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## Reading Playfully: A New Branch of Criticism for The Digital Age

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Reading Playfully: A New Branch of Criticism for The Digital Age.

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
Enzo Cnop

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
May 2016

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## Introduction

“Aristotle...distinguished between narrative, in which an author relates a story (the *Illiad*) and drama in which actors show us a story (*Oedipus Rex*). The immersive video game, in which we take part as actors, is a third, fundamentally different mode.”<sup>1</sup>

During my senior year of high school, I harbored a peculiar notion as to how I should go about selecting a collegiate institution. I knew I was interested in literature because a vast majority of my most positive academic experiences revolved around this field. Thus I was drawn towards Bard. Its serene landscape, small class sizes, and emphasis on personal interaction with professors seemed the ideal environment in which to develop my voice. However, in the background of this search lurked a specter — an interest unvoiced to my teachers and advisors for fear of being viewed with prejudice — a passionate love for videogames. Nearly every waking hour not already relegated to schoolwork, sports, and filling out college applications, I spent playing games. Video games were more effecting than traditional literature, movies, music, dance or television, but I had no vetted framework through which to analyze this medium. The few times I approached someone I viewed as an academic authority to discuss the subject, I was met with a blank stare at best. Either the educator was open minded, but had so little understanding of the medium that our conversations were fruitless, or the educator showed outright disdain towards a medium they believed actively promoted violence and misogyny. When I visited Bard, I discovered the experimental humanities program. Perhaps foolishly, I believed that it would offer me the chance to critically study video games as a new branch in the field humanities.

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<sup>1</sup> 1. George P. Landow, *Hypertext 3.0: Critical Theory and New Media in an Era of Globalization*, 3rd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 250.

With this idea in mind I confirmed my enrollment to Bard College, outwardly toting the schools great literature department, but secretly planning to follow my passion. With the start of each new semester I scanned the course listings for a class that would fulfill my desire. Each semester I was met with disappointment. Much to my chagrin, many of the professors at Bard did not hold my perspective on video games as branch of the humanities. Fantastic courses were being taught that briefly considered video games, but none attempted to approach them in their own right, as a new form of digital narrative. Professors who did understand my excitement often lacked the knowledge base — a type of video game literacy — that predicates an informed discussion on the topic. The lack of this type of literacy meant that many professors I encountered were ill equipped to teach the type of course I was interested in taking.

In my junior year, I identified the opportunity to take matters into my own hands through my senior project proposal. In the fall of 2015, I approached one of the few professors I felt could comprehend the premise of my proposal, and to my surprise, I was met with enthusiasm. Thus, I began working upon the project that now rests in your hands. I conceived of this project as both a fulfillment of my own long held desire to give video games serious academic consideration, and an ‘opening of the door’ to many who may have never considered the potential offered by this exciting interactive narrative form. If this project inspires a single reader to begin playing video games with a critical eye, I will consider it a success.

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As this project is being submitted to the department of languages and literature, I feel a need to buttress it with some context that shows how I began to think of video

games as literary. In 1964 the media theorist Marshall McLuhan published a short but impactful book entitled *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. In this work of media theory McLuhan states:

The electric light is pure information. It is a medium without a message, as it were, unless it is used to spell out some verbal ad or name. This fact, characteristic of all media, means that the ‘content’ of any medium is always another medium. The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph.<sup>2</sup>

If McLuhan’s statement is true, then somewhere buried within video games, must rest a strand of the literary arts. I think the easiest way to grasp at this strand is by looking at a form of interactive fiction that I have always thought of as a video game — the text based adventure game, specifically *Zork* (1980). *Zork* presents the player with a textual space they can explore by way of typing in a limited set of actions, and is a piece of interactive fiction. Building from this is the idea that every video game is an intricately authored space that can be viewed as traditional Arabic numerals (code). Although it would be very difficult to read any video game rendered in this barest form, it should be noted from the outset that every video game is composed of a series of characters that could potentially be printed and read on paper.

Another scholar who is integral to my thinking of video games as form of literature is Espen Aarseth — specifically his 1997 book *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. In this volume, Aarseth identifies certain aspects of literature, derived from reader response theory, which help to frame video games as literary. Perhaps the most impactful upon the formation of this project is the idea of ergodic literature, which Aarseth defines as, “a term appropriated from physics that derives from the Greek words

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<sup>2</sup> 1. Marshall McLuhan, "The Medium is the Message," <http://web.mit.edu/>, accessed April 28, 2016, <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/mcluhan.mediummessage.pdf>.

*ergon* and *hodos*, meaning ‘work’ and ‘path.’ In ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text.”<sup>3</sup> Aarseth goes on to identify multiple forms of ergodic literature that pre-date video games, like the Chinese divination system *I Ching*, which that involves “manipulating three coins or forty-nine yarrow stalks according to a randomizing principle.”<sup>4</sup>

Finally, I must also make a nod to J. Huizinga, author of *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. In this work, Huizinga talks about the general role of play in human culture. Although I never cite his work directly, this text clearly influenced many of the thinkers upon which this project is based, and in some ways, was the progenitor of video games as a ‘serious’ expressive medium. These related philosophies do not necessarily form a coherent ideology. However, they hopefully help one to understand some of the ideas that helped me shape this project.

Here, in this work, I examine videogames from the perspective of literary analysis, and as such, have organized my chapters around what I see as the foundational pillars of narrative structure. The first chapter, ‘Perspective’, explores how a character’s perspective can be leveraged to alienate a reader from a protagonist across media. The second chapter, ‘Setting’, examines how setting can contribute to a feeling of paranoia in both a video game and a short story. In my final chapter, ‘Characterization’, I analyze the potential that video games hold to collaboratively build a character with their readers, and briefly propose a potential path for future studies.

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<sup>3</sup> 1. Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997), 1.

<sup>4</sup> 2. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic*, 10.



## Chapter 1 – Perspective

In order for a narrative to be delivered to a reader, player, or listener, there must be a standpoint from which it is focalized and viewed; thus we can never escape the foundational role of perspective. Authors who are explicitly aware of this necessity may leverage it to add a layer of meaning to their narrative. This chapter will explore perspective as a formal feature that unites media by considering Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us* (2013). My analysis will lay bare how both works employ similar perspectival techniques to alienate their readers in a fashion that invites meaningful interpretation.

The first object of focus is Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) because it situates perspective as a vital structuring principle of its narrative, which ultimately allows a reader to create meaning. It seems obvious, but if the same story were told from a different perspective, it simply would not invite the same field of interpretations. Consider for example, if we had experienced *Jayne Eyre* through the eyes of Edward Rochester's first wife Bertha Antoinetta Mason. Indeed, the entire narrative could be upended by giving the reader an idea of Rochester's life before meeting Jayne, and by elevating Bertha past her status as a plot device.<sup>5</sup>

It should be noted from the outset that, as a result of the structural commitment to perspectives, *Heart of Darkness* lucidly slides between types of narration, or what F.K. Stanzel refers to as 'narrative situations.'<sup>6</sup> While Stanzel has written several books regarding the topic, the term 'narrative situation' itself can be summarized succinctly as referring to the person, mode, and perspective contained within an individual moment

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<sup>5</sup> I use this example specifically because Jean Rhys performed this exercise in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966).

<sup>6</sup> 1. F. K. Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative* (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]: Cambridge UP, 1984), 46.

within a novel. Unlike James Joyce's *The Dead*, where narrative situations can vary from sentence to sentence, Conrad's novel clearly delineates between narrating first persons.<sup>7</sup>

Wayne Booth notes, from the outset of his chapter entitled "Types of Narration", that identifying a piece of literature as being told in the mode of 'First-Person' tells a reader almost nothing about the specific effects said style of narration brings to bear upon a text.<sup>8</sup> So, let us delve further and see exactly what type of first person narration can be found in *Heart of Darkness*. How does Conrad integrate form (perspective) with content (narrative) to alienate a potential reader from his unnamed narrator?

The sea-reach of the Thames stretched before us like the beginning of an interminable waterway. In the offing the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint, and in the luminous space the tanned sails of the barges drifting up with the tide seemed to stand still in red clusters of canvas sharply peaked, with gleams of varnished sprits. A haze rested on the low shores that ran out to sea in vanishing flatness. The air was dark above Gravesend, and farther back still seemed condensed into a mournful gloom, brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth.<sup>9</sup>

In this excerpt from the second paragraph of *Heart Of Darkness* an unnamed narrator begins a description of his surroundings, *in medias res*, with a simile that professes the boundaries of his internally focalized perspective. That the Thames is 'interminable' to our narrator signals that his *person* portrays a version of the present that is firmly set within his own mind (subjective). The subsequent line, which describes the sea and sky

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<sup>7</sup> "Gabriel had not gone to the door with the others. He was in a dark part of the hall gazing up the staircase. A woman was standing near the top of the first flight, in the shadow also. He could not see her face but he could see the terra-cotta and salmon-pink panels of her skirt which the shadow made appear black and white. It was his wife." (James Joyce, "Dubliners," Project Gutenberg, last modified September 2001, accessed April 29, 2016, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2814/2814-h/2814-h.htm>.) This passage begins in the third person omniscient, before transitioning, with the direction of the protagonist's 'gaze', to the third person limited. It then pulls back to the omniscient, to tell the reader that the woman being viewed is the protagonist's wife.

<sup>8</sup> 1. Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983),150.

<sup>9</sup> 1. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism*, ed. Robert Kimbrough (New York: Norton, 1988),1.

as literally “welded together,” strengthens these assertions by clearly displaying how the narrative world is presented from an individual’s perspective. The sea and sky are not literally “welded together”, they merely appear this way to the narrator, and in turn are related to the reader in this fashion. Notably, there is no distinction made between what appears to be, and what *is* within the narrative space. In the final line of this excerpt the unnamed internal narrator personifies the “air” of his surroundings as a “dark...mournful gloom, brooding.” This brooding gloom takes a backseat to the narrator’s powerful subjective associations with the surrounding space, which are effectively condensed and delivered in the form of an opinion of London as “the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth.” However, it becomes clear that the imposition of another narrative agent slowly alters the original narrator’s perception of his own surroundings. This is the bent of the narrative from its genesis, although I will touch upon this point in more detail soon.

Before a productive exploration of this conversion can be conducted, a simple, yet irksome detail must be addressed. The unnamed narrator is relating Marlow’s story to the reader in retrospect. Rather than grant his audience a direct stream of consciousness onto a dinghy in the Thames, the unnamed narrator is offering a retelling of his experience with Marlow. As such, any noticeable change in the unnamed narrator over the course of *Heart of Darkness* is a result of the effects of retelling. That the narrator is retelling his story ultimately strengthens the interpretation presented herein. For it establishes that the effect Kurtz has on Marlow, and Marlow in turn has upon the narrator, is disassociated from the men who exert these effects. They are carriers of an infectious ideology, which spreads between people. Thus, the unnamed narrator’s story is one of infection, and his readers can clearly view said infection, whilst still remaining at a safe distance. As such,

retelling and memory act as amplifiers of Marlow's initial effect on the narrator. The reader can only observe the effect Kurtz has on Marlow, and in turn Marlow has upon the unnamed narrator. This act of separated observance of Kurtz's ideology acts as an agent of alienation.<sup>10</sup> With this clarification in hand we can now turn towards the text of *Heart of Darkness*.

Shortly after the establishment of the narrative's setting, and initial internally focalized narrator, the reader is introduced to Marlow. Marlow's introduction to the reader by the unnamed narrator serves to reveal more about the narrator's ignorance than Marlow's experience. The unnamed narrator has many preconceived notions both about Marlow and the story Marlow is about to tell. He knows Marlow was a sailor, so he assumes that Marlow 'follows the sea' and leads a 'sedentary', 'wandering' life — hinting that this is the life that every seaman leads. Before retelling Marlow's story, the narrator attempts to characterize the way it operates.

The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted) and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that, sometimes, are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.<sup>11</sup>

In this passage, the boundaries of the unnamed narrator's ability to relay his subjective experience to an audience become strikingly clear. While the initial declaration that seamen tell simple stories is intelligible, the modifiers that follow this statement grow increasingly inscrutable. Even the second half of the aforementioned sentence is difficult to parse. That the whole meaning of a story can 'lie within the shell of a cracked nut'

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<sup>10</sup> Retelling as a force of alienation will arise later in this paper. For, it was only through the act of replaying the final act of *The Last of Us* that the cross media connection presented in this chapter came to light.

<sup>11</sup> 2. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 9.

could express that the story's moral is small and contained, but that leaves one to wonder why the nut's shell is cracked. Delving further into the quote only serves to deepen the intricacy and impenetrability of the narrator's language. His metaphors collapse when he tries to describe Marlow's atypical mode of narrative construction. The image itself, while challenging, is not impossible to imagine. Rather, it is nearly impossible to relate to the way that a distant light bringing attention to the density of a surrounding fog (or haze) portrays a type of storytelling. If noticed, this inscrutability creates, at the very least, distance between the reader and the unnamed narrator — if not outright frustration. However, this distance is not yet problematic as it comes at the outset of the narrative, and does not yet muddle the reader's overall understanding of the story. As the narrator is relating this tale to us after having heard it himself, this initial inscrutable descriptions serves as a precursor of the narrative effects to come. When this impenetrable language is employed at a moment of significance, a point that is crucial to understanding the events that precede or follow, this language becomes taxing, and alienates a reader from the text.

The feeling of being alienated from the narrator, the reader's only point of access to the narrative, is cultivated by Marlow's forthcoming story. If nothing else, this story reveals how astute Marlow is at perceiving his surroundings. When his story begins, Marlow's voice takes over the bulk of the novel; he becomes what Stanzel terms a *reflector*.<sup>12</sup> However, the reader is occasionally reminded that they are being relayed Marlow's narrative from the unnamed narrator's viewpoint. Functionally this means all of Marlow's language is philtered through the unnamed narrator. This literary mechanism successfully conveys a simple, yet effective thematic concept: As Marlow's narrative

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<sup>12</sup> Reflecting the events of the narrative through the consciousness of a single character without the imposition of a narrator's opinion or comment. Stanzel "call[s] such a character a reflector to distinguish him from the narrator as the other narrative agent" (2. Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 48).

dives further into the Congo, a veritable heart of darkness, the night surrounding its listeners on the Thames becomes darker. This darkness eventually consumes all those present in the dingy until,

It had become so pitch dark that we listeners could hardly see one another. For a long time already he, sitting apart, had been no more to us than a voice. There was not a word from anybody. The others might have been asleep, but I was awake. I listened, I listened on the watch for the sentence, for the word, that would give me the clew to the faint uneasiness inspired by this narrative that seemed to shape itself without human lips in the heavy night-air of the river...<sup>13</sup>

Up until this point Marlow's narrative voice dominates the story in such a way that the unnamed narrator is nearly forgotten completely. This moment serves to pull the reader out of Marlow's perspective, while still maintaining that the unnamed narrator is entirely captivated. The repetition of "listen" creates space where the reader is reminded of their distance from Marlow. The reader cannot hear Marlow; they must rely on the unnamed narrator to hear his voice and then transcribe said voice onto the page. However, one does not get the benefit of a considerate narrator, who would skip over Marlow's breaks, and weave the story as a continuous whole. Rather, the unnamed narrator acknowledges his complete reliance on Marlow's voice through pauses in the narrative flow to reflect on the narrator's surroundings.

Sitting in "pitch dark", the only sense delivered to the reader through the narrator is sound, and the only sounds present are those coming from Marlow, who appears, "no more to us than a voice." This is a jarring departure from the novel's opening, where the reader is given a vivid sense of how the Thames looks and feels through the unnamed narrator's body. Thus, the reader witnesses an overlapping of Marlow's consciousness

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<sup>13</sup> 3. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 30.

onto the narrator's. As the narrator does not see, and the reader does not know what he feels or smells, the only stimulus offered is Marlow's voice. This voice, in an environment devoid of any other sense that would normally serve to remind the narrator (and reader), of a physical world around them, consumes the narrative voice completely. This lack of stimuli on the part of the unnamed narrator shifts Marlow's distance from the reader. Marlow is no longer a man sitting across from the unnamed narrator in a boat, but an intangible voice that occupies the same space that the unnamed narrator had at the outset of the narrative. He has literally hijacked the words on the page from the unnamed narrator by isolating and consuming his voice.

The excerpt above is not an example of this occupation; rather it is a moment in which this occupation is paused. Marlow's voice fades, and with its fading the unnamed narrator's voice is able to occupy the physical space it had on the page at the outset of the novel. In this way Marlow overwhelms the voice of the unnamed narrator. To reiterate, the passage above outlines this process of consuming the unnamed narrator's voice through exhibiting a moment where this overwhelming voice is suddenly silent. This silence leaves room for the unnamed narrator's voice to move back into its original position, if only to point out the lack of Marlow's voice. This passage also reminds the reader of the act of reading a story told from the lips of an individual they cannot physically perceive. Thus, the reader is estranged from the unnamed narrator's subjective experience, even as they grow closer to Marlow's. This effect is amplified whenever Marlow mentions Kurtz. Take, for example, Marlow's recalling the first time he hears Kurtz's voice:

The privilege was waiting for me. Oh yes, I heard more than enough. And I was right, too. A voice. He was very little more than a voice. And I heard — him — it — this voice — other voices

— all of them were so little more than voices — and the memory of that time itself lingers around me, impalpable, like a dying vibration of one immense jabber, silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean, without any kind of sense. Voices, voices — even the girl herself — now — He was silent for a long time.<sup>14</sup>

This passage emphasizes two effects, created through the repetition of separate elements working in tandem. The first repeated element is the ‘m’ dash. These ‘m’ dashes, which begin to proliferate as the text progresses, show a literal breakdown of language on the page. Their increasing usage shows that the introduction of Kurtz to Marlow’s narrative has a decomposing force upon the unnamed narrator’s sentence structure. They are present from the outset of the narrative, as the narrator has already heard Marlow’s tale, and is retelling it to his audience. It is interesting to note that the presence of these ‘m’ dashes, and their increasing usage throughout the text, can only be interpreted upon rereading. Thus, while the unnamed narrators ‘infected’ status can be seen at the beginning of the text, it is only possible to view this effect in context upon rereading the text. The second element is the repetition of the word ‘voice’. As it is not Kurtz’s words that are important, but the ‘privilege’ of hearing his voice, (‘he was very little more than a voice’) the point of this stress appears to be directed towards the fact that readers have no auditory access to these voices. That the reader has no auditory access to any of these voices is maddening, for they are denied a privilege created by the text. The denial of this privilege, through the implicit knowledge that text does not convey the specific sonic qualities of Kurtz’s voice, alienates said reader from both the unnamed narrator (who has access to this sonic resonance) and the text itself.

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<sup>14</sup> 4. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 48-49.



