

Reading, Writing, Lexigraphing: Active Passivity as Queer Play in Walking Simulators

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Abstract

In this article, we address the histories and influences of reading and writing within the genre of digital games called “walking simulators.” Reading is framed as an activity separate from (and, sometimes, incompatible with) the set of actions afforded to players in most game genres. Walking simulators, on the other hand, converge the act of reading and walking in complex ways that expose the playful but putatively inactive action of reading as a disruptive queering. This queering subverts the standard expectation that to count as “player” (and for walking simulators to count as games) one must act and produce. We call this subversion “lexigraphing,” our repurposed verb form of Garrett Stewart’s (2006) neologism “lexigraph,” which refers to paintings of written text. Lexigraphing, applied to digital games, describes the seemingly passive action of walking in a gamespace, and reading its texts, as a recursive act of writing reading. We argue that the disruptive “passivity” of lexigraphing operates as a form of queering gamespace, citing J. Jack Halberstam’s (2011) rejection of a world that is constantly doing, acting, and producing. We apply lexigraphing to walking simulators through the lens of queer game studies as articulated by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (2017), which invites us to reject limited conceptions of gamic action and participate in a more playful queering. Reading “queer” as a verb is crucial to understanding the feminist and queer actions that walking simulators welcome. With our own verb, lexigraphing, we re-articulate the active passivity of reading-as-writing in walking simulators.

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Introduction

Walking can be a methodology for reading and writing the world. In *Walking Methodologies in a More-than-Human World: WalkingLab* (2018), Stephanie Springgay and Sarah E. Truman ask how walking can help us form new knowledge about our material environs. While walking is commonly defined as a means of moving through space one foot at a time, Springgay and Truman propose that walking can function as an alternative to traditional modes of discursive analysis and research. Walking is, for Springgay and Truman, an embodied and affective reading- and writing-based method that resists the accelerationist ethics embedded in contemporary conceptions of labor, space, and time. Walking slows us down, allowing us to attune ourselves to a multiplicity of feedback from our surroundings. Walking defers the epiphanic revelations of crisis and disaster that result from a quickening chronopolitical field (Virilio, 2008, p. 179) in favor of a politics of slowness that can reveal much about contemporary "notions of agency, vitality, politics, and ethics" (Springgay and Truman, 2018, p. 17). In this interim between inaction and hyperactivity, walking cuts a path that leads us towards an alternative reading and writing practice in which our movement, identities, experiences, and histories collaborate with land, surfaces, and nonhuman agents to de- and re-compose "places" through a never-finished, recursive reiteration of interrelational practices (Cresswell, 2004, p. 82; Massey, 2005, p. 9).

But what might walking mean for the worlds of digital games? In this article, we address the histories and influences of reading and writing within the growing genre of digital games called "walking simulators." Walking simulators converge the act of reading and walking in complex ways that expose the playful but putatively inactive action of reading as a disruptive queering. This queering subverts the standard expectation that to count as "player" (and for walking simulators to count as games) one must act and produce. We call this subversion "lexigraphing," which, applied to digital games, describes the seemingly passive action of walking in a gamespace and reading its texts as a recursive act of writing reading. We argue that the disruptive "passivity" of lexigraphing operates as a form of queering gamespace. We apply lexigraphing to walking simulators through the lens of queer game studies, which invites us to reject limited conceptions of gamic action and participate in a more playful queering. Given that "queer" is not just a noun or adjective, but also verb, we engage this function as crucial to understanding the feminist and queer actions that walking simulators welcome. With our own verb, lexigraphing, we re-articulate the active passivity of reading-as-writing in walking simulators.

Walking Simulators and Reading Simulations

Whereas Springgay and Truman locate radical potential in the verb of walking, the in-game performance of walking has been met with brusque censure within various gaming communities. In particular, walking simulators, which prominently task the player with walking to various places and surveying the mixed media objects that reside within them, have received sharp criticism from some player demographics. Many player reviews and accounts of walking simulators present walking as dull passivity at best and as anti-gaming at worst. User BenjaminBanklin's post, "Can we stop calling walking simulators 'games' now?" (2017) on GameSpot's "System Wars" thread summarizes the general sentiment towards walking simulators:

[Walking simulators] are frankly, interactive narratives, not games. It's kind of a disservice to call them that in the face of game devs that make projects with actual mechanics and challenges that try to ensure people have a good time. Walking around hunting for the next chunk of audio does not a game make. If you're the kind of person that puts walking sims in list wars and completed lists, please have some dignity from participating in video game discussion and read a book instead.

As walking simulators entangle the primary action within the game (walking) with narrative and storytelling, Banklin's post suggests that neither the genre nor its players have a welcome place within the lexicon of gaming. Banklin's dichotomy of gamic and non-gamic actions also suggests that walking, searching, reading, and listening are distinct from and in opposition to the mechanics that compose a game. For Banklin, and in many player commentaries on the genre, walking simulators' emphasis on walking and storytelling should not only disqualify them from being games, but also exclude their players from being "real gamers." Walking is disqualified as a mechanic because it is supposedly no more active than reading a book, or sitting in a movie theater, according to similarly dismissive rhetoric. These types of actions are supposedly passive, hardly even actions at all, unlike those embodied in digital games, which must always be interactive and therefore require different actions. Never the twain shall meet supposedly, despite the drop in interactivity that all actions undergo as designers translate them into procedures within digital games. Walking simulators merely lay bare this fact more pointedly.

