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The Post-mortem of Conflicts in the 'Walking Simulator' Genre

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Introduction

It is common for digital games to position their players as active participants within a conflict (Schell, 2015). The exact nature of such scenarios differs from game to game as the diverse chapters in the presented volume demonstrate; what can be safely asserted, however, is that for most games, conflict occurs in the present tense, forming a central part of the game mechanics.

But what if a game chooses to tackle a conflict only in the past tense, removing it entirely from the sphere of game mechanics, and instead only portrays it in the game's narrative? This is in fact what happens in a variety of disparate games that have come to be known as *walking simulators*. The term 'walking simulator' may appear dismissive, and indeed it was originally pejorative in meaning (Consalvo & Paul, 2019). It refers to games that seemed to lack any substantial gameplay mechanics (Clark, 2017) and revolving around the experience of exploring a setting to gradually discover a story depicted purely through the environment and its affordances such as notes and audio recordings. Conflicts in walking simulators like *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2012), *Gone Home* (Fullbright, 2014), *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* (The Chinese Room, 2015) and *Tacoma* (Fullbright, 2017) are thus all smoke, and no fire. These conflicts are mere ashes inviting the player to discover who started the fire, how it burned and how it was finally put out. In this sense, walking simulators arguably circumvent the narrative limitations Jesper Juul (2001) had argued to exist in games due to their forward-oriented chronological structure. Walking simulators eschew cutscenes and other devices described by Juul (2004) that other games employ to complicate the relationship between the chronology of play and chronology of the narrative. In the walking simulator, play time and event time are synchronous, and narrative complications only exist in traces of events past.

This chapter discusses the depiction of conflict in the walking simulator genre, arguing that far from eschewing conflict, walking simulators provide an alternative way for digital games to depict conflict. By turning to the past tense, walking simulators renounce conflict as a game mechanic, but

in exchange facilitate a slower, contemplative exploration of the conflict in post-mortem. This makes walking simulators well-suited for the examination of complex multifaced conflicts with unclear protagonists and antagonists.

Walking simulators present a wide variety of conflicts, including interpersonal, intrapersonal, intergroup or intragroup conflicts (Cox, 2003; Rahim, 1985). Interpersonal conflict occurs between people and arises from many individual differences, such as personalities, values, perceptions and other differences. Meanwhile, intrapersonal conflict is experienced by a single individual, when his or her own goals, values or roles diverge. More broadly, intrapersonal conflict is between incompatible tendencies the person must discriminate between. When unable to cope with the conflict, one may express a range of behavioral strategies such as apathy, boredom, excessive drinking or destructive behavior (Cox, 2003). Intergroup conflict occurs among members of different communities and groups, for example, work departments, companies, political parties, nations, while intragroup conflict within these groups and communities. The sources of those two types of conflict may vary, involving differences in viewpoints, ideas and opinions, or perceived interpersonal incompatibility of group members (Cox, 2003).

To explore conflict in walking simulators, the chapter first presents a brief discussion on the role of conflict as a game mechanic in digital games, contextualizing the walking simulator in the broader discussion of the limits of what construes a game. Subsequently, the chapter focuses on two pairs of walking simulators, specifically 1) *Dear Esther*, and *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*, and 2) *Gone Home*, and *Tacoma* to describe how these games depict and characterize conflicts in their narratives and environments. While many walking simulators exist, these two pairs of games were chosen due to the strong acclaim in this genre gained by their developers, The Chinese Room and Fullbright respectively (Hinkle, 2014; Yin-Poole, 2017; Consalvo & Paul, 2019).

Methodologically, the games are examined employing textual game analysis. Fernández-Vara (2015) lays out game analysis as a method for holistic and qualitative examination. She highlights the need for such an analysis to examine the game aspects under analysis in a broader context of the whole game and its development history. While in the two decades of game studies, numerous quantitative and qualitative approaches to the examination of games have been developed (for other methods, see especially Consalvo & Dutton, 2006; Miller, 2008; Lankoski & Björk, 2015), textual game analysis is still a relatively young methodology. Fernández-Vara's (2015) textbook serves as the first major attempt to systematically approach the subject. However, textual game analysis also extensively borrows from film analysis (e.g., Bordwell & Thompson, 2013). This is especially significant when exploring walking simulators, whose emphasis on telling a story via the environment is clearly related to the concept of mise-en-scène in theatre and film. As Bordwell and Thompson (2013) explain, mise-en-scène, or putting-on-stage, is the process of arranging what will appear on the stage

or the film screen, and how it will be lit and framed. Such decisions allow the creators to convey additional meaning and build or subvert audience expectations through the environment in which the action takes place.