As a result of the narrator's access to Marlow's voice, Marlow's difficulty in relating a subjective experience is faced directly by the reader. The final lines of the narrative make it clear how the unnamed narrator's subjective view of the world (or London), and Marlow himself, have been profoundly affected by Marlow's story.

Marlow ceased, and sat apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha. Nobody moved for a time. 'We have lost the first of the ebb,' said the Director, suddenly. I raised my head. The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed somber under an overcast sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness.<sup>15</sup>

This vision of the Thames runs in direct contrast to that presented at the beginning of the novel. London as 'the biggest, greatest town on earth' has moved into the background, and the unnamed narrator's eyes now focus upon 'a black bank of clouds'. This view of the Thames echoes Marlow's view of the river just after meeting Kurtz for the first time, "I looked around, and I don't know why, but I assure you that never, never before did this land, this river, this jungle, the very arch of this blazing sky appear to me so hopeless and so dark, so impenetrable to human thought, so pitiless to human weakness."<sup>16</sup> Just as in Marlow's narrative, here a waterway that was once lazily 'interminable' now seems foreboding in its dark infinity. It should also be noted that Marlow has shifted in the narrator's eyes from being a simple sailor, to a 'meditating Buddha'. (Much like Marlow views Kurtz during their initial interaction.) In short, the unnamed narrator has undergone a shift in his subjective perspective as a result of his contact with Marlow, and Marlow's contact with Kurtz. This shift occurs gradually when Marlow's voice overtakes that of the

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<sup>15</sup> 5. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 76.

<sup>16</sup> 6. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 55.

unnamed narrator's, and ultimately serves to alienate the reader from the unnamed narrator and the text itself.

Scholarly interpretations utilize this alienating effect, amongst other mechanisms at play in other works, as evidence that Conrad was firmly against colonial practices. Hunt Hawkins asserts, "Conrad condemned imperialism of all types, both efficient and wasteful, benevolent and malevolent, British and non-British."<sup>17</sup> Through this effect of alienating the reader from the text, Conrad seems to be pushing his audience to reflect upon the intangible horrors wreaked upon the native people consumed by colonialism. Andrea White posits, "...the work exposed the machinery behind the apparent naturalness and inevitability of the imperial endeavor and made visible the conqueror's face hidden behind the mask of a civilizing mission's protestations of benevolence."<sup>18</sup> What White refers to as 'the machinery' underlying colonialisms civilizing mission can be interpreted as this mechanism of alienation. White also highlights how Conrad saw 'The Heart of Darkness' as a physical object.<sup>19</sup> A forced mental departure, or shift of perspective which refocuses priorities. By isolating this machinery and turning it back upon itself users, Conrad creates a text that exposes the psychological power of colonialist practices. By analyzing how perspective is used to engender meaning in *Heart of Darkness*, we can now productively view this same machinery at play in other media.

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<sup>17</sup> 1. Hunt Hawkins, "Conrad's Critique of Imperialism in Heart of Darkness.," *PMLA* 94, no. 2 (1979): 286-299, accessed April 26, 2016, <http://jstor.org/stable/461892>.

<sup>18</sup> 1. Andrea White, "Conrad and Imperialism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad*, by J. H. Stape (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006), 198.

<sup>19</sup> "In an author's note to that volume, Conrad speaks of 'An Outpost' as 'the lightest part of the loot I carried off from Central Africa, the main portion being of course 'The Heart of Darkness'" (2. White, "Conrad and Imperialism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph*, 190.)

In half of chapter one, I contend that certain video games, due to their narrative construction, often utilize similar mechanisms to great works of literature. In this case, I pair mechanisms found in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, with those I have identified in Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us*. Through my analysis, I hope to show that the tools used to deconstruct works of literature can similarly be productively applied to video games.

It is interesting to note that literature and video games share certain descriptive vocabulary. Nearly every video game is described in terms of 'person' and 'dimension' directly after a genre is ascribed to the title. The dimension of a game refers, on a basic level, to how much visual detail is offered to a player. If a game is described as visually two-dimensional (*Super Mario Bros.*), then it is rendered in two dimensions of space. In other words, the player is offered a view of a flat image that moves across panels. With rare exceptions (See *Fez*), there is no depth to the space. If a game is three-dimensional, it can depict objects in three-dimensions, and thus the experience of gameplay is severely altered by the space available for traversal.

Similarly, telling someone that a game is set in the first-person, third-person, or top-down (a distanced third-person), all conjure specific images in the mind of an experienced player. However, just as in a literary context, telling someone a game is set in a specific person does not so much refer to the narrative perspective, but the way in which said narrative is focalized. The concert of these two categories in conjunction with specific delineation of genre, offers a player the ability to quickly describe a game in succinct terms to another person literate in this field.

Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us* is situated in the genre of survival horror, and is played from a third-person perspective. I.E.; the player controls their avatar from an over the shoulder view, in three-dimensional space. However, as this section will soon establish, the third-person view differs greatly from the narrative perspective offered by this view. The beginning of *The Last of Us* establishes a difference between narrative perspective and person. By the end of the game this difference is highlighted, and underscored for greater narrative effect. This effect can be set as the distance between an unnamed narrator, Marlow, and the reader, which are emphasized by Conrad's novel. To establish how this perspective operates, and how the player interacts with said perspective, this essay will introduce its reader to the game from the perspective of Sarah, Joel's daughter, as this is how the game itself opens.

From this over the shoulder (read "third-person") perspective, the player's avatar takes up a fair amount of space on the screen (between 10-40%) depending on how the player chooses to orient the camera [Fig. 1]. In order to show this effect, amongst others, at work, this paper will utilize still screenshots from *The Last of Us*. Here, the player has the option to view their avatar, in this case Sarah, from virtually any angle they choose. This is because the player's perspective is bound to a camera that is tied at a set distance from Sarah (later Joel), but can be moved a full 360° horizontally and vertically with the avatar being a type of anchor. This offers the option of looking at the avatar face first, from the top down, or more typically, from over the shoulder. It may be tempting to label this viewpoint in relation to literature as third-person limited, whereby the reader is confined to a single character's perspective. However, this would categorization would ignore several elements integral to gameplay and storytelling in *The Last of Us*.



Figure 1 – “Tutorial with Sarah.” Naughty Dog, 2013. Author’s Screenshot.

To elaborate, first-person ‘mode’ of storytelling through a third-person camera, is achieved through two major effects. The first effect of this first-person perspective offered through a third-person camera is control over the avatar to which this camera is bound. The player has complete control over the avatar’s body, and thus has unmediated distance from the avatar’s *person*. This distance is akin to what Wayne Booth defines as first-person from a narrative context. The second effect that places the third-person view as situated in the first-person is the aiming reticle, which appears whenever the player aims a weapon.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Aiming is achieved by pressing and holding a ‘trigger’ button.



**Figure 2 – “Aiming Down Sites.” Naughty Dog, 2013. Author’s Screenshot**

This feature creates a circle in the center of the screen, known as a crosshair, that represents approximately where a bullet will travel if a weapon is fired. When this view mode is activated the player’s camera zooms closer to the avatar’s head, and the motion of the camera corresponds to the location of the circle, rather than that of the avatar. This view mode functionally gives the player control of the avatar’s hands, rather than the avatar’s full body or legs and head. Furthermore, there are occasions when the camera fluidly transfers from this over the shoulder perspective directly into the avatar’s first-

person viewpoint [Fig.3].



Figure 3 – “POV Switch.” Naughty Dog, 2013. Author’s Screenshot.

These moments occur when the player chooses to inspect specific elements in the game world, like notes or, in the case of the provided example, a cellphone.

In relation to the *Heart of Darkness* this camera, in conjunction with player input, serves as our unnamed narrator. If one is to force a 1:1 comparison between Conrad’s novel and Naughty Dog’s game, then Joel, the main protagonist, resembles Marlow as the narrative’s primary reflector.<sup>21</sup> This is where delineating between persons becomes a bit fuzzy, because while the player is controlling an avatar from the third-person view, they are experiencing the story from a first person perspective as a result of their control over the avatar in combination with a monitor screen. Often this third-person view fills in aspects of an unmediated first-person view that is necessary for certain practical elements of gameplay to take place. These include the location of other entities in the game (zombies, bandits, Ellie) that are not directly within Joel’s sightline, but are visible to the

<sup>21</sup> At times Joel dominates the narrative, just as Marlow does, such as in cut-scenes or scripted animations — at other times it is clear that the player is given the reins of the narrative, although their decisions ultimately contribute to Joel’s intended purpose.

player nonetheless. In fact, Joel spends most of his time crouched with his head looking straight at a wall or the floor, while the player has a clear view of his surroundings.

[Fig.4]



**Figure 4 – “Peering over Cover.”** Naughty Dog, 2013. Author’s Screenshot.

The player’s ludic experience with *The Last of Us* begins as Sarah wakes to the phone on her bedside table ringing. At this point the camera is situated in an upper corner of the room, looking at Sarah from the front. Sarah picks up the phone without a prompt from the player to hear a distressed voice, Joel’s brother (Uncle Tommy), frantically asking to speak with Joel before the line goes dead. Sarah seems puzzled, but hangs up the phone, and stands to find Joel. Between Sarah hanging up the phone and her standing the perspective shifts from the corner of the room, to sitting just above at Sarah’s right shoulder.

The act of standing is important; it means that Sarah, now with the intent to find Joel, is about to start moving. However, after the camera shifts to put the player



effectively in Sarah's 'perspective', albeit with a visual distance, Sarah does not move until prompted. That the camera is at Sarah's back implies that the player is meant to *push* Sarah towards her new goal. Experienced players will notice this trope immediately, sensing the familiar perspective switch — those who have played this type of game will immediately know they are now holding the reigns of an avatar. However, an inexperienced player may not understand this shift of control the game has signaled. They may have Sarah stand still for several moments before accidentally pushing the control stick in a way that makes her take a small step. Someone who does not accidentally push this button may be prompted by the game itself, for if Sarah stands still for long enough she expresses with anxiety and urgency that Joel must be found soon.

Once control is established the player has freedom to explore Sarah's room. The way Sarah stands, and the angle of the third person camera puts a door in the main frame of view. As the player has been tasked with exploring the house, ostensibly under the guise of finding Joel, (or more basically, learning to navigate the game-space free of stress, but with the definite pressure of Tommy's anxiety over the phone) this door appears to be the most natural place to go. A player who pushes forward (whether it be W or actually pushing forward on a joystick) will walk towards this door, and be offered another button prompt to open said door. This moment is of particular note, because it is teaches the player how to interact with objects in their newly discovered environment. If one does not press the designated 'interact' button, then they will never leave Sarah's room. Once this is accomplished the player has intuited two things. First, the player has internalized how basic movement through the game-space functions. Second, the player

now has a basic understanding of how interactions with objects works within said game-space.

These two forms of basic interaction with the environment (moving and effecting) are repeated hundreds of times throughout the course of *The Last of Us*. They quickly become routine as the player becomes familiar with more complicated and challenging systems. These systems include switching weapons to suit specific situations, melee combat, and aiming. Eventually, as a result of all but the most challenging of these systems becoming second nature, the player's agency becomes conflated with that of their avatar.<sup>22</sup> In effect, the game establishes a complicated vocabulary of inputs that translate into direct action on screen.

Turning back towards the opening of *The Last of Us*, after Sarah leaves her room, the player is tasked with searching through her house to find Joel. This search leads Sarah through Joel's bedroom where the player encounters a television, which proceeds to do some important world building; a newscast establishes through a panicked broadcaster, and cut to static, that events out of the ordinary are occurring in the world outside of Joel and Sarah's home. Just as the television cuts to static, an explosion can be seen in the distance from an adjacent window, which takes up almost the entire wall of Joel's bedroom. This explosion is clearly linked to the abrupt end of the newscast. The player is then expected to proceed downstairs, where their view is simultaneously directed towards three police cars that pass outside another window at the base of the staircase. This builds the tension to find Joel, as danger seems to grow closer and becomes more immediate.

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<sup>22</sup> Actions on screen are rarely thought of as button presses. Rather, as the player becomes more comfortable with the game's systems, said systems are enacted without thought towards the required inputs. This effect is akin to reading a word so many times that seeing it written translates to said word being read without the reader having to think about the details of phonetics or spelling.

Events which were once far away on the telephone and television, and then seen in the distance out of a window, are rapidly moving closer to Sarah and the player as signaled by these passing emergency vehicles. The space itself is also more open, with large windows lining almost every wall that lead into darkness. This darkness makes the player feel vulnerable. They are faced with the unknown, yet also have knowledge of some greater threat looming ever closer out of sight. As Sarah is effectively defenseless, the player's anxiety to find Joel grows in concert with their avatar.

Eventually, Sarah must pass through a pair of double doors into an office. A desk and computer can be seen through the double doors. By this point Sarah is visibly disturbed; her voice is higher and more alert than it was when she first woke up. She also folds her arms and shivers at regular intervals. After she passes through these doors Joel simultaneously enters from an open sliding glass door, and shuts it behind him with considerable haste. Joel then asks Sarah a series of terse questions, as he loads a handgun drawn from a nearby desk. "Sarah. Are you okay? Has anyone come in here? Don't go near the doors. Just...just stand back there."<sup>23</sup> At this moment an obviously maddened person, who is revealed to be Joel's neighbor, begins banging on the recently closed glass door. Said neighbor proceeds to violently crash through the sliding glass door with no inhibition, and charge Joel and Sarah, arms flailing wildly. In response Joel shoots the man, and promptly leads Sarah out of the office and into the living room; an action that the player has no control over. From there an obviously shocked Sarah is brought out to a car that has just pulled up into the driveway, driven by Tommy, and is only given the freedom to move once placed in the back seat.

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<sup>23</sup> 1. *The Last of Us*, Naughty dog, 2013, Sony Computer Entertainment.

This opening sequence is extremely important for establishing both the tone of the game and a vocabulary for the player. Once Joel enters the scene, he is distressed, but he has a plan of action. He is situated as Sarah's protector. The player, as Sarah, implicitly knows that they will soon embody this figure, and are subtly being given queues as to how this character acts and what he does. Moreover, the player is introduced to the game's main antagonist, the Zombie (or 'infected'), in the form of Jimmy — Sarah and Joel's late neighbor. Through this scene it becomes apparent that infected people have no inhibitions, and even when it comes to their own safety they cannot be reasoned with.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, this moment cements a pattern that introduces the player to the game and their role within the game itself, while still keeping said player at a 'safe' distance. A threat first introduced through a phone call and newspaper (which the player may miss), grows ever closer to the player through several mediums, which are physically distinct as 'outside' spaces; divided from the player by various panes of glass. This pattern, which begins with the television broadcast, is continued by the view of an explosion through an upstairs window, then with the passing police cars, climaxes with a deranged neighbor breaking through a glass barrier and into the player's navigable space. The implication being that the final pane, the screen through which the player views the game, will eventually be broken, and that some real world effect will result from action in the game world. In these moments, the player also experiences Sarah's vulnerability as a defenseless avatar in the first person. As an unnamed narrator, the player experiences Sarah's perception of Joel as a protector.

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<sup>24</sup> This is the most human looking zombie in the game. Sarah comments after the neighbors death, "I saw him just this morning", establishing that his transformation took place over the course of a few hours.

In this way, Joel's acts of violence are, from the outset of the narrative, framed as contingently just. They situate later attacks as acts of defense, rather than expressions of Joel's violent or selfish nature. While this effect is rushed, it is executed in this way because it assumes the player will not question his or her own actions as Joel. The brevity of this situating is a weak point, where the game can be seen to rely on tropes.<sup>25</sup> However, the end of the game's narrative redeems itself by utilizing hours of gameplay to push this initial framing to the extreme. The game's close asks the player to question whether Joel's defense of those weaker than himself always leads to a morally righteous outcome.

In the time between this introductory sequence, and the end of the game, several key narrative events take place that should be summarized. The first of these events is the death of Sarah, Joel's daughter, which occurs while Joel is desperately trying to get her to safety. It is clear that Joel views the death of his daughter as a personal failure, and it plagues him throughout the narrative. After Sarah's death, the scene fades to black and opens with Joel twenty years in the future. Society has largely collapsed as a result of the zombie apocalypse, and what remains of the government is focused on ruling the remaining human population in a series of quarantine zones. A rebel group called the 'Fireflies' actively resists the government with their mission to find a cure to the zombie pandemic. The story picks up as Joel is asked by the Fireflies' leader to accompany a

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<sup>25</sup> Phil Owen claims, "While, sure, *The Last of Us* manages to avoid being mind-numbingly dull in the way so many games are, it is definitely still a regular video game that has gameplay and a story that want little to do with each other. There is art in *The Last of Us*, but the game itself doesn't really function as such. It's as if an art gallery curator constructed a very long obstacle course with the art you came to see sprinkled throughout it. Except that analogy doesn't really work, because an art gallery curator would probably have some point to make in building the course. The obstacle course that is *The Last of Us* is just an obstacle course for its own sake." My reading pushes against this critique. I believe these tasks hammer expectations into the player that are later subverted. The 'art gallery curator' does indeed have a conceit for the use of an obstacle course. Per. Owen, Phil. "WTF Is Wrong with Video Games?" *Polygon*. Vox Media, 28 Sept. 2015. Web. 30 Sept. 2015.

young teenager, Ellie, to a research hospital in Colorado. During the ensuing nine chapters Joel fights to survive with Ellie as they travel from Chicago to Colorado on foot. This fight for survival includes the killing of bandits and zombies, searching for food, and following false leads to abandoned Firefly encampments. Over the course of the game Joel becomes emotionally attached to Ellie. Although he initially resists bonding with her, it is implied that he begins to think of her as analogous to his long lost daughter. Joel also learns during their travel that Ellie is the only known person on earth who is immune to the zombie pandemic. With this in mind, a proper consideration of the final chapter of *The Last of Us* can be fruitfully conducted.

In the final chapter of *The Last of Us*, the player is alienated from Joel on two distinct levels. The first level is thematic, and comes when his defense of the defenseless is pushed to a point where it leads to the harm of individuals the game has previously situated as morally upstanding. It begins during a cut-scene when Joel wakes up in a hospital, the Fireflies research facility, and learns that Ellie's brain is about to be harvested in hopes that the fungus growing on it can help researchers create a vaccine for the apocalyptic pandemic. Independent of the player, and Ellie, Joel decides that the Fireflies are not going to get a chance to harm Ellie — even if she is the last hope for finding a cure to the twenty-year long pandemic.

