

Thoughtful Snooping: Agency, Affect and the Walking Simulator

Espionnage réfléchi : le choix du joueur, l'affect et le walking simulator

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Résumé de l'article

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Thoughtful Snooping: Agency, Affect and the Walking Simulator

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Abstract

In the past decade, “walking simulator” has evolved from an insult to a critically and commercially successful genre of games. Through subversive mechanics and an emphasis on immersive, affective storytelling, these games are well-situated to explore LGBTQ+ narratives and queer forms of play (Ruberg, 2019). This paper unpacks the affective implications of games that urge the player to “snoop around” personal spaces, including *Gone Home* (Fullbright, 2013), *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow, 2017), and *A Normal Lost Phone* (Accidental Queens, 2017). After a broad overview of the genre and relevant scholarship, I examine the emotional impact of ludic “snooping”. More specifically, I consider how games centring this mechanic simulate intimacy (while problematizing consent), engage agency through interaction and movement, and harness a disorienting atmosphere in their storytelling. Finally, I reflect on how character identification can be understood in the context of “games for change”, so-called empathy games, and the need to move towards a more thoughtful engagement with queer affect. This paper touches on each of these issues with a broad, interdisciplinary approach rooted in rhetoric, close reading, and queer theory.

Author Keywords

Queer, walking simulator, affect, agency, mechanics, immersion, character identification, empathy

Introduction

You suddenly find yourself in an unfamiliar, deserted place. Where has everyone gone? By examining belongings left behind, can you piece together what transpired? So begins the plot of many “walking simulator” games. The inherent appeal of examining digital objects may not be obvious, but this mechanic often serves as a potent vehicle for affect and character-driven narratives. As a traditionally “feminine”-coded genre (Kagen, 2016), walking simulators are well-situated for subverting patriarchal norms, especially through queer narratives and “queer” play (Ruberg, 2019). Games relying on a mechanic of “snooping around” have particularly interesting implications. How can investigating objects inspire feelings of closeness or even empathy towards absent characters? Is “snooping” ethically neutral, or do embedded values complicate this mechanic?

First, I will briefly examine the context of walking simulators and the hypermasculine charge that they “lack... affective interactivity” (Kagen, 2016). How are these games, in fact, rich in affective potential? How might queer theory introduce a productive lens? With these questions in mind, we

will look at three main components: intimacy, agency, and disorientation. Finally, we will spend more time exploring the dynamics of so-called “empathy games” and the need for a more nuanced approach.

Context: Walking Simulators & Queering Video Games

The “walking simulator”, or walking sim, is a genre with a colourful history. Scholars and critics readily note the term’s roots as a pejorative (e.g. Clark, 2017; Kagen, 2016; Ruberg, 2019). Traditionally, “hardcore gamers dismissed [these games] for their lack of affective interactivity” (Kagen, 2016), and even now most game designers shy away from the term’s associations (Ruberg, 2019, pp. 200–201). However, the term seems to be reclaimed in public discourse, with an abundance of available games and the popular press suggesting that it “may well be the most artful and innovative genre within video gaming” (Clark, 2017). Despite roots in 1993’s *Myst* (Kagen, 2016), the term “walking simulator” became widely known around 2012 (Ruberg, 2019, p. 201).

According to Melissa Kagen, the scorned “lack of affective interactivity” is better understood as a lack of ways to perform hypermasculinity, typically including low agency and players’ relative inability to direct the narrative or display mastery (2016). However, this charge is misleading, as these games can exemplify both affect and a more nuanced interactivity. As a player, one’s experience is centred on “spatial storytelling and exploration... [P]layers wander around a narratively-rich environment without earning points or necessarily accomplishing tasks” (Kagen, 2016). Bonnie Ruberg suggests reflective alternatives such as “lingering” or “observing simulators”, noting that the games are mostly propelled by “emotional, interpersonal challenges rather than boss battles or incoming bullets” (2019, p. 201). Interactivity is possible, but within a different framework. One might consider walking simulators to have more in common with visual novels than first-person shooters.

Is an exploratory style of navigating the world and its narratives the essence of a walking sim, even more than the “walking” itself? I would argue a clear yes. Marie-Laure Ryan’s earlier concept of “internal-exploratory interactivity” could apply as well, particularly in the manner that players express agency by moving through a digital space, “picking up objects and looking at them, viewing the action from different points of view, and trying to reconstitute events” that have occurred (2001). While Ryan’s text far predates the contemporary “walking simulator”, the genre’s predecessor game *Myst* is cited (2001), and these ideas clearly still resonate within the genre and particularly the “snooping” I will later be unpacking. To that end, I am keeping my own definition of “walking simulator” broad and more closely linked to interactivity and narrative styles. You may notice that one of this paper’s focus games, *A Normal Lost Phone*, has no physical “walking” at all. However, keeping Kagen, Ryan and Ruberg in mind, I believe the game’s own form of digital wandering and exploratory storytelling earn it a place in this genre’s conversation.