The Mechanics of Conflict in Games and the Limits of Gameness

In an early landmark study of game design theory, Salen and Zimmerman (2004) posited that conflict is one of several fundamental characteristics of games, without which a game indeed could hardly be called a game. Salen and Zimmerman's definition was based upon a review of existing definitions of games, including such foundational works as Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1949), Roger Caillois' *Man, Play, and Games* (2001), and pioneer digital game designer Chris Crawford's *The Art of Computer Game Design* (1984).

Only three of the eight definitions discussed by Salen and Zimmerman explicitly invoked conflict, but all the remaining definitions were fundamentally compatible with conflict as a core game feature. Similarly, leading game scholar Jesper Juul does not explicitly include conflict in his own definition of the game as a 'a rule-based formal system with variable and quantifiable outcomes, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiable' (Juul, 2005, p. 36). Nonetheless, as he explores in depth each of the six components of this definition, it becomes clear that his definition of player effort and player attachment to outcomes presupposes conflict in the game. According to Juul, then, a game can be distinguished from the more amorphous concept of play by the fact that it can be lost, with the player being happy to win, and unhappy to lose.

It is worth noting that the concept of losing is not the same as that of failing to complete something – indeed, losing presupposes completion. As game scholar Espen Aarseth (1997) notes, there are many traditional texts that are challenging to read through, and are at times described as 'labyrinthine', implying that it is possible to get lost in them – yet this is fundamentally different to the effort required of the player to work through an interactive text. Aarseth puts forward the idea of ergodics, with ergodic literature requiring a non-trivial effort to traverse the path to completion. Ergodics does not necessarily assume conflict, and indeed many of the works Aarseth defines as ergodic are not games, but rather interactive literature where the reader must try to traverse the text, but the text does not necessarily do anything to stop the reader. It is only when this opposition does emerge, when the text switches from passive to active opposition that the reader becomes a player, the interactive work becomes a game, and it becomes possible to lose.

Thus, conflict, whatever form it may take, provides the uncertainty of outcome central to Juul's (2005) definition of games, and a vital feature for

engaging gameplay (Schell, 2015). However, not all games involve conflict, because – as Juul paradoxically notes – not all entities we call games fit the definition of games. Juul illustrates the limits of his and other definitions in the form of 'borderline cases' – works that are widely considered to be games, even though they fail to fulfil all six aspects of his definition. Examples include the open-ended simulator *SimCity* (Maxis, 1989) due to the absence of an end state, games of chance such as casino machines that require no effort, and so on. Even further out beyond borderline cases, Juul notes the existence of various phenomena that are sometimes conflated with games, though they are distinctly not games by Juul's, or indeed almost any definition. In this category Juul places freeform play, noble (i.e. rule-bound) war, and notably – hypertext fiction, a category encompassing Aarseth's ergodic literature. Juul's argument for hypertext fiction not constituting a game is that such works have a fixed outcome that cannot be changed by the player (no losing state), and there is no player attachment to the outcome. The player may or may not like the ending, but the impossibility of achieving any other ending makes emotional attachment a null point.

Disagreements over what constitutes a game are not purely academic. Such disagreements are indeed common among players. Consalvo and Paul (2019), who are critical of the value of definitions such as Juul's (2005) due to their exclusionary tendencies, discuss the history of players, critics, and even game developers disqualifying particular types of games (or not games . . . ?) based on various criteria. Such criteria are not always objective or related to any existing definition of games – just as often, they are arbitrary, emotional, or political. A game may be dismissed by gamers and gaming media because it is perceived to have been optimized towards financially exploiting players. This is evident in the case of numerous Facebook-based and free-to-play games. Another reason for disqualification could be the developer's pedigree – i.e. lack of connections to the 'proper' game industry – as with the casual game companies Zynga and King. Most importantly, games may be dismissed for their relative lack of difficulty and/or attempts to appeal to a casual audience either through the targeting of a simpler technology such as mobile phones, or through the focus on simpler, less demanding mechanics.

