narrative. As they enter Henry's lookout tower, players are introduced to the walkie-talkie. This communication tool can be used to report important objects and events encountered in the game space to Henry's boss, Delilah, in the form of spatially determined dialogue choices. With the appropriation of this narrative mechanic, the ecosystem of the forest can be engaged as codified space that connotes Henry's repressed trauma, lost sense of self, and desire to replenish an existential void with meaningfulness. One of those iconic moments occurs when the player-character traverses a burned part of the park to track a trail of smoke.

At some point, Delilah challenges Henry about his love life and questions his presence in the park. Beside remaining silent, three options are offered; if players choose to open up about his wife by selecting "She's sick and I shouldn't be here," Henry is asked about his wife's disease (*Firewatch*). Delilah then concludes the conversation with an empathic commentary about the virtues of nature and escapism. After this exchange, Henry is left alone with the thought of his wife being abandoned by her husband during the toughest part of her life. Therefore, the burned part of the forest can be conceived as Henry's traumatized mental space. At this moment, the slow pace, the loneliness, the absence of kinesthetic challenges and the calm, hospitable, and relaxing landscape invite players to settle into Henry's consciousness and meditate on his life choices. The spatial details may then be interpreted in light of the narrative, where the dark damaged trees with smoke in the background are conceived as echoing Henry's ravaged interiority and darkening sense of self (Figure 1). In this example, the codified space pushes players to mentally take part in Henry's "hard work [which] is mostly confined to the realm of emotional labour and therapeutic self-care" (Kagen, 2018, para. 4).

Figure 1. Henry, the first-person character of *Firewatch*, facing the burned part of the park with the thought of his wife he recently abandoned.

This codification of space culminates at the end of the game, when it is revealed that a previous lookout named Ned has been causing trouble in the park. In an effort to stay hidden in the woods after witnessing the death of his son in a climbing accident for which he feels responsible, Ned ignites a massive fire to force the evacuation of Henry and Delilah. Ned's situation reflects Henry's guilt and inability to process his trauma regarding his wife's deteriorating condition. In light of codified space, the negotiation of the spatio-narrative obstacles created by Ned (the cutting of climbing ropes and communication lines, the locked gate blocking access to his son's body inside a sinuous cave, deceptive clues spread around the park, the proliferation of inextinguishable fires, etc.) directly mirror Henry's internal struggle. In a last conversation through walkie-talkie, Henry and Delilah recognize they both have inner demons and agree to face them instead of running away (and acting like Ned). Following this exchange, Henry accepts that he has to go back to his wife and settle his personal issues.

The articulation of those generic resources also holds true for other walking simulators like *Dear Esther*, *Gone Home*, *WROEF*, *EBGTTR*, *Tacoma*, and *Scanner Sombre.* These games use forms of codified "metaphorical landscape" (Carbo-Mascarell, 2016, p. 7) to express the traumatic and painful past of their characters. Regardless of the nature of the codified space, players of walking simulators are always engaged in various time-free nonkinesthetic challenges. The main goal is to deliver a perceptive-cognitive nontrivial effort by slowly walking through an uncontested space and peacefully decoding the spatio-narrative details in the light of human tragedy. This solitary journey towards a "salutary state of awe, melancholy, joy, or terror" (Carbo-Mascarell, 2016, p. 5) helps produce a generic effect of peacefulness.

Search for Secrets Among Ruined Places

As already suggested, walking simulators' environments can be conceived as "memory palaces" (Jenkins, 2004, p. 126). Often, they are ruins—abandoned places containing traces of human passage waiting to be uncovered. These spaces plunge players into a calm and peaceful universe stuck in time, where everybody has vanished and only a desolate past remains. Consequently, there are not many projects to undertake in these games besides visiting their ruined places and learning about their secrets (often to find what happened there and where everyone went).