Although players' condemnation of walking simulators as "stroll playing games" might seem isolated, these beliefs are recognized, parodied, and re-packaged within the work of game designers and theorists alike. Most recently, Suda51's *Travis Strikes Again: No More Heroes* (Grasshopper Manufacture, 2019) comments directly on the category of profane passivities within digital games. During the game's text-based, visual novel-esque narrative segment, "Travis Strikes Back," Travis and his

cat, Jeane, discuss how gamers don't want to be bothered with text and reading when they could instead be indulging in the conventional lexicon of action games:

Jeane: "Listen up Travis."

"Most of these gamers bought this game, expecting a goddamn action game."

Travis: "So?"

Jeane: "So they don't want a buttload of text."

Travis: "Hold up."

"So what am I supposed to do?"

"What, you worried about our Meta score?"

"You scared of gamer reviews?"

Travis Strikes Again (TSA) gestures towards this hierarchy of gaming actions during Travis' battle with the Smoking King, who claims that what's inside the hearts and minds of gamers is the hope for action—specifically, combat-based action. While *TSA* might be considered a quirky aberration, such hierarchies also emerge throughout the field of game criticism itself. Alexander Galloway's foundational *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (2006) begins with the following statement:

If photographs are images, and films are moving images, then video games are actions. Let this be word one for video game theory. Without action, games remain only in the pages of an abstract rule book. Without the active participation of players and machines, video games exist only as static computer code. Video games come into being when the machine is powered up and the software is executed; they exist when enacted. (p. 2)

Galloway's claim that games are an action-based medium may have seemed like a necessary intervention in the colonializing and acquisitive practices of film and literary criticism; however, it also promotes a rhetoric of play that marginalizes what might be described as passive actions within digital games. And even when the player puts down the controller, Galloway explains, games are still doing, disks are still spinning, and data is still moving. In short, there appears to be little place in digital games for the slow and contemplative acts of walking and reading.

Wrapped into each of these commentaries is an alignment of walking with reading and the book. Banklin, summarizing a general consensus among many in the gaming community, critiques walking simulators for actions that position the player as *readerly*. Similarly, *TSA* (2019) and

Galloway (2006) highlight gamers' aversion to text and the book—Galloway in particular identifies action as the defining trait that separates games from an "abstract rule *book*" (p. 2, our emphasis). These criticisms expose that, beyond just walking, the aversion to walking simulators may have much to do with how walking simulators challenge the strictly *writerly* and authorial position that many games attempt to simulate for the player. Walking simulators position players' walking outside of, around, and in front of text, and this positioning confronts the player with the limits of their role as author and originator of the narrative. By walking, players also confront the implicit textuality of gamic actions—no longer masquerading as "real actions," but laid bare as the reading strategies and interpretative positions that they signify. Walking in walking simulators is thus a practice of collage, enfolding reading material onto reading practices in a loop that confronts players with walking as a way of meditating on their own readings. In doing so, the walking simulator creates a recursive reiteration of interrelational reading practices that paradoxically maintains reading as both a reading and a writing.

Given the apparent contrast between action/writing and passivity/reading, our work proposes "lexigraphing" as a way of engaging with how walking in walking simulators asks players to walk the readerly and the writerly. We adapt what we call "lexigraphing" from Garrett Stewart's art historical work in *The Look of Reading* (2006) as a verb form of his neologism "lexigraph." He coins this term to describe paintings or drawings of written text that combine the act of looking and reading. Stewart states that lexigraphs "do the graphic work of wording" (2006, p. 330). In the context of gamespace, however, *lexigraphing* does the procedural work of graphing words. In walking simulators, players perform this act by walking both their readings and reading strategies of walking simulators' storyworlds; thus, *lexigraphing* functions as both a reading and writing. We read *lexigraphing's* recursive hybridity as a queer strategy of play in walking simulators (and, potentially, beyond) that enables us to turn a critical lens towards the reading and reading/writing strategies that gaming "actions" signify.

