

# Walking Simulators: The Digitisation of an Aesthetic Practice

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## ABSTRACT

Walking has been a long standing source of literary and artistic inspiration for writers (Poe 1840; Wordsworth 1979; Sinclair 2003) political activists (Chtcheglov 1953; Garrett 2013) and artists (Breton 1960; Aragon 1999). The videogames landscape has seen a surge in walking inspired games controversially tagged as ‘walking simulators’. This paper is a literary reading into three such tagged games: *Year Walk*, *Gone Home* and *Dear Esther*. It frames these games as continuations of the Romantic tradition of walking as an aesthetic practice thus embracing walking simulators as an art, the like of Romantic paintings and literature.

Using the psychogeographic *dérive*, it interprets these ludic experiences as an artistic and aesthetic expression with an emphasis on authentic emotion, subjective in play and design. Through the walk, the landscape of the games become tied to the practice of literary psychogeography following a lineage including Charles Dickets (2010), G. K. Chesterton (1905), Andre Breton (1960), Ian Sinclair (2003) and Will Self (2015). It concludes that there might be an appropriateness in using the term ‘walking’ in defining these games. The Romantic tradition was born out of walking and it is evolving into a digitisation of its practice.

## Keywords

psychogeography, exploration, walking simulators, Romanticism

## INTRODUCTION

Walking is a practice that has gone beyond the mechanics of bodily movement. It is endowed in meaning, critical and aesthetic, environmental and personal. Since the Romantic movement, the hypnotic rhythm of walking has been used as a source of literary inspiration (Poe 1840; Wordsworth 1979; Sinclair 2003; Solnit 2006; Papadimitriou 2012; Self 2015), political movement (Benjamin 1939; Chtcheglov 1953; Debord 1967; Sadler 1999; Solnit 2006; Garrett 2013) and corporeal transcendence (Breton 1960; Aragon 1999; Basset 2007). From the romantic poet to the psychogeographer and the urban explorer, the exploration of landscapes has been a window into an occult mysticism and enchanting perambulation (Coverley 2010). Walking allowed the wanderer to immerse him or herself in a landscape and dwell in its intoxicating past (Benjamin 1939), so finding their route to spirituality in a disenchanted world (Solnit 2006; Self 2015).

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What started as a derogatory term for games with little mechanics to offer, it became appropriated for exploration-heavy games with a particular focus on environments (Goodwin 2014; Gaynor 2015; Their 2015). This project is a literary analysis into *Year Walk*, *Gone Home* and *Dear Esther*, arguing that they are a continuation of the Romantic tradition of walking as an aesthetic practice.

Though the paper acknowledges the controversies behind the term ‘walking simulator’, debating the terminology goes beyond the scope of this essay instead focusing on the experiential aesthetics these games can offer. For lack of a better term, this paper will stick to ‘walking simulator’ due to its proliferation on Steam. It will define walking simulators as games with an immersive use of exploration as a core mechanic utilised for environmental storytelling purposes.

This paper will concentrate on *Year Walk*, *Gone Home* and *Dear Esther* as examples of walking simulators. *Year Walk* has been chosen for its critical acclaim (Unity 2013; BAFTA 2014) as well as its strong references to transcendental walking practices grounded in history (Kent 2014). *Gone Home* has been chosen for my own extended experience with the game as well as its direct inspiration from urban exploration (Gaynor 2012). *Dear Esther* was chosen for its heavy use of idyllic Romantic British landscapes (Pinchbeck 2008) and its use of walking as the single form of interaction. By going on a psychogeographic walk through their virtual landscapes this paper aims to place them within a literary and aesthetic cultural context. Extensive reading followed by the use of a gameplay log will identify the literary knowledge tied directly to the landscape of the games. It thus interprets games as an artistic and aesthetic expression in line with the Romantic’s emphasis on authentic emotion, speculating that these games could be seen as a romantic revolution in which ludic experiences are understood as subjective expressions of players and designers.

