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**The Walking Simulator: How a Contemporary Video Game Genre Challenges Them All to Consider Classification Norms & Traditional Genre Development**

Genres are a tricky subject, to say the least. We tend to think of most genres for any medium as a clear-cut system, but in his discussion of film genres, David Chandler says that “‘Genres... are not discrete systems, consisting of a fixed number of listable items.’ It is difficult to make clear-cut distinctions between one genre and another: genres overlap, and there are 'mixed genres' (such as comedy-thrillers). Specific genres tend to be easy to recognize intuitively but difficult (if not impossible) to define” (2). Indeed, the formation and evolution of genres is confusing to consider as well across all mediums. “If we look at the accumulated materials associated with genre study in literary, television, and especially film studies,” New Media scholar David Clearwater argues that “we can categorize them according to their dominant focus: 1) formal and aesthetic considerations, 2) industrial and discursive context, and 3) social meaning and cultural practice” (44). There are multitudinous dimensions and permutations of genre in the worlds of entertainment and beyond. When it’s said and done, genres “are arbitrary. They are analytical constructs imposed on a group of objects in order to discuss the complexity of their individual differences in a meaningful way” (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, & Tosca 46). While these observations may seem to mitigate the point of pinpointing what genres are about, they are still essential to study with how we recognize and identify everything, and video games are no exception with the complexities and layers they add to genre formation.

When examining the whole of video game genres, many of them are categorized by how their mechanics and design frame experiences. However, “genre production tends to be messy and complex while genre studies often aims for simplicity and tidiness. The lesson is that we should not expect everything to fit neatly into a classification scheme. As well, the terms often

have a historical and social dimension that only adds to the confusion. [...] [One] sub-genre might be dominated by theme and tone,” such as the survival horror or fantasy genre, “while another is characterized by a specific gameplay mechanic,” like the shooter or fighting genre (Clearwater 40-41). With the blending of genres and other types of classification used by the average person, tackling how game studies should approach and perhaps revise this minefield is far beyond the scope of this presentation. In lieu of such lofty goals, I’ll discuss a contemporary genre that has risen in the past decade and grown in popularity and controversy. It directly challenges the way people commonly organize games, bringing a once eccentric debate into the public sphere due to its novelty and peculiarity.

Surprisingly enough, this genre doesn’t even have an agreed-upon name. Games that fall under its umbrella are mockingly called “walking simulators,” which hints toward the divided space of argument concerned with whether these games are actually even games. While I may have my own opinions on this issue, game critic and video essayist Chris Franklin makes a plea to anyone on either side of the fence. “For every title you exclude from your definition of games, you’re putting up a fence, and that fence does two things: it keeps games you don’t like out, but it also marks the limit between what games can do and what they can’t” (Franklin). I agree with the sentiment that games like walking simulators are healthy by pushing the medium to newer and stranger places, so I will maintain that they are games for the sake of this presentation to briefly touch upon how their approach (or lack thereof) to interaction, heavy emphasis on narrative, and unique historical development and reception challenge various approaches to genre in game studies. Because of this, the walking simulator genre deserves a more appropriate, fitting name, and I seek to propose one.

**Interaction**

*Dear Esther* is a prime example of the walking simulator genre. It epitomizes the only thing you can do in the game: walk. Unlike some other games of its ilk, there are no minor puzzles, challenges, or any means to connect with the environment around your character, so all you can do is move forward on linear paths as the game unveils its story through narration and visual clues. Adam Oxford says, “Within all this deliberately confusing symbolism, however, the key point about Dear Esther is that most of the elements traditionally associated with a videogame have been stripped out. As a player, you're unable to make your character run, jump or interact with objects, and there are no puzzles which impede your progress along a predetermined path” (Oxford). Producer Dan Pinchbeck explains these design decisions. “There's a lot of emotional story telling within the environment. A lot of subliminal signposting...It's a really good example of what players are looking for in games, how far they are willing to go outside the norms of traditional gameplay to have an interesting experience. It gives other developers an idea of what can be done with games as a medium” (Oxford).

This is radical for game development, so it seems relevant to bring in Thomas Apperley, who petitions that games should be classified in correspondence to their ergodicity or interactivity, which would differentiate games based on varying types and levels of player performance. The groups he highlights are simulation, strategy, action, and roleplaying.