Juul (2010) traces the history of so-called casual games and their players, arguing such games arose simply through the process of the game industry learning to make games for a broader, non-specialist audience. Juul points out as a post-script that this change is alarming to some gamers from the specialist, 'hardcore' group, as well as to some developers, who fear that complex hardcore games will be simplified to appeal to the casual audience. This thread is taken up by Consalvo and Paul (2019), who discuss how factors such as length, target platform, and perceived difficulty lead critics and/or audiences to loudly and even aggressively dismiss a game, often also criticizing its developers. One somewhat unique 'victim' of such attitudes is the walking simulator genre.

The Walking Simulator – A Nongame?

The walking simulator arose out of the first-person shooter genre. Its technology and interface remain to this day fully grounded in first-person games, employing the same game engines, the same perspectives, and the same control interfaces. At the same time, the walking simulator was fundamentally a negation of the first-person shooter – an attempt to 'strip down a game to the point where it becomes an immersive, compelling world that players step into' (Consalvo & Paul, 2019, p. 110). Fundamentally, the *only* thing the player can do in a walking simulator is walk around a particular location, look at the environment, and pick up items to inspect them, read their contents, or to activate audio cues. The walking simulator can be seen as connected to adventure games (Adams, 2014), with the similarities especially visible in *Myst* (Cyan, 1993) and its modern descendants like *Obduction* (Cyan Worlds, 2016).

However, where adventure games like *Myst* typically introduce varied gameplay mechanics in the form of puzzles, mini-games, or interactive dialogues, walking simulators contained no such elements. The emphasis instead is on what Champion (2008), in another context, refers to as hermeneutic richness. The environment and its artefacts may convey to some limited extent a passive kind of cultural presence, which Champion compares to the archaeological concept of 'trace'. The gameplay here thus occurs in the player's mind, as he or she tries to first detect and identify all relevant traces in the game's environment, then collate and interpret these traces into a coherent story. As the case studies will show, walking simulators typically refuse to provide full disclosure, leaving sufficiently many pieces missing to allow multiple interpretations of their contents.

The controversy around walking simulators is notable because of the division between gameplayers and game critics on whether they should be rejected. While the rejection of Facebook or mobile games tended to unite game critics and journalists with gameplayers, the walking simulator gained acceptance and even acclaim on the part of game journalists, while generating substantial ire among hardcore gamers (Clark, 2017; Consalvo & Paul, 2019). There is a connection to be made here between the rise of walking simulators and the so-called GamerGate controversy. Arguably, the ire that parts of the hardcore gamer audience levelled against game journalists spilled over into an almost-ritual dislike of walking simulators based on the fact that they are perceived to be the 'darlings' of the game journalists (Clark, 2017). Consalvo and Paul (2019) note the 'cottage industry' that has sprung up around criticizing walking simulators, especially ones whose narrative contains so-called progressive themes, such as the female-centric, lesbian-themed *Gone Home*.

As noted previously, the very term 'walking simulator' was originally pejorative in meaning, though it has long since outgrown such connotations. Conversely, while walking simulators are often praised as a unique

new game genre (Ballou, 2019) and as innovative forms of game design (Consalvo & Paul, 2019), it would be impossible to align this genre with most classic academic definitions of games. The walking simulator's lack of conflict and lack of variable player outcomes places it outside the bounds of both Salen and Zimmerman's (2004) and Juul's (2005) definitions. Arguably, walking simulators have more in common, in terms of structure and affordances, with hypertext fiction as described by Aarseth (1997) than with games. Yet, ultimately, there is also widespread agreement that whatever the definition of game may be, walking simulators are games (e.g., Ballou, 2019; Clark, 2017; Consalvo & Paul, 2019).

A deeper exploration of issues around game definitions would lead to the question about the sensibility and utility of strict word definitions, and to philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1968) analogy of 'family resemblances'. Wittgenstein, in his exploration of the difficulty of defining words, used the word 'game' as a key example of a word that is applied to numerous phenomena that seem to have no single unifying trait. However, upon closer examination, those phenomena can be seen to be related through a family continuum of traits (for a game studies exploration of the implications of a Wittgensteinian approach to game definitions, see Arjoranta, 2014). The concept of family resemblances relates to the idea of games as 'composites' put forward by Linderoth (2015). As Linderoth argues, the oft-discussed tension between gameplay and narrative can be dissipated if games are regarded as a composite form in which different frameworks can coexist. The tension between the gameness and simultaneous lack of gameplay in walking simulators is thus dissipated by noting the features, such as exploration mechanics, they share with games. Ultimately, for our purposes, we must simply note the specificity of the walking simulator as a game that refuses to employ conflict-based game mechanics. In spite of this, walking simulators can and do depict conflicts, though typically in past tense. Four examples of such depictions will now be discussed, divided into two pairs – The Chinese Room's *Dear Esther* and *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* being one pair, while Fullbright's *Gone Home* and *Tacoma* being the other.

