I Don't Feel at Home in this Game Anymore

A Closer Look at Uncanny Atmospheres in Walking Simulators

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INTRODUCTION: "IS THIS GAME REALLY SCARY?"

"Is this game really scary?"[1] asks steam user *Ybnal* on the community forum of the game distribution platform *Steam*. "I want to try [it] but seeing [the trailer] I see it has a scary/horror type feel. Is it really scary?" The game in question is Fullbright's first-person adventure GONE HOME which received critical acclaim for its concept and narrative.[2] However, it apparently failed to impress fellow steam user *Chrow*. "This is not a horror game," writes *Chrow* in response to *Ybnal*'s pressing question, "this is a mediocre love story delivered in a[n] awkward way with the pretense of being a spooky mystery to unravel."[3]

Discussions like these can be frequently observed in the discourse around so-called walking simulators (short: walking sims). The originally derogatory term walking simulator applies to a body of (usually independently-produced) first-person adventure games with minimalistic gameplay mechanics and a strong focus

1 Ybnal (User): "Is This Game Really Scary?", post on the Steam Community Forum (Discussions), 27.12.2013, https://steamcommunity.com/app/232430/discussions/0/648814843329531162?l=german.

2 GONE HOME (Steve Gaynor, 2013: Fullbright).

3 Ibid.

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on narrative, atmosphere, and environmental exploration.[4] Games on the walking simulator spectrum tend to be slow-paced and forego aspects of competition, puzzle-solving, and combat.[5] In walking simulators, the player's actions and agency are limited. Their journey through the (often psychologically-charged) game space is a lonesome one. There are no opponents to beat, no monsters to slay, and often not even a visually-represented NPC with which to interact. In this paper, I argue that these factors provide an ideal ground for the emergence of uncanny atmospheres.

The player community seems to be aware of the genre's inherent uncanniness. There is a notable number of entries on gaming-related websites and forums such as Reddit or the Steam discussion boards where players express hesitancy to play walking simulators because they are generally not fond of horror games.[6] On the Steam store page, players and developers can categorize games and software through the application of various (self- or pre-defined) keywords-so-called tags. This tagging system can provide information about players' perception of games.

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4 Cf. Muscat, Alexander/Duckworth, Jonathan: "WORLD4: Designing Ambiguity for First-Person Exploration Games.", In: *Proceedings of the 2018 Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play* (2018), pp. 341-351; Scholars and developers have attempted to come up with more adequate names for the genre, such as Ambience Action Game (Cf. Huberts, Christian and Zimmermann, Felix: "From Walking Simulator to Ambience Action Game: A Philosophical Approach to a Misunderstood Genre.", In: *Press Start* 5 (2019), pp. 29-50.); Cf. Sinclair, Brendan: "5 Things Devs Should Know Before Trying a Narrative Exploration Game", In: gamesindustry.biz, 17.11.2016, https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2016-11-17-5-things-devs-should-know-before-trying-a-narrative-exploration-game). While these terms are certainly better suited to point out the genre's key mechanics, walking simulator is still the most widely known term and will therefore be used here.

5 Cf. Grabarczyk, Pawel.: "It's like a Walk in the Park – On Why are Walking Simulators so Controversial: Reasons Why Study of Walking Simulators is Needed", In *Transformacje* (2016), pp. 241-263, here p. 245.

6 Cf. Vinnygyny (User): "Will is Scare Me?", post on *GameFAQs*, 26.02.2021, https://gamefaqs.gamespot.com/boards/656674-dear-esther/62074309;
Cf. (Deleted Account): "(No Spoilers Please) Is This a Horror Game?", post on reddit (r/Firewatch), 24.02.2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/Firewatch/comments/47d6bo/no_spoilers_please_is_this_a_horror_game/; Cf. AnotherMemory (User): "Is this a Scary Game?", post in the Steam Community Forum (What Remains of Edith Finch / General Discussions / Topic Details), 05.03.2019, https://steamcommunity.com/app/501300/discussions/0/1843566500534330830/

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The top 15 tags appearing together with the tag "Walking Simulator" suggest a connection between walking sim games and the horror genre: In January 2022, the top 4 tags players connected with the tag *Walking Simulator* were *Adventure* (1532 titles), *Singleplayer* (1441 titles), *Indie* (1312 titles), and *Atmospheric* (1244 titles). However, further down the list the tags *Horror* (rank 10, 686 titles), *Mystery* (rank 12, 585 tiles), and *Psychological Horror* (rank 15, 531 titles) can be found. Consequentially, this poses the question of *why* exactly a notable number of players perceived games on the walking simulator spectrum as scary or at least unsettling.