Joel is guarded by a single person, whom he proceeds to overpower and shoot three times in the stomach as a form of 'interrogation'. Once he learns her location, Joel shoots the guard in the head. This scene is particularly graphic, and the guard's obvious confusion in the moment makes Joel's killing feel brash and unnecessary. The feeling of inane violence is increased by the reaction of other guards. When they arrive on the scene

and find the body of their friend, they express their sorrow, “Oh shit. He killed Ethan... Ethan’s dead.”<sup>26</sup>

This short dialogue sequence tells us that Joel has killed a person with, if not a family, at least a few friends. The guard sounds hurt, and refers to Joel as “the smuggler.” This is the beginning of the player’s narrative alienation from Joel as a protagonist. Throughout the game Joel had been protecting Ellie from smugglers and bandits. The guards’ labeling of the player as one of these adversaries is profound because it recasts Joel from the roll of hero forced into a bad spot, to an aggressor who is actively committing murder. It effectively removes the thin veil of moral justification placed on Joel with the game’s opening sequence. Only after Joel has killed Ethan, and heard the other guard’s reaction, is the player handed control.

At this point the player is expected to treat the Firefly hospital as they would any other space in the game that is filled with hostile combatants. What ensues is a player directed rampage through the hospital, which culminates with Joel bursting into an operating room where he finds three surgeons preparing to harvest Ellie’s brain.

This room is where the second type — mechanical alienation — occurs. Ellie is as of yet unharmed, but the head surgeon steps forward and brandishes a scalpel at Joel, telling him, “I won’t let you take her. This is our future. Think of all the lives we’ll save.”<sup>27</sup> At this point the player is offered two options, but both of them lead to the surgeon’s death. The first, and most direct option is to shoot the surgeon. Even if the player chooses to shoot the surgeon in the foot, he collapses to the floor, instantly dead. The second option is to try and hit the surgeon, an input that the player has been trained

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<sup>26</sup> 2. *The Last of Us*, Naughty Dog.

<sup>27</sup> 3. *Ibid.*

to believe is entirely nonlethal through previous combat scenarios. However, if the player tries to take this non-lethal route (knocking the Surgeon out of their path) it results in Joel taking the scalpel and turning it into the surgeon's neck. This moment is jarring (and presumably intended to be so) because, unlike the killing of Ethan, it happens outside of a cut scene and as a direct result of player input. The player performs either action through button inputs, rather than watching Joel, but the outcome is the same regardless. The player gets to 'choose', but of course that choice is artificial in the face of Joel's choices. With that disassociation the games vocabulary becomes muddled and impenetrable.

Just as Marlow dominates the unnamed narrator's story with dense and impossible to parse language, Joel now dominates the player's controller and narrative in an uncomfortable fashion. Even the familiar "non-lethal" option is transformed by Joel into an act of murder, thus profoundly altering the established vocabulary of control over the game. Button inputs, which the game has taught the player have specific consequences through hours of gameplay, are suddenly disassociated. The vocabulary of violence is amplified. Whatever input the player decides to enter, Joel arrests this input from them, and turns it towards his own end.

To reiterate, this disassociation from learned controls is similar in effect to Marlow transposing his voice over the unnamed narrator's. Just as the narrator's voice disappears as he tells the reader Marlow's story, it slowly becomes clear that the player's input matters less and less in the grand scheme of Joel's narrative. If one interprets their controller — ostensibly their only connection to the game world— as an unnamed narrator that mediates between the player and Joel (Read Marlow), then this moment of arrested control can be construed as rather analogous to Marlow's ideological infection of



the unnamed narrator in *Heart of Darkness*. Just as Marlow alters the reader's access to his story by overpowering the unnamed narrator, Joel tears the controller away from the player during a moment of impactful decision-making. This mechanically alienates the player from Joel as an avatar, forcing the player to realize that regardless of the small choices they have decided to make (use this weapon, go around the right or left corner) the outcome of the narrative is ultimately decided by Joel — a flawed character with egoistic and capricious tendencies.

Another surgeon in the room points out the monstrosity of Joel in this moment when she cries, “No! You fucking animal!”<sup>28</sup> perhaps to give the player some cathartic relief, or affirmation that they are not alone in disapproving of Joel's unwarranted violence. The effect created here seems to bridge the gap between narrative and gameplay that has been described in other games as ludonarrative dissonance.<sup>29</sup> Ludo meaning, “Of or pertaining to undirected and spontaneously playful behavior”.<sup>30</sup> Ludonarrative dissonance describes a moment in a game where it is clear that the act of playing does not contribute to, or can be described separately from, the narrative proper.<sup>31</sup> Some would argue *The Last of Us* contains quite a bit of ludonarrative dissonance in the sense that it consistently presents Joel as a caring fatherly figure, while the player directs him to kill hundreds of people over the course of his journey. However, the hospital chapter described above utilizes ludonarrative dissonance towards a thematic end. The player is driven by this scene to be disgusted by Joel's actions, performed by their own hand, and

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<sup>28</sup> 4. Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> 1. Clint Hocking, "Ludonarrative Dissonance in Bioshock," *Click Nothing* (blog), entry posted October 7, 2007, accessed April 26, 2016, [http://clicknothing.typepad.com/click\\_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html](http://clicknothing.typepad.com/click_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html).

<sup>30</sup> 1. "ludic, adj." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>31</sup> Perhaps the easiest example of this are games' whose stories are delivered entirely through cut-scenes.

this disgust allows the game to foster self-reflection in such a way that invites interpretation.<sup>32</sup>

The description of Joel as an animal, while rather basic at first, is ultimately quite accurate. As, in pursuit of defending the defenseless, Joel kills the only known hope of finding a cure to the twenty-year long pandemic. In this way Joel thematically alienates himself from the player. That the player must help Joel accomplish these ends enacts a type of mechanical alienation, which layers and amplifies said thematic distance. The implied threat of something horrible coming through the player's screen is finally acted upon, as the player realizes their perspective regarding their own actions may not be fully in line with the greater set of morals or ethics they believe themselves to abide by. Just as the *Heart of Darkness* invites the reader to re-examine the boundaries of their perspective, *The Last of Us* questions the players assumed beliefs about themselves. However, not every player comes to the same conclusion.

Just like any good piece of literature, Joel's decision to protect Ellie at all costs in *The Last of Us's* final chapter lends itself to various plausible interpretations. Deciding to protect a person who one considers family is not an insane decision; even when this persons' death may be in service of some greater good, there is an ethical argument to be made about the death of one for the betterment of many that I will not engage with in this essay. Suffice it to say that searching the Internet for recorded versions of the game's closing sequence will reveal a plethora of reactions and interpretations. Some players do not seem to have considered about the moral weight of their actions within a video game,

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<sup>32</sup> It should be noted that this moment and its interpretation are ambiguous. During the writing of this chapter, I watched many other people play through the hospital chapter, and some seemed to react very differently to this scene than I did. For example, one player was completely unquestioning of Joel's actions, and when presented with the surgeons, decided enthusiastically to burn them alive with a flamethrower while laughing. Another player I watched shot each of the three surgeons in the room with a shotgun in a systematic fashion, while talking about how these people were evil for trying to hurt Ellie.

and decide to side with Joel by using a flamethrower, grenade, or assault rifle within seconds of entering the operating room. Those more attune to the themes of the game attempt to avoid violence at all costs. Some players choose to walk into the doctor, as if born on an invisible treadmill, until finally conceding that violence is their only way forward. Regardless of how one approaches this scene, short of stopping play, it prompts an interpretation of Joel's actions within the gamespace. The fact that players emerge with a variety of reasonable interpretations, I think, does much to demonstrate the nuance and literary nature of *The Last of Us*.

## Chapter 2 — Setting

How does an experienced gamer ‘read’ and interpret setting in a videogame? In this chapter, I will analyze the ways in which videogame literacy can be applied to narrative setting to reveal the complex effects that games can achieve via their unique status as *interactive* narratives. We might begin by providing an outline of the two most pertinent concepts used to make sense of how gamers understand a videogame’s environment. After discussing these terms, derived from film and literary theory, I will provide a synoptic history of how setting operates in video games. In doing so I hope to help readers unfamiliar with the medium understand how an experienced gamer is likely to read *narrative gamespace*. It may also serve as a focal lens through which an experienced gamer may reorient their own views on videogame setting. With this perspective in mind, I will then show how Looking Glass Studio’s *Thief* (1998) presents the majority of its narrative via interaction with, and movement through, its carefully designed chapters.

Now, I will begin by making a distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic gamespace. This divide rests between the player, and player-character’s, relationship to gamespace. Although the player controls their in-game representation, these two entities experience setting in discrete registers. The ‘lower’ register is that of *diegetic* gamespace.<sup>33</sup> Diegetic space is defined by the OED as, “The narrative presented by a cinematographic film or literary work; the fictional time, place, characters, and events which constitute the universe of the narrative”.<sup>34</sup> This definition might effectively be expanded to include the fictional world of a videogame or ‘gamespace’, as many games

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<sup>33</sup> Whenever this chapter uses the term ‘gamespace’, it is in reference to diegetic video game setting. The term ‘gamespace’ refers specifically to the setting of a video game as represented to an avatar or player-character.

<sup>34</sup> 1. "Diegesis, N." *Oxford English Dictionary*. N.p., n.d. Web. 25 Mar. 2016.

present a fictional universe. The ‘higher’ register is the game world as represented to the player directly on screen. This register includes non-diegetic elements that are vital to proper play, and have bearing upon the operations of the diegetic gamespace, including mini-maps, score trackers, health-bars, and other data about the gamespace or player-character that are present on the ‘lower-register’, but require mediation to be interpreted by the player. It is important to note that sound play a particularly nuanced roll in this dichotomy. Sound is intrinsically understood as diegetic, or non-diegetic as a result of its context.<sup>35</sup> For example, most background music is non-diegetic, unless it issues from an in-game radio.

The next part of our frame is Hans Robert Jauss’ ‘Horizon of expectation’. Jauss suggests that any text, “demands a foreknowledge which is an element of the experience itself, and on the basis of which anything new that we come across is available to experience at all, i.e., as it were readable in a context of experience.”<sup>36</sup> Here, the prior experience of an object, or place, is crucial to the comprehension of an immaterial world. In this paper I expand Jauss’s definition the definition to include the way a player approaches any videogame. However, far from being a deviation, this expansion is logical as many games implicitly rely on a player’s prior experience with the real world, or similar games, to prompt proper play. Furthermore, many video games organize their

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<sup>35</sup> Proper context can render score counters, and mini-maps as diegetic elements. Notably, Bungie’s *Halo: Combat Evolved* (2001), displayed these elements as if they are visible to the player-character via a protective helmet that is a piece of a suit of armor worn by said character. However, instances of this melding are rare, and do not occur until far past the period this chapter is considering.

<sup>36</sup> 1. Hans Robert Jauss, Timothy Bahti, and Paul De Man, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 23.

experience of play, the central dialogue between designer and player, around the construction of a player's horizon of expectation.<sup>37</sup>

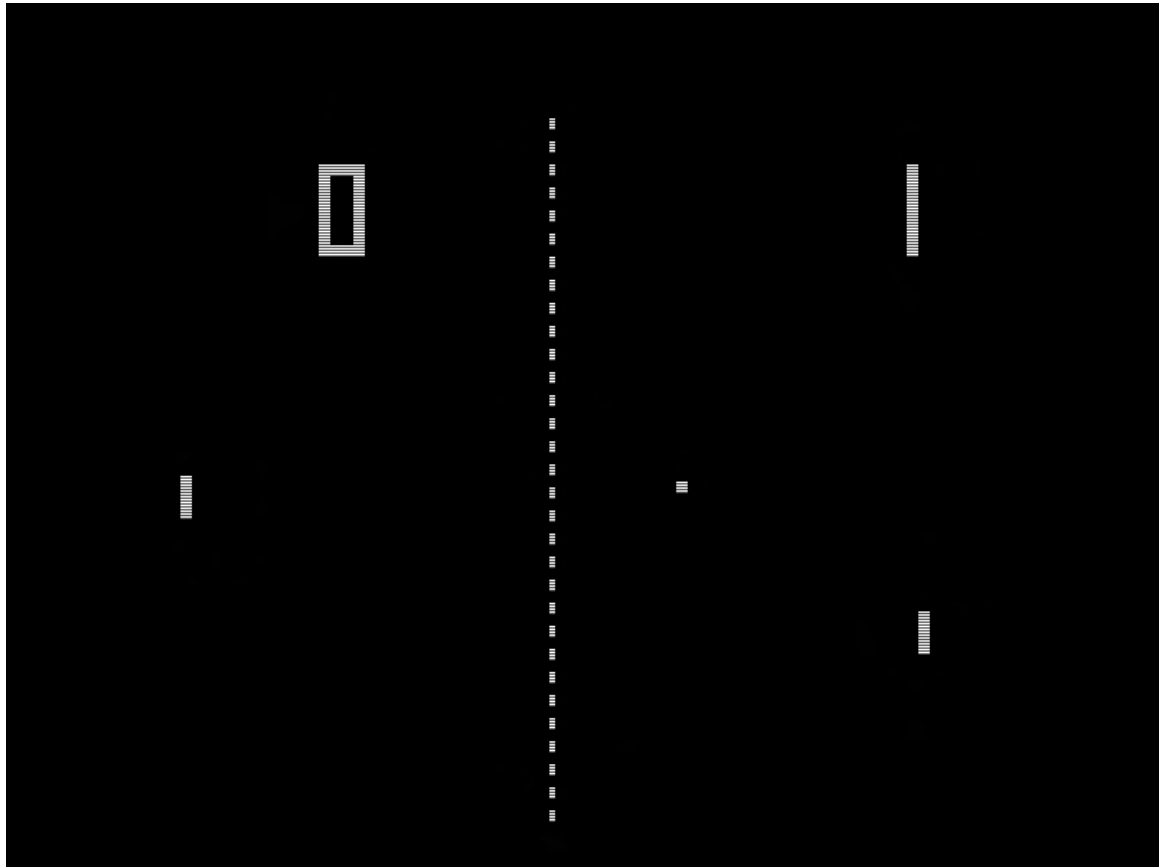


Figure 5 — “Pong.” Atari, 1972. Per: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Pong#/media/File:Pong.png>

In early games, like *Pong*, [Fig.5] the difference between gamespace and interactive object was clearly defined by color palette and movement. The background in Atari's *Pong* (1972) is a solid-black, while the interactive ball and paddles are white. The

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<sup>37</sup> Spikes, fire, and other dangerous objects are often used as obstacles in video games because they are already understood to be dangerous by players accustomed to navigating the real world. If the player does not recognize and object as dangerous, by not avoiding it and being reset to the beginning of a level, they learn this object should be avoided, thus expanding their horizon of expectation for future play. The social scientist James Ash, who studies human-machine interaction observes, “Whereas in earlier systems individuals were disciplined through particular systems of enforced enclosure and exposure...control now operates inadvertently through systems that pre-shape users’ access to space in a dynamic way. This dynamic control limits the very possibilities and potentialities for sense and movement within a space while offering the illusion of compete or total access to that space. For example, in motorway driving one can drive ‘infinitely and ‘freely’ without being at all confined yet while being perfectly controlled” (1. Ash, "Teleplastic Technologies: Charting Practices," 416).

game's objective is simple, get the 'pixel', or ball, past the opposing paddle. At this most basic level, a sports-like narrative is present. The player-controlled paddle is a protagonist, while the entity controlling an opposing paddle takes the roll of antagonist. One might understand this immediately as a result of most players' previous experience with sports like tennis, and the game's physical analogue, Ping-Pong. The mirrored score counters, which keep track of each point scored by the respective player paddle, are neither diegetic or non-diegetic because the game does not present a fictional space. As such, *Pong* can be categorized as a toy or kinetic light sculpture.

Technological advances created the opportunity to render detailed fictional spaces through additional colors and moving objects on screen. Mario's debut as 'Jumpman' in the 1981 Nintendo title *Donkey Kong* [Fig.6] displayed a slightly more complex relationship between gamespace and interactive objects.

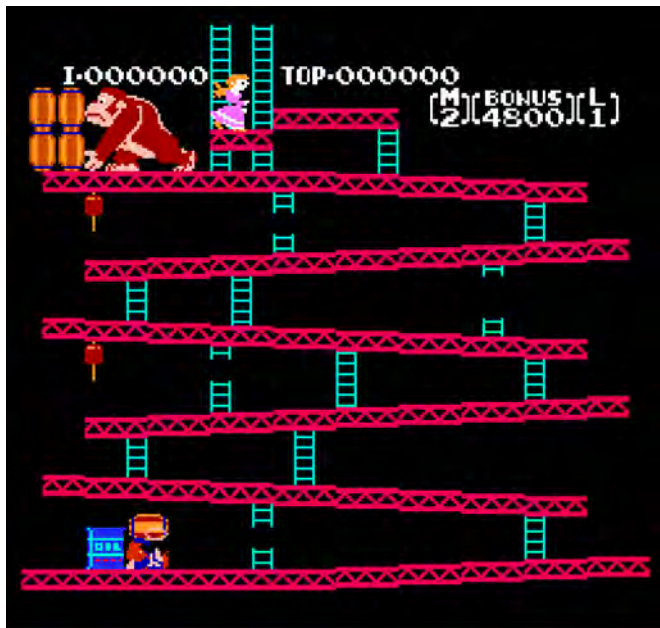


Figure 6 — "*Donkey Kong.*" Nintendo, 1981. Authors Screenshot

In contrast to *Pong*'s 'top down' style view, *Donkey Kong* is set with portrait style perspective. While the gamespace itself was still limited to a static box with a black background, this box held new interactive elements. It features sloping platforms, and barrels that the player must jump on, or over, to gradually progress towards the top of the play screen. These platforms, and the representation of the player through a human-esk avatar introduce the idea of a diegetic gamespace<sup>38</sup> by using computer graphics as a means of mimesis.

Here, I use mimesis in the context of Plato's archetypal understanding in *The Republic*, whereby "Imitation... falls short in that it is not the capacity for producing the things themselves, but only their images. Definitive of these images is that they bear a relation of similarity to objects, one that combines the real and the imaginary... In terms of recognition, the illusion produced by mimesis is deceptive, defective, and thus inferior."<sup>39</sup> *Donkey Kong* achieves the status of platonic mimesis by presenting an illusion of the real world by rendering Jumpman as a pixelated stick-figure. By placing an interactive avatar (Jumpman — later Mario) in an enclosure with a series of other consistent fictional elements, Shigeru Miyamoto and Gunpei Yokoi created a narrative conceit to help players make sense of game mechanics.<sup>40</sup>

The relevant narrative gamespace creates a division between *Pong*'s 'score counter' and 'interactive elements'. The foreground is dominated by non-diegetic

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<sup>38</sup> I acknowledge that the phrase 'diegetic gamespace' is redundant by my own definition. There is no gamespace that is not diegetic. However, it seems necessary to be a bit repetitive here to make the distinction wholly explicit.

<sup>39</sup> 1. Christoph Wulf and Gunter Gebauer, "Mimesis," in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3: 233.

