Bachelor thesis

Rinse and repeat

The ergodic influence of narrative within Walking Simulators

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June 10th, 2020

Abstract

The emergence of Walking Simulators as a genre of video games has raised questions on how to differentiate between video games with stripped-down mechanics and other forms of interactive media. As a response to this, the video game scholar Paweł Grabarczyk initiated the ergodic continuum: a scale to classify games based on their ergodicity. This bachelor thesis aims to expand upon Grabarczyk's ergodic continuum through a textual analysis of the indie-game *Routine Feat* (sad3d, 2019). After outlining what is commonly referred to as the debate between ludologists and narrativists, existing research, and the concepts of spatial stories and affordances through aspects of action, this thesis analyses the game's ergodicity through different types of play. By approaching the game through both instrumental and transgressive types of play, it identifies interactions between playstyle and narrative elements. It consequently argues how these interactions can lead to alternating ergodic outcomes of the same game, and how these outcomes address that in order to classify a game based on its ergodicity, a formalist framework of games as computational problems alone will not be sufficient. Overall, this thesis approaches *Routine Feat* as an argument concerning the need for a re-conceptualisation of narrative within the study of video games, as it shows how narrative elements actively influence types of gameplay, and potentially shape what the player constitutes as a problem or challenge.

Keywords: video games, walking simulators, classification decisions, ergodic continuum, narratology, ludology, instrumental play, transgressive play

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1. Introduction

While the academic debate between ludologists and narrativists has declined in intensity since 2004,[1] the landscape of video games continuously kept evolving. Part of this evolvement is the emergence of Walking Simulators; a genre with an unconventionally strong focus on narrative and use of stripped-down mechanics.[2] In his paper *It's Like A Walk In The Park*, video game scholar Paweł Grabarczyk describes how online debates revolving around the question whether or not Walking Simulators are video games have manifested in message boards, gaming columns and comment sections.[3] Grabarczyk states that while these debates address "fundamental, conceptual questions that remain at the core of game studies", their incentive, being the genre itself, gets very little academic interest.[4] With the question whether Walking Simulators are games or not being asked by the gaming community due to the genre's distinctive qualities, the academic debate between ludologists and narrativists about what approach is best suited to study video games - and specifically these type of video games - becomes relevant again.

 A conflicting title within this already divergent genre is *Routine Feat*. When released by the Russian game developer sad3d on the 9th of June 2019, the game came with a short but remarkable description:

> A game about stucking in a routine. If you play his game in hope to win, you will end up
> with an irritating feeling inside of you. Nothing else. But if you stop and take a breath of
> air, then you might like it. Just look around, listen to the songs, gaze at green leaves and
> do not hurry.[5]

Within this description's strong emphasis on the importance of atmosphere and environment for a meaningful gameplay experience lingers a narrativist argument. One could read it as a warning, that by merely focusing on completion - an act that is bound to specific rules and mechanics - one is missing out on the actual game. This comparably echoes the deterrent

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[1] Hartmut Koenitz, "Narrative in Video Games," in *Encyclopedia of Computer Graphics and Games,* ed. Newton Lee (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 3.
[2] Paweł Grabarczyk, ""IT'S LIKE A WALK IN THE PARK" - ON WHY ARE WALKING SIMULATORS SO CONTROVERSIAL," in *Transformacje 1* (3-4): 241-263, 2016, PhilArchive.org, accessed February 24, 2020, 244.
[3] Ibid, 241-243.
[4] Ibid, 241.
[5] "Routine Feat", Itch.io, accessed March 9, 2020, https://sad3d.itch.io/routine-feat

statement by media scholar Henry Jenkins that "one gets rid of narrative as a framework for thinking about games only at one's own risk".[6]

What sets *Routine Feat* apart from other open-ended Walking Simulators, and titles with a more linear approach to narrative and exploration, is that the game appears to position itself as both, depending on the players' playing style. This creates a unique and contradictory corpus that not only provides a concrete and linear narrative but combines this with gameplay elements that steer away from the laissez-faire type of play its creator publicly encourages.

Because of the overarching question of how to study these type of video games, this thesis asks how *Routine Feat* reads as an argument concerning the need for a re-conceptualisation of narrative within the still lingering debate between ludologists and narrativists. Its approach primarily revolves around a textual analysis, guided by the sub-questions *How do different types of play influence Routine Feat's narratives and mechanics?* and *How does narrative influence Routine Feat's ergodicity?*

2. Theoretical framework

To answer these questions through analysis, I will first give a summary of the previously described debate and its current status. From there on, I shall expand on Paweł Grabarczyk's 'ergodic continuum' from a more narrativist standpoint, which will be guided by the concepts of 'spatial stories' and 'affordances through aspects of actions'.

