

From Walking Simulator to Ambience Action Game: A Philosophical Approach to a Misunderstood Genre

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Abstract

When *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2012) was released in 2012 as a standalone game, the new “walking simulator” genre name came into popular use. The term implies a banalization of game design while also missing the core characteristics of the games subsumed under it and, therefore, lacks epistemological value. Following this notion, we offer “ambience action game” as an alternative to provide an epistemological tool which enables researchers to appreciate the genre’s cultural significance as a continuation of practices of atmospheric experience.

The proposed term offers myriad starting points for analysis and future research by unifying well-received game studies theories with the barely recognized—at least in game studies discourse—philosophical theory of atmospheres. Consequently, this article is a contribution to an affective turn in game studies, which takes player experience beyond the act of play seriously.

Keywords

Walking simulator; ambience action game; explorative game; awareness game; ambience act; atmosphere; environmental storytelling



Introduction: Emergence of a Genre

The so-called walking simulator genre is the result of a research project. In 2007, Dan Pinchbeck, Creative Director at *thechineseroom*, and his team received funding “to develop three [modifications], each exploring a different angle on storytelling, or affective structures” (Pinchbeck, 2008b, p. 51). The provocative goal of this research project was to question to what end the first-person shooter (FPS) genre could be manipulated, distorted, and modified—circumventing its core gameplay mechanic, the act of elimination, to change the “underlying politics of the game” (Pinchbeck, 2008a, p. 187). To achieve this, Pinchbeck and his team developed modifications (mods) for already existing FPSs like *Doom 3* (id Software, 2004) and *Half-Life 2* (Valve Corporation, 2004).

Dear Esther (The Chinese Room, 2012) was one of these mods, created by modding *Half-Life 2*. After ridding the game of the ability to eliminate non-player characters, what remained enabled the exploration of an abandoned island which presented narrative fragments to the player. Four years later, when *Dear Esther* received a standalone commercial release, the walking simulator term was coined by players around the world (Huberts, 2016; Irwin, 2017).

But this term was never meant as a compliment—quite the contrary, as journalist Rainer Sigl (2014) points out in his “First Person Walker Footnotes.” Both parts of the term are, indeed, defamatory in their intention. The emphasis on walking implies a lack of gameplay and evokes the banality of the act of walking (Huberts, 2016), and thereby disregards the experience of the game world and of the plot inscribed within it. The term embodies a hierarchy of game mechanics which positions supposedly meaningful acts like killing non-player characters above seemingly meaningless acts like walking (Irwin, 2017; Huberts, 2016). Additionally, “simulator” implies that the described game actually is not a game at all. Rather, it is a non-game, a reproduction of reality—and of a boring one at that (Kill Screen Staff, 2016).

As game developer Ed Key notes, the walking simulator term constitutes “a similar kind of reductionism” to describing FPS games as “face clickers” (Sigl, 2014). Although aiming and shooting at enemy faces with the click of a button is a common action in this genre, the complexities of gameplay cannot be arbitrarily reduced to this single element. Similarly, “walking simulator” implies a banalization of game design that overlooks the core characteristics of the games subsumed under it. There is no epistemological value in reducing a game to a “boring shooter.” Rather, the essence of such games lies in the experience of their worlds, something that is firmly grounded in a cultural history of creating and enjoying landscapes for the sake of their aesthetic value.

The fact that “the term ‘walking simulator’ has gone from being used in a derogatory manner to being somewhat reclaimed by the creators and fans of the games it’s applied to” (Kill Screen Staff, 2016) can be verified by

visiting the store of the sales platform *Steam*, which lists “walking simulator” as a “[p]opular user-defined tag” (Steam, 2019) to categorize games like *Dear Esther*. As researchers, we are fully aware of the importance of widespread genre terms as a common denominator to “categorize art for consumption’s sake” (Irwin, 2017). Still, as genre terms are inherently vague and subject to constant change (Beil, 2015), we want to partake in this constant process of redefinition by arguing for another term, which emphasizes the strengths of the genre instead of its purported weaknesses. We realize that the proposed terminology will mainly be of importance in an academic context and will most likely be unable to contest the dominant term, because widely recognized terms are based on a “complex concatenation of production, reception and critique” (Beil, 2015, p. 30). However, we want to engage in this discussion nonetheless.

Based on our previous research (Huberts & Standke, 2014; Huberts & Zimmermann, 2017; Zimmermann, 2018a; 2018b), we want to coin the term “ambience action game.” In order to explain why this term is more appropriate than “walking simulator,” we offer a short cultural history on the idea of affective landscape experiences alongside an exploration of the theoretical foundation for this new term. We conclude by showcasing the term’s potential as an “epistemological tool” (Neitzel & Nohr, 2010, p. 421) on the basis of the games *Tacoma* (Fullbright, 2017) and *Proteus* (Kanaga & Key, 2013). Overall, this article demonstrates that the ambience action game term is viable as an epistemological tool. It offers myriad starting points for analysis and future research by unifying well-received game studies theories on environmental storytelling or machine acts with the under-recognized philosophical theory of atmospheres. We see our article as a contribution to an affective turn in game studies which takes player experience beyond the act of play seriously (Bösel & Möring, 2018). In the context of this turn, the importance of the game genre under study in this article becomes particularly evident when it is reframed as “ambience action game” rather than “walking simulator.”

