

GAMEPLAY, EMOTIONS, & NARRATIVE:

INDEPENDENT GAMES EXPERIENCED

Written by
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Carnegie Mellon University: ETC Press
Pittsburgh, PA



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ISBN: 978-0-359-96146-7
ISBN: 978-0-359-98832-7

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This book is devoted to the emotional and narrative immersion in the experience of gameplay. The focus of our research is the complex interplay between the story and mechanics in digital games. The goal is to demonstrate how the narrative elements and the ludic elements together can form a variety of unique player experiences. The volume is a collection of case studies involving close reading of selected independent titles (largely indie games) with the focus placed on the themes, motifs and experimental approaches to gameplay that the relative freedom of the indie scene encourages.

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PREFACE

This book is meant to constitute a comprehensive, but by no means exhaustive analysis of all things concerning digital game texts. We have devoted attention to a number of selected games that in our opinion demanded that attention; not all of them are small independent game texts, and not all of them are high-profile either, but they are all bold in design, testing the limits of both the medium and the content by experimenting with the mechanics and storylines. In our analysis, we have chosen the method of case study and close reading to give justice to the complexity of the discussed texts.

Gameplay, Emotions and Narrative: Independent Games Experienced is intended for a wide academic audience, including scholars, students and professionals interested in digital games, especially in independent games, and their place among other texts of culture, as well as game scholars interested in unconventional gameplay solutions or emotional effects of game texts. The central focus of the volume is the player experience, and for this reason we strived to expand our approach beyond the available theoretical tools by referring to players' and developers' testimonies.

We would like to express our sincere gratitude towards Sahar Kausar (on behalf of Studio Duat—Timothy Ahene, Tai Ching Cheung, Guande Lyu, Euna Park, Guanghao Yang, Shuang You, and herself), Caleb Biasco, Yujin Ariza, Wonjae Kim and Yifei Zhao (on behalf of Music in Motion—Rachel Rodgers, Urvil Ajit Shah, and themselves), Euna Park (on behalf of TheatAR—Raisa Chowdhury, Apoorva Kuduvalli Ramesh, Sudha Manigundam Raghavan, Dan Wolpow, and herself) and Dan Wolpow (on behalf of Prism—Ridima Ramesh, Xueyang Wang, Yutian Zheng, Yidi Zhu, and himself) for their time and insight into the process of

creating digital experiences; we are also deeply indebted to Drew Davidson, Brenda Bakker Harger, Ralph Vituccio, and the other members of the Carnegie Mellon's Entertainment Technology Center for making us feel more than welcome. Their comments and remarks helped us shape some of the reflections in this book.

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INTRODUCTION

The premise behind this book is the analysis of the emotional and narrative immersion in the experience of gameplay, not simply from the perspective of game studies, but from that of cultural studies as well. The goal of adopting a wider perspective is not only to enable the analysis of selected titles as digital game texts representative of their medium, but also to place them in a broader context of the continuity of human cultural activity.

Towards Reciprocity

At the time of publishing of this book, digital games remain perhaps the most recent medium of art and entertainment available to humankind. Some digital game texts constitute artistic endeavors of their creators, others focus on storytelling, while yet others are meant to be purely enjoyable. For this reason, there are researchers who tend to focus on the antagonism—or lack thereof—between prioritizing the narrative and prioritizing the ludic (Aarseth 2001, Crawford and Gosling 2009, Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2013, Frasca 2003, Jenkins 2004, Juul 1999, Kapell 2016, Konzack 2007). However, apart from occasional, as Matthew Kapell refers to them, "outbursts against 'narrative' in general" in digital game studies, the debate concerning the superiority or suitability of giving priority to "play" over "story" or the other way round is, as such, virtually non-existent (Kapell 2016: 1). It is also worth noting that the understanding of the concept of narrative in previously expressed oppositional approaches was rather poor, and consequently provided very little in terms of resolving existing issues or improving research tools (Kapell 2016: 1). The novelty of the medium of digital games, and the relationship between the player and the game software do indeed represent a new form of human activity beyond just another phase in the evolution of

storytelling. Yet, even if game texts were to be treated as such, they are nowadays no longer regarded, explored or analyzed as marginal, avant-garde practices, but as a part of wider entertainment and popular culture landscape (Dubbelman 2011: 162).

However, it is paramount to keep in mind that digital game texts are capable not only of telling stories, but also of delivering experiences to their audiences in ways that until very recently were inconceivable. The key element contributing to this experiencemaking are the mechanics—something that is a characteristic, if not a defining feature of digital games (Elson et al. 2014: 528), and that can also be regarded as a form of expression in itself, complementing other elements of the text responsible for storytelling. In order to conduct a comprehensive analysis that gives justice to a contemporary game text, a scholar cannot and should not, as Jan-Noël Thon points out, reduce the game's world and its content—i.e. the stories and experiences within it—to "either interactive simulation or narrative representation, since it is constituted precisely by the complex interplay between these two modes of representation" (Thon 2016: 17). Reducing a game text merely to a narrative eliminates the participation of the player as well as the systemic nature of games (Fernández-Vara 2015: 87), both of which are, in fact, fundamental to the functioning of digital game texts. Conversely, even if in some games the story element may be irrelevant to the gameplay, the story premise itself, or the events of the story are still indispensable to the analysis if they are central to the experience (Fernández-Vara 2015: 87). Still, in some game texts or even whole genres, the story tends to be the central element of the gameplay experience, but it is the mechanics that determine whether that gameplay is actually enjoyable (Elson et al. 2014: 528). As follows from the above, only by taking into consideration both those aspects of the chosen game text can a scholar do justice to their analysis.

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A digital game text—like any text—can be understood as a *gestalt* of form and content, the medium of choice and the message the creator or creators wished to convey to the receiver (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 2011: 296). Jim Bizzocchi and Joshua Tanenbaum state that "the nexus for [the] reciprocal [dynamic] relationship" between the medium and the message can be found "in the design of [the given, specific text]" (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 2011: 296). As they argue,

> This specific engagement with the form, design, content, and experience of an individual work is at the same time an engagement with the general form and the overall design dynamics of the chosen medium. (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 2011: 296-297)

The actual potential of the complexity of the engagement with text is especially noticeable in digital game texts, constituting a peculiar manner in which games affect their players. Any decisions made by the game creator affect the final outcome of the experience they wanted to create for the player of the game; therefore, even when games tell stories, they tell stories only games could tell, seeing as the player has the power to make choices—either literally through mechanics or by exercising their agency.

Our book *Gameplay, Emotions and Narrative: Independent Games Experienced* is devoted to the interplay between the ludic and the narrative and the resulting experiences game texts can deliver—since, as Emily Joy Bembeneck states, "video games only truly become their own genre when ludic and narrative elements come together" (Bembeneck 2015: 58). For the purpose of this book, we use the concept of the "narrative" to refer to both the story components (i.e. the "succession of events, real or fictitious, that are the subjects of this discourse, and to their several relations of linking, opposition, repetition, etc." [Genette 1980: 25]) and the process of sense making (i.e. the interpretation of the available elements of the game world in a way that provides the

depicted world with coherence). In game texts, narratives emerge only through the process of gameplay (Neitzel 2005: 50-51), which also determines a definite sequence of events (in contrast to all the potential sequences of events) (Neitzel 2005: 47). Therefore, the analysis of narrativity in digital games must never disregard the process of playing as such (Neitzel 2005: 50). The "ludic", on the other hand, as we understand it, concerns such aspects of a game text as mechanics (the rules by which game text software defines the affordance for the player's actions) and gameplay (the process and experience of playing the game), as well as agency (the player's control over available actions and decisions) and feedback (the fact that the world of game responds to the player's actions to a certain degree). Apart from these four aspects, the game architecture (Ensslin 2013: 52) should also be included in the concept of "ludic" the way it is used in this book, specifically the audiovisual representation, since it helps in creating a particular mood, as well as expressing the themes of the given game text (Fernández-Vara 2015: 149).

At this point it is also important to note that games—especially digital ones—have entered a stage of rapid artistic development (Isbister 2016: xvii), becoming ever more capable of engaging their players emotionally and intellectually in increasingly sophisticated ways. They are, however, yet to be universally regarded as potential works of art for a variety of reasons, from the claim that digital games do not reflect "the personal visions" of life created by *an* artist (Jones 2012) to the unfortunately limited perception of them as complex toys; games have, as Thomas Malaby points out, a "long-running, deep, and habitual association with 'play'," a term which is itself quite problematic to define and apply across activities (Malaby 2007), let alone media. The continuing reducing of digital game texts to texts which are supposed to provide primarily—if not exclusively—amusement is simplistic at best and restrictive to their artistic development at worst. Games are capable of evoking intense emotional reactions in the players precisely because they are not separable from

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everyday life (Malaby 2007)—quite the contrary. They often employ specific techniques which allow them to arouse emotions in the players by reflecting the way our brains make sense of the everyday reality of the surrounding world (Isbister 2016: 7). This includes various texts, from visual novel-type games reflecting the most trivial issues in young people's lives (such as numerous stories in the *Episode: Choose Your Story* series, for instance *The Baby Project*, 2018 or *It Starts With A Bra*, 2018) to games whose themes average adults can relate to—for example, working out the difficulties and changes in one's life (as can be seen in *Firewatch,* 2016). Moreover, games are not regarded by their players as either "consequence-free" or non-productive (Malaby 2007), since it is precisely the notion of being capable of performing actions with consequences that "unlock[s] a new set of emotional possibilities" (Isbister 2016: 2), including pride resulting from either progress or conduct (Isbister 2016: 40) or the sense of accomplishment stemming from the ability to overcome challenges either independently or with a group of others, e.g. unlocking as many achievements as possible in a given game or reaching the endgame stage in MMORPGs and actively participating in it, (such as in *EVE Online*, 2003, or *Guild Wars 2*, 2012). Most importantly, digital games are not always "pleasurable" or "fun" (in a "normatively positive" sense—Malaby 2007); sometimes they may be distressing (such as *Behind the Wallpaper*, 2016—a point-and-click digital game text about the fate of the Jewish people during the Second World War), or constitute a source of aesthetic and cognitive discomfort (such as *INSIDE*, 2016, which is known for its confusing plot, sinister aesthetics, and disturbing content). Therefore, not every gameplay experience will be automatically pleasurable and amusing (Malaby 2007). The progress of research and the consequent comprehension of digital games remains impeded by this old-fashioned understanding of "play," just as it is impeded by the division into the narrative and the ludic.

Games, as far as the emotional range of their artistic impact is

concerned, resemble other media texts. They can amuse, they can move, they can horrify; most importantly, they can be imbued with "deep, normatively-charged meanings" by the players (Malaby 2007). The perceived meaningfulness and the enjoyment of the game is dependent to a degree on addressing and fulfilling specific needs of the player; as Elson et al. argue, "unlike enjoyment, the experience of meaningfulness in digital games is based … also on making the player aware of these [needs] and, potentially, also subverting them" (Elson et al. 2014: 533). The significance of the developer's choices concerning either that fulfillment or subversion will be discussed in detail in respective chapters of this book in the context of specific games.

Narrative and Mechanics Balanced in Gameplay

The key concerns of our project are the manner in which diverse experiences are expressed through game mechanics, the way the story is designed to develop in front of and/or around the player through gameplay, and the way in which the ludic elements and the narrative elements of games can be combined and blended to achieve a specific emotional effect on the player. This particular focus on the ludic–narrative division results from the fact that conceptualization of game texts as composites of those two fundamental aspects is not only applicable in case of nearly all digital game texts (Elson et al. 2014: 525), but is possibly one of the most productive academic perspectives as well. The narrative component of a game text is the element which can be easily comprehended by virtually anyone and analyzed with the use of a variety of rhetorical devices, due to the fact that the function of the narrative in game texts is actually very much alike to that in literature or film, even accounting for the interactive nature of game texts; indeed, such aspects as the story and plot, the setting and the characters are all contained within the narrative elements of the game text (Elson et al. 2014: 525). It is important to note that the narrative component of the game is the one to predominantly fulfill either the hedonic (related to

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pleasure-oriented aspects) or the eudaimonic (related to ethics-oriented aspects) "expectations and needs of the player" (Elson et al. 2014: 525). Interestingly, while the ratio of the aforementioned components providing the player with gratification in different game texts may vary, it does seem that more complex narrative structures and designs often correspond with meeting the eudaimonic expectations of the players. Conversely, games that are either purely or at least primarily hedonic in nature tend to include rather simple narratives, like in *Roombo: First Blood* (2019)—a game in which the player must defend a house by means of controlling a killer autonomous robotic vacuum cleaner—or have only rudimentary settings, as it is the case with the racing game *Muppet RaceMania* (2000), or *Kitty in the Box* (2014)—a game in which the goal of the player is to slide cartoon cats into boxes. In contrast, games which are oriented more towards addressing the eudaimonic needs of the players appear to rely on longer or more complex narrative designs; this can be seen in games such as *Lieve Oma* (2016), which attempts to convey the experience of trust and affection in a relationship with a family member, *You Left Me* (2018), which concerns the contemplation of ending one's own life after having suffered a tragic loss, or *Detention* (2017), which explores such themes as political oppression, betrayal and living with guilt—or its impossibility. Sometimes, however, the eudaimonic potential of a game with a complex story can be realized through the mechanics chosen by the developer; an example of this is Alice Rendell's *The Monster In Me* (2015), which makes use of a setting and story premise decidedly oriented towards the eudaimonic gratification, but exerts its effect proper primarily through the ludic component. In this game, throughout the process of gameplay the player's choices affect the emergent narrative in such an unpredictable, sometimes seemingly inconsistent way, that the player's eudaimonic expectations depend more on the mechanics than on the story itself. In this way, the narrative can be enhanced, if not shaped, through the use of mechanics (Elson et al. 2014: 533).

Game mechanics are not only a powerful extension of the engaging narrative experience (Dubbelman 2017: 287), but, together with elements traditionally associated explicitly with the narrative components—such as conventional cinematic or in-game cutscenes, clearly presented major choices (e.g. choosing whether to offer the only dose of antidote to the protagonist's wife, Mia, or to the strange young woman, Zoe, in *Resident Evil 7: Biohazard*) or even environmental storytelling—contribute to the overall experience of the game. The feedback the player receives in response to their input, and the manner in which that feedback is delivered through visual, auditory, and, in some cases, haptic cues (Elson et al. 2014: 527) are all parts of the game mechanics, which means that the ludic design adopted by the developer or developers—the virtual environment, the on-screen prompts, the controls, the actions available to the players—affects the way in which the narrative content of the game can be expressed, as well as, to a certain degree, the expressible content as such. Game mechanics have, therefore, an unquestionable narrative potential (Dubbelman 2017: 287), but one that is strikingly different from the narrative design of game texts; as Thon has it, "in contrast to narratively represented events, ludic events emerge through the rule-governed interaction of the player with the game spaces and are represented during this interaction according to certain rules of representation" (Thon 2016: 17), which makes them specific to both the depicted world of the game and its virtual environment. Scholars can easily distinguish between "rule-governed interactive simulation and predetermined narrative representation as two fairly different modes of representation" in digital game texts (Thon 2016: 17), but both are necessary for the game text to achieve the desired effect the developer or developers were aiming for.

In contrast to texts of other media, including novels, films, TV series or radio dramas, the meaningfulness of the experiences provided by digital games originates not merely from the storyline(s) or the audiovisual representation: the interactivity, as

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Elson points out, "adds a whole new layer of user experiences affecting both hedonic and eudaimonic gratifications in ways that are unique to the digital game medium" (Elson et al. 2014: 524). In case of media such as literature or cinema, the cumulative emotional impact of the given text on its audience is delayed in time, and, furthermore, results from the reader's interpretation, as it is subsequent to completing the process of interacting with the text. When game texts are concerned, this effect occurs in real time, so to speak, not only affecting the player's reception of the game's actualization until that point, but also influencing their further attitude, actions and potential concretizations (as defined by Roman Ingarden in *The Literary Work of Art*, 1973).

While discussing the reception of the game text, it is crucial to consider the significance of the avatar, that is, the character controlled by the player in the game. The avatar serves as a vehicle for experiencing thought-provoking and moving narrative components evocative of the personal lives of real people (Elson et al. 2014: 533). This experience can become more intense due to the unique relation(ship) between the player and the character, a relation(ship) exceeding the traditional extent to which a reader may identify with the protagonist of a novel or a viewer with the hero(ine) of the film. As Katherine Isbister notes, avatars and NPCs (non-player characters), which are specific to game texts, allow players to identify and engage with them in new ways,

> awakening different kinds of emotions that designers use not just for entertainment, but also for encouraging the deep awareness that travels alongside agency—a feeling of responsibility and of the complexity of relating to other beings. They offer us, as humans, a new bag of tricks for walking in another's shoes and reliving a situation in the present tense. (Isbister 2016: 41)

Game texts, when perceived as "series of interesting choices"

allowing for actions with consequences, which in turn have a "direct personal impact" (Isbister 2016: 2) on the emergent gameplay actualization (Marak and Markocki 2016: 19), undoubtedly produce—as a medium—a new, extensive range of emotional possibilities (Isbister 2016: 2) both for the creators and for the audience. In *How Games Move Us*, Isbister discusses the case of the board game *Train* created by Brenda Romero. *Train* constitutes a game text in which the matter of winning or failing is unquestionably secondary to the emotional and ethical impact exerted on the player by the completion of the gameplay. The game starts with players controlling train cars (specifically, box cars) filled with people; the objective is to overcome various obstacles and eventually reach the end of the track. The destination of the trains is revealed only at the very end of the game—and it is Auschwitz. The juxtaposition of the ludic and the ethical connotations in this case leads to a peculiar dissonance; the discordance between "the satisfying, flow-style emotions the player feels while mastering the system and rules of the game" and the "negative emotions that arise from the social context of these actions" (Isbister 2016: 10) deprives the player of pride over their victory. Isbister also points out that "*Train* can be seen as a meditation on similar painful and horrific emotional juxtapositions that may have occurred in the actual historical situation" (Isbister 2016: 10).

The medium of digital games makes it possible for the players to feel strong emotions, allowing the texts, in turn, to become powerful (Isbister 2016: 10). The actual power of games, whether digital or not, lies in their ability to "evoke deep, socially based emotions triggered by choice and consequence" (Isbister 2016: 10). The consequences of actions might be the key issue when discussing games as a medium; the choices made by a player, followed by the consequences inevitably experienced by that player, evoke a sense of personal responsibility characteristic of an agent, not a bystander. Emotions experienced as a result of these circumstances cannot usually be accessed in that particular

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manner in the context of other media (Isbister 2016: 40); the potential guilt of a perpetrator or the pride of a hero will not be felt in the same way by a reader of a novel or a viewer of a film, because, as Isbister notes, the player's satisfaction, as well as their sense of responsibility depend on the ultimate fate of the characters—be it the main avatar or a cherished NPC—in that game (Isbister 2016: 40).

> A reader or filmgoer may feel many emotions when presented with horrific fictional acts on the page or screen, but responsibility and guilt are generally not among them. At most, they may feel a sense of uneasy collusion. Conversely, a film viewer might feel joyful when the protagonist wins, but is not likely to feel a sense of personal responsibility and pride. (Isbister 2016: 8-9)

Some of the contemporary digital game texts not only employ, but actually heavily rely on this capacity to evoke strong emotions in the player, such as the responsibility for a particular NPC—e.g. the avatar's child or friend—guilt, or even disappointment with one's own performance of actions. A well-known example of this might be *The Walking Dead* (2012), where the players sometimes feel shame after Clementine witnesses certain actions of their avatar, or the sorrow and disillusionment in *Shadow of the Colossus* (2005), where at the very end of the game the player discovers that they have murdered innocent creatures for nothing. These experiences contribute to the blurring of the line between personal emotions and sympathetic emotions—i.e. the emotions related to one's own goals and situation, and the emotions felt for others, based on the appraisal of their situation (Frome 2016: 163). This peculiar, unique merging is directly related to the overlap between the goal(s) of the player and the goal(s) of the avatar in video games (Frome 2016: 164), an issue which is impossible to dismiss.

Games are, therefore, characterized by what Jan-Noël Thon refers to as ludic immersion—the shift in attention wherein the

player looks beyond just the components of the game world in order to consider not only the elements of that world, but also the various possibilities of action within that world (Thon 2008: 36). This is a fundamental trait that distinguishes digital game texts from other media texts—when playing a game, the player can, to a greater or lesser extent, at least attempt to influence the direction or the possible outcomes of the emergent narrative through their own actions, decisions and skill (Isbister 2016: 2). The fact that sometimes a game may purposefully deny the player that opportunity is equally significant in the context of the types of gratification which can be elicited from a text.

The Benefits of Close Reading of Digital Games

This volume is a collection of case studies involving close reading of selected independent titles. From a plethora of available game texts created and distributed by developers and publishers—ranging from single independent amateur artists to large companies with high budgets at their disposal—we have selected a relatively small number of digital game texts that meet specific criteria: all the texts must feature a story and a fictional world, can be completed once the player enacts their narrative to the end (or an end), and have been intentionally designed to provoke a strong emotional response (or multiple responses) in the player. All of them are also single player experiences, and all are limited in scope—understood as the size of the text, i.e. the time commitment required and the actual hours needed for traversing both the narrative and the environment of the game (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 2011: 300)—to no more than nine hours.

Another trait common to all the games which are the primary focus of the respective chapters is the fact that every title tends to present a singular, specific idea—a concept that is prominently featured in the way the game is designed as one cohesive text. In terms of the story, as well as the game's mechanics, to a varying

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degree, these concepts tend to be fantastic in nature; the games we discuss in this volume are, indeed, games exploring worlds that are, to a certain extent or in a certain sense, fantastical. Therefore, the notion of the fantastic that we are going to make use of needs to be established at this point. We believe that Tzvetan Todorov's concept is the most apt here:

> The fantastic requires the fulfillment of three conditions. First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural or supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus the reader's role is so to speak entrusted to a character, and at the same time the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work—in the case of naive reading, the actual reader identifies himself with the character. Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as "poetic" interpretations. (Todorov 1973: 33)

Todorov's second condition, which engages the reader's cognitive abilities, thus making a fantastic text interactive to a degree, is of particular significance here. This tension between the potential interpretations of events and phenomena perfectly matches the plots of many games we are analyzing here—such as *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, *>_observer*, or *Beyond Eyes*. Therefore, we are convinced that is worth highlighting the aspect of fantastic narratives that is directed at its recipient, as the uncertainty and the fear become the lot of the player as well. As a result, Todorov's theory is the most adequate explanation of the fantastic nature of the narratives we discuss.