2.1 Ludology and ergodic narratives
With the study of video games growing as an institutional practice around the turn of the millennium, one of the biggest debates that has swept the discourse of gaming analysis is the controversial stand-off between ludology and narratology. With narratology being commonly framed as a field that embraces video games as a vehicle of storytelling, not unlike novels or cinema, ludologists believe video games to be a separate entity, disconnected from other forms of media due to their interactive nature.[7] Throughout the

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[6] Henry Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004), 120.
[7] Espen Aarseth, "A narrative theory of games," in *FDG '12: Proceedings of the International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games* (New York: Association for Computing Machinery, 2012), "2. Ludology vs. Narrativism".

years, this debate has taken a multitude of different forms, with both its early protagonists developing and nuancing their positions, as well as other scholars giving their own interpretation of the friction and overlap between both schools of thought.[8] While the debate itself has become far less intense since 2004, the main protagonists have kept discussing the original positions up until 2016.[9]

Media scholar Hartmut Koenitz questions whether or not this lack of intensity has solved the underlying issue itself: the inclusion of classical narrative frameworks and methods in video game studies.[10] In his paper *Narrative in Video Games,* Koenitz, by citing the video game scholar Gordon Calleja, stresses that within the study of video games there is still too strong a reliance on "classical notions of narrative developed for non-ergodic media such as film or literature".[11] Both scholars suggest a re-conceptualisation of narrative that takes into account both the formal properties of a game, as well as the experiential dimension of the player;[12] a suggestion that this thesis will approach by expanding on what Grabarczyk refers to as 'the ergodic continuum'.

2.2 The ergodic continuum

Taking into account the formal properties of Walking Simulators is what Grabarczyk introduces as the ergodic continuum; a scale on which we can position video games in order to classify their ergodicity.[13] This classification gives an understanding of the effort that the player needs to put in, in order for the game to function. It ranges from *P-hard*, a label that refers to gameplay that requires minimal computational effort (imagine an interactive DVD for comparison), all the way up to *PSPACE-hard* problems, "which cannot be solved without using clever heuristics and luck."[14] This approach treats games as computational problems that are to be solved by an operator; a process that has a beginning and a clear end.[15] While analysing *Routine Feat* through the given scale would give more insight in some of its formal elements, it is the framing of the medium as a computational problem that ignores a vast amount of narrative qualities that could potentially influence the gameplay, and by that the game's ergodicity.

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[8] Ibid, "1. Introduction" - "2. Ludology vs. Narrativism".

[9] Hartmut Koenitz, "Narrative in Video Games," in *Encyclopedia of Computer Graphics and Games,* ed. Newton Lee (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 3.

[10] Ibid, 6.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Paweł Grabarczyk, ""IT'S LIKE A WALK IN THE PARK" - ON WHY ARE WALKING SIMULATORS SO CONTROVERSIAL," in *Transformacje 1* (3-4): 241-263, 2016, PhilArchive.org, accessed February 24, 2020. 257.

[14] Ibid, 259.

[15] Ibid, 260.

In contrast to this framing is the way players approach Walking Simulators as ambiguous stories that - like a riddle - need to be solved through considered (re)play, which does not necessarily lead to a clear endpoint.[16] This not only hints at a more interwoven connection between ludologic elements and narrative but also underlines Koenitz's call for a re-conceptualisation of narrative itself. To build upon Grabarczyk's concept, I aim to expand the framing of video games as computational problems that are to be solved by an operator, to video games as a computational process that needs to unfold through player input. Up to a point, this description resonates with how the video game scholars Stenros and Waern interpret games as "residing in the sweet-spot intersection between designed activities and enacted experiences".[17] Consequently, it enables the inclusion of both ludologic and narrativist elements that do influence a game's ergodicity but do not necessarily lead to a clear end, as it includes the goals that are set by the player in addition to the goals set by the game. To bring such a framing into practice, this analysis relies on two primary concepts: 'spatial stories' and 'affordances through aspects of actions'.