## **NOTES ON METHODOLOGY**

The methodology used for this paper will be based on the psychogeographic *dérive*. Understood as “the correlation of the material obtained by drifting” (Keiller 2013, p.15), it is “a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances” (Debord 1958, p.62-63) where one playfully immerses oneself in the terrain and encounters while observing their effects on oneself. When taking a *dérive* through the landscapes of the three games, I will be recording my observations in a game log. Translating this into game terms: Lindley (2005) divided the interactions with game space into various levels of rising or falling player engagement, from the mechanics of a button press to its consequential aesthetics on a player. The game log will concentrate on the performance level of the games; that is my own contribution within the mechanical structure of the game. This will allow for an uncovering of theory and affect as found in the landscape of the game.

If environments are subjective (de Certeau 1988; Lefebvre 1991) it must follow that videogame environments are subjectively perceived as well. Psychogeography accepts that there is no Aarsethian ideal player (Aarseth 2003). It rejects the idea that there is one dominant interpretation of environmental stories and instead focuses on the aesthetics provoked in a succession of readings through a certain player. I as a researcher must be situated in the game and let myself be immersed in it, reading the provocations caused by the design of the game’s landscape. My approach will be that of a literary explorer. Taking on the persona of Walter Benjamin’s *flâneur* (Benjamin 1939), this lens will allow for a transportation of semiotic study into aesthetic analysis. In the style of Andre Breton (1960), I will be looking in the micro for fortuitous happenings that provoke

associations into the macro. Each chapter is a focus into one aspect of the aesthetic tradition of walking. By placing them directly in the context of the virtual landscape a deeper insight is gained on the potential of games to convey complex human conditions the like of which explored in the past through the Romantic movement. Through their string of meanings, details in the landscape become contextualised into a greater web. I let the landscape of the game play me.

## FIRST STEPS

There is a contested claim on who “introduced walking as a cultural act, as a part of aesthetic experience” (Solnit 2006, p. 82) making the start of *Year Walk* a complication. The game opens with a call to practice a year walk, a letting go into a magical environment. It spurred an academic investigation into the ancient practice of *Arsgang*, also known as year walking (Kent 2014), formally similar to the practice of psychogeography. Psychogeography can be understood as a playful practice: a technique constructed out of wandering in which it is required to subconsciously abandon oneself into the environment and simultaneously become consciously aware of its effects (Debord 1958). *Year Walk* joins the cacophony of voices, *flaneurs*, psychogeographers, urban explorers and voyeurs in their acceptance of exploration as not just a spiritual and contemplative practice but also a necessity that can occur even among the harshest of conditions (Solnit 2006; Garrett 2015). The lens through which I explore *Year Walk* shivers from the cold. A pure white landscape in textured strips of snow-tipped trees flickers in and out of focus. The landscape feels contemplative, spiritual and aesthetic. As I begin to traverse, the camera wobbles to my steps. There is no music, just the rhythm of my footsteps in the snow.

I walk away from the red door where parallax lines make a labyrinth of trees. Its paths are indicated by landmarks of stalked lumber and carts. By pressing left and right, up and down, I walk, discovering the landscape for the first time. Walking to psychogeographers was an art of getting lost (Schweizer 2009). It was a method of immersing oneself into a landscape so allowing for a reconstruction of patterns and stories. Further than an art, Iaconovi (2004) and Debord (1958) also called it a game. an immersion into a landscape through the hypnosis of walking allowing for a playful reconstruction of the environment, a repurposing of the landscape (Bassett 2007). Like psychogeographers, *flaneurs*, romantics and the year walkers must have done, I take a walk through this ethereal landscape, getting lost and finding new objects and new paths.

At night I will pass objects and symbols that I do not yet understand: horses etched on trees and stones carved with runes. There is a mystery in the landscape, rich in riddles and tradition that has yet to be explored. Psychogeography comes from a Romantic heritage that split into two movements, political and literary psychogeography (Bennett 2011). The literary includes names such as Iain Sinclair and Will Self who focus on heritage and myth for introspective purposes. The political has a French background, popularised by Guy Debord (1967) and continued by Henri Lefebvre (1991), who see walking as a political tool. Both strands, however, understood exploration as an “emancipatory praxis” (Bennet 2011, p. 42). It moves the walker away from the physical and then back down to it from a radically subjective height, resisting functionalism in an attempt to re-enchant the landscape by exciting the walker (Sadler 1999). Playful walking, the radically subjective reading of the semiotics of places and inhabitants, represented a fight against the boredom of the modernist city and delusions of control (Chtcheglov 1953). Debord and his group of Situationists International would tread across Paris, alcoholic beverages in hand, in an attempt to break capitalism through aimless walking (Sadler 1999; Self