Before moving too far, I’d like to clarify “affect”. This is a nebulous term generally centred around feelings and emotional experience. However, I specifically nod to Aubrey Anable’s scholarship on the nexus of affect theory and video games, as well as part of her working definition of affect: “the aspects of emotions, feelings, and bodily engagement that circulate through people and things but are often registered only at the... moment of transmission or contact... a way of talking about the myriad ways everyday experience is felt but is not articulated or is inarticulable” (2018, Intro., Affect). In *Playing with Feelings*, Anable emphasizes Tomkins’ work, among other theorists, and

she also highlights “feminist, queer, and subaltern theories of affect”, specifically noting those of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Lauren Berlant, Sara Ahmed, and Sianne Ngai:

Affect in their work is that which *both restricts and makes possible* the notions of personal, collective, and emergent identities. For these theorists, affect is a deeply relational force that attaches itself and is expressed through all kinds of cultural texts. Affect *shapes the surface and very being of subjects and objects* as they come into contact with each other. (2018, Intro., Affect, emphasis added)

While this paper doesn’t delve deeply into affect theories or their history, I wish to foreground the relational and transformative qualities of affect, as well as the ways that embodiment, emotional responses, and identity formation may all be implicated in gameplay.

How else might gender and sexuality enter this conversation? As discussed by Kagen, the walking sim genre “subverts hypermasculine play in its very form” and its games are often “coded as feminine within the discourse because of their content, reception, historical valence and mechanics” (2016). For instance, femininity is generally ascribed to “‘casual’ games” (Ruberg, 2019, p. 202). In contrast to hypermasculine ideals, walking simulators may be interpreted as “an anxious homogeneity of passive non-performance” (Kagen, 2016). As will be later explored, this does not do justice to the genre’s complexity of engagement. However, the fact remains that walking simulators tend to feature feminist and queer narratives, and thus that controversy involving them disproportionately impacts audiences and designers who are not cisgender, straight and male (Ruberg, 2019, p. 186, pp. 202-204). As Ruberg notes, “the implicit stakes of the debate [surrounding walking sims] are deeply tied to issues of gender, sexuality, and identity... [As explored above, e]ven the basic claim that the mechanics of these games are insufficiently game-like has gendered implications” (2019, p. 202). On a broader level, Anable similarly delves into the devaluing of certain genres and aspects of games that are considered “feminine”, as well as so-called “feminine” forms of critique (2018, Intro., Video Games).

Marketing and social factors reinforce notions of a game’s intended audience (Taylor, 2006, p. 101). In that sense, it is perhaps unsurprising that walking simulators with so-called feminine tasks and non-combative goals or other genre subversions would alienate hypermasculine players (see Kagen, 2016; Vist, 2015). However, the genre’s success also reflects hope and creativity. As Ruberg notes, “In walking simulators... lies the potential to imagine visions of difference and resistance through play” (2019, p. 204).

Along that thread, I will be considering both queer narratives and “queerness” in a broader methodological sense. In *Teaching Queer*, Stacey Waite has helped refine my understanding of this lens. Waite notes David Halperin’s definition of “queer” as “*whatever* is at odds with the normal, legitimate, the dominant” (qtd. in Waite, 2017, p. 46). The sheer broadness and flexibility of this term may be in turns “contradictory” and “disorienting”; Waite proceeds to reflect on this while engaging queer pedagogies (2017, p. 46). Waite defines “queer forms” as “non-normative and category-resistant forms of writing that move between the critical and the creative, the theoretical and the practical, the rhetorical and the poetic, the queer and the often invisible normative functions of classrooms”, or in this case, the screen (p. 6). Waite associates “queering” and “queer ways of knowing” with embodiment, challenging normativity, and possibility (2017,

p. 84). In other words, a queer lens extends beyond LGBTQ+ representation to engage with ways of thinking and being (Waite, 2017, e.g. 5).

Ruberg (2019) masterfully applies queer theory to game studies in *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, describing how queer lenses can engage all games, not only those with LGBTQ+ representation, namely: “[q]ueerness and video games share a common ethos: the longing to imagine alternative ways of being and to make space within structures of power for resistance through play”. Ruberg notes an impressive scope that can be discovered through queer design, interpretation, or play, including “queer experience, queer embodiment, queer affect, and queer desire” (2019, p. 1). In many ways, this recalls Mary Flanagan’s “critical play” of the previous decade, which “demand[ed] a new awareness of design values and power relations, a recognition of audience and player diversities, a refocusing on the relational and performative... and a continued and sustained appreciation of the subversive” (2009, p. 261). More specifically, Ruberg’s chapters on affect and movement have proven invaluable to the investigation of queerness in walking simulators.

Walking simulators cover differing situations; several popular titles, for example, emphasize nature. Moving forward, however, I’d like to specifically focus on those that enable (or require) “snooping around” indoors: actively examining others’ personal objects and spaces. Similar to Elise Vist’s use of the term, I believe this would be a valuable “fuzzy set” of games to analyze (2015), although I also refer to it as a subset. Generally, a “snooping” mechanic or emphasis enables the player to learn more about the (typically absent) owner of the space they are investigating. In this paper, we will discuss several contemporary games but focus on three. *Gone Home* (Fullbright, 2013) asks the player to navigate an eerily empty home to deduce why their family is absent. Similarly, in *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow, 2017), the player explores a long-abandoned house to investigate the demise of Edith’s family members. Finally, *A Normal Lost Phone* (Accidental Queens, 2017) engages this concept with a different setting and interface, wherein the player finds an abandoned phone. Instead of sifting through physical belongings, the player examines the phone owner’s digital life: everything from texts and photos to their innermost secrets. The layers of phone-owner Sam’s backstory are unlocked with light puzzle-game elements, such as deducing passwords and codes for different apps.