2.3 Spatial stories

Within the early debate between ludologists and narrativists, Jenkin's description of spatial stories - as written in his article *Game Design As Narrative Architecture* - was a reaction to what he saw as an exclusion and rejection of narrative frameworks from academic research concerning video games.[18] Through this, Jenkins aimed to provide a middle-ground "that respects the particularity of this emerging medium" and examines "games less as stories than as spaces ripe with narrative possibility."[19] With Grabarczyk's framing of the ergodic continuum strictly focussing on the mechanics that need to be engaged with in order to complete a Walking Simulator, it feels appropriate to analyse *Routine Feat* through the lense of spatial stories to see if its narrative also plays a role in the game's ergodicity.

Jenkins frames spatial stories as stories "which respond to alternative aesthetic principles, privileging spatial exploration over plot development".[20] Through spatial stories, Jenkins distinguishes between the ways a game tells a story through, for example, audio or text, and how it unfolds a story through the use of environments, their contents, and how

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[16] "Eastereggs, fun things to do, and endings", Steamcommunity.com, accessed April 26, 2020, https://steamcommunity.com/app/221910/discussions/0/530649887200986726

[17] Jaakko Stenros & Annika Waern, "Games as activity: Correcting the digital fallacy," in *Videogame studies: Concepts, cultures and communications*, ed. Monica Evans (Oxford: Inter-disciplinary Press, 2011), 11-22.

[18] Henry Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004), 118.

[19] Ibid, 119.

[20] Ibid, 124.

items or spaces relate to each other, as well as how they relate to the player. With sad3d's description of *Routine Feat* stressing the importance of spatial exploration above its other mechanics, this framework - in which a narrative is unveiled through the character's movement across the map - enables the analysis to expand beyond the game's *easy P-hard* ergodic narrative (the one that unfolds through formal, instrumental play) and understand how its environment influences both this narrative, the game's ergodicity, and underlying gameplay. In order to do this accurately, we first need to differentiate between three overlapping concepts that Jenkins refers to when he writes about spatial stories, being 'evocative spaces', 'embedded narratives', and 'emergent narratives'.

Evocative spaces frequently activate ingrained assumptions - or previous experiences - that guide the players' interpretation and behaviour due to their familiarity.[21] To illustrate his point, Jenkins refers to *American McGee's Alice*; a psychological horror action-adventure game which could be seen as an original interpretation of Lewis Carroll's classic *Alice in Wonderland*. Jenkins states that one can safely assume that starting players already have a well-developed mental map of *Alice in Wonderland*'s environments, characters, and situations; making it possible for them to read McGee's "monstrous images against the background of mental images formed from previous encounters with storybook illustrations and Disney movies."[22] While Jenkins only refers to fictional environments when it comes to evocative spaces, the dynamic he explains does not necessarily exclude non-fictional places. For example, *Routine Feat* takes place in its creator's impression of a Post-Soviet Russian neighbourhood;[23] an environment the player might be familiar with due to their own experiences in real-life, which can then be build upon in works of fiction.

In addition to the macro-approach of environmental storytelling that is portrayed through evocative spaces, there is a micro-approach that Jenkins describes as embedded narratives, being narratives that are "embedded within the mise-en-scene awaiting discovery."[24] Like in a detective story, an arrangement of objects has the ability to tell a story on its own, as it can refer to a previously encountered or established happening. This way, "the game world becomes a kind of information space, a memory palace."[25] With *Routine Feat*'s environment being cluttered with objects, this concept helps to understand more of its thriving narrative.

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[21] Ibid, 123.
[22] Ibid, 124.
[23] "The It's Winter and Routine Feat developer explains Russian sadness and powerful moods", Rockpapershotgun.com, accessed April 27, 2020, https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2019/09/13/the-its-winter-and-routine-feat-developer-explains-russian-sadness-and-powerful-moods
[24] Henry Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004), 126.
[25] Ibid.

Lastly, Jenkins introduces emergent narratives as a label for "game spaces [that] are designed to be rich with narrative potential, enabling the story-constructing activity of players."[26] This latter category distinguishes itself from the previous two by its potential to shy away from the game's consciously implemented story-elements, and instead let the player construct their own narratives. While evocative spaces and embedded narratives already evoke a personal construction of narratives - since it will always be the player to read and interpret what they encounter - emergent narratives come forth from a more participatory and interactive form of story-constructing, as they are "pre-structured or pre-programmed, taking shape through the gameplay".[27] In a way, evocative spaces set a bigger stage in which embedded narratives can be found by the player and emergent narratives can unfold through the player. It is precisely this last concept that causes the most friction with framing video games as computational problems with a clear end, as it is partly through emergent narratives that the player decides what constitutes as a goal and what does not.