Between the Readerly and the Writerly

Theories of action and play within digital games have largely emphasized their writerly qualities. Since the early work of Espen J. Aarseth (1997), Sherry Turkle (2005), and James Paul Gee (2005), games have been defined as semiotic constructions in which everything depicted is a sign that resembles, connects, and associates with various referents beyond the game. Gee, specifically, argues that a large part of play's pleasure is becoming fluent in and deploying the semiotics established within those domains (p. 233). Under these writerly interpretations, digital games present players with a sign-based discourse that they are expected to master and mobilize. Rather than signifying positions of reading and interpretation, *doing* in games is

commonly associated with the writerly act of creating and reproducing of a game's semiotics. These theories descend from Roland Barthes' (1975) notion of "writerly texts." In contrast to the readerly text, which Barthes views as *product* rather than *production*, Barthes defines the writerly text as

a perpetual present, upon which no *consequent* language (which would inevitably make it past) can be superimposed; the writerly text is *ourselves writing*, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages. (p. 5)

In the writerly text, per Barthes' estimation, artifice is put on display for the reader. Writerly texts make evident their own constructedness by striving to make the reader aware of their role in producing a text's various affects and experiences. Whereas Barthes' writerly text works through the reader's self-awareness, many theories of play take this cognizance as a given. In *Cybertext* (1997), which focuses specifically on the genres of electronic literature and interactive fiction, Aarseth classifies games as configurable strings of signs that can be modified or added to by the player or the material platform during play (p. 62). Hanna Wirman (2009) extends Aarseth's theory to games writ large, explaining that "games as cybertexts are only partly predetermined or precoded before the activity of play takes place" (para. 2.5). For Wirman, the same game can facilitate many different play experiences. Such practices entail a re-writing of the "string of signs" that composes the game by adding to or modifying it. Similarly, Anna Anthropy and Naomi Clark, in *A Game Design Vocabulary* (2014), suggest that play is the construction of sentences. Players deploy designer-provided or player-invented verbs to link a subject with an object, teach the player a literacy, and drive the game towards its eventual conclusion (p. 15). Finally, in "Beyond Myth and Metaphor—The Case of Narrative in Digital Media," Marie-Laure Ryan (2001) posits a writerly conception of gameplay, noting that "the player performs actions which, were he to reflect upon them, would form a dramatic plot—though this plot is not normally his focus of attention during the heat of the action." Each theory here, among many others, returns to the idea that gameplay positions players in a writerly relationship with the game text. Their actions range from simple reproductions of in-game verbs, to the construction of elaborate player-texts that arise through and from gameplay.

The emphasis on writing and writing-based approaches to play and game design, however, neglects the significance of play practices associated with reading. Although gaming criticism has tended towards reading actions for what they *do* to the text, we can also read these actions as marks of the interpretive positions and reading strategies that

players perform as they interact with games. According to Terry Harpold (2008), for example, “any bookshelf which appears in a computer game is sure to contain at least one volume that opens when retrieved, revealing a new point of egress, another passageway of the game world” (p. 112). The bookshelf, and our interaction with it, therefore denotes a broader conception of what it might mean to *read* games through the metaphor of the passageway. It indicates breaks and ruptures in the game—places where games ask us to read to sustain immersion and prevent the exposure of the machinery operating beyond the simulation.

While readerly theories of play are scant, even more rare are theories that merge reading and writing. For this reason, we turn to Stewart’s (2006) exploration of a genre of painted scenes of reading, known as “lectoral art” (p. 6). Stewart explains that lectoral art depicts scenes of figures often reading books or related material. While depictions of reading figure prominently in image-based media, lectoral art differs in that it denies the spectator the privilege of reading alongside the characters depicted in the art work. Either because the spectator is shut out by book covers from the “wrong” observational angle or because the scripts sampled for the audience “fall ... beneath the threshold of legibility,” paintings in this genre invite spectators to read others’ reading; however, they deny spectators the opportunity to read what others read (p. 15).

In his book’s final chapter, Stewart leaves us with the term “lexigraph” (p. 329). Whereas lectoral art includes environs from which the spectator can attempt to glimpse at what the reader is reading, lexigraphs refer to paintings of text without the surrounding scene. In stripping out the narrative support of surroundings, lexigraphs focus our attention on the text itself. They ultimately align reading with looking to remind us that scripts are themselves visual strokes too. Stewart writes that the lexigraph is devoid of “subject figured on canvas to embody either the strain or the release of interpretation,” meaning that “reading, such as it is, is ineradicably left to you. No longer narrated, it nonetheless awaits performance” (p. 329). Stewart’s use of “performance” is critical here because it denotes that without a painted scene of reading to rely upon, lexigraphs call out of the canvas to the only reader there has ever truly been: “you alone” (p. 7). The lexigraph extends outward beyond the margins of the painting to enfold the spectator into the scene as reader in a complex interplay of participatory construction and interpretation.

The contrast between lectoral art and lexigraphs thus leaves us at a potential impasse. Lectoral art, in Stewart’s reckoning, normally features scenes of reading, but not often reading itself legible to the reader/viewer. Lexigraphs, on the other hand, can sometimes be “hyper-legible ... lectoral mimesis,” but don’t really narrate scenes (p. 330). Although both of these terms provide a framework for understanding the *play* of reading within walking simulators, neither

quite typifies walking simulators' collage of reading material. The genre of print artifacts discovered within walking simulators are not entirely lectoral, nor are they entirely playable lexigraphs. Perhaps, then, another way to reference walking simulators would be to describe them as "lexigraphical" games.

