

*Master's thesis*

# **Not Going Home**

Transgeneric Elements and the Exploratory  
Branches of Walking Simulators

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## Abstract

The term 'Walking Simulator' surfaced after the release of its acclaimed educer *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2012). Since then, the term became a genre that raised questions on what constitutes a videogame, the narrative potential of the medium, and its societal possibilities. While responses to these questions have been given by a broad variety of people, when it comes to what constitutes a Walking Simulator, scholars, critics, and gamers hold on to a handful of early, now-canonical titles. Thus, our expectations of the genre stem from the qualities that have been found in and through a small percentage of its earlier examples. Throughout this thesis, I expand our understanding of Walking Simulators by analysing two more recent and divergent titles: *Paratopic* (Arbitrary Metric, 2018) and *Eastshade* (Eastshade Studios, 2019). After problematising the concept of 'genre', outlining genre as interchanging, and stating generic experiences with canonical titles, I analyse *Paratopic's* and *Eastshade's* textual and discursive dimensions. This analysis is guided by a theoretical framework that consists of the 'lyric, dramatic, and epic position', 'affordances of aspects of actions', and 'patterns of spatial use', as well a Critical Discourse Analysis that enables engagement with ergodic media. From these findings, I argue that the current conditions of the genre - and by this part of videogames as a medium - to be silently expanding yet vocally restricted to the perceived limits of Walking Simulators' earlier titles.

*Keywords:* videogames, walking simulators, player mode, classification decisions, genre, critical discourse analysis, instrumental play

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## Introduction

With a name born from spite, indie-developers embracing its characteristics, and its flag-bearers being both praised and scorned by critics, Walking Simulators unearthed an abundance of statements, conflicts, and re-considerations throughout its still-brief existence as a videogame genre. Some have passionately but arguably dismissed its titles as bare interactive stories in which all one does is walk;<sup>1</sup> denouncing them as fraudulent imposters that merely pretend to be games.<sup>2</sup> Others, more welcoming, underlined how its use of stripped-down mechanics enables new narrative potential and even proclaimed it to be a mysterious but genuine new phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> The genre's conflicting aura did not only give rebirth to the discussion of what is and is not a videogame but also shines through academic pleads to rename it entirely, of which "ambience action games",<sup>4</sup> "light adventures",<sup>5</sup> "exploratory games",<sup>6</sup> and "empathic experience simulators"<sup>7</sup> are but a few examples. Despite these suggestions, the term Walking Simulator stayed. Leading platforms like Steam and Itch.io implemented it as a legitimate genre indicator and various game developers now use it to refer to their own creations.

Interestingly, the previous exclusionary atmosphere that drenched concerns on the legitimacy of the genre has nestled itself in how we talk about the very titles that are said to embody its defining characteristics. Even though new and exciting Walking Simulators pop-up in diverse forms, both academic and public discourse on what substitutes as a Walking Simulator continuously refers to now-canonical titles like *Gone Home* (Fullbright,

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<sup>1</sup> "A brief history of the "walking simulator", gaming's most detested genre", Salon.com, accessed November 30th, 2020, <https://www.salon.com/2017/11/11/a-brief-history-of-the-walking-simulator-gamings-most-detested-genre>

<sup>2</sup> Mia Consalvo & Christopher A. Paul, *Real Games, What's Legitimate and What's Not in Contemporary Videogames* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2019), 113.

<sup>3</sup> "The Walking Sim Is a Genuinely New Genre, And No One Fully Understands It", Vice.com, accessed November 30th, 2020, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/wxeqzw/the-walking-sim-is-a-genuinely-new-genre-and-no-one-fully-understands-it>

<sup>4</sup> Felix Zimmer & Christian Huberts, "From Walking Simulator to Ambience Action Game: A Philosophical Approach to a Misunderstood Genre" in *Press Start Vol 5 No 2 (2019): Special Issue: Walking Simulators*, Press-start.gla.ac.uk, 2019, accessed December 7th, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> 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 December 4th, 2020, 243.

<sup>6</sup> Hayley McCullough, "From Zelda to Stanley: Comparing the Integrative Complexity of Six Video Game Genres" in *Press Start Vol 5 No 2 (2019): Special Issue: Walking Simulators*, Press-start.gla.ac.uk, 2019, accessed December 7th, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Michael James Heron & Pauline Helen Belford, "All of your co-workers are gone: story, substance, and the empathic puzzler" in *Journal of games criticism*, 2015, Gamecritism.org, accessed March 12th, 2021.

2013), *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2012), *Proteus* (Ed Key and David Kanaga, 2013), *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow, 2017), and *Firewatch* (Campo Santo, 2016).<sup>8,9</sup>

Whilst these titles undeniably play a fundamental role within the genre's popularity, I would argue their ceaseless re-introduction to enforce what qualifies as the genre itself.<sup>10</sup>

Consequently, said discourse does not involve a rising number of divergent titles that are granted the genre's name, either by their developers or through online classification systems. This does not only mark a blind spot amongst attempts to paint a generic portrait but also influences how we view the genre's broader potential when it comes to ludic and narrative experiences. Given how Walking Simulators are frequently praised for their ability to reduce direct action to stimulate emotional and contemplative engagement with pressing societal themes,<sup>11</sup> expanding upon what has already been unearthed will provide a broader scope of its experiential possibilities.

To more concretely focus on how contemporary Walking Simulators stray off the beaten paths, this thesis' corpus consists of *Paratopic* (Arbitrary Metric, 2018), *Eastshade* (Eastshade Studios, 2019), and their surrounding discourse. These two videogames - as will be addressed later - are acclaimed to be rather dissimilar when compared to canonical titles in their appearance, descriptors, and profiling. Despite this, and in some cases against their creators' own liking, they are presumed to be strongly connected to the genre in a variety of ways. This disconnect allows to analyse how Walking Simulators branch out from a formal perspective, whilst simultaneously acquiring insight in how parts of the gaming community discuss the genre's current affordances and limitations.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, the research question of this thesis states as follows: "*What can the corpus tell us about the currently ascribed conditions that make up a Walking Simulator, and how do these conditions affect the reception and development of new titles?*" This question will be guided

<sup>8</sup> Part of this discourse will be addressed in '1.2 Generic experiences with canonical Walking Simulators'.

<sup>9</sup> Appendix A1: A brief description of canonical titles.

<sup>10</sup> It needs to be acknowledged that Montembeault and Deslongchamps-Gagnon, whose research I will refer to in 1.2, decided not to analyse *Gone Home* and *Dear Esther* precisely because of the amount of attention these titles already received.

<sup>11</sup> "Everybody's Gone to the Rapture: creating a romantic apocalypse", TheGuardian.com, accessed March 14th, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/jul/22/everybodys-gone-to-the-rapture-game-apocalypse>; "VIDEO GAY-MER | Gone Home: A Powerful Exploration of Queer Youth", Popdust.com, accessed March 14th, 2021, <https://www.popdust.com/videogamer-gone-home-queer-youth>; "Firewatch, A Game About Avoiding Your Problems Until They Burn Everything Down", TheAfictionado.com, accessed March 14th, 2021, <https://theafictionado.wordpress.com/2016/07/14/firewatch-a-game-about-avoiding-your-problems>

<sup>12</sup> Whilst there are other contemporary Walking Simulators that stray away from the genre's ascribe norms, I have chosen *Paratopic* and *Eastshade* specifically because of the genre-focussed friction that is noticable in their discourse. Besides their discursive practices, these two titles differ widely when compared to one another. This way, given the limitations of this thesis, I would still be able to unearth a broader amount of divergent formal elements.

by the sub-questions “*how does the corpus’ formal elements allow for overlapping or differing player experiences to be brought forward when compared to more canonical titles?*” and “*how, and through what means, does adherent discourse in- or exclude these games from the genre?*”

To approach these questions, chapter one of this thesis consists of an analysis of previous research concerning videogames and genre, as well as generic player experience throughout canonical Walking Simulators. In chapter two, I elaborate on my theoretical framework, which consists of the concepts of ‘lyric, dramatic, and epic position’, ‘affordances of aspects of actions’, and ‘patterns of spatial use’. Chapter three outlines the Critical Discourse Analysis that forms the foundation of this thesis’ methodology. To answer the question of how the corpus’ formal elements allow for overlapping or differing player experiences, this Critical Discourse Analysis involves a formal game analysis of *Paratopic* (4.1) and *Eastshade* (4.3). Answering how, and through what means, adherent discourse in- or excludes these games from the genre is done by analysing these game’s discursive practice (4.2, 4.4). Lastly, it is through addressing the titles’ social practice (4.5) that an answer is given concerning the genre’s currently ascribed conditions, and how these affect the reception and development of new titles.

## **1. Amidst descriptors and desires**

In 1.1, I linger on the importance of recognising an individual game as related to several different genres. I outline conflicting characteristics that come forth from our daily usage of genre, and argue how grouping texts based on overlapping formal elements influences how we relate to, converse about, and develop media. From there on, and to sketch a general oversight of the ways in which Walking Simulators are generally perceived, 1.2 forms an analysis of several generic experiences and influential formal elements that are detected throughout canonical titles.

### **1.1 The beautiful mess that is genre**

Approaching genres as predefined fields in which texts ought to be positioned, quickly unveils the impossibilities of such a task without losing the necessary nuance and honesty. Though some of our efforts appear stable and concrete, upon closer inspection, fragments of a text giddily find their way outside of set frameworks. This is not only because - in some

cases - one person's science-fiction is another's western,<sup>13</sup> but mainly due to genres' limited ability to provide structure within a complex and diffuse whole.

As early as the mid-2000's, scholars have argued against the tendency to perceive videogame genres as specific checklists and rigorous sorting methods.<sup>14</sup> Instead of being a "clean" separator, they function as rough, general guidance in daily practices; ranging from dinner table conversations to processes of production, promotion, and reception. Referencing genre, thus, allows us to communicate similar characteristics between shifting clusters of texts - not that a text exclusively belongs to one grouping. It has, for example, become rather common for first-person shooters to implement elements that are more dominantly ascribed to stealth-, role-playing-, and platform games.<sup>15</sup> Despite those transgeneric elements, these titles do not lose their descriptor as a first-person shooter, meaning that these implementations do not cross the current limits of how we perceive a genre.

This might at first appear as a trivial semantic issue but to nuance our understanding of videogame genre is to separate the medium from some of its current restrictions. Acknowledgement of overlap opposes "neat" categories as defined by the industry and places disparate games into new circuits of connectivity.<sup>16</sup> This, successively, could expand the reach of lesser represented qualities and thus open-up new perspectives and dynamics when it comes to the potential of the medium. Especially now, when the emergence of Walking Simulators caused developers, critics, and players to re-approach the question of what constitutes a videogame, it would be an exciting time for a more fluent approach to genre.

Of course, things are easier said than done. Even when perceiving videogame genres as overlapping and ever-changing, we are inclined to see their temporary frameworks as constructed of formal elements that sequentially evoke specific experiences of play. Consequently, and unjustified, this pushes forward the age-old assumption that texts with

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<sup>13</sup> Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI Pub., 1999), 23-24.; "Is Star Wars more of a western or high fantasy?", Quora.com, accessed February 17th, 2021,

<https://www.quora.com/Is-Star-Wars-more-of-a-western-or-high-fantasy>

<sup>14</sup> Dominic Arsenault, "Video Game Genre, Evolution and Innovation" in *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture* 3 (2009): 149-176, Eludamos.org, 2009, accessed February 17th, 2021, <https://eludamos.org/index.php/eludamos/article/view/vol3no2-3/125>; Thomas Apperley, "Genre and game studies: Toward a critical approach to video game genres." in *Simulation & Gaming - Simulat Gaming*. 37, Journals.sagepub.com.org, 2006, accessed February 17th, 2021, 19.

<sup>15</sup> One example would be how Call of Duty: Warzone (Raven Software, Infinity Ward, 2020) implements the use of experience points - a common mechanic in role-playing games - to have players upgrade/unlock weapons and rise up in ranks. Another one would be the manifold inclusion of platforming - the backbone of platform games - in Doom Eternal (id Software, Panic Button Games, 2020).