Let us now delve into the affect of gamified “snooping”. How does this mechanic foster emotional storytelling? How do these games implicate agency and foster atmosphere? In what ways might these feelings be positive or problematic, and how could queer studies enhance our understanding?

Understanding Ludic “Snooping”

Intimacy & Consent

There is an uncanny feeling of intimacy in seeing someone’s home and personal belongings. This is arguably earned, as one’s surroundings can convey considerable information. In a study by Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, and Morris, participants generally deduced a stranger’s personality *more* successfully if they observed their bedroom than if they briefly met (as per previous “zero-acquaintance” studies) (2002). Rather than activating stereotypes from a brief encounter, room observers may notice “identity claims... [and] behavioral residue” by examining the space, including how it is decorated and organized (Gosling et al., 2002, p. 381). While nuances of

different contexts and traits vary, the researchers concluded that “much can be learned about persons from the spaces in which they dwell” (Gosling et al., 2002, p. 297). As in real life, ludic exploration of a personal space may foster understanding of a character who dwells there. This “get to know you” sentiment is not exclusive to traditional walking simulators. Consider one player’s unease at entering another’s *Animal Crossing* home: “[T]his felt weirdly intimate... Yes, we were playing a game... But I suddenly felt like I was imposing. Homes are private places... Of course this wasn’t really a home. I was just buying into the metaphor more strongly than I’d expected” (Totilo qtd. in Isbister, 2016, p. 115). Interacting with objects in a bedroom can be found in other games and visual novels, such as indie titles *missed messages* and *One Night Stand* (He, 2019; Kinmoku, 2016). Overall, perusing belongings can quickly foster a sense of knowing someone.

Scholar Sara Ahmed reinforces this in her book *Queer Phenomenology*, calling moving “a process of becoming intimate with where one is” (2006, p. 11). Similarly, “[I]oving one’s home” is equated with “becoming part of a space where one has expanded one’s body, saturating the space” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 11). Perhaps fittingly, *Gone Home*’s protagonist Katie is arriving to her own home for the first time, as her family recently moved. She should belong there, but doesn’t yet, and she (via the player) pieces together the home’s emptiness by re-orienting herself and examining the objects with which her family has “saturat[ed] the space”: everything from pop cans to mysterious crumpled notes. We will later expand on the disorienting affect of the game (Vist, 2015; Ahmed, 2006) and the everyday nature of some of these objects. As players can affirm, “being lost is a way of inhabiting space by registering what is not familiar”, yet this state also leads to familiarity (Ahmed, 2006, p. 7).

Intimacy with an absent person can be built with varying degrees of subtlety. The situation of perusing belongings may mentally prime players for curiosity or connection, but affect is also guided by spaces and objects. For instance, the player navigates through several bedrooms through Edith’s eyes in *What Remains of Edith Finch*. Critic Reid McCarter asserts that

[o]utside of the imaginative diary vignettes, the cast’s preserved rooms do the most to inform the player’s opinion of the characters. In some cases, the effect works well... Though often fairly on the nose, the effect is decent enough visual shorthand... At its worst, though, this tendency becomes too reductive.

McCarter notes a character whose complex characterization is undermined by “set-dressing [that] paints him as a bizarrely single-minded man”. In other words, a space *can* be a meaningful reflection of its owner, but its nuanced presentation in a video game is likely to impact how individual players respond.

Why might exploration feel more personal than purely expository storytelling? As the popular maxim goes, “seeing is believing”. Creators across several media use various techniques, such as close-up views, to simulate intimacy and “amplify identification with... virtual people and situations” (Isbister, 2016, p. 7). Furthermore, by looking through digital eyes, one may imagine access to an uncensored version of a character’s life. In addition to everyday belongings, players in these games can often access journals and other personal documents, sometimes left behind in a hurry, and the intimate content they relay would almost certainly take longer to learn from spoken

dialogue. Games may invoke journals multimodally to great effect. For example, both *Gone Home* and *What Remains of Edith Finch* feature skilled voice acting for their journal entries, and the latter also displays the journal text near where it was discovered. As Mitchell, Kway, Neo, and Sim note, importing different modalities into the game can be considered a poetic gameplay device that “defamiliarize[s] player expectations [of] boundaries” (2020). As a notable distinction, *What Remains of Edith Finch* situates the player *as* each journal writer, meaning that they switch characters and ultimately spend the most time hearing Edith and looking through her eyes. In *Gone Home*, players navigate as Katie, but most artifacts focus on her family members, and it is her sister Sam’s oral journal entries that drive the narrative. In that sense, character identification is also fostered by the way that these games direct our attention.