In lexigraphical games, players lexigraph—in other words, they confront their own reading as readers reading text. We use lexigraph as an action word that synthesizes the active passivities of walking and reading queerly in walking simulators. To best define lexigraphing, we indulge multiple meanings of "graph" here, from the tactile to the textual and statistical. According to Shannon Walters (2014), "etymologically ... the verb 'to write,' [derives] from the Greek *grapho*, mean[ing] 'to scratch,' a tangible expression of meaning" (p. 5). This etymology speaks to the embodied, emplaced action of lexigraphing, an admittedly complex critical concept that begins in innate physical engagement with gaming hardware and procedural mechanics. But as Walters suggests, graph also comes to mean *write*, making lexigraphing, reiterated differently, a way of reading-as-writing. Additionally, in statistical or mathematical understanding, graph (noun) takes on a spatial dimension as representation of points on x-, y-, and z-axes, giving graph (verb) a connotation of movement—aligning the act of lexigraphing with a walking that resists the dichotomy of reading or writing: thus, walking *queerly*. We could keep speaking in the "graphic" language of mathematics and call it *plotting* to pun our way out of statistics and into walking simulators' storyworlds. Across all the cross-pollinating wordplay explored here, lexigraphing describes players' reading of the collage of reading and reading practice.

Active Passivity as Queer Play

Lexigraphing, as a subversion of digital games' conventional approach to doing by way of reproducing a game's semiotics, presents what we read as a mode of queer play and design. In the introduction to *Queer Game Studies* (2017), Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw elaborate on the project of queering games and queer gaming. They explain that "queerness has emerged as a focal point in the push to diversify both games culture and games critique" and "queer thinking has the potential to simultaneously destabilize and reimagine video games themselves" (p. ix). From queerness itself to queer thinking then, the next step becomes "queer game studies," a difficult-to-define dyad between game studies and queer studies that "stands as a call to action, an argument for the scholarly, creative, and political value of queerness as a strategy for disrupting dominant assumptions about how video games should be studied, critiqued, made, and played" (p. x). Though Ruberg and Shaw ponder over how best to describe queer game studies, we find the simplicity of their first iteration perhaps the most useful here: a toolset for "exploring difference in games and exploring games as different" (p. ix). Their latter point is especially instrumental for our purposes here—

“exploring games as different,” they elaborate, means “much more than studying LGBTQ content, players, or game creators ... queerness ... challenge[s] a variety of dichotomies that have long structured how scholars and designers alike understand games (e.g. narratology/ludology, production/reception, control/agency, success/failure)” (p. ix-x). Queer gaming practices thus collapse key binaries, and as Springgay and Truman (2018) explain, walking accomplishes this debinarization through its politics of slowness.

Queer walking games the speed at which heteronormative (re)productivity operates. It attempts, for Springgay and Truman, to trouble accepted dichotomies and expose the semiotics and politics that scaffold various environments. They write: “we must *queer* walking, destabilizing humanism’s structuring of human and nonhuman, nature and culture” (2018, p. 14). As can be demonstrated briefly by events from only United States history, such as the Woman Suffrage Parade of 1913; Pride festivals, which commemorate the 1969 Stonewall Riots; and the Black Lives Matter marches, which arose in response to the tragic 2012 shooting of Trayvon Martin and more heartbreaking 2013 acquittal of his murderer George Zimmerman, walking is fraught with ethical and political tension that can resist and re-code the political construction of space. Queer walking taps into these practices by performing a “walking-with that engenders solidarity, accountability, and response-ability ‘in the presence of others’” (Springgay & Truman, 2018, p. 15). It does so, however, through a politics of slowness, which

is not necessarily about variations in speed (although it can be), [but] rather ... is intended to ask critical questions, and to create openings where different kinds of awareness and practices can unfold. Slowness is a process of unlearning and unsettling what has come before. (Springgay & Truman, 2018, p. 15)

The slowness of walking results in a queering by unsettling norms and, as Naomi Clark (2017) argues in “What *Is* Queerness in Games, Anyway?,” resisting what is considered useful in a counter-hegemonic move to remain deviant and offensive (p. 11). The active passivity of slowness, as identified in the criticisms that opened this article, proves one of the most deviant and offensive forms of gameplay.

Active passivity is a queer project engaged in walking simulators that refuses to acquiesce to either reading or writing. The concept of active passivity, as we define it, is a state of performing acts commonly considered to be passive, or paradoxically *inactive*. In classic literary fashion, it could be Vladimir and Estragon in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1954), filling their day with conversation and activity which amount to *doing* nothing while they eponymously wait. In digital game parlance, it’s *EarthBound*’s (HAL Laboratory, 1994) three-minute wait “password” at Grapefruit Falls by which Ness and friends gain entry into Belch’s Factory. But it’s not just waiting—in walking

simulators, active passivity is the “less is more” procedural economy of walking and reading/writing that just looks like “less.” Active passivity operates upon the contradictory nexus of both the active and the passive, where doing less, doing differently, is still *doing*, and reading is still writing is still reading. In short, active passivity is walking simulator’s resistance that troubles the dichotomies that scaffold game design and discourse.