Like film scholar Dominic Arsenault, I understand genre as the "temporary crystallization of a common cultural consensus."[7] Based on my observations of the player discourse, *the uncanny*—which is also commonly used in horror media to evoke feelings or terror and uneasiness in the audience—can be understood as a core element of the walking simulator genre on both the diegetic level and the level of player discourse.

Due to this paper's scope, I will only focus on the manifestation of the uncanny aesthetic in the form of the atmosphere with a particular emphasis on game spaces and the player's relation to them. Furthermore, I will reflect on how these atmospheres embody both traditional and contemporary ideas of the uncanny, namely the aesthetics and symbolism of the Freudian uncanny and the disruptive spatiotemporal patterns of Mark Fisher's theory of Hauntology.

Based on Gernot Böhme's phenomenological concept of the atmosphere, I explore how walking simulators can produce uncanny atmospheres through genre-specific traits such as: 1) the subversion of hegemonic game mechanics and player roles; 2) the use of solitary protagonists; 3) a lack of NPCs; 4) a focus on small, interior game spaces (particularly the space of the home); and, finally, 5) a preference for emergent narratives (conveyed through the material world) that entail a spatiotemporal pattern of subversion.

7 Arsenault, Dominic: *Des Typologies Mécaniques à L'expérience Esthétique. Fonctions et Mutations du Genre dans le Jeu Video*. Unpublished Dissertation, Montréal 2011, http://hdl.handle.net/1866/5873, here p. 333-334.

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CONJURING THE UNCANNY: FROM BÖHME TO FREUD

Spatial Feelings: Atmospheres as (Re-)Producible Media

In his essay on atmospheres of the past, media scholar Felix Zimmermann defines the atmosphere as a medium that "connects perceiving subjects with their surroundings on a phenomenological level" and is "used to produce certain feelings in certain contexts"—in our case, feelings of uncanniness in the context of walking simulators.[8]

Zimmermann bases his idea on the work of philosopher Gernot Böhme, who understands atmospheres as affective spaces. Böhme's approach draws its methodology from the fields of scenography and architecture, thus proving particularly useful for the application onto the spatial medium of the (3D) digital game. The interpretation of an atmosphere is always connected to the subjective feelings of the individuals who constitute its audience. However, despite this subjectivity, Böhme understands atmospheres to be "objective or, better, inter-subjective."[9] This means that atmospheres can be produced "by certain agents or factors, particularly by sound and illumination, but also by the geometry of a room" and that well-crafted atmospheres are able to evoke identical feelings in different individuals.[10] After all, "if everyone in the auditorium perceived the atmosphere on stage in a different way, the whole scenography would be meaningless."[11] Böhme calls the creators of atmospheres "aesthetic workers" which can refer to anyone involved in the production of any aesthetic object—in our case, a digital game.[12]

8 Zimmermann, Felix: "How Atmospheres of the Past Satisfy Needs of Authenticity", In: Marc Bonner (ed.), *Game | World | Architectonics: Transdisciplinary Approaches on Structures and Mechanics, Levels and Spaces*, Aesthetics and Perception, Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing 2021, pp. 19-34, here p. 24-25.

9 Böhme, Gernot: "The Theory of Atmospheres and its Applications" (transl. by A.-Chr. Engels-Schwarzpaul), in *Interstices: Journal of Architecture and Related Arts* 15 (2014), pp. 93-100, here p. 94.

10 Böhme, Gernot: *The Theory of Atmospheres and its Applications*, here p. 94.; Cf. Böhme, Gernot: The Aesthetics of Atmospheres, London, New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group 2017, here p. 3.