Philosophical Contextualisation

Aesthetic Dominance, or History of an Idea

As mentioned above, we want to outline the characteristics of our proposed genre terminology in a rather unorthodox way. The elaborate philosophical derivation that follows now is by no means an end in itself. Rather, we believe that defining the ambience action game’s place in western cultural history and in the philosophical traditions of aesthetic theory and phenomenology significantly changes the way we are able to engage with the genre, enabling us to appreciate its cultural significance.

Hence, we start this journey by following Gernot Böhme (2017) in asking “What is magic?” (p. 146). One way in which he defines magic is the “effect of materials in the theater of the world” (p. 146). At first, it seems contradictory to call something “magic” when it seems to be so firmly grounded in the realm of rationality. A given object is made from

a specific material which bestows specific qualities upon said object. But this is only half the truth. There is a “rift between material and materiality, between the quality of the raw stuff and its theatrical value” (Böhme, 2017, p. 143), between how an object physically exists and how it acts, how it affects the world around it. Objects can produce specific atmospheres—of warmth, of ease, of naturalness—without being verified as being of congruent material origin. There is no need to touch the bark of a tree to be aware of its materiality, to feel its influence on its surroundings and—in consequence—on you. The “pure aesthetic of materials” casts its spell on us (Böhme, 2017, p. 146). Only later do we try to link cause to effect, or rather effect to cause. This is the magical quality of materiality that Böhme identifies.

Realizing that objects or—to use a broader term—things are more than the material they are made from and can act on their own by means of their materiality means realizing that things can be more than what they were originally made to be. Coming back to the bark of a tree, it becomes clear that its influence on the surrounding atmosphere is not the reason for its existence. Rather, the bark exists to protect the tree. Umberto Eco (1997) call this a “primary function” which hints at what he calls “secondary functions” (p. 187). Knowing of things’ secondary functions, people have used objects or architecture in contexts outside of their primary function, for example by constructing buildings that offer—apart from shelter—a specific materiality. Böhme (2017) notes that materiality is “a part of culture per se” (p. 143). Still, he urges to see the understanding and consequential use of materiality, of things’ secondary functions as “a product of economic development and of the state of science and technology” (p. 143), of economies of abundance, where aesthetics are of more importance than practicality (p. 144).

We want to trace this conscious use of materiality back to the landscape gardens of the 18th century. Böhme (2017) connects Christian Cay Lorenz Hirschfeld’s theory of the English landscape garden, published between 1779 and 1785, to something he calls “the language of stage settings” (p. 21). These landscape gardens offered exploration-based experiences which were made possible by arranging the landscape in specific ways, exemplified in Hirschfeld’s works. He describes the means to create so-called Szenen (scenes) constituting a specific arrangement of objects or—to come back to this notion—by craftily using objects’ materiality for a desired effect on the emerging atmospheres. A burbling stream with a clear blue surface, lush green leaves that give way to the tiniest rays of light or narrowly placed trees that darken the visitors path: causes for a desired effect.

The landscape spaces formed in such a way can surely be described as spaces of secondary function, of aesthetic dominance. Therefore, we want to call these spaces “awareness spaces” to clearly differentiate them from the spaces of primary function which are dominant in digital games and are, above all, enablers of player action.

Encounters with the Functional

As mentioned, game spaces are predominantly functional spaces that encourage players to interact with them. The understanding of video games as “possibility spaces” is grounded in a ludic reception of virtual worlds (Sicart, 2008). Consequently—following Eco’s (1997) description of primary and secondary functions—the architectures, landscapes, and objects in video games mainly fulfil primary functions, such as where walls offer cover from enemy fire. However, these architectures, landscapes, and objects can also embody secondary functions which fuel specific atmospheres in virtual game worlds, though they are usually overpowered by the ludic reception of the widespread functional spaces.

What Böhme calls the language of stage settings—so distinctly present in the creation of the English landscape gardens of the 18th century—is the same language used in the production of digital game worlds. Game designer Christopher W. Totten (2014) calls the act of creating such a virtual world “placemaking” (p. 112). He describes in detail that “homely places should feature natural or rich materials: grass, wood, brick, stone” (p. 291), thereby using the same vocabulary as Hirschfeld in his remarks on landscape scenes.

Totten heavily draws from the work of Henry Jenkins (2014), who calls places which utilize elements “already well known to visitors” evocative spaces (p. 123). It is important to note a crucial difference between our theory and Jenkins’ understanding of the game world in his influential essay. Where Jenkins elaborates on the narrative potential of the game world, we specifically want to address its atmospheric potential and, therefore, understand game spaces as evocative, insofar as they utilize “already well known” elements for the production of atmospheres. This is not to say that game spaces are of no importance for a game’s narrative; quite the contrary, as we demonstrate when we further explain the ambience action game. What we want to make clear here is that the magic of materiality is also potent in the virtual world.¹

In conclusion, we see that there is a connection between the crafted landscapes of the real world and the virtual world, but this connection