How do walking simulator “snooping” games implicate consent? Depending on one’s perspective, intrusive snooping might evoke feelings of excitement or unease, even guilt. The focus games appear to assume goodwill, though one could argue that consent itself is nebulous. For example, *Gone Home*’s most personal insights about Sam are garnered from journal entries written *for* the protagonist (her sister). There is evidence that Sam intended to show Katie the secrets of the house, namely the journal entries for her, even as the note on the front door deters searching: “Please, please don’t go digging around trying to find out where I am. I don’t want ~~Mom and Dad~~ anyone to know” (Fullbright, 2013). One could assert the ethics of disregarding this to assure Sam’s safety. However, there is notable “collateral damage” of privacy as one tears the house apart, including indicators of the parents’ rocky marriage. As Katie, the player has rightful access to the house, but they are still uncovering secrets they were not intended to pursue.

In *A Normal Lost Phone*, consent is murkier still. It seems reasonable that a stranger might access a lost phone to help return it to its owner. However, the player here is allowed (and encouraged) to read through Sam’s messages and code-break into personal spaces. In fact, the entire premise is marketed as “exploring the intimacy of an unknown person whose phone was found” (“A Normal Lost Phone”, 2017). Who is Sam? Who does Sam interact with on dating apps? What is in that hidden journal? While this prying is encouraged, there is an underlying unease at learning details about an unknowing stranger’s conflicts and, later, closely guarded gender identity as a transgender woman. Furthermore, while unable to craft messages, the player can send email drafts and message a picture of Sam as a (mostly closeted) trans woman. Critic Heather Alexandra notes the latter as exemplifying an “uncomfortable amount of control over Sam”, since “[y]ou can choose to send a photo of her while she is not presenting as female... [coming] dangerously close to outing a closeted trans person. Who am I to decide how much Sam would share with this person?” (2017). This specific interaction plays out as positive, providing further clues if one shares the intended photo. However, the phone finder has clearly gone beyond mere curiosity or helpfulness into an in-depth, presumably unwanted navigation of sensitive details. The player may indeed feel a sense of intimacy towards Sam, but at what cost?

One Night Stand (Kinmoku, 2016) is not a walking simulator; its style is more closely in line with a visual novel. However, it employs a comparable mechanic: the player wakes up in an unfamiliar bedroom next to a nude woman, with no memory of the previous night. The woman leaves several times, giving the player the opportunity to flee or else examine objects in the room that later impact conversation. Since the room’s owner, Robin, is sometimes present, implications of consent are much less subtle than in the earlier games. The player has been invited into the space. Asking about

visible and “safe” items, such as a guitar or a movie, lead to pleasant conversation that further illuminates Robin’s personality. More intrusive examination, however, pays for its insight with a high social price. For example, revealing that one has read her journal or investigated her wallet causes distress. If Robin is sufficiently offended, she casts the player outside, regardless of their state of undress. In contrast to the other games, there are a wide variety of possible endings. Replay is encouraged by showing the player which endings they’ve “unlocked”, ranging from friendship and affection to various hurtful or humiliating outcomes. In *One Night Stand*, knowledge gained from “snooping” only builds intimacy insofar as it strengthens the player’s relationship with the other character. Violating Robin’s trust by breaking into journals or mistreating her items limits future relational growth. This raises questions as we look back at our focus games, which don’t have the same built-in “conscience” feedback. Can one experience true intimacy without consent, or is it simply an illusion? To what extent is consent implied and permissible while trying to find someone who may be in danger?

From another angle, why do ethical conversations about digital “snooping” matter if it is merely in a game? Why are we dwelling on positive and negative implications, rather than a narrow focus on storytelling efficacy? As Flanagan and Nissenbaum explore in *Values at Play*, values are embedded into the subtler aspects of games as well as more intuitive ones, including “settings, narratives...landscapes, sound... game goals, rules [and] challenges” (2016, pp. 8–9). These value experiences are not static, as they are impacted by player perceptions; nonetheless, a certain scope of interpretations is inherent in the game itself (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2016, pp. 15–16). As Isbister notes, “Games require the users to act and as such appear to implicate the player in the actions of the avatar they are controlling” (2016, p. 16). In that sense, it may be fruitful to evaluate these mechanics’ potential for intimacy alongside their treatment of consent. However, to what extent is the player truly implicated when they are *urged* to investigate? This leads us to broader conversations of agency and how it manifests within predetermined limits.

Agency & Movement

One of the defining features of the archetypal “walking simulator” is the player’s relatively low ability to impact the plot (Kagen, 2016). However, the player may still feel varying degrees of agency in how they are empowered to interact with the space. By counterculturally enabling “the desire to linger”, walking simulators “offer opportunities for gameplay that stand at the intersection of temporality, spatiality, sexuality, gender, agency, and resistance—an intersection at which the very ontologies of video games begin to break down” (Ruberg, 2019, p. 186). This can also be understood in terms of Sara Ahmed’s queer phenomenology, as we will later explore. In addition, relationality to objects can enhance our understanding of game values: “What types of interactions does the game afford between playable characters and the nonsentient aspects of the game world?” (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2016, p. 51). Let us consider these factors for our focus games.