11 Böhme, Gernot: *The Theory of Atmospheres and its Applications*, here p. 94.

12 Böhme, Gernot: *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, here p. 73.

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Somewhere in Between: The Freudian Uncanny

Among other things, the term uncanny refers to both an aesthetic concept and a quality of feeling. In premodern society, the uncanny had a spiritual and social place and was associated with the otherworldly and supernatural.[13] In the Western world, the uncanny presumed its modern form in the 18th century—a time "heavily influenced by the breakdown of established social values and structures."[14] Typical themes, structures, and motifs of the modern uncanny can be found in the works of Edgar Allan Poe or E.T.A Hoffmann.[15] Sigmund Freud drew on those literary sources when he wrote his essay *Das Unheimliche* (The Uncanny), published in 1919,[16] and popularized the idea of a modern, psychological uncanny which has been expressed in a plethora of genres and media since then. In turn, an analysis of the uncanny in Western media—such as the walking simulators examined in this essay—will benefit from knowledge of Freudian symbolism.

When it comes to aesthetic expression (production) and audience reaction (perception), Böhme's atmosphere and Freud's uncanny share one key feature: ambiguity. Freud defines the uncanny as an ambivalent psychological state shaped by the return of the repressed, and Böhme's concept of the atmosphere can itself be interpreted as uncanny in the Freudian sense. After all, atmospheres exist in the space between subject (audience) and object (medium). Due to their connection to individual emotions, their essence is one of ambivalence.

According to Freud, the uncanny emerges when the past penetrates our perception of the present and the familiar (the known, the safe, the light, the home) is slowly but surely permeated by the unfamiliar (the suppressed, the dead or mechanical, the dark, the unknown or supernatural). The uncanny is the return of the repressed. As Freud writes with reference to Friedrich Schelling: "one calls

13 Cf. Botting, Fred: *Limits of Horror: Technology, Bodies, Gothic*, Manchester: Manchester University Press 2008, here p. 26.

14 Botting, Fred: *Limits of Horror*, here p. 7f.

15 Cf. Apter, Terri E.: "The Uncanny. Freud, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Edgar Allan Poe", In: T. E. Apter (ed.), *Fantasy Literature: An Approach to Reality*, London: Palgrave Macmillan UK 1982, pp. 32-47.; Cf. Schlipphacke, Heidi: "The Place and Time of the Uncanny", In: Pacific Coast Philology (2015), pp. 163-172, here p. 164.

16 Cf. Freud, Sigmund: "The Uncanny", In: Sigmund Freud et al. (eds.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, London: The Hogarth Press 1955 (Reprint), pp. 219-253.

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uncanny all that which should have remained in secret, hidden, dormant, but has come to light."[17]

When confronted with the uncanny, we enter a state of in-betweenness structured by the slow yet uncontrollable transition between two parts of a split space: a space of normality and a space of alienation.[18] Entering the psychologically-charged split space of the uncanny can have a powerful impact on audience members. During their exploration of walking simulator game spaces, users like *Ybnal* may have experienced what psychiatrist Thomas Fuchs calls *Bangnis* (fearfulness): "the atmospherically encompassing, undivided whole of the uncanny."[19] *Bangnis* is a multi-layered emotional state caused by the constant fluctuation between familiar and unfamiliar.[20] In the beginning of this essay, I highlighted the fact that many players connect walking simulators and the horror genre to the point of downright refusing to play certain walking sim titles because they "seem scary." This reluctance becomes understandable when we engage with the idea that *Bangnis* is often "experienced with a mixture of terror and curiosity."[21] Creators of horror media have long since desired to cultivate this effect in their audience and use elements of the uncanny to achieve it.[22] Actual horror walking simulators like the AMNESIA series, SOMA, or VISAGE embrace the unsettling qualities of uncanny atmosphere to amplify their horror elements.[23, 24, 25, 26] However, unlike horror, which is threatening and "condenses around certain objects, the uncanny

17 For original quote, see: Schelling, Friedrich W. J. von: *Philosophie der Mythologie*, Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchges. 1990, here p. 649.; my translation.

18 Cf. Leitgeb, Christoph.: *Topologische Unheimlichkeit: Unheimliche Topologie*, Paderborn: Brill | Fink 2020, p.1.

19 Fuchs, Thomas: "The Uncanny as Atmosphere", In: Gianni Francesetti and Tonino Griffero (eds.), *Psychopathology and Atmospheres. Neither Inside nor Outside*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2019, pp. 101-118, here p.104.

20 Cf. Fuchs, Thomas.: The Uncanny as Atmosphere, p. 104.

21 Ibid.

22 Steven Jay Schneider examines the relations between horror and the uncanny in depth in: Schneider, Steven J.: *Horror Film and Psychoanalysis: Freud's Worst Nightmare*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004.