As resistance, active passivity might thus be described as a queer doing. We adapt this concept from J. Jack Halberstam’s *Queer Art of Failure* (2011), in which he classifies passivity as part of an “alternative feminist project, a shadow feminism which has nestled in more positivist accounts and unraveled their logics from within” (p. 124). Halberstam describes passivity as “a shadow archive of resistance, one that does not speak in the language of action and momentum but instead articulates itself in terms of evacuation, refusal, passivity, unbecoming, unbeing” (p. 129). We could walk queerly, in Springgay and Truman’s (2018) terms, towards this collection of terms and realize along the way that Halberstam’s (2011) shadow archive formulates its feminism in the politics of slowness. Slowness sets the pace for the procedural economy of play in walking simulators. Walking queerly, as a pathway for active passivity, in digital environments harmonizes the player’s movements with the nonhuman actors of the game as machine. As they walk, the player unlearns dominant logics by reading their own position as readers, which foregrounds and elevates the agency of other actors in the gamespace beyond the human player. Players both enact and are suspended above their participation in the text, participating in the negation of their capacity to participate. This doubling gestures towards a position not accounted for in Barthes’ (1975) dichotomy between readerly and writerly.

Doubling and debinarizing the readerly and writerly creates queer potential for embracing the actively passive co-constitution of storyworld in walking simulators through *collage*. As players wander throughout these games, they read and read their own reading as they learn which artifacts are setpieces and which are readable objects, decide which ones to read in full or in part, pick up texts in their own chosen order as they walk around, perhaps realize which ones they missed and need to go back for to find the right clue or missing plotpoint. They do not just read a (digital) book from page one to done, nor do they, more generously, find unbound text to read. That kind of rhetoric is readerly relegation. Through active passivity, players glom the readerly onto the writerly in rejection of a binary they did not choose. They read-as-write and create a procedural, performative collage of text-as-they-found-it. Halberstam (2011) considers collage to be

another realm of aesthetic production dominated by a model of [active] passivity and unbeing. Collage precisely references the spaces in between and refuses to respect the boundaries that

usually delineate self from other ... the copy from the original. In this respect, as well as in many others, collage (from the French *coller*, to paste or glue) seems feminist and queer. (p. 136)

Borne out of histories of authorship, reading, and publishing, the capital "B" Book sometimes bears the unfortunate guilt of association with patriarchal print cultures and can stand in as the monument to heteronormative wholeness. What collage, as a model for lexigraphing in walking simulators, illustrates is that there are ways of doing differently that matter most precisely because they reject dominant logics. Lexigraphing presents a way of (un)being-in-the-storyworld that stands out as queer in the face of reproductive futurism, normative wholeness, and cultural control. As players piece the storyworld together themselves across various reading materials, they read their own reading within the gamespace, having created a unique narrative collage through the choices made throughout their playthrough. And each time, "there is always the possibility, indeed the probability that the fragments of the whole will never be reunited" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 138). Even completionists who manage to discover every artifact available to them within the game are always only discovering scraps of a richer world unavailable to them, not included in the storyboard designed for them. It is the world offscreen, the world of their reading. Like the "finished product" of collage, which materially foregrounds its incomplete progress, the storyworlds of these walking (reading) simulators are framed by fragments. Halberstam (2011) advises that we "emphasize this commitment to the fragment over any fantasy of future wholeness," a heuristic for "shadow feminism" that could be a gameplay and design rhetoric for queer game studies (p. 138). Lexigraphing, as a way of collage encompassing disparate reading materials in walking simulators, combines both reading and reading practice. It is readerly and writerly and beholden to neither. It is queer gaming comprised of—collaged from—queer doing. In the following section, we explore two distinct examples of walking simulators, one more open-world and the other more confined to a single location, in terms of active passivity to better understand how they subvert the writerly and readerly dichotomy and ask the player to read-as-write.

Lexigraphing the Great Out- (and In-)Doors of Digital Games

The practice of lexigraphing at play in digital games is entangled with a complexly analogue history of reading, print, and the book. Nick Montfort, in "Continuous Paper" (2004), addresses this role of paper during the early days of computer gaming and its connections to programming and interface. He writes:

The screen is relatively new on the scene ... Early interaction with computers happened largely on paper: on paper tape, on punchcards, and on print terminals and teletypewriters, with their

scroll-like supplies of continuous paper for printing output and input both. (para. 4)

In the case of interactive fiction *Adventure* (Crowther & Woods, 1976), one of the earliest examples of a “walking simulator,” players often relied on paper to take notes and draw maps of what they thought was important/valuable for progressing the game, providing a paper-based materialization of their reading practices. In response to player actions, *Adventure* provides a text-based output *reading* of where players have moved to as well as the consequences of their actions, and players would read these readings, in-scribe their reading, and re-read it to guide their movement—a loop of writing readings. Beyond this loop is the further legacy of print-based anti-piracy DRM “feelies” included in later Interactive Fiction (IF) titles released by Infocom that required players to consult print materials that contained information pertinent to puzzles within the game. Such work exposes that above all else, what players *do* when they play a game is *read*. Walking simulators, drawing on their origins in interactive fiction, turn this rhetoric outside-in when they ask players to lexigraph, drawing print materials into digital environments.

