

Embodied Engagement with Environmental Storytelling in Walking Simulators: A Case Study of *What Remains of Edith Finch* (2017)

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Environmental storytelling (ES) is a key concept for understanding narrativity not only in videogames, but also in theme parks, theatre, among others. Henry Jenkins (2004; see also Carson 2000) introduced the concept to game studies, identifying four narrative functions of game space: 1) evoking associations with existing narratives; 2) serving as a stage for narrative enactment; 3) embedding narrative information; 4) providing resources for emergent narratives. Fernández-Vara (2011) proposed “indexical storytelling,” where narrative is conveyed through “indices,” the traces that indicate past or ongoing events in the game space and guide possible next actions. Cyran et al. (2025) highlight how cultural backgrounds influence interpretations of ES. An emerging strand of research has applied archaeological frameworks to understand the ways the player reconstructs background narratives through spatial exploration (Bennett et al. 2023; Nicholls & Cook 2025).

While early discussions of ES tended to adopt a design-oriented perspective, treating ES as the strategic use of space for narrative delivery, more recent studies have shifted toward a player-centric perspective. However, the player does not always engage with environmental storytelling as an “archaeologist” who deliberately searches for narrative evidence. Rather, narrative information is often absorbed intuitively as the player navigates the game world. This process involves complex embodied cognitive processes that existing research has yet to fully capture. To address this gap, this article examines how ES can be experienced in walking simulators. This game genre foregrounds spatial exploration over complex mechanics and challenges. It thus provides a focused point of departure for exploring ES experiences.

This research conducts a case study of *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow 2017). This game has the player navigate the Finch house and uncover the family curse from Edith Finch’s first-person perspective. It offers an information-rich case within the walking simulator genre, in which narrative information is extensively distributed across multiple layers of the environment. A case study of the game therefore enables an in-depth, theoretically informed account of how ES may be experienced through embodied play. The analysis is guided by the 4E cognition theory (see Newen et al.,

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2018), which posits that cognition naturally unfolds through our physical interactions with the surrounding environment and serves as an effective framework for identifying the cognitive and phenomenological processes the player undergoes within ES. The analytical method is playthrough poetics (Droumeva, 2024), treating gameplay as a situated research practice rather than just an object of textual interpretation. The analysis draws on the author's own gameplay experience, documented through field notes and screen recordings, to examine the subjective experiences and meaning-making processes that emerge through play. Ultimately, the analysis reveals four interrelated dimensions of embodied engagement with ES:

First, environment as perceptual cues. The Finch house contains numerous perceptible elements through which player derives narrative meaning. For example, books scattered throughout the house could evoke prior narrative knowledge that echoes the family's or a particular member's fate. There are also "indices" that invite intuitive interpretation based on one's sensorimotor familiarity with domestic spaces, such as piles of salmon cans in the kitchen that imply the family's habitual diet through traces of everyday routine. The wind chime at the side door (the correct entrance to the house) may not evoke such grounded associations, yet it mirrors the instinctive jolt of revelation, when a small sensory cue marks a larger realization. This auditory effect thus represents another form of narrative signal, woven into the gameplay rhythm and attuning the player's affective attention.

Second, environment as action affordances. The dynamic interplay between the game's encoded mechanics and the player's embodied understanding of the house gives rise to the game space's action affordances, namely the possibilities for action that the environment offers to an embodied perceiver (Gibson, 1979). Such affordances do not just indicate what has happened or could be enacted there, but can also convey deeper implications. Consider how playing as Edith, an expectant mother who frequently crawls and climbs, allows the player to naturally grasp the family's lingering dysfunctional lifestyle; and how the linear and surrealist gameplay parallels the experiential quality of literary engagement, suggesting that each scene emerges from the reconstruction of a potentially unreliable narrator.

Third, environment as affective tones. Through ongoing engagement with the house and the events it stages, the player develops a growing sense of the house's atmosphere as "spatially extended moods" of the Finches (see Böhme, 2021, p. 1). In turn, this emotionally charged space takes on an embodied dimension and enriches the overall narrative experience. A typical example occurs when Edith/the player finishes several family members' vignettes and steps outside the house to behold the night-time ocean. The moment does not contain any specific narrative event, yet it creates an atmosphere that envelops the player in the collective grief of the Finches, pushing the story to an emotional climax.

Fourth, environment as spatial metaphors. At a more abstract level, the Finch house itself becomes a concrete representation of the family's history. Its irregular structure, with stacked rooms twisting and layering over generations, exudes a living presence, where the player can physically resonate with grief and tension that weigh down the family tree. Inside, sealed-off rooms still reachable through hidden passages offer another symbolic reflection of the fractured yet stubbornly interconnected dynamics among Finches. These metaphorical meanings emerge through the player's continuous movement throughout the house, making it an organic metaphor that shapes and carries the holistic impression of the story.

In short, complementing the archaeological perspective, the insights here emphasize that engagement with ES is often less a matter of rational, deliberate investigation than of intuitive, immersive, and embodied involvement. Finally, the findings presented here do not claim to capture all possible modes of embodied engagement with ES across games, or even across walking simulators. Rather, they are intended to open up one productive avenue for future inquiry into ES: an embodied approach.

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