2015). The wide breadth of psychogeography would soon move into the occult. Magico-Marxists, a strand from the political psychogeographers, believe the way class emancipation can occur is through the use of occult ritualism, leaving sigils and traces of mysticism through the landscape. *Year Walk*, though occult in its scratchings on the tree and rivers, has no overt political intentions. I am instead performing an ancient ritual for introspective purposes related solely for my own subjective interpretation. The walk, while beautiful to look at, produces ‘moments of insights’ and transports me to ‘flashes of older or other worlds’ (Bennet 2011, p. 423). The psychogeography of *Year Walk* is literary.

Following footsteps and carts, I reach a windmill where a girl, warm and lively, darkens at the utterance of my ritual. ‘Year walking? You must be joking. You do remember what happened to my cousin, don’t you?’ (Simogo 2013). Getting lost is a dangerous practice. The surrealists understood this (Bassett 2007). A complete letting go and subjecting to the landscape means letting the subconscious reign. Louis Aragon would one night in 1926 wander into the new malls of Paris where he hallucinated the sight of a mermaid behind the glass of a shop window. When you adopt a playful attitude and allow yourself to get lost into the subconscious rhythms of the body walking through a landscape, you give up control. One that leads to radical readings and experiences.

On a black screen I uncover objects to the sound of a beating rhythm, like a heartbeat, anticipating the unknown. I am lost in the landscape of a black screen and piece together the objects my exploring mouse trips over on the screen. Perhaps this is a synecdoche of later gameplay. I will be exploring and piecing together the landscape to the hypnotic sound of footsteps. If I want to uncover the story I must abandon myself completely to the landscape and only then will I be able to find the pieces. It is play, yet lonely and internal, like the literary walks of British psychogeographers. An angelic voice sings for every object I find, giving it an eerie feel until ‘Year Walk’ is spelled out on my screen. I am back outside the ajar door. It is night time now. I begin my walk.

## **EXPLORERS**

In *Gone Home* a locked door impedes my entrance into the mansion. On its board sticks a note from a loving family member by the name of Sam warning me not to search the house for her. The character I am embodying, Kate, just having come back from a year of backpacking Europe, must have been expecting her family welcoming her home into a warm embrace of loving comfort. Instead I am all alone on a stormy night staring at this note. With the wind howling through the porch and thunder crackling me sharp, curiosity tells me everything is not fine and this family member might be in grave danger. I try to open the door. The door is locked. I begin to look behind every cranny and open every drawer. There must be another way in.

According to Bateman (2014), in a study on the collection and classification of all player types, he would call me the seeker archetype, a type of player that approaches games, its mechanics, environments and story with curiosity. They search for the endomorphin thrill of interpreting found and dubious information. Solnit (2006) calls this urge to explore and curiosity about the world universal, in fact, natural. However it is constrained out of us through restrictive authority. If walking really is universal and curiosity natural, then the large popularity of seeker archetypes might come to no surprise (Bateman 2014). They are players who upon seeing a mysterious note and a forbidden space, become eager to explore what’s behind it and what it all might mean.

Notes like the one hanging on a locked door function like a purport, a word keyed by film theorist Hjelmslev (1953) where an object or situation contains within it a series of possibilities. This note is an unexpected occurrence that spikes my curiosity and feeds speculation. Irvin Biederman and Edward Vessel come to call such objects richly interpretable information (Biederman and Vessel in Bateman 2014). Somewhere in the house is a series of objects that will answer my questions arising out of this mysterious note, all of them together functioning thus like Vsevolod Pudovkin's (1964) questions and answers scenes. This form of storytelling has been studied heavily in film and Bateman (2014) ties it tightly to the seeker archetype. There is a similarity in the erotetic model of narrative, a film technique of opening questions and closing them in later scenes, with rich interpretable data. Interpretable data opens questions and answers others in a space-time puzzle of semiotic association (Bateman 2014). While in film these might be organised in scenes, spatiality organises the story through the arrangement of objects. Psychogeographic practice requires 'active engagement' (Pinder 2005, p. 400) and in *Gone Home*, too, I must actively engage with the house and its objects until I find something that will answer my questions, or raise new ones. That is to say that the mechanics of *Gone Home* itself pushes me along the erotetic model of narrative. Every corner I look around gets me one step closer to the answers. Play becomes a performative act. I open the door to the cupboard tucked away on the left-hand-side of the porch. A Christmas duck sits awkwardly in the corner. I pick it up. Underneath lies the key to the house.