Proteus, a 2013 release designed by Ed Key and David Kanaga, in many ways builds upon the lexigraphical legacy of early text adventure games like *Adventure* (1976) and *Zork* (Infocom, 1977). But where *Adventure* and *Zork* feature quests and objectives for players to accomplish, *Proteus* focuses gameplay entirely on walking and exploring its randomly generated islands. *Proteus* is played through the first-person perspective; upon starting, the player’s eyelids open to a seemingly endless ocean. As players move forward through the ocean, a distant island fades in through the mist. From there, players may choose how they wish to navigate the island. They can walk towards distant mountaintops, follow flocks of birds and chase hopping frog-like creatures, or wander the forests. Alternatively, they can choose to stand and observe as their surroundings change around them. In short, *Proteus* provides no map, strategy, or tutorial on how to play, leaving it entirely on players to walk and read the game space and develop their approach to understanding and appreciating its many mysteries. Moreover, *Proteus* shirks gaming conventions, preventing players from relying on the literacies established in other gaming spaces to inform their reading of this one. In doing so, *Proteus* stages a queer confrontation with traditional gaming literacies—as players walk its abstract space, they walk their own reading practices—and it almost taunts them to try and make sense of its space through standard gaming vocabularies.

As players meander and stroll, the seasons change until eventually reaching winter, at which point the game concludes. *Proteus*’ conclusion not only marks one possible “end” to the game, but it also denotes the end of that island. Each time the player returns to *Proteus* and begins

the game, they are taken to an entirely new island with a different layout, different music, different structures, and so on. This feature resonates with the game's title, inspired by Proteus, a Greek god of seas and rivers whose character and form was as fluid as the shape of the waters he embodied. While *Proteus* captures the loose structure as well as fleeting affect and beauty of walking, the game features a "postcard" section that takes a screenshot players can use to return to a version of the island on which the postcard was created. As Key and Kanaga write in the game options, returning "feels familiar, but unique," an experience that Alice & Pip (2016) elaborate on in "What Is (And Isn't) a Walking Simulator?":

You can go back. But ... it's not the same? It's weird. There's one particular island configuration I still think about a lot, but revisiting feels like being inside a photograph rather than returning to a beloved spot. It's not quite right. That island's gone. That me is gone. No going back. (para. 25)

Whereas reading and playing are typically meant to center us within a world, *Proteus'* lexigraphical play instead creates an experience of disorientation. Each walking leads to an island which players are encouraged to become familiar with on a non-discursive level through the affective and spatial aspects of gameplay. The game defies the fixity of mapping and discourse. As players walk, their strategies for reading and understanding the island transform it from foreign to familiar. The first reading centers the player, but it also distorts the island, collapsing its space and privileging specific areas over others. Yet players have no way of marking or writing on the space, so when they return to the island they are disoriented by these attempts at orienting themselves because they are re-confronted with these spectral possibilities—in short, players re-walk their former walking and reading that initially led them to produce a snapshot of the island. They may ask, what was it that captivated me? Was it this tree where I had a significant realization? *Proteus'* design makes such sites phantasmic when replaying an island, and their spectral presence exists as a pure possibility players walk in pursuit of, perhaps endlessly. Re-playing an island thus produces a distinctly queer experience in that it both creates an uncanny doubling, an island haunted by former readings, and in doing so it works against the feelings of mastery and control that many authorial games emphasize.

Where *Proteus* allows players to wander the great generative outdoors, many walking simulators confine their queer potential to the sole setting of the house—which is often, but not always, a home. The focus on the home as gamespace is particularly interesting, however, precisely because of the ways in which play becomes gendered within different titles. *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Café, 2013) is arguably a quintessential example of the walking simulator genre, but it traps the player inside a vacuously corporate office, which stereotypically signifies

a masculine environment. What began as a clever mod of *Half-Life 2* (Valve, 2004) became a (not-so) indie gaming phenomenon—because “boys liked it.” With a more default audience assumed and assuaged, it attracted none of the ire that smaller, more domestic and *homely* game narratives had brought down upon them. *The Stanley Parable*—an admittedly brilliant and important text of subversive gaming—is a navelgazing work of masturbatory metafiction; it did not “make the mistake” of depicting quotidian feminist and/or queer spaces. Walking simulator titles that found themselves in trouble with stereotypical gamer demographics were those more influenced by the example of *Gone Home* (Fullbright Company, 2013), such as *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow, 2017). *What Remains of Edith Finch* (*WROEF*) dared to aspire to active passivity, in a collage narrative that players lexigraph for themselves. Its pregnant protagonist navigates a family drama rich in homespun details and procedurally constrained storytelling. Most poignantly, its situation within the domestic space of the home and its dominant logics of nuclear family living complicate the potential for walking queerly to become reading-as-writing. From a queer game studies perspective, the game works against its own narrative setting to discover alternative ways of being-in-the-storyworld that can critique the domestic by inhabiting it. *WROEF* attests to the subtextual stifling of queerness that domesticity itself purports. It situates its house setting as a failed home, for geosemiotic commentary on domesticity, heteronormativity, and ultimately, queer potentiality. Unlike the utopic idyll of *Proteus* for walking queerly outside of traditional discourse, *WROEF* complicates queer embodiment by dispersing discourse across an “embarrassment of material forms” that require as much reading—and less shooting—as its digital environment does walking (Gitelman, 2014, p. 6).