¹ Posthumanist scholars like Conor Mckeown (2018) criticize western philosophical movements in game studies as “the hangover of the Kantian ontology” (p. 330). Mckeown attests that “[a] digital ‘object’ surely cannot be said to have a thing-in-itself, as it is instead a blueprint for a series of actions” which opposes the concept of materiality we presented here (p. 332). We recognize the importance of theorizing the ontological status of objects generated by a computer program but want to argue that—applying a phenomenological and constructivist perspective—the question if the objects in virtual worlds really exist is of little importance for the players’ experience. The affects and feelings that players are able to experience in atmospheric virtual worlds are real, and thereby the players construct their own reality based on objects which are experienced as real (Kerz, 2017, p. 70).

has long been suppressed by the emphasis on player action in digital games. This is why we want to clearly distinguish between the spaces of primary function as possibility spaces and the spaces of secondary function as awareness spaces. The language of stage settings has always been part of digital games and has always been used to create situations in which the act of play could take place. It is the remarkable quality of the ambience action game that it accepts the aesthetics of the virtual world, of the landscapes in these virtual worlds, as meaningful in their own right and, consequently, as its *raison d'être*—just like the English landscape gardens. In its conscious disengagement from the dominance of the functional—of enabling player action, as it is understood in the context of digital games—the ambience action game is a “counter-movement to the increasing functionalization and abstraction of space” (Reiche & Gehmann, 2014, p. 446).

Towards a Definition of the Ambience Action Game

The Ambience Act

Our concept of the ambience action game is based on Alexander Galloway's (2006) idea of an “ambience act” (p. 10), which he explains in his “Essays on Algorithmic Culture.” Understanding the “ambience act” is only possible if one follows the premise that digital games can be understood as “actions” (p. 2). Crucially, there is a distinction to be made between the actions of the player via peripheral hardware and the actions of the machine, understood as the sum of hardware and software, “in response to player actions as well as independently of them” (p. 4). To make this distinction visible in his analytical language, Galloway coins the terms “machine actions” and “operator actions” (p. 5). In reality, the interactions between machine and operator are fluent, so a clear distinction is hardly possible as player actions depend on and lead to machine actions and vice versa. Rather, this artificial distinction opens up a new perspective on digital games, one in which the machine exists (at least) as equal to the player.

Usually players do not become aware of the machine acts, as they are busy performing their operator acts. If the operator acts are reduced to a minimum or even completely put on hold, an “ambience act” occurs, which Galloway (2006) describes as follows:

The machine is still on in an ambience act, but the operator is away. Gameplay recommences as soon as the operator returns with controller input. The ambience act is the machine's act. The user is on hold, but the machine keeps on working. (p. 10)

The game world acts—or, rather, the machine acts through the game world. What remains for the player are landscape experiences similar to the landscape gardens described above. Galloway (2006) exemplifies this as “the inverse of pressing pause” (p. 10). Instead of the game, the player is approaching a state of pause. But while every digital game is

shaped by machine acts, not every game can produce ambience acts. Only such games which do not force operator acts by, for example, imposing a time limit or by influencing (e.g. attacking) the avatar through non-player characters can be fertile ground for the ambience act (Galloway, 2006, p. 10).²

Before the ambience act was transformed into a genre of its own, there were numerous games that hinted at the potential of digital games to not only be possibility spaces but also awareness spaces (Zimmermann, 2018b). One of the most notable examples is *Shenmue* (Sega AM2, 1999), which is played, according to Galloway (2006), "by participating in its process" (p. 8). Even when the players have to wait for a moment, the hustle and bustle of the Japanese city Yokosuka continues around them. Another notable experience of ambience can be had in *Shadow of the Colossus* (SIE Japan Studio & Team Ico, 2005), which featured long and uneventful rides on horseback long before the more recent *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games, 2018).

The ambience act, therefore, enables us to describe what makes games labelled as "walking simulators" special, without being reductive. By calling them ambience action games, it becomes clear that the operator acts are reduced to a minimum and the machine acts are dominant. As a result, the ambience action game is constantly in a latent state of aesthetic dominance. The ambience act is ever-present. We now want to delve deeper into what players really perceive of this ambience act.

Atmospheres and the Sphere of Action

Böhme (2017) claims that atmospheres are "spheres of the presence of something, their reality in space" (p. 19). It seems worthwhile to further describe what this "something" is constituted of and by, as we see the experience of atmospheres in the ambience action game as the fundamental reason to play these games. As Böhme notes, "atmospheres are a typical intermediate phenomenon, something between subject and object" which, therefore, is lacking a "secure ontological status" (p. 29). Connecting this to the recent work of Aubrey Anable (2018), atmospheres can be said to reside in the "in-between space" (p. 6), connecting subject and object by infusing the space both occupy with a potential to alter the subjects' feelings. Atmospheres are felt as a "Totaleindruck" (total impression) of a given situation (Kerz, 2017, p. 38). Atmospheres, therefore, do not originate from a given object and befall someone becoming aware of that object. Rather, the perceiving subject itself also adds to the emerging atmosphere(s). An atmosphere can only emerge from a situation comprised of subject(s) as well as object(s). Only later, in analytical retrospection, can atmosphere be dissected into its

² It is important to note here that there is, of course, the possibility for hybrid forms of games which are not an ambience action game per se, but contain certain situations in which operator acts are optional and in which, consequently, an ambience act can occur.

constituent parts, as the success of an atmosphere heavily depends on the willingness of the subject to engage with the aforementioned total impression of the situation. A critical distance or an analytical approach to the situation will prevent the atmosphere from arising. Therefore, it is necessary to put experience first and analysis second.