The door opens to a hall. The lights of the mansion blink on like a challenger awoken from its slumber. Shadows are cast on crevices, a staircase invites me into a darker passage while the walls lift their corners, hinting at me the mysteries that lie behind them. Like urban explorers, I have been circling the boundaries of the porch, searching for crevices through which to slip into new spaces. My exploration at this point has been rewarded with a place full of richly interpretable information that provides answers but simultaneously raises more questions in a cacophony of curious objects.

Urban exploration is a practice of infiltration into temporary, obsolete, abandoned and derelict spaces, often described as a child of psychogeography (Garrett 2013). Bradley Garrett writes on the London urban exploration groups in his ethnographic research, following them from the London underground to the heights of the Shard. They find holes in the edges of the urban through which to slip and discover 'behind-the-scenes sights' (Ninjalicious in Garrett 2013, p. 1). I like to think myself a virtual urban explorer, using my curious-minded exploration to gain access to intimate places that will answer my questions about the behind-the-scenes of the Greenbriar family. I head towards the family portrait where the parents and their two daughters smile over a sloppy metal engraving. In one corner of the cupboard lies a postcard and a flight leaflet, in the closet, the mother's forester and work clothes. Exploration is at the center of this game. It is how I begin to get to know the inhabitants, gaining a sense of belonging in the house, fulfilling my curiosity and amassing knowledge (Carr 2014). A light blinks on the answering machine. The panicked voice of a girl cries out for Sam. My fear and curiosity for what might have happened to Sam deepens. In my search from corner to corner, I start to become more involved in the place but also with the story and the characters that inhabit it.

Urban explorers similarly search from corner to corner in a pursuit to become closer to that grand sense of place, described by Bernstein as 'salutary states of awe, melancholy, joy or terror' brought about by environments (Bernstein in Hussey 2001, p. 91). Urban

exploration, psychogeography and walking simulators like *Gone Home* are about the exploration of places and seeking that surprise and awe in the stories the landscape brings forth. Both Bennett (2011) and Garrett (2013), while disagreeing on the political undertones of the practice, show how urban explorers connect with the spirit of the places they explore, Garrett by sitting with them in an abandoned hotel, Bennett by investigating how they talk about places in their forums. Like psychogeography, it is a way to experience the landscape in new ways, transforming it into something ‘marvelous, life-affirming or exciting’ (Pinder 2005, p. 391). By wandering urban explorers collect knowledge that connects them to a heritage and spirit. The objects become something beyond their materiality. The painting of the family is not just a portrait, but the faces of the lives I am intimately searching. The phone is not just a phone but can contain the message that spins my mind out of control with speculations. Exploration and the bodily movement that enables it thus becomes a way to turn the mundane into the exciting.

Exploring is more and more contested in the corporeal. With Garrett fighting legal battles, my trespassing into the Greenbriar mansion seems like a breeze comparatively. There are no tensions of getting caught; I have the right to be there from the moment I paid and downloaded the game. The experience revolves around me, the player. The way the information is dispersed in space is designed to satisfy my curiosity in a cycle of explore, discover, unlock and explore some more. Yet the tensions of politics and gender of the corporeal are replaced by other fears designed by the game to immerse me into the unknown. Ouija boards and flickering lights are among them. However, despite the obstacles or perhaps because of them there is a pull towards the need to explore. With Solnit (2006) stating it is natural, Bateman (2014) finding a vast population of seeker archetypes in videogame players and Garrett (2015) even going on to say that exploration is inevitable, spaces like *Gone Home* are designed to satisfy the curious minds of explorers.