2.4 Affordances through aspects of actions

Due to their ergodic nature, spatial stories do not simply appear on our screens like the narratives we encounter in, for example, television shows and movies. Instead, they are made possible by the game's mechanics that require player input. In order to understand *Routine Feat*'s mechanics, I have approached the corpus based on what video game scholar Jonas Linderoth refers to as 'affordances through aspects of actions'. In his article *Beyond the digital divide: An ecological approach to gameplay*, Linderoth distinguishes between exploratory- and performative aspects of action.[28] Where exploratory aspects of action provide the player with means to gather information from the game, and from there on create new affordances, performative aspects of action enable the player to achieve something in relation to the challenge the game presents. For instance, when moving the in-game camera around in a third-person video game, the player has the possibility to look for enemies, power-ups, clues, and directions, which in turn helps to understand the environment's possibilities.[29] It is through this exploratory aspect of action that the player can express performative aspects of actions, being either interacting with - or avoiding - what is in sight.

Analysing *Routine Feat* through Linderoth's affordances allows for differentiation between the mechanics offered to the player and their influence on the game's ergodicity.

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[26] Ibid, 129.
[27] Ibid, 128.
[28] Jonas Linderoth, *Beyond the digital divide: An ecological approach to gameplay,* Digra.org, 2011, accessed February 23, 2020. 6.
[29] Ibid, 6.

Simultaneously, it functions as a potential bridge between these mechanics and the game's spatial stories since both heavily depend upon the player's involvement through said affordances.

3. Methodology

A textual analysis, as encouraged by the video game scholar Clara Fernández-Vara in her work *Introduction to Game Analysis*, is the center approach of this thesis. It frames *Routine Feat* as a cultural production that carries meaning (resembling what Fernández-Vara refers to as 'the game as an object') and includes the importance of the player as part of the medium as a complete text ('the game as a process').[30] To do so, the analysis is divided into two successive parts, revolving around what media scholars Jasper van Vught and René Glas describe as instrumental- and transgressive play; two methods to differentiate between the act of 'playing' a game and 'gaming' a game.[31]

Instrumental play follows the game's lead, meaning that the player does what is necessary in order to advance within the game itself. With *Routine Feat*'s description discouraging a style of play that is mainly focussed on winning,[32] instrumental play is a necessity to understand this discouraged route's ergodic positioning, mechanical affordances and narrative elements, as it takes the player through the game from beginning to end.[33] During my instrumental playtime, I focus not only on the narrative as it unfolds through written text but also include the spatial stories (being evocative spaces, embedded narratives, and emergent narratives) that are involved within this route. Accompanying this is a focus on both exploratory- and performative aspects of action in order to understand how the game introduces and facilitates its mechanics, and how it positions itself within the ergodic continuum. This route is concluded after the game itself signals it to be finished and gives no other solvable problem to the player.

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[30] Clara Fernández-Vara, *Introduction to game analysis* (2nd ed.) (London: Routledge, 2019), 6-7.
[31] Jasper van Vught & René Glas, "Considering play: From method to analysis." in *DiGRA '17 - Proceedings of the 2017 DiGRA International Conference* (Melbourne: Digital Games Research Association, 2017), 1-16.
[32] "Routine Feat", Itch.io, accessed March 9, 2020, https://sad3d.itch.io/routine-feat
[33] One could ask the question whether the instrumental route of *Routine Feat* is determined by the game as a text or by sad3d's statement involving the importance of deviant play. While it serves as an intriguing example of friction between outcome and intention, I've decided for this analysis that the instrumental route would be the one sad3d so passionately discourages, as the game itself gives no profound signal that not following its lead might lead to completion.

Transgressive play, on the other hand, aims to understand player behaviour by "not just following but exploring, pushing, bending, deviating from and transgressing the rules of play".[34] Van Vught and Glas describe this method as 'gaming' a game, rather than the instrumental approach, which can be summarised as 'playing' a game.[35] During a transgressive playthrough, the player ignores the formal elements that are necessary to progress and instead enters a more free form, disobedient, and/or divergent type of play. Following up on the instrumental route I discussed earlier, is a similar but transgressive approach in which possibilities outside of - and deranging from - the game's main premise are explored. This type of play allows to analyse the game's further use of mechanics and narrative outside of the earlier instrumental route, which helps explain why the developer's encouraged laissez-faire approach might lead to different results. Due to this approach, there will not be a strictly scripted unfolding of narrative and gameplay, making it difficult to conclude when a run has come to a clear end before attempting and being involved in the run itself. Therefore, this thesis based the length of its transgressive playthrough on the preceding instrumental playthrough, meaning that both types of play have occured within the same amount of time.