23 AMNESIA: THE DARK DESCENT (Frictional Games, 2010: Frictional Games).

24 AMNESIA: A MACHINE FOR PIGS (Frictional Games, 2013: Frictional Games).

25 SOMA (Frictional Games, 2015: Frictional Games).

26 VISAGE (SadSquare Studios, 2020: SadSquare Studios).

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does not arise abruptly or forcefully."[27] Instead, the uncanny slowly creeps in; "ominous things at first only shine vaguely through the familiar."[28]

HOW WALKING SIMULATORS CREATE UNCANNY ATMOSPHERES

Making Strange: The Subversiveness of the Walking Simulator

For aesthetic workers, the (subtle) defamiliarization of the familiar is a powerful technique for the production of uncanny atmospheres, and walking simulators offer the perfect medium. The most prominent characteristic of the walking sim is its subversion of ludic mechanics and player agency. The Chinese Room's DEAR ESTHER is the paradigm of the walking simulator, and the discourse surrounding it did, in fact, yield the formerly derogatory genre name.[29, 30] In the game, the player roams an uninhabited Hebridean island where the unstable and ever-changing memories of a troubled protagonist confront her. This very first "official" walking simulator was a potentially uncanny defamiliarization of the first-person shooter (short: FPS) genre and, in a more radical way, the medium of games itself. DEAR ESTHER's original 2009 rendition was a modification of the widely beloved FPS HALF LIFE 2.[31] It was, according to media philosopher Pawel Grabarczyk, "consciously crafted as an experiment inspired by an academic question-the question of how minimalistic game design could get—of how many mechanics could possibly be stripped from a typical First-Person Shooter."[32]

DEAR ESTHER consciously undermines the ludic conventions of the FPS and thereby gains the capability to alienate. It keeps HALF LIFE 2's first-person

27 Fuchs, Thomas: The Uncanny as Atmosphere, p. 104.

28 Ibid.

29 While the actual term walking simulator came into popularity around the time of DEAR ESTHER's standalone release in 2012, the roots of the genre can be tracked back to the earlier days of digital games. One example of an early walking simulator is Asmik Ace Entertainment's PlayStation-exclusive LSD DREAM EMULATOR (Asmik Ace, 1998: Asmik Ace) wherein the player slowly, solitarily, and aimlessly explores the surreal space of a playable dream from a first-person perspective.

30 DEAR ESTHER (The Chinese Room and Robert Briscoe, 2012: The Chinese Room and Curve Digital).

31 HALF LIFE 2 (Valve, 2004: Valve).

32 Grabarczyk, P.: It's like a Walk in the Park, here p. 245.

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perspective but foregoes combat-related goals and mechanics such as running, climbing, jumping, or shooting. There are no enemies to defeat, no territory to conquer, no physics puzzles to solve, and no points to score. Neither interface nor inventory are needed, as the player's main task consists of deliberate exploration, observation, and (narrative) analysis of the in-game environment. However, Grabarczyk remarks that even this 'goal'—the active investigation of the game-world and the story bits it yields—is optional.[33] DEAR ESTHER can be rushed through without paying attention to the unfolding narrative, because the semi-randomly occurring story bits are not linked to the player's actions.

With this in mind, it is not difficult to see why DEAR ESTHER and its descendants have sparked controversy—especially in the male-dominated sphere of hardcore gamers who, as game studies scholar Melissa Kagen writes, "dismissed [these games as walking simulators] for their lack of affective interactivity."[34] Walking simulators provide alternative spaces within the game industry; their tendencies towards defamiliarization and "subversive appropriation" are not limited to audience and ludic mechanics but also the game industry as a whole and to the field of what Dean Bowman calls "orthodox game studies."[35]

A tendency towards ambiguity and defamiliarization is present on the diegetic planes of many walking sims. As a genre leaning towards the slow and thorough exploration of the hidden, strange, and mysterious, the walking sim often focuses on underrepresented narratives and utilizes themes and motifs related to subjective emotions and experiences. An exemplary look at the popular titles GONE HOME, FIREWATCH, and WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH reveals the genre's preference for protagonists who, in exploring parts of their identity, subvert the social norms of their surroundings and the long-established heteronormative characteristics of digital games, especially the traditionally male-oriented FPS.[36, 37] In GONE HOME, a young woman explores the past of her estranged lesbian sister; FIREWATCH invites its player to perform "care-oriented masculinity" instead of "toxic, traditional videogame hypermasculinity;" and WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH offers a

33 Cf. Ibid, here p. 244.

34 Cf. Kagen, Melissa.: "Walking, Talking and Playing With Masculinities in Firewatch.", in *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research 18* (2) (2018), http://gamestudies.org/1802/articles/kagen.