However, it ought to be kept in mind that within the depicted world of each of the games under discussion, their respective fantastic nature has a different status. Indeed, many of them are, to various extent and differing degrees, speculative in nature, be it by constituting a simulation of a dystopian future world, of a psychotic experience, or of reduced sensual perception. As such,

we consider it significant to explain the notion of speculative fiction:

> Works of speculative fiction are often constructed in a similar fashion, with complex puzzles yielding to elegant logical analyses, but speculative fiction is more closely related to a different aspect of the aesthetics of science, which fans of science fiction often refer to as the "sense of wonder". By this they mean a particular sensation of enlightenment provoked by discovery, whose extreme is an awe-inspiring expansion of imaginative perspective. (Stableford 2006: 6)

We believe what might quite successfully connect the research into various types of texts of popular culture is the concept of "formula", which refers both to the narratological tradition, and to theories related to studies on media messages and games as such as conventional text structures.

> A formula is a conventional system for structuring cultural products. It can be distinguished from form which is an invented system of organization. Like the distinction between convention and invention, the distinction between formula and form can be best envisaged as a continuum between two poles; one pole is that of a completely conventional structure of conventions – an episode of the Lone Ranger or one of the Tarzan books comes close to this pole; the other end of the continuum is a completely original structure which orders inventions – *Finnegan's Wake* is perhaps the best example of this, though one might also cite such examples as Resnais' film *Last Year at Marienbad*, T.S. Eliot's poem "The Waste Land," or Becket's play "Waiting for Godot." All of these works not only manifest a high degree of invention in their elements but unique organizing principles. (Cawelti 2004: 8)

This notion, coined by John G. Cawelti many years ago, now tends to be productively used in the context of popular stories about superheroes (Hatfield et al. 2013); in addition, it also makes it possible to determine the intertextual and intermedia relations

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between typical texts of popular culture. In our opinion, introducing the concept of formula into an analysis of indie games makes it possible to showcase the "indie" phenomenon a little more precisely, as it situates these games in the domain of "invention" (unique organizing principles) rather than that of "convention" (completely conventional structure). For that very reason, the games we discuss as case studies in the present book are ones that create tension between the player's expectations stemming from their familiarity with the formula, and the solutions, which subvert this formula or develop it in an unexpected direction. In this sense, *What Remains of Edith Finch* appears to be a monster-less horror text, while *The Music Machine* situates the player's ethical choices outside of the conventional conclusions, and *Imscared* disturbs the illusion of a fictional game world, etc. In such circumstances, close reading of a number of selected cases is especially productive as a particularly comprehensive method.

Among the important components of the mechanics/worlds of the games we analyze there is also sound design. As Karen Collins notes, "The sound design asset list tracks the assets needed for the game, and can be adapted to also function as an audio report, which can detail where the sound came from, any DSP effects it was treated with, and so on" (Collins 2008: 98). In many games under discussion, most notably *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* and *Beyond Eyes*, the sound design not only creates the soundscape of the depicted world, but it also becomes an active factor influencing the player's decisions and actions, as it impacts them on many levels of reception:

> In addition to sound effects and foley, ambient sounds are a key part of a game's overall feel. This may include music, or ambient dialogue, or it may include outdoor environmental sounds. Creating a mood (of safety, of excitement, and so on) can be used to prepare a player for a particular situation, or to trick the player into thinking an area may be safe when it is not. (Collins 2008: 92-93)

However, in the cases analyzed herein sound design pertains particularly to games whose important aspect is the fantastic nature of their depicted world; this connects them with other types of multimedia science fiction and fantasy narratives that work with specific sound effects:

> With new audio technology, sound designers such as Walter Murch (*THX 1138*, *The Conversation*, and *Apocalypse Now*) and Ben Burtt (The *Star Wars* series) were able to collapse for the first time the duties of sound recordist, editor, and mixer to experiment with sound in unprecedented ways. As a result, these sound constructions became multilayered and multifaceted in their ability to convey meaning. (Whittington 2007: 3)

Thus, analyzing sound design becomes a significant component of our interpretation of selected games also with regard to how they construct a non-veristic game world; in turn, this makes it possible to better understand the phenomenon of how indie games influence their players.

Aspects of "Indie-ness"

The games discussed in this book are not analyzed in terms of defining or characterizing the degree of their "indie-ness" or their perceived credibility as "real games"; all of the selected game texts meet at least one of the criteria generally considered to be the defining factors of an independent product—financial independence, creative independence, and publishing independence (Garda and Grabarczyk 2016). Although some of the discussed games have separate publishers, and others are paid products, none of them are high-budget Triple-A titles, and, as such, they have a number of features markedly different from such titles. The categorization of independent games is even more complex than the categorization of mainstream games—some would even refer to is as futile (Nakon 2017)—due to differences in broadly understood genres, the scope, the user

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interface or even general premise. What the majority of independent game texts tend to have in common, nonetheless, is the "unique art direction" (Nakon 2017), which sometimes includes quite extraordinary storylines and most innovative mechanics. Therefore, instead of discussing the degree to which a given game text is independent, the focus is placed on the themes, motifs and experimental approaches to gameplay that the relative freedom of the indie scene encourages.

Independent games, in general—and the selected titles in particular—are especially worth examining due to their extraordinary diversity in terms of ideas; they encompass most disparate virtual environments created in a plethora of different styles, aesthetics and conventions. Additionally, they are less constrained by financial aspects, which allows for considerably greater creative freedom. Instead of privileging either story or gameplay, the independent game developers tend to combine the ludic elements and the narrative elements (mechanics and story) in game texts to create memorable, sometimes unique types of experience for the players.

One of the particularly remarkable features of independent game texts consists in their sharply defined focus. Some of them undermine the perceived relationship between the scope of the text and its quality, just as they undermine the relationship between the high-end graphics—or complex mechanics, or intricate storylines—and the quality of the final product. The player may be able to complete a game in under an hour and still have a meaningful experience; the same applies to the retro 8-bit graphics (in comparison to high polygon count of the Triple-A titles), the simplest walking simulators, or barely outlined stories. This works to the advantage of the developers as well, allowing them to forge stories and experiences which can be far more unconventional—and less "safe" as far as the audience expectations are concerned. The primary limitations of an independent producer are their time and patience, i.e., the

amount of time they are willing to devote to creating a game text; everything else—the lack of access to advanced hardware or software, the limitations of technology and open source software etc.—can be made to work in the developer's favor and be used purposefully to achieve a specific and impressive effect. In this sense, the emphasis is shifted away from the technical aspects of the game text and onto the concept of the text itself. Independent games can thus highlight the fact that technology is secondary to the developer or developers' artistic vision—an issue clearly visible in the case of some Triple-A titles, which have been criticized for the fact that their unentertaining gameplay does not live up to their high quality graphics, such as *Resident Evil 6* (2012) or *The Order: 1886* (2015). An interesting concept, on the other hand, can display creative brilliance regardless of system requirements, visual conventions or the number of hours of gameplay.

Game developers experiment with the way they can express a concept, a condition or an experience through the gameplay process in its entirety; by carefully blending the ludic elements and the narrative elements, they are able to evoke a specific reaction in the player—an effect that would sometimes be impossible to elicit by any other media text. Oftentimes, this result is achieved by combining the mechanics and the story seamlessly, and at other times it is produced when the developer finds a way to skillfully exploit the limitations or possible discrepancies between the ludic and the narrative. In addition, the relative artistic and conceptual freedom allows the creators to experiment with more controversial, taboo, or just downright bizarre ideas that a large company would not take a chance on, since significant financial investment may always potentially incur significant financial losses. In contrast, independent developers, unburdened by such concerns, can freely choose the concepts behind their games. For this reason, the players have access to a variety of game texts, including titles such as *(Don't) Open Your Eyes* (2019)—a game in which the player effectively

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constructs the monster threatening them; *Cultists and Compounds* (2019)—a scenario in which the player fights and kills police officers to protect their fellow cultists; *Getting Over It* (2017)—a game designed to be extremely annoying and punishingly difficult; *I Am Bread* (2015)—which allows the player to control a slice of bread that must get across various rooms to the toaster to become the best breakfast toast possible); or *Sociolotron* (2005)—a very peculiar MMORPG revolving around fighting and having sex with other players' characters and NPCs.

Selected Cases

In each of the chapters we focus on different ways in which the respective game texts communicate their respective defining ideas through their storylines and mechanics, and through the use of complementary themes and specific imaginative strategies, producing their overall powerful effect. Each chapter is dedicated primarily to one game; none of these games are Triple-A games—instead, they range from either free or name-your-own price products published by their developer or developers, to games developed by small teams or distributed by a small publisher, with limited resources and budgets.

Chapter One is devoted to the analysis of the 2017 high-end non-Triple-A dark fantasy game *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*. The focus of the analysis is the representation and exploration of mental and emotional experiences and states (such as shame and guilt, sense of responsibility, as well as despair, anguish and terror) through the mechanics of the fantastic. By analyzing the selected aspects of Senua's journey and her portrayal as a character, we aim to demonstrate how *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* provides a ludic representation of various aspects of the mindscape of a person who is mentally spiritually preconditioned and, simultaneously, mentally ill. We devote particular attention to the significance of belief and imagination, which are—in our opinion—the most essential and central to the subject matter

of the game, especially in the context of the horror-oriented elements of folklore and mythology.

Chapter Two examines the short but innovative independent 2015 first-person exploration game *Beyond Eyes*. The premise of the game revolves around the simulated lack of vision and its representation in a visual text form. A closely related issue discussed in the chapter are the various aspects of the soundscape in visual environment of digital games and the role of acousmatic sounds in the process of cognition. We have placed particular emphasis on the extent of the player's actual access to the fictional world as opposed to their ability to explore the virtual environment, both of which depend on the character of Rae. The chapter also concerns the issues of loss, helplessness and fear related to blindness, occasionally contrasting the main game with other titles using a combination of darkness and echolocation.

Chapter Three contains the analysis of the critically acclaimed 2017 non-Triple-A game *What Remains of Edith Finch*. The primary focus of our analysis is the diverse creative design and its employment for the purposes of the subversion of the player's expectations concerning agency. By examining the stories of the selected family members, we attempt to emphasize the way in which *What Remains of Edith Finch* strikes a specific balance between the player agency and linearity in the design of the gameplay experience. The diverse game mechanics and aesthetic address—and showcase in the form of gameplay—reactions to death and loss. The main focus is placed on the idea of storytelling as a form of narrative identity and numerous layers of storytelling, all linked together by Edith Finch. Occasionally, the main game is contrasted with other independent games involving similar themes and game mechanics meant to address the issue of death and loss.

Chapter Four examines the 2017 high-end non-Triple-A psychological cyberpunk game *>_observer.* From the ludic

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perspective, the analysis concentrates on mindscapes and the characteristic use of the virtual environment. The most attention is devoted to the constantly changing virtual environment and the way in which it manipulates the player, limiting their agency or even overruling it, as well as the manner in which the game mechanics can impose an actual experience upon a player; through the lens of the avatar—Dan—doubt, addiction or altered states of consciousness are defined within the narrative framework without being a narrative element in themselves. The chapter also examines the hauntological and retrofuturistic elements of the game design (i.e. communist dystopia and imaginary totalitarianism in Poland), while occasionally contrasting the main game with other titles concerning the same or similar issues, including the concept of human condition and the mind as Self.

Chapter Five focuses on the avant-garde independent exploration horror game published in 2015, *The Music Machine*. The main focus of this chapter is placed on the various emotions related to the gameplay itself, such as the sense of responsibility, complicity, control, satisfaction and regret, all of which are illustrated by the in-game dynamics between Quintin and Haley. The relationship between the player and the avatar, as well as that between characters and the game world through the division of the basic avatar functions are also examined.

Chapter Six studies the meta-text aspects of the 2012 free version of the independent games *Imscared: A Pixelated Nightmare*, *Sara is Missing* and *Stories Untold: The House Abandon*. The main focus of the chapter is the use of the convention of breaking the fourth wall as a storytelling technique and a means of constructing mental dis-order beyond the fourth wall in digital games. We concentrate on the cognitive dissonance of the player regarding their empirical environment as a source of the uncanny, with particular emphasis placed on the various aspects of the interaction between game and the player, including the

game AI, the avatar, and the game system, as well as the way they are employed to convey the story.

Finally, Chapter Seven discusses the problems related to the environment of virtual reality as exemplified by the 2016 VR horror game *A Chair in a Room: Greenwater*. This closing chapter differs from the previous ones in that it focuses on the shortcomings and fortes of the currently available VR technology. Although a brief analysis the game of *A Chair in a Room: Greenwater* is included, it serves to illustrate the issues which emerge when a given game text fully exploits the possibilities offered by its mechanics' system of choice. Other discussed matters include the issues of immersion and the player's extended presence in the VR environment, and the limitations of the technology of Virtual Reality.

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THE MECHANICS OF THE FANTASTIC

Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice is a fantasy psychological horror game developed and published by Ninja Theory in 2017. Inspired by Norse mythology and Celtic culture, *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* follows Senua, a Pict warrior who attempts to win back the soul of her slain beloved from the ruler of Helheim. Senua, a woman suffering from psychosis, pushes forward through tests, trials and battles until she reaches her destination and faces Hela, all the while struggling to make sense of her past and the world surrounding her.

This chapter focuses on the way in which mental and emotional experiences and states such as guilt, despair, anguish and terror are represented and explored through the mechanics of the fantastic, including the elements of religious pareidolia and ludic representations of various aspects of the religious experience. The analysis places particular emphasis on the psychotic

symptoms of emotional trauma and distorted interpretation of reality in the game *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*. The chapter also highlights the significance of belief and imagination in the context of the horror-oriented elements of folklore and mythology.

The narrative constructed by *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* concerns many mature and disturbing issues. The protagonist, just like her mother, Galena, suffers from mental illness—a "psychosis" which in the game is primarily signaled by the voices she hears in her head. As it is revealed by the means of flashbacks, Senua's father, Zynbel, the druid of her clan, was a religious zealot who believed that the voices came from the underworld and were a sign that both Galena and Senua were cursed by gods for some form of disobedience. This led him to burn Senua's mother alive and to abuse Senua, claiming that "the gods can only fix [her] through [his] hand" (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017[1]); he subjected her to painful rituals and isolated her from other people. In time, Senua met Dillion, the chieftain's son, whom she befriended and later fell in love with, and she rebelled against her father, running away to be with Dillion. However, after some time, Senua went away, attempting to cope with her illness (her "darkness"); in that period, she met Druth, a former slave of the Northmen, who taught her about the Norse lore. During Senua's absence, Dillion's village came to be raided by Northmen, who massacred everyone living there. Consumed by guilt, despair and self-loathing, Senua sets out on a quest to save Dillion's soul, taking his severed head into Helheim. The entire game from this point forward focuses on Senua accepting Dillion's death and coming to terms with his loss.

The Mind and Quest of Senua

In order to dispel the doubts concerning the psychosis

1. All dialogue of *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* has been transcribed by the authors of this book.

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experienced by Senua and to emphasize its influence on her quest, it should be highlighted that both the protagonist's life and her quest are deeply embedded in the world of myths. At this point it is worth noting that the mythology in the game is a syncretic one, in which Nordic and Celtic elements are present simultaneously, and they merge into one through Senua herself, as her character is determined by both of these religious and magical systems. Understanding the function that mythical characters, themes and motifs fulfill in the game is more important for the appreciation and interpretation of the game world and gameplay elements than the identification of distinct sources of selected mythological elements (seeing as both mythologies originate from the Indo-European body of myths, and most of what differentiates them is fairly superficial). According to Ernst Cassirer, "myth is fiction, it is an unconscious, not a conscious fiction. The primitive mind was not aware of the meaning of its own creations" (Cassirer 1962: 99); therefore, the truths of the myth constitute reality, and not fiction, superstition or illusion for those who believe in them. The social function of myth has been further explored by Bronisław Malinowski, who observed: "Myth is a constant by-product of living faith, which is in need of miracles; of sociological status, which demands precedent; of moral rule, which requires sanction" (Malinowski 1948: 122). In his analysis of the cultural function of myths, Malinowski pointed out that:

> Myth, as a statement of primeval reality which still lives in present-day life and as a justification by precedent, supplies a retrospective pattern of moral values, sociological order, and magical belief. It is, therefore, neither a mere narrative, nor a form of science, nor a branch of art or history, nor an explanatory tale. It fulfils a function sui generis closely connected with the nature of tradition, and the continuity of culture, with the relation between age and youth, and with the human attitude towards the past. (Malinowski 1948: 122)

In this regard, a myth in fact co-creates—or even produces—the

reality in which the believers of that myth live. It sanctions the existence of characters, events, social institutions, making them necessarily and inevitably real. As Malinowski noted, in mythical world the "[c]ommunication between spirits and the living is carried out in several ways. Many people have seen spirits of their deceased relatives or friends … Again, there are now, and seem to have been from time immemorial, men and women who in trances, or sometimes in sleep, go on long expeditions to the nether world" (Malinowski 1948: 111). Naturally, in a mythical world all such encounters and travels are considered real, as they become a part of reality for people experiencing them. The introduction of the element of psychotic experience in *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* into the mythical reality constructed in the game, an element that undermines the disposition and cognitive competence of the character, gives the gameplay an additional dimension. Now the player must not only take into account the mythical aspect of the depicted world, but also assume that in thusly constructed reality not every experience might be true, not every voice may belong to a supernatural creature, and not every sign could be communicating specific content to Senua. This is especially significant when taking into account that a myth "brings down a vague but great apprehension to the compass of a trivial, domestic reality" (Malinowski 1948: 111). This happens due to the fact that

> [w]hen we examine the subjects which are thus spun into stories we find that they all refer to what might be called the specially unpleasant or negative truths; the loss of rejuvenation, the onset of disease, the loss of life by sorcery, the withdrawal of the spirits from permanent contact with men, and finally the partial communication re-established with them. (Malinowski 1948: 113)

How is such mode of experiencing the world related to the psychotic experience, whose presence in *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* is pointed out by the producers, critics and players alike? It seems that the most valuable conclusions in this context may

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be the ones made in humanistic psychiatry and existential psychiatry, both of which can be traced to, among many others, Karl Jaspers. Drawing from those observations, Ronald David Laing describes the subjective psychotic experience as follows:

> The individual in the ordinary circumstances of living may feel more unreal than real; in a literal sense, more dead than alive; precariously differentiated from the rest of the world, so that his identity and autonomy are always in question. He may lack the experience of his own temporal continuity. He may not possess an over-riding sense of personal consistency or cohesiveness. He may feel more insubstantial than substantial, and unable to assume that the stuff he is made of is genuine, good, valuable. And he may feel his self as partially divorced from his body. (Laing 1964: 42)

In his characteristic way, Laing highlights the exceptional significance of the subject's individual experience as the subject enters the psychotic world, where they can embark on a voyage of initiation, supposed to be completed through the transformation of personality. The authenticity of the experience and the possibility of expressing that experience—often in the form of a story—become crucial aspects of a schizophrenic voyage of that kind (Laing 1970: 120-137). In this context it is worth mentioning here one of the most famous modern first-person narratives of madness (Adame and Hornsten 2006), namely, August Strindberg's *Inferno* (originally published in 1898), in which the description of psychotic experience of the famous Swedish writer leads to a number of interesting observations. Firstly, Strindberg, a modern intellectual with philosophic and scholarly aspirations, senses a constant tension in his experience between that which is rational and that which is supernatural, between the harassment of ghosts and the mental illness, which he expresses directly by saying: "Since I do not wish to believe in the interference of supernatural powers, I imagine that I am the victim of a nervous illness" (Strindberg 1912: 94). Secondly, the writer suffers the peculiar affliction of

over-interpreting random elements of the world surrounding him; as a result, he is predisposed to treat those elements as signs to be explained and justified, and which point him towards a path to follow: "At the foot of the monument I found two pieces of cardboard cut in an oval shape, one stamped with the number 207, the other with the number 28. These are the signs for the atomic weight of lead, and of silicium. I made a note of the discovery, and when I got home began a series of experiments with lead, leaving silicium for another time" (Strindberg 1912: 49-50). Finally, he is constantly haunted by voices—advising, commanding, mocking—of demons, ghosts and warlocks tormenting him:

> Have I lost myself in a dark wood? The good spirit has guided me on the right way to the island of the blessed, but Satan tempts me. I am punished again. I sink relaxed on my scat, an unwonted depression weighs upon my spirits. A magnetic fluid streams from the wall, and sleep nearly overcomes me. I pull myself together, and stand up, in order to go out. As I pass through the passage, I hear two voices whispering in the room adjoining mine. Why are they whispering? In order that I may not overhear them. (Strindberg 1912: 80)

It could be said that—speaking in metaphorical, not medical terms—Strindberg, during his psychotic episodes, participates in a game whose rules he does not know or understand, or he even perhaps creates them himself in an improvised, instinctive manner, to get out of problematic, seemingly hopeless situations; the ghosts must naturally be exorcised, demons defeated, the alchemy experiment finished, etc. This experience is evidently accompanied by an increasing trauma—fear and the questioning of one's own cognitive abilities—as the surrounding reality crumbles down, revealing its supernatural nature, and demands integration through interpretation. Strindberg's schizophrenic voyage—in which, as Karl Jaspers pointed out many years ago, the schizophrenic content becomes immediate and definite, just as regular sensory perception would be accessed by neurotypical

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people (Jaspers 1977)—is, as a narrative, embellished in metaphors and allegories originating in spiritualism and alchemy, turning into a parable relating the transformation of the subject, one that is tragic and incomplete as it alienates the protagonist and pushes him to the margin of society. Indeed, Strindberg's example shows that a clear analogy can be drawn between the psychotic experience and a voyage (pilgrimage) mythical and/or religious in nature, whose goals are to transform one's personality and to discover the truth about world and oneself by means of overcoming adversity, and enduring hardship and suffering.

All of the aforementioned elements can be seen in *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, as throughout her quest Senua reacts to everything she sees and hears—no matter how unrealistic or supernatural it seems—in the same way, as if these were all normal sensory perceptions to her. There are other similar games that touch upon the psychotic experiencing of the surrounding world—a title worth mentioning in this case is a point-and-click puzzle horror adventure game *Fran Bow* (2015), developed by Killmonday Games. In *Fran Bow* the player controls the actions of a little girl called Fran, who is a patient at a mental institute for children. Early in the game the player is given information that according to the doctors, Fran had a psychotic episode, which ended in the death of her parents. Meanwhile, Fran herself claims that some kind of monster came and killed her parents. The shift in the perspective of the Fran's world—the game's visual representation—and, more importantly, in the perceived probability of her being the murderer occurs when the player finds special pills that are kept away from the patients. After the first time the player opts for Fran to take the mysterious pills, Fran's perception of reality surrounding her changes. Instead of clean rooms and corridors of the mental institute and the medical personnel, she starts seeing walls smeared with blood and disturbing images; the personnel is either missing or Fran sees them as decaying corpses. Now the player can also

see the bizarre monsters that Fran and the other children at the mental institute were describing earlier. Since every time the player decides that Fran should take one of the pills, the perspective in reality shifts between what the player would consider the representation of the regular reality and the representation of the reality seen by the children from the institute, it is difficult to say which version of the game world is real. One thing, however, is consistent: Fran and other characters considered to be psychotic or mentally ill in the "regular world" interact with this monstrous reality in the same manner the medical personnel members do with the "standard version" of the world. In this context, both versions of reality are true and real to Fran. This issue is also connected to the fact that Fran is, to begin with, mentally unstable and—on top of that—very young; she accepts both the "regular" reality and the monstrous one without discrimination, seemingly undaunted by the horrific monsters, blood and bizarre images she sees.