In conclusion, I summarise how these different forms of play can give different understandings of *Routine Feat* and the genre of Walking Simulators, and how this relates to Grabarczyk's ergodic continuum and Koenitz's and Calleja's call for a re-conceptualisation of narrative.

4. An instrumental routine

The following chapter describes an instrumental playthrough of *Routine Feat*. It argues how the involved narratives and mechanics influence each other, and how this causes the game to position itself on the lower end of the ergodic continuum.

4.1 Introducing the loop

A new day. As usual, work awaits me today, nothing else. But I am trying to become a freer person: I will write my own book, that I've been dreaming about. I've just

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[34] Jasper van Vught & René Glas, "Considering play: From method to analysis." in *DiGRA '17 - Proceedings of the 2017 DiGRA International Conference* (Melbourne: Digital Games Research Association, 2017), 9.
[35] Ibid.

need to type my thoughts on a paper.[36]

Routine Feat's instrumental route tells the story of an aspiring writer in an anonymous Post-Soviet neighbourhood. From the get-go, the game introduces the player to its goal, the writing and publishing of a book; as the protagonist believes this to be their way to happiness.[37] In order to acquire this, the player will continuously have to advance through a specific gameplay loop that can be summed up as follows:

1) Wake up in your apartment.

2) Press E repeatedly in front of your typewriter until no new pages appear.

3) Put the written papers in a package.

4) Walk to the bus stop.

5) Enter a bus to get to work.

6) Repeatedly press E in front of a computer until a door opens so you can go home.

7) Walk home from the bus stop.

8) Press E repeatedly in front of your typewriter until no new pages appear.

9) Put the written papers in a package.

10) Press E in front of your bed to go to sleep.

11) Briefly traverse through a surrealist dreamscape.

These actions need to be repeated throughout several days, until the player has written twenty pages and posted them as a bundle in one of the available mailboxes outside. As a full traversal throughout all locations in the game is not necessary to reach completion, this chapter focuses on the scripted narratives and actions that chronologically unfold within the described gameplay loop.

4.2 The world as an assembly line

The first half of the route, which is the traversal from the apartment to the bus stop, heavily contrasts the bitter and depressed writings from the game's protagonist. Where this prose is filled with a defeatist pessimism,[38] the environment itself is lively and serene; continuously bathing in sun rays that create a warm and upbeat atmosphere, complemented by the occasional presence of comfortable ambient music. While never showing other human beings, the game facilitates their presence as an embedded narrative through the use of

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[36] sad3d, *Routine Feat,* English Version (Windows), itch.io, 2019. Opening text.
[37] Appendix 1, *A piece of paper in the protagonist's bedroom*, 20.
[38] Appendix 2, *Fragment of the protagonist's future book*, 21.

audio, objects and text. For instance, when inside, the player hears their neighbours'
light-hearted conversations and laughter. In the stairwell, the sounds of children playing and
moving furniture can be heard. Textually, an addition to this already bright and lively
atmosphere comes through short graffiti messages that are written on the walls in the
staircase and the bus stop. While most are short and sweet, like *я тебя люблю* (which
translates to *I love you*), *все возможно* (*everything is possible*), and *солнце* (a diminutive for
sun), others are more difficult to comprehend, like *цветы @2303* (*flowers/plants @2303*).
Scattered throughout this route are embedded narratives that underline the lower-class
community through which the player traverses, such as shattered glass, smoked cigarettes
on the floor, and trash bags that seem to signify that the garbage chute which runs through
the stairwell is no longer in use. The combination of all these elements sets a rich,
welcoming stage that sadly does not play a formal role within the pursuit of the game's set
goal, as they do not require any interaction or evoke possible confrontation.

After a brief bus ride through the neighbourhood's green area, and without being able to
see the chauffeur, the player gets transported to an office. There is no one in sight, although,
once again, the player can hear the muffled sound of others. This single office room consists
of one desk that hosts a computer, some pills, an ashtray, an apple, and a paper containing
the following instructions to do our job:

> You type text on the computer. To work with a computer press the [E] key.
> Press it repeatedly, so that the computer clearly and unambiguously responded to
> your actions. When the computer stops responding to your actions, you can assume
> that the work is over.[39]

This work description hosts similarities with instrumental play as a concept and the idea of
treating games as computational problems that are to be solved by an operator. By
interacting with the computer, the player solves the problem of the current input being
incomplete. As soon as sufficient input has been given, the unavoidable task is complete,
and the operator can continue with the solving of their overarching problem. *Routine Feat*
emphasises this by the sudden opening of the previously locked office door, allowing the
player to continue their circulair route.