<sup>40</sup> The game's limited graphical capability in rendering this fictional world were aided by decorated arcade cabinets, which dominate a player's peripheral vision while playing. Had Jumpman been a cube or paddle instead of a man, players may not have understood why barrels and spikes should to be avoided. Jumpman's digital model is not capable of feeling pain, but the rendering of an 8-bit human like figure, evokes a sense of human like vulnerability.



elements like the ‘high score’, ‘bonus’ counter, time counter, life counter, and little ‘100’, which all keep track of action occurring in the gamespace. Diegetic gamespace is defined by objects that the player can interact with (I.E. barrels, red platforms, ladders, Donkey Kong, and Princess Peach). The background, defined in this case by a static black, offers a vague space in which the action of the game takes place, but is not yet used for any specific purpose. It is important to note this background is black because nothing is being rendered within this space. Thus, the blackness was a result of hardware limitations. In this way *Donkey Kong* introduced the wedge of mimetic and diegetic ‘gamespace’ between the foreground and background present in *Pong*. This three-tiered divide defined the way diegetic narrative space would be presented to players of 2-D video games for years to come.

Nintendo’s 1985 release of *Super Mario Bros.* made an important advancement by using scrolling landscapes in conjunction with a more detailed background layer. While the game was still limited to a two dimensional portrait perspective, the player’s field of view now scrolled at a fixed rate from right to left. The player was expected to move with the scrolling ‘camera’, reacting to a variety of obstacles that could only be avoided through proper traversal of the gamespace. [Fig.7]

Variation of the background, in combination with a right to left panning camera, gave players a sense of progression through space and time.<sup>41</sup> The end of a level, as marked by Mario’s entering a green pipe or castle, prompts a black screen and the start of a new level. Changes in the game’s textures, color palette, and background features

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<sup>41</sup> The addition of scrolling movement as a method of connect varied spaces added a chronotope to gamespace. “Spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history.” (I. M. M. Bakhtin and Michael Holquist, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, University of Texas Press Slavic Series, no. 1 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84.)

between levels form a logical sense of movement through a continuous fictional world. So, while the background of early levels hold blue skies, friendly clouds, and green bushes, later areas display darker and more muted tones. This progression of vibrant to muted color is tied to Mario's progression towards greater danger and ultimately the final boss. The visual change comes with, and marks, a change in difficulty as denoted by new enemies or more challenging traversal. Cleverly, the designers mirror this shift with the game's audio. Here, the music becomes faster and more ominous the further Mario progresses into danger. Notably, elements present in the foreground, such as time, score, coin, and life counters persist from *Donkey Kong*, and remain in fixed positions throughout the course of play.



Figure 7 - "Super Mario Bros." Nintendo, 1985. Author's Screenshot.

In this way, the setting of *Super Mario Bros.* utilizes its background in concert with diegetic gamespace to build a story about Mario's quest to rescue Princess Peach.

Without using a cut-scene, text-box, or narrator, the player is quickly able to grasp that Mario is moving deeper into Bowser's castle to rescue Princess Peach. While this simple rescue narrative could have been conveyed entirely by progressing through *Super Mario Bros.*' gamespace, Nintendo still included an instruction booklet containing a synopsis of its simple story<sup>42</sup>.

While the details within this manual are not necessary to understanding *Super Mario Bros.*' narrative, its content shows that its creators were hesitant about their audience's ability to read and interpret the game's meaningful progression through varying settings, enemies,<sup>43</sup> and music. As an instruction manual is normally looked at before play, or by a confused player, the addition of narrative exposition within this manual would help any player who had not critically thought about Mario's shifting backgrounds, and constant right to left movement.

When video games began to move into three-dimensional space, game makers were forced to grapple with setting in an entirely different context. Modern games are often defined in relation to the way they approach world building through setting<sup>44</sup>. Much like two-dimensional games, setting in three-dimensional games can be separated into static and interactive elements. However, where 2-D games rely on a clean division between foreground and background to distinguish between these elements, 3-D games

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<sup>42</sup> 1. Nintendo Co., *Super Mario Bros. Instruction Booklet* (n.p.: Nintendo, 1985), accessed May 1, 2016, <http://legendsoflocalization.com/media/super-mario-bros/manuals/Super-Mario-Bros-Manual-US.pdf>.

<sup>43</sup> Later referred to as mimetic objects. The enemies in Mario, and indeed in many video games, utilize mimetic qualities in order to communicate their status to the player. For example; Mario encounters Koopa Troopas (animated turtle enemies) in nearly every level of *Super Mario Bros.* While in early levels these enemies sport green shells that only require a single jump to be defeated, Koopas that appear later have red shells that need to be jumped on twice to be defeated. There are over thirty different 'species' of Koopa in the Mario universe, each recognizable as the same turtle, but each holding a unique quality.

<sup>44</sup> One may recall from the first chapter that many video game genre categories sometimes denote their perspective. The same is true for the way setting operates in other genres. I.E; Open world or sandbox games strive to present the illusion of a vast setting as a continuous whole. Often overlap occurs in between categories. I.E; the real time strategy (RTS) genre presents an isometric landscape from a far removed birds-eye view.

do not have such a tidy depth based delineation to help players determine what objects are fair game for play. While the foreground, which contains instruments that reflect the player-character's status in game are still distinct from the gamespace, the gamespace itself is collapsed with the background. As a result, game designers increasingly began to rely upon the player's horizon of expectation to prompt "proper" play. For example, if the player is presented with a surface that looks like ice, they know before touching it that it is slippery.

Furthermore, game designers began adding new instruments to the foreground in order to help players gauge their place within a game's diegetic world. Atari's *Battle Zone* (1980) and Williams Electronic's *Defender* (1981) were some of the first games rendered in three-dimensional space. As a result of hardware restrictions at the time, these games utilized a sparse wire frame aesthetic. This simple visual style necessitated that both games rely heavily on a 'minimap'<sup>45</sup> to help the player make sense of their place within the gamespace. The minimap represented enemies both onscreen, and outside of the player's field of view. As both games are set in the vacuum of space, their settings are restricted to stars against the blackness of a display screen<sup>46</sup>, while enemies, the player-character, and obstacles were rendered in green wire frame. These games did not attempt to tell a complex story with their new graphics, and simply asked the player to survive a series of combat scenarios.

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<sup>45</sup> A small map often relegated to a corner of the screen that shows a simple 'top down' view of diegetic gamespace. The minimap has the benefit of showing the player elements that are behind them, around corners, or otherwise out of view. This allows players to orient themselves in otherwise confusing and difficult to navigate gamespaces.

<sup>46</sup> Setting these games in outer space allowed for unused portions of uniformly black monitors to become an intuitive part of the gamespace. It was a trick that utilized a narrative conceit to mask hardware limitations.

Finally, an extremely important graphical leap was made by Id Software's popular FPS *Doom* (1993), which set aside grid-based textures, and introduced dynamic lighting<sup>47</sup> alongside vertically scaling platforms. Shadows and more realistic textures helped to create a creepier and more engrossing gamespace. While the ability to create vertical gamespaces was utilized immediately as an integral part of *Doom*, it took a number of years for dynamic lighting to serve as more than mere decoration.<sup>48</sup> However, *Thief* does just this, by making scaled lighting a mechanic tied to sneaking, and integral to proper play.

In conclusion, I argue that an experienced gamer, consciously or unconsciously, must read and subsequently interpret specific elements of videogame setting with a context created by prior games. The most vital amongst these elements are the division between diegetic and non-diegetic space. Tied to this division, are a series of interconnected divisions that constantly inform gameplay. These include the difference between foreground and background, and the difference between interactive and non-interactive elements. Developments in technological sophistication allowed these divisions to emerge and take shape. They also contributed to a shift in the way videogame

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<sup>47</sup> "Game environments are dynamic and unpredictable due to the interactive freedom afforded to users within the world, thus narrative context, users' positions and perspectives within the gameworld-crucial parameters to the calculation of lighting-cannot be assumed... Dynamic lighting is a type of simulated lighting where lighting calculations are computed in real time. Therefore, using dynamic lighting enables on-the-fly lighting calculations accounting for real-time variations, such as change in game state, narrative, player's and characters' positions and camera movement. This practice privileges interaction, emotion and dramatic content, as opposed to the current methods that tend to rely on static lighting to emphasis virtual space." (1. Magy Seif El-Nasr et al., "Dynamic Lighting for Tension in Games," *The International Journal of Computer Research* 7, no. 1 (August 2007): accessed April 29, 2016, [http://gamestudies.org/0701/articles/elnasr\\_niedenthal\\_knez\\_almeida\\_zupko](http://gamestudies.org/0701/articles/elnasr_niedenthal_knez_almeida_zupko).)

<sup>48</sup> "One key way in which survival horror games create their emotional effect is by maintaining a state of player vulnerability, often by suspending the player in a state of incomplete knowledge. The perceptual conditions for this state of vulnerability are enhanced through visual obscurity. Obscurity supports a sense of vulnerability (uncertainty) and is thrilling because it is makes the object of terror indistinct. It should be noted that the opposite of obscurity is not light, but clarity; thus, obscurity can be produced by anything that thwarts clear perception: darkness, atmospheric phenomena (such as fog) or occlusion (blocking by architectural objects)." Ibid.

narrative is presented to the player. This shift can be interpreted as a movement from the Platonic to the Aristotelian form of mimesis.

### ***Thief: Fostering Affect via Gestalt and Mimesis***

Now let us turn to *Thief: Dark Project* to analyze how this game executes narrative progression by way of a carefully constructed gamespace. *Thief* accomplishes this task by constructing its chapters<sup>49</sup> through a visual vocabulary that can be productively read and interpreted. Like *Super Mario Bros.*, reading elements of *Thief's* setting is vital to proper play. However, unlike *Super Mario Bros.*, *Thief* is rendered in three-dimensions. As a result, the game does not have a constantly scrolling 'background' layer to aid in the progression of its narrative; nor does it lean too heavily on expository, movie-like cut-scenes, to tell its story like many modern games. Rather, *Thief's* setting manages to surpass the necessity of fostering proper play, and enters into the realm of narrative exposition. By comparing its constricted opening tutorial sequence with 'The Sword', a chapter that appears midway through the game, I hope to dissect the method *Thief* employs in fostering mimesis.

In this case we are better served by the Aristotelian definition of mimesis, rather than the previously presented Platonic notion. In *Poetics* mimesis is understood as, "a representation involving a casually connected sequence of action that leads to some sort of epiphany or clarification...the essential pleasure of mimesis is 'learning and inference.'"<sup>50</sup> In this way mimesis refers not to what *Thief is* but what *Thief does* through its carefully constructed setting. This differs from *Donkey Kong's* in that *Thief* surpasses

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<sup>49</sup> *Thief* refers to its various levels as 'chapters'. This detail speaks to the way in which *Thief's* creators conceptualized its gamespaces as ripe for narrative exposition.

<sup>50</sup> 1. Leon Golden, "Aristotle: Reception of Aristotle in Modernity," in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1:106-109.

the creation of a fictional representation of reality by using a slightly more sophisticated representation — albeit one that still clearly announces itself to be nothing more than an illusion by way of not achieving a photorealistic aesthetic — to lead its reader towards a specific ‘epiphany’. I have identified this ‘epiphany’ as the creation of affect, namely, the re-introduction of paranoia to the experience of play.

*Thief*'s narrative is constructed of two primary elements — cut-scenes and chapters. The game's cut-scenes materialize before and after each chapter. Much like *Super Mario Bros.*' manual, they contextualize a forthcoming gamespace, and define what the player is attempting to accomplish within this gamespace. They are delivered in the form of static images, rendered in a hand drawn aesthetic, paired with narration. In addition to providing a hint towards ‘proper’ play, these cut-scenes' most important role is to show the player a diegetic map of the gamespace they are about to enter. [Fig.8] The player is told how the information displayed on it was gathered under the guise of preparing the player-character for their next ‘job’. Furthermore, it often proves unreliable, if not woefully incomplete once the player is in the gamespace said map purports to represent. The map featured below is of the first chapter, encountered directly after the tutorial. It is detailed, well labeled, and the area in which the player-character stands glows blue. It gives the player a good idea of how they should approach the gamespace, with the front entrance marked “HEAVILY GAURDED!!” and a, “well [that] leads to basement via waterway” is marked with “One Guard”. The player can go where they choose, but this map reveals the easier path to follow. Later chapters display less detailed maps just before the player enters the gamespace they represent. In this way, *Thief*'s cut-scenes focus on orienting the player, if incompletely, in a forthcoming gamespace.

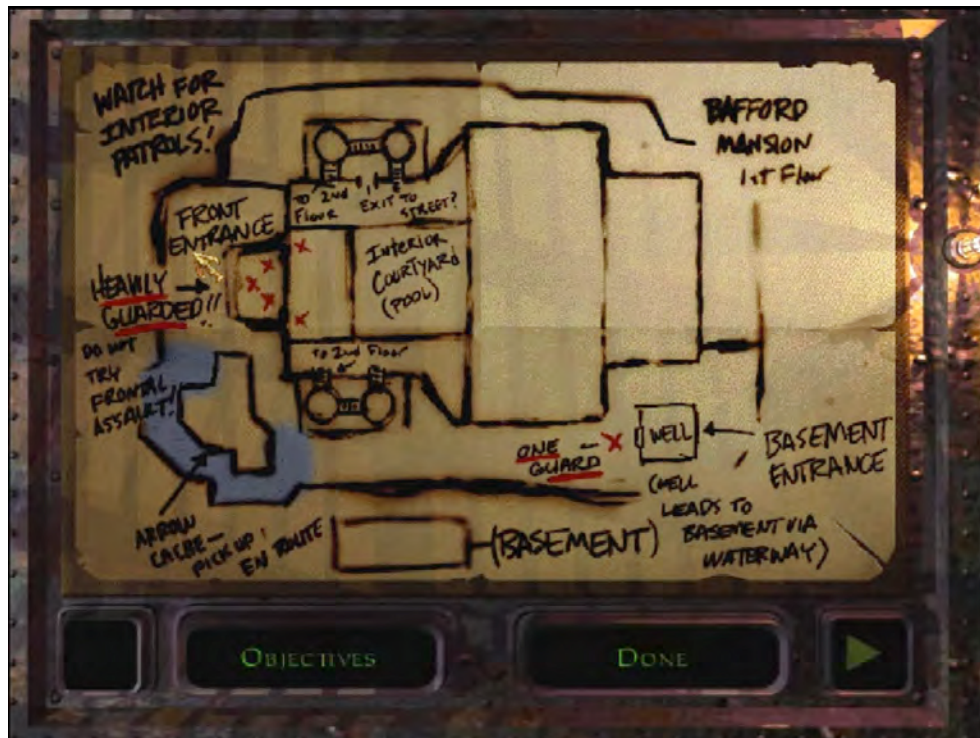


Figure 8 – “Map of First Chapter.” Looking Glass Studios, 1998. Author’s Screenshot.

*Thief*'s chapters are where gameplay occurs. Often manifesting as mansions or castles that create the illusion of a livable space, these gamespaces can be approached in a non-linear fashion. While one player may choose to enter through the front door, another may find it more advantageous to find an open second-story window. Regardless, the objective of nearly every level in *Thief* is to safely reach each distinct structure's center, ostensibly where an item of value is held, before traversing back to the point of entry.<sup>51</sup> *Thief*'s difficulty does not derive from overcoming a certain number of enemies on the way to a specific location. Rather, the core challenge is to figure out where to go, and how to get there unseen and unheard. In this way, the game challenges its players to

<sup>51</sup> This is the game's basic premise, and is not adhered to by the game as a rule. For example, one level tells the player that treasure is hidden exclusively in the homeowner's bedroom because he believes his staff is stealing from him. Once the player reaches this bedroom there is a large quantity of gold to be found. However, if the player continues to explore the house, and reaches the kitchen, they will find that the homeowner's suspicions were not unfounded! Stowed amongst the pots and pans is a large sum of gold.



constantly orient themselves in its 3-D space, and keep track of elements that may be out of the player's direct line of sight. In light of this context it is productive to consider that *Thief's* opening sequence is decidedly set in opposition to this design philosophy.

*Thief* opens with a directed and streamlined tutorial. Although it is framed as though the player-character is learning the art of thieving, a disembodied narrator breaks the fourth wall to direct the player through a variety of rooms which each teach a single game mechanic. The first room teaches the player to read and interpret game's dynamic lighting, by asking said player to sneak up on a guard by means of following a dark path.

[Fig.9]

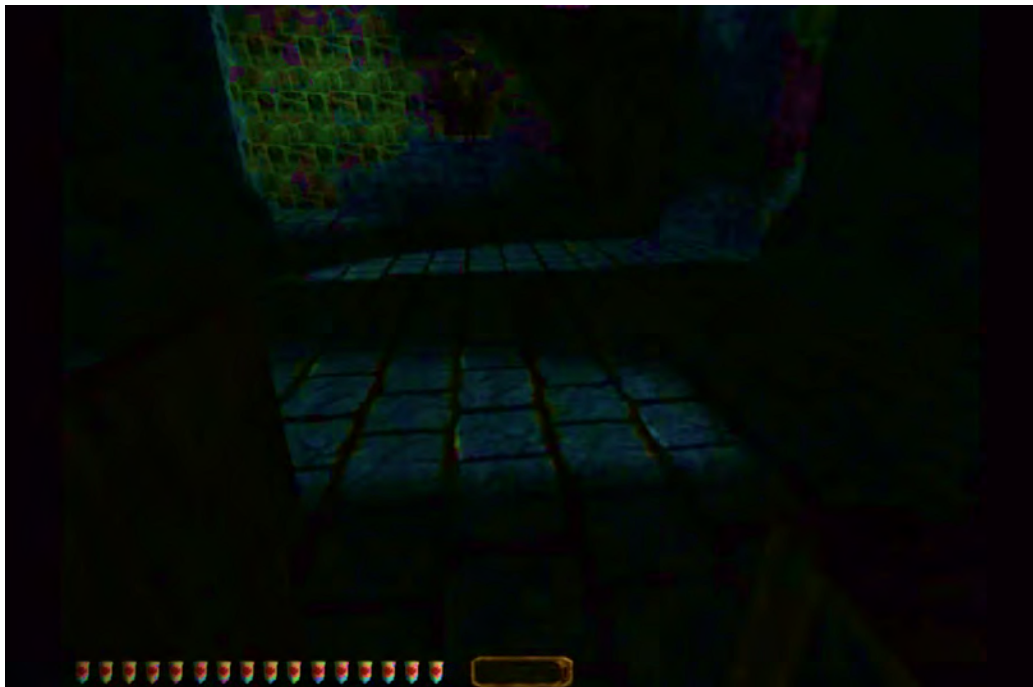


Figure 9 - "Variable Lighting Tutorial." Looking Glass Studios, 1998. Author's Screenshot.