35 Cf. Bowman, Dean: "Domesticating the First-Person Shooter", in *Press Start 5* (2019), pp. 150-175, here p. 150.

36 FIREWATCH (Campo Santo, 2016: Campo Santo).

37 WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH (Giant Sparrow, 2017: Annapurna Interactive).

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glimpse into the eccentric lives and deaths of a family in which intergenerational trauma blurs the boundaries of time, space, and identity.[38]

Wandering Haunted Grounds: Ordinary Protagonists and Unfamiliar (Home) Spaces

A noticeable trait of many walking sim protagonists is their ordinariness. This ordinariness—and its gradual disruption—is a key element in the production of the uncanny atmosphere.[39] Usually, the protagonist we play in walking sims is a regular person. A park ranger in FIREWATCH or a young woman returning to her family home in WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH, GONE HOME, and THE SUICIDE OF RACHEL FOSTER.[40, 41] While these protagonists have their own stories (and active voices to tell them), not one of them possesses special powers or supernatural abilities. On one hand, this mundaneness provides room for the player's personal identification with the protagonist. On an emotional level, Edith Finch's wish to get in touch with her family history or Henry's (the protagonist of FIREWATCH) attempt to deal with the trauma of his wife's early-onset dementia might be experienced as more relatable than the fight against literal monsters in HALF LIFE 2. On the other hand, the same mundaneness mirrors the Freudian uncanny with its deep rootedness in "the world of common reality."[42]

Walking simulators tend to isolate the player-character, meaning that the protagonist is usually alone while roaming their surroundings. NPCs are either nonexistent or, quite literally, not present. The crew members we meet in TACOMA are holograms of people long gone, the same goes for the light orbs in EVERYBODY HAS GONE TO THE RAPTURE.[43, 44] In DEAR ESTHER only ghosts and a faceless narrator keep us company on the deserted island, and IT'S WINTER lets us explore an apartment complex that seems simultaneously abandoned and inhabited, personal,

38 Kagen, Melissa.: Walking, Talking and Playing with Masculinities in Firewatch.

39 The terms (player-)character and protagonist are used interchangeably here. Non-playable side characters are rare in walking sims and therefore simply referred to as NPCs.

40 FIREWATCH (Campo Santo, 2016: Campo Santo).

41 THE SUICIDE OF RACHEL FOSTER (One-O-One-Games, 2020: Daedalic Entertainment).

42 Cf. Kirkland, Ewan: "Horror Videogames and the Uncanny", In: *DiGRA'09. Proceedings of the 2009 DiGRA International Conference: Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory* (2009), pp. 1-4, here p.1.

43 TACOMA (Fullbright, 2017: Fullbright).

44 EVERYBODY'S GONE TO THE RAPTURE (The Chinese Room, 2015: Sony Computer Entertainment).

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and strange.[45] While this diegetic isolation of the protagonist adds to the overall ghostliness of the walking sim, it also puts the player in the role of the solitary wanderer who explores her inner environment through the physical act of walking. In this regard, the walking sim digitally continues the psychogeographical practice of the literary dérive[46]—a revolutionary 19th century practice that its creator Guy Debord described as "a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiences."[47]

The spaces we explore in walking simulators tend to be comparatively small, interior spaces. This genre-specific characteristic is yet another re-emergence of the Freudian uncanny. It is also a powerful agent in the creation of uncanny atmospheres. Just like the atmosphere itself, the walking simulator emphasizes subjectivity and emotions through the central medium of architecture.[48] Architecture plays a major role in the staging of uncanny atmospheres, as it can act "as an instrument for its narrative and spatial manifestations."[49] In digital games, architecture is central to the medium as it determines how players move through space by offering (and sometimes predetermining) suggestions of movement.[50]