Once back home, the player arrives at the last part of the gameplay loop: the continuation
of pressing E in front of a device, the bundling of papers, pressing E in front of a bed, and
briefly traverse a surrealist dreamscape. It is these dreamscapes that - unlike other

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[39] sad3d, *Routine Feat,* English Version (Windows), itch.io, 2019. "About work".

fragments within the loop - change visually every night. Nevertheless, they do not extend beyond being a mere stage through which one must traverse; making them similar to the narratives the player encounters during the day. Noticeably, after every completed loop, the game states that "*It's time to wake up! Today will be a great day*".[40] This text-based interference gives the player the option to choose between continuing the game (*Hooray*) or quit (*I'm so tired of this…*); which consequently reassures that in order to reach completion, the same actions will have to be repeated.

When the given loop is repeated sufficiently, the player surprisingly finds an enormous amount of money at the bottom of the stairwell; an unavoidable location within the loop. Accompanied with the bills of money is the following note:

> Dear friend!
> We were so impressed by your book! It is so sincere and refreshing! Thank you for daring to write it. We will publish it with a circulation of 100,000 copies. The whole nation will be reading you. Here is your first fee for the book.
> <i>Your publishers</i>[41]

While the player is able to pick up the money - which will raise a counter in the pause screen - currency is not a mechanic within the game itself. Its presence is merely decorative and at this point functions as an embedded narrative that addresses the earlier loop to have been repeated into completion. After fulfilling the loop one more time, the game will show the following message:

> My book is being published, and soon I'll become famous! The sum of money that I've received today will allow me to live freely for a very long time without a need in anything. Now I can quit my job. I will devote myself to writing a new book.
> I'll live happily.[42]

From this point, *Routine Feat* will quit itself, which indicates a clear endpoint and concludes our instrumental run as a solved computational problem.

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[40] Ibid, Continuation screen.
[41] Ibid, "Letter from the publisher".
[42] Ibid, End Screen.

4.3 Affordances of repetitive action

During the instrumental playthrough, the earliest introduced affordances of exploratory actions undergo a drastic transformation. Where at first the player's camera movement is used to answer questions concerning the player's location and goal, like *where am I?*, *where should I go?*, and *what should I do?*, the monotonous nature of *Routine Feat*'s gameplay loop causes these questions to largely disappear. After day one, the game does not introduce any new features to reach the set goal. Instead, the player has to continuously move forward through the given gameplay loop. This way, after day one, the locations within this route become evocative spaces that remind the player of the repetitive tasks that are at hand, as has been made clear throughout their previous experiences with these environments. Because of this clear indication of what to do and when to do it, the exploratory aspects of actions lose their explorative dimension and instead become performative ones. This transformation subtly removes the aspect of exploration from a significant part of the game itself, and replaces it with routine.

While the surrealist dreamscapes that occur at the end of the loop do awaken earlier exploratory affordances - due to these environments being visually new and thus re-introducing the earlier stated questions - they never evolve into new performative aspects of actions, as the end result and overall goal will always be a restart of the loop. While the surrealist dreamscapes might provide a minor visual break, they do not influence the story's lineair development. Rather, they underline the already occurring process due to their sporadic focus on three recurring objects that already serve as narrative components: the typewriter, the computer, and the bed.

This repetitive character caused me as a player to rush throughout the given assignments by adjusting older performative aspects of action. To illustrate, after day four I no longer used the stairs to leave the apartment but alternatively jumped from my balcony which shortened the distance between the apartment and the bus stop.[43] With the game not including conventional mechanics like health or hit damage, the fact that the balcony is on the fourth floor does not affect the gameplay. While accelerating the process, it simultaneously means that potentially new narrative- or ludologic components within the old route would be missed by the player. When at work, I would no longer take the time to sit behind my desk since the computer also responds to the E-command when facing it from the opposite direction, consequently shortening my time at work. A shortening that also occurs

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[43] Here we encounter a noticeable friction between instrumental play and transgressive behaviour. While one might consider taking a shortcut as being deviant, it does not fall out of line with the necessities that are required to complete our goal. The game at no point asks the player to traverse a specific route, as it only requires the player to interact with specific objects at specific locations.

due to my continuously accelerated pressing of the E-key. Where on day one there is a moment of discovery when interacting with the computer, the at first charming sounds and movements that occur when giving input no longer evoke the same amusement due to the repeated interaction throughout the days. Where the protagonist starts off with the incapability to see other human beings, the player potentially too blocks narrative elements; confining them to a blurry backdrop during their quest for completion.