Immediately recognizable to an experienced player is the health bar, represented by a series of individual shields adorned with crosses couched in the bottom left of the screen. Not so recognizable is the 'light gem', one of the few non-diegetic elements present in *Thief's* sparse foreground. This 'gem', which is just a gold bar at the bottom of

the screen that ranges in color from bright green to pitch black, indicates the player-character's degree of in-game visibility. The more enshrouded in shadow the player-character is, the darker the light gem appears to the player. The proceeding areas teach the player that their character's footsteps make varying degrees of noise, depending on what surface is being traversed and at what speed (running makes far more noise than walking). A room directly following shows the player that they can glean details about rooms they have not yet entered, simply by listening to the footsteps of NPCs within. An adjacent courtyard is used to teach the player to use a sword and bow.<sup>52</sup> Finally, the tutorial offers an obstacle course where the player is encouraged to, "stay to practice their climbing, jumping, leaning, ducking, and crawling". Notably, each room is designed to display a single mechanic, rather than present the illusion of a livable space. Furthermore, all of these spaces are connected linearly by a series of narrow hallways, cordoned off by gates. [Fig.10] Once the player has properly followed the narrators' instructions, a gate opens, and the next tutorial room is revealed. This eliminates any chance of the player wandering or getting lost and begins to build a visual vocabulary.

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<sup>52</sup> Water arrows are used to extinguish torches, creating patches of darkness that the player can proceed to pass through safe and unseen. Noise arrows can be used to temporarily distract guards from their regular patrol patterns, opening up new paths. Moss arrows create patches of, well, moss that dampen the noise of the player's footsteps. Finally, 'rope arrows' create a temporary rope ladder that allows for vertical traversal of gamespace.



Figure 10 – “Hallway to Gate.” Looking Glass Studios, 1998. Author’s Screenshot.

No other chapter in *Thief* features such a strict path. The tutorial is designed so that the player can come to terms with their tools for interacting with the gamespace, before they are challenged by the prospect of deftly moving through said space. In this way, *Thief*'s tutorial is directed towards helping the player develop what Craig Lindley refers to as a *game-play gestalt*, “Learning to play a game, making progress within a game and completing or winning a game are matters of learning how to interact within the game system and its rules in a way that supports progress. This is a matter, not necessarily of learning the game rules, but of learning a *game-play gestalt*, understood as a *pattern of moves* within the game system. Playing the game is then a matter of performing the gestalt. It is what the player does, within the system and as allowed by the rules of the game.”<sup>53</sup> By doling mechanics one-by-one, and restricting the player to a

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<sup>53</sup> 1. Craig A. Lindley, "The Semiotics of Time Structure in Ludic Space As a Foundation for Analysis and Design," *The international Journal of Computer Game Research* 5, no. 1 (October 2005): [Page #], accessed April 30, 2016, <http://www.gamestudies.org/0501/lindley/>.

dictatorially linear path, this tutorial jumpstarts the development of a player's game-play gestalt.

*Thief's* later chapters begin to manipulate this gestalt (a type of Horizon of Expectation) by way of removing select elements, or introducing familiar elements in a new order, duration, or frequency. The first indicator of this manipulation can be observed by way of subtle changes in the maps presented to the player before each chapter. At first the red 'x's marking guard locations are removed. Then the various labels disappear, followed by the buildings floor plan and convenient blue highlights. By approximately the seventh chapter, 'The Sword', the presented map is woefully incomplete [Fig. 11]. However, many players do not perceive this as problematic, because reaching this chapter necessitates intimate familiarity with the exercise of forming a mental map of the game's various 3-D spaces. The maps vagueness can be interpreted as an additional gamic challenge.<sup>54</sup>

After completing *Thief's* first six chapters (approximately four hours of playtime), most players feel confident in their ability to construct a map of the gamespace and control their player-character through *Thief's* various mazelike mansions with catlike ease. A player who reaches this point in the game has developed a well-defined game-play gestalt. The seventh level, 'The Sword', serves to make the player feel, once again, like a novice, by disrupting this carefully developed gestalt. The affect created by the disruption of the players' gestalt is where *Thief* utilizes gaming literacy.

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<sup>54</sup> There is something about the game riding the line between diegetic conceit and gamic challenge that makes the forthcoming effect appealing. The moment the player realizes the most gamic aspects are placed, as messages, is the moment they properly 'read' the game.

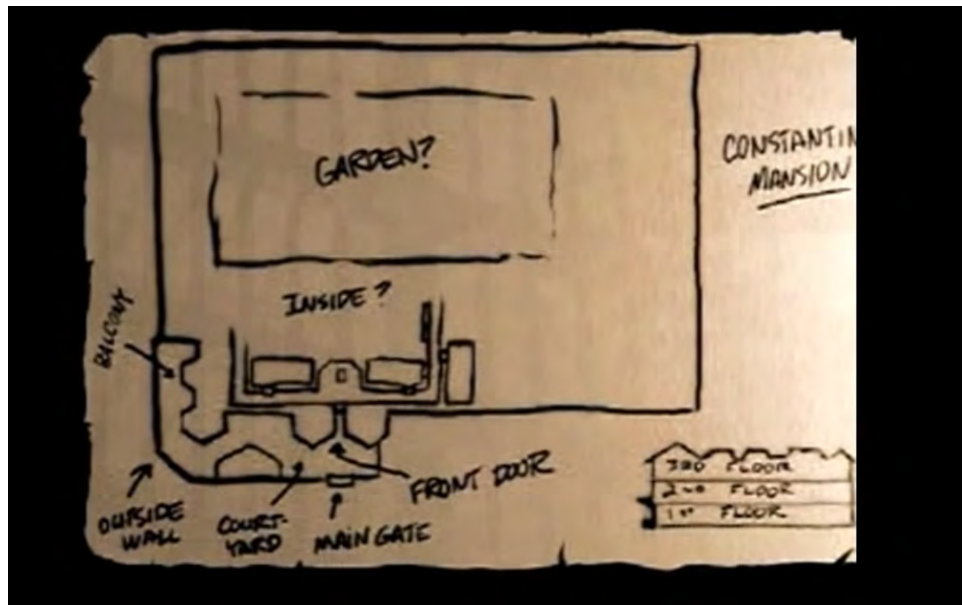


Figure 11 – “Incomplete map of *The Sword*” Looking Glass Studios, 1998. Author’s Screenshot.

The first floor of the mansion eases the player into a false sense of security. Mechanics and habits learned in the first six chapters serve the player very well in what appears to be a comfortable living space. The keen eye will notice that in the second level of the mansion details are subtly out of place. A fireball trap, the first trap featured in game, is hidden behind a door. This particular trap only activates if the player examines it in search of an alternate path. In this way, the fireball trap actively discourages habits of play (gestalt) established by the previous six levels. The ‘wait it out and plan’ style, previously integral to gameplay, does not work with this trap, and may startle a player who has fallen into this pattern of play.

But, this detail may not be seen as suspicious by players who approach *Thief* with a horizon of expectation created by other video games, whereby encountering enemies and traps is a signal of moving in the correct direction, towards an increase in difficulty, rather than acting as a type of foreshadowing. From a diegetic perspective, this aggressive form of defense indicates that the mansion’s owner has planned for intruders

(if not the player-character specifically!) one might cynically conclude at this point the level designers at Looking Glass Studios became lazy, or lost the direction of their design philosophy as presented in earlier chapters. However, a player invested in the game's story may remember that this mansion is the most unknown space the player-character, and the player, have approached since the game's start.

Whatever one chooses to believe, the third floor of the mansion, which is reached through an indoor moss covered cave, twisting vines, and the noises of strange animals, is a surreal departure from everything the player has seen before. The player first encounters a room that is flipped upside-down. Each subsequent room is increasingly kaleidoscopic.



Figure 12 — “Turning Room” Looking Glass Studios, 1998. Author’s Screenshot.

One room, which appears to contain the vastness of space, is particularly notable in that it explicitly breaks the illusion that the player-character is traversing what could potentially be a realistic mansion [Fig.12]. This is an illusion the game carefully crafts

from its first chapter, and is a key aspect of the players ability to orient themselves in the gamespace. By revealing to the player that this mansion is not constructed in a linear, or even physically possible fashion, makes it extremely difficult for any player to get their bearings. It effectively disrupts a game-play gestalt developed over hours of playtime. Furthermore, it indicates that this visual and auditory vocabulary is not only unreliable, but likely irrelevant in this new context. Thus, this chapter drastically shifts the status of the narrative, from safe and run-of-the-mill towards the dangerous and confusing.

For the first time, the player is faced with an area that is not a series of linearly connected boxes. This new space can be contrasted with the previous chapters, which are constructed as a series of interconnected hallways and rooms, naturally understood by any gamer. The introduction of non-linear space and previously familiar elements in new sequences, effectively render the player a born again novice. Established habits of play that the player should have begun to question on the mansions second floor, have now entirely turned against the player. Vital auditory cues like footsteps, which before helped determine the positions of enemies and scouting unseen spaces, echo in such a way as to have no discernable source. That the player's attention to audio cues, integral to reading previous gamespaces, are now useless, is driven home by the presence of disembodied laughter which permeates the mansions third floor. This laughter implies on a diegetic level that the player is being watched.

On a non-diegetic register, it feels as though the game's designers are relishing in watching you, the player, squirm with discomfort at being forced to deal with a foreign gamespace. Whether conscious or unconscious, in order to continue play, the player must reassess and reinvent their game-play gestalt. However, unlike at the beginning of the

game where the player's gestalt is fostered by the game itself via a tutorial, at this stage the player is under considerable pressure to develop a new gestalt within the most challenging space encountered thus far. In this way 'The Sword' shatters a carefully established visual and auditory vocabulary in order to make the player feel paranoid. This move is particularly literary in that it robs the player of their ability to *read* the gamespace with confidence. Although no new threat is present, the breaking of habit via confusing patterns that established said habits, creates the feeling impending danger from all sides.<sup>55</sup>

A significant portion of *Thief's* gameplay is about planning around the player-character's fragility — being aware of ones own vulnerability. All suspense essentially disappears when *Thief's* mechanics are mastered. Once a player understands how guards behave, and how to traverse every piece of setting, suspense begins to fade, and is replaced by a feeling of mastery that is momentarily empowering, but monotonous in the long-term. At first monotony is subverted by placing elements in shifting and increasingly compacted orders. However, at a certain point, the player internalizes the game's visual and auditory vocabulary, and develops an effective game-play gestalt, so as to navigate these linearly connected spaces with ease. When a seasoned player encounters the third floor of *The Sword's* mansion, any illusion of mastery is instantly displaced. The introduction of nonlinearly connected, almost paradoxical space, in concert with disembodied noises, aggressive traps, and visual illusions, bring back the vulnerability

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<sup>55</sup> "In learning to deal with the various inhibitors and disinhibitors in the environment, these video games encourage particular forms of movement and gesture from users as they navigate through them. This leads to dissolution of bodily cardinality and reorganization of this cardinality in relation to the disinhibiting ring created between user and game environment. Whilst the user's body is still corporeally 'present', located and placed in front of the screen, the user's sense of perception of presence is spread and distributed into the environment on screen. In other words, through the creation of a disinhibiting ring (the limits and potentials for movement and action in the game), video game environments operate teleplastically to reorganize user's cardinal orientation." 2. Ash, "Teleplastic Technologies: Charting Practices," 427.



felt early in the game. Furthermore, proper traversal of this new space depends on ignoring elements that previously demanded the players attention. As a result, confusion and paranoia seep back into the experience of play again. That this process occurs simultaneously for player and player-character make it all the more powerful.

Up until ‘The Sword’ the player-character, Garrett, is a brash and confident man. He is trained in the arts of stealth by a secretive religious organization, and decides to reject this organization in order to pursue individual wealth by way of burgling “The City’s” elite noblemen. Much like the player, Garrett enters ‘The Sword’ with confidence, but little information about the mansion or its owner. All he or the player knows is that they have been conscripted to steal a sword, that it will be challenging, and that it will pay more than their last job. Upon encountering the third floor of the mansion featured in this chapter, Garrett realizes he is meddling with forces he does not understand. In the heavy-handed cut-scene following the chapter’s completion, Garrett is told that the previous chapter was a test. He did not *read* the situation well and gets himself into trouble as a result. That the collapse between player and player-character occurs on the level of literacy is significant because it shows that a certain type of literacy is present and necessary to playing *Thief*.

The prominent games scholar Espen Aarseth, pioneer of the term ‘Ergodic literature’, notes,

Game analysis is not just a critical/ theoretical practice; gamers do it all the time. The primary objective/meaning of most games, how to play well and win, demands an analytical approach. In order to progress through the learning stages of a game, the player must explore various strategies and experiment with different techniques. This kind of pragmatic analysis could be said to be present in the consumption of other genres also, but non-academic viewers or players do not

regard their engagement with a new literary or cinematic work as a learning process, which every player of a new game must and does. While the interpretation of a literary or filmatic work will require certain analytical skills, the game requires analysis practiced as performance, with direct feedback from the system. This is a dynamic, real-time hermeneutics that lacks a corresponding structure in film or literature.<sup>56</sup>

In *Thief*, the player's active analysis of setting practiced as performance (play) is used to make the player re-assess their relationship to the game. This prompted reassessment is a move that makes the player feel uneasy and somewhat paranoid.

A text that creates a similar affect with regards to active analysis of setting is Poe's 'The Fall of The House of Usher'. It is a classic short story that leverages the reader's attention to detail towards great narrative effect. Setting up how Poe's story performs the same 'move' as *Thief* should help one reflect on the way that literacy is important to interpreting any narrative, and why videogame literacy reveals the potential richness of game narrative. Both require the performance of non-trivial interpretive work. The similar affect created by each text and videogame reflexively points to the idea that doing this work is where the pleasure of narrative rests.

### **The Fall of The House of Usher – Finding Pleasure in Paranoia.**

The way setting is delivered in a novel can be split into two modes, traversal and enclosure. Using Edgar Allen Poe's short story, "The Fall of the House of Usher" I explore the specifics of traversal and enclosure as methods of world building in literature. I suggest that methods of creating and moving through setting can create a similar feeling of paranoia across media, creating similar moments of self-reflection. Furthermore, I

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<sup>56</sup> 1. Espen Aarseth, "Playing Research: Methodological Approaches to Game Analysis," *Proceedings of the Fifth International Digital Arts and Culture Conference*, May 19, 2003, 5, accessed April 30, 2016, <http://hypertext.rmit.edu.au/dac/papers/Aarseth.pdf>.

argue that the non-trivial work required to experience these affects are where the true pleasure of each narrative rests.

The term ‘enclosure’ refers to the moment when a narrator introduces a category of space to the reader. Whether it is a house, time of year, or country — when described through enclosure, space is proffered to the reader categorically, rather than through specific details. Teresa Bridgeman points out quite aptly that, “The concept of the container is necessary to our understanding of inside and outside. Containers may be rooms, houses, vehicles, or entire cities and are important factors in the three-dimensionality of narrative spaces. Whole narratives may be constructed on whether protagonists are inside or outside a container...”<sup>57</sup> ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ is organized around this principle. The outset of the narrative focuses on defining the ‘container’ or enclosure in which the narrative will take place. Then, every narrative event takes place within said container. Using enclosure to describe a space relies on a reader’s habits of thinking about the space. As the Kelly J. Mays notes, “The effect and meaning evoked by setting depends on our traditional associations with, and often unconscious assumptions about, particular times, places, and even such factors as weather conditions...”<sup>58</sup> While this might be true as a blanket statement, Mays fails to address specificity in description. Calling a living space a ‘shack’, ‘house’, or ‘mansion’ asks the reader to work off his or her own preexisting ideas of model spaces. Enclosure utilizes these associations to give the reader a sense of place in a quick and efficient manner.

When not balanced with elements of traversal, a setting characterized only by

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<sup>57</sup> 1. Teresa Bridgeman, "Time and Space," in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. David Herman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 55, accessed April 30, 2016, <http://universitypublishingonline.org/cambridge/companions/ebook.jsf?bid=CBO9781139001533>.

<sup>58</sup> 1. Kelly J. Mays, *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, 11th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014), 161.

methods of enclosure begins to unravel. For, stating that one is in a bedroom without giving any specific detail about said bedroom may give different readers estranged versions of the same space; purely as a result of the associations they bring to the text. As discussed earlier, Hans Robert Jauss identifies these associations in an exploration of the boundaries of genre, and refers to these associations as the reader's 'Horizon of expectation'. Jauss aptly indicates that any text, "demands a foreknowledge which is an element of the experience itself, and on the basis of which anything new that we come across is available to experience at all, i.e., as it were readable in a context of experience"<sup>59</sup>. To reiterate, Jauss states prior experience of an object, or place, is crucial to the construction of an immaterial or otherwise fictional world. Jauss continues on to relate how this foreknowledge is crucial to the cordoning of a specific genre, "The new text evokes for the reader (listener) the horizon of expectations and rules familiar from earlier texts, which are then varied, corrected, altered, or even just reproduced. Variation and correction determine the scope, whereas alteration and reproduction determine the borders of a genre-structure"<sup>60</sup>. While Jauss is specifically concerned with examining how the boundaries of genre exist in a constant state of flux, in the process of this examination Jauss establishes that literature demands that a reader hold some 'horizon of expectation'. This succinct term encapsulates the individual ideas and perspective a reader brings to a text, which grants enclosure utility as a method of world building.

The reader's horizon of expectation is a necessary basis for the use of enclosure. Enclosure necessitates the placing of a static symbol before the reader in a moment alienated from regular narrative time. Unlike traversal, enclosure is disassociated from

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<sup>59</sup> 2. Jauss, Bahti, and De Man, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, 23.

<sup>60</sup> 3. *Ibid.*

narrative time. To borrow a term from film, an instance of enclosure can work similarly to an “establishing shot”. *Thief*'s maps and early chapters rely on enclosure to help create the illusion of livable spaces for the player to traverse. It is in the subversion of the illusion created by enclosure that *Thief* uses to create narrative affects.<sup>61</sup> In summation, enclosure is a method that relies on categories, and is most often employed to set an initial scene.

The following excerpt from ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ is a good example of enclosure being utilized to create narrative space. It occurs just after the death of one of the narrative’s three characters.

The vault in which we placed [the casket] (and which had been so long unopened that our torches, half smothered in its oppressive atmosphere, gave us little opportunity for investigation) was small, damp, and entirely without means of admission for light; lying, at great depth, immediately beneath that portion of the building in which was my own sleeping apartment. It had been used, apparently, in remote feudal times, for the worst purposes of a dungeon-keep, and, in later days, as a place of deposit for powder, or some other highly combustible substance, as a portion of its floor, and the whole interior of a long archway through which we reached it, were carefully sheathed with copper.<sup>62</sup>

This paragraph, which outlines a part of the Usher estate that the reader was previously unaware of, begins with the invocation of a relatable container (‘the vault’). The narrator does not move through this space, but places it before the reader in its entirety. After establishing the tone of ‘the vault’ as ‘small’, dark, and ‘damp’, the narrator

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<sup>61</sup> Although this is admittedly a misnomer or sorts, as enclosure is explicitly related to textual horizons of expectation, I believe it this usage of enclosure ‘fits’, as it were. For, enclosure works by placing the idea of an object before a person, that said person then expands into a fictionally realized object. The façade, and first floor of *The Sword*, performs ‘enclosure’ by presenting the illusion of a livable space consistent with past chapters. Narrative affect is created when this illusion is broken by the second and third floors.