A person who becomes aware of a space which is atmospherically charged “through the presence of things, of persons, or environmental constellations” affectively—that is to say, before intellectually classifying what they see—reacts to this space by unconsciously accessing previous experiences with the space or similar spaces (or objects, or persons, or constellations of such) (Böhme, 2017, p. 19). On the other hand, the space itself and the objects inhabiting it influence the atmosphere by means of their materiality, as elaborated on above.

So, when constellations of objects and experiential predispositions of subjects meet, atmospheres emerge. The key challenge now lies in finding an analytical approach to this phenomenon that appears to evade linguistic enclosure because of its highly subjective nature. This is where the “language of stage settings” is again of importance (Böhme, 2017, p. 21). It “rids atmospheres of the odor of the irrational” (Böhme, 2017, p. 30), which means the constructivist impetus of atmospheric experience is grounded in an empirical notion of cause and effect. A set designer—or game designer—does not surrender to the subjectivity of awareness. Rather, the “aesthetic worker”, as Böhme (2017, p. 73) calls them, creates stage settings (or game worlds) to evoke certain atmospheres by utilizing specific arrangements of lighting, colours, or props. Böhme concludes that atmospheres are indeed “quasi-objective” and, therefore, reproducible to a degree, at least approximately (p. 2). Still, the subjectivity of the subject remains an unstable factor in the creation of atmospheres, as they rely on specific experiential or cultural predispositions of the perceiving subjects. This suggests the conclusion that (the creation of) atmospheres can be both a success, as well as a failure (Willner, 2016, p. 66).

So when we look back at the ambience action game or the ambience act, respectively, we understand that the ambience act can also be described as the state in which the total impression of the atmosphere is unhindered. In this state, the player wanders through the virtual space and reacts to the materiality of the presented constellation of objects, lighting, architecture, and so forth by accessing previous experiences with such constellations or similar constellations in the real world (Kerz, 2017, p. 57).

These atmospheres emerge in every digital game, but it is the peculiarity of the ambience act that the appreciation of the atmospheres is not obstructed by excessive operator acts. In this, the instances in which an ambience act occurs are quite similar to what Böhme (2017) describes as an “artistic setting” (p. 17), a specific awareness space like

a museum, an art installation or a gallery “outside the sphere of action” (p. 17). The core idea of the ambience action game—the reduction of the operator acts to enable the experience of atmospheres—is therefore summarised in the corresponding German term “handlungsentlastet” (which could be translated as “action-reduced”) (Böhme, 2013, p. 30).

So while the player is possibly unable to linguistically grasp what keeps them playing these games, we can now attest that it is presumably the joy of “being in the world and the moment” and the atmosphere of the world that is being experienced (Irwin, 2017). While people of the 18th century might have wandered through a landscape garden to achieve this kind of experience, the wanderer of the 21st century might delve into an ambience action game.

Two Philosophies

As we refined our theory of the ambience action game, we realized that there is a variety of games subsumed under the “walking simulator” term which—apart from the experience of atmospheres—offer different delights. In a collection of statements titled “Is it time to stop using the term ‘walking simulator?’” developer David Szymanski states that “[t]wo nearly opposite philosophies [are] falling under the same label” (Kill Screen Staff, 2016). One of these philosophies surely is the genre’s inclination to offer action-reduced experiences, which Szymanski refers to as “Walking Simulators that seem to think player agency and interaction get in the way of the narrative” (Kill Screen Staff, 2016). The second philosophy, which Szymanski identifies as “others that try to use player agency and interaction to enhance the narrative” (Kill Screen Staff, 2016), we elaborate on in the following paragraphs.

We claimed that *Dear Esther* can be viewed as the first ambience action game. As a “storytelling experiment” (Pinchbeck, 2008b, p. 54), there is more to the experience of this game than delving into its atmospheres. *Dear Esther* offers an abandoned island to explore which reveals narrative fragments while players wander around the moonlit shores. This hints at a different layer of experience that ambience action games are able to offer.

Ed Key specifies the two layers or philosophies inscribed into the ambience action game: “games about the sensation of wandering, and games about discovering a narrative” (Kill Screen Staff, 2016). We described the “sensation of wandering” in detail by connecting it to the concept of atmospheres. On the other hand lies the possibility of “discovering a narrative” as seen in games like *Dear Esther*—or, in a more nuanced way, in a game like *Tacoma*.

Dear Esther and *Tacoma* provide the player with engaging awareness spaces through which they may experience emerging atmospheres. But they still uphold a greater level of player agency by focusing on explorative operator acts like moving or searching, required to unveil the narrative inscribed into the environment.

The idea of channelling a certain narrative through the game world is by no means a unique trait of the ambience action game. Worch and Smith (2010) define "environmental storytelling" as "the act of staging player-space with environmental properties that can be interpreted as a meaningful whole, furthering the narrative of the game" (p. 16). Predecessors of the ambience action game like *System Shock 2* (Irrational Games & Looking Glass Studios, 1999) or *BioShock* (2K Games, 2007) are influential examples of games which use this technique.