Case Studies of Conflict in Walking Simulators

Dear Esther *(2012) and* Everybody's Gone to the Rapture *(2015)*

Dear Esther stretches the concept of conflict to the extreme of the intrapersonal (Cox, 2003), that is, a person's own internal struggles. The game is frequently invoked by journalists and scholars as the protoplast and in some sense the archetype of the walking simulator (e.g., Pickard, 2016; Ballou, 2019; Consalvo & Paul, 2019).

Originally developed as a research project at the University of Portsmouth by lecturer Dan Pinchbeck, and subsequently redeveloped for commercial release, *Dear Esther* was an experiment in telling a story

through the environment. Exploration was not merely the core mechanic; it was the only mechanic. *Dear Esther*'s setting is a desolate island off the shores of Scotland, devoid of human characters or interactable wildlife: there is literally nothing to interact with here. Apart from the natural landscape, the environment also contains man-made elements such as shipwrecks, a lighthouse and a shepherd's shelter, allowing the player to gain some (very limited) insight into the island's former human inhabitants from their material traces. However, the core of the story is delivered in the form of off-screen narration; the nameless narrator reads fragments of letters he had written to his wife, Esther. The letters, delivered in fragments triggered at various points on the island, are intentionally oriented more towards symbolism and poetry than description (McMullin, 2014). They simultaneously reveal a forward-moving story of the narrator's final days on the island, culminating with his implied suicide, and two backstories.

The first of these is the story of the island, its 18th century inhabitants and their encounters with an explorer, Donnelly, whose book the narrator relies on. The other story is the story of the narrator himself, especially the aftermath of the car accident that resulted in Esther's death. Conflict never comes to the fore in these letter fragments – it is always just around the corner, an implicit possibility and tension that never materialized. The narrator visited Paul, the driver responsible for Esther's death, but there was no confrontation; in the distant past, the visiting explorer Donnelly is said to have hated the materially and spiritually impoverished shepherds on the island, but if any substantial disagreement emerged in this relationship, the narrator does not reveal it. Finally, the narrator himself appears to be struggling against himself, either trying to make up his mind whether to commit suicide or striving to overcome the physical debilitation of an injury to jump off the island's tallest point – but these struggles are open to interpretation and couched in poetry.

The game establishes the post-mortem pattern of storytelling so typically employed by later walking simulators: everything here seems to be happening in the past. Even the letters read out by the narrator have already been written, with the implication that, though the story of the narrator's suicide seems to unfold in the present as the player moves through the island, it is in fact a past event, with the player and the narrator being two separate characters.

Many narrative works, such as murder mysteries, concern themselves with what happened before the present-tense story begun; this kind of storytelling also appears in many digital games, such as the first-person shooter *Bioshock* (2K Boston, 2007). However, such works do usually include a present-day story – the detective must overcome present obstacles to catch the murderer, for instance. The pattern established by *Dear Esther* is that of no interaction with human characters, and no present-tense conflict: the storytelling concentrates on uncovering the past, not influencing the present.

Everybody's Gone to the Rapture builds on where *Dear Esther* left off. Like its predecessor, *Rapture* does not ground its player as a specific character – players move about the world as a human being, but with no explanation who they are, and indeed no explanation why they are there. Also, *Rapture*'s narrative implies the world has literally just ended, with humanity wiped out by an inexplicable alien entity.

Unlike *Dear Esther*, however, *Rapture* contains a large cast of characters. The game is set in a small, idyllic English village in the 1980s, a careful recreation of the English countryside (Yin-Poole, 2017) and a plot straight out of a low-budget science fiction film. A husband-and-wife pair of scientists, Kate and Stephen, working at the astronomic observatory in the village have detected a strange pattern of lights, which seems to be alive. Somehow, they have managed to cause the light-based entity to enter the village and start subsuming people into itself by burning them to ash.