While a bit unwieldy, *Gone Home* enables the player to rotate, move, look closely, and crouch. In addition to doors and significant “storytelling” or “clue” items, the game lets players interact with a surprising array of objects. There are some non-interactive items; for example, not every paper can be read, as seen by their failure to illuminate from the cursor. However, players can turn on faucets, open doors and cupboards, and move or examine tissue boxes, pens, toilet paper, and other everyday objects. Close-range examination of the familiar may “amplify identification with... virtual people and situations”; in the tradition of “grounded cognition”, such techniques “evoke

emotion because they mirror the way our brains make sense of the world around us in everyday life” (Isbister, 2016, p. 7). Some of these interactions might be considered taboo: the player encounters a box of tampons, as well as a fully stocked fridge one could disrupt. The player is again implicated (Isbister, 2016, p. 16); will they put items back neatly, or throw them on the ground? Will they choose order or chaos? The overarching narrative is fixed, yet subversive or “queer” ways of playing are possible and encouraged. In addition to a traditional run-through, Steam also unlocks achievements for unconventional play, including turning on faucets, moving a duck, or accomplishing speedruns. Speedruns have also been associated with both queer and hypermasculine play for their intersection of mastery and subversion (Ruberg, 2019, p. 186). As Ruberg notes, “Though moving unusually fast and moving unusually slowly may seem like opposite approaches to playing video games, they both represent challenges to dominant standards of what it means to play in ways that are normal, valuable, or right” (2019, p. 186). In *Gone Home*, the player can rush or linger, following the prescribed narrative or creating chaos. One has the affordance of choice.

What Remains of Edith Finch has an arguably more restrictive approach to interactivity. The player experiences several vignettes featuring creative mechanics, yet their journey through the house as Edith evokes a more limited approach than *Gone Home*. Movement is similarly unwieldy at first, and the range of highlighted interactable objects is much smaller. The player can peer into peepholes, zoom in, or activate the journal’s oral and written text at checkpoints, yet they cannot interact with most objects. The story is linear: players may return to previous areas, but to move forward, they must go to a specific spot or perform a specific action (as signalled by a small icon). There are elements of playfulness, particularly if broadening our gaze to the vignettes, but ultimately the player is only retracing Edith’s journey through the house, rather than blazing a new trail.

A Normal Lost Phone further limits the player’s agency in interacting with the lost phone. The player can make a couple of limited choices, such as playing music or sending a message draft that helps lead to further clues. However, the mechanics somewhat recall a “read-only” document: the player cannot generally *do* anything in the traditional sense. The phone is conveniently out of minutes, so calling is impossible. Subversive modes of play are less apparent; the way forward is to proceed in the narrative of codebreaking the phone’s secrets. However, once the player has reached the innermost layer of the phone’s secrets, they receive a message suggesting that the ethical choice is to delete the phone’s data. This recalls Flanagan and Nissenbaum’s exploration of whether players should be guided strongly towards moral choices or given free will to “make ethically meaningful choices” (2016, p. 28). In this situation, the player is not *forced* to “do the right thing” and leave Sam some privacy, yet in some sense they are compelled: this is the only way forward, just as invasive searching was necessary to reaching this point.

Questions of movement implicate player affect and queer play, from the frustration of manually redirecting gaze to the joy of noticing nuanced details. As mentioned above, “enacting alternative models of relating to time and space... also embody alternative forms of desire: the desire to rush, the desire to linger” (Ruberg, 2019, p. 186). As a continued contrast to hypermasculinity, walking simulators “invite a slower and more contemplative relationship that is often structured around strolling, stopping, and seeing” (Ruberg, 2019, p. 201). Unconventional or resistant play within this genre, as seen with *Gone Home*, creates new avenues for agency and empowerment. As

Isbister explores, “programmed boundaries can be warped and even actively transgressed. Players have always enjoyed exploring these limits. Indeed, this can be an integral part of the joy of play” (2016, p. 67). Expanding on Butler’s description of agency from *Undoing Gender*, Waite deftly notes “the possibility that agency is both possible and constrained, empowered and limited - or to put it another way, that limits are the conditions from which agency might emerge, however impossible that may seem” (2017, p. 102). With this paradox in mind, the genre’s decried “relative passivity” is worth a second look (Kagen, 2016).

Thus, even within this focused group of games, one notes varying possibilities for movement and object interaction. Non-linear and more subversive modes of play can heighten feelings of player agency. However, as noted, even varying one’s speed can be enacted as a form of queer play. In any case, walking simulators’ apparent lack of agency does not tell the full story.

Atmosphere & Disorientation

Atmosphere is another tool leveraged by walking simulators to shape affect. In isolation, navigating a space and looking at objects is insufficient for an emotionally engaging atmosphere. Walking simulators use various elements to build their chosen ambiance, including music, lighting, and strategic artifacts. A couple of our focus games specifically disorient the player in a way that engages queerness, especially *Gone Home*. While an in-depth look at queer phenomenology is beyond our current scope, Sara Ahmed’s framework (2006) and Elise Vist’s application to “cyborg games” (2015) offer meaningful insight into this conversation.