Such games use "embedded narrative elements" (Vella, 2011, p. 12; based on Jenkins, 2004) like audio logs, letters, teddy bears, or puddles of blood. These elements or objects refer to meanings and can thereby be described as non-verbal signs in a semiotic sense (Hahn, 2014, p. 119), where a given object also stands for something else (that is, holds information that does not directly refer to the object itself). This connects with Jenkins' (2004) description of a story as a "body of information" in his notions on embedded narrative (p. 126).

Apart from the atmospheric potential of ambience action games, these games incorporate common practices of environmental storytelling on which research has already been conducted (for example, Sloan, 2015; Unterhuber, 2015). It is important to not abandon the games' narrative potential in the light of their atmospheric prowess. Affectively experienced game worlds can of course be analytically evaluated. The total impression of atmospheres can be dissected in the following intellectual process of perception (Kerz, 2017, p. 361). But sometimes there is no meaning to be found, as in *Proteus*, we argue. Or, it is not necessary to seek meaning, as in *Tacoma*, which can for the most part be finished by standing around and ignoring the embedded narrative (Grayson, 2017). This is why we conclude that there are indeed two different philosophies inscribed into the ambience action game: two poles between which a given ambience action game can oscillate.

We find it necessary to introduce two additional terms to complement the ambience action game, as it would be again reductive to imply that a game like *Proteus* is not conclusively different from a game like *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company, 2013). We want to be as precise as possible in the framing of our postulated terms to ensure that they can add to a productive discussion on the potential of digital games in general and the ambience action game in particular.

Three Definitions

We want to understand the ambience action game as an umbrella term, referring to games in which presence in awareness spaces is central to the experience. In a tradition of aesthetic uses of space, the ambience act is dominant while the operator act is reduced. The degree of this reduction is determined by what the developers, understood as aesthetic workers who create atmospheric stages, want to achieve.

Here the term “explorative game” comes into play. The explorative game is a mitigated form of the ambience action game. It is defined by a specific focus on embedded narrative elements, which influence the emerging atmospheres by attributing meaning to them. Explorative operator acts, like moving and looking, remain an integral part of the experience, as they enable the player to uncover a narrative stored in the landscape. Games like *Gone Home*, *Tacoma*, or *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow, 2017) fit into this subgenre.

On the other side of the spectrum, we find the “awareness game.” The awareness game is an intensified form of the ambience action game. The game world is absolutely independent of the player and does not rely on their input. Rather, the game world allows players to be present in it and to experience the arising atmospheres. The operator act is either reduced to a trivial minimum, not necessary or even impossible. The atmospheres of the awareness game are predominantly tuned by the objects in the game world and their potent materiality. Games like *Proteus*, *Mountain* (O’Reilly, 2014), or *Fugl* (Team Fugl, 2017) belong to this subgenre.³

To underline the potential of our concept, we offer two case studies in which the ambience action game term is used as an epistemological tool.

Case Study 1: The Explorative Game *Tacoma*

In *Tacoma*, you arrive at an abandoned space station of the same name, in the year 2088. After a fatal accident, the player, embodying the avatar of Amy Ferrier, is tasked with recovering the artificial intelligence still onboard. Aided by an augmented reality device, the player bears witness to the conversations and actions of the six crew members who inhabited the space station until shortly after an accident. Through exploration of the space station, the player uncovers the fate of the crew and what led to the consequential accident. As an explorative game, *Tacoma* heavily relies on environmental storytelling to present its narrative. Still, *Tacoma* remains a game about experiencing the space station’s atmospheres, affectively as well as intellectually.

When entering the hub area connecting the different areas of the space station, the player is confronted by something which almost feels like a living organism. The station around is buzzing, rattling, and objects are weightlessly floating around you. A cleaning robot crosses your path and pursues its bustling activity. The station might be abandoned, but it is far from lifeless. The entrance to the different stations flash in bright colours and infuse the hub area with a friendly and inviting atmosphere. This sets the tone for the upcoming hours: The abandoned stations mean you no

³ Hybrid forms of the ambience action game oscillating between these two extremes—such as *Dear Esther*—are possible and are of interest for individual case studies.

harm, there are no monsters lurking, and there is no fighting to do. What you feel is the presence of the station around you— for you to explore.

As an explorative game, *Tacoma* also prominently offers atmospheres which are infused with meaning. This enables players to affectively participate in the atmospheres around them and also to reflect on the game world and its embedded narrative. When you activate the augmented reality device, stylized holograms appear on the scene which refer to crew members that left the station some days before your arrival (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The former crew of space station *Tacoma*. Screenshot by Felix Zimmermann.

However you experienced the atmospheres around you before, this experience is transformed by the sudden appearance of the crew—or, rather, the testimonies of their bygone presence. What you are able to be part of here is an atmosphere of the past (Zimmermann, 2018b). This atmosphere quite literally enables an experience of “past presencing” (Macdonald, 2013, p. 16). The past and the present become intertwined in such a way that it almost feels like entering a time machine. The uncrossable barrier between past and present appears to be transcended.