When the player enters, these events have already taken place: the village is deserted, leaving only the environment for interaction. Phones and radios, when activated, trigger the playback of past conversations – some from before the catastrophe, and others during its progress, tracking the scientists' attempts to understand and stop what was happening. Material remains also hint at past events, with stalled or wrecked cars and trains typically being arranged in such a way as to reveal what had caused them to stop functioning.

The main way of communicating the past conflicts with the player in *Rapture*, however, comes in the form of vignettes re-enacting events from the past. The vignettes revolve mainly around conversations between the village inhabitants, and while the characters involved are visually unclear – essentially just luminous silhouettes – their voices are fully understandable. Most of the vignettes concentrate on events from the last hours before and during the rapture-event, some of them depict instead conversations from days, weeks, or months before. In these vignettes, the role of the alien being is in many ways understated – most of the time, the vignettes concentrate not on the alien threat, but on characters' reactions to ongoing events, and myriad small interpersonal conflicts that emerge in the face of an unknown but deadly threat.

Not all conflicts revolve around the rapture events. A significant subplot is constructed around the scientist Kate Collins: a triple outsider in this rural community: firstly, as a scientist, secondly as an American, and thirdly, as an African American. Several vignettes depict Kate and Stephen as they attempt to integrate into the community, and the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intragroup tensions that emerge.

The depiction of these various conflicts in vignettes gives players a broader view, being privy to conversations that show how the same events looked from various perspectives. However, the information given to the player is limited, with pieces intentionally left out to allow a broad range of interpretations. *Rapture* never attempts to explain how the player accesses

these vignettes, nor why these conversations are available while others are not. Furthermore, unlike the linear *Dear Esther*, *Rapture* puts the player in a relatively open world, making it possible for the player to 'complete' the game without discovering all story fragments. Overall, the storytelling model employed in *Rapture* is even more unconventional than *Dear Esther*; while the gameplay remains as simple as in all walking simulators, *Rapture* is challenging by virtue of the effort it demands of its audience to firstly seek out story fragments, and secondly to reconstruct a mental picture of a multitude of characters bound in a complex network of relationships, and the full range of conflicts: intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup, and, if the light entity is considered, also intergroup (for a sense of the complexity of *Rapture*'s interwoven stories, see Hamilton, 2016).

Gone Home *(2014) and* Tacoma *(2017)*

Fullbright's two walking simulators are in many ways the opposite of The Chinese Room's games. Rather than an extensive, open and natural setting, *Gone Home* takes place entirely within a single (albeit large) house, while *Tacoma* on a space station. Rather than a story told almost purely through audio, in *Gone Home* most of the story is instead told through the material environment, while *Tacoma* weaves together both methods. Rather than an unidentified observer, the player in both cases is assigned a concrete role: there is a story to the player-character's presence.

   Gone Home's narrative structure and the tools employed to deliver that narrative is strongly connected to conventional games. Like *BioShock*, *Gone Home* favors diegetic measures: the bulk of the story is told in letters, notes, post-its, journal entries and other material objects that exist physically in the world. The player is cast as Katie Greenbriar, an American college girl returning home after a gap year spent travelling in Europe. However, she finds her home mysteriously deserted, with both her parents and her younger sister Samantha absent. To further complicate matters, her home is not in fact her home – while Katie was away, the Greenbriar family had moved into a new home, recently inherited from Katie's father's deceased uncle Oscar.

   Since the game is set in 1995, the comparative poverty of intercontinental communication means Katie is completely unfamiliar with the new home, as well as being out of touch with the day-to-day goings-on in her family. Thus, the game's narrative opening justifies the player's unfamiliarity with both the milieu and its absent occupants, providing diegetic motivation that unifies Katie and her player in a desire to explore. Additionally, the recent move justifies the house being full of out-of-place items, bringing to the surface old and forgotten secrets and trivia. For instance, a torn, 23-year-old letter from uncle Oscar to Katie's father Terrence hints at some past event that caused a permanent rift between the two until Oscar's lonely death in this house. The game intentionally uses the environment and early

story fragments to encourage players to expect a typical haunted house story, only to gradually dispel this notion through the rest of the story. Individual story fragments inform the player about a network of interconnected intrapersonal and interpersonal struggles in the Greenbriar family. A cold disapproval for Terry's career choices from his father, a sequence of letters cataloguing Terry's failures and successes as a pulp science fiction author and electrical appliance reviewer, a workplace friendship threatening to bud into a romantic affair between Katie's mother, Janice, and one of her co-workers, and so on.