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Apperley, "Genre and game studies: Toward a critical approach to video game genres." in *Simulation & Gaming - Simulat Gaming*. 37, Journals.sagepub.com.org, 2006, accessed February 17th, 2021, 19.

overlapping formal qualities will produce similar effects in their audience.<sup>17</sup> This essentialist expectation shapes not only the interpretation of a text but also colours developers' considerations on whether or not a genre qualifies for the experiences their texts ought to evoke. After all, it is previous involvement that colours our association.<sup>18</sup> When wielding a hammer, we are used to looking for nails. When playing a first-person shooter, we are used to scouting for enemies. In other words: the ways in which we continuously speak of a genre creates a generic terminology that both high-lights and excludes a variety of aspects. This, in turn, influences how we approach and produce texts that are described as acquainted with said genre. Because genre classification functions as a consensual agreement between the audience, producers, and promoters,<sup>19,20</sup> this dynamic, when not confronted, repeats itself and continuously strengthens previous understandings, pushing away alternative interpretations in the process.

Luckily, and despite dominant discourse, the genre of Walking Simulators does not only entail its canonical titles. Yet, before diving into the examples that I deem divergent, a general oversight of the discourse that constructs this genre is in place. What, according to others, makes a Walking Sim a Walking Sim? Therefore, the following subchapter focuses on academic arguments and findings that are previously acquired.

## 1.2 Generic experiences with canonical Walking Simulators

What is it like to play a Walking Sim? Although the genre is more commonly described through formal elements as a cluster of first-person, narrative-centred videogames with stripped-down mechanics,<sup>21</sup> scholars have specified a variety of experiential qualities that (re)occur throughout the most centralised titles.

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<sup>17</sup> Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI Pub., 1999), 2.

<sup>18</sup> Mark Okrent, "Equipment, World, and Language" in *Inquiry*, 45:2, 195-204, 2002. DOI: 10.1080/002017402760093289, 200.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Apperley, "Genre and game studies: Toward a critical approach to video game genres." in *Simulation & Gaming - Simulat Gaming*. 37, Journals.sagepub.com.org, 2006, accessed February 17th, 2021, 9.

<sup>20</sup> It is this dynamic that makes videogame genres such ungraspable phenomena. One could, for example, argue that the idea of horror as a videogame genre would not be suitable as it stems from classifications of earlier non-ergodic media. In *Screenplay: cinema/videogames/interfaces*, Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska argued for a clearer separation between platform, genre, mode, and milieu, of which horror would then be positioned somewhere in the latter two. While I admire academic attempts to provide a more comprehensible structure, till now, videogame genres have shown little acknowledgement of academic authority, as is seen in current discourse and platforms that avoid these types of categorisation.

<sup>21</sup> "This is the decade where exploration did the talking", PCGamer.com, accessed December 22th, 2020, <https://www.pcgamer.com/this-is-the-decade-where-exploration-did-the-talking>; "A brief history of the "walking simulator," gaming's most detested genre", Salon.com, accessed November 30th, 2020, <https://www.salon.com/2017/11/11/a-brief-history-of-the-walking-simulator-gamings-most-detested-genre>

### *Reducing challenge and providing space*

Jesper Juul argues how the genre's formal qualities encourage engagement with the medium that is similar to conservative and traditional dynamics between an aesthetic object and its participant.<sup>22</sup> By distinguishing three types of 'aesthetics' in videogames, he addresses differences between player attitudes when it comes to games that provide or - like Walking Simulators - remove utility-seeking and optimisation. This removal, according to Juul, reduces or abolishes the concept of challenge from the experience, which guarantees safety and thus opens up mental resources for other tasks. Framed as an 'aesthetic of disinterest', these conditions allow the player to more poetically engage with the text; potentially creating excitement "but not a desire for the object".<sup>23</sup> Unlike those that praise the newness of the genre, Juul points out how these new titles are structured around a much older form of engagement that is reminiscent of art galleries, musea, and cinema. We, for example, do not strategically optimise our way through the works of Francisco Goya, Berline de Bruyckere, or Andrej Tarkovski in the same way as we engage with videogame series like *The Legend of Zelda*, *Sid Meier's Civilization*, or *Fallout*. The available space - both in-game and mentally - for exploration and contemplation as present in Walking Simulators is argued to more easily channel the genre's reach from our homes to the sterilised white cubes of our cultural institutions, rather than the noisy and lively environment of 90's arcade halls or contemporary Gaming Cafés.

This divisive rhetoric is in line with the tendency to paint the genre as fundamentally different from, not belonging to, or lesser than the overall medium of videogames.<sup>24</sup> Whilst Juul states that the emergence of the genre brings forth refreshing questions that challenge our idea of what a game is, he also expresses a disappointment in how this perceived smoothening of problem-solving and strategic-improvement replaces unique qualities from the medium itself with aesthetic dimensions from more traditional artforms.<sup>25</sup> Yet, the differences are not as clear as night and day, as Juul too acknowledges forms of strategic

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<sup>22</sup> Jesper Juul, *The Aesthetics of the Aesthetics of the Aesthetics of Video Games: Walking Simulators as Response to the problem of Optimization*, paper presented at Philosophy of Games Conference, Copenhagen, Denmark, accessed December 7th, 2020, <https://www.jesperjuul.net/text/aesthetics3>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Mia Consalvo & Christopher A. Paul, *Real Games, What's Legitimate and What's Not in Contemporary Videogames* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2019), 109-130.

<sup>25</sup> Juul's interpretations of these dimensions seem to refer to one specific ideal situation in which a subject is allowed to engage privately yet disciplined - according to certain etiquettes - with a work of art. Whether or not this is a golden standard is debatable, as anyone who has attempted to visit the Louvre or the State Hermitage Museum knows that it is a game of strategic optimization, and not necessarily one of reflection and contemplation.

optimisation throughout some of the most popular Walking Simulators.<sup>26</sup> The given that online communities even started to take part in speedrunning canonical titles like *Gone Home* and *Firewatch* signifies that players are capable of finding strategic challenges even when these are not portrayed at face value.<sup>27</sup> For some, this might open up discussions about ways and environments in which a game is supposed to be played but it also - and more interestingly - re-introduces the given that our attitude towards the medium shapes the text itself.

### *From peacefulness to self-reflexive distancing*

Expanding upon and partially contradicting Juul's experiential observations, is how Hugo Montembeault and Maxime Deslongchamps-Gagnon derive five major clusters of generic experiences of Walking Simulators through analysing the most discussed titles within publications by journalists, designers, academics, and gamers.<sup>28</sup> They conclude that peacefulness, purposeful secretiveness, fatalism, everydayness, and self-reflexive distancing play central roles throughout these games' player experience.<sup>29</sup> Most of the time - and in line with Juul's earlier argument - these experiences are assigned to how those titles ask for minimal psychomotor efforts.<sup>30</sup> This lack of player-progression through reflexes, hand-eye coordination, or timing gets paired to a sense of non-agency and fatalism, as the scripted narratives are not dependent on the skills of a player or the choices she makes.

Despite this, Montembeault and Deslongchamps-Gagnon do recognise that reduction of agency does not strip these titles of, what they call, 'gameness'. Throughout their corpus, they specify players' attraction to non-kinesthetic challenges based on collecting or merely finding easily overlooked semiotic fragments that create new layers of depth within narrative and ludic structures. Examples of purposeful secretiveness would be the concealed notes and personal belongings in *Gone Home*, entities like the Spectral Wolf and the Birdman in *Proteus*, and the ghosts and hidden objects in *Dear Esther*. Where a broad variety of games focus on getting the player through clear stages by providing concrete challenges, the

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<sup>26</sup> Jesper Juul, *The Aesthetics of the Aesthetics of the Aesthetics of Video Games: Walking Simulators as Response to the problem of Optimization*, paper presented at Philosophy of Games Conference, Copenhagen, Denmark, accessed December 7th, 2020, <https://www.jesperjuul.net/text/aesthetics3>

<sup>27</sup> "Gone Home - speedrun.com", Speedrun.com, accessed December 23th, 2020, <https://www.speedrun.com/gonehome>; "Firewatch - speedrun.com", Speedrun.com, accessed December 23th, 2020, <https://www.speedrun.com/fw>

<sup>28</sup> Hugo Montembeault & Maxime Deslongchamps-Gagnon, "The Walking Simulator's Generic Experiences" in *Press Start Vol 5 No 2 (2019): Special Issue: Walking Simulators*, Press-start.gla.ac.uk, 2019, accessed December 7th, 2020.

<sup>29</sup> None of these titles touches upon all five of these experiences. Rather, as with genre, multiple of these experiences occur in canonical titles, interchanging depending on the title we are referring to.

<sup>30</sup> To a small degree, the involvement of psychomotor efforts and their pacing might explain why it is so uncommon to read *Tetris* (Aleksij Pazjitzinov & Vadim Gerasimov, 1984) as a story on labour in capitalism - as is beautifully done by Janet Horowitz Murray in her work *Hamlet on the Holodeck* - but so apparent to read into the themes of isolation, mourning, and loneliness as portrayed in *Firewatch*.

most-discussed Walking Simulators allow for playthroughs in which it is up to the player to decide how much of the world she wants to explore and unravel.

Due to the genre's use of stripped-down mechanics, this exploration is primarily done through looking, reading, interpreting, walking, grabbing objects, and the entering and leaving of environments. These everyday actions enhance a sense of voyeuristic and sometimes even embarrassing exploration of intimacy that does not only address the everydayness of the portrayed themes but also opens up moments of self-reflexive distancing for the player.<sup>31</sup>

Generic experiences like voyeurism and intimacy challenge Juul's description of Walking Simulators' inability to create a desire for the object, as voyeurism and intimacy constitute a strong pull between the player and the game as an object as well as a process. Similarly, the experience of purposeful secretiveness lies in line with an understanding of desire as caused by the concealment or suppression of a thing.<sup>32</sup> This way, Walking Simulators - like videogames in general - do play upon a player's urge to either obtain, master, or be around certain qualities within the text. Having said so, the idea of a reduced input through psychomotorical means influencing the experiential dimension of the player remains a pressing point of interest for this research - whether or not this plays into our understanding of the complexity that is desire - as it partly addresses why Walking Simulators are thought of as such contemplative experiences.

The previously addressed player experiences and interpretations of Walking Simulators provide a necessary understanding of the perceived interwovenness of a handful of dominant titles within the genre, which forms a basis to see how this research's corpus differs. Yet, while major generic experiences allow to more concretely analyse *if* other forms of player experience occur within *Paratopic* and *Eastshade* - and in what ways they differ - they do not illuminate how these experiences are evoked. To address this problem, this research is guided by the following concepts of the 'lyric, dramatic, and epic position', 'affordances of aspects of actions', and 'patterns of spatial use'.

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<sup>31</sup> Everydayness here does not necessarily refer to the mundane. Rather, it is an experience that raises questions about human conditions by communicating with players as everyday social beings, instead of magical warlocks, supersoldiers or other more fantastical entities.

<sup>32</sup> Farooq Sheikh, "Subjectivity, desire and theory: Reading Lacan" in *Cogent Arts & Humanities*4 (2017), DOI: 10.1080/23311983.2017.1299565, 9.

## 2. Positions, affordances, and spaces

This chapter links three concepts that play a dominant role in analysing how the corpus' formal elements allow for overlapping or differing player experiences to be brought forward. In 2.1, I expand on 'the lyric, dramatic, and epic position' as a guidance to better differentiate between several player positions of engagement (i.e., what is the player's attitude towards the game?) . 2.2 Focuses on 'affordances of aspects of actions' as a means to analyse dynamics between positions of engagement and the formal elements within a game (i.e., through which in-game means does the player engage with the game's world?). Lastly, 2.3 draws on 'patterns of spatial use' to more concretely specify the types of in-game environments that are evoked/constructed through a game's formal elements (i.e., how does the gamespace stimulate specific forms of engagement?) .