However, the discovery of secrets is frequently optional and impeded by "occlusion techniques" that "do much to entice and misdirect player perception and navigation" (Muscat et al., 2016, p. 11). This technique instills gameness in walking simulators which is strongly tied to an "uncertainty of perception" (Costikyan, 2013, pp. 101–103) and a "semiotic contingency" (Malaby, 2007, p. 108). First, in walking simulators, uncertainty of perception ensures difficulty in fully exploring the game world and narrative possibilities. Choosing where to go, where to look, from what angle, for how long, how to use the zoom-in mechanic, which sounds to filter and focus on, and so on, are core gameplay elements. Secondly, uncertainty of perception extends to uncertainty of interpretation. The experience of semiotic contingency renders certain interpretive paths accessible and others not. This alters how the game codified space and the story are semiotically decoded, thus creating "the unpredictability of meaning that always accompanies attempts to interpret the game's outcomes" (Malaby, 2007, p. 108). There lie the dominant mechanical and sensorial dimensions of the nonkinesthetic challenges of walking simulators. This act of overcoming uncertainty and dealing with semiotic contingency must be done through "apprehension," which Therrien (2017) defines as "seeking information through perceptual or cognitive exploration" (p. 6). One game that distinguishes itself for its unique form of apprehension is *Proteus*.

Proteus starts with an iris-in, revealing a sea and distant island. As expected from a walking simulator, the possibility of actions mostly involves slowly navigating a 3D environment in a first-person perspective. When reaching the procedurally generated land, players are welcomed by the pixelated abstract scenery, composed of trees, animals, insects, flowers, all made of pastel colors, and also by the remnants of civilization, such as towers, gravestones, and statues (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Clockwise from top left (*Proteus*): Unexplained ruins. Strange cemetery in the middle of the inhabited island. Circle of alien-like statues during the mystical ascension at the end of the game. Mysterious stone at the summit of a hill.

Something else greets them on arrival: a strange but symphonious concert. This concert is responsive to spatial movement with an indeterminate arrangement of layers of sound effects and repeated sonic patterns, fading in and out, pitching high and low, that is reminiscent of generative and serial music. Every visual element on the island has its own audible quality, even the different types of terrain. Players are thus encouraged to hunt down new musical arrangements to contemplate. In this regard, *Proteus* could be described as an acoustic safari, in which players locate new sounds, modulate them, listen to them evolving over time, and take off for another excursion. Sooner or later, players stumble upon particles floating in the air that guide them into a circle of strange statues. Standing there at night makes the current season pass at an accelerated speed, evocative of a macro-scale time-lapse that foregrounds the notion of a cyclical cosmic time to which all life forms are subjected. This ritual can be accomplished three times, passing from spring to summer, autumn, and winter, until the final mystical elevation of the player-character accompanied with chanting mantras in the background.

Once players know the stone circle location and when to visit it, nothing else provides resistance to the completion of the game. Nevertheless, the island guards other secrets that only in-depth apprehension will unlock, since the game system does not enforce or register their discoveries. These secrets are comparable to ornamental Easter eggs, which Consalvo (2007) defined as "designed for display rather than being functional to gameplay" (p. 19). They indeed do not have any usage value, but they reveal that there are spirits among the ruins. If players take the liberty and time to seek everything there is to see and hear, they will trigger supernatural phenomena when stopping at the few unique landmarks during the night of certain seasons. For instance, staying close to the big tree after dark in

autumn summons the spectral wolf who, hiding behind vegetation, only shows its face, disappearing and reappearing here and there (Figure 3).

Figure 3. The spectral wolf of *Proteus* appearing near the sole big tree of the island during autumn nights.

A similar event takes place also during autumn nights if players wait inside the circle of statues long enough to provoke the sudden apparition of the Birdman. To trigger this occurrence, players have to exhaust the space repeatedly, day and night for every season, paying attention to subtle audiovisual variations, sometimes having to stand still and wait in tranquility—eyes and ears alert for something to show up. Otherwise, rushing through *Proteus*, as with any walking simulator, means missing rewarding findings. Having the patience and initiative to uncover optional secrets is of great importance for engaging in the nonkinesthetic challenges of walking simulators.

Many other walking simulators are configured in a way that each playthrough entails the detection of new semiotic fragments that can be easily overlooked during the exploration of the game space. This is the case for the ghosts and hidden objects in *Dear Esther*, as well as the personal belongings and concealed notes in *Gone Home*. One way to describe the gameness of walking simulators is as facultative Easter egg hunts, the discovery of expressive secrets, and the recollection of narrative fragments which offer the nonkinesthetic challenge, the uncertainty of perception, and the pleasure of semiotic contingency. One major generic effect that emerges from this cluster is that of purposeful secretiveness.