[T]he genre of simulation...suggests that games can be organized according to how

authentically they follow the rules of simulation as opposed to the demands of entertainment. The strategy genre highlights the distinction between games that require the constant attention and performance of the player, and those that require a more distant

approach characterized by intervention. The action genre demonstrates a particular

category of hyper-performative games, whereas the crucial element of the roleplaying

genre is understanding the way that generic conventions circulate between and within communities of players (Apperley 21).

With these in mind, this does away with the remediation that permeates genre names, which is “the formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms,” according to Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin. “[T]he recycling of representational aesthetics across mediums is challenged, as something more than the visual is operating, requiring the tracing of genealogical trajectories that looks beyond video games aesthetic borrowing from cinema and television” (7-8). It’s an admirable proposal that would likely benefit game studies, but walking simulators prove an oddity to all of Apperley’s genres. He says that simulation games have a “strict adherence to ‘the real’ [that gives] way to the more pragmatic requirements of entertainment. These contradictory demands that shape the simulation genre, highlight a broader conflict across the medium as a whole, between adherence to ‘the real’ and pure entertainment” (7). Walking simulators hardly seek to emulate the realism and absolute feel of walking. Nor do they aim to primarily provide entertainment in the act of walking around. Likewise, the games aren’t intensely performative like action games, involve little to no strategy or thoughtful player intervention, and rarely contain elements of social practice since they encourage isolated, solo gameplay. “Pinchbeck believes that ‘the 'game' of *Dear Esther* happens away from the screen as players piece together what has happened’” (Oxford). It was among the first walking simulators to radically de-emphasize gameplay as a means to an end, bringing every other ancillary aspect – especially the story and environment – to the forefront as the pillars of its appeal. It’s a departure from the traditional evolution of genres, and while I will touch on that later, it’s important to note what else Pinchbeck said in his interview about *Dear Esther*. “It felt like often the more atmospheric, non-gameplay parts of many great shooters really stood out as amazing sequences. You look at AAA games and you can find an increasing number of exploratory or less high octane sequences that are loved by players” (Donnelly). These small sections interspersed across action-oriented games inspired this new genre to move away from gameplay rather than carrying on or improving mechanics as a sub-genre by embracing narrative instead.

**Narrative**

Dominic Arsenault cites game designer Ernest Adams, who said that he “identifies 5 dimensions of game classification: Genre, Setting, Audience, Theme and Purpose. Unequivocally, ‘video game genres are determined by gameplay: what challenges face the player and what actions he takes to overcome those challenges’ (Arsenault). However, walking simulators rarely if ever pose any challenges to the player, so why should they be determined by gameplay? Clearwater recognizes that “[t]o consider...thematic differences as 'uninteresting ornament' might mean we would miss important details about the design and production of these games and how they are valued by their audiences. And to dismiss their thematic or semiotic elements entirely would be to gloss over how these elements are intimately tied to...differences in the gameplay...” (33). Apperley is open to wider classification like this, but his ways would put walking simulators in an awkward position since they are inherently thematic and don’t place their memorability on the act of interactivity. Borrowing from Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska, viewing the concepts of genre (popular classification), platform (the format of a game), mode (the design of a game’s world and space), and milieu (visual themes) through an interactive lens is what he advocates (9-11). However, devaluing “visual iconography” from the equation doesn’t account for walking simulators’ focus on narrative through visual and aural – rather than interactive – means. The genre of “serious” games is a relevant example. “While gameplay, format, and platform are important elements of discussion, they are not held as defining elements of the genre and its various sub-categories. Instead, subject matter and the intended use (education or marketing) are the defining characteristics of the genre” (36). Other categories can take prominence in a game’s experience and must be weighed against interactivity to determine a more appropriate way for people to understand what any given game seeks to provide as entertainment.