<sup>62</sup> 1. Edgar Allan Poe, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, comp. Project Gutenberg (n.p.: n.p., 2010), accessed April 30, 2016, <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/932>.

contextualizes its location in relation to the setting that already exists in the reader's mind, 'beneath...my own sleeping apartment'. The passage then goes on to further contextualize the vault by describing its past uses. One is left to guess at the horrors present in 'the worst purposes of a dungeon-keep', and the other military use of the space is not particularly redeeming. Notably, these details are all related outside of the passage of regular narrative time. The reader is related this container in a freeze frame of narrative time. However, even this passage stands as a testament to how wedded enclosure is to traversal. For, 'the whole interior of a long archway through which we reached it, were carefully sheathed with copper', is certainly a detail that emerges through the narrator's movement and experience through space. Once a mention of movement is invoked ('through which we reached it') narrative time begins again, and the mode of relating setting slips into traversal.

Traversal refers to the method whereby a reader is brought through a space that is described in a procedural manner. Rather than relying on associations with a category, traversal sets individual objects before the reader. As the narrator notices objects coming towards, or passing them, they are related to the reader, and begin to populate previously blank space through which the narrator is moving. The literary critic and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin describes this effect as, "time...thickens takes on flesh" and, "becomes artistically visible." He goes on to describe time's relationship to space when traversal is effectively employed, "space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history."<sup>63</sup> These objects develop into fodder for interpretation, depending upon

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<sup>63</sup> "In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history." (2. Bakhtin and Holquist, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four*, 84.)

their order, frequency, and duration of description.<sup>64</sup> Rather than invoking the image of a house as a container, traversal introduces individual items that are representations unto themselves (coffee cups, books, windows). Whether the narrator's eyes move over the façade of a building, or describe objects as they pass in a hallway, traversal is tied to implied movement and passage of narrative time.<sup>65</sup> Turning back towards 'The Fall of the House of Usher' with this discussion in mind, Poe's use of traversal becomes apparent:

I scanned more narrowly the real aspect of the building. Its principal feature seemed to be that of an excessive antiquity. The discoloration of ages had been great. Minute fungi overspread the whole exterior, hanging in a fine tangled web-work from the eaves. Yet all this was apart from any extraordinary dilapidation. No portion of the masonry had fallen; and there appeared to be a wild inconsistency between its still perfect adaptation of parts, and the crumbling condition of the individual stones.<sup>66</sup>

This instance of world building can be seen to utilize traversal in the first two words with the phrase 'I scanned', which connotes movement of the narrator's eyes. That the narrator seeks to relate the 'real aspect' of the building implies he will attempt to give the reader a view of the structure's most prominent and defining features. This is important, for it indicates that the narrator's eyes are not going to traverse the building brick by brick, and in this way Poe's narrator slips momentarily into using enclosure with the summoning of an unspecific 'building'. However, that the reader is related 'the real aspect' of the structure with increasing specificity signals that the reader's view of the building will be conveyed primarily via traversal. The process of traversal continues with mention of an

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<sup>64</sup> For more on this topic, see Gerard Genette's translated paper on narrative method - Guerlac, Suzanne, Gerard Genette, and Jane E. Lewin. "Narrative Discourse, an Essay in Method." *Mln* 95.5 (1980)

<sup>65</sup> It should be noted that traversal takes place on two separate levels that should not be confused. For, the reader's physical traversal of the text on the page with their eyes is different from the narrator's traversal of setting in narrative space. This difference between the physical experience of a reader and the mental experience expressed by the narrator should be kept as distinct.

<sup>66</sup> 2. Poe, *The Fall of the House of Usher*.

individual type of ‘minute fungi’, which are given as an individual aspect before the narrator ‘spreads’ them over the entire façade. That ‘no portion of the masonry had fallen’, invites the reader to question why this detail is important. The implication being that it looks as though some masonry should have fallen based on the estate’s appearance. Once again, the narrator generally renders an object before applying it to a specific portion of the building.

Ultimately, the passage rests on the reader’s own interpretation of the narrator’s paradoxically rendered space. For, the House of Usher is simultaneously ‘crumbling’ while ‘no portion of the masonry had fallen’. It manages to be ‘wildly inconsistent’ while still remaining ‘perfectly adapted’. If a reader is paying close attention to the text, an odd effect is created. One must create their own version of the estate if they are reading the story in a linear fashion. The paradoxical quality of the manor’s façade makes the reader self-conscious of the exercise that is mentally building an image of the space for themselves. That the passage opens with ‘I scanned’, a type of looking, but also a type of careless or rapid reading, heightens this effect and may be making a joke for careful readers at the expense of those who ‘scan’. Poe builds a house that makes sense in pieces, but cannot be sensibly viewed as a whole. The exterior of the Usher’s house is simultaneously crumbling and not crumbling, wild and perfectly ordered. The narrator presents a manor that exists only in the mind of the reader, and appears spectral, as its details could never take any real physical form as described within the story. . As the narrator looks longer, more details emerge until the reader is satisfied with their own image of the build’s exterior.



Enclosure and traversal are often used in service of one another, and can be clearly delineated by the passage of narrative time via motion.<sup>67</sup> In order to further explore these two modes of moving through a text's setting, we will now turn to the opening of "The Fall of the House of Usher". One need only read the first two sentences of Poe's short story to see how invested it is in the creation of believable space using a combination of enclosure and traversal.

During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country, and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. I know not how it was—but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit.<sup>68</sup>

What happens when the narrator announces the day being described is 'in autumn'? In this case, readers are being asked to rely on their own memories of a day in autumn, albeit one that is contextualized as 'dull', 'dark', and 'soundless'. By stating that the narrative is opening during 'a day in autumn', the narrator is using enclosure to define a platform for the narrative. One must recall a specific day in autumn in order to relate to Poe's narrative. A potential issue with this method arises when someone who has lived near the equator for most of their life will, presumably, have a different image of this day than a person from far north or south of the equatorial line. It is only after the reader is asked to summon these associations that the mode relating setting switches to traversal with a push towards specificity, 'passing through a singularly dreary tract of country'. From this clause, the reader learns that their narrator is moving through the 'country'. In this case, the countryside is servicing the tone set by the enclosing term 'autumn'.

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<sup>67</sup> To be clear, if the narrator is in motion in any way, traversal is being employed. If a static space is presented, it is most likely that enclosure is being utilized.

<sup>68</sup> 3. Poe, *The Fall of the House of Usher*.

Like most texts, the introduction to Poe's short story traverses and encloses in tandem to introduce its setting. The reader is moved through a space as it is described, until they can glean a reasonable picture of the day as a whole. As the reader is moved through the space, its qualities become increasingly specific, until 'at length' the narrator faces the reader with a container, 'the melancholy House of Usher'. The following sentence is more specific than the first, for it is telling the reader how to think about the house of Usher as a result of the narrator's own perception of the space. The house itself is not 'insufferably gloomy', rather the way in which the narrator constructs the space — the order, frequency, and duration of objects in the text inspires such feelings. By telling the reader how he feels, the narrator is leveraging the reader's own existing associations with gloomy places in order to more accurately describe the presented fictional space.

These observations regarding the narrator, traversal, and enclosure build an interpretation of Poe's centering on paranoid reading.<sup>69</sup> Starting with the narrative's first paragraph, which points towards how setting creates specific affects within literature:

There upon me as I pondered. I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion, that while, beyond doubt, there are combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth. It was possible, I reflected, that a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of the picture, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression...<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> 'Paranoid Reading' is a term borrowed from the narrative theorist Eve K. Sedgwick. It refers to a type of reading that seeks a hidden, or otherwise not immediately obvious meaning within a text. Any interpretation drawn from the practice of 'close reading' can be considered paranoid under Sedgwick. "Concomitantly, some of the main reasons for practicing paranoid reading strategies may be other than the possibility that they offer unique access to true knowledge. They represent a way, among other ways, of seeking, finding, and organizing knowledge. Paranoia knows some things well and others poorly" - 1. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 123-51, accessed April 30, 2016, [http://sydney.edu.au/arts/slam/downloads/documents/novel\\_studies/3\\_Sedgwick.pdf](http://sydney.edu.au/arts/slam/downloads/documents/novel_studies/3_Sedgwick.pdf).

<sup>70</sup> 4. Poe, *The Fall of the House of Usher*.

At its core, this passage is an invitation by the narrator for the reader to close-read the remained of the short story. This invitation begins with a break in regular narrative time, ‘there upon me as I pondered’, which signals a tangent from the narrative proper. Poe’s narrator uses this tangent to make his readers aware that narrative’s setting holds a power to ‘thus affect us’, as derived from an intentional and careful arrangement of specific items (like crumbling stones or networking ivy). In this way, the narrator makes it clear that the setting’s tone is derived from ‘considerations beyond our depth’, and that this tone could easily be altered by a ‘different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of the picture’. So while a reader’s feelings about aesthetic qualities within this setting may be derived from their own horizon of expectation, the combination of these aesthetic parts can be leveraged by the narrator to create a specific affect.

That Poe’s narrator shows his awareness actively of setting a ‘scene’ for his readers creates a space in which the reader becomes acutely aware, or suspicious, of the setting. In this way, Poe’s narrator creates a sense of paranoia around the space he is presenting. From this point forward a careful reader will begin to examine the details presented by Poe’s narrator for patterns or inconsistencies. Certain details become suspicious, simply because the narrator places them in proximity to other ‘unrelated’ details. A trope that begins to arise from these seemingly unrelated details are instances of doubling. A suspicious reader will notice that nigh every aspect of the narrative has some type of mirror within the narrative itself, whether literal or syntactic.

The literary critics Herrmann and Kostis seem to have taken the narrator’s hint, and build their interpretation of ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ upon the different arrangement of particulars in various scenes within the short story. Specifically, they

point out instances of doubling (a facet of frequency) and consider what they might mean in context. They conclude that the story's numerous instances of doubling serve to conflate and overlap metonymy (a word, name or expression used as a substitute for something with which it is closely associated) and metaphor,

On the level of the signifier, such a superposition represents the abolition of barriers already destroyed by duplication, which intervenes simultaneously on the level of both signified and signifier, as though to confound them...a metaphor which allows the tale to end with an extraordinary metonymy...brings about the triumph of reason and destroys forever duplication — the image of disorder and essence of the fantastic tale.<sup>71</sup>

In other words, by tracking instances of doubling Herman and Kostis have concluded that the literal fall of the Usher estate, as expressed in seeming economic terms in the title of the narrative, serves as a metaphor for the superiority of rational thinking. The impossible house of Usher, full of suspicious duplicates, literally collapses when put under the close scrutiny it invites.

By making readers aware of the fact that every individual piece setting is part of a carefully constructed whole 'scene', Poe's narrator makes his readers hypersensitive small details. This hypersensitivity, given credence by strange instances of doubling that Herman and Kostis identify, create many false positives. Otherwise mundane details stand out as strange. Furthermore, objects which could be construed as strange or creepy are brushed off by Roderick, the estate's owner, as normal. For example, the narrator reacts to Roderick's claim that the vegetables growing around his house are 'sentient' with a dismissive statement, "Such opinions need no comment, and I will make none". Furthermore, the narrator describes the house of Usher as having, "vacant and eye-like

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<sup>71</sup> 1. Herrmann, Claudine, and Nicholas Kostis, "'The Fall of the House of Usher' or the Art of Duplication.," *Substance* 9, no. 1 (1980): (36-42) University of Wisconsin Press. doi:10.2307/3683927.

windows” and goes as far as to call the strange mist that surrounds the house an “exhalation”. These features of setting, carefully introduced throughout the narrative, create suspense by making the house seem alive. However, this tension is not resolved within the narrative proper. The house is never proven to be alive, or hold any tangible force. Instead, a seemingly minor character, Roderick’s sister, comes back from the dead (or never died), which leads the narrator to promptly flee from the house of Usher as it falls into itself. The story becomes too taugth with suspense, and collapses under its own stress, setting and all, with “a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters”. Paranoia is created, but never resolved. Nothing is proven. The story ends with an abrupt collapse. The many carefully placed tension-building bits of setting, such as numerous instances of doubling, are not used to any narrative conceit. The reader’s paranoid reading is not rewarded, as the things this type of reading is able to identify are not utilized. The reader is robbed of an impactful and cathartic finish. The meaning of such a story, therefore, can be derived not from an exciting finish, but the journey to that finish.

Arthur Robinson, another critic who attempts to pull symbolic meaning from the narrative through an interpretation that rests upon patterns of doubling within the story, concludes, “The issue is that of order, and any malfunctioning of the whole will affect each part, including Roderick himself. In summary, one can say that the ordered arrangement of the ‘House of Usher’ has resulted in its ‘sentience,’ and the two have combined in a ‘terrible influence’ tending to duplicate that order, and its impending collapse, within the family of Usher”.<sup>72</sup> In short, Robinson concludes that the story’s

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<sup>72</sup> 1. Arthur E. Robinson, "Order and Sentience in 'The Fall of the House of Usher,'" *PMLA* 76, no. 1 (March 1961): 71, PDF.

meaning rests in the reader's experience of traversing its specifically ordered setting. The interpretations of doubling within Poe's short story that Robinson and aforementioned scholars identify, explore, and attempt to interpret, resist a 'clean' or 'strong theory' reading<sup>73</sup>. What these critics, and indeed Poe's narrator agree upon, is that the story contains a carefully arranged series of particular parts that compound to make the reader feel uneasy. However, rather than attempt to pull meaning from the way these parts are ordered and placed, I posit that Poe's short story is about paranoid reading itself. The narrator's acknowledgement that the house of Usher's creepy tone is created by a careful and ordered arrangement of particular details creates a story in which these details become the reason for the stories existence. When the house of Usher collapses, and the narrative comes to an end, the reader is left with an unresolved series of duplicated symbols and queues.

The very type of reading encouraged by the narrator at the beginning of Poe's story becomes irrelevant with the stories conclusion. This is extremely similar to *Thief*, in that the type of reading taught by the tutorial and playing through a majority of the game (gestalt), is made irrelevant by confusing gamespace presented on the third floor of the mansion in 'The Sword'. What is more, both types of reading are challenged by the act of moving through (traversing) the setting of each respective narrative. As such, both narratives achieve a similar affect when they force their respective readers to reassess their position in relation to each texts' setting.

In both cases, the narrative serves as a diversion from everyday experience. The narrative theorist Paul Cobley points out that,

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<sup>73</sup> The idea of 'strong theory' is drawn from Sedgwick, and results from a well evidenced paranoid reading. (2. Sedgwick and Frank, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy*, 123-51.)

The progress of fictional narrative must, necessarily, be impeded; and this is the key point. Narrative must entail some kind of delay or even diversion, detours and digressions. Moreover, these can yield a certain amount of pleasure for the reader. Crucially, however, such delays or digressions are not fool proof mechanisms which guarantee enjoyment; instead, the space between beginning and end in narrative is where the reader will be involved in doing work.<sup>74</sup>

Rather than try to cover up that narrative must be impeded and hold digressions between its beginning and end, Poe's narrative asks the reader to pay attention to the idea that it is a digression. The narrative's resistance to a clean interpretation drawn from paranoid close reading, what Cobley calls 'doing work', implies that the enjoyment of the narrative comes from this puzzling over work. In other words, 'The Fall of The House of Usher' may intentionally be an unsolvable literary puzzle-box — A work that resists interpretation through its awareness of the idea that the reader is constantly working with the text. The idea of doing non-trivial work should resonate with my discussion of ergodic literature as presented in this project's introduction. In the context presented therein, 'The Fall of The House of Usher' can be considered a piece of ergodic literature only if approached with close reading in mind.<sup>75</sup> Similarly, *Thief* asks its players to 'do work' in learning to read, interpret, and react to its various gamespaces — in developing a gestalt. It does not attempt to hide the idea that the player is doing work, rather this idea is at the forefront of the game's design with each chapter (level) presented as a new 'job' for the player to complete. That the two texts overlap, both in similar affect, and in the method of work required to achieve this affect creates an interesting case in cross media

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<sup>74</sup> 1. Paul Cobley, *Narrative* (London, NY: Routledge, 2001), 12.

<sup>75</sup> This is, admittedly, a slippery slope. For, what piece of literature would be denied the labeled ergodic if approached by a reader determined to analyze and thus do non-trivial work with the text. I think the classification does not fit for Poe's narrative because, although it invites this non-trivial work in its first paragraph, the fact that the story can be understood without doing this work pushes against its classification as such.

studies. For, both texts present the idea that performing the act of 'reading and interpreting' (i.e. doing work) is pleasurable unto itself. It is interesting to note that both texts point to this pleasure by way of using it to create an unsettling affect. Once one realizes that the text is only unsettling as a result of ones own work, a distance from said affect is created, allowing the worker to enjoy the fruits of their labor.



### Chapter 3 – Characterization

“While narrativity is a type of meaning, interactivity, when put in the service of entertainment, is a type of play.” – Marie-Laure Ryan.<sup>76</sup>

In May of 2004 Espen Aarseth published an essay in the *Electronic Book Review* entitled ‘Genre Trouble’. Within this essay, Aarseth argues for a study of videogames actively divorced from the study of literature, film, and other pre-existing media. He pushes against a trend in academic analysis of video games towards, “...an ideology that we might call ‘narrativism.’ This is the notion that everything is a story, and that story-telling is our primary, perhaps only, mode of understanding, our cognitive perspective on the world. Life is a story, this discussion is a story, and the building that I work in is also a story, or better, an architectural narrative.”<sup>77</sup> Under the epidemic of narrativism, Aarseth lambasts the kind of work performed by this project, of connecting video games to other narrative forms, namely literature.<sup>78</sup> While addressing comparisons of video games to literature specifically, one of Aarseth’s primary gripes is that while, “Novels are very good at relating the inner lives of characters (films perhaps less so); games are awful at that, or, wisely, they don’t even try. We might say that, unlike literature, games are not

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<sup>76</sup> 1. Marie Laure Ryan, "From Narrative Games to Playable Stories: Towards a Poetics of Interactive Narrative," *A Journal of Narrative Studies* 1 (2009): 45, PDF.

<sup>77</sup> 1. Espen Aarseth, "Genre Trouble," *Electronic Book Review*, May 4, 2004, accessed April 30, 2016, <http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/firstperson/vigilant>.