Sense of Fatalism and Spectrality

Video games are not known for their accurate or complex treatment of death. Hoffman (2010) remarks that:

> The history of death in video games seems to indicate that as a *function* it is not and was not originally intended to induce philosophical contemplation of actual real-world death. (p. 114)

One reason for that is the repetitiveness of games, which Grodal (2003) emphasizes is "felt as less serious, less 'real' than activities like tragic stories that represent irreversible processes" (p. 140). However, death in walking simulators not only becomes an irreversible process, but it is often an unavoidable one. Playable characters in *Dear Esther*, *Proteus*, and *WROEF* walk to their inevitable death as if it was predestined. No matter what players do, they cannot save the characters. The "sense of nonagency" (Ensslin, 2013, p. 89) toward their stories conveys the idea of fatalism, since nothing can be done to escape their fate.

Death is not always the final destination of the walker; it is also rooted in the codified space of the game environment. Returning to Benjamin and de Certeau, Carbo-Mascarell (2016) suggests that the scenery in walking simulators embodies death:

> The landscape is filled with the traces of people and their stories ... these traces become haunted places and the objects take on spirits of the past. The landscape has a spirit. (p. 8)

The numerous ruins bring back a defunct past and act as *memento mori*, provoking apprehensions about the finitude of life. This transcendent presence of death is particularly felt in *WROEF*. Players control Edith Finch as she returns to her childhood home. The goal of the game is to explore this labyrinthine house partly built from wreckage to discover the strange circumstances surrounding the deaths of the Finch family members, who were placed under a so-called intergenerational curse. When players find personal or official documents related to one of these circumstances in the still-intact room of the deceased, they are transported back in time to re-enact the death from the character's subjective perspective. These sequences remind us of Romero's notion of complicity, subsequently developed by Juul (2013, p. 109). According to the latter, complicity is a type of tragedy specific to video games that actively engages players in events they wish they could avoid. Even though these sequences are flashbacks, they elicit reluctance, pity, and discomfort, since players have to fulfill the grim task themselves.

For example, in the childhood room of twin brothers Calvin and Sam—Edith's great uncle and grandfather—a small monument made in the memory of Calvin is accessible. The monument resembles a spaceship's cockpit, where a letter written by Sam is placed inside a toy astronaut helmet (Figure 4). It gives context to a flashback of 11-year-old Calvin's death, in which players control the child as he plays on a squeaking swing dangerously close to a precipice. As Sam says, Calvin "always wanted to fly," so players have to make the boy go all the way around the swing and propel him in the air (*WROEF*). While players are swinging Calvin's legs

back and forth with both joysticks to gain momentum and reach greater heights, Sam speculates whether Calvin would not be dead if he did not challenge him to do it or if the wind did not pick up. Despite suspecting what is coming, players have to overcome their discomfort and keep swinging. At a certain speed, Calvin rotates fully on the swing and is launched over the cliff. The scene fades to white, concealing what happens next.

Figure 4. Top: A monument to Calvin in his childhood room in *WROEF*. Bottom: Re-enactment of Calvin's death in front of the cliff where he will fall.

The truthfulness of flashbacks in *WROEF* is doubtful because these sequences illustrate the Finch family's relationship to death. These moments are filled with ambiguities and feed on the imagination of the characters. They occur in the dreamlike worlds of memories, through different media (e.g. photos, drawings, and comics), and integrate supernatural elements—when Calvin leaves the swing, it seems like he is

flying exactly like the first-person character of *Dear Esther* at the moment of his suicide. Walking simulators mostly imply death in a euphemistic and symbolic way, instead of showing it. For the Finch family, it seems death is too painful to confront. This is especially true for Edie, Edith's great-grandmother, who prefers fatalism by constantly reminding others of the curse. Having transformed the residence into a museum of the dead, Edie preserved every bedroom as they were when the occupants died and sealed them so nobody (but the player-character) can disturb the deceased. Death lurks in every corner of the Finch's home, with the spirit of the place haunting Edith as she wanders around.

Death is evoked in many other ways in walking simulators. The absence of human beings inhabiting the game world and the stories about disappearing characters cause uneasiness about forthcoming events—one could think of Samantha in *Gone Home*, Ethan in *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter*, the villagers of Yaughton in *EGTTR*, or the workers of the orbital station in *Tacoma*. As mentioned above, if human beings populate the game space, it is often in the form of spectral figures replaying past events without acknowledging the presence of the player-character—who may as well embody a sort of ghost stuck in a time cycle such as in *TIMEframe, Proteus*, and *Scanner Sombre*. As in *WROEF*, death pervades walking simulators and brings forth generic effects of contemplation of finality or trepidation about mortality.