## **THE PURSUIT OF A SECRET**

I am washed ashore in *Dear Esther*. An idyllic Herbedean landscape and poetic voice welcome me. The narrator describes the island as both of his own creation and found, somewhere inside a fissure. His narrative voice and words are mysterious and cryptic. He seems to be searching for a ‘fresh insight’ (The Chinese Room 2012) into the landscape and himself. I press W and I seem to glide. There is no rhythm to my walk. Perhaps I am a ghost? Lost, the narrator doesn’t give me any answers and so I am driven forward to find them.

Walking past a dilapidated lighthouse, I only find seagulls and pots of fluorescent paint. The coastline rises up to picturesque cliffs and majestic rocks protruding from the shore, littered at its feet by rusting cages tangled in seaweed. Down into a hole in the rock the narrator talks of a hermit, ‘a holy man who sought solitude in its most pure form’ (The Chinese Room 2012). There is very little description of who I am and who is talking to me. My identity floats alienated somewhere between the boundaries of the narrator and the hermit. Like him, I’m a solitary figure. I wander through the coastline listening to the prose of a melancholic narrator. The slow pace leaves time to think between the snippets of his literature. I am searching crevices and crannies of the enchanted landscape in the hopes that the narrator will enlighten me with the full story. Instead I am bound to piece together the mystery of the character and this island. Like Sinclair’s writing, I am exploring and re-imagining the ‘forgotten nooks and crannies of ordinary landscapes’ in an attempt to ‘re-enchant and re-mythologize prosaic geographies’ (Bonnett 2009, p.46).

What was just a hole in the rock becomes a window into the legendary character of the Hermit. I walk to enchant the landscape with secrets.

The further I walk, the deeper the narrator's remarks go into his thoughts and the intimacy of his memories and speculations. Nick Papadimitriou (2013) conducts what he calls deep topography and in his writing of *Scarp*, describes his practices as one of crawling through forbidden portals to find forgotten memories. In *Dear Esther* I walk along the shoreline towards the white chalk cliffs while the narrator slips 'into the delusional state of ascribing purpose', speculating that the landscape was formed during the impact of a car crash. In a tying together of rural topology and car I too begin to ascribe purpose to the landscape, the parallel cuts into the chalk cliffs transform into a metaphor of skid marks on a highway or seat-belts into flesh (see Figure 9). Both Papadimitriou (2013) and Sinclair (2003) talk of cars and landscapes, similarly to *Dear Esther*. The car threatens overlooking the arcane knowledge of the landscape through their high-speed blur and at the same time causes the landscape around them to change in return. In Sinclair's *London Orbital* (2003) where car and landscape mesh like the skylines of *Dear Esther*, Sinclair attempts to find the stories that revolve around the M25 ring motorway. He calls the psychogeography behind his work an occult practice that reveals hidden, arcane knowledges (Bennett 2011). Among the hills of *Dear Esther*, the hidden stories seem to have manifested as metaphorical landscape. I, the explorer, take on the occult practice and search to uncover the secrets of the narrator, manifested as environment.

His kidney stones become islands and his injuries scars on a landscape. The unreliable narrator mixes reality with the imagined, landscape and words blend together into a crashing together of analogies, similes and metaphors. The narrator is on a search on the island for some sort of peace, like Andre Breton (1960) who begins his surrealist writing, *Nadja*, by presenting himself as a ghost, defined by the people and objects he haunts. He traces his steps under the illusion of exploration, recalling memories, relearning what he already knows. This narrator talks of repeating and recognizing the landscape as he goes, reminiscing the steps of a story. Something unknown to me has happened to him. He is doomed to wander to try and complete himself and I wander with him to complete the story. We are both on a search, spiritual and material.

Social scientists such as Michel de Certeau (1988) have used the immersion invoked in walking to read cities. Walking is a spatial trajectory that allows the exploration of hidden stories embedded in the landscape and so early writings by the romantic literaries followed the spatial pursuit of a secret. In Edgar Allan Poe's *Man of the Crowd* (1840), the writer followed the nightly wanderings of a man through London. Throughout the voyage in which the author falls deeper into the hypnosis of insomnia and the rhythms of the walk, Poe takes a psychological anonym. He abandons his identity so he can attempt and fail, to attach himself to that of the vagabonding stranger. He takes on the position of Walter Benjamin's (1939) archaeologist, collector and *flaneur*. Similarly Thomas de Quincey searches for *Anne of Oxford Street* (1822) when he himself vagabonds the streets. In their alienated position, the *flaneur* can attempt to excavate the hidden secrets of night-time London. Both of them fail in their pursuits. Their search is the poetry.