Gone Home concentrates, however, on one person in particular: Katie's younger sister Samantha. Sam's story is told through a rich panoply of text-based sources – her journal being the most important, but also letters, notes left hanging around the house as 'notices' to her parents, school assignments and other creative outputs. Sam's story is privileged as the only one where the developers choose to break the limits of diegetic environmental storytelling. At specific points and places in the house, the player will hear Sam's voice reading out relevant entries from her journal; though the player does ultimately find this journal at the game's conclusion, the way these entries are delivered ahead of this discovery is extradiegetic. Sam's story is that of a troubled teenager, whose life has been disrupted by the move to a new house and new school, who has evidently had for years struggled in her relations with her parents, and who has become entangled in a same-sex relationship with Lonnie, a girl who has become her only friend in the new school. The same-sex relationship caused a further degeneration in Sam's relations with her parents. However, by the time the player as Katie returns home, this most recent conflict has unexpectedly concluded: while Katie's parents are away at a marriage counselling retreat, Sam ran away from home with Lonnie, leaving no way to trace them.

The sources documenting *Gone Home*'s characters and intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts are often constructed carefully as palimpsest with multiple layers of meaning. In some cases, as with one of Sam's homework assignments, there are literally multiple layers of information – the text of the assignment itself, and the teacher's comment to 'see me!' at the bottom. In other cases, the story is in the material used for the note, its location, or its state. Thus, a wastepaper bin in Sam's room contains a school disciplinary referral for her friend Lonnie. The fact that this note, which Lonnie was required to return to school signed by her father, is instead found crumpled in a bin in her friend's room reveals what Lonnie did with the note. Damage to textual sources can thus be used to hint at a character's emotional state and actions.

Tacoma builds on the methodology from *Gone Home*, but also integrates into its toolbox the storytelling methods from The Chinese Room's *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*. Like in *Gone Home*, a lot of the story is told through material items: papers, photos, book covers, but also varied digital files accessible through computer screens. However, *Tacoma* also provides itself

an excuse to depict character vignettes not dissimilar to *Rapture* – except, as seems typical for Fullbright, more strongly justified diegetically. The player in *Tacoma* is cast as Amy Ferrier, a data retrieval specialist who has been dispatched to the abandoned space station Tacoma with the mission to retrieve artificial intelligence (AI) data from the station, along with the main processing module of the station's central AI. As Amy enters the station, she is informed that everyone on the station is monitored and always recorded. These recordings can be accessed and replayed in the form of *Rapture*-like vignettes showing holographic depictions of the six members of Tacoma's crew. They are depicted in various situations as the station experiences an emergency triggered by a meteor impact that has severely limited the oxygen supply. The player's role as a data retrieval specialist encourages her to be inquisitive and watch and listen to all the vignettes, even when they show crew members in intensely personal interactions. Like *Gone Home*, *Tacoma* is structured semi-linearly: the order in which the player accesses different station sections is prescribed, ensuring the story of the station's crew is gradually revealed in a much more orderly and conventional fashion than *Rapture*, though with room for small divergences.

At *Tacoma*'s core is a science fiction story of futuristic corporate conflict. As the player explores the station and encounters more and more story fragments, she not only sees the varied personal stories of the station crew, but also discovers how the crew has been pushed against their will into a far broader intergroup conflict of a political nature. The Venturis Corporation which owns the station has been trying to push through the repeal of an international accord banning automated, unmanned space stations, the accord preventing Venturis from developing its new investment. When Venturis' boss consulted the corporation's strategic AI searching for a solution, the AI proposed to arrange an accident at Tacoma, which, by causing the death of the station crew, would demonstrate the dangers of requiring stations to always remain manned. Ultimately, the station's own AI, ODIN, can reveal this information to the crew, making it clear that they must not wait for corporate rescue, and instead must mount their own (ultimately successful) escape plan. Thus, ODIN refused to be an obedient tool of the corporation, finding a way to break its own protocols to warn the crew.