The walking sim is a narrative-heavy genre and small game spaces tend to be beneficial to the conveyance of narrative information (particularly embedded narratives), as game designers possess a higher degree of control over the temporal order in which the player receives narrative information.[51] Players who explore the vast game space of an open world game are confronted with a plethora of narrative elements and they "can't be expected to find or recognize the importance of any given element."[52] The small and often linearly structured game spaces of

45 IT'S WINTER / ШХД: ЗИМА (sad3d, 2019: GRüN STUDIO)

46 Cf. Carbo-Mascarell, Rosa: "Walking Simulators: The Digitisation of an Aesthetic Practice", In: *DiGRA/FDG '16. Proceedings of the First International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG* (2016), pp. 1-15, here p. 1.

47 Cf. Debord, Guy: "Theory of the Derive", In: Tom McDonough (ed.), *Situationist International Anthology: Revised and Expanded Edition*, Berkeley CA: Bureau of Public Secrets 1958, pp. 62-63.

48 Cf. Montembeault, Hugo: "The Walking Simulator's Generic Experiences", In: *Press Start 5* (2019), pp. 1-28, here p. 19.

49 Cf. Ibid. Kirkland cites: Vidler, Anthony: *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, London: MIT Press 1999.

50 Cf. Böhme, Gernot: The Aesthetics of Atmospheres, here p. 19.

51 Cf. Jenkins, Henry: Game Design as Narrative Architecture, retrieved from: https://web.mit.edu/~21fms/People/henry3/games&narrative.html.

52 Ibid.

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walking simulators, however, can create a stage to condense and spotlight all narrative information.

On another level, smaller spaces can trigger different emotions in the player which may fuel the uncanny atmosphere's desired emotional mixture of "terror and curiosity." Depending on architecture and context, small spaces can feel claustrophobic, eerie, lonely, or confusing. Notable examples include DEAR ESTHER's island with its glowing caves, sublime cliffside, and withered cottages; the snowed-in apartment block in IT'S WINTER; the rotting, labyrinthine hotel in THE SUICIDE OF RACHEL FOSTER; the architecturally impossible Finch residence with its sealed rooms and self-made shrines; and, of course, GONE HOME'S horror-movie-trope-turned family home.

The home has a close and long-standing connection to uncanny aesthetics. The English term uncanny derives from the Anglo-Saxon *ken*, meaning "knowledge." The un-canny, in turn, refers to something unknown, something beyond one's understanding or mental perception. Here, the term's connection to the hidden and the unknown becomes obvious. Its German counterpart, however, emphasizes the concept of the home. In German, *unheimlich* derives from *heimlich*, a word with two opposing meanings that captures the contrasting essence of the concept perfectly. It can mean both homely and in secret, or hidden. The ideal of the home—a safe, private, and familiar place for most people—and its creeping disintegration are key features of the uncanny atmosphere of several walking sims.

Hauntology: Broken Time and Hauntings from the Past

WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH is a particularly uncanny gaming experience, especially with regards to architecture and general environmental design.[53] In the Finch residence, the past permeates the present. The sealed-off bedrooms serve as shrines and museums for their former inhabitants. Narratives of lives long gone emerge from everyday objects, handcrafted artifacts, personal trinkets, and heaps of books.

Like the other walking simulators mentioned in this paper, WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH is, as anthropologist Shane Snyder writes, an "exploration of what

53 Kirkland writes in-depth about this topic in: Kirkland, Ewan: "'He Died a Lot.' Gothic Gameplay in What Remains of Edith Finch", In: Matt Coward-Gibbs (ed.): *Death, Culture & Leisure: Playing Dead (Emerald Studies in Death and Culture)*, Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing 2020, pp. 95-107.