Gone Home creates an eerie, yet ultimately nostalgic atmosphere, skillfully subverting expectations of the horror genre. The house is almost entirely cloaked in darkness, forcing the player to find light switches and lamps in each room. Rainfall pounds on the roof, punctuating the player’s exploration with the occasional flash of lightning. The television blares out a severe weather warning. At one particularly memorable moment, the player finds a red-spattered bathtub only to immediately find a bottle of red hair dye. Despite bated breath, the player finds “no haunted house to flee, just the coming of age story of a queer girl and the aching nostalgia of coming home” (Vist, 2015, p. 59). In the language of Ahmed’s queer phenomenology, the game re-orient its subjects: “it takes players who believe they know what to expect and gives them an entirely different story... As soon as players realize [this], the game space is legible and the player can find their way” (Vist, 2015, p. 60). Ironically, to hardcore gamers this disorientation of hypermasculine norms “*was* actually horrific” and *Gone Home*’s accolades were met with outrage (Vist, 2015, p. 59). Intriguingly, Vist deems *Gone Home* a “cyborg game” since it “creates feelings of disorientation in [normative players] by twisting the tropes and forms of videogames” (2015, p. 56).

Indeed, one of the more charming aspects of *Gone Home* is its everyday objects. One might critique the overuse of certain elements, such as nearly identical cupboards in several rooms. However, despite technical limitations, there is arguably enough variety to maintain the thrill of discovering new rooms. As Vist notes, this ephemera is part of the subversion, including the “blasphemous” inclusion of tampons (2015, p. 59). Several of these items reinforce nostalgia for the 1990’s, including cassettes that the player can pop into a nearby player.

As alluded earlier, players’ perceptions impact their interpretation of a game’s values. As Flanagan

and Nissenbaum explore, “how players or spectators experience the values of [a game] depends on the unique combination of personal, cultural, and situational factors that they bring”, even as the game itself introduces constraints (2016, p. 16). The same is true on a broader experiential level. As Vist notes, players may feel uneasy in *Gone Home*’s faux horror setting if they are well-acquainted with that genre, taking longer to reorient themselves (2015). However, receptivity of the game’s themes also depends on individual perspectives. As discussed by Ahmed, the state of disorientation is positive, yet it may be received with excitement or, indeed, horror (Vist, 2015, p. 67).

What Remains of Edith Finch similarly fosters an affecting atmosphere through sounds, lighting, and the narrative itself; however, one could also argue that it disorients the player through embodiment. Similar to Waite’s argument that “[t]here is no bodiless pedagogy, no disembodied scholarship” (2017, p. 23), bodies are worth linking to queer theory but also to feelings more broadly. As Ahmed notes, “Objects and bodies ‘work together’ as spaces for action” (2006, p. 57). Here, while walking through the house, the player manipulates objects using Edith’s hand(s), whether opening a book or winding a music box. More provocatively, players choosing to look down at their own digital “body” can perceive Edith’s pregnancy before it is revealed in the narrative. While this is a different type of disorientation, one could argue that it disrupts full immersion and also “creates spaces where normative [male] players... who have always been invited into game worlds, are confronted with a space they don’t fit into” (Vist, 2015, p. 55). In that sense, this may also qualify as a “cyborg game” (Vist, 2015). In contrast, *Gone Home* helps Katie to recede into the background, essentially a fill-in for the player, by hovering objects mid-air without hands.

A Normal Lost Phone builds atmosphere in a different way. Turning to Rickert’s concept of ambient rhetoric, Alisha Karabinus (2017) proposes that the game could be considered an “*ambient* adventure”:

The entire game takes place on the screen of a phone, but the narrative stretches far beyond that seemingly small space; the space becomes an environment, an experience of its own. It’s not the same as a game like *Gone Home* or *Dear Esther*, and yet there are elements that overlap, that intertwine to create particular experiences of embodiment, of experience, of discovery. (2017)

One might assert that embodiment is less present here than in the other focus games, where the playable character here is faceless, bodiless, and only manipulating a screen. However, not unlike Katie’s vagueness, this absence is filled in by the player themselves. As Karabinus notes, “[the player] could be anyone, until suddenly, in the narrative, [they] have a role to play” and exploration is made personal and significant (2017). Eventually, one might ask if they are still embodying the mysterious phone finder or if they are in fact playing at *being* Sam as they navigate and access her phone as if it is their own device. Otherwise, in terms of atmosphere, *A Normal Lost Phone* refines its affective tone through music. The phone’s music app has a short playlist set up, and the player can manipulate this or add further listening material as they find Sam’s files. Would Sam *want* others to listen to the music she wrote? Again, consent is side-stepped, but in any case, the player can choose to listen. Ultimately, *A Normal Lost Phone*’s narrative is not as driven by atmosphere as the other focus games, but it still “becomes an environment, an experience of its own”

(Karabinus, 2017) through its tactile navigation and supplementary music.

Empathy Games & Queer Narratives

We have explored how the mechanic of “snooping” can facilitate potent affect and character identification. However, does that make these texts “empathy games”? If it does, is this label inherently positive? Why or why not?