### 2.1 The lyric, dramatic, and epic position

Opening up Deleuze's cinematograph categories of the time-image, the movement-image, and the thought-image to be suitable for ergodic elements - which require nontrivial effort in order for the text to reveal itself -<sup>33</sup> is what Joost Raessens and Chiel Kattenbelt refer to as the lyric, dramatic, and epic position. These three concepts are described as different modes of player engagement, ranging from an observative and emotional (lyric) , action-motivated (dramatic) , and a reflective, contemplative attitude towards the game-world (epic) .<sup>34</sup>

The lyric position, thus, can be interpreted as an emotional orientation towards - and affective perception of - phenomena within the text. This does not only entail narrative and formal elements but also affects ludic constructions, given that the lyric position of the player within a string of actions potentially influences both the string as well as its outcome. I would argue that in many cases, it is the presence or absence of a lyric position that colours the player's actions, as the way in which we relate to the playing-field, in relation with the possibilities that we are given, shapes how we behave amongst its elements. The dramatic position entails the player's movements throughout the text: the things she does from an ergodic, senso-motorical perspective through physical button-commands, and mental processes that involve strategic considerations. Raessens and Kattenbelt argue how typical it is for the medium of videogames to stimulate reflexes in favour of reflection, concluding

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<sup>33</sup> Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 94

<sup>34</sup> Joost Raessens & Chiel Kattenbelt, "Computer games and the complexity of experience" in *DiGRA '03 - Proceedings of the 2003 DiGRA International Conference: Level Up* (Utrecht: Digital Games Research Association, 2003), 422.

that the dramatic commonly overrules lyric and epic positions.<sup>35,36</sup> Lastly, the epic position is in line with what Montembeault and Deslongchamps-Gagnon refer to as Walking Simulator's generic experience of self-reflexive distancing. Thus, the epic position stimulates the player to reflect on the relationship between the events that take place within the text as well as through the player's relationship with the text. Or, as Raessens and Kattenbelt state: "being with the world is at the same time being with yourself."<sup>37</sup>

For the analysis of this thesis, the lyric, dramatic, and epic position allow to more precisely navigate between player experiences. This will not only help to see if the corpus' titles lean more strongly on positions that allow for more poetic engagement with the text - as is argued to be the case for earlier addressed Walking Simulators - but will simultaneously show how these positions co-facilitate divergent player experiences as well as the canonical player experiences as described in 1.2. Where Juul, Montembeault, and Deslongchamps-Gagnon refer to the reduction of action as a stimuli for other, more poetic experiences, the separation between the lyric and the epic by Raessens and Kattenbelt allows for a more precise lense to analyse through.

## **2.2 Affordances of aspects of actions**

As I am interested in the combination of formal elements and player experiences, the previous lense of position-categorisation alone can not be sufficient. While it illuminates if and to what amount player experiences are present, it does not explain through which formal factors they surface. To do so, I will draw upon what Jonas Linderoth introduced as 'affordances of aspects of actions'.<sup>38</sup> Affordances, in this case, refer to the reciprocal relations between a player and her environment. Linderoth gives the example of an empty space between two fitting jigsaw pieces to further specify how an environment needs to have specific properties in relation to an acting organism's physical appearance and capabilities.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 422-423.

<sup>36</sup> This observation shares similarities with Juul's statement that the removal of utility-seeking and optimisation opens up mental capacity for other forms of engagement. And while both parties acknowledge this friction between diverse modes of engagement, and underline how they seemingly work against each other towards one dominant mode, they do not prioritise the same quality of the medium. Where Raessens and Kattenbelt argue how the lyric and epic positions can only flourish once they are liberated from the necessity of action - which restricts the medium as it strongly reinforces formats of classical cinema - Juul states, seemingly contradictory, that it is precisely this removal of action that re-establishes experiences known from other classical forms of media. When positioned aside from each other, Raessens, Kattenbelt, and Juul not only portray dominant arguments about what videogames should and should not be but more compellingly showcase a desire to have the medium provide experiences that differ from those that we have grown accustomed to throughout a broader scope of time.

<sup>37</sup> Joost Raessens & Chiel Kattenbelt, "Computer games and the complexity of experience" in *DiGRA '03 - Proceedings of the 2003 DiGRA International Conference: Level Up* (Utrecht: Digital Games Research Association, 2003), 422.

<sup>38</sup> Jonas Linderoth, "Beyond the digital divide: An ecological approach to gameplay" in *DiGRA '11 - Proceedings of the 2011 DiGRA International Conference: Think Design Play* (Utrecht: Digital Games Research Association, 2011), 6.

This way, an affordance answers the following question: what does an environment allow players to do given the conditions and mechanics to which they are bound to operate?

To help streamline this question, Linderoth distinguishes between exploratory and performative aspects of action. Exploratory aspects of action allow the player to acquire information from her environment, to then create new affordances within the game. An example of this would be orientation through the use of an in-game camera or movement controls. This form of information-gathering enables the player to orientate for further engagement with objects, enemies, non-playable characters, other players, et cetera, as well as scout for directions in which she can potentially continue her playthrough.

It is through the exploratory that the player gets an understanding of what the environment allows or requires her to do, which in turn enables performative aspects of action that interact with - or avoid - the elements that are in sight. Classical examples of performative actions in videogames would be the opening of a chest, the moving of a ladder, or the shooting of a gun, but the concept involves any action that changes the current situation so that new affordances appear. When compared with a game of chess - to slightly generalise the concept - the exploratory would refer to the scanning of the board and analysing its pieces, whilst the performative embodies making a concrete move to transform the current situation in order to open up new possibilities.

By analysing the corpus' formal elements based on their allowance for exploratory or performative gameplay, I aim to recognise how these elements encourage either the lyric, dramatic, or epic position of the player, and how this differs from - or shares similarities with - previous observations of the genre. What elements cause the player to act exploratory in order to engage performative, and what causes her to act performative to open up new affordances to explore? Additionally, it gives the possibility to broaden the idea of what constitutes as performative, as progress does not necessarily revolve a computational progression towards a state of completion but - as illustrated in 1.2 - also involves the solving of non-kinesthetic challenges.

### **2.3 Patterns of spatial use**

Where the combination of the lyric, dramatic, and epic position and affordances through aspects of action is used to analyse player position and behaviour, it is the concept of 'patterns of spatial use' that helps to categorise relations between a player and her surrounding environment. This framework by Georgia Leigh McGregor builds upon what Henry Jenkins referred to as 'spatial stories'<sup>39</sup> and allows us to further "look at how game

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<sup>39</sup> 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.

space and gameplay work together”.<sup>40</sup> Whilst the complete framework consists of six prevalent patterns of spatial use, the following three play a dominant role in this research:

- 1) *Challenge spaces* are environments that directly challenge the player and thus become opponents. This can be through a series of discontinuous platforms that the player needs to traverse, swimming areas that require strategic planning to grasp for air, a puzzle that involves architectural complexity, or other ways in which an environment itself provides a challenge.
- 2) *Nodal spaces* provide structure throughout a game space. They are discrete zones in which the player performs a specific task. Examples would be an auction house to sell items, an inn to find quests, a church to save one’s progress in, or a nursery to get healed. These spaces do not directly impact the gameplay but place boundaries on a player’s capabilities once she is in them, thus making forms of gameplay location specific.
- 3) *Codified spaces* explicitly represent something other than themselves by forming a connection to information that itself is not spatial. They are environments that tell stories through spatial objects (scattered glass signifies a potential incident, footprints signify the presence of another being), or function as symbolic containers that either represent linked capabilities (the way in which clicking an army-building can spawn soldiers in real-time strategy games) or narrative elements (how for example a burned-down environment can be read as a metaphor for a protagonist's character development).

The concept has been used by Montembeault and Deslongchamps-Gagnon to analyse how “nonkinesthetic challenges may be shaped by the game world of a walking simulator.”,<sup>41</sup> but it also proves useful to gain more insight in formal elements that stimulate player positioning. As there is a strong relationship between a game’s spatial use and the player’s use of her affordances (we react to the environment we inhabit with the tools that we have been given) both factors heavily influences the forms in which the lyric, dramatic, and epic position is brought forward.

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<sup>40</sup> Georgia Leigh McGregor, “Situations of Play: Patterns of Spatial Use in Videogames” in *DiGRA '07 - Proceedings of the 2007 DiGRA International Conference: Situated Play* (Tokyo: Digital Games Research Association, 2007), 538.

<sup>41</sup> Hugo Montembeault & Maxime Deslongchamps-Gagnon, “The Walking Simulator’s Generic Experiences” in *Press Start Vol 5 No 2 (2019): Special Issue: Walking Simulators*, Press-start.gla.ac.uk, 2019, accessed December 7th, 2020, 7.

### 3. Methodology

Because of my interest in *Paratopic*, *Eastshade*, and the discourse that surrounds and constitutes them, my methodology embraces Fairclough's description of Critical Discourse Analysis (from here on referred to as CDA) as a way to examine how texts account as "a major source of evidence for grounding social structures, relations, and processes".<sup>42</sup> As there is no unitary theory or set of methods<sup>43</sup> - especially not throughout game studies - a description of my approach to CDA's three key principles is in place, from a textual analysis of specific texts - in this case being the games themselves - to their related discursive and social practices.

The textual analysis takes place in 4.1 (*Paratopic*) and 4.3 (*Eastshade*). Here, I address how those games' formal elements allow for overlapping or differing player experiences to be brought forward when compared to key titles within the genre. The discursive practice (4.2 for *Paratopic* and 4.4 for *Eastshade*) is discussed after the textual analysis of each game and addresses how adherent discourse lays out a general understanding of Walking Simulators. The consequences of such an understanding for reception and development - being its social practice - is discussed in 4.5. Thus, the following questions will be addressed throughout the analysis' three key stages:

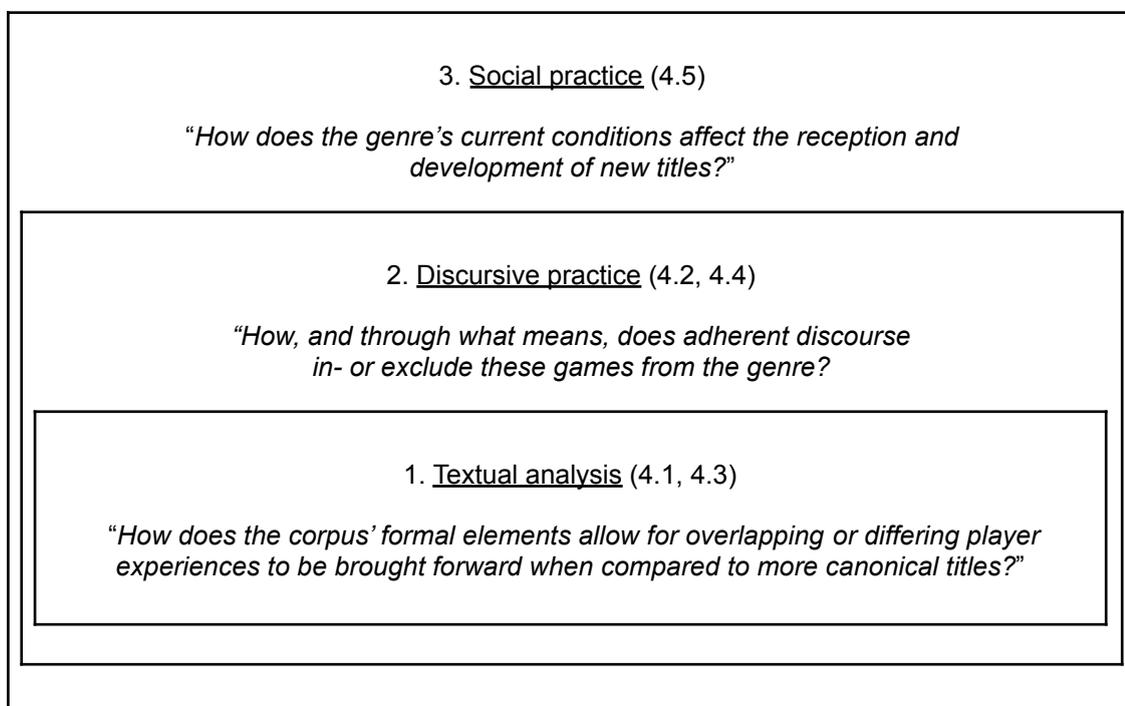


Table 1. *Structure of the analysis.*

<sup>42</sup> Norman Fairclough, *Media Discourse* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), 209.