WROEF (2017) intensifies the scope of family history explored before by *Gone Home* in a sprawling narrative of family curses and print framing devices that makes one think, “we’re going to need a bigger house.” In this walking simulator of sorts, titular protagonist and player avatar Edith Finch is the last in a long family line all afflicted by a supposed curse that claims the lives of every member of each generation save one Finch who continues the family name. The game begins with Edith writing in her journal as she takes the ferry returning to the ominous house née home of the family Finch. She goes back, and players with her, to learn about her family history, which her mother Dawn never wanted her to know. The player perspective dives into the pages of her journal, and within this intratextual storyworld, participates with Edith to explore the now abandoned and boarded up house in which she and many Finches grew up—and died. In lexigraphing, players discover through a collage of family belongings and writings just how each branch of the Finch family tree was cut short in, on, or around this property. As the story comes full circle from Edith’s exploration of the house and players learn throughout that Edith is actually 22 weeks

pregnant, they ultimately discover that there has been a recasting of controllable character. The final remaining frame through which players reach into the game and participate recruits Edith's son Christopher, the last remaining Finch, as the last player avatar; they realize that everything they have experienced has emerged from him reading the journal that she left for him, having died in childbirth.

The game's familial tragedy, as we have relayed it in brief, has been written about by several game critics and journalists, often waxing poetic at its heartbreaking power as a work comparable only to the best literature. Articulating this walking simulator's importance in just literary terms, as Jason Sheehan does in his writeup on the title for his *Reading the Game* (2017) segment for *NPR (National Public Radio)* when he likens it to "a nested collection of short stories, curled around each other like snakes in a jar," reveals that critics are still insisting on the aesthetic merit of digital games based on someone else's terms. Teddy Pozo (2018) blames film critic Roger Ebert for some of this anxiety of form, for famously calling cinema "a machine that generates empathy" while also infamously "declar[ing] that games could never be art, an assertion videogame studies, fandom, and design have sought to disprove" (para. 6). Pozo (2018) seeks for a better queer game studies framework beyond "empathy games"—which walking simulators have often been accused of and confused for being—that contextualizes "empathy within a broader repertoire of queer game design strategies focused on affect, embodiment, and tactility" (para. 7).

Active passivity, as a queering of the procedural economy of digital games many players have come to expect, could potentially qualify as one such affective strategy. And *WROEF* works this affective strategy into its gameplay and narrative, as players have the power to do—and yet can only ever do so much. It may contain a beautiful and devastating narrative for players to lexigraph and even learn from, but its endgame is not just feelings, but doings. By doing, we continue to stress, we do not mean the action-addled insistence on more hyperactive control, but the "less is more" of active passivity that prompts players to feel through *how* they do. In other words, by reconceiving of *WROEF* as more than an empathy game, we are less concerned with prompting understanding through doing itself than we are with the politics of slowness that dictate said doing, which attune human players to the rhythms of the non-human machine. The game achieves this alienness, according to Simone de Rochefort (2018), through

playable vignettes [that] punctuate the first-person gameplay with splashes of beauty, or abstraction. You play as a kite, or as a rubber duck. You work in a cannery. You're a monster. Each section effectively breaks up what could be described, not unkindly, as a walking simulator. (para. 12)

As players walk abstractly, they walk *queerly*. From these starting points, the game may still move us from an outside positionality, and within that affective gap, we come to understand the importance of not understanding.

WROEF is now no longer just an empathy game, but a complicity game. Writing for *Eurogamer*, Rachel Ditum (2017) explains the devastating effect of this playing-onto-death in language resonant within our project of active passivity:

Players ... assume that interactivity means giving the player an arcless mass of options. But what's great about *Edith Finch's* gameplay isn't that it makes you powerful: it's that it makes you complicit ... You know that none of these stories will end well, yet you drive Edith on through them because the alternative is no story. (para. 6)

The collage narrative that players lexigraph within this game then ultimately forms a rap sheet. As players learn the stories of Molly, Barbara, Gregory, and others through diaries, comic books, divorce proceedings, and other print materials, their readings are killing them. Their reading practice is one of rehearsing death. In the queer potential of this gap that does not require the civility of mere empathy, that indulges the radical incompleteness of not understanding, players are walking queerly towards the death drive. Lee Edelman (2004) states that "the death drive names what the queer, in the order of the social, is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social viability" (p. 9). The incompletely finished product of collage in *WROEF*, one of death and family tragedy that players enter as outsiders, posits that negativity as a positive through activity as passive. Lexigraphing, as modeled in this final title through gaps and through loss, can be a queer strategy of play within walking simulators that could potentially help us rethink action across the spectrum of digital games.