Amy arrives after the crew's evacuation, with company orders to shut down ODIN and remove its processing unit. This time, then, the player is no longer just a bystander, but an actor in the story – rather than a protagonist in the conflict, however, the player is here to clean up the traces of the conflict. However, as the player completes the assignment by collecting all data and the processing unit, it is revealed that Amy is secretly a member of the 'AI Liberation Front'. She accepted the Tacoma assignment with the ulterior motive of retrieving ODIN's processing unit not for the corporation to erase, but to take the AI into a safe haven.

In a sense, this conclusion of *Tacoma*'s story shows the limits of the walking simulator, and the understandable desire of the developers to move

beyond the constraints they had originally set for themselves. The lack of gameplay mechanics and present-tense conflict is a key characteristic of the walking simulator, and by extending the game's conflict into the present, by giving the player the role of an active protagonist even without incorporating more advanced mechanics, *Tacoma* seems to be an attempt to break out of the genre's limitations.

Conclusion

The four examples discussed show how the walking simulator as a genre allows a slow, contemplative exploration of various types of conflicts: interpersonal, intrapersonal, intergroup and intragroup. Presented in past tense, these conflicts can be small or big, deeply personal or societal, simple or complex, and in each case, can be depicted from multiple perspectives. The mechanics of the walking simulator genre preclude any genuine player engagement in the conflict. Even in *Tacoma*, where Amy as a character does at the end take sides in the political conflict, the player's lack of choice about this outcome means that Amy acts, but the player merely watches, never invested. This limitation is also the genre's value in examining conflicts. The core of the walking simulator is the player's slow, deliberate movement through a space, with the game's story and structure actively encouraging players to be thorough in their exploration, leaving no stone unturned. Whether it is the radios and conversation traces in *Rapture,* crumpled notes in a wastepaper basket in *Gone Home,* or garbled text fragments in *Tacoma,* the smallest details can potentially be the keys to unlock a particular character's point of view. The player is thus taught to ignore nothing, to consider everything a part of the investigation. Having been sidelined to the role of a bystander/investigator, the player is free to consider the conflict carefully, deliberately, and without emotional engagement.

However, where do walking simulators go from here? Neither The Chinese Room nor Fullbright, thus far key trendsetters for the genre, have followed on with further walking simulators. The Chinese Room rejected subsequent publisher proposals to develop more games in this genre, with the company undergoing a painful transition to develop more traditional games (Yin-Poole, 2017). Meanwhile, recent years have exposed dramatic internal conflicts at Fullbright, culminating with Gaynor, the studio's creative head and co-founder being forced to leave the company following numerous accusations of toxic behavior (Carpenter, 2021).

The evolution of any game genre inevitably involves the introduction of new mechanics. For the walking simulator, which started off as an experimental reaction to ordinary first-person shooters, as anti-game and nongame (Watts, 2019) consciously deprived of all but the most basic mechanics, ironically, innovation may mean the genre's demise, as it loses its core characteristic. The walking simulator as a genre can be defined by the lack of active conflict and the sidelining of the player into the role of

the contemplative, attentive but ultimately passive bystander/investigator. *Tacoma*, thus far the final game in Fullbright's output, displayed a desire to break from this mold by making the player an active participant, but further development on this path of activity would inevitably detract from the genre's contemplative quality. Game journalist Rachel Watts claimed the 2010s as the decade of walking simulators, where 'exploration did the talking' (Watts, 2019). This statement may prove to be literally true: the era of the walking simulator phenomenon may now be over, as new games emerge that inject traditional adventure game mechanics into this genre. A forerunner of this trend was *Firewatch* (Campo Santo, 2016), which, though described as a walking simulator (Carpenter, 2021), incorporated dynamic dialogue interactions and a far greater than usual emphasis on a present-tense story, albeit still deeply concerned with the past. *Firewatch*, forcing the player to very directly make choices that shape the lead character and his relationship with the world, may still be relying on the environmental storytelling methods the walking simulator genre had pioneered, but it has lost the genre's contemplative core. In a very real sense, this is a loss. The genre's specific approach to the examination of past conflicts certainly retains value, and could conceivably be used in many contexts as a tool to deescalate conflict (e.g., intrapersonal) by encouraging greater understanding of nuance. Even if, however, the walking simulator is subsumed into the older adventure game genre, the environmental storytelling methods the genre pioneered or developed to new heights will remain, leaving behind and indelible trace of influence in adventure games and beyond.

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