In *Dear Esther* the goal is not the centre of the game. It is not indexed with a marker but rather just blinks at us through the clouds like a looming inevitability. The secret is uncovered through exploration and observation of places. Walk the place, dig the place, collect the story; I am, too, embodying the three figures of Walter Benjamin. The

landscape cannot be skipped as it is at the very centre of its mechanics. The pursuit of the secret is the game.

## **SPIRIT OF THE LANDSCAPE**

At first the empty house of *Gone Home*, the still snow of *Year Walk* or the vast deserted landscapes of *Dear Esther* seem lonely. In this alienated state, I can read deeper into the landscape only to realise that I am not alone in it. The landscape is filled with the traces of people and their stories, haunted by the ones that were there before (de Certeau 1988). In a tradition that follows Walter Benjamin (1939) in which living is seen as leaving traces, these traces become haunted places and the objects take on spirits of the past. The landscape has a spirit. This *genius loci* is what transforms a space, defined as a geometric expanse barren of spirit, into a place, an area filled with story and life (Tuan 2001; de Certeau 1988; Lefebvre 1991). In *Dear Esther*, *Year Walk* and *Gone Home*, the secret stories are found in the environment and linked tightly to it. The cave in *Dear Esther* shines a light down like a doctor's flashlight into a pupil, the Huldra of *Year Walk* lives inside trees and Sam's love interest is hidden tightly in a locker wrapped in the privacy of her room. The everyday is revealed to have a deep spirit beyond its physical confines. It is in the everyday that we find the answers to the secrets.

Secrets hide in the fissures of the landscape. Nick Papadimitriou (2013) calls it deep time, where the past echoes through the spaces and fills it with an intense spirit of place wrapped in quietude and a past. Urban explorers thirst for objects that connect them with a deep past (Bennet 2011; Garrett 2013). It is a way of connecting with an authentic experience. They pursue a secret through objects that resonate the ghosts of the past, found in old diaries and discarded letters. Louis Aragon (1960) called this phenomenon the frisson, where an object constitutes a very idea, an authentic spirit. The sensation of finding a frisson and connecting with its spirit comes through finding the cracks of the landscape and in fact is the crack itself. To feel them I must wander through the scenery in search for places where the spirit of the place shines through.

*Dear Esther's* journey reveals a very subjective retelling of a car crash set to the emotional turmoil of the narrator. It is a romantic game in the way it doesn't try to simulate an accurate representation of the systems of a car crash but rather concentrates on the way the narrator experiences its repercussions. It is in a Baudelairian sense an expression of "intimacy, spirituality, colour, yearning for the infinite, expressed by all the means the arts possess" (Baudelaire 1981, p. 53). The focus is on the emotion of the narrator, from The Chinese Room's home in chalky Southern England and set in the Herbedean Island of Boreray (Pinchbeck, 2008). It makes sense that the first game to follow in the footsteps of the romantics should be found here, where Chesterton (1905) imbued the coastal landscape with national and spiritual, almost holy literature. To him the landscape is the poetry. It is imbued with a spirit. Like in *Dear Esther* everything, including the ground, is a metaphor of something greater. It is a land where the ordinary chalk becomes filled with a spirit of something pure and authentic, a spirit of something greater.

In a similar way, *Year Walk* revives Scandinavian mythology. Between the rhythms of the snowy landscape the Huldra will sing me a path to her lair or from a river the Brook Horse will send me to collect the dead. Excavating stories from the everyday forest and rivers, we are performing an Iain Sinclair-style re-reading of the Swedish woods and so folksy localism comes to life (Bonnet 2009). But more importantly, it can only be



experienced through walking, abandoning oneself and stepping into the spirit of the landscape.