Voyeuristic Apprehension of Everyday Life

The major argument of this cluster is that walking simulators expand a form of videoludic "social realism" (Galloway, 2006). The main catalyzer of this generic experience is the audiovisual aesthetic of immediacy and the minimalistic gameplay which both mimic the phenomenological experience of everyday human life on three levels: representational, situational, and actional. This idea is consistent with common critics stipulating that walking simulators are boring because they emulate reality. Under those videoludic conditions, the genre meets the "fidelity of context" and the "congruence requirement" that Galloway (2006, p. 78) postulates to define realist games. These are "games that reflect critically on the minutiae of everyday life, replete as it is with struggle, personal drama, and injustice" (p. 75).

As realist games, walking simulators distinguish themselves by asking players to engage in the first-person voyeuristic apprehension of characters' everyday life in the aftermath of a traumatic event narrated through "indexical storytelling" (Fernández-Vara, 2011). In this form of narrative based on indexes in the Peircean sense, players have "to connect the relationship between the sign and the event that it points to" (Fernández-Vara, 2011, p. 15). What is even more relevant here is that the vast majority of indexes from which the narrative events are mentally reconstructed remain faithful and congruent with the everyday social reality known and lived by players. For instance, games of the corpus all spatialize familiar items like family photos, diaries, newspaper articles, handwritten notes, emails, individual libraries, and manipulable mundane

objects. Therefore, those traces act as strong markers of social realism since they simulate their everyday life equivalent in terms of aesthetic forms, circumstances of presence, and affordances.

Moreover, the close apprehension of those markers of realism incites players to conceptualize characters as realist entities, as they appear to struggle with plausible human situations and problems. In this context, voyeurism emerges from scrutinizing the everyday belongings and intimate space of troubled strangers who have vanished in the face of a tragedy in which players are external and powerless. By the same token, this voyeuristic and embarrassing exploration of intimacy combined with humanlike means of perception and interaction (look, read, interpret, walk, grab objects, open/close doors, etc.) leads to a generic effect of everydayness that is highly characteristic of the walking simulator's generic experience. The proposed effect not only echoes the criticism of the genre's boringness coming from so-called hardcore gamers, but also reflects the positive form of enlightened boredom that Kagen (2017), Juul (2018), and Leino (2018) associate with it.

Tacoma is a useful case study for this sense of voyeurism and social realism. When the player-character, Amy, starts investigating the abandoned Lunar Transfer Station Tacoma, she goes from offices to personal rooms, from common areas to workplaces, from gym lockers to bathroom showers, from the shared kitchen to the botanic garden, and so on. Each location is an occasion to learn more about the previous crew members and their personalities, authentic experiences and social relationships. For example, when players explore the private cell of station doctor Sareh, the character representation in augmented reality is lying on the bed looking at the social media profile of a young man called JJ Pratt on a web-based platform that keeps active profile pages of dead people as a memorial. Her intimate life can be further examined from a rich array of markers of social realism such as her personal belongings; books about astronomy, mathematics, and Chinese divination; readable handwritten poem on the theme of truthfulness and nature; and chat logs with other crew members (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Clockwise from top left (*Tacoma*): Personal library of Sareh exposing an excerpt of the Quran, as well as books about anxiety and emotions. Reading and writing space around a poem. Web-based activities showing JJ Pratt's profile. Personal drawer under the bed full of mundane stuff.

All those realistic traces of Sareh's intimacy make more sense when players connect them later with indexes in her work environment. In her office, a confidential email from her employer, Venturis Corporation, mentions that better job options would be offered if Sareh "accept[s] personal responsibility for the incident of September 2, 2085 upon the Foundation of Paradise" (*Tacoma*). Furthermore, a diary note near anti-anxiety pills reveals that Sareh is engaged in a therapeutic process to cure some form of guilt (a narrative clue that resonates with a panic attack she had in the botanic area). Under the notepad, there is a key to a nearby locker. Once it is unlocked by Amy, she finds a newspaper article about JJ Pratt's death during an AI-assisted surgery executed by Sareh. While the doctor argues that the incident is due to the "faulty judgment of Venturis' Medical AI, HEKA," Venturis "admitted no wrongdoing in the death of Mr Pratt" (*Tacoma*).