<sup>43</sup> Marianne Jørgensen & Louise J. Phillips, "Critical Discourse Analysis." in *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, 60-95 (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2002), 60.

### 3.1 Textual analysis

Where traditionally, CDA focuses on non-ergodic media like news publications and political speeches, it does not necessarily exclude the multi-modal qualities of video games.<sup>44,45</sup> Still, due to the medium's ergodic nature, an additional framework is required to efficiently engage with the material. Therefore, CDA's first dimension, the description of the selected texts, will be through a textual analysis as introduced by Clara Fernández-Vara; framing the games in question as both an 'object' and a 'process'.<sup>46</sup> Where *games as an object* refers to the text as a cultural product that carries meaning through its formal qualities, *games as a process* includes the player as an important part of the medium to form a complete text. This approach distinguishes between three areas: game context, game overview, and formal elements.<sup>47</sup> The game context of the corpus - being the social-historical conditions under which these games are played, perceived and produced - has been left out of the textual analysis as it stands in no direct relation with this part's research question. It will not remain untouched though, as motives for production and general reception will be addressed during the analysis of the discursive practice (4.2, 4.4) and interpretations of the overall genre have already been stated in 1.2. Thus, the textual analysis of each game will be the reading of a playthrough that focuses on both player experience as well as the game's rules and goals, mechanics, and spaces.<sup>48</sup>

To streamline the above, my playthroughs will be guided by what Jasper van Vught and René Glas refer to as 'instrumental play', being a playthrough in which the player follows the game's lead.<sup>49</sup> This does not only allow to experience the developers intended playthrough from start to finish<sup>50</sup> but is also in line with previous research that addresses the player experiences and formal elements as described in 1.2. During these playthroughs, my theoretical framework functions as the most dominant lense, enabling me to focus on the relations between positions of engagement and formal elements. Yet, to specify my findings, I will also refer to what Fernández-Vara describes as 'building blocks'. In this research, those include diegetic VS. extradiegetic rules (rules of the world VS rules of the game),<sup>51</sup> save

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 61.

<sup>45</sup> Norman Fairclough, "Critical Discourse Analysis" in *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, J. P. Gee, M. Hanford, eds., 9–21. (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 12.

<sup>46</sup> Clara Fernández-Vara, *Introduction to game analysis (2nd ed.)* (London: Routledge, 2019), 6-7.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 97.

<sup>49</sup> 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.

<sup>50</sup> Presuming that following the game's lead actually leads a player to the game's ending. In rare cases, this intention might not match with a game's design or unforeseen circumstances/bugs, causing the player to unawaresly stray away from the intended playthrough.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 140-141.

games,<sup>52</sup> and level design.<sup>53</sup>

### 3.2 Discursive practices

After analysing *Paratopic* and *Eastshade* on a textual level, I focus on their adherent discursive practice. Both subchapters start with an analysis of publications by the game's developers. This is primarily done through Values Coding to indicate the inferred values, attitudes and beliefs that are expressed.<sup>54</sup> In the case of *Paratopic*, this involves the article "How I Attempted to Redefine the "Walking Sim".<sup>55</sup> For *Eastshade*, it involves the blogpost "Not a Walking Simulator" and a Twitter thread that continues this blogpost's argument.<sup>56,57</sup> After this, the analyses continue with reviews of these titles, descriptors on Steam, and online player commentary. These steps enable the distillation of themes-formations that give a broader understanding of how these titles are generally perceived and discussed, either on their own or in relation to the genre, providing a broader scope of contemporary perceptions of what the genre should and should not entail.

### 3.3 Social practices

As Jørgensen and Phillips state that creative use of communication has the potential to change dominant discourse,<sup>58</sup> the analysed titles - that creatively divert from the genre's norms - and their adherent discursive practice give insight in the genre's current development and reception. Therefore, the third part of the analysis gives a social explanation of the found discursive themes and paints a picture of how the in- and exclusion of certain elements affects the production and reception of both current and future Walking Simulators.

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<sup>52</sup> 142-143.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 181-185.

<sup>54</sup> Saldaña, Johnny, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers (3th ed.)* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications Ltd, 2009), 110-115.

<sup>55</sup> "How I Attempted to Redefine the "Walking Sim" With Paratopic", USGamer.net, accessed March 18th, 2021,

<https://www.usgamer.net/articles/how-i-attempted-to-redefine-the-walking-sim-with-paratopic>

<sup>56</sup> "Not a Walking Simulator", Eastshade.com, accessed April 11th, 2021,

<https://www.eastshade.com/not-a-walking-simulator>

<sup>57</sup> Weinbaum, Danny. Twitter post. February 21, 2021, 9:55 PM,

<https://twitter.com/eastshade/status/1362868362129281024>

<sup>58</sup> Marianne Jørgensen & Louise J. Phillips, "Critical Discourse Analysis." in *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, 60-95 (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2002), 71-72.

## 4. Analysis

Throughout this chapter, I carry out a textual analysis of *Paratopic* (4.1) and *Eastshade* (4.3). Consecutively, I analyse their discursive practices to see how these games are positioned in relation to the genre of Walking Simulators, its canonical titles, and whether or not - and on what ground - they are included in this cluster (4.2, 4,4). Lastly, I address the possibilities and obstacles that come forth from these discursive practices (4.5).

### 4.1 Textual analysis: *Paratopic*

The first-person, Lynchian fever dream *Paratopic* was released on Steam for Linux, MacOS, and Windows in September, 2018.<sup>59,60</sup> Two years later, it also became available in the Nintendo eShop for the Nintendo Switch in August, 2020.<sup>61</sup> Throughout this short and compact single-player game, submerged in a visual style that reminds of the seemingly fargone 32-bit era, the player non-linearly takes on the role of a smuggler, a birdwatcher, and an assassin. Whilst doing so, she traverses a variety of scenes that manage to evoke strong experiences of disorientation and impotence. Yet, before diving into how the game's spaces and mechanics provide such an atmosphere, it feels appropriate to first address the game's name as a starting-point to understand how *Paratopic* differs from the Walking Simulator genre.

#### *The neglectance of a utopic space*

A topic space, as described by Martin Bronwen and Felizitas Ringham, is a location in which both the narrative and the main subject transforms.<sup>62</sup> The term consists of two different categories: paratopic and utopic spaces. In a paratopic space, a qualifying test occurs. It is an environment that requires competence from a story's protagonist. Prevalent examples within the medium of videogames would be a room in which a final boss is challenged, or where the protagonist needs to obtain a game-changing item through trial.<sup>63</sup> A utopic space, on the other hand, refers to the primary location where the object of the quest is at stake, like

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<sup>59</sup> "Paratopic", Store.steampowered.com, accessed March 17th, 2021, <https://store.steampowered.com/app/897030/Paratopic/>

<sup>60</sup> Earlier that year, previous versions had already surfaced on Itch.io. Throughout the months, and partly based on feedback from other players, its developers kept modifying the game until they released The Definitive Cut in September.

<sup>61</sup> "Paratopic", Nintendo.nl, accessed March 17th, 2021, <https://www.nintendo.nl/Games/Nintendo-Switch-download-software/Paratopic-1822103.html>

<sup>62</sup> Martin Bronwen & Felizitas Ringham, *Dictionary of Semiotics* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2000), 135.

<sup>63</sup> Given the limitations of this thesis, I can not fully address the ways in which paratopic spaces relate to the medium of videogames. A cutscene in which the protagonist undergoes a narrative-changing challenge is not the same as a safe but playable version of the scene like in *Paratopic*, or one in which there is an actual risk of losing, and thus a call upon the player's competence.

a fortress or an island that holds something the protagonist desires. Utopic spaces commonly embody much larger areas that include - or are adjacent to - paratopic spaces but lack the presence of a narrative-changing, qualifying test.

From a surface perspective, entire Walking Simulators seem to be built around one utopic space and often avoid paratopic spaces through clever use of story-telling. *Gone Home*, for example, centers around the protagonist's family home and relies on narration and environmental storytelling to inform the protagonist - and thus the player - about events outside of what is currently happening. Similarly, *Firewatch* unfolds in the Wyoming wilderness, and both *Proteus* and *Dear Esther* are strictly bound to their islands. *Paratopic*, in contrast, uses a broad variety of locations to establish its three differing storylines without ever directly showcasing the utopic space that encapsules them. Where canonical titles use a utopic space to provide an understanding of previous paratopic spaces - but do not allow the player to first-hand experience those particular events - *Paratopic* appears to show both paratopic and non-topic spaces to provide an understanding of the utopic outside-world whilst never actually granting access to it. To better understand this dynamic, a more detailed description of said spaces and their relation to the game's mechanics and unfolding player experience is required.

#### *Paratopic's spaces, mechanics, and experience*

At first sight, the time of day, geographical location, and decoration of *Paratopic's* spaces differ widely and do not appear in direct relation to each other. Nonetheless, all of them are connected through a red thread of absent wealth. The filling station the player encounters is scarcely stocked, hotel rooms are decaying, forest paths are blocked by abandoned cargo containers, and all is drenched in a saturated colour palette that underlines how these environments are the remnants of a brighter, more prosperous time. This interpretation gets strengthened through in-game dialogue, as non-playable characters give brief insights in the area's adjacent locations, current economic condition, and societal morale.



Image 1. *Inside a bathroom stall.*<sup>64</sup>

While these visual and textual elements credibly evoke a fragmented but general understanding of the harsh living conditions that come with this fictional world, it is by the jump cut-esque manner through which the game's spaces are introduced that the feeling of disorientation really comes to flourish. One moment, the player is at an American diner, the other she stands in front of an elevator, only to eventually find herself positioned amongst pine trees and rock formations. By reducing player control through this unexpected changing of scenes, the game continuously does an appeal on its affordances of exploratory action due to a frequent recurring need for the player to reposition herself and understand the environment anew. The effect is a lack of habituation. It is never directly clear what these spaces ask of the player to do, nor can she backtrack previous progress to acquire a more concrete perspective.

To add more fuel to this disorienting fire, *Paratopic* regularly changes what the player can and can not do depending on the scene in which she appears. Like with the abrupt change of scenery, this change of mechanics also brings forward the need to re-contextualise, as all of a sudden the player drives a car, holds a gun, or strikes up a conversation. Where, for example, *What Remains of Edith Finch* carefully establishes a context that clarifies what character the player embodies, *Paratopic* does not blatantly signal whether we are playing as the smuggler, birdwatcher, or assassin. Instead, it uses its exchanging environment and mechanics to give a probable interpretation of the situation and thus the avatar the player embodies.

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<sup>64</sup> Arbitrary Metric, *Paratopic*, Steam, Microsoft Windows, 2018.

At first, categorising *Paratopic*'s spaces according to their patterns of spatial use would give a description of the game as a continuous string of nodal spaces. Each separate location serves one dominant mechanic that is only available then and there, making forms of gameplay location-specific. Yet, it is the game's recurring ambiguity that causes its environments to share qualities with codified spaces. Besides signalling snippets of its narrative these spaces also address the player's expected role and attitude. When suddenly positioned behind the wheel of a driving car, the player drives it over the dark, daunting road in front of her. When carrying a camera, she scouts for a prominent red bird that keeps flying away. When all of a sudden holding a gun, she fires it at the first unexpected encounter with another being. Because the game provides the bare minimum of those mechanics, combined with a lack of context and situations or environments that do not require complicated actions, an epic, self-reflexive position pushes itself to the foreground. Thus, questions arise concerning the player's own actions, as the motives of the character that she inhabits are not only clouded but also not necessarily her own. This way, *Paratopic* showcases how the epic position can be brought forward through the dramatic, instead of being repressed by it.