Video games’ “turn toward empathy” is well-documented, with a range of actors characterizing video games as “empathy machines”—interactive experiences that allow players to feel what others feel” (Ruberg, 2019, p. 178). In contrast to gaming stereotypes, in *How Games Move Us*, Isbister asserts that “[g]ames can actually play a powerful role in creating empathy and other strong, positive emotional experiences” (2016, p. xvii). Ruberg notes this quote’s emphasis on empathy, as well as its strong normative depiction of empathy as inherently valuable and good, even “gaming’s redeemer” (2019, p. 178). Teddy Pozo highlights this quote as well, affirming the prominence and value of empathy in game studies scholarship (2018).

Why might designers and critics specifically seek empathy? Allen praises video games as a particularly conducive medium for feminist pedagogy, citing Kaufman and Libby’s “experience-taking”; in essence, “temporarily inhabit[ing] the mindset of a transgender woman” or other minority through play can lead to more engaged learning (2014, p. 70). By taking on protagonists’ goals, actions and frustrations, Allen’s students could “understand, in part, the experience of being transgender” in a way they likely never would in the real world (2014, p. 71). Such phrases invoke the concept of empathy games. Feminist pedagogy also supports students “tak[ing] action in order to learn”, and games encourage a high level of student engagement (Allen, p. 74). Isbister has also noted how games show high pedagogical potential, focusing on younger players (2016, p. 25).

Similarly, “games for change” are “designed to impact a player’s actions and growth toward advancing... social good” using “immersion by enactment and identification” (Isbister, 2016, p. 25). LaPensée similarly identifies the (capitalized) “Games for Change” as “a subset of serious games” as well the name of a non-profit that has curated *Gone Home*, *What Remains of Edith Finch*, and other games “engag[ing] contemporary social issues in a meaningful way” (2014, p. 44; “Games Archive - Games For Change”, n.d.). Continuing along this thread, “social impact games”, among other names, represent a type of persuasive game that helps the player to learn about social issues (LaPensée, 2014, pp. 47-48). Players themselves may experience change and growth, such as through “affective learning” rooted in emotional responses (LaPensée, 2014, p. 51). This recalls the notion that “affect shapes the surface and very being of subjects and objects as they come into contact with each other” (Anable, 2018, Intro., Affect). Turning to Ray, Faure and Kelle, LaPensée explores how players’ curiosity can be channelled into engaged learning, and how games “can also elicit empathy by immersing players in new perspectives” (2014, p. 48). As with other texts, players bring their personal experiences and knowledge to games, which leads to “a unique personal understanding that emerges from gameplay” (LaPensée, 2014, p. 48). Common among these terms is a belief that video games inspire unique and emotionally powerful ways of learning, and that designers can harness them in socially beneficial ways.

The expression “experience-taking” should perhaps signal that so-called empathy games are not universally appreciated. “Small-scale, queer games” are most frequently associated with empathy,

though Ruberg is quick to attribute this label to “commentators, not... their creators” (2019, p. 179). Anthropy’s *Dys4ia* and Brice’s *Mainchi* are often lauded as meaningful simulations of life as a transgender person (e.g., Allen, 2014); however, in addition to other queer designers, Anthropy has pushed back and rejected that “that her game, or any game, could actually allow players to feel what she has felt” (Ruberg, 2019, p. 179). A few minutes of discomfort or other engagement cannot compare to a lifetime of complex experiences (Ruberg, 2019, p. 180). Furthermore, are straight, cisgender players truly engaging in some productive form of empathy, or are they “consum[ing] queer affect” and “coloniz[ing]... queer bodies...to actualize their self-congratulatory beliefs about what good LGBTQ ‘allies’ are supposed to feel” (Ruberg, 2019, p. 180)? Such questions might be perceived as harsh, but Ruberg emphasizes that “inviting non-queer players to engage in a kind of queerness tourism... strips the act of playing queer of its own self-sovereignty and turns LGBTQ lives into a game” (2019, p. 181). In other words, affect can be interpreted or harnessed in deeply hegemonic ways. As Ruberg unpacks throughout the section, even well-intentioned empathy can problematically reinforce “the heteronormative status quo” (2019, p. 181).

How might a player discern if a game is problematic? As per earlier discussion of player perceptions, it is worth considering who plays a game, or, perhaps more tellingly, for whom a game may be designed. Games critiquing empathy, such as *Empathy Game* and *empathy machine*, inspire crucial questions: “who is feeling empathy, and who is the object of that empathy? Whose labor, affective or embodied, teaches empathy? Who consumes empathy?” (Pozo, 2018) Do cisgender players *do* anything with this newfound “empathy” that benefits the lives of marginalized game designers (Pozo, 2018)? Critical players should note that empathy may be rhetorically used to legitimize video games as an industry, as well as selling games with “a promise of immersion and emotional connection” (Ruberg, 2019, p. 180).