4.4 Press E to win

The narrative elements that are encountered within the instrumental playthrough do not lead to a more complex ergodicity. Instead, they potentially evoke a style of play that accelerates the player's process throughout the required input. This in turn enhances the bursts through which the player delivers input and eventually reduces the time and amount of actions that are required for the problem to be solved. An instrumental playthrough of *Routine Feat* thus positions the game on the far left of the ergodic continuum as an easily solvable *P-hard* problem. Never does it require a complex input from the player or does it rely on aspects like skill or luck, as there are no random encounters that could interfere with the player reaching the game's end. Thereby, it distances itself from more conventional video games that require a more complex input and combine this input with the element of chance.

5. A transgressive stroll

In addition to the instrumental playthrough in which *Routine Feat* is framed as a computational problem that needs to be solved through an operator's input, there is a transgressive playthrough that frames the game as a computational process that needs to unfold through the player's input. This transgressive playthrough appeared to have no set goals, yet those that came forth from it appeared in the following order:

- Make a meal.
- Find the largest object to flush through the toilet.
- Clean the staircase.
- Break into another apartment.
- Find the source of the salsa jam.
- Throw all my belongings out of the window.

While every goal differed thematically, the way spatial stories and affordances influenced this style of play has been rather similar. Therefore, the analysis focuses merely on the first goal, being the preparation of a meal.

5.1 Associate and animate

By walking around the apartment, I quickly stumbled upon the protagonist's kitchen; an area that is completely in line with the compact and functional character of Khrushchyovka, being the low-cost, concrete-paneled apartment buildings that have been built in Russia during the early 1960s. It is a humble space that does not offer anything beyond the requirements it is built for. The one table that takes up most of the area's space contains a cut piece of bread, its originating loaf, a plate and a butter knife. This embedded narrative, that refers to the act of dinner - amplified by the evocative space that is the kitchen - caused me to decide my first goal to be the preparation of a meal.

By using the in-game camera to look around, in combination with the possibility to open the cupboards, fridge and freezer by pressing E, I was able to analyse what was available. I concluded that the following steps had to be taken: turn on the radio for an appropriate atmosphere, turn on the tap, fill a large pan with water, put it on the stove, get potatoes from the fridge, boil them, fry an egg in a frying pan, and serve all on a plate accompanied with a complementary tomato. Within this string of actions rests a complex dynamic between the game's affordances, mechanics, narrative, and the player's associations. By not having a set goal, the player at first applies exploratory actions by using the camera and movement-controls to get familiar with their surroundings. After familiarisation and contextualisation, the player can associate their surroundings with possibilities to act upon, and from there on set themselves a goal. This goal is achieved through performative aspects of action (moving objects from one place to another, and having them interact with each other) that are made possible not only by *Routine Feat*'s mechanics that allow the player to pick up smaller objects and freely move them around, but also by the given that certain items (like the pan and the water, or the egg and the frying pan on the stove) react to each other in ways that play along with our previous associations. The result is an emergent narrative that unfolds - and is partly constructed - through the player's interaction with their environment.

The situation above, as well as its occurrence throughout the other goals, can be summarised and generalised as follows:
1. Information is conveyed to the player through the use of affordances of exploratory actions.

2. Contextualisation takes place through the interpretation of an environment and its objects, which is made possible due to their characteristics as spatial stories.
3. The player considers possible future actions, which are influenced by the present spatial stories as well as the game's mechanical affordances.
4. A goal is set by the player, who in turn uses affordances of performative actions to achieve their set goal.

While this dynamic is heavily reliant on the experiential dimension of the player, it does underline the primacy of spatial stories during transgressive play, as they precede intentionality by forming a milieu that projects possibilities and shapes intention. This contrasts their presence during *Routine Feat*'s instrumental play, in which they - at their strongest - act as a mere mediator between the player and their already given goal.

