Mechanics & Materialities: WORLD4 and the Effort of Looking in Videogames

Alexander Muscat
School of Design
RMIT University
Melbourne, Australia
alexander.muscat@rmit.edu.au

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

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INTRODUCTION

"*Looking and listening are not passive lenses through which we let the world in, but active ways we intend toward the world*." --Brendan Keogh (2018, 134)

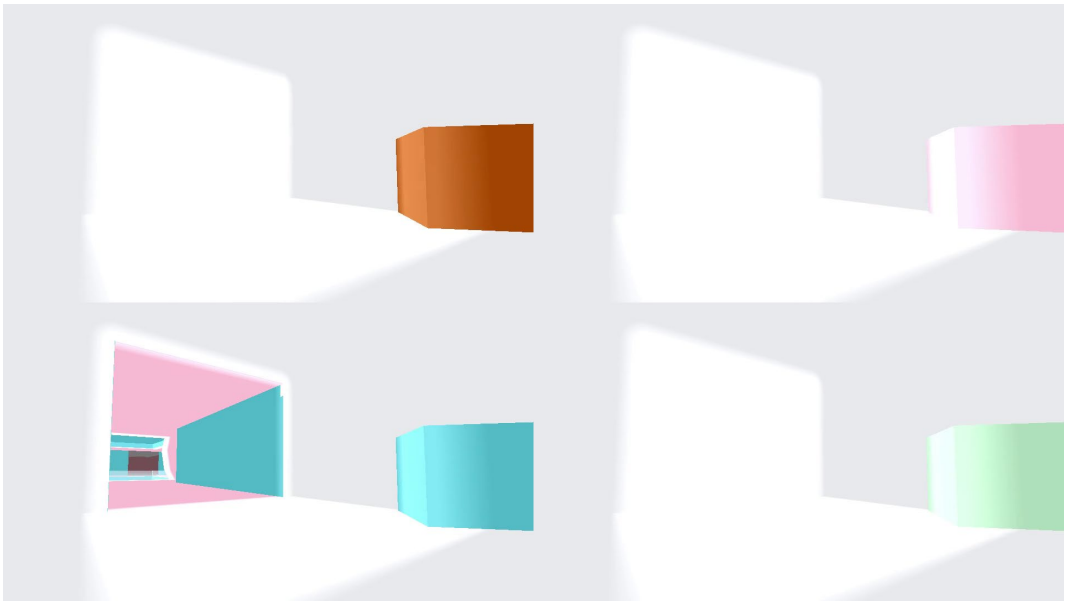

Figure 1: Screenshot, *WORLD4*.

The conventional understanding of walking simulator games (also known as walkers) is that they are mechanically minimalistic or reduced (Keogh 2015; Cross 2016), intentionally stripping away mechanistic conventions like puzzles, obstacles, or repetitive failure-states (Kill Screen Staff 2016; Irwin 2017) that may impede "experiencing the narrative, with the exception of finding objects" (Clark 2017). Some critics, advancing a broader understanding of 'gameplay', suggest that walker gameplay takes place largely within the player's own head (Bozdog, Galloway 2016; Franklin 2015; Cross 2015), affording experiences of interpretation and self-reflection through exploratory play (Muscat et al. 2016; Street 2016; Carbo-Mascarell 2016;

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Sicart 2014). A famous genre exemplar is *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2008; 2012), which modified first-person shooter *Half-Life 2* (Valve Corporation 2004), removing combat, physics puzzles, goals, and AI opponents as an experiment in placing more focus on the story (Pinchbeck, 2008). Without these familiar mechanics, *Dear Esther* and other walkers ask their players to interact with an environment by looking, listening, and moving.

This notion of 'stripping away mechanics' looms large in the popular understanding of walkers and their continued aesthetic positioning against other commercial 3D videogames. In this paper, I ask the questions: are walkers really that mechanically 'minimal'? And what complexity does that understanding overlook?