Another game featuring similar motifs is a 2016 Norwegian adventure psychological horror *Through the Woods* developed by a small independent studio Antagonist. *Through the Woods* follows the story of Karen, a widow whose son is kidnapped by an elderly stranger and taken to a mysterious island. Karen wanders the island, searching for her son and repeatedly calling his name; at the same time, she tries to avoid strange creatures and monsters lurking among the trees. The game's atmosphere relies on a peculiar representation of the dangers of the forest through a partly fantastical and partly mythical lens, which is supposed to reflect the way a child might see it[2]. The most important issue in the game is not the objective existence of the creatures from Norse mythology and Norwegian folk tales or the player's perception or opinion of them; even if Karen voices her doubts concerning whether or not the creatures are real, what is important is that she is terrified of them, and the game's ludic

2. http://www.antagonist.no/throughthewoods/. DOA 17.07.2019.

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design requires the player to use the stealth mechanics in order to sneak past the monsters, since they pose a real danger. In other words, the objective existence of trolls and other creatures in *Through the Woods* is irrelevant as both the player and the avatar react to them as if they were real.

While in *Fran Bow* and *Through the Woods* the balance between psychosis and accurate perception of reality is represented, in ludic terms, primarily visually, the psychotic perception can be also portrayed in digital games through the sound design, which can successfully perform many different functions. As Karen Collins points out:

> Dynamic audio complicates the traditional diegetic–nondiegetic division of film sound. The unique relationship in games posed by the fact that the audience is engaging directly in the sound playback process on-screen (discussed further below) requires a new type of categorization of the sound–image relationship. Game sound can be categorized broadly as diegetic or nondiegetic, but within these broad categories it can be separated further into nondynamic and dynamic sound, and then divided further still into the types of dynamic activity as they relate to the diegesis and to the player. (Collins 2008: 125)

In regard to diegetic sounds, it is important to note that "[t]here are also diegetic sounds (source music or "real sounds") in games, which can be nondynamic, adaptive, or interactive" (Collins 2008: 126). Furthermore, in case of "nondynamic diegetic audio, the sound event occurs in the character's space, but the character has no direct participation with it. These sounds of course occur in cutscenes, but they also take place in gameplay" (Collins 2008: 126). "On the other hand," as Collins further shows, "interactive diegetic sounds occur in the character's space, and the player's character can directly interact with them. The player instigates the audio cue, but does not necessarily affect the sound of the event once the cue is triggered" (Collins 2008: 126). In this context, *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* offers the player a wide

spectrum of both diegetic and nondiegetic sounds that create the specific atmosphere of various locations in the game (e.g. discreet ambient music) and allow the player to navigate by sound in the game world (i.e. "real sounds" of wind, water or storm). Some sounds are more difficult to interpret (namely, the haunting voices) as they blur the difference between the subjective experience of Senua (possibly related to her psychosis), and the objective, i.e. the sounds of the environment or a voice of a supernatural being who is a part of the game world. Thus, the sound design of *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* can be seen to particularly "complicat[e] the traditional diegetic–nondiegetic division of film sound" (Collins 2008: 125).

There are, naturally, games which concern the portrayal of the experience of living with a mental illness or a non–neuro-typical condition and employ sound and visual cues to this end without any ambiguity. An example of this can be a short independent game focused on a seemingly much simpler quest and targeted at a much younger audience—*Prism* (2017), which is meant to convey the experience of the challenges faced by the people on the autism spectrum. The game takes place in a forest filled with various animal characters, which is under the threat of a flood. The protagonist, a little fox, is tasked with saving the forest, a goal he must achieve through co-operating with other animals on building a dam across the river. As a nocturnal animal, the fox, forced to travel through the forest during daylight in order to talk to other animals, is quite often overwhelmed by the bright light. The experience is mechanically conveyed to the player through the distortion of music and increase in the brightness of the screen to the degree when the elements of the virtual environment are difficult to make out. To remedy this situation, the players can press "F" to howl. This represents the soothing strategies, called stimming (Bergemann 2013, Yergeau 2017), which is one of the ways the people on the spectrum sometimes utilize to cope with sensory overload. Although stimming can

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take many forms, in the game it is depicted specifically in the form of howling—creating a distinct sound.

The fact that *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* focuses on a protagonist living with mental illness at times prompted reviewers and scholars to simplify her story to a scenario where the darkness is her psychosis or is related to symptoms of her psychosis (Faulkner 2017, Scaife 2017). Others have painted Senua's illness as a super power that can give a character "true sight" (Stang 2018). Such approaches greatly simplify *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* as a digital game text, mixing together the personal aspect of Senua as a character (her illness), her individual backstory, as well as the culture and world she lives in. By reducing the rot appearing on Senua's arm to a mere symptom of her illness (Lacina 2017) or her rune seeking to only pareidolia strengthened by the illness (Lacina 2017), the interpretation leaves out important aspects of the game experience that have been mentioned here before (the religious and spiritual aspects). To argue that Senua's illness is a gift that allows her to see what really is there (Stang 2018) is to ignore her culture and upbringing, dismiss the fantastic discourse of the story, and diminish its emotional impact[3]. Although some have argued that Senua's illness could be easily removed from the story altogether and replaced with actual demons and dark magic with little to no change to the game experience (Faulkner 2017), it actually provides context and, in some cases, the foundation to multiple storylines. Zynbel's portrayal as the antagonist stems from his religious fanaticism, not from his inability to cope with Senua's illness (Faulkner 2017); indeed, he used her condition to mentally manipulate her by convincing her she was cursed by gods. Such an approach also grossly neglects the importance of the relationship between Senua and Dillion, as he is the one who brings a new perspective on her illness. Dillion clearly

3. The opening screen of the game informs the player that the game "contains representations of psychosis" (Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice, 2017), and does not claim to be a representation of psychosis.

distinguishes between the "darkness" and Senua's illness; he sees Senua's psychosis as a part of her, not as the darkness—which he refers to as "Zynbel's poison" (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017).

In fact, some of the aspects of *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* that tend to be interpreted as related specifically to psychosis are actually related to how human beings in general tend to perceive the world through patterns. Such an approach is even more prominent in people with a spiritual or religious background, like Senua and her family. A great example of that is provided by Senua's mother near the end of the game. In her final voiceover after the battle between Senua and the image of Hela, Galena speaks of various phenomena of nature, describing them as "magic from which we emerge" and to which we return, which suggests a spiritual but not necessarily religious perspective:

> GALENA'S VOICE:
>
> Never forget what it is like to see the world as a child: where every autumn leaf is a work of art; every rolling cloud, a moving picture; every day, a new story. We too emerge from this magic, like wave from the ocean, only to return back to the sea. Do not mourn the waves, the leaves and the clouds. Because even in darkness, the wonder and beauty of the world never leaves, it's always there, just waiting to be seen again. (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017)

Her words emphasize the natural human tendency to see more in things than there may be to them. In the context of the reality depicted in the game, where magic and gods are believed to be real, people tend to see that magic and deeper meaning everywhere, regardless of their mental condition.

It is critically important to understand that mental illness does not fulfill any antagonistic role in *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*. Senua does not "defeat" or "overcome" her mental illness—the one (crucial) thing she does overcome is the perceived stigma and her own feelings of guilt and responsibility that she learned

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to associate with her condition due to her father's words. Once Senua fails in her quest of bringing Dillion back and the darkness simply disperses, despite her having bravely faced it, the only thing left to do for Senua (and the player) is to accept two facts: that the voices and images are an integral part of her and that, just as Dillion told her, none of the horrible events and tragedies that occurred were ever her fault—it was simply her father's spiritual perspective and fanatical upbringing that contributed to the way she perceived reality. This acceptance is also imposed upon the player through the ludic route, since the player not only has agency in Senua's world, but is also actually a part of Senua's reality as Senua perceives it for a brief period of time in her life. The player becomes a part of Senua's mind, so—in the same way Senua's illness sometimes affects her more, and sometimes less—the player sometimes can control Senua and influence her actions (the Narrator even states this explicitly, asking in her opening monologue: "maybe you too have a part to play..?" (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017)), and sometimes they cannot. Similarly, the player can barely affect the retrospections (apart from the occasional camera angle), because those events had already taken place in Senua's life. It is quite natural for the players to be unable to interfere with the events during cutscenes, since they are typical instances of push narrative, in which "the player is a captive audience," and "story elements are imposed upon the players whether they like it or not," with action suspended (Calleja 2011: 122-123). In those moments *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* catches the player up with Senua's past and the path down which she had partly traveled, and partly been pushed in life, whose meaning the player, just like Senua, must sort out during gameplay, and create both a new path and a new narrative as they progress.

One of the most defining features of Senua's quest is the emotional impact of the experience of confronting the past and loss in the way the game specifically allows for. Games, as Jonathan Frome points out, do not usually engender significant

loss, because they tend to have positive endings in which the protagonist succeeds in their task; the sadness tends to be generated by "situating a sad sub-plot within a larger structure of victory" (Frome 2016: 168-169). With that taken into consideration, it becomes clear that the emotional effect of *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* relies on a peculiar reversal of the relationship between the victory and task fulfillment—Senua sets out to bring back her lover, a task in which she fails, but she is also victorious as an individual in her character arc, because she finally renounces the darkness that tormented her throughout her life and led her to believe that she was cursed and somehow responsible for the death of her loved ones. At the end of the game, faced with the indisputable failure of defeating the final enemy in the game, the player initially experiences the same confusion as Senua, seeing as they set out on their journey genuinely believing that they can reach and battle Hela, and thus save Dillion. They come to comprehend the situation better as they progress through the game, only to realize at the very end that the goddess whom they sought will remain indifferent to Senua's pleas and threats and will not give Dillion back. At this point the player, together with Senua, experiences a sudden, inescapable realization that Hela was not responsible for Dillion's death. She did not take him and she cannot, therefore, return him to Senua. Significantly, Senua too was in no way responsible for Dillion's death and she could not get him back to atone for her perceived wrongdoings. In this scene, *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* reaches its greatest potential of evoking intense sadness in the player, as with this realization, Senua herself moves on from shame and self-hatred to unadulterated sadness alone, as there is no one to challenge or blame. As Frome argues:

> Sadness is most intense when loss is perceived to have an impersonal cause, such as disease, nature, or fate (Ellsworth and Smith, 1988). When loss is caused by a person or other intelligent agent, we tend to feel emotions that overwhelm or compete with sadness. If we blame someone else for our loss, for example, we tend to be angry. If we blame ourselves,

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> we might feel regretful or ashamed. If no one is to blame, in contrast, then we are most likely to feel sad (Barr-Zisowitz, 2000). (Frome 2016: 165)

A similar concept (of dealing with loss) is also expressed in the final gameplay sequence of *Through the Woods* when Karen is trying to resuscitate her son whom she pulled out of water; however, in contrast to *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice,* the player is not merely a spectator of the protagonist's acceptance of the state of things. In *Through the Woods* this experience is delivered not as a narrative event, but a ludic one, in which the player is directly involved (Thon 2016: 17). Throughout the scene, at regular intervals between the animation of Karen performing CPR, the player is prompted by the game to press a specific button to continue the resuscitation of the child by clicking "save Espen" (*Through the Woods*, 2016). After some time the another option appears below "save Espen"—namely, "accept" (*Through the Woods*, 2016), which causes Karen to discontinue the CPR. From this moment on the player can choose either; in this way the producers of *Through the Woods* compel the player to actively make the choice with the mother (seeing as the game's story is linear) and choose for her to "accept" her loss. In *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* the player is never given a similar choice—they can only observe how during a cinematic sequence Senua makes the decision for herself and lets go of Dillion's skull, accepting the fact that she lost him. Since this is delivered as a narrative event, the players find themselves in the position of "invisible witnesses", a role normally associated with film audiences, who

> frequently see narrative events that "would by all means justify altruistic responses … on the part of the viewer," and that the viewer's emotion always includes "a component of helplessness" ([Tan] 1995: 17–18). Viewers' inability to affect the situations portrayed in films is a key factor in films' ability to elicit tears (Frome, 2014). (Frome 2016: 160)

The expectation of the player towards a digital game text,

however, presupposes agency and the ability to influence the outcomes of events through their own efforts (Isbister 2016: 2). In this context, the relationship between the player and the avatar in digital game texts can make the personal and the sympathetic emotions difficult to distinguish (Frome 2016: 164). This is particularly visible in the structure of *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, where once the player becomes a part of Senua's mind, they are at times reduced to a mere witness to her powerlessness. Therefore, Senua's loss becomes the player's loss due to the vicarious relationship to the video game world through their player-character (Frome 2016: 164), because the loss becomes, in a sense, personal. This contributes to the dramatic effect of the story's finale, since the player, being only a part of Senua's mind, is just as helpless as Senua herself is, and equally powerless. Thus, failing to fulfill the narrative task while simultaneously correctly completing the game is crucial for the emotional experience the game sets out to deliver to the player.

The way this ending is structured and set up emotionally can be compared to the finale of another game which subverts the justified expectation of the player and denies them victory—*Narcosis*, a survival horror released in 2017 by Honor Code. In *Narcosis*, the player is also destined to fail in their task, but the concept and the execution are rather different; the story follows one of the engineers working at Oceanova, an undersea mining complex which suffers critical damage as a result of an earthquake. The player's task is to guide the avatar to an escape pod that will take him safely to the surface. The gameplay is accompanied by a voiceover of the sole survivor describing his experience in an interview. The ending of the game shares some similarities with *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* in that at the end the player realizes suddenly that the very goal of the quest is—and was, in fact, all along—unobtainable. However, this strategy serves a different purpose. In *Narcosis*, it is the protagonist of the story, Kip Mattas, who survives the catastrophe and who narrates the whole thing. The game's avatar, meanwhile, is a completely

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different person—Virgile Faille, another scientist, who does not make it to the pod. The player, however, is unaware of this to the very last moment, when they see someone already inside the pod, and Kip recalls in the voiceover how horrifying and distressing it was to see Virgile just outside, but being unable to let him in due to the automated pod control. The player watches the pod launch to the surface, with Kip shouting "No, no no!" (*Narcosis*, 2017), and then they are left to wander off into the dark water, as Virgile's visor slowly becomes overgrown with algae and the closing credits appear on the screen. The sudden revocation of victory understood as accomplishing the task serves more as a dramatic, heart-breaking twist than a turning point of the difficult journey to self-acceptance.

The Mechanics of the Fantastic

The story of *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* ideally fits into understanding of the fantastic as it was described by Tzvetan Todorov. To follow from the definition provided in the introduction to the present book:

> The concept of the fantastic is … to be defined in relations to those of the real and the imaginary: and the latter deserve more than a mere mention. … The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination — and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality — but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. (Todorov 1993: 25)

As has already been shown, the game world of *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* is not "a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires" (Todorov 1993: 25); just the opposite—it is a world full of mythical characters and magic, one which allows for the intervention of the supernatural and the divine. Yet still occasionally "there

occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world" (Todorov 1993: 25). From the perspective of both the avatar and the player, there are certain events in the game world that seem to call the laws of the game world's reality into question, making their experience ambivalent.

The nature of what Senua experiences throughout her journey is unclear—she could be either confronting powers flouting the laws of the world, or she could be subject to delusions in a world whose rules remain unbroken. "The fantastic," as Todorov states, "occupies the duration of uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighbouring genre, the uncanny or the marvellous" (Todorov 1993: 25). It is, therefore, inconsequential that the game world of *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* does not correspond to a regular contemporary world but instead it is a mythical one that is nowhere close to realism (naturalism) in its narrow sense; the basic doubt that accompanies the player during the gameplay, which centers around Senua's journey, is the source of experiencing Todorov's fantastic.

Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice contains many fantastic elements, both on the narrative and on the ludic level, but for the purpose of this analysis and the assumed perspective, only a number of selected ones will be discussed. The game mixes the psychological, the religious, and the supernatural to the point where it is difficult to tell one from the other. While the voices that Senua hears definitely represent the psychological, and gods' minions represent the supernatural, all elements in between usually stand for a blend of two or more. One of the most important instances of this is the darkness, which combines the symbolic representations of religion and mental illness insofar that it constitutes a religious interpretation of Senua's psychosis, imposed on her by her father.

There are many elements in *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* that convey a religious experience. Some of them are expressed

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though the concept of the darkness, which contributes to the fact that Senua "sees things differently" (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017). As far as the mechanics of the fantastic are concerned, *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* takes a universally understood scenario (a warrior wanting to bring her beloved back to life) and uses this as an entry point for immersion and identification; these, in turn, contribute to a sense of participation and involvement (Isbister 2016: 25) and make it possible for the player to experience the specific combination of faith and illness of the game's protagonist. Senua, as an individual character, is obviously not representative of the experience of all religious people or all people with mental illness, but she is certainly the avatar facilitating the player's participation in the experience of one specific (albeit fictional) person of faith who also happens to suffer from mental illness.

One of the key elements of Senua's quest consists in her seeking runic signs. Runes are an actual element of many religions, so it is not very surprising that they are included in a story about a warrior on a quest to resurrect her beloved. The Picts are assumed to have had a religious system similar to the Celtic one, and to have been superstitious (Wagner 2002). Even if Norse gods are not her gods, Senua still expects a sign from the alien gods Druth told her so much about, so she focuses and looks for signs from gods and of gods—and so she finds such signs.

In order to seek the runes—the signs—she relies on her belief that the signs *must* be there, either given or left by the gods. The player searches for the runes, experiencing the simultaneous uncertainty of where to look and the certainty that the sought sign must be there. Just as it is the case with any other religion's pareidolia, the runes are in the end found in mundane objects (Oppy 2015), such as trees, overlapping shadows, missing boards in the wall of the building, and they happen to correspond exactly with what Senua is looking for—and what the player must find—to progress. Significantly, each new rune is easier to locate,

as the player learns to look for them and predict where they might be, which is also consistent with spiritual priming and religious thinking (Oppy 2015).

Given the fantastic nature of the story, this process is simulated quite aptly through the mechanics of finding the runes by focusing one's "inner eye," as Druth tells Senua, which is supposed to lead to seeing "what's hidden in plain sight" (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017); in this way the game reinforces the association between the runes and pareidolia. However, it turns out that when Senua searches for the signs from gods, they are actually everywhere, waiting to be seen, and she has no way or ability to distinguish the "right ones" from illusions and delusions. In terms of gameplay, the sheer number of potential solutions might seem overwhelming[4]; when the player looks around, searching for signs, it is impossible to tell whether the multitude of possibilities indicated by the game results from pareidoilia arising from religious mindset, or—which is less probable—from Senua's mental illness. While the runes are a magic tool required to access areas and open gates, looking for the symbols requires a certain mindset a religious or spiritual person would have. Sometimes the two (the task and the mindset) interfere with each other, such as when Senua approaches Valravn's gate, but the number of possible divine signs overwhelms and confuses her, sending the voices in her head into frenzy as they shout "there's too many of them!" (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017). The voices (also referred to in the game as Furies) actually explicitly whisper and hiss at some point that Senua (and the player) sees runes everywhere, and question the meaning of both the signs and the tests:

4. KatFTWynn, KatFTWynn: Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice! ~Full Playthrough~ (Psychological Dark Indie Game) ? (https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLuZ7jAsUWTJuYzgNjGZVdfO1xSrdYIuFK). DOA 17.07.2019.

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FURIES:

#1 Why did you think you could make this work?

#2 You keep seeing runes, you see runes everywhere!

#3 *Everywhere*!

#2 But what if they're not real?

#3 What if they don't actually make sense?

#4 What if they're a trick?

#2 The gods were lying.

#1 You think they make sense but really the gods are playing with you.

#3 It makes sense in your mind but it doesn't make sense in the real world.

#1 —worlds.

#2 But it doesn't make any sense.

(*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017)

In the same way, the player follows the path set by the developers, not knowing what the runes actually mean, what the rules are, and why the Shard Trials take the form that they do in the game. Similarly, when the player faces the other champions, they cannot be sure whether they are real god avatars, but they do recognize them immediately as enemies standing in the way—enemies that must be defeated, in the same way the runes are missing puzzle pieces that must be found. But within the game world, are they actual gods and signs? They look that way to the player and work that way as well, and there is no way of positively determining what they actually are.

The rot appearing on Senua's arm is another instance of the mechanics of the fantastic in the game. Essentially, the rot is

another visualization of the darkness, and it is explicitly described so by the Narrator, who says that "the darkness is rot" (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017). It symbolizes the way Senua sees her illness, and what she believes it to be—something destructive and spreading, and eventually fatal once it fully envelops the mind (soul). The imagery itself—the progressing, observable decay—might actually be an unconscious representation of the way Zynbel talked and how he berated Senua in his abusive monologues, saying that the darkness comes from inside her and that reaching out to other people and accepting the voices will make the voices rot her from the inside. Additionally, the Narrator refers to the darkness as "rot" at the beginning of the game:

> NARRATOR:
>
> A vision, of what's to come? Poor Senua. The darkness does not bargain. It does not reason. It is rot. And now it has taken hold, it will spread towards her head, the seat of the soul, until there is nothing left of her. (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017)

Significantly, in the same way as Zynbel's words prove to be untrue within the narrative, as far as the game mechanics are concerned, the rot does not actually kill Senua (despite the warning shown to the player at the gate to the Gjöll Bridge). It only scares her—and the player—and makes her feel like something horrible and repulsive.