5.2 The fluctuation of complexity

Where during the instrumental playthrough the player input can be described as minimal and repetitive, a transgressive playthrough potentially positions *Routine Feat* much higher on the ergodic continuum. As the instrumental run requires - and constricts to - one outcome for its completion, the transgressive approach requires multiple runs and observations in order to understand the processes that are involved within the completion of an emergent narrative. For example, the player-set goal of creating a meal can be achieved through a multitude of approaches, ranging from putting a slice of bread on a plate (an easily solvable *P-hard* problem) all the way up to the construction of an exquisite dinner including ingredients and objects that are to be found far outside of the kitchen (a *PSPACE-hard* problem). While the possibilities to approach such a player-set goal might be enormous, they are by far not endless due to the outcomes being bound to the components of the game. Where in real life my possibilities to make a meal might be considered endless given enough time and materials, within *Routine Feat* I can not go beyond the available objects to interact with, or the given mechanics to do so.

There is a chance that players - similar to the analysis above - limit themselves to a strict instrumental or transgressive playthrough. Yet when looking at that same analysis, it becomes clear that when emerged in such a process, the opposing style of play does occasionally step forward. Where transgressive characteristics seemed tempting throughout the instrumental run, a longing for rules or direction simultaneously came forward while playing transgressively. Outside of an academic context, this fluent approach to play, in which a player is both 'playing' a game and 'gaming' a game, can be seen as rather

common;[44] which only further stresses the relevance of narrative elements in establishing a game's ergodicity.

6. Conclusion

This analysis of *Routine Feat* shows that when addressing Walking Simulators based on their ergodicity, a formalist framework of games as computational problems alone will not be sufficient. The two diverging playstyles as shown above lead to a varying positioning of *Routine Feat* on the ergodic continuum, depending on the experiential dimension of the player. This experiential dimension, evoked by spatial stories, needs to be taken into consideration when we continue further academic research on Walking Simulators as a genre - and video games as a medium - as it can show us a variety of approaches to - and versions of - video games that could otherwise be ignored.

 While classical notions of narrative, developed for non-ergodic media such as film or literature, might help us to understand the unfolding narratives within *Routine Feat*, they alone are not enough to address how these narratives shape the interaction between the game and the player. Because of this, *Routine Feat* can be read as an argument that underlines the need for a re-conceptualisation of narrative, as it shows how narrative elements actively influence types of play, and potentially shape what the player constitutes as a problem or challenge. This analysis therefore functions as an approach both to how we could engage with Koenitz's and Calleja's call for a re-conceptualisation of narrative, as how we could expand upon addressing a game's ergodicity to further understand interactions between video games and their players.

Routine Feat's developer's warning that winning alone - being the successful solving of a problem through the given rules - will not satisfy the player, holds true if we consider playstyles for Walking Simulators that transcend an instrumental approach and focus on 'gaming' a game as its modus operandi. While I have described this as the player's motivation to unfold a game's content through traversal - to uncover what type of challenges or discoveries it potentially holds - further research into players' motives to engage with Walking Simulators can prove fruitful.

 With this analysis being limited to my own experiential dimension, other's playthroughs

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[44] Jasper van Vught & René Glas, "Considering play: From method to analysis." in *DiGRA '17 - Proceedings of the 2017 DiGRA International Conference* (Melbourne: Digital Games Research Association, 2017), 9.

can provide with additional or contrasting findings concerning the influence of spatial stories on a game's ergodicity. This analysis simultaneously raises questions about the elasticity of the genre, and about the type of mechanics that potentially evoke spatial stories in the first place. With *Routine Feat* merely portraying a small amount of possible mechanics, chances are that differing combinations of mechanics lead to further expanding insights.

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8. Appendix

Appendix 1. *A piece of paper in the protagonist's bedroom.*

"I hope that today is the day when I can change something. All these things - work, home, sleep - there is no damn sense in it for me right now. Is this a life? It's just a being, even hamsters in their spinning wheel have a better one.

I guess that I should start writing a book today. Yes, obviously. Finally, I will be able to say what I want, things that were silent for all these years. This will mean something. And when I will finish it there would be a person who will appreciate it.

And if someone will read and appreciate it… then I guess it is worth trying. My life will mean something. Reader's recognition - is this a meaning of life?

However, it doesn't matter right now. The following thing is important: my book will be the mirror of my thoughts. I'll type them on the paper. Traditionally, I will be doing this by pushing [E] button. That's strange, but I have got no power to control anything in this world, even myself. No surprise.

I'll collect all these papers and put them into the envelop. I'll send it to the publisher by post. When the book will be published, everyone will like it and I'll become happy."

Appendix 2. *A fragment of the protagonist's future book.*

"There is no point in what I've been doing all this time. I can't go on. I am so scared. I am so lonely.

I am tired of being stuck in this spinning wheel. I am tired of being such a whiner. I don't know what to do."