It is tempting to classify this lack of agency as yet another example of Walking Simulator's generic experience of fatalism. And while fatalism plays a dominant role in canonical Walking Simulators,<sup>65</sup> it hardly ever stems from a feeling of impotence. In these titles, the player prominently scouts a more static environment that forms the aftermath of an event of interest. *Paratopic*, instead, replaces the player position of a fatalist spectator with a impotent participant. Its events are unavoidable - with very little room for the player to approach them differently than intended - as they are programmed to unfold through ergodic participation. This potentially causes a sense of fatalism after an in-game event but fails to do so during its unfolding as the player is actively involved. She does not hear of a shooting. She aims and shoots a gun. She does not see flashbacks of a long car-ride in the dark. She cruises through the barren night. She does not hear of a paratopic space. She participates in one.

### *A second shot*

The above paints a general description of the game on a first playthrough but does not yet conclude the end of the instrumental run. Completely in line with previous examples of the game's urge to re-contextualise is the achievement screen that appears after its first completion. On it, the player sees a variety of icons that refer to actions she did or did not do

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<sup>65</sup> Hugo Montembeault & Maxime Deslongchamps-Gagnon, "The Walking Simulator's Generic Experiences" in *Press Start Vol 5 No 2 (2019): Special Issue: Walking Simulators*, Press-start.gla.ac.uk, 2019, accessed December 7th, 2020, 12.

accompanied by empty slots. This, in turn, encourages another, more explorative playthrough. Where during the first playthrough the game - and/or transgressive needs - might tempt the player to engage in what previously were non-kinesthetic challenges, it is by implementing this achievement model that it specifies their existence. By unexpectedly injecting a concrete call for a more goal-oriented approach, the game re-opens the dramatic positioning that had been narrowed earlier through added extradiegetic rules. The effect is a rebranding of the game's environments to challenge spaces that form environmental puzzles breathing with purposeful secretiveness. Where they at first embodied codified spaces concerning the overall narrative, on later playthroughs they not only continue to promise a further understanding of this narrative but also harbour those very concrete achievements. The result is a form of utility-seeking that is very much in line with one's attitude during a treasure hunt, as the player tries to track down in which scenes and throughout which interactions those achievements can surface.

While it is quite common for achievement-hunting to surface within the genre,<sup>66</sup> it does underline the fragility of game spaces. A player's attitude towards the game, or the eventual addition of a mechanic, can easily transform these spaces from one category to another. What separates *Paratopic* from the flock is the decision to show these achievements only after a first run, making sure that they do not directly interfere with previous attitudes.

### *Non-generic experiences*

Besides experiences of disorientation and impotence not playing a dominant role in more-discussed titles, these experiences consequently and successfully block a sense of peacefulness that has become expected throughout the genre. Therefore, *Paratopic* shows how the epic position does not necessarily require the idyllic, non-threatening environment that is so easily envisioned with moments of contemplation. Whilst it is true that the game - in line with canonical titles - never really puts the player at risk of losing, it does continuously evoke the dreadful feeling that something wrong, any minute now, can happen. Where canonical titles might cause voyeuristic and intimate experiences through engagement with objects that refer to other characters and events - and cause a lyrical positioning in the process - *Paratopic* circumvents this by putting the player not as a spectator in a moment *after* particular events but right in the middle of them, as a participatory force in a paratopic space. On paper, this might read as a dominant dramatic positioning. In reality, this quickly gets overshadowed by an epic positioning due to the game's use of tempo and lack of direct

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<sup>66</sup> "Achievement Guide for Firewatch", Steamcommunity.com, accessed March 31th, 2021, <https://steamcommunity.com/sharedfiles/filedetails/?id=861640643>; "The Stanley Parable- Achievement Guide", Steamcommunity.com, accessed March 31th, 2021, <https://steamcommunity.com/sharedfiles/filedetails/?id=206099649>

repetition of earlier performative actions, as those are only sparsely available and far-between.

To summarise, when it comes to similarities between *Paratopic* and canonical titles, the generic experiences of self-reflexive distanciation and purposeful secretiveness are very much present. Its genre-typical slower pacing - excluding a few moments of direct action - allows for the epic position to dominantly be brought forward and thus have the player reflect on the game-world and her own participation. More obvious but not to be ignored surface similarities would be the game's use of first-person perspective, stripped-down mechanics, and strong focus on narrative. Differing from other Walking Sims and even challenging previous understandings of the genre is the large absence of peacefulness and its accompanying feeling of safety. Where a feeling of safety is commonly attributed to a lack of optimisation and utility-seeking, as this potentially reduces the pacing of a game, *Paratopic's* spaces and mechanics show us ways in which opposing experiences like disorientation, impotence, and a sense of dread can still flourish despite the removal of said elements.

#### **4.2 Discursive practice: *Paratopic***

This subchapter entails an analysis of the article "How I Attempted to Redefine the "Walking Sim", written by Doc Burton, one of *Paratopic's* developers. Following this, is an analysis of the game's reviews, granted descriptors, and player commentary. The analysis sketches an understanding of how the game is perceived, both by one of its authors and its public, and how this relates to an understanding of the genre of Walking Simulators as a whole.

##### *Devoid of life and in need of restoration*

"How I Attempted to Redefine the "Walking Sim" was published on USGamer.net in 2018.<sup>67</sup> Most prominent in Burton's article is the conviction that Walking Simulators lack the capability to let the player truly experience the events and societal themes they set out to explore.<sup>68</sup> His explanation of this is bound to a second conviction that the genre - unlike 'good' examples from the medium - is devoid of what he calls "life",<sup>69</sup> which ought to be evoked through avoidance of narration and voyeurism in favour of experience through mechanics.<sup>70</sup> Burton portrays an understanding of the genre as uneventful, stale, and above

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<sup>67</sup> "How I Attempted to Redefine the "Walking Sim" With Paratopic", USGamer.net, accessed March 18th, 2021,

<https://www.usgamer.net/articles/how-i-attempted-to-redefine-the-walking-sim-with-paratopic>

<sup>68</sup> Appendix A2: Fragments and codings of "How I Attempted to Redefine the "Walking Sim" With Paratopic": A2b, c, d, i, k.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, f, h.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, d, e, g, i, j.

all distant from its players. In an attempt to fix this broken phenomenon, he and his co-developers implemented a broad variety of mechanics into the game - which enable “verbs” as performative actions -<sup>71</sup> whilst trying to keep some of the genre’s characteristics intact. Sadly, the article does not define what those characteristics might be, besides - as is commonly ascribed to Walking Simulators - the game having an ‘interesting subject matter’.<sup>72</sup>

While Burton credits *Dear Esther* for being a beautiful, well-written game that deserves to be played by everyone at least once, he simultaneously dismisses the succeeding genre as a lesser experience within the medium.<sup>73</sup> In line with Juul, Burton addresses a distance between the object and the player, which, to him, obstructs the medium’s potential to let one walk into another’s shoes.<sup>74</sup> With this comes the proposition that a more complete form of empathy or relatability requires first-hand participation in a crucial event, something that - as discussed in 4.1 - is rather rare within the genre. Because of this, to Burton, Walking Simulators are inefficient to further include and truly discuss pressing societal themes within the medium.

#### *Neither a “real” Walking Sim nor “really” about poverty*

Despite Burton's positioning being a familiar one when it comes to critical voices concerning Walking Simulators, his strong, generalising statements and honest intentions do not echo in *Paratopic*'s overall reception. While at times referred to as a Walking Simulator, either in reviews, comments or through tagging systems,<sup>75</sup> the majority of reactions to *Paratopic* do not hail the game as a refreshing breeze throughout the genre. Most commonly, the discourse, when mentioning Walking Sims, shares similarities with a single line from a TheVerge.com review that states how *Paratopic* “fits loosely into the walking game genre”.<sup>76</sup> Where one article differentiates the game from the genre due to its frequent displays of

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid, e.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, b.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, c.

<sup>75</sup> “The Bird Watcher, the Smuggler, and the Assassin - Paratopic”, Horrorobsessive.com, accessed March 19th, 2021, <https://horrorobsessive.com/2019/09/24/the-bird-watcher-the-smuggler-and-the-assassin-paratopic>; “Paratopic - Walking simulator ft. Twin Peaks”, YouTube.com, accessed March 19th, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T7CePvnUfa4>; “Paratopic (Nintendo Switch) An Honest Review”, Youtube.com, accessed March 20th, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8d0E36Naao8>; “Reviews Paratopic”, Steamcommunity.com, accessed April 2nd, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/897030/reviews>; “Paratopic”, Steamspy.com, accessed March 19th, 2021, <https://steamspy.com/app/897030>

<sup>76</sup> “Paratopic is a short, grimy horror game with a style straight out of 1998”, TheVerge.com, accessed March 19th, 2021, <https://www.theverge.com/2018/4/29/17228744/paratopic-horror-exploration-game-tapes-review>

violence<sup>77</sup> - underlining Montembeault and Deslongchamps-Gagnon's central positioning of peacefulness - most commentary does not mention the term. We see this reflected in Steam's tagging system through which users of the platform classify the game. Here, 'Walking Simulator' is one of the lesser added tags:

Indie (69), Surreal (57), Adventure (55), Horror (52), Atmospheric (48), Short (44), Retro (43), Great Soundtrack (38), Experimental (38), Psychological Horror (34), Stylized (34), Dark (23), Walking Simulator (14), Mystery (10), First-Person (8)
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Table 2. Added descriptors of *Paratopic* through Steam's tagging affordance.<sup>78</sup>

When removing descriptors that focus on atmosphere (Surreal, Atmospheric, Dark, Mystery), formal elements (Short, Retro, Experimental, Stylized, First-Person) or production conditions (Indie) the cluster contains the following genre-descriptors: Adventure (55), Horror (52), Psychological Horror (34), and Walking Simulator (14). This lower positioning of the genre - even when ignoring classifications focussed on atmosphere, formal elements and production - signals a perceived distance, rather than a resemblance, between *Paratopic* and the canonical island. This is simultaneously brought forward in the sheer lack of canonical titles in the Steam thread "Games similar to *Paratopic*?" in which short, horror-themed indie games are dominantly recommended.<sup>79</sup> Still, the given that the genre is used as a descriptor signifies that part of the playerbase sees prominent overlapping qualities.

Co-existing with a scarcity of the term Walking Simulator is a lack of discussion surrounding its central theme: poverty. Burton claimed this to be an explored topic throughout the game,<sup>80</sup> even stating it "literally is about the horror of being poor".<sup>81</sup> Where Walking Simulators are generally praised due to their attention to - and foregrounding of - societal themes, the attempts by *Paratopic* to portray the horrors of poverty appear to be largely unnoticed. At the very least, they are barely documented within digital discourse

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<sup>77</sup> "Paratopic haunts the walking sim with verbs and violence", Gamesindustry.biz, accessed March 20th, 2021, <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2019-02-21-haunting-the-walking-sim-with-verbs-and-violence>;

<sup>78</sup> "APP DATA Paratopic", Steamspy.com, accessed April 2nd, 2021, <https://steamspy.com/app/897030>

<sup>79</sup> "Games similar to Paratopic?", Steamcommunity.com, accessed April 2nd, 2021, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/897030/discussions/0/1638662230384552234/>

<sup>80</sup> "How I Attempted to Redefine the "Walking Sim" With Paratopic", USGamer.net, accessed March 18th, 2021,

<https://www.usgamer.net/articles/how-i-attempted-to-redefine-the-walking-sim-with-paratopic>

<sup>81</sup> INDIE GAME MAKERS OPEN UP ABOUT THE MONEY THEY ACTUALLY MAKE",

TheVerge.com, accessed March 20th, 2021,

<https://www.theverge.com/2019/10/9/20903139/indie-game-developers-creators-money-funding>

outside of interviews with its creators and the article *Dream on the Screen* by Astrid Budgor, who beautifully weaves the scenes from *Paratopic* with writings by Ballard, Fischer, and Žižek.<sup>82</sup> Reasons for this absence are unclear, as a wide variety of factors can determine whether or not a topic gets talked about, with the clarity through which a text approaches these subjects being one of its larger determinators. Still, when taking into consideration that our attitude towards the medium shapes the text itself, *Paratopic* not fully being granted - and formally obtaining - the Walking Simulator descriptor potentially causes audiences to approach it with a different analytical tendency than they would have done otherwise.