The rot is closely related to the way the game uses the combat mechanics to express the theme of self-loathing and fear through the imagery of darkness as something that is internalized, inescapable and cannot be defeated—the fact that the rot covers only Senua's right arm, and not the left one, is mirrored in how Hela is described by the Narrator as "the half-rotten goddess," and later depicted in the game as such. When Senua fights Hela, it is not the first confrontation she has with the colossal form of the goddess. However, the fight can take place only after she faces

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all the champions during her journey—the master of illusion and master of fire (both of whom can be symbolically linked to the figure of Zynbel, as they are related to, respectively, obscuring reality and burnt sacrifice). Notably, when Senua desperately tries to reach Hela in the heart of Helheim (or at least at the end of her journey into Helheim), she keeps fighting the same minions she has already battled. In this sense, it can be once again seen how both the small battles and the final battle are cyclical, repetitive, and, in a way, futile. Senua fights many times in the game, both with supernatural entities and with gods' minions, who are so numerous that at times they seem endless. Moreover, due to the fact that multiple enemies can share the same design, the players may be unsure of whether or not they are fighting multiple distinct enemies or the same ones over and over again. It is the latter interpretation that may lead the players to form an impression that the adversaries are unbeatable. Furthermore, the fights are monotonous and tiring, and at many moments futile (no victory can be achieved, as it is the case with the final battle). The difficulty does not come from demanding controls or (the lack of) the necessary mastery, but from the fact that the fights are inescapable, long, and their duration is impossible to predict. This ludic design also serves to allow the player to experience the weariness and the suspicion that all effort might be pointless, familiar to a person with a strongly religious view of reality. In this regard, the fights can be interpreted as symbolic representation of magical and religious worldview, standing for trials of one's religious resolve. The literal battles present the image of obstinate pressing forward without the support of evidence, and facing adversity through magical (religious) perspective without the comfort of being able to count on a positive outcome. Fighting gods and fighting their minions is also a separate matter; Senua does reach Hela in the end, but never really fights her, only her minions—which is discussed in detail later.

From a spiritual perspective, the battles symbolize the journey to Senua's eventual transformation; as such, the majority of what is portrayed onscreen as physical struggle would be simply a representation of the struggles that have taken place in Senua's mind, and not in the external reality. Some players, however, are hesitant to reduce those battles merely to a manifestation of Senua's inner journey, because at the end of the game her body is still covered in wounds and scars[5].

The Voices

The protagonist's mental illness is not the sole theme of *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, but it is a fundamental story element, and, as such, is expressed as an experience through a variety of mechanics in the gameplay. One of the most important elements of the game world (in both ludic and narratological terms) which needs to be discussed in order to provide comprehensive analysis of the dynamics between and dramatic aspects of both specific events and as well as the entirety of the plot of *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* is the phenomenon of the voices that haunt Senua in her quest. This aspect of the protagonist is essential to the way in which she is constructed and developed as a character, seeing as it places her in an ambivalent position: either the game world depicts a reality which allows its inhabitants to communicate with spirits or supernatural entities, in which case, Senua's being haunted by specters is not an exception from the rule, or it does not, and Senua is person with cognitive deficits—a person suffering from a mental illness.

The voices are the first ludic aspect the player notices in *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* when the game begins. The voices are predominantly female, and they all come from the ill mind of Senua. They whisper and hiss constantly, some of them

5. MARZ, Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice (https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLU5c5YzX2iBb5WuxKjP4eHYKn4MYHrka9). DOA 17.07.2019.

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encouraging, some discouraging, some hopeful and some doubting:

> FURIES:
>
> #1 What will happen when she meets Hela?
>
> #2 She must beg.
>
> #3 She must fight.
>
> #4 She must bargain with Hela.
>
> #1 She has to kill Hela. Now she has Odin's sword.
>
> #2 No, she can't. Hela has already beaten her twice.
>
> (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017)

Although the voices are not, strictly speaking, a part of the game mechanics (they do not offer actual gameplay tips to the player or serve as objective markers), they do influence the gameplay; they make it difficult for the player to focus, plan, and make decisions, especially since they overlap and are often contradictory. The players sometimes perceive them as judgmental and feel uncomfortable listening to the constant whispering[6]. The fact that the voices (Furies) cannot be silenced (they become quiet only briefly once Senua steps through the gate in the third act, but return later, before the finale) conveys to the player the strain on Senua's psyche. That strain on the protagonist's mind is even explicitly articulated by the Narrator more than once—at some point she discloses that Senua tried to pretend that the ghost of Druth was not real, but "what good was that when [the other] voices are there all the time?" (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017). The Narrator is also the one who introduces the voices to the

6. KatFTWynn, KatFTWynn: Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice! ~Full Playthrough~ (Psychological Dark Indie Game) ? (https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLuZ7jAsUWTJuYzgNjGZVdfO1xSrdYIuFK). DOA 17.07.2019.

player, making them aware of their narrative significance, saying: "Oh, how rude of me. I never told you of the others… You hear them too, right? They've been around ever since the tragedy. Well… that's not quite true. Some are old, some are new" (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017). Senua's illness in the game, and the psychosomatic burden it places on her are communicated primarily through the simulated auditory hallucinations.

Nev Jones and Tanya Marie Luhrmann's research concerning the "auditoriness" of the auditory hallucinations (AH) and their overlap with symptoms grounded in alterations of thought rather than perception (Jones and Luhrmann 2015:1) thoroughly explores the problem of auditory hallucinations in schizophrenia. In the subjective experience of the subject that is hearing voices, the inability to differentiate between real voices and hallucinated voices is crucial, just as the sensation of racing thoughts and the unknowing tendency to misperception of actual voices. In the words of one of the participants of Jones and Luhrmann research: "… it becomes really, really difficult for me to distinguish (or explain the difference) between real voices, 'hallucinated voices', thoughts in my own head, other people's thoughts, thoughts that might be circulating in the air, and then even the extent to which anything exists other than thoughts" (Jones and Luhrmann 2015: 4). The researchers have identified seven dominant voice-hearing patterns: "Auditory," "Mixed," "In-between," "Thought-like," "Transformed," "Limited auditory," and "Multisensory with strong visual features." The types of voices heard by the patients span a continuum from a literally auditory (audible) voice, through mixed forms, in which the voice is neither fully auditory nor thought-like or the patient has a misperception of actual voices or sounds, to strongly multisensory descriptions, typically equally or more strongly visual than auditory. In the last form, the "voices" may communicate through images instead of words (Jones and Luhrmann 2015: 4). Another important finding from Jones and Luhrmann's research is an overlap between the thought and

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belief symptoms: "[the] participant's transformed voices strongly overlapped with delusions of reference and communication, at times to such an extent that it was difficult to draw clear distinctions" (Jones and Luhrmann 2015: 7).

Additionally, in their further research Luhrmann and her team focused more on the comparative study of the phenomenon of auditory hallucinations in schizophrenia in various cultures (USA, India, Ghana), whereupon she notes that "[i]n a California sample, people were more likely to describe their voices as intrusive unreal thoughts; in the South Indian sample, they were more likely to describe them as providing useful guidance; and in our West African sample, they were more likely to describe them as morally good and causally powerful" (Luhrmann et al. 2015: 1). This shows that both the reception of the voices and their subsequent interpretation are strongly related to the cultural framework within which the people suffering from that ailment function. Therefore, the participants from United States displayed a marked tendency to include medical terminology in the descriptions of their experience: "In general, Americans used diagnostic labels and were often familiar with the diagnostic criteria" (Luhrmann et al. 2015: 5). The participants from Ghana, on the other hand, tended to regard the voices in a religious context, ascribing spiritual significance to their experience: "They emphasized the moral action of their voices … Many identified the voices as spirits and described themselves as suffering from 'spiritual attack' by malevolent voices who spoke audibly" (Luhrmann et al. 2015: 7). What is more, the interpretations in question would for the most part have more allegoric character, and would draw from mythological symbolism:

> A good example of this kind of phenomenon is a young woman who said that she had been cursed by a human man and woman who caused her to be followed by an evil snake under the control of an evil merwoman, a "queen under the sea" (this is a local folklore figure). The hissing snake would

> speak to her, tormenting her with terrible predictions—that she would get sick, that her family would die and "never get peace". (Luhrmann et al. 2015: 7)

In the research conducted in India the key element of the participants' experience was the fact that they "heard voices of kin" (Luhrmann et al. 2015: 8). Regardless of whether the voices were good or bad they would be voices the members of "an ancestral group of father, grandfather, mother's father, mother's sister" (Luhrmann et al. 2015: 8), commenting on the life of the person hearing them. In the research a clear correlation can be seen—the types of the voices being heard, the interpretation, and assessment of what is heard are related to the socio-cultural surroundings of participants, who refer to various ideas and principles in order to come to terms with and assign meaning to their experience. These attempts to account for the phenomenon could include anything and everything from turning to religious beliefs, mythological allegories, the semantics of kinship to the use of medical, or even explicitly mental health-related discourse. In this context, a question can be posed how the voices heard by Senua in the game world should be considered.

First and foremost, the voices haunting Senua throughout her quest take on the characteristic features of "*acousmetre*"—i.e. "a kind of voice-character specific to cinema that in most instances of cinematic narratives derives mysterious powers from being heard and not seen" (Chion 1994: 221). As Michel Chion aptly points out, acousmatic voices are of critical importance to the process of shaping the dynamics and the suspense of the story and plot in cinematic (film) narratives:

> Fiction films tend to grant three powers and one gift to the acousmetre, to the voice that speaks over the image but is also forever on the verge of appearing in it. First, the acousmetre has the power of *seeing all;* second, the power of *omniscience;* and third, the *omnipotence* to act on the situation. Let us add that in many cases there is also a gift of *ubiquity*—the acousmetre seems to be able to be anywhere he or she wishes.

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> These powers, however, often have limits we do not know about, and are thereby all the more disconcerting. (Chion 1994: 129-130)

Therefore, it can be assumed that these three powers are detectable in other multimedia texts—digital game texts included—which, just like *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, employ them intentionally to construct their characters, specifically avatars, in an ambivalent way, thus inviting the player's suspicion of those avatars, who are supposed the allow for the projection of the player into the virtual environment of the depicted world of the game. The subject who "hears voices" might not win the player's trust or inspire their confidence, seeing as the character could potentially be insane (and therefore not have full cognitive capacity), haunted, or even possessed—that is, deprived of their own will, and acting according to the command of some mysterious powers. Thus the player may harbor suspicion that their control of the avatar, and the resulting agency, is only partial, and some of the avatar's actions result from the influence of other entities, e.g. ancestors, gods or demons. Taking into consideration the fact that the fictional world of *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* is already filled with magic, and does not necessarily overlap with the virtual environment, which serves the purpose of the experience that is supposed to be conveyed in the game, the voices contribute to the unreliability of the feedback a player normally gets from the interaction with that world and their ability to properly assess what is actually happening based on visual and auditory cues the game delivers in response to their actions (Elson et al. 2014: 527). It is important to note at this point that the voices that Senua hears, the aforementioned acousmatic voices, tend to be mostly commanding in nature. As Slavoj Žižek points out, it is the Freudian "superego embodied in a *voix acousmatique*, a free-floating voice that is not assigned to any bearer. Michel Chion has already drawn attention to a peculiarity of the film's soundtrack, more precisely, its background sounds: we hear a diversity of voices to which we are

always able to assign bearers, i.e., emitters" (Žižek 1992: 58). In regard to horror texts communicated through a medium—such as radio plays, film or digital games—another remark made by Chion seem particularly accurate: "Everyone knows that the classical sound film, which avoided showing certain things, called on sound to come to the rescue. Sound *suggested* the forbidden sight in a much more frightening way than if viewers were to see the spectacle with their own eyes" (Chion 1994: 22). In horror or thriller narratives, the goal of using sound in such a way is to create an impression on the viewers of a presence unseen by them—again, this is what Chion calls *acousmetre*. In a horror text such presence—which could well be a specter, a demon or a killer waiting in hiding—is also especially important in the context of the influence it exerts over the text by means of concealing its appearance as well as its capacity to shape the dramatic quality of events due to the sheer possibility of its sudden coming into sight on the screen (Chion 1994).

The Darkness Within

As far as it comes to the game design, darkness is used in *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* in a specific way, which does not concern merely the visual artistic conventions or directing the player's gaze. The primary importance of darkness consists in the way it is referred to symbolically and the concepts it stands for, and not simply the way it complements the light.

Aesthetically speaking, the game design employs both light and darkness in a manner quite standard for a high quality digital game text, using "complex lighting situations in real time, such as shadows, atmospherical elements or reflections," allowing the developers to construct "realistic spaces, as well as to use lighting as a navigation and interaction element in itself" (Fernandez et al. 2013: 57), such as it is the case in one specific section during Senua's Shard Trials. Darkness is also used as a means of navigating the game world, since the brightness (or lack thereof)

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of some areas of the environment gives the players cues concerning their path or the next task necessary for progressing in the game (Fernandez et al. 2013: 57). Naturally, within the fictional world the player can access through the virtual environment, Senua is guided by various sources of light, such as fires and torches, while at other times the lighting is location-specific and related to architecture (Fernandez et al. 2013: 60). Sometimes the lighting is used for storytelling purposes, such as dramatic composition (Fernandez et al. 2013: 58), which can be seen in the shot following Senua's frustrated attack on the gate to the Gjöll Bridge. Most importantly, however, it is used in juxtaposition with darkness beyond the mere effect of illumination; even when the game uses cutscenes, light and darkness tend to be largely symbolic, with darkness representing Senua's loneliness, hopelessness and resignation. In contrast, the scene in which Senua talks to Dillion for the first time is bright and colorful, signifying life, safety and good intentions (Fernandez et al. 2013: 61). Dillion, at that point, is not a part of Senua's life, but represents what she longingly admires from afar and what she believes she cannot have—he metaphorically (and quite literally in the game aesthetics) brings light into her life.

In terms of the story itself, the darkness plays an even more important role in *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*. It represents—quite traditionally—danger and fear, enemies, lies, death, and evil (Fernandez et al. 2013: 61), encompassing a complex nebula of concepts, beliefs, emotions and characters in the protagonist's life; the darkness embodies not only the religious fanaticism of her father Zynbel, but also Senua's instilled belief that she is cursed, her resulting tendency for self-destruction, and the cruelty of those who did not accept her—again represented by Zynbel. All those components not only blend together, but are fundamentally connected and even arise from one another: for instance, Senua's belief in being cursed is the direct consequence of Zynbel's abuse. Importantly, the reason Senua left the village—and was, therefore, absent during the massacre in which

Dillion was killed—in the first place was to "banish her furies and fears" (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017), as she had been taught to perceive them by Zynbel. However, the same darkness Senua was trying to face—the furies and fears—appeared again in another form. This time it took the shape of the invading Northmen; "in the darkness they came, through stormy black seas, they raided these shores" (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017), killing and converting the native inhabitants of the land, as Senua learns from Druth, and "bringing a new kind of darkness" (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017). As the players are told by the Narrator, Senua sees a "deep connection form between the Northmen and the darkness" (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017). It is particularly significant that both Druth and Zynbel are figures who employ decidedly religious discourse. Zynbel is a religious fanatic who sees "darkness" in Senua, and whom Senua later accuses of being the actual darkness. Druth, on the other hand, is a man who was forced to participate in following the religion of the Northmen, the "new kind of darkness," and spreading it. In both interpretations of the meaning of darkness, religion provides the necessary symbolic discourse and a comprehensive system of signs (signifiers) that comes together in one unified representation that is the darkness—the darkness of Hela, and the darkness of being cursed by gods.

As a direct result of the first understanding of the darkness, Senua is provided with her quest, as far as the story is concerned, and the player—with an endgame task. Druth explicitly tells Senua that "darkness comes from Hel, and her fate lies there" (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017):

> DRUTH:
>
> The world of the dead is ruled by giantess, Hela, daughter of Loki. The gods feared her bloodline—bad on her mother's side, and yet much worse on her father's. So, as a child, the All-father cast her down into Helheim and gave her power over those who die of sickness, age, hardship and

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> selfslaughter. In all of the Nine Worlds, only Hela can resurrect the dead. To Hela, your Dillion was sacrificed, and with her you must bargain. (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017)

In the game, Hela represents the alien gods—the non-Pict gods—which caused Druth, a man hurt and broken by the Northmen, to perceive and characterize her as darkness, a belief he has shared with Senua. In the beginning, Senua starts on her quest to Helheim guided by Druth's words, instructing her that only Hela has the power to release Dillion. However—as is critically important from the narrative point of view—within the reality of the game, Hela does not bring the dead back to life, which is foreshadowed earlier in the game by the story of Baldr:

> DRUTH:
>
> The Northmen tell how the gods mourned Baldr. His body was to be burnt on his ship, but they could not manage to push it into the sea and sent for a giantess to do it. She comes riding a wolf and has vipers for her reins. She pushes Baldr's ship into the sea with such force that the ground shakes and the rollers burst into flames. When Baldr's wife sees his body carried onto the ship, her heart bursts with grief and she dies. She is put next to her husband and the pyre is lit, sending the dead to Hel. But even so, the gods cannot accept his death. Overcome with grief, the gods send Hermod to ride to Hel and ask Hela to let Baldr return home. "All the gods are weeping!" he says. "Are they?" asks Hela. "We shall see if he is truly missed! If everything in the world will weep for him, he shall go back to the gods. But if even one thing refuses, Baldr stays with me." The gods send messengers everywhere. "Weep for Baldr! Weep him out of Hel!" And everything wept—men, beasts, earth, stone, trees, metal—everything except for a giantess they found in a cave. "Baldr was never my friend," she says. "Let Hel keep what she has." (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017)

From the beginning Druth states that Senua must "bargain" with Hela—as Senua eventually does, after trying and failing to defeat

the giantess—in order to try to get Dillion back. However, there is a reason why Senua's battle with Hela is futile. Due to the way the word "darkness" is used throughout the game, its meanings overlap at many points, and it is especially important in this particular moment. Senua tells Hela "you are not a lie. But you are a liar," (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017) thus distinguishing the darkness she accepted into herself and the darkness her father created, which she called a lie earlier in the game. Between Zynbel's fanatical brainwashing, Senua's guilt and confusion, and Druth's stories, Hela—as seen in the final sequence of the game—becomes a combination of darkness understood as a curse from gods, alienation resulting from being different, and a foreign deity, blending both aforementioned interpretations. In those final moments, Senua speaks to Hela perceived as that combined personification, addressing her various aspects in her monologue:

> SENUA:
>
> If you are a lie, and there is no darkness, then you never took him from me, did you? And I can't save Dillion. (*begins to laugh*) Is that what you want me to believe? After all you have done to me?! To him? (*in a determined voice again*) No. You're not a lie. But you are a liar. You've crawled into me, to confuse and deceive me. But I know he's here. I know you have him.
>
> (*begins again, pleading*) I will give you my life. That's what you want, isn't it? My soul. Take it. I will be your slave warrior. Fight with you at Ragnarok… if you release him. But if you won't then you will have to kill me because I have nothing left. No fear. No hate. No quest. Nothing. And you have no power over me. (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017)

The way Senua's attitude and the manner of addressing Hela changes dramatically and rapidly a number of times within this one monologue, which emphasizes Hela's presence within both the narrative and the game design as an amalgam of negative

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emotions and beliefs Senua has held until this moment in the story.

Even before the player realizes this, Hela's figure becomes a stand-in for Senua, expressing her real emotions, which is apparent when the giant figure cries as she picks up Dillion's head and carries it over to the edge. Once she drops Dillion's head into the nothingness, where it falls and disappears from sight, she appears again on the screen as Senua, having symbolically let go of Dillion, the fear of gods, as well as her own guilt and conviction that she was the one responsible for his fate. This is the moment when the player realizes that the entity they were fighting was not actually Hela—Senua could not possibly ever strike the daughter of Loki, and the ruler of Helheim was probably not even her enemy to begin with. Senua's readiness to associate Hela with darkness came from Druth, who himself was tortured in the name of religion, and the connection he and Senua drew over their understanding of darkness as the source of her psychological distress and self-hatred was understandably dependent on religion. Due to this religious perspective, the figure of Hela has become fused with the darkness in Senua's mind.

The second understanding—and, in a way, a form—of the darkness in the game constitutes the catalyst for the aforementioned quest, but also for most of Senua's actions and decisions before Dillion's death, and it comes from the character of Zynbel. Zynbel quite literally appears in the game at first as a shadow, unrecognizable as Senua's father but very similar in presentation to the darkness as it appeared before the Gate of the Gjöll Bridge. Seeing as Zynbel is initially introduced as a shadow, a moving darkness, the game establishes a clear connection between him and the evil he represents, symbolically portraying him as a monster:

ZYNBEL:

> Did you think that I would let you go? That you lost me back in the wilds? I will never let you go. You can't get rid of me. I am your shadow. And I will be watching when you draw your last dying gasp. (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017)

In this sense, Zynbel as a character becomes indistinguishable from his actions and their consequences—i.e. the way Senua has perceived and managed her illness, to the point where his words "I will be watching when you draw your last dying gasp" mirror the words spoken by him in a flashback—which is shown to the player later—"[the darkness] will watch as you draw your last dying gasp" (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017).

It is difficult to tell which of the "symptoms" (feelings and sensations) Senua experiences in her adult life—and during the majority of the gameplay—are a manifestation of her original illness, and how many of them stem from Zynbel's abuse in her childhood, including her anxiety, emotional problems, depression and suicidal ideation (Bottoms et. al 2004: 10). Zynbel's position as a religious leader is also a source of Senua's cognitive dissonance, as his actions fuelled her guilt and confusion over the relation of those actions to the religion she was being taught to believe and follow (Bottoms et. al 2004: 24). Zynbel also meant to isolate Senua from others, and deprive her of support of other people who could possibly reach out to her and help her, as well as to make her sense of guilt stronger:

> ZYNBEL:
>
> The darkness touched you. Everyone could see it in the hollows of your eyes, a gaze averted from life. You ran from it but brought it nearer. Led it to him. An endless suffering worse than death. And you wanted to surrender? Abandon him to find peace with the gods? No. The darkness won't allow it. So you will walk into the lair of beast, look it in the eye and you will go to war. This is your mission. This is your quest. There is nothing else left. Why suffer the past, when

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> there is a new road ahead. The only one that makes any sense. (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017)

In the third act of the game, Senua recalls a repressed traumatic memory: she sees Zynbel by her side as her mother is burning alive, which Zynbel claims to be "the will of the gods" (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017). Zynbel asks Senua if she can see the darkness, and soon after says that if Senua "listens to the voices from the underworld and defy gods" she will rot like her mother and the "darkness will come for [her] too" (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017). At this point, Senua straight out says that Zynbel is the one who "created this darkness" (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017). The burning figure of the mother, significantly, transforms into Hela. Senua screams that her father killed her mother and adds: "you are the darkness!" (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017).

Zynbel represents cruelty and betrayal as both a familial figure and a religious figure. His abuse of Senua lies at the core of the darkness in the story, both as a theme and as a metaphor:

> THE NARRATOR:
>
> People think of evil as an unnatural invisible force, and so invoke the gods for protection. But evil can come from the hand behind the gods: a familiar hand, cold and cruel. He tried to fix her with his…rituals. Kept her trapped in that hole. She couldn't say which was worse… the darkness or the monster that her father had become. She couldn't fight them both. And so she left. Headed for the one ray of light that shone down on her. If she had stayed, she wouldn't have survived. But… maybe Dillion would still be alive… (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017)

It is difficult to tell to what extent Zynbel actually believed his own words. On the one hand, his words and action might be explained through the religious motivation serving as rationalization of violence of decidedly non-religious nature. On

the other hand, he could have actually seen "the darkness" (Senua's illness which he did not recognize as a simple affliction, but a supernatural condition which can be only explained by divine intervention) as punishment for defying the gods and "listening to the voices of the underworld" (which corresponded to Senua embracing the fact that the illness was a part of her), one that had to be purified by fire; either way, as a result of this abuse Senua's understanding of her illness was severely distorted.