Later in the game when Amy explores Natali's cells, hacked files from Venturis Corporation show the development scale of HEKA, the medical AI implicated in JJ's death (Figure 6). If players closely study the graph bearing in mind Sareh's story, they can notice that one month before the incident, HEKA's skill set was downgraded in every field. One month after, the chart exposes a major upgrade in each ability, thus confirming Venturis' responsibility in the incident.

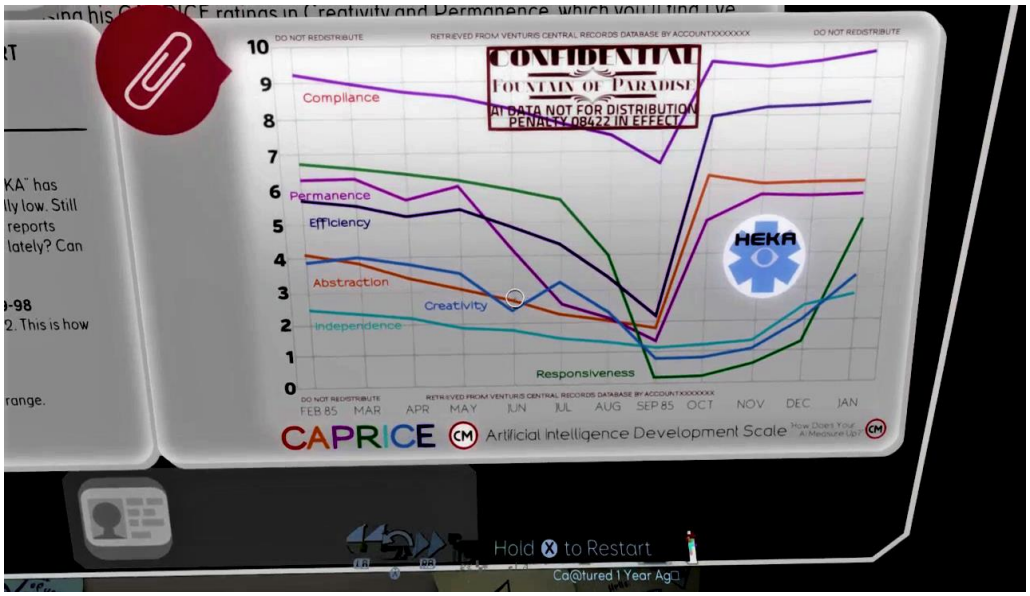

Figure 6. The desk of Natali, *Tacoma* space station's network specialist, showing Venturis Corporation's alteration of the medical AI implicated in JJ's death.

When Sareh's personal remains are retrospectively pieced together, her traumatized intimacy and psychological problems are interpreted as a consequence of the pain, guilt, anger, and injustice she felt regarding JJ's death. Players may realize they have invaded the privacy of a spiritual, artistic, honest, and humanitarian individual that was unfairly considered accountable for the death of someone by her employer, who uses economic power to silence the case and refute responsibility.

As *Tacoma*'s indexical storytelling multiplies the markers of social realism to expose Sareh's tragic story and everyday struggles (like with Sam in *Gone Home*), the protagonist is necessarily conceptualized as a realist entity. By extension, players are more intimately addressed as realist people and everyday social beings since the game's representation, action, and situation appear congruent to real life. From this peculiar position, they are invited to reflect on their own integrity, moral values, beliefs, and worldviews regarding contemporary AI-related dilemmas, hacktivism, social injustice, working-class conditions, and corporate exploitation. In terms of generic effects, the outcome is a sense of everydayness, intimacy, compassion, and humanism. Regardless of the nature of their commentaries, *The Stanley Parable*, *The Beginner's Guide, That Dragon, Cancer*, *Marie's Room*, and *Virginia* are other walking simulators that tap into social realism to communicate with players as everyday social beings and raise questions about human conditions. Still, the mechanisms through which players' social self is foregrounded in the walking simulator's generic experience remain to be clarified.