*Gone Home* allows you to pick up items and examine them as you explore your family’s house, piecing together what’s happened to them while you’ve been away. *Everybody’s Gone To The Rapture* is set in an abandoned town where you occasionally interact with strobes of light that replay citizens’ conversations, but much of the experience is walking around, listening to echoes of the past, and observing visual clues as to where everyone’s gone. *Proteus* has no meaningful interactivity or narration at all, since all the player can do is roam around an island to piece together what the game seeks to convey through its environments alone. However, one could say the interactivity is found outside of the gameplay in a different shade. Chris Franklin points out that “[j]ust as music consists of notes and silence, and film editors mix quick edits and long stretches of single shots, so too can game designers use intense activity and periods of players being passive. Just because you’re not actively playing or just because your interaction is minimal doesn’t mean you’re not involved with a game” (Franklin). This is something ludologists – those who emphasize that games are defined by mechanics and interaction – would balk at, and Arsenault captures their views, saying, “thematic or iconographic genres, such as Science-Fiction, Fantasy and Horror, are either seen as little more than window-dressing by the ludological line of thinking, or as narrative enablers and aesthetic or iconographic throwbacks to prior media that can guide interpretation (enter the narratologists!)” (Arsenault). However, the very experience of walking simulators hinges on players analyzing and pondering on this “window-dressing” from iconographic imagery to aural clues; exploration and observation are the defining markers of walking simulators. “You explore without a clearly defined end-goal, it's open ended (much like real life), and you find yourself seeing the journey itself as the primary experience,” Gamasutra writer Katherine Cross notes. “In the process, the exploration becomes a kind of alchemy, turning the most basic forms of interaction and living into golden discovery. [...] That instinct to explore, to ‘ramble’ in a new land is part of gaming's wonder, and it's why we bother at all in such seemingly ‘boring’ titles. They simulate an adventure of meaning-making, constructing and reconstructing a character, and, perhaps, ourselves” (Cross). The name has been tossed around before in the games industry, but what better name to define this genre than “Exploration?” By also preceding the name with a given game’s perspective (first-person, third-person, etc.) and/or milieu, it is no longer defined be the action of walking, but by what the walking allows us to do: explore. The interactivity is a rudimentary part of these games analyzed on its own, so it must be understood within the scope of how it is used to engage people to not be passive observers but intrigued hunters in these deep narrative experiences by “turning the most basic forms of interaction and living into golden discovery” (Cross). Whether these games find their meaning in visual or aural or textual storytelling, exploration lies at the heart of uncovering it all.

**Historical Development**

Pinchbeck has said it’s hard to understand *Dear Esther* from a traditional perspective. “People struggle to identify it as a game not because you don’t have a shotgun to face down armies of zombies. “You have an awful lot of work to do as a player, but it’s not involved in the mechanical act of negotiating the environment” (Oxford). That’s a key statement to understanding how much the exploration genre is an oddity in the scope of usual genre formation, but how does this formation usually come about? One way that seems obvious is through evolutionary means, but scholars have largely rejected this biological understanding of genre. “Genre does not ‘evolve’ here, but simply changes or mutates; things are tried without any sense of progression towards anything. This has become the prevailing view through most, if not all, genre studies, whether literary or filmic” (Arsenault). Genres are unpredictable in nature, disappearing and recurring without warning. Variations are produced that take a specific mechanic, perspective, feature, or something else and make it central to a group of games. What this implies is that genres branch out and influence each other endlessly, but what makes the exploration genre different is that it strips away so many “game-y” aspects, opting to focus on its literary and/or filmic qualities, which is why everyone has struggled to give it a name that seems fitting for video games.

When comparing 2D scrolling shooters and 3D first-person shooters, Arsenault asks a question: “Is this a technical improvement...or an aesthetic switch?” For the exploration genre, the answer isn’t clear-cut. We can see its history in action-oriented games, usually of the first-person variant. They have experimented with moments of downtime between all the excitement, such as *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves*, which has a level where you walk around and interact with villagers instead of shooting antagonists (Donnelly). *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* entices players to settle down and look around new places to discover what their cultures and histories are like through the environments and dialogue in between slaying dragons. What exploration games have done is take these quiet, sometimes out-of-place sequences and made them into full games. As technical improvements, the opposite is true since they are more of an intentional downgrade with mechanics and features. As an aesthetic switch, they still utilize similar perspectives and themes, just without as much bombastic flair. It’s not easy to place these games on a spectrum that doesn’t account for narrative development in video games. Regardless, Pinchbeck saw a potential for games to be conduits for story-driven experiences that invoke the natural curiosity and interest we have in reading literature or watching films without exploiting any particular interactivity that adds meaning to or takes precedence over experiencing the story. He cleared the table of these normal advances to allow for the purity of a world and narrative to express itself in *Dear Esther*. “Gamers love worlds and love exploring them, I think it's just an intrinsic pleasure of gaming” (Donnelly).

