All of your co-workers are gone: story, substance, and the empathic puzzler.

Abstract
Narrative games such as The Walking Dead, Gone Home, Dear Esther and The Stanley Parable are difficult to situate into the general framework of game genres that are popularly, albeit informally, understood by mainstream audiences. They are too unabashedly contrarian with reference to the generally accepted definitions that the field uses—indeed, questions have been raised as to whether or not they can even truly be considered games at all. In this paper, the authors argue that these games are properly differentiated into two key categories. The Walking Dead and The Stanley Parable are branching narratives that are spiritual successors to the Choose Your Own Adventurer style game-books. Dear Esther and Gone Home are freeform narratives that are best understood as tools for generating, interrogating and integrating empathy through the exploration of characterisation through situated spatiality within an emotionally resonant environment. It is the very lack of narrative structure in any linear or branching format that argues for these to be considered as a game genre of their own—one we have termed the “empathic puzzler”. They are related to more engineered narrative structures, but their design offers unique opportunities for emotional reflection. This paper argues for an encompassing definition of game that is appreciative of the different intentions that may be perceived in structure and freeform narratives—that the substance of such titles is found in the largely unparalleled opportunities they present for exploring issues of choice, agency, and empathy within video games.