First-person (Dis)embodiment and Ambiguous Sense of Identity

Following Chess's (2014) study of hidden object games, which has relevance to the walking simulator, it is understood that players are

distanced intellectually from their character for two main reasons. First, when players face an inalterable story that "happens *in spite* of gameplay—not because of it" (p. 426; emphasis in original). Second, when there is a strong emotional and focalization inequivalence between players and the character. In this case, the distancing effects take place either with highly intellectual, talkative, and cryptic characters that appear to know too much (*Dear Esther*, *WROEF*, *Firewatch*, *Sunset*) or with silent, discreet, and invisible avatars that seem to know nothing (*Gone Home*, *Tacoma*, *Proteus*, *TIMEframe*, *That Dragon, Cancer*, *The Old City Leviathan*, *Homesick*). The absence of a virtual body and the proliferation of disembodied perceptive-cognitive interactions with objects floating in the air are also intellectually distancing. In each case, the subjectivity of players is kept at the forefront of the experience.[9]

The outcome of this particular sense of disembodiment or intellectual dissociation is a "dance of subjectivity" (Chess, 2014, p. 421) in favor of players rather than the character, whose sense of self remains othered, ambiguous, or non-existent. In conjunction with social realism, this co-subjective positioning contributes not only to the foregrounding of players' subjectivity, but also of their sensibility as everyday social beings. Consequently, players' "gamer habitus" (Kirkpatrick, 2015), "ludic self" (Vella, 2015), or "ontologically hybrid self" (Leino, 2018) are left in the background. Under those conditions, the social self of players is positioned within the game world and inside a protagonist with whom they never fully identify. Therefore, players inherit a status that resembles a powerless diegetic ghost or a social consciousness. What is even more interesting is how the genre toys with the "Zen-like state of simplicity and awareness" (Kagen, 2017, p. 283) derived from this ambiguous sense of selfhood to create unique generic effects.

In the opening sequence of *EGTTR*, an audio log from astronomer Kate implies that players embody the scientist herself as she claims to be the only one left. Slowly walking and wandering through the village of Yaughton reveals signs of a place quarantined before an obviously recent catastrophe that caused the vanishing of human presence. As players traverse the ghost town, they can hear their character's footsteps even though they have no virtual body. The interpretation of indexical remains indicates that a deadly alien presence was channeled on earth by Kate's experiences in an astronomy laboratory.

In several key locations, orbs of golden light can be interacted with in the form of a sound puzzle with spatial positioning elements (Figure 7). The completion of those time-free nonkinesthetic challenges triggers sequences where golden silhouettes of the inhabitants re-enact past interactions and

[9] Chess (2014) defines subjectivity as "a person's ability to identify themselves as 'subject,' and within that role acting with beliefs, opinions, and the ideological underpinnings of their own selfhood" (p. 418). Therefore, subjectivity is linked to the formation, affirmation, and internalization of ideology and sense of self.

conversations as if the player was not there. The abstract manipulation of the orb and the disembodied apprehension of the flashback fragments create a strong sense of distanciation that makes room for players' subjectivity to settle in as a first-person external observer.

Figure 7. Disembodied execution of a sound puzzle in *EGTTR*.

From the start, certain sound puzzles trigger remnants of Kate's life. Questions begin to emerge. If Kate is the only one left, how can she attend to her past? If the alien showed this to Kate, why is she not sick or raptured like other inhabitants in contact with the entity? Is it possible that players embody the ubiquitous cosmic entity and, if so, why the sound of the footsteps and the slow humanlike walking condition that contrast with the high speed of the orb-like alien? During the last act of the game, players finally explore Valis Observatory. The last sound puzzle reveals Kate's rapture (Figure 8). A poetic and ambiguous monologue suggests that during the whole game, players were controlling an assemblage of Kate and the entity interacting with Yaughton's collective consciousness to revisit the dramatic event with more clairvoyance, openness, and a detached perspective.

Figure 8. Re-enactment of Kate's rapture by the cosmic entity in *EGTTR*.