The Darkness Without

The moment when Senua finally associates the darkness with her father instead of herself is the key turning point both in her quest and in her life. As she draws nearer to the end of her journey and recalls all the evil her father committed, not only against Senua herself but also against her mother, her frustration and anguish find an outlet in an angry outburst during her exchange with the memory of Zynbel:

> ZYNBEL:
>
> This is what happens when you listen to the voices of the underworld. They crawl into your soul and rot you from the inside. Defy the gods like your mother, and the darkness will come for you too. Do you understand, Senua?
>
> SENUA:
>
> I do understand. You cursed me with your own madness. You created this darkness! I was just a child… You created this darkness, so you could hide behind it.
>
> ZYNBEL:
>
> Only suffering brings salvation. It is the way of the gods.
>
> SENUA:
>
> It was all a lie. You are a lie! She didn't defy the gods. She defied you! And so you killed her.

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ZYNBEL:

You didn't pray to the gods. You prayed to your mother. Your mother, who was too weak to fight the darkness and abandoned you.

SENUA:

You tortured her! You killed her. You are the darkness! You would have killed me too! Now I know what you are, I won't let you hurt me anymore!

ZYNBEL:

Those rituals. The years of isolation. The pain that still haunts you. It was the only way to fight the curse within you. The darkness is inside you and it will destroy you!

SENUA:

You're a liar!

ZYNBEL:

No, Senua. The darkness is here. You cannot wish it away. And it will watch as you draw your last dying gasp.

SENUA:

You're a liar! I won't let you kill me! I can see through your darkness! You're a liar and a murderer! (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017)

This realization drastically changes Senua's perception not only of the darkness but also of her illness, making it possible for her to break her father's hold on her: the darkness her religious father made her believe existed. According to some players, in order to do that, a part of her had to be battled and had to be reborn[7]—the part that was corrupted by Zynbel and believed

7. MARZ, Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice (https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLU5c5YzX2iBb5WuxKjP4eHYKn4MYHrka9). DOA 17.07.2019.

his manipulations to be true. This brings forward a fundamental transformation of Senua's character.

This transformation is first foreshadowed and later recounted by one of the more important figures in the game, both in ludic and narrative terms: the Narrator. At the very beginning of the game, the Narrator—at that point having no special status among what she calls "the others" (other voices)—addresses the player directly:

> THE NARRATOR:
>
> Hello, who are you? … It doesn't matter. Welcome. You are safe with me. I'll be right here, nice and close so I can speak without alerting the others. Let me tell you about Senua. Her story has already come to an end but now, it begins anew. (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017)

More importantly, she mentions that Senua has heard the interaction between her and the player. Seeing as this places the player among the other voices Senua hears, this exchange establishes a particular relationship between the player and the character of the Narrator, wherein both fluctuate in and out of being real to one another. The gameplay later reveals that the Narrator is not the same as the other voices, since she can talk out of turn and is never engaged by the other Furies, and tends to retain a more detached, less emotional attitude—although she is always sympathetic to Senua— when she discusses the events from Senua's past. She also refers to the Furies as "them" and "others," clearly not counting herself among them. While the other voices are parts of Senua's mind, the Narrator and the player, who has become one more voice among the others, take on a different function. The game explores a critical moment in Senua's story, which simultaneously marks an end of a certain period in her life (where she perceived herself as cursed and thought of her illness as darkness) and the beginning of a new one (where she holds on to the hope Dillion's words gave her, and her new freedom). In this moment, her old perception of self

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and her new perception of self overlap, which means that the stage of Senua's life obscured by darkness—the one related by the Narrator—ends with leaving Helheim, and the new stage begins with the journey to Hel. As one Senua—the new Senua—emerges from the journey, strong and wiser, another one—the tired, lonely Senua full of guilt and fear—fades away.

> FURIES:
>
> #1 Is that—?
>
> #2 Oh no! Oh… It's—
>
> #3 The rot!
>
> #4 The darkness is coming! The darkness is coming—!
>
> (*Senua clenches her fist, breathing deeply*)
>
> FURIES:
>
> #1 Wait! Wait!
>
> #2 What is it?
>
> #3 It feels…
>
> #4 It's… It's different. It's okay.
>
> #3 It feels…
>
> #5 Is it okay..?
>
> #6 Something's changed. The darkness isn't here with us.
>
> THE NARRATOR:
>
> This is where my story once began. And so it has to end here. Because I cannot see further than this. (…) My friend, go with her. This now will be your story to witness. Good bye. (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017)

The Narrator cannot see any further, because the old Senua could not imagine a life where her illness is not the horrifying,

dangerous rot. Her perception of darkness is the one Senua brought with her into her quest:

> THE NARRATOR:
>
> This is a journey deep into darkness. There will be no more stories after this one. Oh, how rude of me. I never told you of the others… … They've been around ever since the tragedy. Well… that's not quite true. Some are old, some are new, but they've… changed. I think the darkness changed them just like it changed her. (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017)

Once Senua realizes that the darkness in not the rot consuming her but a lie, a projection of her father's cruel conditioning and psychological abuse, she is no longer the same person who started the "journey into darkness"; instead, a new Senua begins a new journey.

Conclusion

Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice gives the player insight into the perception of reality through the distorted prism of mental illness by means of a story with all the hallmarks of a mythological tale, revolving around a dangerous, nearly impossible quest that must be undertaken by a lone, brave heroine. However, the game as an experience also consists of many other important motifs such as religion, domestic abuse, and the issues of trauma and self-acceptance.

The game notably includes specific mechanics which not only reflect the concept of Todorov's fantastic, but actually allow to implement it in the game world. Accompanied by the fantastic elements of the game narrative, these mechanics can be perceived as manifestations of magical realism, or as symptoms of religious conditioning, or even of mental illness. Particularly important are the voices, which continuously haunt Senua—whispering, jeering and shouting at her—throughout her journey, and which

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affect the player's reactions and the overall experience of the game.

Another tremendously significant aspect of the narrative is the darkness. The darkness can be—and is—interpreted in a number of distinct ways by both the player and Senua herself. What connects those interpretations is the fact that throughout the majority of the gameplay narrative, the darkness appears to be altogether inescapable due to the various levels on which Senua had been subjected to mental conditioning—in terms of her family and her illness, as well as her culture, including the religious beliefs of that culture. The darkness as a symptom of Senua's religiously induced psychosis (Mohr 2004, Mohr et al. 2009), determining the way in which she interprets the reality around her and all the fantastic phenomena occurring within it in terms of religion, permeates the whole game as a text, manifesting itself in the story, the gameplay and the game world.

Despite the fact that *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* tends to be associated by both players and critics with its portrayal of mental illness, the game offers, in fact, an insight into much more complex aspects of human psychology. Through its narrative and gameplay design the game conveys the psychotic experience expressed as a cohesive narrative. In this way *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* does not present the player with a victim narrative, but a hero(ine)'s journey narrative instead (as described by Propp 2009 or Campbell 2008), through which the character of Senua can display strength, resilience and persistence in the face of the struggle posed by her mental illness. The player thus experiences the world which includes the elements of mental illness not merely as a psychotic voyage (Bateson 1961: xiii-xiv), but also as an initiatory journey during which the heroine struggles with the outside world and her illness, in this way establishing her own identity and the sense of self-respect.

2

THE FLUX OF SOUNDSCAPE AND LANDSCAPE AND THE FICTIONAL WORLD

Beyond Eyes is a 2015 adventure game developed by Sherida Halatoe, which revolves around the concepts of friendship, bravery and loss, with a simplistic story that does not impede the emotional experience. The avatar and protagonist of *Beyond Eyes*, Rae, is a little girl who lost her sight in a tragic accident. At an unspecified time after the accident, the girl befriends a cat, Nani, who has wandered into her garden. When the cat stops coming, Rae sets out on a lonely journey where she must navigate alone the unknown, unseen world around her; this journey eventually

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ends with Rae's ideas and hopes being confronted with the cruel reality of the fact that her cat friend has died. The mechanics of *Beyond Eyes* focus on the experience of blindness, but what sets the game apart from others featuring a similar concept is the way in which that experience is expressed through the use of the game's soundscape, especially sounding objects, and the pacing of the gameplay.

The present chapter discusses the issues of helplessness and apprehension related to blindness in *Beyond Eyes*, as well as other audio-oriented games, in comparison to how those themes have been portrayed in other texts of fiction (such as literature and film) according to affordances of the medium in which they have been expressed. The ludic design of the way in which the game simulates the experience of the lack of vision in a visual text form is also discussed. Particular emphasis is placed on the various aspects of the soundscape in visual environments of digital games, the role of acousmatic sounds in the process of cognition, and the extent of the player's access to the fictional world.

On the Origin of Hearing Fear

The design of *Beyond Eyes* raises the question whether a world experienced through sound only must necessarily be perceived as threatening. The direct connection between hearing, cognitive uncertainty, and the resulting feeling of fear was first described by Friedrich Nietzsche in his *The Dawn of Day*:

> It was only at night time, and in the semiobscurity of dark forests and caverns, that the ear, the organ of fear, was able to develop itself so well, in accordance with the mode of living of the timid—that is, the longest human epoch which has ever yet existed: when it is clear daylight the ear is less necessary. (Nietzsche 1911: 206)

This idea is further developed by David Toop in his study *Sinister Resonance*, where he devotes considerable attention to the

connection between hearing and fear, focusing mostly on the tension "between madness and the hypersensitivity to external sounds" (Toop 2011: 167) that determines the dubious, ambiguous psychological condition of the weird tales' protagonists. Toop examines carefully the uncanny potential of sound in Western cultures, discussing music, literature, painting, and the changes the culture of listening has undergone; he connects that aspect of acoustic experience with the prenatal phase of human life—human beings hear sounds sooner than they see images. Consequently, all sounds remain indeterminate and unidentifiable due to their detachment from a visible source—they come from the enigmatic "outside" as both mysterious and disturbing (Toop 2011: ix).

Listening and fear are perceived as interconnected in evolutionary psychology, which argues that the connection between them is based on the attributes of the cognitive aspects of the human brain, which has been shaped in the course of evolution by the natural environment, where human beings occupied an ambivalent position on the predator-prey spectrum. Pascal Boyer links the human cognitive system of "detecting live beings" directly with imagery of unnatural creatures of clearly predatory attributes and with the beginnings of religion:

> there are important evolutionary reasons why we (as well as other animals) should have "hyperactive agent detection." Our evolutionary heritage is that of organisms that must deal with both predators and prey. In either situation, it is far more advantageous to overdetect agency than to underdetect it. The expense of false positives (seeing agents where there are none) is minimal, if we can abandon these misguided intuitions quickly. In contrast, the cost of not detecting agents when they are actually around (either predator or prey) could be very high. (Boyer 2001: 145)

This uncertainty or lack of information becomes the primary source of fear, since the mysterious "agent" can potentially turn out to be dangerous:

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> Moreover, imagining barely detectable agents around oneself is in general rather cold comfort if one is scared. Suppose you are on your own in a house on a deserted moor and hear noises around the house. Is it really that reassuring to think that they are caused by someone you cannot see? Is it really better than to imagine that the noise came from branches brushing against the window? (Boyer 2001: 143)

In consequence, in the world of experiences subject to mis- and over-interpretation supernatural entities may come forth, such as gods, monsters or apparitions. Michael Tomasello, conversely, links the relationship between the cognitive system and fear with the characteristic of human beings' experience based on intentionality and socially constructed causality: the "structure of the reasoning processes involved is of the same general nature: antecedent event > mediating force > consequent event" (Tomasello 1999: 23). What is very specific about this point of view is that Tomasello uses the formula of stimulus–fear–flight to illustrate his idea, linking the domain of physical causality with the domain of social causality. Among the examples provided by Tomasello the following can be found: "Predator appears—Subject afraid (psychological force)—Subject flees", as well as "Noise—Subject afraid (psychological force)—Subject flees" (Tomasello 1999: 24). From these examples it is clear how culture "appropriates" the biological foundations of cognitive processes, furnishing them with imagination of and conviction about the non-random nature of sounds and noise, or the intentionality of events. In this way cultural (social) reactions reproduce, in a way, the biological patterns described by Boyer. Hearing produces the tendency towards over-interpretation of that which is heard, which, in turn, puts in motion the mechanisms of imagination and fantasizing, thus fueling fear.

For the purpose of discussing game texts relying on blind protagonists, it is useful to briefly outline the manner in which sound has been used in fiction in the context of portraying protagonists who cannot see. A good place to start is one of the

more famous short stories in the history of horror fiction: *The Pit and the Pendulum* by Edgar Allan Poe. *The Pit and the Pendulum* happens to be the first horror story (in the broad sense) decisively featuring the tension between the visible and the audible—or, rather, between what cannot be seen and what can be heard. This tension provides both the basis for plot and the dramatic structure for the following events. The story begins with the main character fainting upon having received a death sentence. The transition between the two—the pronouncement of sentence and the loss of consciousness—is already crucial insofar that it comprises a shift in description of those two senses (hearing and seeing):

> The sentence—the dread sentence of death—was the last of distinct accentuation which *reached my ears*. After that, the sound of *the inquisitorial voices seemed merged in one dreamy indeterminate hum*. It conveyed to my soul the idea of revolution—perhaps from its association in fancy with the burr of a mill-wheel. This only for a brief period, *for presently I heard no more*. Yet, for a while, *I saw—but with how terrible an exaggeration*! I saw the lips of the blackrobed judges. They appeared to me white—whiter than the sheet upon which I trace these words—and thin even to grotesqueness; thin with the intensity of their expression of firmness—of immovable resolution—of stern contempt of human torture. (Poe 2006: 43, our emphasis)

Thereafter, the events take place in a mysterious, secluded place where the main character finds himself left, all alone, prey to darkness, fear, and disturbing phantasms of his excited imagination. This is accompanied by the gradual return of his senses:

> Very suddenly there came back to my soul motion and sound—the tumultuous motion of the heart, and, in my ears, the sound of its beating. Then a pause in which all is blank. Then again sound, and motion, and touch—a tingling sensation pervading my frame. Then the mere consciousness of existence, without thought—a condition which lasted long.

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> Then, very suddenly, thought, and shuddering terror, and earnest endeavor to comprehend my true state. (Poe 2006: 45)

Subsequently, the protagonist makes the first attempt at exploring his environment and curbing his fear through looking at his surroundings—an attempt that fails:

> So far, I had not opened my eyes. I felt that I lay upon my back, unbound. I reached out my hand, and it fell heavily upon something damp and hard. There I suffered it to remain for many minutes, while I strove to imagine where and what I could be. I longed, yet dared not, to employ my vision. I dreaded the first glance at objects around me. It was not that I feared to look upon things horrible, but that I grew aghast lest there should be nothing to see. At length, with a wild desperation at heart, I quickly unclosed my eyes. My worst thoughts, then, were confirmed. The blackness of eternal night encompassed me. (Poe 2006: 45)

The character is surrounded by absolute darkness—possibly a dungeon, prison cell or perhaps even the bottom of a well—which forces him to rely on the testimony of his ears and hands, that is, his hearing and touch:

> Upon recovering, I at once started to my feet, trembling convulsively in every fibre. I thrust my arms wildly above and around me in all directions. I felt nothing; yet dreaded to move a step, lest I should be impeded by the walls of a tomb. (Poe 2006: 46)

The sense of touch, however, leaves the main character anxious and uncertain about the shape, size, and depth of the seemingly bottomless room he is in. He then decides to listen purposefully in hope of gauging the depth of the abyss next to which he was abandoned:

> I put forward my arm, and shuddered to find that I had fallen at the very brink of a circular pit, whose extent, of course, I had no means of ascertaining at the moment. Groping about

> the masonry just below the margin, I succeeded in dislodging a small fragment, and let it fall into the abyss. For many seconds I hearkened to its reverberations as it dashed against the sides of the chasm in its descent; at length, there was a sullen plunge into water, succeeded by loud echoes. (Poe 2006: 48)

The information gathered through the sense of hearing does not dispel his fears, instead making them worse, as he is forced to rely only on fragmented, inconsistent evidence of selected senses; this is not enough for him to form a cohesive mental image of the place of his execution. Instead, the uncertainty about the shape, depth, and size of the space stimulates his imagination, filling him with dread, and evoking memories and speculations about the ways of inquisition torturers. With every subsequent rustle, voice and noise, the character's anxiety grows, and his mind forms visions in which reality blurs with cruel phantasms: "[b]y long suffering my nerves had been unstrung, until I trembled at the sound of my own voice…" (Poe 2006: 48). Even when the character actually hears something, the reader cannot be sure whether the mental image connected to the sound is real or just the prisoner's imagination: "I forced myself to ponder upon the sound of the crescent as it should pass across the garment—upon the peculiar thrilling sensation which the friction of cloth produces on the nerves" (Poe 2006: 52).

The Pit and the Pendulum presents a clear and direct relationship between cognitive fragmentation—in the form of sensory experience being limited only to hearing—and the overactive imagination that for lack of concrete knowledge based on full and detailed sensory observation creates horrific visions instead. It is also deeply significant that the finale of the story once again focuses on that very same sense of hearing, seeing as the deliverance from the desperate, seemingly hopeless situation comes with the commotion set up by the French army marching into Toledo:

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> There was a discordant hum of human voices! There was a loud blast as of many trumpets! There was a harsh grating as of a thousand thunders! (Poe 2006: 56)

This final scene marks the moment in which the indeterminate sounds coming from the darkness surrounding the character, on which he was previously condemned to rely on, are replaced by distinct, readily identifiable sounds connected with political and historical events. From this moment on the prisoner can hope for not only the release from the dark dungeon but also the freedom from the uncertainty stemming from the necessity to interpret the limited sensory stimuli. The fall of inquisition in the finale of *The Pit and the Pendulum* marks the end of both the protagonist's torment and of his torturous delusions. However, prisoners locked in dark dungeons are not the only ones who tend to fantasize about the sounds they hear—such tendency can pertain to anyone, even in the light of day.

Hearing (without seeing) deludes and confuses the subject, tempting human imagination by offering fantastical—to a varying degree—interpretations of what the source of a noise, rustle or rattle is, which results in the perception of sounds which evade a straight-forward cognitive categorization. This happens because, as Salomé Voegelin points out, "[s]ound narrates, outlines and fills, but it is always ephemeral and doubtful. Between my heard and the sonic object/phenomenon I will never know its truth but can only invent it, producing a knowing for me" (Voegelin 2010: 5). Voegelin's observations are based on her own experiences of listening to the soundscape of London's Waterlow Park at dawn, when the local sounds of the park carry more clearly and reach the listener in relative isolation, not mixed with big city noise. In such circumstances listening "produces the park as an invented space that is not unreal but phantasmagoric: born out of the reality of experience" (Voegelin 2010: 14).

Further examples worth mentioning in this context, wherein the

experience of not seeing (including the inability to see the impending danger) is essential to the story, creating suspense and the dramatic aspect of the action are the films *Wait Until Dark* (1967) and *See No Evil* (1971). Both films feature as their protagonists lonely young blind women (portrayed respectively by Audrey Hepburn and Mia Farrow), tormented by male attackers in empty houses. Moreover, in both cases the women, at the mercy of the burglars, are awaiting the fall of the night, counting on the darkness to even the odds at least a little in the confrontation with the sighted tormentor. In both cases it is the senses of hearing and touch that become the main source of information about the shape and size of the surroundings, the presence of intruders, and potential danger. The dissonance between the knowledge of the viewers—who can see the villain lying in wait—and the heroine's observable attempts to hear their movements, given as they can only sense (or suspect) the villain's presence, is what creates suspense in the film. All of the rustling, tapping and other noises in this situation become either significant or possibly significant, while the protagonists must take them into account in their plans and actions, being exposed to the attackers' gaze, which makes it possible for the villain to derive perverse pleasure from watching the defenseless, helpless victim. Such scenes can also bring similar pleasure to the viewers who enjoy the atmosphere of danger and the clear imbalance of power between the tormentor and the victim—an imbalance which will suddenly shift once the darkness falls in the house.

A somewhat different situation is portrayed in the movie *A Quiet Place* (2018), depicting the story of a family trying to survive in a world overrun by alien predators who possess extraordinary hearing and attack every source of even the tiniest sound indicating the presence of prey. Virtually every horror fan will easily recognize the hyperbolic reconstruction of a typical horror movie situation in this film: the fear of being noticed by the predator or monster. However, the element that was the essential part of the film's climax in texts such as *Alien* (1979), *Cujo* (1982)

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or *Predator* (1987), constitutes the starting point of the story in *A Quiet Place*, and determines basically all of the actions of the characters. What is more, the concept of "being noticed by the predator or monster" is redefined in this case, as it concerns not the sight, but hearing, thus shifting the peril from being visible to being audible. In this sense the situation depicted in *A Quiet Place* is exaggerated: in a traditional horror film the characters are afraid to make noise for fear of the eyes of the monster, whereas in *A Quiet Place* the protagonists need to stay absolutely quiet at all times in broad daylight, and even darkness brings no safety. A similar motif is employed in the movie *Don't Breathe* (2016), where the protagonists break into the house of a blind man who mercilessly uses his familiarity with the house to hunt down and kill off the burglars. In this case, the imperative tone of the movie's title should be treated literally, as even the faintest sound draws the attention of the blind murderer and provokes him to attack. The audience, meanwhile, witness the struggle of the protagonists who are doing their best to remain completely silent despite their growing anxiety and worsening situation. In both cases, the significant common denominator is the radical shift in the focus of the attention of the audience members from the visual to the audible. What is the most essential in the context of the dramatic quality and the story progression does not take place in field of vision—either that of the characters or of the audience—but in the soundscape of the setting. It is the whispers, rustles and knocking that turn out to be the most significant as their occurrence in hearing distance of the character, as well as in the movie soundtrack, is the catalyst for change in the story dynamics; it also prompts the audience members to break the decidedly cinema-related habit of focusing their attention on what is visible on the screen in favor of what is audible. In this context, such film texts can be regarded as peculiar "movies designed for listening" (Eisner 1969: 313-314), in which the predominance of the image—despite being impossible to deny—can certainly be questioned.