As is typical for an ambience action game, the operator act is reduced to minimal level. You can start, stop, and fast-forward the recording of the crew, but you cannot interact with them directly—everything they do has already happened. You can only witness a past event unfolding.

You can, however, read the crew’s notes by accessing their personal computers when they, in turn, access them in the recording (Figure 2). Interestingly, the accident has left the notes corrupted. Instead of readable letters, the notes are streaked by faulty characters. This adds to the environmental storytelling, since the crucial information is deliberately withheld to encourage exploration. But it also influences the atmospheres. The corrupted parts of the notes can be seen as “traces of

wear and tear, decay, and disintegration” and, therefore, as “material clues” which add to the atmosphere of the past (Holtorf, 2013, p. 432).

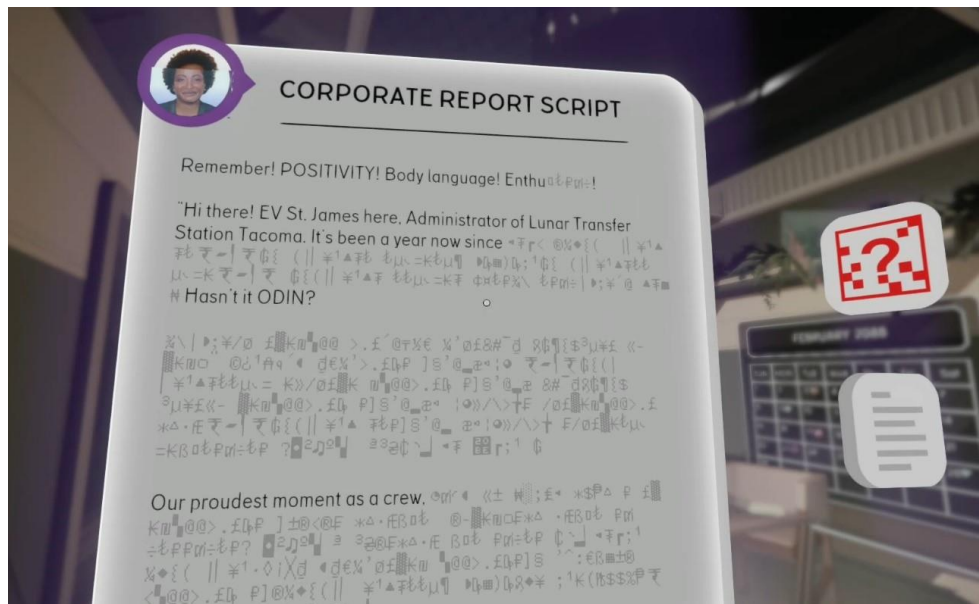


Figure 2. The notes of the crew captain E.V. St James. Screenshot by Felix Zimmermann.

As shown above, the ambience action game and its explorative game subgenre—used as an epistemological tool—allow us to shed light on what shapes the experience of *Tacoma*. It is special in how it adds the crew to the pool of objects that shape the atmospheres, which the player can be a part of. In the way it transcends the affective awareness of atmospheres, it can clearly be categorized as an explorative game and, therefore, a player-focused approach to the ambience action game.

Case Study 2: The Awareness Game *Proteus*

On the other end of the spectrum, we find *Proteus*, a game which fully embraces the idea of pausing the player. At first, *Proteus* seems to be about exploration, just like *Tacoma*. The player awakes in the middle of an ocean, with a procedurally generated island right in front of them awaiting to be traversed and scrutinized for meaning (Figure 3). It is filled with animals, vegetation, ruins, monuments, and sounds. But this is just a “ruse,” as Ian Bogost (2015) writes in his review of the game, tricking the player “into thinking the game is about you” (p. 120). There are no meaningful artefacts to be found and understood, no embedded narrative to be encountered, and no rewarding story conclusion to be reached. As Bogost continues: “One explores *Proteus* less like one explores a wooded nature preserve and more like one explores a naked body – by moving it through one’s attention rather than moving one’s attention through it” (p. 120).