Miguel Sicart (2009) surveys a variety of definitions of 'game mechanic' and presents his own definition: methods invoked by agents (player or computer system), designed for interaction with the game state. He distinguishes two types of mechanics: primary mechanics, which are "directly applied to solving challenges that lead to the desired end state", and secondary mechanics, which "ease the player's interaction with the game towards reaching the end state". As an example, Sicart uses the contextual 'cover mechanic' in the third-person shooter *Gears of War* (Epic Games, 2006) to illustrate primary mechanics ("the cover mechanic of *Gears of War* is primary, since not using it implies the almost immediate death of any game agent").

But what about more generalized actions like looking and listening? In a walker like *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2012), the player can move their mouse to reposition the camera or listen to the voiceover narration to try to make sense of the game's cryptic story. Nevertheless, these kinds of activities have often been derided by mainstream game culture as passive and insufficiently ludic. The very genre name "walking simulator" was a term popularized as a derogatory categorization for titles considered rudimentary or uninteresting (Gursoy 2013), inferring that looking and listening lack sufficient complexity to be considered essential determinants of a videogame. Conversely, within first-person shooters, looking is aiming as core mechanic, evident in the almost ubiquitous crosshair reticle onscreen. However, 'aiming' the camera is needed for more than just shooting enemies; it is also required to navigate the 3D level geometry and to observe moments of environmental storytelling. As such, we might ask ourselves: how challenging does an action have to be in order to qualify as a mechanic? And which kinds of challenges are conventionally recognizable as mechanistic?

At stake here is a kind of metaphysics of gameplay. Are 'mechanics' abstractable concepts, describable by high-level, medium-independent language? (e.g. jumping, aiming). Soren Johnston (2014), for example, makes the argument that videogames and boardgames are not primarily distinguished by their materialities, but rather by design values like transparency. But what if we want to compare two games in the same genre - say, how aiming and shooting differs between *Quake* (id Software, 1996) and *Counter-Strike* (Valve Corporation, 1999). From a designer perspective, the devil is in the details - the algorithm controlling the camera movement (Keren 2015), field of view and the size of the aiming dead zone (Hauteville 2011), the crosshair drawn to the GUI (Afzoud 2012), the game feel (Swink 2008), etc. We could say that aiming is a core 'mechanic' in both shooters, but such a conceptual framework does little to reveal the significant technical and experiential complexities at play.

Brendan Keogh (2018), drawing from phenomenology and feminist theory, argues that looking and listening "are embodied activities in their own right and are vital components of videogame play" (15). In short, mechanics cannot be adequately

separated from audiovisual engagement; the two are irreducible. Although this phenomenological understanding applies to all videogames, we might double down on this insight, taking it as an invitation to reorient how we go about designing. Rather than asking whether certain games or genres have 'more' or 'fewer' mechanics, we could search for different language altogether. As games research and criticism increasingly attends to the material (Apperley & Jayemanne 2012), we might look to materiality as an alternative conceptual scaffolding for design practice.

As a concrete case study, I present the multi-view exploration game *WORLD4* (Muscat & Duckworth 2018a), which attempts to accentuate the richness of looking in walkers and other 3D exploration games. The project was conceived through examining camera and lighting in 3D walkers more generally, and in the Unity engine more specifically (Muscat 2018b). In *WORLD4* the game world is fragmented across four separate first-person views onscreen, each displaying similar or different elements like objects or pathways. When looking is obfuscated and complicated to such a degree, it becomes inherently effortful to observe and navigate surroundings - so much so that the activity becomes a puzzle-like challenge. Moreover, looking is inextricably related to material components of the world - its labyrinthic level layout, as well as the emissive and unlit materials that reduce depth and enhance color blending and contrast. Still, it isn't immediately clear whether looking in *WORLD4* should itself be considered a 'mechanic'. As one playtester articulated, *WORLD4* "feels like a puzzle to be explored, not solved". The boundary between embodied perception and game-like challenge is blurry indeed.

WORLD4 attempts to highlight supposedly 'minimal' player actions like looking and listening - actions that are often taken for granted, that have always been effortful and complex. By calling attention to the experience of looking, *WORLD4* hopes to make players more aware of the algorithmic and material specificity of navigating 3D virtual worlds. In doing so, *WORLD4* posits an alternative approach to game design - one that organizes itself around a motivating materiality instead of a core mechanic.

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