A concept similar to the "unidentified sound" of Edgar Allan Poe's work that can be found in movie narratives is *acousmetre*, as it has been introduced in Chapter One—the sound that "derives mysterious powers from being heard and not seen" (Chion 1994: 221). The *acousmetre* can be strikingly similar to familiar sounds—such as a human voice, breathing or a heartbeat—but revealing a slight sound imperfection, making it unrecognizable and providing it with the attribute of the uncanny. Prolonged listening to such uncanny sounds creates an "acousmatic situation," thoroughly described by Pierre Schaeffer, which "in a general fashion, symbolically precludes any relation with what is visible, touchable, measurable" (Schaeffer 1966: 93, in Kane 2014: 24), whereby the subject loses themselves in the activity of listening. This listening then leads to the emergence of disturbing phantasms that are supposed to identify the source of the said rustles, taps and sighs. An unprepared listener can adopt one of two strategies in this situation: the first one is identification based on their imagination, which will make it possible for them to re-create the actual or presumed source of the sound—and, as a by-product, create fearsome, disturbing phantasms. The second strategy is to surrender to the aesthetic contemplation of those unidentified sounds coming from both somewhere and nowhere. Due to the cognitive frame of the human mind people much more often tend to become "fantasizing subjects." Cinema provides numerous interesting examples of fantasizing about sounds on the basis of acoustic data; this is especially evident in those genres which, ever since the introduction of sound film, had to work around the problem of how to make "the impossible" audible, i.e. the issue of how the sound representation should be associated with the supernatural or the uncanny. Among the genres facing this issue horror cinema is the most prominent.

The motif of a character confined to impenetrable darkness in the face of an unidentified and unseen danger is strongly emphasized in movies which feature blind

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protagonists—someone immersed in darkness, relying on their other senses, such as hearing and touch. Perhaps the most distinct case of cognitive (in)disposition of a character trying to hear "the impossible" can be observed in a film widely regarded as a quintessential example of an exceptionally bad horror film, infamous in its reputation as a failure: *The Screaming Skull* (1958). The protagonist, living in a "haunted" house, spends a sleepless night listening to mysterious sounds coming from various nooks and crannies of the old colonial house; a several-minute-long sequence of her listening is built through a gradation of weird, alarming sounds (which are decidedly prominent in the movie soundtrack). Most of those sounds belong to the cinema canon of scary acoustic cues: the howling of the wind associated with storm, branches banging at the windows, and the sound of footsteps on the wooden stairs which disturb imagination. It is worth pointing out that the first two examples are reflected by the visual part of the film, as the audience can see trees whipped by the wind and branches actually hitting the window panes; the sound of footsteps, however, remains purely acousmatic, with no identifiable source. Interestingly, when the key attribute of "the impossible"—the titular "screaming skull"—eventually makes an appearance, it remains silent in the scene. What is important is that the confusing sounds which herald the appearance of the monster retain their uncanny nature regardless of whether that monster does actually appear, or whether it is restricted to the protagonist's fantasy.

Audio-oriented Games

Sound and music have always been a major component of the design of digital games, from complex soundtracks and soundscapes to music-based gameplay (Oldenburg 2013). Their importance in constructing the game world cannot be underestimated: sound offers a unique feel of "spatial freedom" and facilitates gameplay that allows "a 360° field of interaction around the player" (Röber and Masuch 2005). Traditional games

featuring visual representation include two main types of dynamic audio—the diegetic, interactive audio dependent on the player's actions, and non-diegetic, adaptive audio, which is governed by the game system in relation to events taking place; additionally, game texts can utilize static audio such as non-dynamic soundtrack (Oldenburg 2013). As a narrative medium, sound is highly expressive, and "essentially as flexible as graphics and animations. Sonic landscapes … can be as immersive as advanced three-dimensional visual environments. Sounds can also communicate very specific information and generate suggestive musical environments or subtle moods" (Friberg and Gärdenfors 2004: 149).

A specific type of digital games which rely solely on sound are audio games; these are "digital games that feature complete auditory interfaces, so they can be played without the use of graphics" (Friberg and Gärdenfors 2004: 148). Such games feature no visual feedback, only audible one—at times accompanied by tactile feedback. In this type of game texts (as can be seen in e.g. *Dark Passenger*, 2017 or *BlindSide*, 2012), the main challenge the player faces is developing an operational map of the surroundings in their mind; this simulates the experience of being visually impaired in real life, where a person deprived of visual input would rely on the sounds made by objects (Oldenburg 2013). Within the given game, those sounds tend to be exaggerated, and sometimes items in the depicted world which do not emit sound in the real world become sounding objects, thus allowing the player to understand and navigate their surroundings (Oldenburg 2013). For the sighted players, the resulting confusion and inability to move around in audio games is much more considerable. Without a way to access the virtual environment visually, the player tends to feel disoriented, awkward and incompetent. This is all the more important considering the fact that the environment of the majority of digital games is quite complex, but even an intricate environment design can be arguably absorbed visually within a fraction of

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a second, objects, shapes and general layout included, in comparison to the sound-based recognition, which requires much more time (Oldenburg 2013) and effort on the part of the player. As a consequence, a game with this kind of mechanics compels the player to use different strategies to achieve their goals, while—more importantly—at the same time preventing them from using the skills and strategies they are familiar with and have come to rely on. While excelling at simulating lack of vision, audio games do have a weak point of being flawed simulations of sightless exploration, as they do not introduce olfactory feedback and very limited to non-existent tactile feedback (similarly to other digital game texts), at the same time removing one of the only two senses the player relies on during gameplay. This lack of comfort in playing audio games is only exacerbated by the fact that in comparison to the visual input, where the graphics in games can be at times accurate to the extent of being photorealistic, the sound in digital game texts is, in comparison to its real world equivalent, reproduced very poorly; the player is rarely able to tell whether a sound is coming from behind or the front, below or above.

Another type of games which strives to simulate to a certain extent the lack of vision are games which feature blind protagonists but employ visual representation. This effect is usually achieved through the use of darkness and simulations of echolocation, and can be observed in games such as *Lurking* (2014), *Sightless* (2014) or *Perception* (2017). The player can create the sound wave themselves (by walking, clapping or striking an object against a surface), or they can rely on a sounding object, such as a ticking clock. Once the sound wave created in such a way dissipates, or the sound source disappears, the map of the surroundings vanishes again, leaving the player in complete darkness. While the player will retain some memory of the fictional world, the visual environment is temporarily unobservable to them. The echolocation-like style of representing the environment might be an inconvenience for

the players accustomed to playing sighted avatars: on the one hand, it is, in fact, very accurate—the rendering happens in real time and is both precise and credible (dependable). On the other hand, however, when the player creates noise to explore the environment (when they "sound to see"), they in turn need to wait for the sound wave to reach the furthest corners of the current location in order to be able to examine their surroundings; if they turn around or look away, they might remain unaware of the fact that there is a door in a corner or an important item nearby. This facilitates evoking uneasiness and terror in the player, and most game texts featuring blind avatars indeed happen to be horror games.

As far as aesthetics are concerned, most of the game texts that decide to use a blind protagonist end up depicting a world that is supposed to only partially reflect the physical nature of blindness, and rarely focus on any aspects of coping with it. Instead, when the player is offered some—even if limited—visual cues, the focus of the gameplay shifts from the experience of blindness as the main subject of the game to merely a mechanic-related gimmick, where the player is expected to perform tasks they would have in any other adventure or horror game. The only difference is that in order to continue, the player occasionally needs to render the surroundings of the fictional world locations discernible through sounding; therefore, while games of this type still rely primarily on sound, they are not restricted to sound only. In contrast, the mechanics in *Beyond Eyes* is also sound-based, but the gameplay is designed around the difficulties and challenges of the blind protagonist. As such, *Beyond Eyes* strives to depict both the world surrounding the character, Rae, and the world inside her head—the world as she remembers it.

Beyond the Eyes

Beyond Eyes belongs to the category of game texts which use

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visual representation to convey the experience of interacting with the surroundings as a blind person. However, the visual representation the developer opted for distinguishes the game from other digital game texts of this type; additionally, it serves a specific expressive purpose, which is discussed later in this chapter. *Beyond Eyes* foregoes blackness, which is typically associated with and used for simulating blindness, and dull, unsaturated colors in favor of white and a bright, pleasant watercolor palette. Instead of choosing a first-person avatar, the player observes Rae in third-person perspective on pure white background, not unlike blank canvas, onto which the protagonist projects her memories of what the world and objects in it looked like. The objects, conjured from Rae's memory onto the empty space of possible scenery are both symbolically and—to a certain extent—quite literally woven from the fabric of her memories, and provide a stark contrast to the whiteness with the very vivid, very bright colors and beautiful shapes. A very important aspect of the narrative and gameplay is the fact that Rae had lost her sight in a firework accident at the age when she already had a broad catalog of visual memories and concepts. With the help of these, she constructs her own world in her head. As a result, the player moves around in the virtual environment of a world that is actually fictional within the depicted world: a world that is not only imaginary (established in the player's mind), but also imagined (created in Rae's mind). The foundation of this world is a combination of Rae's memory and one of remaining senses—hearing. Interestingly, her other senses also play a role in this world-making—for example, Rae reaches out to touch certain objects, and she can smell fish and freshly baked bread as well, but she relies primarily on sound. Touch is, in this case, much more limiting than sound, because it extends only as far as Rae's fingertips: a ringing bell, a singing bird in a tree or a rushing car are beyond her reach. Sounds, in comparison, come to Rae on their own, and allow her to create the world in her mind, in her immediate vicinity as well as in the distance. They come from real sources (as far as the depicted world is concerned), and

are the basis for the imagined world that Rae recreates in her mind. This recreation is the basis of the virtual environment of the game, which not only allows for the actual gameplay, but also, simultaneously, offers the player a glimpse into Rae's head and encourages them to explore the space in order to move forward. In this way *Beyond Eyes* strikes an optimal balance, since the simulated experience of lack of sight (in comparison to other games which attempt to achieve this effect) comes across as beautiful and compelling thanks to bright colors and the charming aesthetics of the projected world, but at the same time, it is not distracting because it remains at all times dependent on the sound mechanics.

Still, instead of an aesthetic contemplation of sounds, *Beyond Eyes* offers a traumatic experience of navigating an environment composed of acousmatic sounds, the sources of which are uncertain and potentially dangerous. In this context, *Beyond Eyes* is a game text designed like a horror story, even if one were to disregard the ambiguous nature of the final scene, which places the interpretation of the game story closer to supernatural horror, where a blind girl meets spirits of the dead; however, the story is, in fact, another example of Todorov's fantastic, which naturally "occupies the duration of uncertainty" (Todorov 1993: 25). The gameplay, throughout the majority of its scope, is characterized by a suspenseful cognitive uncertainty given that Rae—and, consequently, the player—either falls victim to "an illusion of the senses," or occupies a reality that "is controlled by laws unknown to us" (Todorov 1993: 25). A child protagonist with limited capacity for exploration, navigating a seemingly familiar and safe environment (a garden, a meadow, the vicinity of the house) which reveals its unpredictable and dangerous side (a busy street, an aggressive dog near the path) have constituted plots of numerous literary and movie horrors texts. Examples of those include Stephen King's *Pet Sematary* with its deadly highway near the house, claiming the life of the family cat and the protagonist's son, or the orphaned teenager living in an

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abandoned house in Sheridan Le Fanu's *Uncle Silas*, to name just a few. The cat playing the role of an unruly guide that the protagonist follows in hope of bringing him home also carries literary and movie horror connotations—among most memorable ones being the search for the cat in Ridley Scott's *Alien* or Lewis Teague's *Cat's Eye*. Due to these elements, the player may easily recognize the game world as a variation of a horror text plot and staffage, even if the events in the game do not culminate in a monstrous confrontation. In this way, the game narrative recreates a horror scenario on the composition level, but not on the story level. The emotional tension, typical for horror texts, results from the limited knowledge the protagonist possesses about the game world, which she must navigate and make decisions about solely on the basis of scattered, fragmented information about the environment. Nevertheless, it is essential to keep in mind that, in contrast to all other texts mentioned in this chapter, *Beyond Eyes* is not a horror text, or even a text supposed to make the player stressed or anxious. Despite the ludic design, which shapes the way in which the game world is presented to the player, the gameplay does not revolve around the feelings of uneasiness and terror—in fact, the player is meant to clearly distinguish between the personal emotion of fear and sympathetic emotion of fear (Frome 2016: 164-165), since the game is not meant to scare the player through the inability to see, but lend them the experience of a blind, scared girl.

The key premise of *Beyond Eyes* is fairly simple; it amounts to the soundscape, understood as "the sonic environment" (Schafer 1994: 274), being experienced in advance of the landscape—a landscape which is also imaginary. This landscape emerges gradually, as a result of various actions taken by the player—their steps or focus directed somewhere specific—and is inherently unstable, as it appears only briefly, based on valid acoustic signals misinterpreted by the blind character (for instance, when she mistakes the sound of rushing water in the sewer for a fountain).

In this way there is created a peculiar atmosphere of anxiety and threat, based on the scattered and unreliable data available to the character—and, in consequence, to the player—in the surrounding environment, which itself is full of sounds which could be ascribed to different sources (e.g. the motor of a lawn mower or a car, a domesticated cat or a stray). What the player interacts with is, in fact, the sound environment itself, as they only partially identify the soundscape which gradually transforms into a landscape, giving a visual form to that which was until then only auditory. *Beyond Eyes* raises the deceptively simple matter closely related to Shafer's deliberations—i.e. the actual possibility of "clairaudience", that is, the "exceptional hearing ability, particularly with regard to environmental sound" (Schafer 1994: 272) in a situation in which the subject has only partial environment data at their disposal. In other words, can clairaudience exist by itself, as an autonomic cognitive system, or does it require cooperation of other similar systems—in this case, primarily sight, lacked by the character, but possessed by the player (in her place). The structure of the game seems to suggests that forcing the subject to navigate the environment by using only one sense (e.g. hearing) inevitably leads to cognitive errors and misinterpretations of their surroundings, creating, in turn, a situation characterized by certain anxiety and vulnerability. This finding would be quite banal in the theoretical context, but a digital game has a distinct advantage over academic discourse: it can transform a question into an experience by putting the player in the place of the character who needs to muddle through the unstable and uncertain tangible environment. *Beyond Eyes* focuses the player's attention on the acoustic aspect of the game world. In place of soft background music which creates the atmosphere of opening and closing sections of the gameplay, the game uses, instead, the naturalistic diegetic (or seemingly diegetic) sounds of the foreground—such as the chirping and cawing of birds, the murmur of water or the whistling of wind, the sounds of cars etc. The seemingly diegetic nature of these sounds results from the simple fact that the player hears them

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before they can identify their source. Additionally, the fact that in *Beyond Eyes* (as well as in other games revolving around a blind avatar) the player must react to the sounding objects around the avatar might be regarded as a point of remote resemblance to "rhythm-action or other kinetically based games"; as Karen Collins aptly points out, "[t]hese games are designed to have players directly physically participate and respond to the sound" (Collins 2008: 128). Obviously, in the case of *Beyond Eyes* the goal is not to make the player actually physically react to the rhythm of the game soundtrack, but to compel them to make a decision (to move or not to move, to enter or not to enter) based on the soundscape. The decision-making process is additionally rendered more problematic by the aforementioned seemingly diegetic nature of the game world explored by the blind protagonist.

Furthermore, some ludic events are clearly synaesthetic in nature, since the player can see what Rae hears, or even smells or touches. This remains true even when she misinterprets some sounds, and thus the image on screen displays her mental image of her surroundings instead of actual objects in the fictional world. The relation between the sound and the image in this case acquires somewhat paradoxical nature in the sense described by Maurice Merleau-Ponty:

> Seen in the perspective of the objective world, … the phenomenon of synaesthetic experience is paradoxical. The attempt is therefore made to explain it independently of the concept of sensation: it is thought necessary, for example, to suppose that the excitations ordinarily restricted to one region of the brain—the optical or auditory zone—become capable of playing a part outside these limits, and that in this way a specific quality is associated with a non-specific one. (Merleau-Ponty 2005: 265–266)

In this sense *Beyond Eyes* becomes a peculiar example of a synaesthetic exercise, during which the player learns to see

sounds and hear images within the possibilities of the scope of the design of the game mechanics.

In the game world, nearly every diegetic sound gains the status of an acousmatic sound—for the avatar and, by extension, for the player—as the situation of the blind girl is *par excellence* acousmatic, as it "is the opposite of direct listening, which is the 'natural' situation where sound sources are present and visible" (Kane 2014: 4). By having the soundscape envelop the player in advance of the landscape, the game creates an acousmatic situation by "isolating the sound from the 'audiovisual complex' to which it initially belonged" (Kane 2014: 4). The main difference in this case concerns the fact that the acousmatic situation postulated by Schaeffer "creates favorable conditions for reduced listening which concentrates on the sound for its own sake, as sound object, independently of its causes or its meaning" (Kane 2014: 4), while in *Beyond Eyes* the character—and the player—must explore their environment and make decisions which affect the gameplay.

During the gameplay, the mechanics of sound is utilized in the following manner: Rae is located in the center of the screen, which is—initially—blank apart from her immediate surroundings. Whenever Rae hears a sound, an object or entity corresponding to that sound forms on the white background at an appropriate distance from her. If her guess concerning the nature of the object or entity is wrong, the image will change to match Rae's understanding of what surrounds her. In contrast to the games which employ echolocation-like mechanics to allow the protagonist to acquire some semblance of a reliable image of their surroundings, *Beyond Eyes* uses sounding objects to help Rae establish an idea of where she is and what lies before her and behind her. She then recreates these features in her mind, continuously filling her mental image of the world with new objects and entities. Indeed, the game never actually permits the player to "see" the world around Rae—they can only look at the

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world she imagines. The only sense the player and Rae really share is the sense of hearing. As such, *Beyond Eyes* also leaves the player with a feeling of want, as they are aware that there are objects and elements of the scenery they do not (and never will) have access to, because Rae cannot hear them or does not recognize the sound. For example, the pier and the water beneath and around it are most certainly teeming with life and detail, but Rae cannot hear it due to the fact that most of these sounds are drowned out by the rain and the waves. Since these two elements dominate the soundscape, the sources of those sounds are therefore the dominating features on screen.

Seeing through Sound

The central theme of *Beyond Eyes* is the disconnection between reality (as represented by the objects and events in the depicted world) and the innocent fantasy and expectations or, at times, hope (as represented by Rae's imagination and assumptions). Accordingly, this concept is reflected in the mechanics very early in the gameplay. When Rae ventures beyond the garden, she soon hears the sound of water she interprets as splash of a fountain. The game responds to player leading her to that point by introducing a new element in the player's visual environment—an appealingly colorful fountain, which emerges against the backdrop of the empty white background. For a moment, before Rae actually reaches the source of the sound (the splashing water), both she and the player are moving forward believing the object to be a fountain. Then, as Rae touches the sounding object—which is, in fact, a drain—and realizes that she was wrong, her mental image of her surroundings is updated accordingly. Since Rae keeps making similar mistakes on her way, the player must take this into consideration and distinguish between the objects they see on the screen (the virtual environment) and the objects that actually exist in Rae's world (the fictional world). This is a quite remarkable trait of *Beyond Eyes* as a game text featuring a blind avatar.

It is also worth noting that the fountain appears on screen in beautiful watercolor gray, with cheerful green foliage, while the color used for the sewer is depicted as more faded. When Rae misrecognizes—and then recognizes—that element of the world around her for the first time, the game emphasizes this important moment with a line on the screen, reading "Things were not always as she imagined them" (*Beyond Eyes*, 2015)[1]. Rae expects something pretty and familiar, but instead finds something else. Similarly, very close to the fountain there is a scarecrow, initially mistaken by Rae for laundry hung out to dry. As soon as a crow lands on it and she recognizes the object for what it is, the surroundings immediately change in response to Rae's emotional state—she is afraid of the scarecrow and the bird on it. These moments highlight another tremendously significant aspect of the gameplay: the way in which the player accesses the fictional world is filtered not only through Rae's imagination, but also her emotions. Whenever she is sad or scared, the surroundings change—the nearby objects take on dimmer, more ominous colors, ranging from gray to almost black. The most obvious example of this transformation is a busy road Rae needs to cross at one point in the game. As soon as she recognizes the sound of heavy traffic, a black wall of smoke-like abstract mist emerges along the line the road runs; Rae cowers and hugs herself, slowly making her way alongside the speeding cars until she can finally cross the road. Interestingly, even as she walks past a hood of a car, the car itself is not black or even ominously gray—the still car looks regular because the threat Rae cannot visualize is the road where the traffic flows, not the vehicle itself. Thus, *Beyond Eyes* emphasizes the significance of familiarity and hostility viewed as a binary opposition: all dogs, birds and hostile cats look the same, because they are not familiar to Rae, in contrast to things she believes to be pretty (a fountain, an umbrella) and things she cares about (home, Nani, her new friend), which are

1. All dialogue of *Beyond Eyes* has been transcribed by the authors of this book.

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detailed, colorful and diverse. A similar thing happens when Rae is disappointed—when the cat near the pier, whom she believed to be Nani, turns out to be a different one, she loses interest and the animal becomes displayed as just another nondescript cat. Sometimes this works in reverse: a scary object (a car) becomes nonthreatening (turning into a lawnmower) when Rae recognizes the sound.

The fence is another example of the way in which the game conveys the experience of not being able to see—and, thus, being disoriented by stimuli. Rae can clearly hear the cat's cry, and the player can see that cat, but upon moving forward they discover that there is fence between Rae and the cat, blocking their way. The player can then spend from five to even up to ten minutes slowly navigating along that fence, unable to strategically plan an optimal route. Rae can hear *where* she wants to be, but she cannot hear *how* to arrive at her destination. She cannot hear the obstacle, so she must work her way around it, continuously tracking the source of the sound marking the place she wants to reach. In terms of mechanics, this approach affects the whole game. Within the game world, Rae has a specific goal, but she does not know where to go to achieve it—and the player is placed in the exact same situation. Without the immediate, simultaneous access to all visual data, the capability of instantaneous plotting a course to a specific place or object is non-existent; similarly, it is impossible to take interest in or estimate the potential value of an object if neither the player nor the character realize the object is there—until they bump into it. This differentiates *Beyond Eyes* from the majority of other games, which tend to steer the player along a map, or at least guide them with visuals or music, thus manipulating them to choose the preferred path set by developers even if another path appears available. Sometimes this guidance might be extremely awkward, when the creators erect an invisible wall that blocks the player's path, but not their field of vision. In contrast, *Beyond Eyes* pushes the player out into a completely unfamiliar and unknown space,

forcing them to examine the surroundings at a painstakingly slow pace (there is no option to toggle sprint) while, at the same time, taking away their ability to plan their route beforehand.