Stephen Neale invokes Thomas Schatz when he writes that in films that follow genre conventions, “‘these components have prior significance as elements of some generic formula.’ This formula is established by repetition. Generic elements are repeated. So too are the ‘formal, narrative, and thematic’ contexts in which they conventionally occur. Repetition also helps generate audience knowledge, allowing viewers to weigh a ‘film’s variations against the genre’s preordained, value-laden narrative system” (196). Daniel Chandler echoes this observation by citing John Corner. “'[G]enre is a principal factor in the directing of audience choice and of audience expectations...and in the organizing of the subsets of cultural competencies and dispositions appropriate for watching, listening to and reading different kinds of thing'” (8). Why do we set these classifications up in the first place? Chandler provides emotional motive behind Neale’s points by saying that “pleasure is derived from 'repetition and difference;’ there would be no pleasure without difference. [...] We may derive pleasure from observing how the conventions of the genre are manipulated. We may also enjoy the stretching of a genre in new directions and the consequent shifting of our expectations” (9). The exploration genre is certainly a qualifier for “stretching” limits, “However, challenging too many conventional expectations for the genre could threaten the integrity of the text. Familiarity with a genre enables readers to generate feasible predictions about events in a narrative” (8). In the context of interactivity, this is exactly what the exploration genre did, which is why it still encounters controversy and derision today since they veer close to film and literature in how much they require thematic division. While scholars like Apperley and other more interactive-leaning scholars may not be comfortable with this, Arsenault says otherwise. “It is natural to expect literary genres, speech genres and film genres to share certain characteristics - they are all genres, after all - but the reality might be far less logical and satisfying” (Arsenault). We may try to separate and whittle down genres into neat categories, but it must be admitted that what “different taxonomies highlight is the fluidity and impreciseness of the concept of genre itself, and how it is used in actually describing games” (Arsenault).While video games are unique with their interactivity, what makes them even more special as a medium is how we can and need to combine the genre studies of other mediums to understand them fully, especially exploration games. Clearwater says it most eloquently in regard to embracing this idea.

Obviously, certain aspects of these traditions—especially those that deal with the formal characteristics of their respective media—might have limited applicability to the study of videogame genre without some modification. Others, however, will prove to be exceedingly useful and it would be prudent to take advantage of the failings, mis-starts, breakthroughs and refinements that have already taken place within genre studies in those fields. While a ludological approach is correct in insisting that videogames represent a unique medium with its own inherent possibilities, it is misleading to deny any similarity with other media. Videogames, film, and television do indeed have much in common: they are all audio-visual media with potential for experimental, documentary, and narrative-based forms (Clearwater).

**Conclusion**

The walking simulator, first-person, or environmental storytelling genre. What I’ve named the exploration genre has these names and more, and for what reasons I have chosen to call it that have only scratched the surface of genre theory, hardly addressing the amount of argumentation that could be made for and against my claims for walking simulators. However, I believe they deserve some form of justice as a genre where narrative isn’t secondary to gameplay. It commands and drives the experience of these games, whisking players away from testing reflexes to observational skills. The stories aren’t unnecessary or peripheral, but central to the enjoyment and purpose of these games. It reminds me of how Katherine Cross compares them to Kim Stanley Robinson's science-fiction novels, where “the narrative is not a traditionally structured plot, but a placid exploration of the world he has created” (Cross). Readers come to care about the characters through indirect stories that frame the universe from broader, stranger perspectives instead of “the narrow limits of sight afforded by most paperback fiction” (Cross). He challenged what literature could be and how writers can provide equally compelling experiences through a radically different lens. Is that not what these so-called walking simulators seek to do as video games? The genre explores new ground for the medium, and while it may remain in an indecisive state with its classification, its recent contributions to invigorating discussions of genre and game studies as a whole cannot be underplayed.

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