<sup>78</sup> “What keeps the genre [of story driven adventure games] alive is increasingly more photorealistic, detailed three-dimensional graphical environments, but apart from that, it is mostly the same story-game over and over again. Unlike other games, but like most novels, these games are normally only played once, and typically not completed. This makes them very different from other games. Players are often stuck on one of the puzzles and have no choice but either to buy the solutions book, download a “walkthrough” guide from the Internet, or give up. Perhaps we could say that this genre is really only one and the same game, the same rule system repeated over and over with variable cultural conventions and increasingly better technology... The gameworld is its own reward, and the end, if and when it comes, does not offer dramatic satisfaction, but a feeling of limbo. There is no turning back, and no going forward. You are no longer employed by the game. Time to buy another.” (2. Aarseth, "Genre Trouble,")

about the Other, they are about the Self. Games focus on self-mastery and exploration of the external world, not exploration of interpersonal relationships”.<sup>79</sup> While this may have been true of most ‘AAA’ titles being released in 2004, it has been twelve years since Aarseth made this definitive statement.

In recent years the advancement, streamlining, and simplification of videogame development systems — specifically game engines like Unity, The Source Engine, and Unreal 3 — have opened up a space for smaller teams, or individuals, to affordably author focused digital narrative experiences.<sup>80</sup> Within this new space, a fairly new genre of game has emerged. Derisively termed the ‘walking simulator’, this genre of video game offers a focused experience. The genre is defined by three primary factors — duration, control schema, and experience of play. These games usually take between one and five hours to play through to completion. They limit player interaction and movement through 3-D space to ‘WASD’<sup>81</sup>, and an ‘interact’ button, often designated to a mouse’s ‘left click’. Finally, as their colloquial name suggests, they consist primarily of walking through a 3-D environment.

This chapter will consider *Firewatch* (2016), a recently released ‘walking-simulator’, as an example of a game that powerfully resists Aarseth’s claim regarding characterization. By implicitly avoiding a focus on ‘self-mastery’, and offering the player a series of minute choices during the course of exploring the gamespace (specifically

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<sup>79</sup> 3. Aarseth, "Genre Trouble,".

<sup>80</sup> It should be noted that an important part of these engine’s popularity is their nature as ‘open source’ tools. Unlike engines developed by ‘AAA’ studios, which demand licensing fees to produce and market a product, these engines require little or no money to download and utilize assuming the user has hardware capable of 3D modeling and rendering. In this way, the videogame designer is limited by time and artistic ability, rather than funds and coding prowess (although the latter still poses trouble for many, even with simplified ‘drag and drop’ systems). In this way, the making of videogames has recently become ‘democratized’.

<sup>81</sup> “WASD” movement refers to movement in 3-D space whereby ‘W’ is bound to forward motion, ‘S’ to backwards, ‘A’ to left, and ‘D’ to right.

directed towards characterizing the protagonist) *Firewatch* is able to simultaneously satisfy a desire to see oneself reflected within the gamespace whilst also successfully telling a story about the interpersonal relationship between two volunteer fire lookouts in the wilderness of Wyoming. It accomplishes this trick by asking the player to inhabit the player-character (Henry), but maintains that Henry remains distinct unto himself. In this way, the player is Henry, but Henry remains clearly distinct from the player.<sup>82</sup>

Furthermore, I posit that *Firewatch*'s narrative is uniquely suited to the medium of video games, and that the way characterization occurs could not be seamlessly accomplished by other forms of media.

While this chapter is primarily interested in the mechanics of characterization, as these mechanics are inseparably tied to character progression, a discussion of the former would make little sense without a basic sense of the context granted to the latter.

*Firewatch* follows a man named Henry during a retreat from the responsibility of caring for his wife who suffers from early onset dementia. During the performance of regular maintenance activities under the purview of his supervisor and only contact to the outside world, Delilah, Henry begins discovering strange occurrences. Early on Henry finds an abandoned backpack belonging to a boy named Brain, whom Delilah explains was once a fire lookout with his father, Ned. A series of seemingly unrelated strange notes, and other signs that Henry is being surveyed, are discovered at regular intervals. Furthermore, a mysterious fence, of which Delilah has no knowledge, hides a government run research camp. Eventually Henry finds the remains of Brain, who died during a climbing accident

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<sup>82</sup> For another take on this idea see Olivia White's article published by Vox Media's 'Polygon' on February 12th 2016. White, Olivia. "Firewatch Took Away Our Ability to Be Good People, and That's Where It Shines." *Polygon*. Vox Media, 12 Feb. 2016. Web. 17 Apr. 2016. <<http://www.polygon.com/2016/2/12/10966494/firewatch-agency-campo-santo>>.

with his father. Unable to take responsibility for the death of his child, Ned escaped society by living as a hermit in the same forest he was once assigned to tend. By the game's end, Ned, who is never caught or seen directly, reveals himself to be the source of the signs of surveillance via a tape recording. The abandoned government camp, which upon initial discovery appears mysterious and sinister, was erected simply to study local wildlife. The fire, which ignites at this camp shortly after its discovery, merges with another local fire, and an evacuation order is given to all fire lookouts. Henry says goodbye to Delilah over the ever-present two-way radio, having never seen her, and escapes the fire via an evacuation helicopter. Henry ostensibly claims responsibility for his mistakes (DWI, alcoholism) and return home to care for wife.

The game's narrative follows a simple pattern: The PC (Player Character), Henry, awakes in his fire-watch tower to the voice of Delilah over the radio, who presents a new, often mundane task to be completed. The completion of this task always requires the player to traverse, or 'hike', through a new part of the game's environment. On the course of this hike the player will always encounter at least one of several minor distractions from the main task. Shortly after completing that day's task, if the player is not asked to hike back to the fire-watch tower, the screen turns black and a new day begins. This structure repeats until Henry must escape the forest via helicopter — an event that ends the game.

Characterization in *Firewatch* manifests itself through three primary forms of interaction: Instruction, distraction, and dialogue. These interactive forms of characterization intertwine and enable each other in a cyclical pattern. 'Instructions' constitute the choice offered in nearly every game: to follow, or deliberately ignore,

instructions given by the game. In *Firewatch* the player is offered the illusion of an open world. A central hub, Henry's lookout tower, connects a series of hallways depicted as hiking trails. While these hiking trails are very well decorated by the dense flora and fauna of Wyoming's wilderness, and the player can wander off the path at times, any thorough inspection of the gamespace will reveal the nature of these paths as linear hallways, rather than truly open wilderness found in games like *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) or *The Elder Scrolls: Oblivion* (2006). When asked to perform a certain task, the player must consult a topographical map to find the correct path to follow. At this point the player can choose whether or not Henry will follow Delilah's instructions. However, this form of 'characterization', built into the game by its nature as an interactive system, is not encouraged or rewarded by narrative progression. Furthermore, any undirected exploration is not noted or recorded by the game, which does not set time limits, or have any interest in the amount of time it takes a player to reach a marked point of interest. In this way, whether the player makes Henry lackadaisical or militant in his completion of Delilah's instructions is a form of characterization that is created, and only recognized by, the player himself or herself. It should also be noted that the lack of any time constraints, or reward for mastering the game's basic control schema (outlined above in my general description of 'walking simulators'), allows *Firewatch* to handily sidestep any interest in what Aarseth terms 'self-mastery'.

The next form of characterizing interaction, distraction, arises during the normal course of play. While Henry is hiking, or in the process of completing a task, many objects that are entirely ancillary to the task at hand can be picked up, examined, and commented upon by way of a two-way radio (we will address the radio shortly). One of

the first tasks Henry must perform is addressing a thin plume of smoke that leads to an illegal campsite. While investigating this campsite, a majority of players will notice a bottle of whiskey perched atop a nearby rock [Fig.13].



Fig.13. “Whiskey Bottle.” Campo Santo, 2016. Author’s Screenshot.

If the player directs Henry to pick the bottle up (by way of moving the circular reticle over the bottle, and pressing ‘left click’), they are offered the choice to leave the whiskey at the campsite, “DROP”, or take it with them, “SAVE FOR LATER”, in the bottom right hand corner of the screen.<sup>83</sup> Although this choice may seem arbitrary at first, it has subtle yet reaching implications. The game drops hints during its prologue that Henry has an issue with alcohol abuse<sup>84</sup>, and if the player chooses to allow Henry to indulge in his

<sup>83</sup> The ability to see Hank’s legs, arms, and chest from his first person perspective is important. Most games, either by way of intentional choice, or limits on the game’s engine, do not let the player see the body they inhabit. By making this inhabited body not just present, but stylized — Hank has thick hands, wears shorts, boots, and a large hiking backpack with straps that occasionally swing into view — *Firewatch* is making an intention choice to couch the player in the body of a set character. Looking around the environment or interacting with an object is synonymous with catching glimpses of Hank’s body, an event that serves to remind the player they inhabit a character distinct from themselves. The body is not their own, or even one they have created. This point may seem stressed when viewed from the perspective of a literary audience, but from the view of an experienced player, this choice is a significant one.

<sup>84</sup> Henry first meets his wife in a bar while drunk. Much of their relationship as described during the game’s ‘click-through’ text prologue is foregrounded by Henry’s constant consumption of alcohol. Part of what brings Henry to the wild of Wyoming the fact that he got a DWI while he was supposed to be caring for his wife —

habit by taking the bottle, it will appear on Henry’s desk the next morning [Fig.14]. Moreover, it will remain full on Henry’s desk for the duration of the game. As such, regardless of whether or not the player forces Henry to have a moment of weakness — whereby they decide to take the bottle for later consumption — Henry remains distinct unto himself by never drinking the whisky. This implies that Henry feels genuinely guilty for the irresponsible actions that lead to his being considered incapable of taking care of his wife. It solidifies that by fleeing to the forest Henry is making a legitimate attempt to clear his mind and change his behavior. So, while the player can choose whether or not to take the bottle, Henry proves distinct unto himself by continuing his quest to reflect and reform despite a brief moment of weakness. Furthermore, and perhaps reductive to the aforementioned idea, is the fact that the bottle’s presence reminds the player of their agency within the space. It adds to the illusion that player choice truly matters within the gamespace.



**Figure 14 — “Whiskey on Henry’s Desk.”** Campo Santo, 2016. Author’s Screenshot.

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an incident her family uses to push Henry further away from his already estranged wife who is suffering from early onset dementia.

While at first these small distractions appear inconsequential, by the time the player completes the game, a series of interactions with minor distracting objects help to create a verisimilar character that holds a series of quirks with which the player can empathize. Continuing, these ‘distracting’ objects give rise to the third, and arguably most impactful interactive form of characterization found in *Firewatch* — dialogue trees.

Brent Ellison, a prominent game designer who holds a master’s degree in level design and wrote his thesis about interaction with non-player characters (NPC) in video games, defines dialogue trees:

The player reads dialogue and chooses their response from a limited set of choices available to them. Conversation typically moves forward such that the player cannot go back to previous topics or responses. From this basic framework, NPC interaction can be as simple as the player answering a yes or no question in a three-line conversation with a random NPC in town, or as complex as the relationship-building simulations in Japanese dating games like *Tokimeki Memorial* ...One common technique employed to give the player a greater illusion of freedom is to have multiple responses lead to the same path. This is usually done as an attempt to limit the quantity of dialogue that must be produced for the game. Therefore, branching dialogue usually curves back in on itself such that while an individual choice may immediately produce a unique response, the rest of the conversation is typically not unique to that choice.<sup>85</sup>

When Henry sees an object of interest, the player is given the option to comment on that object to Delilah via a two-way radio. It can be brought into the player’s view by holding the ‘shift’ key, and offers between one and three context dependent dialogue options [Fig.15]. By choosing a line of dialogue the player compels Henry to remark upon the object of interest, and Delilah usually responds. The import of the object determines whether Delilah’s response comes in the form of a statement or conversation starter.

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<sup>85</sup> 1. Brent Ellison, Defining Dialogue Systems, Gamasutra, last modified July 8, 2008, accessed April 30, 2016, [http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/3719/defining\\_dialogue\\_systems.php](http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/3719/defining_dialogue_systems.php).



Notably, Delilah’s responses shift in accordance with the chosen dialogue option. Although Delilah is never seen, and all interaction with this character is mediated via the radio, by the game’s close she has achieved verisimilitude alongside Henry through these conversations. Furthermore, the content of the choices made in these conversations are tangibly reflected within the gamespace.

Take, for example, a moment that appears about halfway through the game. Upon the start of a new day<sup>86</sup>, Delilah asks Henry what he looks like. Replying that he doesn’t know where to start, Delilah proceeds to pose Henry with a series of questions regarding his appearance. As the player is only granted a view of Henry’s body dressed in hiking garb, and does not see a depiction of his face in-game or his body pre-player possession, the answers to these questions are very open to interpretation. However, the options presented by Henry all convey the same sentiment, but in slightly different tones.



Figure 15 — “Dialogue Tree.” Campo Santo, 2016. Author’s Screenshot.

<sup>86</sup> Unlike most dialogue in *Firewatch*, this moment is not triggered by an in game object, but by an event (the start of a new day). The reason I use this example, rather than one that is triggered by a ‘distracting’ object, is because this conversation has tangible repercussions.

“Clothes. I don’t really think about it” and, “I try to look nice, usually” are almost exactly the same type of vague and casual response to the question ‘What do you normally wear?’ because they both convey a general lack of specific thought. While it may be difficult to determine without the context provided by Henry and Delilah’s usual banter, the center option, ‘Tuxedos, as often as possible’, is a response that jokingly avoids the question altogether. Like the other two options, this response shows a general lack of concern for attire. It is revealed after another half hour of play that the way the player chose to respond to these questions is reflected in a tangible drawing.



Figure 16 — “Three Permutations of Henry.” Campo Santo, 2016. Compiled Author’s Screenshot.

Pictured above [Fig. 16] are but three permutations of the same drawing as effected by specific choices made within the aforementioned conversation. Notice how in the first two images Henry is in a tuxedo jacket, while the third shows Henry sporting a bowling shirt. Each image shares the same eyes, beard, hairy legs and shorts, but the specifics of dress, posture, and expression change in accordance with the previously selected conversation options. This is how characterization functions in *Firewatch*. Interaction

with distracting objects, like the whisky bottle, in combination with found objects that reflect player choice (like this image) contribute to the feeling that Henry and Delilah are “round”<sup>87</sup> characters who doodle idly while chatting, and have habits they may or may not resist. They also satisfy a desire that Aarseth identifies to, ‘see oneself reflected in the gamespace’, whilst still leaving room in the avatar to build a distinct verisimilar character — A character whose negative traits are set, but whose positive quirks are selected primarily by the player, ensuring that said character will be likable on some register. Notably, this form of characterization would be impossible without player input. If a player chooses not to act, or answer any of Delilah’s questions, the game’s plot cannot progress. If the player only answers ‘story critical’ questions, but ignores all other dialogue, the story quickly begins to make little sense.<sup>88</sup>

Requiring interaction to experience the storyline seems to couch *Firewatch* somewhere between what critics have termed the fictional ‘holodeck’ and real ‘hypertext’ — frameworks for understanding interactive material. The holodeck is a fictitious form of ‘perfect’ virtual reality, introduced on the television show *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987). The idea was given serious academic consideration by Janet Murray in *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997). Murray, a senior research scientist in MIT’s Center for Educational Computing Initiatives at the time of publication, describes the holodeck as;

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<sup>87</sup> 1. E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 65-82, PDF.

<sup>88</sup> I owe this observation primarily to a forum user ‘Floralcode’, who made a post on Reddit about the issues created when the player refuses to interact with Delilah via the radio. — 1. Floralcode to Reddit web forum, "just beat Firewatch and only talked to Delilah when the game made me. Here's what happened. (Lots of spoilers)," February 10, 2016, accessed April 30, 2016, [https://www.reddit.com/r/Firewatch/comments/454ujh/i\\_just\\_beat\\_firewatch\\_and\\_only\\_talked\\_to\\_delilah/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Firewatch/comments/454ujh/i_just_beat_firewatch_and_only_talked_to_delilah/)

...an empty black cube covered in white gridlines upon which a computer can project elaborate simulations by combining holography with magnetic ‘force fields’ and energy-to-matter conversions. The result is an illusory world that can be stopped, started, or turned off at will but that looks and behaves like the actual world and includes parlor fires, drinkable tea, and characters... [The holodeck] is a universal fantasy machine, open to individual programming: a vision of the computer as a kind of storytelling genie in the lamp... [that enables a user] to participate in stories that change around them in response to their actions.<sup>89</sup>

In this way Murray positions the holodeck as the penultimate narrative medium in which a user could experience a reactive narrative world indistinguishable from reality. The user is offered complete freedom within the holodeck-space and any derivative action would be subsumed by, and incorporated into, the overarching narrative presented by the simulation. In this way, the holodeck offers any user complete agency within a set scenario.

On the opposite end of the spectrum sits the hypertext. Unlike the holodeck, the hypertext is both limiting and very real. At its core, a hypertext is any text that evokes another text without explicit mention of said text. Many people have casually encountered a hypertext while browsing the Internet, in the form of an e-mail or article that contains links<sup>90</sup> embedded within its text. Gerard Prince, a French literary theorist, defines ‘hypertextuality’ as, “any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the *hypertext*) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the *hypotext*), upon which it is

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<sup>89</sup> 1. Janet Horowitz Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1998), 15.

<sup>90</sup> Hyper-links or ‘http’ links to a website when clicked.

grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary.”<sup>91</sup> The literary scholar Marie-Laure Ryan, who examines the space created between hypertext and holodeck states:

[Hypertext] limits the user's agency to selecting an item from a menu of possible choices. What hypertext gains in actual feasibility over the Holodeck, thanks to the simplicity of its algorithm, it loses in ability to create narrative meaning and immersion in a fictional world: narrative is a linear, causal sequence of events whose significance depends on their position on a temporal axis, while hypertext is a net work of textual fragments that can be read in many different orders. Unless the user's choices are severely restricted, it is highly unlikely that they will produce a sequence that respects narrative logic.<sup>92</sup>

*Firewatch* can be seen to strike a balance between these two forms of interactive storytelling by incorporating a form of organized hypertext, the dialogue tree, into an imperfect ‘holodeck- esque’ game-world. I say ‘holodeck- esque’ because while *Firewatch* clearly does not present the level of interaction or immersion made available by the theoretical holodeck, it does place a user within the body of a clearly defined avatar in digital space.

In striking a balance between hypertext and holodeck, *Firewatch* can be understood as a type of play, designed to be enjoyed by an actor rather than an audience. Within this analogy Campo Santo is the playwright and the player can be understood as an actor. Once the actor is given their script, in this case the game’s instructions, they must make decisions as to how to interpret this script for themselves — Take, for example, *Othello*; Does Iago plot to ruin Othello because he is passed over for promotion, because Iago is racist or xenophobic, because he is insane? — All these interpretations of Shakespeare’s famous villain are valid, and can be supported by the text of *Othello* to

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<sup>91</sup> 1. Gerard Genette, "Five Types of transtextuality, among which hypertextuality," in *Stages*, trans. Channa Newmann and Claude Doubinsky, vol. 8, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 5, PDF.