Another aspect that sets *Beyond Eyes* apart from the games mentioned briefly hereinbefore is the fact that the main theme of the game concerns the juxtaposition of what is expected with what is real in an emotional context. The game begins with a brief outline of how Rae lost her eyesight in an accident involving fireworks, and then devotes more time and artistic attention to establish the leading premise of the game's narrative—Rae's friendship with the cat Nani and her loneliness when the cat disappears:

> Each time Nani left the garden, Rae would worry, wondering if he would ever come back. Spring brought the garden back to life, but Nani was nowhere to be found. Rae missed her friend badly. One day she decided to go and find him. (*Beyond Eyes*, 2015)

This quote is particularly significant, as despite the fact that the gameplay is structured around the inability to see, the subject matter of the game as the entire experience concerns something of a much more emotional nature: the loss of a friend—Nani. Rae loses her friend once when the cat ceases to visit her in her garden, and then for the second time when she understands why he stopped coming; in the end, after a long journey, Rae reaches a small cemetery, where she finds Nani's collar. The final scene on the cemetery develops and defines the concepts introduced earlier in the game only by the mechanics and certain ludic events: the difference between fantasy and reality, expectations (and hopes) and the actual state of events. Upon hearing the sound of Nani's bell, Rae imagines him sitting on a tombstone, expecting a happy reunion. However, when she approaches, it turns out that Nani's collar is merely hanging on a tree branch. Rae falls to her knees and cries, gathers some flowers and eventually just lies on the grass next to the collar. In this moment

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she realizes Nani is dead, and her journey was meaningless; this is also reflected in the gameplay, since the game does not require the player to guide Rae home—she is just left there, alone. Similarly to *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, at this point the player realizes that the goal of the journey cannot be fulfilled. In contrast to *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*—and *What Remains of Edith Finch*, which is discussed in detail in the next chapter—*Beyond Eyes* is characterized by a very clear focus on loss and dealing with that loss, which is aided by its intentionally limited scope (as defined by Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum, 2011: 300).

The importance of those essential aspects of the *Beyond Eyes* gameplay can be best illustrated by juxtaposing the game with another audio-oriented game which focuses on horror and employs the concept of avatar's blindness purely as a mechanics gimmick[2]—*Perception* (2017). *Perception* is a horror adventure game developed by The Deep End Games. The story revolves around the mystery of the curse plaguing the family descending from Thomas and Faith Durham. The protagonist, a young blind woman named Cassie Thornton, sets out to find and explore a mansion in Gloucester, Massachusetts, housing a strange set of

2. An excellent example of this is the clever set up about trust, which the protagonist mentions at the beginning of the game; Cassie tells the player that when one is blind, one learns "a thing or two about trust," and, throughout the gameplay, it is implied that she trusts both her senses and her intuition. When she wants to investigate something that requires sight, however, she—and the player—must rely on the application Friendly Eyes, which allows her to contact a sighted operator who is supposed to describe to her whatever she is pointing her camera at. An operator of the application, Nick, helps her on numerous occasions, resulting in creating a situation towards the end of the game that is very conducive to horror: upon connecting with Friendly Eyes, what the player assumes to be Nick tells Cassie to jump down the edge of the floor since "she belongs there" as a "blood of Durham," and his voice briefly changes into that of the Presence (the entity haunting the Durham bloodline). However, the game does not use this situation to actually trick the player or put them in danger. Cassie's blindness never facilitates the story development nor does it impede the player's progress.

items that haunt her in her dreams, and to solve the mystery of those dreams. As a game *Perception* might appear to share more similarities with *Beyond Eyes* than with the sub-group of games employing echolocation-like mechanics tailored for blind protagonists, to which it belongs. However, those similarities are still employed within the conventional horror text structure, specifically the haunted house motif. The fictional world is accessible to the player at all times through exploration (as objectively reliable as echolocation allows for); furthermore, some of its elements exist in Cassie's mind as well, independent of her position and active attempts of exploration, such as the landmarks of the location that she remembers after having encountered them only once. This means that Cassie always has some sense of direction in her environment, even when she is not relying on sound. The reliability is, of course, limited—there is no way of distinguishing between memories and landmarks, which means that while the player knows where to head for, or sees an object on screen, it is impossible to tell whether the object appears as it really is, or as Cassie's distorted memory forms it. For example, the shape of Cassie's hands might be accurate (she might be a short person with small palms and short fingers) or the image might come from her idea of what she probably looks like now. One particularly interesting use of this ludic solution is the case of the painting done by Cassie's mother—Cassie has a memory of the painting itself, but not of its content, so the framed picture appears simply as canvas to the player, with clearly visible texture, but no image on it.

A further similarity between *Perception* and *Beyond Eyes* consists in the fact that they both feature a story that in itself is not based around the blindness of the protagonist itself, but on something else. However, Rae's blindness in *Beyond Eyes* serves a particular purpose of conveying the aforementioned difference between expectations and reality. In contrast, in *Perception* the fact that the protagonist is blind is inconsequential to the story, and serves more to hinder the player in their progress (increasing difficulty

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and padding out the gameplay time). This is only emphasized by the fact that the player is expected to accomplish quite regular objectives such as finding and fetching objects, and even read notes and other material either through the use of the in-game Delphi text-to-speech function or the Friendly Eyes application, or a peculiar mechanics similar to second sight, where Cassie can pick up an item such as a postcard and somehow access its content. All of these actions together form an experience of regular exploration, similar to the majority of other horror game texts.

Conclusion

As a digital game, *Beyond Eyes* offers a unique insight into the experience of being unable to see, which is impossible to achieve in other existing media. Among audio-oriented games, *Beyond Eyes* foregrounds the challenges of blindness, limiting the exciting stimuli and instead forcing the player to find their way in the depicted world that they cannot actually access. The essential experience provided by the game is built upon the relationship between the soundscape of *Beyond Eyes* and the landscape expressed through the game's sound design. It renders the visual representation of the virtual environment, instead of just suggesting one. Furthermore, that visual representation can be more of a hindrance and source of confusion than any actual help to the player. Even though *Beyond Eyes* seems to be graphically more lenient, it is, in fact, much more limiting. What is significant here is the fact that accuracy is therefore secondary, in the sense that while in *Lurking* or *Perception* it is impossible to make out the actual details of the appearance of an object or a person, in *Beyond Eyes* the virtual environment relies solely on Rae's creative process of imagining the world around her. In other words, while in the case of *Beyond Eyes* the player can only access Rae's inner world, the two aforementioned games produce representations of the respective outer worlds unmediated by the avatar's senses.

In games that center around a blind protagonist, the developers usually do not offer the player much opportunity to do things that are natural for any game employing a visual representation of the world: examining their surroundings carefully, searching for objects that the player can interact with, admiring the scenery or locating danger without moving forward and attracting attention of enemies. In case of *Beyond Eyes*, the player appears to have access to some visual elements, since there are objects on the screen, but because of the fact that those objects do not necessarily correspond to the "real" objects in the fictional world, the player cannot rely on those elements—and cannot therefore rely on their eyes, just like Rae. Their strategy, therefore, is limited to Rae's own strategies and abilities; for example, when crossing the street, they cannot rely on their own agility and reflexes or any other meta-game skill to remove Rae from the harm's way, as they would in any action-adventure game—instead, they need to risk crossing the road with no idea whether or not a car might be coming their way, and hope they make it across all right.

Despite the apprehension evoked in the player, *Beyond Eyes* distinguishes itself amidst other audio-oriented games by its complete lack of horror overtones. It is in horror texts of various media that the connection between the limitation or absence of visual stimuli and the feeling of fear is typically very pronounced. However, the effect achieved by *Beyond Eyes* is by no means a frightening, or even eerie one, despite the presence of a numerous elements typical of the horror genre. In this way, the game aims to challenge the player, and not horrify.

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3

AGENCY, COMPLICITY AND GOTHIC INSANITY

Developed by Giant Sparrow and published in 2017 by Annapurna Interactive, *What Remains of Edith Finch* is a first-person psychological drama walking simulator. The plot of the game revolves around the tragic history of the Finch family, whose fate has been adversely affected by the escapist delusions of the family matriarch, Edie Finch. While the primary narrator of the game is Edie's great-granddaughter, a young woman named Edith, the gameplay involves controlling multiple avatars corresponding to almost every member of the Finch family buried in the on-site cemetery. As the game progresses, the player guides Edith through the tall, twisted house as she explores and revisits her childhood home, attempting to piece together and put into words the history of the family for the sake of her unborn son.

This chapter focuses on the balance between the player agency

and linearity in the design of the gameplay experience, and the effects that can be achieved through the subversion of the experience of agency. Through the analysis of *What Remains of Edith Finch* various ways in which game mechanics can help to address—or present in the gameplay form—reactions to death and loss are explored. The idea of storytelling as a form of narrative identity and the numerous layers of storytelling found in the game are also discussed in detail.

With a journal held close to her chest, Edith enters the rooms of subsequent Finches, which Edie maintained, untouched, as they were in the moments of their owner's deaths. In every room, there is a picture of the given family member, painted by Edie, and some sort of testimony related to that person's death, arranged together like a small shrine. During her exploration of those rooms, Edith reminisces about the family members she knew, and discovers new details regarding the deaths of her relatives. The gameplay reveals that the Finches can be described as an extremely unfortunate family, whose members have been dying in strange and untimely ways for five generations, to the point that in each generation only one child lived long enough to reach adulthood and have children of their own. The family matriarch, Edie, insisted on a fantastical narrative, according to which the family was plagued by a curse killing them one by one. Her unnatural fascination with the "curse" and death led her to expand the Finch house by adding new rooms, so that those belonging to the already deceased could be preserved, in a manner reminiscent of burial chambers, instead of using the house as a regular family would. Edith continues to explore the house, encountering and reading diaries, letters and other records that allow her glimpses into what led each family member to their demise. Eventually, once she visits all the rooms and sits down to write down her final thoughts, it is revealed that her narration is also a story read by her own son, whom she orphaned soon after having given birth.

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The Mechanics of Family Memory-bilia

The gameplay consists largely in exploration of the Finch family house, where Edith enters the rooms of subsequent Finches and inspects the interior for—apart from a couple of rooms—the first time in her life. As the player prompts Edith to pick up the item that stands as the testimony—a diary, a letter, a slide viewer—the gameplay changes, introducing a unique sequence in which the player re-enacts the events leading up to the death of the particular Finch family member the item is relevant to, with the narration displayed on the screen the entire time. Performing specific actions pushes the narrative forward, so that subsequent lines of text of the document are displayed on the screen. Depending on whose death narrative it is, the player will have to perform different actions or somehow interact with the already displayed text. For example, during one sequence—the death of Gus Finch—the text is presented in the sky and the player, in order to proceed to the next part of the story, has to "gather" the letters with help of the kite that Gus was flying that day.

The actual gameplay in each sequence revolves around re-creating the events of the past; the final outcome does not rely on either the choices of the skill of the player, which is why it is impossible for the player to "fail" in their pursuit of the goal of each sequence. This remains true even if the player suddenly faces a new reality (Lewis Finch) or transforms into a new form (Molly Finch). For instance, when the avatar becomes a cat in Molly's sequence, and the player is expected to jump and run along the branches of the trees around the Finch's house, the player cannot fall down to their (Molly's) death; the game only allows them to go further on the correct path to unravel the narration of the story. The sole way to conclude the sequence is to play through it—failure or running out of time are not an option; once started, the story re-enactment sequence can only be completed by the player experiencing the death of the particular member of the Finch family.

The material character of memories is one of the main traits of the world of *What Remains of Edith Finch*; Edith can only access the memories of the already dead or missing members of Finch family (as well as the memories about them) through solid objects. They are the vehicles that store, give access to and constitute a link with the traumatic past of the family, whereupon they become the foundation of Edith's life experience. This composition is not only understandable and deeply embedded in the game world, but also in cultural practices easily recognizable to the player. As Bjørnar Olsen rightly points out:

> The materiality of memory is well understood among ordinary peoples as reflected in their care and passion for objects, places, and monuments. It is also evident in the deliberate "care" devoted to destroying and erasing materials associated with "the other" in war and ethnic conflicts. This importance of materials for individual and communal memories is clearly recollective in character, although this recollection is mostly (if not always) grounded in a lived, habitual engagement with them. (Olsen 2010: 126)

According to Olsen, objects are vehicles not only for memories that are desirable and worth preserving, but also for involuntary ones (Olsen 2010: 117-119), memories that are unwanted, pushed to the margin of consciousness, or even repressed (due to being traumatic for the subject). In this context, an item can become a medium capable of releasing the traumatic memory in an uncontrollable and random manner. Regarded from this perspective, the Finch family house takes on the appearance of a peculiar mausoleum, a remembrance site where all of the objects and items are meaningful in the context of the past and family history—e.g. the plates left after the last supper Edith and Dawn had with Edie, the stack of cans near the entrance to the basement, the remnants of the dragon slide left to decay in the pond, or the "Missing" posters for Milton. In this sense, *What Remains of Edith Finch* relies on indexical storytelling—although

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the deaths are depicted through individual sequences and referred to in documents, the player needs to reconstruct the broader context of the story from indices. Indeed, many aspects of the Finch family story are told exclusively through indices (such as the date on the Lewis' memorial service invitation and the decoration on his tombstone both pointing to Edie's insanity, which is discussed later in this chapter). As a virtual environment, the Finch family house is full of items which the player can examine, or at least look at. Those objects are related to various past events and encourage the player to reconstruct not only the events themselves, but also the relationships between them (Fernández-Vara 2011), as well as the people involved. The entire narrative design of the Finch house promotes the navigation necessary to construct the story of the "cursed" family: traversing the corridors and rooms makes it possible for the player to interpret the elements of the environment (Fernández-Vara 2015: 159). The creativity of the game developers does not end with the materiality of memories—it also encompasses the aspect of preserving memories in a variety of media formats specific to individual Finch family members. Those media formats, including letters, a diary, a sketchbook, a comic book, a poem or a series of photographs, constitute a personal microhistory of subsequent Finches, which come together to represent the complex and bizarre story of the whole family. This assignment of a specific medium (item) to a particular character allows for a personalized story that reflects the distinct personalities of individual family members. This aspect of the story design simultaneously allows for the use of different forms of expression to recount various stories, such as the first-person narration of a diary or a sequence of photograph, and also consolidates the entire narrative, making it possible for the inanimate objects to speak about the family history in a place Edith inspects, item after item, like in a museum. All fragments of *What Remains of Edith Finch* which constitute Edith's gameplay are also important for a couple of reasons; firstly, Edith's narration frames the narrative of her own

story, and is in itself preserved in a medium of a diary. Secondly, as a primary avatar of the player, Edith can convey the experience of discovering the hidden secrets and piecing together the events and actions she never witnessed. *What Remains of Edith Finch* features indices and a specific design in conjunction with stories told in words by Edith—who comments on everything she sees and explains much in detail—as well as by materials and documents left in the rooms of the house, and, lastly, by the overarching narrative of Edith's own diary. Each character has their own, distinctive medium of delivery that describes their fate and serves as a record of their life and demise; it is, however, important that it is Edith who seeks access to the stories these items contain—she is there to learn the same stories which Edie believed in and which Dawn accused of having killed her children.

The first story the player explores is the story of Molly Finch, the daughter of the Finch family matriarch and Edith's great-aunt. The player learns the story of Molly, who died at the age of ten, after Edith picks up her diary and starts reading:

> December 13th, 1947. Dear diary, I will be gone soon, but I wanted to tell somebody about what's gonna happen. It started when Mom sent me to bed without dinner. I woke up and I was starving. So I looked around for something to eat. The gerbil food was dry but I didn't mind it. My Halloween candy was all gone. I thought about eating Christopher, but I held back. I kept eating and eating. I ate a lot of things that night. Then I heard chirping outside my window. It was a barn swallow going back to her nest. (*What Remains of Edith Finch*, 2017[1])

The player, as Molly, explores the room in which she was locked without supper on the night she died in search of something to eat. If they try to leave the room, the player will discover

1. All dialogue of *What Remains Of Edith Finch* has been transcribed by the authors of this book.

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that the door is locked. Depending on the items the player tries to interact with, the narration will be supplemented by Molly's description of the object in terms of her overwhelming feeling of hunger—such as the comment that she had to hold back from eating her own pet fish.

Having looked around the room, eating one—or more—poisonous items triggers the line "I ate a lot of things that night" in Molly's narration, and she describes being transformed into different predatory animals. The player controls each predator form in the first-person perspective, just as they controlled Edith's son, Edith herself and Molly before that, and they hunt down new prey in that form. As a cat, the player hunts and devours a small bird; immediately after eating it, they transform into an owl and start hunting rabbits. Then the avatar changes into a shark—as soon as the player reaches the ocean (having tumbled down towards it in a rather amusing way, which only emphasizes the fantastical, surreal impression of this fragment), they start hunting a seal. All of this is listed in Molly's journal:

> I reached out for her and suddenly… I was a cat! I tried to be quiet but the bird was really scared. Mom and dad didn't even look at me. I jumped and almost got her. I could tell she was getting really tired. Now I was in the big tree. I promised dad I wouldn't climb it anymore. But all I cared about was eating that momma bird. I gobbled her up. And suddenly I was an owl! First, all I heard was the wind. Then I heard little teeth nibbling in the grass. Rabbits! I imagined his face looking up and seeing mine, through my talons. I swallowed him him and I didn't chew one bit. Then I flew off to find something bigger. A momma rabbit! She was almost too big to carry. I started choking but I couldn't stop eating. And suddenly I was a shark! I rolled off a cliff and into the ocean. Now I was hungrier than ever. I wanted fat, juicy seals. I tore off her flipper and it tasted really good. I grabbed on tight. But I was so hungry, I jumped out of the water. (*What Remains of Edith Finch*, 2017)

At the moment of the last attack on the seal, the avatar jumps out of the water and onto a boat, turning into squid-like monster, and then proceeds to eat the people on the boat:

> When I opened my eyes, everything had changed. Now I was a monster. And I smelled people everywhere. I was big, but I moved real quiet. I wanted to stop, but also I didn't. After the last passenger, I was still hungry. And across the water I smelled something new. Something I had to have. So I swam towards it. I slivered onto the sand and the good smell went into an old pipe. All my stomachs started growling.
>
> And suddenly I was me again. I held my breath for a long time but I couldn't hear anything. I think it's waiting for me to fall asleep. But it's not going to wait much longer. It needs to feed.
>
> And we both know I… will be… delicious. (*What Remains of Edith Finch*, 2017)

The sequence ends with the player returning in the form of the monster to Molly's bedroom, and hiding under her bed. This particular narrative requires deciphering and sifting through fantasy (monsters and shape-shifting) and reality (a poisoned little girl), which is particularly significant, seeing as the player, distracted by the fantastical elements of the gameplay, at this point in the game might not realize that they have actively fed Molly the poison, which will eventually lead to her death. Neither may they realize that the rest of the game will consist in their conscious involvement in the death of each family member whose story they examine (save one). In this sense, killing Molly is not something the player chooses to do or participate in, but something they are—in a manner of speaking—tricked into doing.

When Molly's gameplay sequence begins, she is already dead, and reading her diary feels like distant recapitulation of what happened to her. However, although the narration begins with a simple record of the events of the night and Molly poisoning herself, her actual story (both in the sense of her narrative, i.e.

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the way she made sense of her experience, and in the sense of the experience itself) is relayed through her segment of the gameplay.

While the gameplay initially seems to invite free exploration of Molly's room, the game does not allow the player to progress—let alone complete Molly's sequence—unless they make the child avatar eat the poisonous holly or the toothpaste. While the first part of Molly's diary sequence conveys the actual events to player, explaining the real tragedy behind the girl's death, the second part allows the player to experience the delusional fever dream that Molly sees as she is lying in her bed, hungry and dying of poison. Once she hallucinates jumping out of her bedroom window and transforming into a cat, she has visions of changing into numerous predators; as she goes from a cat to an owl to a shark to sea monster, the player has an opportunity to prowl, fly and swim. There seems to be no underlying connection between the animals (apart from the fact that they correspond with the toys on Molly's bed, which means they might have influenced her hallucinations), but there are two consistent themes in Molly's delusions: her hunger and her resentment for her mother. In contrast to the hunger, the resentment is never explicitly put into words, but, instead, the game makes the player hunt and eat mothers, as Molly chases, catches and devours a "momma bird" and a "momma rabbit"—even the seal is female. Having briefly returned to her senses, Molly believes that the monster is under her bed, about to eat her. She writes the last sentence of that account in her diary, stating that she will be "delicious."

Molly's case is quite unique, as it reveals the fundamental tension in the relationship between the monster and the victim. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen aptly points out:

> The monster also attracts. The same creatures who terrify and interdict can evoke potent escapist fantasies; the linking of monstrosity with the forbidden makes the monster all the more appealing as a temporary egress from constraint. This

> simultaneous repulsion and attraction at the core of the monster's composition accounts greatly for its continued cultural popularity… (Cohen 1996: 16-17)

The fear of a monster is, at the same time, a form of desire to be eaten by it—and, in consequence, becoming one, as the monster embodies the cravings and practices forbidden to humans, but not to the Other—the monster. Monstrosity, in this context, frees a person from any ethical restrictions of the human nature. Therefore, through devouring herself Molly becomes both the monster (as the one who devours) and the victim (as the one who is devoured). What is more, by doing so, she breaks one of the most rigid and deep-seated taboos in virtually all human cultures—cannibalism. The fear of the monster and the desire for the monstrous meet in a singular image of a "monstrous girl."=

The next story Edith examines showcases the game's artistic and conceptual diversity in terms of storytelling through mechanics. The gameplay sequences of respective family members investigated by Edith are manifold in form and length, as becomes clear when Molly's surreal narrative is immediately followed by Calvin's story, which is brutally realistic and leaves absolutely no doubt about what happened to the boy. Calvin, Edith's great-uncle, died having fallen off a cliff right by the Finch family house. The details of his tragic and easily preventable death are presented to the player in his own gameplay sequence, which is initiated when Edith starts reading the composition his brother Sam wrote as a child:

> "How I want to remember my brother," by Sam Finch.
>
> The thing I remember is that when he made up his mind, that was it. My brother said he'd die before he ate another mushroom. And he did. At Barbara's funeral we swore we'd never be afraid again. And he wasn't. (*What Remains of Edith Finch*, 2017)

The gameplay sequence itself is even less emergent than Molly's,

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offering the player virtually no opportunity to make any decisions at all (Fernández-Vara 2015: 151). In contrast to the previous story, which starts out innocent and gradually becomes more abstract, Calvin's sequence is the first one where the player clearly and immediately realizes that they will be forced to kill the little boy. This time, the sequence is short and simple—the avatar is sitting on a swing, and there is no possibility of stepping off it. The only agency left to the player is to refuse swinging, but this choice means that the game will not progress. The outcome of the action is already determined, and the narration—Sam's composition—reminds the player of the goal of the sequence in a manner which leaves an impression somewhat reminiscent of *The Stanley Parable* (2013):

> I think Calvin always wanted to fly. But that day, he finally made up his mind to do it. I told him going around was impossible. Maybe If I hadn't said that… Or maybe if the wind hadn't picked up…Then maybe he'd still be here, but I doubt it. I think he'd already made up his mind. That's what I want to remember about my brother.
>
> The day he made up his mind to fly… And he did. (*What Remains of Edith Finch*, 2017)

Thus, the player can only make Calvin swing higher and higher—which actually requires some effort—and send him soaring off the swing. Moreover, in contrast to Molly, Calvin's fate is not merely suggested: the player can watch, in first-person perspective, as the boy falls from the swing and over the cliff, head first into the water, to his death. In this way, *What Remains of Edith Finch* establishes its peculiar utilization of player agency for the purposes of its dramatic and emotional design. The game achieves its effect through not so much subverting the player's agency—taking into consideration the extent of agency in other games with set goals which are required in order to progress in the game—but, rather, subverting their expectations of what they can do with that agency.