Should LGBTQ+ allies then avoid games inspiring empathy altogether? Ruberg suggests no; “Instead, we need an adjustment of affective expectation from empathy (an appropriation of queer experience) to compassion (an increased awareness of and sensitivity toward queer experience)” (2019, p. 180). From a design perspective, Pozo asserts that “Queerness and games must exceed the limitations of ‘empathy games’—not by... dismissing any version of empathy as a critical framework... but by contextualizing empathy within a broader repertoire of queer game design” (2018). Rather than specifically naming compassion, Pozo urges that the “lazy” conception of empathy as “seeking to take another’s place” can be replaced by “more challenging and nuanced relationships with the body and the emotions, among which may be built truer forms of empathy” (2018). As both scholars allude, the question is not then eradicating empathy, but moving beyond more restrictive, problematic understandings of empathy in game design and consumption.

The bottom line, as Pozo notes, is that “the problematic ways games journalists and critics deploy empathy show that we need new frameworks for studying queer and activist feelings in games” (2018). As one alternative, we might consider Donna Haraway’s “‘becoming with,’ wherein two subjects can stand together, see each other, and value one another without attempting to possess one another or become one” (Ruberg, 2019, p. 181). This complements the previously discussed turn towards compassion, as well as reinforcing the importance of consent.

We return, then, to our “fuzzy set”. Do walking simulators extort empathy, or are they already geared towards compassion? As one might expect, it depends on execution, even within this

smaller “snooping” group. *Gone Home* and *A Normal Lost Phone* both centre queer narratives, but they handle this affective balance quite differently. As Ruberg alludes, “[w]alking in another person’s shoes” is problematic, risking appropriation of queer bodies and experiences (2019, p. 180). However, in *Gone Home*, the player embodies not Sam but Katie, a loving sister pursuing answers about her missing family. Similar to *What Remains of Edith Finch*, one is pulled into Sam’s story with emotive audio journals and visual artifacts. As explored earlier, players may feel at turns immersed in the nostalgic era, uneasy in the empty house, and moved by the love story. They may even mirror Sam’s “queer desire” and “queer affect” (Ruberg, 2019, p. 1) as they unravel the threads of her struggles, leading to an impactful ending. However, they do not walk away with a sense that they have “been” Sam. Players explore as Katie, a sister and intimate observer, which avoids a sense of *putting on* or *dressing up with* a queer identity; the game instead simulates compassion for a character who recently discovered her sister’s sexuality. Lived experiences inevitably vary, but I would argue that *Gone Home* prioritizes solidarity over unearned empathy.

In contrast, *A Normal Lost Phone* promotes itself as “build[ing] empathy with the characters, allowing to explore difficult topics”, and the team consulted transgender people in its creation (“A Normal Lost Phone”, 2017; Alexandra, 2017). It won numerous awards and nominations, and as of April 2021, it has a “Very Positive” rating on Steam (“A Normal Lost Phone”, 2017). To some extent, its creators position it as a “game for change” to potential players: “[I]f you close the app but still think about the game, have you truly stopped playing?” (“A Normal Lost Phone”, 2017). However, the game has also been critiqued for “emotional tourism” and the ways that the player *can* “speak for” Sam, such as sending her photo; this “allows the player an unprecedented and uncomfortable amount of control over Sam” (Alexandra, 2017). Unlike the familial ties in *Gone Home*, the player has no consent. As discussed earlier, the player is merely a curious stranger putting on the digital identity of Sam by accessing and transmitting private information. Critic Heather Alexandra rejects *A Normal Lost Phone*’s invasive premise and execution: “for an empathy game... [it prioritizes] the player and satiating their curiosity” (2017). Although clearly some players find it more constructive than others, the game engages problematic elements as it pursues empathy.

Conclusion

Conclusion

We have now delved into a range of issues surrounding the affective potential of “snooping” walking simulators. Here, “snooping” is evaluated in terms of its situation and game mechanics. At its core, this paper has asked two questions: firstly, in what ways can “snooping” influence player affect, and, secondly, are these evoked feelings productive or problematic, and how might we determine the difference? To add further nuance, we have turned to queer scholars such as Ahmed, Pozo, Ruberg, Vist, and Waite. We have also considered prominent game studies texts, including those implicating affect and values by Anable, Isbister, Flanagan and Nissenbaum.

Through readings of multiple games, we have perhaps encountered more questions than answers. While embodiment and consent have arisen in these discussions, we have thoughtfully considered three main affective responses: intimacy, as an offshoot of character identification; agency, as it relates to movement and object interaction; and disorientation and other atmospheric feelings of unease or nostalgia. After establishing the strong affective potential of this “fuzzy set” of games,

we turned more fully towards the ethics of said responses. High character identification is traditionally linked to “empathy games”. How has ludic empathy been understood as a valuable pedagogical tool? In contrast, why is there notable backlash to the empathy turn, especially from queer scholars and designers? As Pozo asks, what can we find “after empathy” (2018)?

In the nexus of these conversations is exciting potential for nuance, especially in “games for change” which seek to empower marginalized groups and challenge the status quo. Moving forward, I believe we could also continue fruitful conversations about various topics, including affect in games, immersive storytelling techniques, power dynamics surrounding “feminine” games, and the ways in which queer narratives are shared and experienced.

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