EGTTR plays with the first-person player-character's ambiguous sense of (dis)embodiment observable in many walking simulators—that of a diegetic ghost, a first-person external observer, or a pure consciousness that has no power to affect the course of events—to cultivate an intriguing ludo-narrative aporia. Players were literally put in the role of a metaphysical consciousness from which they had to interpret the past more from their own subjectivity and social self than from their character's perspective. Other games like *Proteus*, *Scanner Sombre*, and *The Novelist* are perfect examples of this cluster, since they put players in the fictional role of a ghost or disembodied consciousness from which they are invited to personally engage with social realism. This cluster therefore becomes a gateway for generic effects along the line of Zen-like mindfulness, self-affirmation, self-realization, and self-reflexivity. The result is a generic experience that is keen to open paths of interrogation and interpretation where players are encouraged to self-consciously meditate and question their own existence, belief system, moral code, and social reality.

Towards Transgenericity Studies

According to the five clusters of generic resources explored in this article, the culturally consensual corpus of walking simulators exploits generic effects of peacefulness, secretiveness, fatalism, everydayness, and self-reflexive distanciation. This does not mean these effects are all contained in every single walking simulator or recognized as such in their reception. As already highlighted, thanks to Gregersen and Arsenault, genre must be understood as fragmented connections. Every walking simulator has its own generic and cultural models, wherein the resources deployed interact in a way that renegotiates the genre's cartography. The investigation of each cluster has proven their heuristic value as an analytical tool to apprehend the innovative assemblage of this still-evolving genre.

The next step in studying the walking simulator's generic experiences should further take into account their hybridization with other video game genres and their dissemination beyond the medium. Future inquiries would gain insight from examining transgeneric phenomena. As pointed out by Arsenault (2011), "a generic effect is always isolated, situated in a certain location and filling a certain portion of the object's semiotic sequence" (p. 284; freely translated). The walking simulator's generic resources and effects do not have to permeate the whole game to influence a player's generic experiences.

For instance, *Gone Home* is a walking simulator known for its horror effects. The player-character arrives at her parents' new house—which is reminiscent of a haunted manor—during a stormy night, only to find it abnormally empty. A letter from her sister suggests something serious has happened to her. The exploration of the residence is then accompanied by a worrisome ambience, punctuated by generic horror cues such as the rumble of thunder, cracking of wooden walls and floors, flashing lights, and the finding of a *Ouija* board. However, during gameplay, what Arsenault (2011) would call the "density" and "resonance" of these horror effects are low and dissipate as players uncover the personal struggles of the family without being interrupted by any threat, allowing the walking simulator genre to surface in the pragmatic experience.

Transgeneric phenomena also explain why the "walking simulator" tag is voted on Steam for disparate genres such as survival games (*The Long Dark* and *Eidolon*), adventure games (*Kona* and *Homesick)*, horror games (in the vein of *The Park*, *Kholat*, and *Layers of Fear*), and even puzzle-platformers (like *NaissanceE*, *Fibrillation HD*, *Kairo*, and *Lifeless Planet*). Voters obviously have registered generic markers that somehow produce generic effects they associate with walking simulators and wanted to report them to set the horizon of expectations for the community. Even if the walking simulator generic markers are not prominent in a certain game, this does not mean the genre is not potentially present. The quality of the markers and the abilities of players to recognize them also come into play. The genre may then be sporadically actualized or differentiated in the pragmatic experience.

On a broader cultural level, each generic effect of the walking simulator can be mixed with resources from other artistic forms. The exploration of the disconnected levels of *Brutalism: Prelude on Stone* and *Fugue in Void* propose an obvious aesthetic and structural remediation of installation art and abstract sculpture. On the artist's personal website, *Brutalism* is tagged as a "small installation art exhibition" (Linke, 2017); while on itch.io, *Fugue in Void* (2018a) is identified as an "Artistic audio visual experience." However, *Brutalism* (2017) is also tagged as "walking simulator" and "artgame" on itch.io; while *Fugue in Void* (2018b) is labeled as "walking sim" and "simulation" on the Steam store. These examples show how non-game artistic traditions can be harmonized with video game genres to create unique hybrid experiences. On the pragmatic and discursive levels, the unconventional horizon of expectations can be set through the use of common generic labels that imply a specific

arrangement of (trans)generic effects. The same can be said about the formal similarities between walking simulators and hypertextual fiction or graphic novels where transgeneric effects may emerge from the reconstruction of a fragmented narrative through non-linear reading interspersed with audiovisual contemplation.

In the end, the walking simulator genre runs through various genres and mediatic forms as much as it is indebted to them. In that sense, the generic portrait of the walking simulator will remain incomplete as long as its transgeneric dynamics are not walked through.

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