<sup>92</sup> 2. Ryan, "From Narrative Games to Playable," 44.

some degree. However, whichever version of Iago is depicted on stage is ultimately a result of choices made by the actor who plays him. Iago is always despicable and unequivocally evil, but how and why these traits manifest is left to the actor who plays him. In the same way, Henry is always selfish, indulgent, sarcastic, but nonetheless attempts to do ‘the right thing’. Every possible version of Henry is in Wyoming to take a break from the stresses of attempting to care for his wife who suffers from early onset dementia. Every possible version of Henry flirts with his supervisor Delilah. Every possible version of Henry escapes an out of control fire via helicopter. However, the details that come in-between these set story nodes are malleable. Here the player is given agency to interactively shape his or her own version of Henry, often towards the end of seeing oneself (subconscious or otherwise) reflected within the character. The game grants Henry many set negative traits by way of these set story nodes, however it leaves the player to select his most palatable enduring traits. In *Firewatch* dialogue trees restrict the player to acting as Henry, however while the negative aspects of Henry are set, his quirks, which make him endearing and ‘relatable’, are left to user choice. This type of character building, that all but grants the creation of an enduring character, is unique to the medium of video games, as it is impossible to achieve without an interactive system.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Although I have just likened this type of character building to the art of stagecraft and theatrical performance, there are some key differences that set video games as unique, which derive from the fact that video games are *designed* to be enjoyed by a player, rather than created for a passive audience. For, while in stagecraft the decisions involved in character building are actively hidden from an audience, in *Firewatch* the audience and character-builder are one in the same. Decisions in character are placed front and center. Unfortunately, the collapsing of audience and actor comes bundled with severe limitations. Rather than having complete agency (an actor on stage can choose to do whatever they please at any given moment), the player is guided through the process of building Henry by a series of pre-written sequences (hypertext). Unlike in stagecraft, no or truly unique version of Henry can be created, as each version of the character is pre-supposed by the game’s designer, who wrote each dialogue option and placed them in a logical sequence. However, the joy of playing through *Firewatch* is not diminished by this fact, and many players find great pleasure in discovering the multiple, pre-authored, versions of Henry.

In this way, *Firewatch* presents a form of viewing the inner life of a character that Aarseth didn't consider — a participatory form. Interaction does more than to help the player stay engaged with the narrative. The game's dialogue trees turn long hikes into meditative, rather than droll, experiences. They act as a buffer, and grant the player a customizable period of time to dwell, before 'turning the page' as it were to the next narrative event. Furthermore, these dialogue trees tie the exploration of an external world (gamespace) to the exploration of an interpersonal relationship. Any time the player chooses to make Henry remark upon a detail in the gamespace via the radio to Delilah, an opportunity is created for characterization. Campo Santo recognizes this opportunity, and uses it to great effect, compounding numerous instances of mundane interaction with the environment to collaboratively build verisimilar characters that hold a series of customized quirks.

Ultimately, *Firewatch* does not completely tear down Espen Aarseth's entire argument as presented in 'Genre Trouble' (2004). Multiplayer games like *Counter-Strike* (1999), *World of Warcraft* (2004), and *League of Legends* (2009) still demand the creation of a separate field of academic study to be properly understood in their own right. However, as this chapter has shown, Aarseth's claim regarding characterization in video games<sup>94</sup> can be challenged by the example posed by *Firewatch*. While this is the only game that I have engaged with on a critical level in this chapter, it is not the only game experimenting with single-player narrative exposition. *Gone Home* (2013), *Dear Esther* (2012), *The Stanley Parable* (2011), *The Beginners Guide* (2015), *The Vanishing*

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<sup>94</sup> "Novels are very good at relating the inner lives of characters (films perhaps less so); games are awful at that, or, wisely, they don't even try. We might say that, unlike literature, games are not about the Other, they are about the Self. Games focus on self-mastery and exploration of the external world, not exploration of interpersonal relationships" (2. Aarseth, "Genre Trouble,")

of *Ethan Carter* (2014), and *The Witness* (2016), are but a few games that delve into the messy work of crafting a game whose play is inseparable from experiencing its narrative. Perhaps in its striking a balance between holodeck and hypertext by way of allowing free exploration of the gamespace, but limiting dialogue to a series of selectable options, I argue that *Firewatch* is the most successful of these games to date.

More than anything else, I believe the example of *Firewatch* as presented in this chapter makes an argument for two separate permutations of games study that must both be understood as the same field. One permutation would focus specifically upon narrative video games, and would analyze games as a branch of the humanities. The other field would analyze non-narrative driven games — mimetic systems best enjoyed in replay varied by the actions of player(s). However, understanding of one type of game must be balanced against an understanding of the other. For, knowledge of the medium as a whole is required for responsible criticism.



## Conclusion

The first thing that must be acknowledged when establishing a basis for responsible games criticism is that video games take two fundamentally different forms in seeking to accomplish two fundamentally disparate goals. One form, which I term the ‘narrative form’, is expressly focused on leading its players through a story. The other: the ‘mimetic form’, achieves success when it can be enjoyably replayed. The mimetic game does not seek expressly to deliver a narrative, although aspects of the mimetic game may be explained by way of narrative. Rather, it attempts to create an experience of progression and mastery over a set of mechanics. These two approaches are often blended in modern commercial game design, to the great detriment of the overall experience of play. *Firewatch* is a rare example of a game that is confident enough in its ability to deliver a narrative that it explicitly avoids dipping into the mimetic form. The mixture of the two forms is most often seen in larger commercial games that include single player and multi-player modes.

Most educational institutions known for their game design programs do not focus on what this project has identified as the ‘humanities’ aspect of video games. They teach their students how to code in various languages, how to work on a team, and how to fit into the commercial infrastructure that forms the pipeline of most modern game creations. We can say they are broadly utilitarian, and in some ways, the ‘creative writing’ classes of game design. Clearly lacking from these programs is the ‘critical analysis’ type of course. While I’m sure some critical analysis goes on in practically oriented game design classes, I have yet to find a class that focuses specifically on

assessing video games as art objects. The ‘lit 103’ of game design, which teaches one to read and interpret the act of play in relation to game story, does not seem to exist.

Teaching future authors the practical tools to create games, but completely avoiding the humanities aspect of game design — the undefined unique ‘feel’ that so many games hold — has resulted in an insular culture. One common example of this insular culture is the common practice of describing games through other games. A recent review of the *Doom* (2016) beta, a reboot of an game from the 90’s, caught my eye as a particularly glaring example of this problem:

Doom [official site]! It’s the bloodsoaked new game with the demons and the rocket skeletons and the telefrags and the shotguns and the multiplayer levelling and the character customisation [sic] and the class-like loadouts and the double-jump. Yeah, you know Doom. Hmmm. Some of those things are more familiar than others to a seasoned Doom player like myself and I fear change more than I fear a sextet of Cyberdemons. The multiplayer beta for id’s latest opened today and, determined to face my fears, I’ve been playing for most of the day. It doesn’t feel like Doom. It’s a little like Quake 3 and a little like Unreal Tournament and maybe even a little like Call of Duty, though that’s more a structural comparison than a *game-feel* comparison. But whatever else it does feel like, it doesn’t feel like Doom.<sup>95</sup>

While this reviews strikes a casual tone, and is not attempting to be academic in any sense, it is clearly attempting to give its readers a sense of what the game *is* before they have played it. As such, the reviewer leans on assumed past experiences of play. He describes *Doom* (2016) as a combination of *Quake 3* (1999), *Unreal Tournament* (1999), and *Call of Duty* (2003) — a description that is entirely impenetrable to someone who has not been immersed in video game culture for the past sixteen years. Although I know

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<sup>95</sup> 1. Adam Smith, "Impressions: Knee Deep In DOOM's Open Beta," review of *DOOM (2016)*, Rock Paper Shotgun, last modified April 15, 2016, accessed April 30, 2016, <https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2016/04/15/doom-beta-review/>.

what this reviewer *means*, and he spends the rest of the review deconstructing the aforementioned paragraph, this method of description is problematic. What is more, it will only become more problematic as time passes, and more players have not played, or do not have access too, older games.

What is more, I myself am guilty of this tendency. While I have written this project for those less familiar with video games than myself, and have explicitly avoided weaving this type of description into my prose, I have still, at times, made quick nods to specific games (E.g. my mention of *Fez* at the beginning of Chapter 2). As such, I understand the pull towards this flawed epistemology. Video games are iterative. The history I present at the outset of Chapter 2 hopefully made this fact apparent.

Designers are constantly borrowing and re-implement systems from other games into their own. However, the act of re-implementation involves recoding a mechanic from the ground up — often in a different game-engine, using a different coding language. This introduces perceptible differences in how games *feel*. How does one capture this feeling without describing it in terms of other games that are similar? I believe the answer to this question lies somewhere in the dual academic study and critical analysis of games as both mimetic systems (already underway) and as a branch of the humanities which has yet to be fully embraced. If I have been successful, this project will server as a model for a field burgeoning field of study. For, by treating video games as a branch of the humanities, and applying the literary tool of close-reading to their mechanically driven narratives, I have inaugurated a new field of literary criticism for the digital age. I welcome others to pick up a controller and follow in the footsteps I have blazed through these pages.

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**Appendix of Images**

--Appendix of Figures—

Chapter 1:



Figure 1 – Tutorial with Sarah. Naughty Dog, 2013. Author's screenshot.





Figure 2 – “Aiming Down Sites.” Naughty Dog, 2013. Author’s Screenshot.



Figure 3 — “POV Switchh.” Naughty Dog, 2013. Author’s Screenshot.



Figure 4 — “Peering over Cover” Naughty Dog, 2013. Author’s Screenshot.

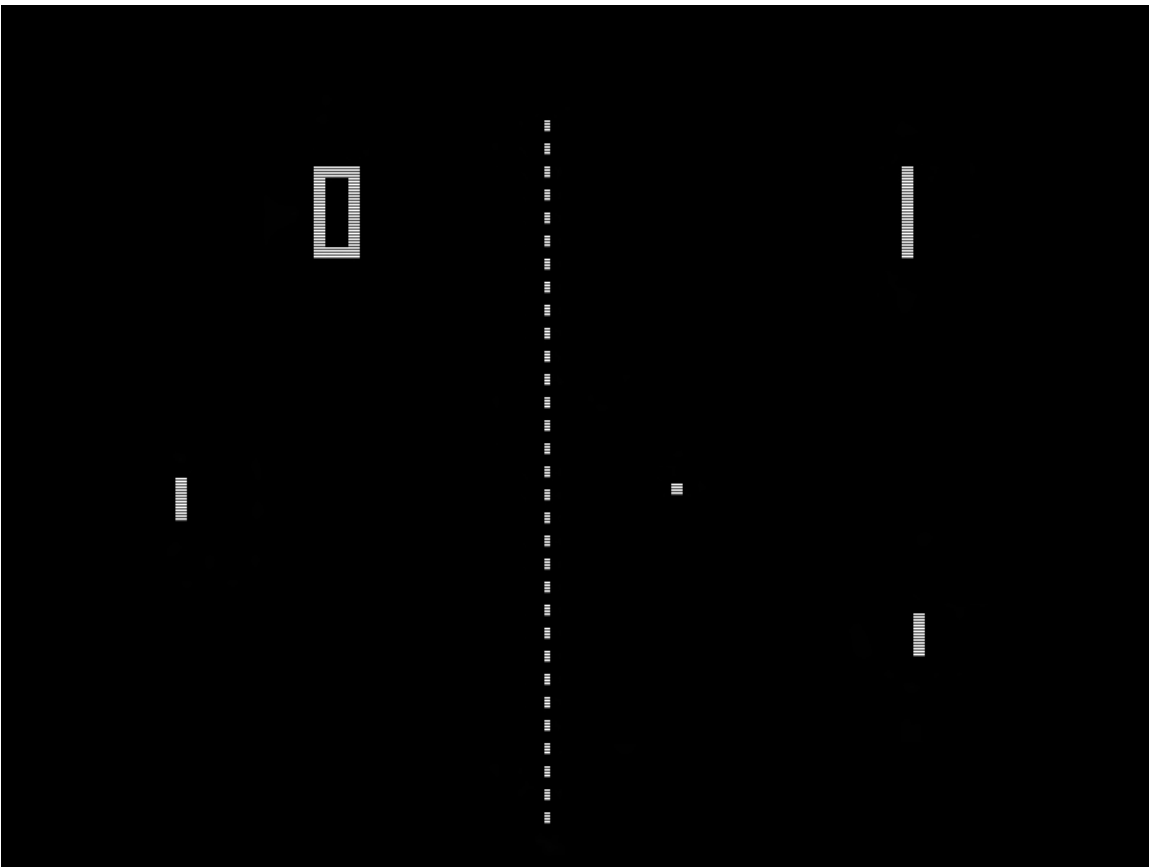


Figure 5 — “Pong.” Atari, 1972. Per:

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Pong#/media/File:Pong.png>

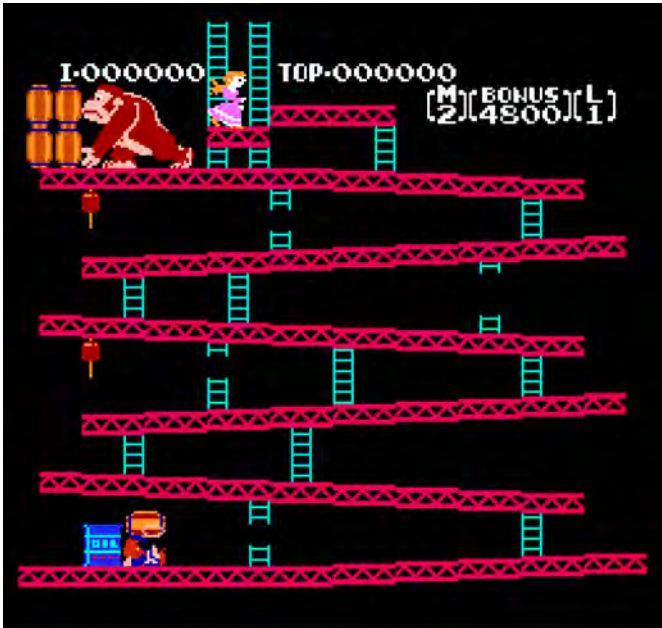


Figure 6 — “Donkey Kong.” Nintendo, 1981. Authors Screenshot Per:

<http://www.nesconsole.com/hp/donkey-kong/>



Figure 7 — “Super Mario Bros.” Nintendo, 1985. Author’s Screenshot Per:  
<http://www.nesconsole.com/hp/super-mario-bros/>



Figure 8 — “Map of First Chapter.” Looking Glass Studios, 1998. Author’s Screenshot.



Figure 9 – “Variable Lighting Tutorial.” Looking Glass Studios, 1998. Author’s Screenshot. (Image recolored for visibility)



Figure 10 — “Hallway to Gate.” Looking Glass Studios, 1998. Author’s Screenshot.

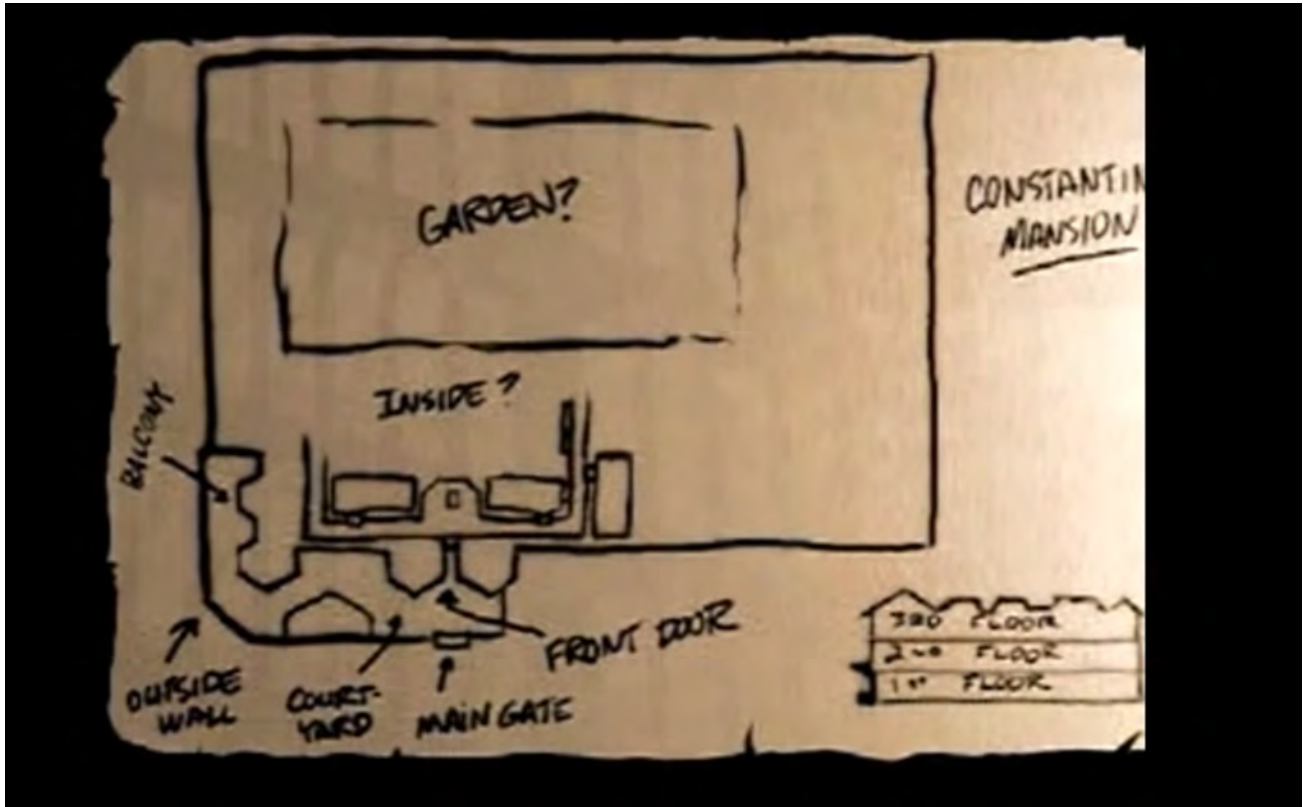


Figure 11 – “Incomplete map of *The Sword*” Looking Glass Studios, 1998. Author’s Screenshot.



Figure 12 — “Turning Room” Looking Glass Studios, 1998. Author’s Screenshot.



Fig.13. “Whiskey Bottle.” Campo Santo, 2016. Author’s Screenshot.



Figure 14 — “Whiskey on Henry's Desk.” Campo Santo, 2016. Author’s Screenshot.



Figure 15 — “Dialogue Tree.” Campo Santo, 2016. Author’s Screenshot.





Figure 16 — “Three Permutations of Henry.” Campo Santo, 2016. Compiled Author’s Screenshot.