Even though linkage between *Paratopic* and the genre of Walking Simulators seems fragile in its surrounding discourse, reactions to the game do approach the idea of genre as shifting and non-exclusive. Rather than this being a conscious decision, *Paratopic* appears to be such an enfant terrible that, to many, there seems to be no other way than to describe the game through non-exclusive terms, instead of welcoming it between its firmly categorised predecessors.

### 4.3 Textual analysis: *Eastshade*

Positioning itself thematically different from *Paratopic* is the first-person, idyllic daydream *Eastshade*. This single-player game by Eastshade Studios was released on Windows, Xbox One, and Playstation 4 throughout 2019.<sup>83</sup> In it, the player undergoes a peaceful stroll through an identically named island that harbours lush forests, broad mountainscapes and soothing shores.<sup>84</sup> The game's vanilla fantasy-approach vividly reminds of Tolkien's The Shire. Yet, where the latter is swarmed by pipe-smoking halflings, *Eastshade* is inhabited by well-dressed anthropomorphic animals.<sup>85</sup> The player character - a similar beastlike creature whose physical appearance stays out of view - is an off-shore painter. Her goal is to capture four of her departed mother's favorite places on canvas. To achieve this takes about ten hours of play and - by departing from the island - completes *Eastshade*'s instrumental run. Alternatively, the player can choose to stay a little longer, wrap up unfinished side-quests or simply wander amidst the game's bloomy scenery.

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<sup>82</sup> "Dream on the Screen | Paratopic", Heterotopiaszine.com, accessed March 20th, 2021, <http://www.heterotopiaszine.com/2018/05/29/dream-screen-paratopic/>

<sup>83</sup> "Eastshade", Eastshade.com, accessed April 8th, 2021, <http://www.eastshade.com/eastshade/>; "Eastshade", Store.playstation.com, accessed April 8th, 2021, [https://store.playstation.com/nl-be/product/EP3567-CUSA16966\\_00-0000000EASTSHADE;](https://store.playstation.com/nl-be/product/EP3567-CUSA16966_00-0000000EASTSHADE;) "Eastshade", Microsoft.com, accessed April 8th, 2021; <https://www.microsoft.com/nl-nl/p/eastshade/9plcr0fr564k>

<sup>84</sup> Throughout the analysis, *Eastshade*, when written in cursive, refers to the game, where Eastshade, written in non-cursive, refers to the island.

<sup>85</sup> The game also features, yet hardly ever foregrounds, realistically scaled non-anthropomorphic birds, mammals and fish as part of its overall scenery.

### *Eastshade's spaces, mechanics, and experience*

The game's eurocentric fantasy aesthetic immediately sparks a feeling of familiarity in those who are accustomed to the genre.<sup>86</sup> Whilst the player has never visited these specific woods, cabins, and riversides, she has seen similar vistas throughout other media. Consequently, the game provides the comfort of recognition from the very start; a given that gets enhanced by the stereotypically gentle harps, violins, choirs and woodwind instruments that make up the game's overall soundtrack. This way, *Eastshade's* introductory visual and musical elements form the starting point of its spun-out approach to peacefulness, as its mechanics and narratives simultaneously rely on both recognition and comfort.

Fully front and centre throughout *Eastshade* is how it addresses the player's mental map of the island. The player is continually asked to memorise her surroundings and capture not only sights that appeal to her, or are significant for the game's main-quest, but also - as she is a painter by trade - to be on the lookout for vistas that resonate with the island's inhabitants. Due to this, the game's explorative aspects of actions take the front seat and are alternately used for recognising new stimuli (informal exploration) and scouting for specific items or sightings (goal-oriented exploration). To avoid having the player aimlessly dwell all-over the place, thresholds are positioned to ensure steady progression. For example, in order to cross a toll bridge that blocks the road, the player needs to acquire sufficient currency, which is gathered from NPC's by completing quests that revolve around location-specific scenes or objects. Due to kindred thresholds, the player gradually processes and eventually becomes familiar with *Eastshade's* infrastructure and the day-to-day business of its inhabitants.

Whilst there are challenges throughout the game, a real sense of urgency remains absent. Part of this is because of the earlier described visual and musical aspects but a large amount of this can be ascribed to the game's mechanics. The player can save and load a previous state whenever she pleases, every NPC or creature in the game is either a friend or friendly enough not to cause actual harm, the island's architectural puzzles do not put a playthrough at risk, and given that there is no health-system, there is no risk of fall-damage when climbing steep areas or quickly descending higher spaces. This laissez-faire attitude is also found in the ease of its performative aspects of action. Painting, crafting, conversing, and traversing are made possible through brief button clicks and do not require complicated or time-based input. Neither are they location-specific, enabling the player to freely choose when to engage with them.

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<sup>86</sup> It would be a mistake to assume that every single player is familiar with phenomena like *The Lord of the Rings*, *Dungeons and Dragons*, *The Chronicles of Narnia* or any other form of fantasy media that aesthetically romanticises medieval Europe. Still, this aesthetic - and its habit to situate the Western cultural mythos as familiar to its audience - has had such a central presence in fantasy texts in and outside of Western countries that it is not something I can easily ignore.



Image 2. *Painting a scene.*<sup>87</sup>

### *Utility-seeking and optimisation*

In line with canonical titles, the island embodies a large utopic space that hides sights, items, and architectural riddles that are to be found by the player. Differing from this norm, is how *Eastshade* requires a variety of these findings to be delivered to NPC's in a traditional fetch-quest manner. While these strings of action never involve direct violence, they do provide differing challenges, as at night the outside world becomes non-traversable due to a tremendous decrease in temperature. The effect is a calculative effort from the player that raises preparative questions: How far do I need to go? How much time will this cost me? Are there alternative ways to get there? Can I return safely, or is there a place to find shelter for the night? Given that the game never really punishes you for being outside at night - you are generously transported to the nearest inn, thus only losing time - these questions are, like the majority of *Eastshade*, light and frivolous but nonetheless provide a tactical dimension to the overall experience. Later on, the player can acquire items that further optimise travel like a bicycle, a jacket to stay warm and thus also traverse at night, a zipline to descend to lower places, and a special tea that allows for fast travel. Where utility-seeking and optimisation mainly occur in canonical titles when approached as a speedrun or transgressive challenge, an instrumental run of *Eastshade* evokes the urge to optimally approach time and space due to needed traversal and limiting conditions.

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<sup>87</sup> Eastshade Studios, *Eastshade*, Steam, Microsoft Windows, 2019.

### *Anthropomorphic conditions*

A similar call for utility-seeking is found within the game's dialogue system. Through conversation with the island's inhabitants, the player opens up potential quests, narrative arcs, and other forms of information. Picking different replies leads to different and at times irreversible results. This, in turn, provides a sense of control that obstructs the canonical experience of fatalism, as our choices determine the outcome of several characters' story arcs. In theory, this dynamic could provide a fertile foundation to stimulate the player's lyric and epic positioning, and while the game highly invests in the player's lyric dimension, it struggles to provide conditions that allow for the epic dimension to flourish. This is not because *Eastshade* lacks material worthy of reflection, as the game flirts with a variety of topics that potentially raise questions on our own human condition. Themes like hedonism, sexuality, religion, childcare, having a social safety net, fraud, and difficult family ties are present throughout the game but - and in favour of its overall peacefulness - hardly ever reach a depth or centralised moment that allows the player to more fully digest them. Part of this is due to the game presenting these theme's solely through brief dialogue-trees, letters or books. Despite pulling the occasional emotional string and thus influencing the player's lyric positioning, this textual focus ignores forms of environmental storytelling that have been so dominant in titles like *Gone Home*, *Firewatch*, and *What Remains of Edith Finch*. Therefore, the player is told about the effects of her actions but very rarely shown their outcome.<sup>88</sup> Because of this, generic experiences like voyeurism and everydayness are only - if at all - slightly present since the player never enters environments that mirror the game's narrative's themes. This disconnect between narrative and environment causes the island to appear lively - as there is plenty to be found - but not lived in. Where the player - as is common within Walking Simulators - is unable to make an impact on its physical surroundings, so too - and unlike the genre - are its characters bound to a hollow existence, surrounded by unpersonalised material conditions that fail to ground the social themes found throughout their dialogues.

### *Touch-and-go*

In short, *Eastshade* shares many surface level similarities with canonical titles in the Walking Simulator genre, yet brings forth very few of the cluster's generic experiences. The game is filled to the brim with formal elements that cause a sense of peacefulness and purposeful secretiveness but avoids delving into experiences like fatalism, everydayness, and self-reflexive distanciation. While there are rare moments throughout an instrumental playthrough that have the potential to evoke said experiences, *Eastshade* merely brushes

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<sup>88</sup> Slight exceptions to this would be quests like 'An Unsuitable Parent' and 'Toma's Apples' that - depending on the player's choices - do minimally impact the game world by repositioning NPC's.

over them in favour of its warm, escapist character. Therefore, the game does not appear as a title that sets out to conceive a considered approach to social themes. Instead, it uses stripped-down mechanics and a gentle pacing that are equally found in Walking Simulators to construct an idyllic haven, rather than a way to address one specific theme like, for example, grief, love, sexuality or poverty.

#### **4.4 Discursive practice: *Eastshade***

Similar to the subchapter concerning *Paratopic*'s discursive practice, this part analyses two online publications by *Eastshade*'s developer Danny Weinbaum, reviews of the game, and comments and genre-classifications as found in *Eastshade*'s Steam section.

##### *Not a Walking Simulator*

Two years before the release of *Eastshade*, Weinbaum published a brief blog post titled “Not a Walking Simulator”.<sup>89</sup> In it, he distinguishes the game from the genre, which he describes as inherently non-violent and lacking in mechanics, progression, and goals to fully embrace an envisioned atmosphere.<sup>90</sup> He continues to paint the genre as non-responsive<sup>91</sup> - meaning that the gameworld does not react according to the choices the player makes - and claims its titles to be telling one controlled and distilled storyline.<sup>92</sup> Throughout the years, Weinbaum seemingly never shifted his stance when it comes to *Eastshade* not belonging to this grouping. In a Twitter thread, started on the 19th of February, 2021, he addresses his discontent with the label; not because of the term itself but because describing *Eastshade* as one does a disservice to what he perceives to be the genre.<sup>93</sup> Throughout a few tweets, Weinbaum explains how a variety of reviewers crown *Eastshade* as a title that “fixes the genre”,<sup>94</sup> which - not unlike *Paratopic*'s Doc Burton - suggests it has been broken since its emergence. Weinbaum clearly rejects this sentiment,<sup>95</sup> but does perceive the genre to be uncompromisingly static, as to him the inclusion of RPG-elements already causes a title to be excluded from the overall cluster.<sup>96</sup>

Like Weinbaum, a small number of Steam users feel the urge to argue against *Eastshade* being labelled a Walking Simulator. On *Eastshade*'s Steam forum, the inclusion of more mechanics and dynamics - like how being outside at night can cause the player to faint and

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<sup>89</sup> “Not a Walking Simulator”, Eastshade.com, accessed April 11th, 2021, <https://www.eastshade.com/not-a-walking-simulator>

<sup>90</sup> Appendix A3: Fragments and codings of “Not a Walking Simulator”: A3a.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, A3b.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, A3c.

<sup>93</sup> Weinbaum, Danny. Twitter post. February 21, 2021, 9:55 PM, <https://twitter.com/eastshade/status/1362868362129281024>

<sup>94</sup> Appendix A4: Fragments and codings of @eastshades Twitter Thread, A4a.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, A4b.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, A4a.

be transported to the nearest inn - is presented as evidence for exclusion.<sup>97</sup> Similarly, in the thread “so this is basically... a walking simulator?” it is argued that the appearance of puzzles, tasks, and backtracking excludes *Eastshade* from being categorised as one.<sup>98</sup> This urge to exclude does not seem to stem from an outspoken contempt towards the genre. Instead, it involves the idea that this classification fails to truly describe the complex text that is *Eastshade*. Because of this, the suggestion of the game being a combination of established genres is very much present - and even lead to a curated list titled “Games, even remotely, resembling Eastshade”.<sup>99</sup> While the lists does describe various genres to be *Eastshade*-adjacent, and also features canonical examples of Walking Simulators, the term ‘Walking Simulator’ is noticeably absent in its description -<sup>100</sup> as if merely noticing the genre colours one’s impression too heavily.