In *Gone Home* I am holding Lonnie's tear stained drawing relating to me her teenage heartbreak. If a place and its objects can be infused with a spirit, it follows that they can be injected with a story and that story can be read by a player with the ability to understand its semiotics. Lindley (2005) describes game stories to be non-interactive cutscenes with a repetitive second act. However these games have their first and third act embedded in the game. They are breaking Lindley's traditional method of storytelling in games. We have entered the realm of environmental storytelling. Like Iain Sinclair or Walter Benjamin, these games place the story directly into the environment.

In the 18th century, the British built gardens that hold the stories of mythology (Solnit 2006). A series of statues and garden paths represented the tribulations of goddesses and legendary figures. By walking through the garden these stories could come to life. The tables have since turned with walkers concentrating on emergent rather than designed environmental stories (McMillin 2011; Kekou 2013). However the two spaces are converging again through the use of games. Davies (2007), on studying pervasive games, calls for designers to make use of the stories already found in the landscape, stringing them together to create a particular perception and action. Thus a design of the landscape becomes a playing with semiotics. *Gone Home*, *Dear Esther* and *Year Walk* could be called digital garden paths or time images in the sense that their stories are dispersed over a landscape that reveal the story. It is filled with an ascribed spirit of the designer.

Understanding the landscape in terms of a spirit often opens an understanding of story told through environment. In the field of environmental storytelling, games such as walking simulators are changing how videogame stories are told. But the theory is not new. Walter Benjamin was fascinated by the environmental storytelling of cities (Solnit 2006). To him the city was a treasure trove of stories that could only be read by walking and the mind would interpret the chaotic semiotics of spatial time into a narrative. Exploring the stories communicated through space in walking simulators, we have begun to see how game designers can use a spatial language to express an exaltation. Henry Jenkins (2004) is not far off in calling designers architects.

## **OTHER PLACES**

At the center of the Romantic literary tradition of psychogeographical practice is the act of walking. As one moves, the entire landscape moves around with the traveler in a direct sensory feedback of locomotion and visuals (Benjamin 1939; Lynch 1960; de Certeau 1988). Practicing space is what allows for its interpretation and connection. This is precisely why urban explorers go to such great lengths, fighting the law and risking their lives, to peak into forbidden places (Garrett 2013). I too continue their practice by performing my interpretation of Sam and Lonnie's relationship through exploring their alcoves in the basement. the collage leaflets, punk-rock tapes and letters speak to me of their hidden and exciting teenage romance. A narrativisation of the game space is constructed in my mind. It is a stringing together of narrative from a sequence of signs presented, in film as frames, in games as spatial configurations. There is after all an appropriateness in using the word 'walking' in defining these games as it is motion that allows for exploration and meaning. Exploration creates story.

While critics state that walking simulators are simply the absence of mechanics (Goodwin 2014; Their 2015), it is worth countering that walking may deserve to be a mechanic in

its own right. Walking is what transports the wanderer into the world (Gros 2014). It is a tool for immersion popular among groups like the Surrealists who would hypnotise themselves with the rhythm of their legs to let a subconsciousness impose itself over their landscape (Breton 1960). Game scholars define immersion as a mental process in which a player becomes absorbed into the world on screen, raising an acute awareness into the game's spatiality and story (Ermi and Maya 2005; Calleja 2011). It could also be understood as an urban dream, like Poe's (1840) writing in which he walks the streets in a 'convalescent state, a heightened state of awareness'. Or like Andre Breton's (1960) deambulations into the countryside to transcend physicality and reach that between point of reality and dreams. The world is framed as split into two realms, the asleep and the awake, the sane and the insane. It is a Freudian understanding of the mind. To Dickens (2010) both were tightly interlaced as at night dreams from the subconscious could come to life. Walking, in particular night walking, was a way to access that other place, often secluded by the rationalism and enlightenment of the era. Their walking practices heightened their sense of what was around them beyond reality into a radically subjective state. It was an immersion into space and time that Walter Benjamin (1939) called spellbinding and intoxicating. It is one of the paths into an immersive trance and so I must walk to not just immerse myself into the lives of the Greenbriar family but also to enter the subconscious mind of the narrator of *Dear Esther* and his path to atonement, achieved "specifically through walking" (Pinder 2005, p. 396).