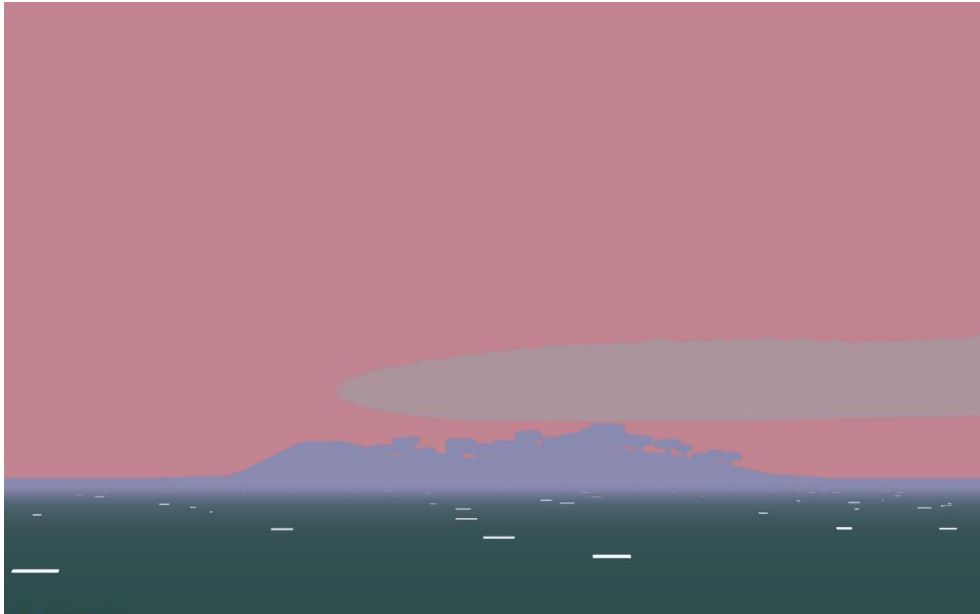


Figure 3. The isle of *Proteus*. Screenshot by Christian Huberts.

Proteus is not concerned with problems of archaeology but rather with problems of ecology. Objects and their primary functions are of little importance in the game. Instead, it is the abstracted display of the materiality of things that is in the center of the experience of the awareness game. There is no need to reflect upon the meaning of the trees, frogs, and rocks of the island of *Proteus*. "Through perception we enter a common actuality with the things of nature," as Böhme (2017, p. 97) writes, describing the possibility of being perceptually present with objects in a given environment without the need for interpretation or action. The player does not have to explore the island of the game; you have to be aware of it and the atmospheres that radiate from it, co-creating it by your presence. The "move act," as Galloway (2006, p. 37) calls it, is only ever necessary to switch from one atmosphere to another—spring, summer, autumn, and winter (Figure 4)—and to regain awareness of "how I feel here" (Böhme, 2017, p. 18). This is by no means passive but a "performance of sensual experience" (Böhme, 2017, p. 119), like stepping into an installation of the artist James Turrell. Being present in a featureless room filled with colorful, diffused lights offers no meaning to the visitors, but it co-creates intense bodily sensations of vastness and disorientation.