### *Not unlike a Walking Simulator*

Besides the cases noted above, most Steam users do not seem to share this urge to exclude and differentiate. Of all the tags that are ascribed to the game on the platform, ‘Walking Simulator’ hovers near the front as found in the table below.

<p>Exploration (152), Relaxing (150), Open World (147), Beautiful (143), Atmospheric (132), Adventure (110), Walking Simulator (98), First-Person (81), Singleplayer (78), Indie (67), Colorful (64), Casual (57), Nature (57), Interactive Fiction (45), RPG (42), Story Rich (25), Fantasy (22), Great Soundtrack (15), Survival (11)</p>
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Table 3. *Added descriptors of Eastshade through Steam’s tagging affordance.*<sup>101</sup>

When stripping the table from descriptors that focus on atmosphere (Relaxing, Beautiful, Atmospheric, Casual), formal elements (Open World, First-Person, Singleplayer, Nature, Story Rich, Great Soundtrack) or production conditions (Indie) the cluster contains the following genre-descriptors: Exploration (152), Adventure (110), Walking Simulator (98), Interactive Fiction (45), RPG (42), Fantasy (22), and Survival (11). Leaving aside questions concerning the legitimacy of Exploration, Interactive Fiction and Fantasy as videogame

<sup>97</sup> “It’s the first time I died in a walking simulator”, Steamcommunity, accessed April 11th, 2021, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/715560/discussions/0/2995422855900195075/>

<sup>98</sup> “So this is basically... a walking simulator?”, Steamcommunity, accessed April 11th, 2021, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/715560/discussions/0/1640927348811041989/>

<sup>99</sup> “Games, even remotely, resembling Eastshade”, Steamcommunity, accessed April 11th, 2021, <https://steamcommunity.com/sharedfiles/filedetails/?id=2102982281>

<sup>100</sup> The description limits itself to Adventure, Exploration, Family Friendly, First-Person, Hidden Object, Open World, Platformer, Point & Click, Puzzle, Quests, Third-Person.

<sup>101</sup> “APP DATA Eastshade”, Steamspy.com, accessed April 11th, 2021, <https://steamspy.com/app/715560>

genres,<sup>102</sup> it becomes clear that *Eastshade* for many shares dominant qualities with the Walking Simulator genre. This is echoed in the Steam thread “Any other game even remotely like *Eastshade*”.<sup>103</sup> In it, titles like *Dear Esther*, *Firewatch*, *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*, and *What Remains of Edith Finch* appear amongst other peaceful and explorative games like *Walden, a Game* (USC Game Innovation Lab & Tracy Fullerton, 2017), *Yonder* (Prideful Sloth, 2017), and *Abzu* (Giant Squid, 2016). Most dominant throughout this thread is the prioritising of games that lack violence in favor of a peaceful atmosphere, rather than a similar approach to story, quests or an open world.

As mentioned earlier through Weinbaum's tweets, reviewers often classify *Eastshade* as a Walking Simulator. Where some do this without a doubt, with occasionally mentioning the light inclusion of various mechanics known from other genres,<sup>104</sup> others are a bit more careful but do conclude that the label underlines the game's core.<sup>105</sup> Centered in those reviews - and similar to the popular Steam thread - is a focus on the game's lack of violence, use of first-person camera, peaceful setting and slow pacing. What is interesting about this, is that to those reviewers the lack of a singular theme does not exclude the game from the genre, whereas to nay-sayers the mere inclusion of lighter mechanics does. In ways, this would suggest that, in the case of *Eastshade*, many do not see a diverging type of story-telling as a reason to exclude it from the genre, whilst a diverging use of multiple mechanics arguably would.

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<sup>102</sup> This diversity of descriptors could bring us once more to King's and Krzywinska's plea for a clearer separation between platform, genre, mode, and milieu. Personally though, I read Steam's tagging affordance as a casual conversation about a title, not as a be-all end-all description. Its multitude of elements - brought forward by a multitude of people - tries to convey an image that, for as good as it gets, is close to the actual game. If anything, it shows precisely what genre is capable of: guidance, not containment.

<sup>103</sup> “Any other game even remotely like *Eastshade*?”, Steamcommunity.com, accessed April 11th, 2021, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/715560/discussions/0/1631916887490159479>

<sup>104</sup> “If you need to go for a walk ... why not wander around a video game?”, TheGuardian.com, accessed April 15th, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2020/apr/16/video-games-escape-lockdown-walk-around-virtual-landscapes>; “*Eastshade*, Walking-Sim Has You Traveling And Painting Environments”, Oneangrygamer.net, accessed April 15th, 2021, <https://www.oneangrygamer.net/2018/02/eastshade-walking-sim-traveling-painting-environments>; “*Eastshade* Review”, Wel-played.com.au, accessed April 15th, 2021, <https://www.well-played.com.au/eastshade-review>; “Review: *Eastshade* - PS4”, accessed April 15th, 2021, <https://pureplaystation.com/review-eastshade-ps4>; “*Eastshade* wants you to “go slow and chase the butterflies”, Indiegamewebsite.com, accessed April 15th, 2021, <https://www.indiegamewebsite.com/2019/01/08/eastshade-release-date>

<sup>105</sup> “Live as a Wandering Artist in *Eastshade*”, Mypotatogames.com, accessed April 15th, 2021, <https://mypotatogames.com/live-as-a-wandering-artist-in-eastshade-available-on-pc-now>; “*Eastshade* Review – Every Shade of Colorful”, Techraptor.net, accessed April 15th, 2021, <https://techraptor.net/gaming/reviews/eastshade-review-every-shade-of-colorful>; “*Eastshade* Review”, Nerdburglars.net, accessed April 15th, 2021, <https://nerdburglars.net/review/eastshade>

Throughout the discourse surrounding *Eastshade*, it becomes clear that Walking Simulators are not yet freed of earlier stigma. Besides being partly framed as broken, they are also seen as restrictive, or at the very least bound to specific conditions. To some, the label discredits games that feature a variety of mechanics, without examining the lower forms of complexity through which those games enable them. To others, the label refers to a peaceful, laissez-faire atmosphere that does not necessarily involve a singular engagement with societal themes. Notable is also the absence of explicit arguments on why *Eastshade* would be a Walking Simulator. While the connection is made, either in reviews or through tagging-affordances and recommendations, confrontation with the opposing party does not occur.

#### 4.5 Social practice: The present and future of the Walking Sim

In the subchapters above, I outlined how a greater amount of the genre's ascribed qualities is substantially present in the corpus (summarized below in table 4). At the same time, *Paratopic* and *Eastshade* broaden the genre's prescribed boundaries by implementing earlier unseen elements (see table 5).

	<i>Paratopic</i>	<i>Eastshade</i>
<b>Generic experiences</b>		
Peacefulness		
Purposeful secretiveness		
Fatalism		
Everydayness		
Self-reflexive distancing		
<b>Generic formal elements</b>		
First-person perspective		
Reduced amount of player input		
Stripped-down mechanics		
Narrative-centred		
Narration-driven		
<b>Notably labelled a Walking Simulator</b>		

by its creators		
in online reviews		
through online classification systems		

Table 4. Summarised overlapping qualities found in the analysis.

	<i>Paratopic</i>	<i>Eastshade</i>
<b>Non-generic experiences</b>		
Disorientation		
Dread		
Impotence		
<b>Non-generic mechanics</b>		
Crafting		
Currency		
Dialogue-options		
Quests		

Table 5. Summarised divergent qualities found in the analysis.

Whilst *Paratopic* and *Eastshade* are divergent when it comes to a multitude of factors, they do not fully escape key characteristics that are generally ascribed to the genre. Given their pressing and recognised similarities, these titles form part of the genre’s current landscape and, thus, further expand its experiential potential by introducing a more supple approach to its earlier established framework.

When it comes to the question of how the genre’s current conditions affect the reception and development of new titles, this research shows the answer to be twofold. On one hand, the *Walking Simulator* is expanding beyond its canonical conditions, on the other, it remains exceptionally constrained. Developers build upon and creatively warp the genre’s characteristics to bring forth diverging experiences that extend its experiential potential. This is done without striving too far from a general understanding of the genre, which makes that, on a significant scale, these titles are acknowledged as part of its domain.<sup>106</sup> Consequently,

<sup>106</sup> When questioned by Nico Carpentier in a 2006 interview on the concept of hegemony in society, Chantal Mouffe points out that “The social is always the result of a hegemonic articulation [...] There is always something that has been excluded, so there is no consensus without exclusion.” Our understanding of videogame genres - and their gradual development - is no stranger to this dynamic.

its potential to have players more emotionally and reflectively engage with pressing societal matters relies less strongly on a predetermined formula and already established audience.

Additionally, generic formal elements found in both canonical and non-canonical titles - like the lower demand for ergodic input, first-person camera perspective and a slower pacing of gameplay - play a firmer role as genre-determiner than its addressed foregrounding of narrative and praised, in-depth portrayal of societal themes. Meaning that, whilst crowned as a vehicle for reflective, contemplative player experiences, the genre could just as well function as a harbour for titles that dominantly focus on evoking an observative and emotional mode. Formal elements that continuously stimulate a lyric positioning, as seen in *Paratopic* and *Eastshade*, do not necessarily lead to reflective and contemplative results.

Contrary to the above, restrictions are firmly set in place. When looking at *Paratopic*'s and *Eastshade*'s discursive practices, two dominantly expressed views on Walking Simulators come forward:

1) *Walking Simulators - unlike other genres - are confined.*

The genre is restricted to a reduced amount of mechanics, of which all ought to be engaged with through minimal player input. These mechanics strictly support the player's need to traverse and orientate in favour of the game's storyline. As soon as mechanics occur that are prominently found in other genres - despite their ergodic complexity or role within the game's narrative - the title ceases to be a Walking Simulator.

2) *Walking Simulators are a means to a predetermined atmosphere.*

A slow pacing and lack of direct confrontation forms the basis of the genre's overall peaceful experience. Whilst occasionally dark, it can never be violent. A singular societal theme is optional but not required.

These two views show a strictly specified, formalistic understanding of the genre. Given that, within the games' discourses, something is either a Walking Simulator or not, this perception constrains the genre's flexibility and rejects the idea of a text consisting of transgeneric elements; a freedom that simultaneously is granted to older, more established videogame genres.<sup>107</sup>

This restrictive understanding of Walking Simulators noticeably limits their experiential reach, as a single step out of line easily positions a game into another categorisation.

Therefore, experiences through titles that partly operate outside of these restrictions get

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When a text strikes too far from a general understanding of a genre, it is less likely for a broader audience to embrace it as such - despite one or two present similarities. *Tetris*, to give an exaggerated example, is not seen as a first-person shooter, even though it does - like the genre - rely on the removal of elements to progress.

<sup>107</sup> This, in turn, raises questions concerning the development and metamorphosis of videogame genres in general. Did (previously) established genres face similar restrictive views, and if so, what caused them to either continue, disappear or resurface?

associated with other genres or divergent classifications. The effect is an enforcement of the idea that Walking Simulators, whilst partly acknowledged in the medium's landscape as a separate island, are not "real" games, nor can they ever become one. To be a Walking Simulator is to be restricted at best and broken at worst. To be remotely like a Walking Simulator means to be sterilised through rebranding, which in turn stagnates the genre.

I would not go as far as to state that this hints at a future reduction of videogames that excel in evoking a lyric or epic position by reducing ergodic input. This is, despite being one of its often occurring characteristics, not an exclusive trait of the Walking Simulator genre. Yet, the term 'Walking Simulator' - and with this its conceived societal relevance - is in a threatening position, for its expansive reach relies on - but is vocally excluded from - the ability to think of each individual game as belonging to several genres at once.

## Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I set out to acquire a more detailed understanding of the current conditions that comprise a Walking Simulator. By comparing the more diverging titles *Paratopic* and *Eastshade* on a textual level with canonical titles from the genre and mirroring my findings with their discursive practices, I found that earlier statements concerning what makes a Walking Sim a Walking Sim are more flexible than initially considered.

Because of this, the experiences and formal qualities as addressed in previous research alone provide insufficient support for further research involving the genre. The removal of utility-seeking and optimisation within canonical titles, as addressed by Juul, has shown itself to be considerably less strict concerning the reception of *Paratopic* and *Eastshade*. While both games dominantly feature stripped-down mechanics, the higher amount of different mechanics did not influence these titles' positioning as a Walking Simulator, meaning that a current understanding of the genre allows for ergodic utility-seeking and optimisation outside of the non-kinesthetic or transgressive challenges that have already been addressed through earlier titles. Additionally, the reflective, contemplative experiences that are unearthed by Montembeault and Deslongchamps-Gagnon are shown not to be a necessity either. *Eastshade's* scarcity of moments that allow for an epic positioning even showcases that the genre does not strictly require elements that cause the player to contemplate on events that take place within the text. While this opens up a broad amount of other player experiences, the exclusion of reflective and contemplative engagement simultaneously undermines the idea that the genre unconditionally spearheads a movement of more socially engaged videogames. Thus, continuing to ignore recent and future titles that - like *Paratopic* and

*Eastshade* - challenge our perception of the genre would mean to continue the unjust and almost mythical framing of Walking Simulators as a demarcated island, rather than a fluctuating part of the medium.

Still, even though divergent titles like *Paratopic* and *Eastshade* do appear, the expansion of the genre does not occur smoothly. Where the inclusion of divergent titles goes without conceived forms of friction through tagging-affordances and online reviews, it is the process of exclusion that takes on a more vocal dimension on public fora. Throughout arguments that make a stand against *Paratopic* and *Eastshade* being Walking Simulators, I found a dismissal of the genre to remain active, despite the number of years that have passed since its confinement. Alternatively, when not explicitly discarded as broken or lacking, the genre is prohibited from merging with other genres due to part of the audience's strict - but unspecified - threshold of formal elements. As soon as a title involves a variety of mechanics, despite other present similarities, parts of the gaming community will vocally exclude it from being a Walking Simulator.

However, this research alone can not provide a complete overview of the genre's current conditions. Even though the dismissal of the genre appears to be more vocal than its acceptance, it remains to be seen whether or not its presence will be - or already has been - a drastic influence on the genre's overall development. Given how this research only uses discursive material that is published online, interviewing developers, promoters, and gamers on the genre can provide a more concrete view on accepting and dismissive stances. Similarly, analysing non-canonical titles that do not share the friction that accentuates *Paratopic* and *Eastshade* would issue a more nuanced overview and understanding. Expanding the corpus might also involve social platforms like Twitch, Discord, and Reddit, which - whilst playing their influential part in the gaming community - have not been included in this research as they hosted no direct relations. Respectively, a media-archaeologist approach to videogame genres could help to mirror the current development of Walking Simulators to previous metamorphosis throughout the medium.

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## Appendix

### A1: A brief description of canonical titles

*Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2012)

Whilst exploring an unnamed island in the Hebrides, Scotland, the player listens to a troubled man reading letters addressed to his deceased wife, Esther. By traversing the invisible protagonist across the island, details of Esther's mysterious death are brought forward.

*Gone Home* (Fullbright, 2013)

After arriving at her family home, the player - who embodies the 21-year old Katie - finds it to be abandoned. By exploring the house, she puzzles together not only what happened in her absence but also acquires insight in her family's social dynamics.

*The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe, 2013)

The player finds herself in an abandoned office building. By following or discarding the narrator's directions, she uncovers a multitude of paths, endings, and experiences revolving around - and questioning - autonomy.

*Proteus* (Ed Key and David Kanaga, 2013)

On a procedurally generated island, the player sets out to explore its depths without prescribed goals. Due to its focus on exploration and lack of narration or instructions, *Proteus* positions itself as one of the earliest Walking Simulators that exclusively tells its ambiguous narratives through environmental story-telling.

*Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* (The Chinese Room, SIE Santa Monica Studio, 2015)

The player explores a small, semi-abandoned village in England. Through engagement with glowing spectres, audio logs and environmental clues, she gains detailed information about the narrative's six centred characters and unravels how and why the village's original inhabitants have mysteriously disappeared.

*Firewatch* (Campo Santo, 2016)

By taking on the role of Henry, a new fire lookout in the Shoshone National Forest, the player explores Shoshone's woodlands, the walkie talkie-driven dynamics between Henry and his supervisor Delilah, and Henry's inner turmoil.

*What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow, 2017)

By traversing through her family home, the player - who is in the shoes of Edith Finch - learns about her relatives deaths, and the social structures and beliefs that occurred amidst them. Inside each bedroom, a re-telling of every last moment of her family members occurs, during which the player switches character and thus looks through the eyes of a soon-to-be deceased relative.

**A2: Fragments and codings of “How I Attempted to Redefine the “Walking Sim” With Paratopic”**

<p><u>A2a</u>: “These games are called walking sims because that’s all you do. You walk. You walk forwards. You consider the world around you, if you like, and you walk, and as you walk, a narrator tells you what’s happening, and eventually, you stop walking and the game ends. If you’re lucky, you might experiment with a few light puzzle elements. Some of the horror-themed walking sims, like Amnesia, have running and hiding mechanics as well, but in general, walking sims are very mechanics-light.”</p>	<p>- <i>The majority of Walking Sims provide nothing else but a monologue and the ability to traverse a linear path. Only the exception to this rule adds additional gameplay elements, and if done, it happens sparsely.</i></p>
<p><u>A2b</u>: “Dear Esther is a beautiful game. It’s a well-written game. It’s an astonishing game to listen to. The experience is definitely one worth playing once, but I’m not sure it needed to birth a genre. To a particular breed</p>	<p>- <i>Plenty of societal themes remain underexplored in gaming but Walking Simulators are not the appropriate genre</i></p>

of critic, walking sims are exciting because they focus heavily on storytelling, which means new subjects can be explored, which is awesome if you're tired of Game Number 95472's Brown-Haired Space Marine Committing War Crimes in the Name of Experience Points. How many AAA action games deal in-depth with grief? What about sexuality, disability, or poverty? Not many, I'd wager. So for a lot of people, walking sims were exciting new ground."

A2c: "An awful lot of people aren't fans of the walking sim. I'm one of them. I fell in love with games because I grew up reading wonderful stories about going to other worlds. I loved how games let me escape the pain of my disability by doing wonderful and interesting things. I loved how games put me in another person's shoes, let me try things I'd never be able to do with a body and income like me. I liked games because I liked doing things."

A2d: "There's not a lot of mileage in a game where you walk around and listen to someone tell you a story that happened outside the game. What's the point of listening to someone else's experience instead of having your own? Is it really meaningful to walk into a room and listen to a narrator reading a letter or watching some CG ghosts acting out a more interesting story than 'a person walks?' Sure, the subject matter might not be explored in games, but a topic is only as interesting as its execution, and the uneventful voyeurism of walking sims has a very short shelf-life."

A2e: "In games, the actions you take are called 'verbs.' Walking and shooting are verbs, for instance. The more verbs a game has, the more interesting it is, so to make a walking sim interesting, I reasoned, I'd have to make

*to successfully tackle this.*

*- The strength of videogames - and what is missing in Walking Simulators - is the capability to actively transport the player out of her mundane experiences and into the fantastical.*

*- Walking Simulators replace what could be experienced firsthand by the player with a secondhand experience through narration and voyeurism.*

*- It is the amount of actions that a player can undergo that determines how interesting and thus worth exploring a game is.*

one with an awful lot of interesting verbs. In a sense, it would be more of an anti-walking sim, a conscious decision to do a lot of different things instead of very few things. I don't think people who love walking sims like them for their simplicity, they like them for the interesting subject matter. If I could make a walking game with interesting subject matter but used a lot of unique verbs to explore that subject matter, maybe I'd make a game worth exploring."

A2f: "Walking sims are devoid of life. The games I love are practically bursting with it. Alien: Isolation's titular monster doesn't just stalk you around the station, killing you if it catches you like the monsters in Outlast, it fears your flamethrower. It preys on the other people in the station dynamically—you can trick it into killing enemies for you."

A2g: "A walking sim can really only rely on voice actors to achieve emotional impact. If the narrative and performance aren't up to snuff, a walking sim loses all of its impact. It's so much harder to achieve critical emotional mass when you don't have any mechanics to reflect on."

A2h: "Having conversations—real conversations, not just info dumps—puts you in the world better than a walking sim where you just listen to someone tell you a story that happened to them rather than comment on the story you're experiencing right now."

A2i: "We didn't want to tell players how to feel, we wanted to make them really feel it"

A2j: "I don't know if we fixed the walking sim, because I don't know if you can fix a genre."

- *Good games burst with life. Walking Simulators do not.*

- *Emotional impact through Walking Simulators solely relies on narration.*

- *Good games burst with life. Walking Simulators do not.*

- *Walking Simulators lack the ability to truly evoke an emotional process.*

- *Walking Simulators are a broken, incomplete experience.*

<p><u>A2k</u>: “I wanted to make a game that seemed like a walking sim on the surface, but used its verbs to tell a story instead of exposition. I wanted it to explore subjects that people don’t really talk about, like poverty and violence, and I wanted it to show that violent games aren’t thoughtless. I succeeded in that, and honestly, that’s all I ever wanted. I don’t think that walking sims are great at covering unexplored territory, but that’s okay. I explored how I wanted to.”</p>	<p><i>- Plenty of societal themes remain underexplored in gaming but Walking Simulators are not the appropriate genre to successfully tackle this.</i></p>
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### **A3: Fragments and codings of “Not a Walking Simulator”**

<p>A3a: ‘Eastshade is a non-violent game; however, it’s not a game without mechanics, progression or goals. To me, a walking sim is a game that forgoes these things and focuses solely on atmosphere.’</p>	<p><i>- Walking Simulators are non-violent and lack mechanics, progression, and goals in favor of atmosphere.</i></p>
<p>A3b: “Mechanically, Eastshade is a game that gives players the space to wander. We’ve made an effort to make the world feel alive and responsive as players explore. But there is also a clear sense of direction and progression.”</p>	<p><i>- Walking Simulators or not alive and responsive.</i></p>
<p>A3c: “Story wise, Eastshade is not one particular tale that we were burning to tell. In order to allow the player to live the experiences we let go of orchestrating a controlled storyline and focused on building the world at large. To that end, Eastshade is filled with many little stories; each with their own effects and consequences on the state of the world. If you love the distilled sense of place that some walking sims have, Eastshade has it for you. However, if you weren’t a fan of Dear Esther or</p>	<p><i>- Walking Simulators tell one controlled and distilled storyline.</i></p>

Gone Home, it doesn't necessarily mean you will dislike Eastshade."	
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#### A4: Fragments and codings of @eastshade's Twitter thread

A4a: "Despite my best efforts, I still often read people lauding Eastshade as "finally a walking sim that did it right!" or "I really hate walking sims, but Eastshade really won me over!" Its lovely that they like the game, but it really does a disservice to walking sims. Because... EASTSHADE IS NOT A WALKING SIM! Doing a walking sim right cannot possibly mean throwing out the entire core conceit of the genre! Adding a bunch of RPG mechanics to a walking sim doesn't "fix" the genre, it means its not a walking sim!"

A4b: "Its fine if walking sims aren't someone's cup of tea! But I cannot agree that we "fixed" the genre which brought us games like Dear Esther, Gone Home, and Firewatch, all clearly masterpieces in their own right."

A4c: "To a good walking sim title, the lack of challenge, clearly defined game goals, highly mutable world state, and auxiliary mechanics are not oversights, they are part of the design manifesto."

- *The inclusion of mechanics found dominantly in other titles excludes a title from being a Walking Simulator.*

- *Walking Simulators are not broken and thus do not need to be fixed.*

- *Walking Simulators are carefully crafted following a specific manifesto.*