

Ambiguities of Game Design and the Challenge of the Walking Simulator

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INTRODUCTION

The walking simulator or walker is a niche yet pervasive genre of games, that has historically been a point of debate, inquiry, exploration, and influence within broader games culture, academic research, and creative game making (Bratt 2016; Cross 2016; Irwin 2017; Clark 2017; Muscat 2018; Lilford 2018; Ballou 2019; Montembeault & Deslongchamps-Gagnon 2019; Hawey, Ferland-Beauchemin, Benoit 2019; Bowman 2019; Sliva 2020; Briscoe 2021; Kunzelman 2022). Walker games include studio developed and non-commercial titles, and share a trait of reduce mechanical complexity (Sicart 2008). This acts as a contextual frame, which implicitly directs player attention towards the audio-visual world, shaping the game experience as something not to be overcome, but of keen perception and close enquiry.

Within walker games ambiguity, for example, has been identified as a common designed trait, often in the form of environmental focal points uncovered by players during navigation, that can compel meaning making through association (Cross 2015; Muscat 2016). Walkers often cannot be strictly 'solved', nor are there clearly discernible 'conflicts', explicit feedback or quantifiable outcomes; traits often associated with designed games. Walker game mechanics can be said to be a means to reveal the extent of ambiguity through a player's close comprehension, with little assistance in finding a 'correct' resolution (Muscat 2018).

Through these design choices, subjective, interpretive readings of game world elements are encouraged, relying on players to form their own mental recollection, reflections, or written notes, which can be described as an "emotional playground ... spaces designed for using the experience of play rather than its form to create emotions" (Sicart 2014, p.55).

As such, walker game traits reveal a tension within dominant game design theory and knowledge (e.g. Hunnicke 2004; Koster 2004; Schell 2009; Adams 2013; Fullerton 2018), falling between definitions of what has classically been defined as game and play (Salen, Zimmerman 2004, p.342). Walkers contain formal designed rules; operational, in their use of 'core' interaction mechanics, and constitutive, in hidden

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rules and activated events. These rules define activities like navigation, and do much to frame a walker's exploratory game experience, which, in a strict sense, does feature a variety of gameplay: a "formalised interaction that occurs when players follow the rules of the game and experience the system through play" (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, p.342).

Although formalistic game design traits are present within walkers, these elements do little to account for or explain characteristics fall outside of operational and constitutive determinants, including reduced temporality, perceptual and environmental emphasis, and ambiguity. It has been argued that a more materially-focused design perspective can shed defining, contextual insights (Muscat 2019), but this does not fully capture or articulate broader, pervasive traits of walker games that do not align with popular game design values (Lawhead 2017; Yang 2015).

This research investigates walkers as both a designed game and as designed play, "free movement within a more rigid structure" (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, p.305), drawing upon design fields such as 'ludic' and playful design (Gaver et al. 2004; Gaver 2015; Deterding et al. 2011). In doing challenges and limitations within the broader cultural field of game design are highlighted, with an intent to further design language to that more alternative games and gameplay experiences may be better accommodated and understood within the field.

Insights reveal that walker play is largely transformative of the more rigid operational 'game' experience, as more free-form, open-ended and perhaps 'playful' experiences. Furthermore, an inherent ambiguity of play (Sutton-Smith 2001, p.2) is heightened in walkers as they resist being 'gamed'; they are interpreted, as their ambiguity is not quantifiable and often non-conclusive. Walker design characteristics configure first-person gameplay into an experience that is best defined as a curious one; walkers cannot be mastered, but we still wish to understand them. These insights raise further question to the broader importance of instinctive, self-directed play (Sicart 2014) within the design of games.

BIO

Dr Alexander Muscat is Lecturer in Games at University of the Sunshine Coast. His research investigates game-making practices, production processes, design theory, and player experience. Alexander's research includes an experimental, practice-based focus with special interest towards how games challenge sensory perception and compel curiosity. His work has been disseminated at scholarly, arts, and industry venues including CHI Play, DiGRA, A MAZE, and Games Connect Asia Pacific.

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