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has been left behind."[54] This central role of the past is typical of walking simulators and makes the genre particularly well suited for analytical approaches through the lens of Hauntology. Hauntology is a philosophical approach focusing on the return or persistence of elements from the (personal or cultural) past—often (but not always) in the form of a ghost. In his definition, the author and cultural theorist Mark Fisher writes that hauntology entails that both "the past and the future can be experienced and understood as hauntings."[55] When the past haunts the present of a place, such as the Finch residence or the Village in EVERYBODY'S GONE TO THE RAPTURE, time is out of joint. Haunted (game-)spaces become pockets of broken linear time in which "the virtual agency of the no longer" manifests.[56] The Freudian uncanny, with its deep-rooted symbolism of the resurfacing repressed, reemerges in the concept of hauntology. Even the atmosphere itself is a spatial form of hauntology.[57] After all, atmospheres always carry a vague and irrational component at their core which "haunts the middle ground between subject and object."[58]

On the diegetic level of walking sims, hauntings can occur in thematic and intertextual references. While the spatiotemporal heterogeneity of haunted spaces can certainly be experienced as negative or frightening (mainly due to mixture of the living and the dead), haunted spaces can also provide spaces of multi-perspectivity. The walking simulator genre is filled with underrepresented voices. A possible reason for this tendency lies in the idea of the haunting and the haunted space itself: the ontological status of hauntings is always unclear, and it is precisely this ambivalent ontological status which offers possibilities for the disruption of dominant views.

Sometimes, the genre's uncanny conjuring of the 'no longer' and the 'not here' even transcends the diegetic borders of a single game space. This is the case whenever multi-temporality is produced through intertextuality. One notable example is THE SUICIDE OF RACHEL FOSTER. While the hotel in this game does not seem to

54 Snyder, Shane: „The Impossible Relationship: Deconstructing the Private Space in Gone Home.", in *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds* 10 (2) (2018), pp. 7-20, here p. 9-10.

55 Fisher, Mark: "What is Hauntology?", In: *Film Quarterly* 66 (1) (2012), pp. 16-24, here p. 16.

56 Ibid, here p. 20.

57 Buser, Michael.: "The Time Is Out of Joint: Atmosphere and Hauntology at Bodiam Castle", in *Emotion, Space and Society* 25 (2017), pp. 5-13, here p. 6.

58 Ibid.

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host any literal ghosts, it is clearly haunted by Stanley Kubrick's THE SHINING.[59] GONE HOME is set in the 1990s and emphasizes the inclusion of iconic period-specific media such as cassettes and VHS tapes. This nostalgic setting reproduces tropes of slasher and/or haunted house movies. Such references are medial hauntings as they merge different times, diegetic spaces, and media forms. This calculated utilization of the audience's (pop-)cultural knowledge influences its expectation towards the game and the game's level of (felt and/or presumed) uncanniness.

CONCLUSION

The initial question of why audiences perceive so many non-horror walking simulators as "scary" can be answered with the fact that the genre possesses certain (diegetic and non-diegetic) qualities well-suited as frames for the creation of uncanny atmospheres. At its essence, the uncanny atmosphere lacks clear ontological status. It draws its power from the psychological and emotional impact of ambiguity, defamiliarization, and subversion which—when well-crafted—can evoke a sense of *Bangnis* in the audience. The games discussed in this paper reflect these properties on both the non-diegetic and the diegetic level.

The walking simulator is a comparatively young game genre which will certainly continue to develop and refine its language of form. However, its roots will always lie with the subversion of the status quo. DEAR ESTHER defamiliarized not only the FPS but the entire medium of the digital game at the time. The genre's inherent subversion of the hegemonic status can be understood as a non-diegetic continuation of the (Freudian) uncanny. It furthermore opens up a sphere to tell and experience underrepresented narratives.

The genre's uncanny subversion extends to the themes, tropes, and narratives on the diegetic level of many walking simulators when players continue the literary tradition of the dérive: the passage through various ambiences for the sake of (emotional or psychological) self-reflection. The walking sim protagonist is often an ordinary person exploring a small (usually interior) space in which the material world is symbolically charged. Their journey often entails a return to the home space, a confrontation with a resurfacing past, and a struggle with (both individual and collective) identity. All of these elements are agents in the creation of the uncanny atmosphere as they continue both the Freudian tradition of uncanny symbolism and disruptive spatiotemporal structures of Hauntology.

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The goal of this paper was to shed a little light on the topic of uncanny atmospheres in walking simulators. While I was hopefully able to provide some theoretical entry points and impulses to the topic, further research needs to be conducted, especially about walking simulators that convey non-Western ideas of the uncanny. It would certainly be compelling to investigate if, how, and why walking simulators from non-Western cultures differ in their narrative use and structural creation of uncanny atmospheres. After all, fear of—and fascination with—the dark, the dead, and the unknown is universal.

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