I walk from object to object, trying to solve the puzzle of the Greenbriar family. Or at least a simulation of what walking can be, a movement through space to the rhythm of footsteps. There is no physical rhythm to my pressing of the 'W' key on my keyboard. The sound of the footsteps might as well be that of a car engine, wheeling me around the space. However, each revelation I encounter through virtual movement draws me further into the game. There is no passivity to the way I uncover Sam and Lonnie's relationship. I find an intimate diary page in which Sam describes her sexual experiences with Lonnie which Katie promptly puts down. I realise I am, like the urban explorers, adding my own experiences to the story in the way my embodied character or I explore and react to it. To Garrett (2013) this is the way to add heritage to place, rather than the encasing of story in glass and marketplace value. *Gone Home* is not a museum. I interact directly with the house, picking up things and, while I cannot alter Sam's past, I can add my own experience to the house. I add to the spirit of the place and emerge with my own stories to tell about the house: The time I had found Sam and Lonnie had tried to call forth the ghost of the previous inhabitant. In a secret passage wrapped in 1950s newspapers and lit by a single bare light bulb, I find a wooden Christian cross. I pick it up. The light bulb bursts. I jump in my seat and scream as the screen goes dark. I look around only to realise Sam and Lonnie haven't actually ouija boarded a ghost and the light was simply an electrical failure. Such a moment brings together a series of times, past and present, into one constellation, a dialectical image of Benjamin's that transcends the physical space and provides a moment of illumination.

Nothing shows the effects more stunningly than the end of *Year Walk* where the walking of the landscape ends with a walk through time. When I begin to believe the game is over, I find a password that unlocks the blog of a fictional researcher investigating the year walking practices of 19th century Swedes. After uncovering the mystery of who killed the girl, he decides to travel back in time to change her fate. He does so by repeating the ritual. He traverses the landscape, connects with it and so travels back in time to leave our character a knife. Like the urban explorers, he is visiting a place to

access its past and add to it through the present. Walking becomes a transcendence into other times and other places.

## **CONCLUSIONS ON WALKING**

Over the course of this paper we have observed how an aesthetic practice of walking seems to have moved beyond the 19th century Romantics, transcended the physical and manifested in the virtual through walking simulators such as *Year Walk*, *Gone Home* and *Dear Esther*. The playful readings of places have become designed games revolving around a story to be uncovered by a solitary player. Through their careful placing of objects and semiotic arrangement of space, designers create rich, interpretable data the player can immerse themselves in. Interpreting the story becomes a performative act in which the player must traverse and explore landscapes in order to experience its spirit. The answers to the mysteries of the story are not handed to the player through cut scenes and neither are they encased in a museum-like glass, rather the player must engage through exploration in order to push the narrative forward. Experienced subjectively, these games play with the interpretations of players. Where interpretable data is concerned, subjectivity is what brings forth the aesthetics of exploration and authentic experience, in the Romantic sense. The landscape and the story found within it become tied to the personal meaning-making of the player. Salutary states can come to life. Walking simulators are an art, the like of Romantic paintings and literature. They have the power to search inside our environment and ourselves and evoke emotions of awe and terror.

Walking simulators are made for seekers. In their spatial design of hidden objects and interpretable secrets, the mechanics follow a pattern of explore, discover, unlock and explore some more. The act of virtually walking becomes something more, an engagement with a story, making the game come to life. While year walking might be a practice of the past, urban explorers and walking simulators come to show that walking still has a continuing aesthetic tradition though its form might be changing. Bennett (2011) compares videogame characters directly to urban explorers, speculating that some urban explorers might have entered the practice through an extension of their on-screen activities. Conversely, with physical space being constantly restricted by governments and urban exploration being physically stratified by, often male, bodies, wouldn't some people who can't explore the physical satisfy their exploration needs through digital means? In 1939 Walter Benjamin described the dioramas of Paris, a device that would project the countryside into the city, effectively bring the exploration of landscapes into the home. The screen on which I play these games becomes a diorama, bridging the exploration of dangerous and strange worlds into the safety of my home. It could be said the aesthetic tradition of walking is evolving into a digitisation of its practice. In these walking simulators I am beholding the game designers that have lived. Their experiences expressed in virtual lines like the pen strokes of Romantic poets. Their environments confide in me through my play an authentic emotion; a marvelous, life-affirming experience.

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