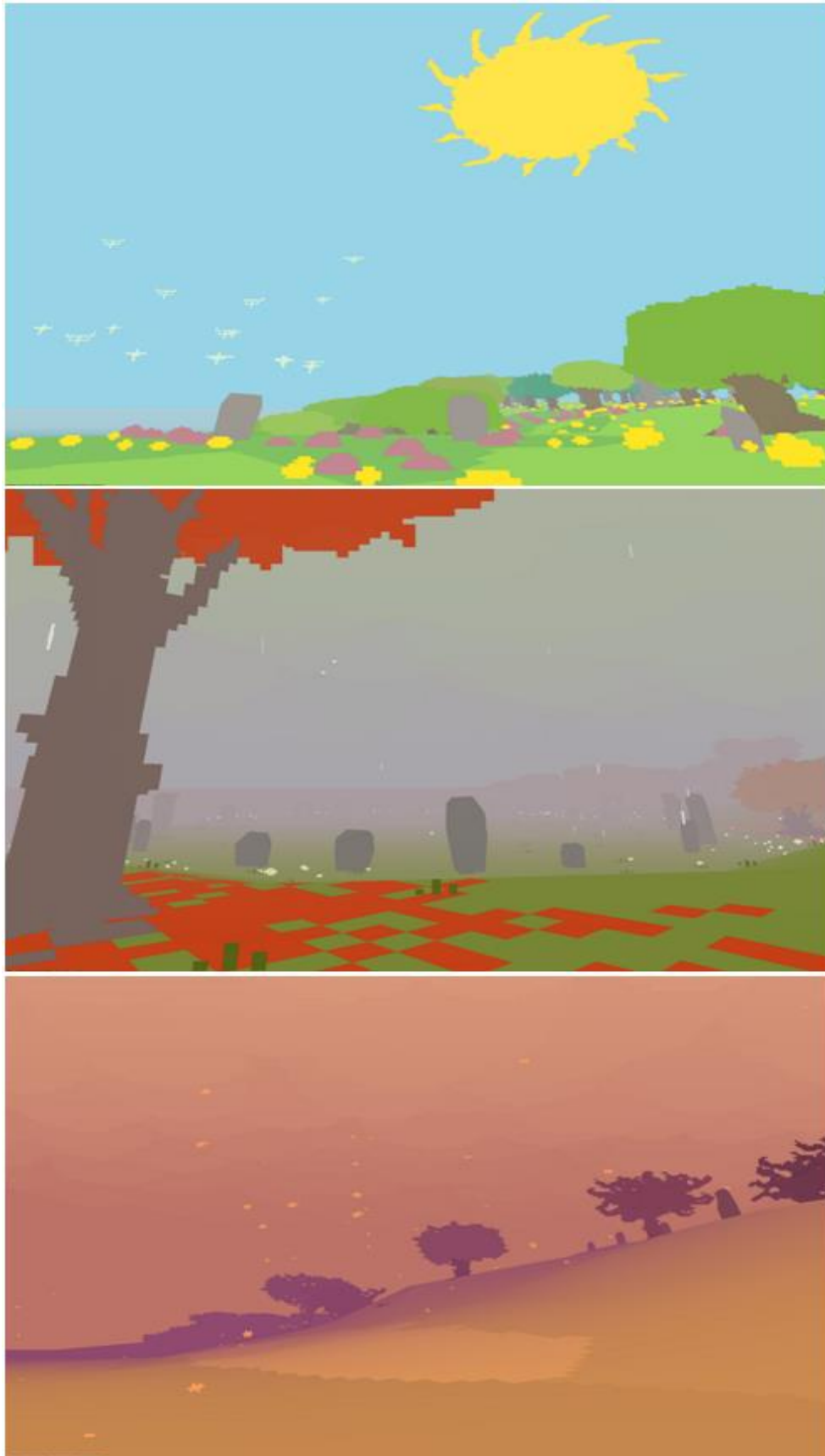


Figure 4. From top to bottom: summer, autumn, and winter in *Proteus*.

Screenshots by Christian Huberts.

Where the explorative game still relies heavily on the operator act to allow for the exploration of atmospheres of the past, the awareness game only ever takes place in the actual moment. The ambience acts of *Proteus* reference no past occurrences. Everything is randomly placed with every new playthrough. Movement is possible but not necessary or superior to idleness. "It is about possibility," writes Galloway (2006), "a subtle solicitation for the operator to return" (p. 11). There is little narrative structure to be found on the island, only nonbinding proposals of different atmospheres. No perspective and no ambience act is more important than the other. *Proteus* ends in winter, but it is not ended by the player. Instead, you are slowly plucked from the surface and carried away into the sky by another ambience act. The island is there, as Bogost (2015) writes, "until it gets bored and turns you off" (p. 120).

In its most extreme form, the awareness game can become downright useless as a digital game, at least when you apply the aforementioned hierarchy of meaningful and meaningless acts in digital games and conclude that "meaningless" is tantamount to "useless." The status of *Proteus* as a game, while being generally intact, is still never far from slipping into a "logic of the traditionally expressive or representational forms of art such as painting or film" (Galloway, 2006, p. 11). Like an "artistic setting" (Böhme, 2017, p. 17), awareness games, even more so than explorative games, take place "outside the sphere of action" (Böhme, 2017, p. 17). Their usefulness depends on their uselessness.⁴

As the second subgenre of the ambience action game, the awareness game denotes the quintessence of our new genre. Unlike *Tacoma*, *Proteus* does not focus on atmospheres of the past infused with meaning, but instead on the pure sensual experience of being present in an atmosphere. While both revolve around ambience acts, only *Proteus* fully prioritizes them over operator acts. Most ambience action games are hybrids of the two subgenres, but a closer look at *Proteus* allows us to illustrate the broad spectrum of the genre and define the range of these terms as epistemological tools.

Conclusion

We have shown how the magical quality of objects finds its way into digital games. The materiality of objects can cast a spell on us, no matter if the object exists in the physical world or as a construct of polygons wrapped in a convincing texture. When the game designer Christopher W. Totten encourages fellow designers to take part in the placemaking of virtual

⁴ This is reflected in how Ed Key, the creator of *Proteus*, named his company: "Twisted Tree" references a story from the Zhuangzi, a collection of Daoist texts, that revolves around a useless tree that thus escapes being cut down and can be admired by travellers (Nicklin, 2015).

worlds, he shares his knowledge as an aesthetic worker. As such, he engages in the creation of atmospheres of which the player can be a part.

We have argued that atmospheres are a phenomenon present in every game, but are regularly overpowered by the dominant player action. More often than not, the game world revolves around this player action, degrading the space around the player to a possibility space whose only function is to serve.

But there is a trend in modern digital games which points to the potential of atmospheres as an end of their own. *Shenmue* and *Shadow of the Colossus* hinted at this potential, as does *Red Dead Redemption 2*. It is a notable feat of *Red Dead Redemption 2* that it regularly forces the player to pause while the game world works its magic on them. The developers even implemented a “Cinematic Mode” (Figure 5) which enables players to fully embrace the beauty of the game world while the game takes care of controlling their horse. The ambience act is only a press of a button away.



Figure 5. The Cinematic Mode in *Red Dead Redemption 2*. Screenshot by Felix Zimmermann.

We therefore argue that there are glimpses and influences of the ambience action game in this—and other—highly successful and well-received games. Future research will be conducted on atmospheric experience in the blockbuster games of our time (Zimmermann, 2018b; see also Bonner, 2018 on the “wilderness experience” and Bonner, 2014 on atmospheres in open world games). But only the ambience action game fully embraces the atmospheric potential of virtual worlds by subversively challenging what games should and should not do to their players.

When the ambience action game brings the player into a latent state of pause, it fills the emerging void with the action of the game world—the ambience act. For some players, this might seem like a humiliating idea, being less important than the world around them. But it mustn't be.

Our aim in this article was to show that there is value in seeing virtual game worlds as awareness spaces. While this understanding can open up new perspectives on digital games as a whole, it especially enables us to do justice to the games backhandedly referred to as “walking simulators.” Apart from contributing a new term to the wide range of genre terminology, we would like to encourage the reader to understand the ambience action game as a specific mindset which changes the way players of digital games play. If we let go of the idea that everything has to revolve around us, we open ourselves up to unexpected experiences.

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