Conclusion Queered

What, then, might we take away from walking simulators' queer resistance to the dichotomies of reading/writing and masculinity/femininity through the active passivity of walking? Perhaps they might point towards the emergence of a new type of player subjectivity, one not restrained by the overbearing shadow of Barthes' readerly or writerly. A player who feels the world is not (and cannot be) theirs to control and manipulate in their image, but also one in which they must and can only act upon the margins of theirs and others' reading. Who is this player implied by the lexigraphical structure of walking simulators, and what might they mean for the future of game studies and game design?

Whereas *doing* in digital games is established on a reproductive logic often encoded as "iterative design" that instills a feeling of progress and

control over the direction of the game, walking simulators favor a passive slowness that troubles the comfortable dichotomy between action and inaction within digital games. As we have explored throughout this article, this disruptive “passivity” openly rejects a world that is constantly doing, acting, producing, and the like, and operates as a form of queering the game space by turning the reproductive futurism of “writing-as-doing” in on itself. The walking always comes outside of and after the text, positioning the player as collector or conduit rather than cybertextual author. The walker, by performing *active* passivity through purported *in*action, occupies contradiction, the very site that haunts the narrator in the opening of *Dear Esther* (2012):

I sometimes feel as if I’ve given birth to this island. Somewhere, between the longitude and latitude a split opened up and it beached remotely here. No matter how hard I correlate, it remains a singularity, an alpha point in my life that refuses all hypothesis.

The value of walking, then, is that it operates as an alternative mode of reading-writing the gamespace and experiencing embodiment that challenges what Boluk and LeMieux (2017) identify as the ideology of the “standard metagame.” Metagames, they argue, leave a “material trace of the discontinuity between the phenomenal experience of play and the mechanics of digital games” (p. 9). The most insidious discontinuity of them all, in their estimation, is the standard metagame, “the metagame we play when we don’t think we are playing a metagame [which] trains players to consume software in particular, often narrowly defined ways”—in this case, narrowly assuming that games *have* to be active and *have* to be doing (p. 280). Walking, instead, irritates this assumed dichotomy by privileging passivity and slowness over what we classify as the “reproductive logics” of many digital games. In doing so, walking simulators queer the conventional logic of digital games, forcing players to imagine how digital games might be otherwise.

For rejecting the standard metagame can ultimately be a disavowal of the heteronormative fictions that bend our (gaming) cultures towards the insistence for making, writing, doing, and (re)producing. Instead of moving for the sake of motion, walking simulators slow down “hyper attention” for a more ludic-atmospheric augmentation of “deep attention,” combining the two cognitive modes to relay experiences confined to neither (Hayles, 2007, p. 187). N. Katherine Hayles has us imagine the following scenario to understand “the contrast in the two cognitive modes ... picture a college sophomore, deep in *Pride and Prejudice*, with her legs draped over an easy chair, oblivious to her ten year-old brother sitting in front of a console, jamming on a joystick while he plays *Grand Theft Auto*” (p. 187-188). That kind of differentiation has its uses, but it also has its abuses: it severs potentiality between reading and doing modes in a taste-making move

that assumes games can only ever be “hyper.” Walking simulators, however, indulge the depth of what gaming can be through a both/and as well as neither/nor in storyworlds definable on their own terms—as well as ours. When players lexigraph, they read their reading as well as reading practice, ultimately reading-as-writing by walking queerly in ways irreducible to either the readerly or writerly. This queer strategy of play rejects the kind of dichotomizing and binarization gamers and even game studies have used to determine what’s in and what’s out, what is or is not a game. We have proposed lexigraphing in contribution to switching off the standard metagame, as part of “a queer game studies paradigm” that refuses “the normalizing tendencies of game studies projects that seek only to build taxonomies of players, create narrow definitions of games and play, and reduce importance of a medium to commercial success” (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017, p. xviii).

Walking simulators, as we have argued, are important texts in the ongoing queer game studies project precisely because of their commitment to active passivity. They invite players of all kinds, against categories of casual or hardcore; they open up new meanings for play through validation of passive doings as persuasive procedural rhetorics; they last as important statements for digital games whether users like Benjamin Banklin buy them or not. In Nicole Clark’s (2017) primer on walking simulators for *Salon*, which she quips are “gaming’s most detested genre,” she demonstrates the flawed logics of categorizing these games “by [their] limitation, rather than [their] capability: in walking sims, according to critics, all you do is walk” (para. 5). These flawed logics lead to gamers’ tendency to think “of these games as subtractive, rather than additive” (Clark, 2017, para. 17). The same troubled discrimination can equally be identified against actual queer identities, deemed different in their societies because they *lack* straightness or normativity and because they do not *do* the things that straight, “normal” people do. So when the standard metagame puts a magic circle around only certain games, planting flags that these games are just games, “fantasies ... just ‘for fun’” (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017, p. xxi), we should ask “fun for whom?” What kind of games are not even games? What gamers are not gamers? What kinds of actions do not count? We reject those questions and take different action. Our article has taken up the walking simulator—that “non-game” game and its gaming potentials for walking queerly, reading-as-writing, and lexigraphing—to queer action across a wider spectrum of digital games through active passivity.

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