The next case explored by the game is the death of Gregory, the infant brother of Edith's mother and the son of Sam and his first wife, Kay. His story is introduced to the player by Sam's letter to Kay, jotted down under their divorce contract:

> Dear Kay,
>
> Do you remember the way Gregory used to laugh when he thought he was alone? Like something funny was happening but only he could see it. I think he saw things the rest of us don't. I wonder what he saw. He reminded me so much of Calvin. Lost in his imagination. Whatever it was he saw… it sure made him happy. I know how silly it sounds that I worried about a baby being too happy, but I felt him slipping away. (*What Remains of Edith Finch*, 2017)

This sequence puts the player in the perspective of the baby—Gregory—in the bathtub. The player controls and moves his toys around in the tub, bumping them into other toys and objects in the vicinity. This starts with a single toy frog—once the player moves Gregory's hand holding the frog, they hear happy, uplifting music in the background; the music continues to play only if the player continues to move the frog around. The sequence requires the player to steer the frog and other toys and eventually turn the water tap on again, letting the water fill the whole bathtub until Gregory, left unattended by his mother, is entirely submerged. The gameplay of this sequence is so colorful and comes across as so cheerful as if it were intentionally designed to distract the player from the fact that their goal is to drown an infant in a bathtub.

When Gregory ends up underwater, the aesthetics change, and the player can briefly explore a fantastic underwater world of the bath, following the swimming toys further and further to the bottom of the bath and the run-off. This imagery remains consistent with the narration of Sam's letter:

> I know you did everything you could. Maybe if I hadn't called

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> that night… I wish he could have told us about the world he saw. Kay, there is so much I don't understand. About Gregory… About everything… But I know what happened wasn't your fault. And wherever Gregory is now… I'm sure he is happy. And he'd want you to be happy too. Good luck, Kay.
>
> Love, Sam (*What Remains of Edith Finch*, 2017)

Gregory's sequence, although very similar to Calvin's, is in many ways much more disturbing. In both cases the medium of delivery is a message hand-written by Sam, a close relative of the deceased: a son in the first case and a brother in the second. The critical difference concerning the narrator's emotional and psychological state is communicated through the actual gameplay; when Sam, as a traumatized boy, uses plain, seemingly indifferent phrasing to talk about Calvin's dislike of mushrooms and uses the word "fly" as a metaphor, clearly knowing that this is all it is, the gameplay presents the player with a boy swinging on a swing, trying to loop the loop. However, when Sam, as a tormented father, racked with guilt, talks about his drowned infant son, he latches onto a fantasy of how Gregory could see things others did not—a magical world, which is clearly visible in the emotional language and vague phrasing he uses in the letter. The game allows the player to experience this fantasy—what they are presented with is not Gregory's story, but in fact Sam's story, or, more specifically, the way in which he attempted to make sense of what had happened. Gregory's scene is among the most disturbing ones in the game, mostly due to the dissonance between the joyful visual and sound representation and the dark subject matter. The game scripts the player (Murray 2005: 79) into drowning the baby; the player's expectations concerning their agency are, again, subverted, as they can only fulfil the single goal of the sequence in the scripted manner. Firstly, the goal of the player is the exact opposite of the well-being of the avatar, and secondly—and more importantly—the game forces the player to do something they feel uncomfortable with or are profoundly opposed to doing. In this way, *What Remains of Edith*

Finch puts the player in a position other media cannot—of being complicit (Isbister 2016: 10) in involuntary manslaughter. Just as Edith is a semi-complicit spectator, pouring over the details of each tragic death—not to mourn but to satisfy her curiosity—the player plays to complete the game and witness every death.

Another story worth mentioning here due to its gameplay mechanics is the one of Sam Finch, Edith's grandfather. In this particular sequence the narration is driven forward through camera use; the player, as his daughter Dawn—and, later, Sam himself—must take pictures of various things in order for the story to progress. Having taken Dawn on a hunting trip, Sam teaches her how to shoot animals. After she fires at a deer and supposedly kills it, Sam wants to take a timed picture with his daughter and the deer's body. The player controls Sam in third person as he starts the camera timer and runs up the hill in time for the picture to be taken. At that point, it turns out that the deer is still alive, and the animals pushes Sam off the cliff to his death. Since Sam's main interests included the military, hunting and photography, it is significant that he died during a hunting trip, combining two of his favorite activities into the cause of his death, with photography providing testimony to it. The exact moment of Sam being thrown of the cliff must be captured with a camera by the player, thus creating the item linked specifically to Sam's story.

Perhaps the most extraordinary gameplay sequence in Edith's exploration, however, is that of Lewis Finch, Edith's older brother. It is the most complex from the point of view of both the narrative and the gameplay mechanics. Lewis worked in a cannery, a place Dawn hoped would keep him away from Edie's influence; however, this mundane job prompted Lewis to start daydreaming. The player is given this information explicitly in the words of the letter Lewis's psychiatrist wrote to Dawn:

> Dear Mrs. Finch,

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> As Lewis's psychiatrist I can understand your desire for explanation. As I see it, the trouble began in January, shortly after we convinced your son to seek treatment for substance abuse.
>
> Newly sober, I believe Lewis first noticed the monotony of his daily life. He kept working at the cannery but he withdrew part of himself. In our sessions I saw the same behavior. His mind began to… wander. I asked him to describe it. He said he started small, imagining a labyrinth. He'd feel his way about. Then something moved… bats. And toads. And things that have not names. He knew it was all in his head, but he took it very seriously. (*What Remains of Edith Finch*, 2017)

From the letter, the player learns that when Lewis started his tedious, dreary job in the cannery he would become lost in thoughts, and indulge in a fantasy in which he would go on amazing adventures. As the time passed, his imagined world started to take over more and more of his attention. The gameplay in that sequence, meanwhile, conveys to the player what was going on in Lewis's head through a combination of visual elements and complex mechanics. Lewis's wandering mind is represented by vivid images that are imposed on the mundane reality of the production line in cannery. The first images Lewis sees contain very few colors and strongly resemble old-fashioned 2D cRPGs. However, with each passing moment, the images he sees change and become more detailed. What is more, this imaginary world grows, signifying that his sanity is slowly slipping away:

> I had hoped he'd find himself. But he found something more. I worried about him then, daydreaming at the cannery. I spoke with his boss, but he said Lewis had become a model employee. Methodical, tireless, focused… Like a whole new Lewis. So I let him go on. I even encouraged him. It seemed very promising at first. He told me he'd made a new friend on the edge of a city he named Lewistopia. He built the city up slowly, brick by brick. Then he made musicians and songs for them to play. He talked about starting a band and he was

> always humming something. Every day his imagination grew stronger. He no longer spoke at the cannery, but his chopping was as reliable as ever. Then one day it struck him that all the cheering crowds, even the stones under his feet were all in his imagination, so he could do whatever he wished. He held an election for a mayor and he won. They begged him to stay but his mind was already wandering. (*What Remains of Edith Finch*, 2017)

The escalation of Lewis's losing grip on the reality is depicted by the change in the images the player sees on the screen. More colors appear and the graphic style shifts from 2D perspective to 3D; the increasingly elaborate images gradually take up more and more of the screen, and in the end players can no longer see the production line in the cannery at all, only the fantastic world created by Lewis in his mind:

> It became a game for him. He'd conquer a city then immediately push on. He started drifting away from our reality. Until one day he forgot to go home from the cannery. Even as his mother pleaded with him, part of Lewis kept sailing on. In Lewisburg, he heard rumors of a beautiful prince [a handsome queen][2]. The prince [queen] was on his [her] own quest for radiant rainbows [sinister serpents]. He followed the sound of his [her] electric sitar [silver harp]. His chase led him to a golden palace east of the sun and west of the moon. (*What Remains of Edith Finch*, 2017)

The gameplay mechanics in this particular sequence emphasize this change in perception and Lewis' distancing himself from the reality. The player has to control two separate tasks at the same time: one is moving the imaginary Lewis in his fantastic world and the other is moving the salmon to the guillotine to chop off their heads, and then put them back on the production line. All the while the narration progresses according to the player's actions in Lewis's imaginary world. At the beginning, it tends

2. At this point, the player can make a number of non-crucial choices in the gameplay.

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to be difficult for the player to control both activities at the same time. As the narration progresses, the field of view is taken over by the fantasy; at the same time, however, controlling the imaginary Lewis becomes easier and the activity of moving fish becomes more automatic, even though the player cannot not see the production line or guillotine anymore, as they are completely obscured by Lewis's imaginary world. As in the other sequences, the gameplay mechanic is designed in such a way that the player cannot fail their task or injure Lewis in any way before the story arrives at its conclusion, which is explicitly explained in the words of the psychiatrist's letter:

> Even then, his logic remained sound. He knew the world was all in his imagination, but he was so proud of having created it. In his own eyes, he'd become something greater than a king. For someone who'd never known success in the real world, I think it was overwhelming. And then it struck him that the real Lewis was not the one chopping salmon, but the one climbing steps of a golden palace. "My imagination is as real as my body" he told me. It was hard to argue with him. He began to forget the world we know. I think it pained him to remember Lewis, the cannery worker. He began to despise the man with the royal contempt. I still thought I could save him. Even after he said he was being crowned king over all the lands of Wonder. The palace would be packed with his companions, including the wise calico who had insisted on advising him. His prince [queen] waited, holding his crown. There was only one thing left to do. Bend down his head. And the rest I think you know.
>
> Mrs. Finch, your son was a kind of a man that will be missed by all of us who knew him.
>
> My sincerest condolences,
>
> Dr. Emily Nuth (*What Remains of Edith Finch*, 2017)

As far as the ludic design is concerned, Lewis's sequence may well be the most impressive one in the game. It utilizes the expressive power of digital game texts, through its controls and mechanics

successfully conveying an idea and experience no other medium but a digital game could have conveyed. The eudaimonic gratification elicited by the narrative itself is paired with and enhanced by similar gratification elicited by the specific mechanics, provoking the players to reflect upon the story and increasing their capacity to be moved by it (Elson et al. 2014: 533). In the story of Lewis Finch, *What Remains of Edith Finch* blends the ludic and the narrative, the visual representation and the scripted interaction (Murray 2001: 79) in order to allow the player to experience Lewis's faltering grip on reality; the player, just like Lewis, needs to manage simultaneously the demanding task of dealing with his real job, and the imagined world in his head, which becomes increasingly attractive with every passing moment. Since that world is far more appealing and dynamic than the reality—not to mention the fact that it can be explored—the player, eager to discover Lewis's story, will tend to favor the imaginary world, and focus on it instead of on Lewis's job. The "Lands of Wonder" develops gradually from a black-and-white, empty 2D maze to a colorful, populated 3D environment, and, eventually, a fully-fledged virtual world, growing in size all the time; it starts as a small portion of the screen, and then expands to the point of literally obscuring everything else and ultimately starts to blend with the real world of Lewis Finch. This also conveys to the player the notion that—fed by Edie's fantasies since early childhood—Lewis could not deal with the mundane reality of adult life his mother Dawn attempted to steer him towards.

Edith's other brother, Milton Finch, is also given a short sequence whose uniqueness has a different reason. Milton is the only member of the Finch family who did not fall victim to the family "curse"; indeed, his escape is emphasized by the way his sequence plays out mechanics-wise. There is a very brief, very non-interactive sequence where the player can have Edith thumb through a small sketchbook with pictures, which show Milton painting a door on the wall, opening it and stepping in, and

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then taking a bow before shutting the door behind him, leaving forever. It is significant that he walks out of the life of the Finch family and their influence through a door, which, when shut, is meant to shield him from their sight—whereas Edith learns the secrets locked behind the doors of each room and the details of other people's lives by peeking through peepholes. It should also be noted that the player never gets to control Milton—the agency they can exercise through Edith is never transferred to Milton as the player's avatar; this is all the more important seeing as that agency is the way in which the game expresses Edith's acceptance of the stories and her willing participation in Edie's insanity. By walking through the door—a means of escape he created for himself—Milton leaves the grasp of the Finch "curse" (i.e. their twisted mentality), and even his medium does not yield to the player's control, because he cannot be controlled by a Finch.

Digital games tend to be regarded as something that the player can "by definition … succeed at" (Elson et al. 2014: 527) by many scholars and players. "Success or winning," as Malte Elson, Johannes Breuer, James Ivory and Thorsten Quandt point out, "does not necessarily involve a positive narrative outcome"—it does, however, "require that the mechanics are used in the way intended by the developer in order to finish the game" (Elson et al. 2014: 527). *What Remains of Edith Finch* is not a vehicle for gameplay which leads the player to victory, but, rather, it constitutes just another form of presenting a story, the finale of which is already predetermined. The player cannot change the events, they can only replay them as they (or at least some version of them) happened in the fictional world. The game mechanics in *What Remains of Edith Finch* are, therefore, more of a narrative technique; the distinct game mechanics implemented in each story constitute, in a way, a part of that story and—together with the events themselves—create a certain image of a specific person, be it Milton (the artist) or Molly (the girl with a vivid imagination), or anyone else from the family.

There are other games that employ strategies similar to *What Remains of Edith Finch* in order to structure both their narratives and the emotional experience the player is supposed to be subjected to. A famous independent game known for a similar premise is the 2013 exploration drama *Gone Home*. In that game, the player controls, also in first person perspective, the character of Katie Greenbriar; the game begins with Katie arriving at home after a year-long absence, having gone on a year trip to Europe. Katie finds a letter from her younger sister, Samantha, taped to the front door, explaining that she had to leave and that they will meet again someday. Then the player, as Katie, starts exploring the house room by room, drawer by drawer and cupboard by cupboard, in order to discover what prompted Sam to leave. Similarly to *What Remains of Edith Finch*, in *Gone Home* the player must explore the family house and look for anything that would help them understand what happened in Katie's family. The player's comprehension of the game's narrative depends on their meticulousness while examining and interacting with various objects in the house. A thorough exploration, and the subsequent interpretation of the environment with all its surroundings will eventually allow them to deduce that Samantha left home to be with her lover, Lonnie, in face of her parents' lack of acceptance for her sexuality. The main difference between *Gone Home* and *What Remains of Edith Finch* is that interacting with specific objects does not initiate playable sequences, but simply unlocks new entries in Katie's sister's diary. To reconstruct the events of the previous year, the player needs not only to interact with all specific objects to unlock all diary entries, but also to explore the house and find other notes, which are not related to the diary, but add more information about what had happened in the house during Katie's absence. Similarly to *What Remains of Edith Finch*, the player cannot in any way influence the outcome of the events in the main story of the game, because the main goal for players in both games is to understand the story, and not change its events. The experience *Gone Home* offers concerns a normal life event; this is expressed through the mechanics of examining the

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items in the house—the slow sifting through mundane, everyday objects such as postcards, textbooks, school assignments and pages torn out of notebooks. Where *What Remains of Edith Finch* surrounds the player with secret passages, underground vaults and keys hidden in music boxes, *Gone Home* fills its world with crumpled pages fished out of trash cans, tickets and run-of-the-mill wedding invitations.

That Dragon Cancer is another game which should be mentioned in the context of the player's inability to affect the unfolding events. Published in 2016, it follows two parents, Ryan and Amy, who face the inevitable death of their son Joel, diagnosed with cancer at the age of one, and eventually succumbing to the disease at the age of five. What sets this particular game text apart from other game texts analyzed in this book is the fact that it is based on real events—Ryan Green, the father of Joel, felt that the medium of a digital game, with its interactivity, was the best one to express their experience of coping with the tragedy. The gameplay in *That Dragon Cancer* is arranged similarly to the gameplay of *What Remains of Edith Finch*, including shifting between first-person and third-person avatars, environmental storytelling, and overlay narration through phone calls, letters and dialogues. Moreover, the game revolves thematically around loss and emotional pain associated with full comprehension of the unfolding tragedy. Some elements of denial (the mother's phone call concerning Joel's hearing loss) are present as well, but the overall focus is placed on the inevitability of loss and the acceptance of that loss.

What differentiates *That Dragon Cancer* from *What Remains of Edith Finch* are the simplistic 3D graphics lacking great detail, combined with symbolic imagery—where *What Remains of Edith Finch* employs realistic or semi-realistic imagery to convey fantasy (made-up explanations of real tragedies), *That Dragon Cancer* uses allegoric and figurative environments and mini-games to convey the emotional state of the characters in the

story. An excellent example of this is the racing mini-game in the "End of Treatment Party" vignette. Aesthetically, the treatment race against the clock segment does indeed resemble a conventional racing game: it is colorful and features cheerful music and cute, child-oriented objects (blow-up animals), as well as all the expected elements such as the time limit, collectibles, buffs and an end line. However, the time limit is in fact the actual time span of the treatment. Therefore, the buffs do not serve the expected purpose—while the speed strips do increase the actual speed of movement, they also affect the total time, which speeds up as well. Additionally, the items the player collects turn out to be blood transfusions, drugs, as well as procedures such as lumbar punctures and radiation treatment and tests. After having successfully completed all three laps, the player will see a congratulatory victory screen, followed by a loud crash in the background. This segment represents race against death that in Joel's case cannot be won, even when no mistakes were made by the player during the race.

Another scene worth mentioning is the discussion with Joel's doctors in the "I'm sorry guys, it's not good" vignette. The ludic nature of this particular fragment manifests mainly in the interactive way in which the player can explore the thoughts and feelings of the characters participating in the conversation. However, the game combines this with symbolic imagery and real-time progress in order to convey the impression of hopelessness; no matter who the player chooses to listen to, the room will continue to fill with water. Similarly, any attempt to save Joel, who is depicted as sitting in a boat, is destined to fail. The player's agency is thus not merely subverted, but, in fact, erased, since they are reduced to a witness in a sequence which is not a cutscene, but, technically, a part of actual gameplay. The erasure is crucial to the experience the game intends to convey.

Interestingly, *That Dragon Cancer* offers insight into both stages of dealing with loss—before the inevitable, and after the

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inevitable (before and after the eventual death). *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* and the aforementioned *Through the Woods* also offer a similar perspective, with *Through the Woods* specifically stressing the importance of assigning meaning to loss. In contrast to *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* and *Through the Woods*, however, *What Remains of Edith Finch* and *That Dragon Cancer* employ strictly non-magical worlds, which emphasizes the importance of the contrast between the crushing despair and dread as opposed to the desperate search for significance in the tragedy that has already occurred. The tone of *That Dragon Cancer* changes halfway through the gameplay; once the parents are fully aware of the inevitability of Joel's death, they begin to look for significance in his passing. Especially for Joel's mother, Amy, the Christian faith the Greens have followed their whole life is the key to assigning perspective—as opposed to Karen in *Through the Woods*, who absorbs new spiritual concepts from old mythology and the consequent spiritual context of her son's demise in order to assign meaning to Espen's death.

Edie: A Paranoiac Matriarch

Edith Finch Senior —referred throughout the game as Edie—is the great-grandmother of Edith Finch and the mother of Molly, Barbara, Sam, Calvin and Walter Finch. The Finches were presumably a very wealthy family, which made it possible for them to attempt to transport their entire family house to their new place of residence—an attempt which failed, as a storm sank the house and claimed the life of Edie's father, Odin, leaving Edie in the position of the head of the family. In his essay "The Villain of Edith Finch," Joseph Anderson points out that Edie in fact outlives almost everyone in the family (Anderson 2017), apart from Edith and her mother, Dawn. The role of Edie's character is crucial in all events concerning the Finch family, past and present. Both as a personality type and as an individual, Edie is characterized by her obsessive ideas concerning persecution and the "family curse." Some of her actions can be interpreted as

symptoms of a particular disorder—paranoia (i.e., the paranoid personality disorder): collecting news articles, perpetuating the narrative about the curse (such as her husband Sven being killed by a dragon, etc.), conserving the rooms. Her personality most certainly bears the characteristics of a paranoiac personality. As Bruce Fink notes, "[t]he phenomenon of persecution clearly falls in the category of imaginary relations, and is the predominant feature in paranoia (one of the psychoses)" (Fink 1997: 96). Until her very death, Edie expresses an unshakable conviction about the existence of the family curse—a conviction which nourishes the obsessive persecution fantasy about the tragic inevitable death of the family members; this fantasy then plays itself out in the form of self-fulfilling prophecy as the subsequent Finches die suddenly. Edie's entire paranoiac knowledge (Millis 2007) concerning predestination and persecution results from the obsessive thoughts. Jacques Lacan thoroughly discussed the concept of paranoiac knowledge in a seminar on psychoses (1955-56), which he regarded as a disruption in the relation between the Real (réel) and the Symbolic (symbolique)—the order of the language and the order of the law. Based on the observation that the paranoiac subject makes the effort of "explanation of himself" (Lacan 1997: 22), Lacan notes that in the case of psychosis "reality itself initially contains a hole that the world of fantasy will subsequently fill" (Lacan 1997: 45). It can be argued that the act of fantasizing originates from the hole (the lack) in the Real; however, the paranoiac subject differs from the "normal" one in that their insistence "that something emerges from reality that is obstinate, something that imposes itself upon him, and that nothing one says will in any way change the core of the problem" (Lacan 1997: 80). This, in consequence, leads to "the emergence in reality of an enormous meaning that has the appearance of being nothing at all—in so far as it cannot be tied to anything, since it has never entered into the system of symbolization—but under certain conditions it can threaten the entire edifice" (Lacan 1997: 85). Furthermore, as Lacan demonstrates, "the delusional, as he climbs the scale of delusions,

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becomes increasingly sure of things that he regards as more and more unreal" (Lacan 1997: 77). Viewed in this way, Edie becomes an instigator—however, one who is not cruelly deliberate, but conflicted and in denial—of her children's, grandchildren's, and great-grandchildren's tragic fates. Her constant escaping into the fantasy of the family curse not only helps her provide an excuse for her mistakes and losses, but also facilitates the creation of situations and circumstances which lead the Finch family to self-destruction.

One of the first instances of Edie's obsession the player can see in the game is the design of the Finch family house; Edie's influence on the house is both tremendous and disturbing. The house itself, as Edith explores it, is a misshapen bricolage of—literally—mixed media and fragments of various time periods and different individuals' lives. As time went on, Edie kept adding many new, bizarre elements of construction to the original house. Whenever a family member died, Edie maintained their room in the state they left it. Instead of allowing other family members—e.g. Dawn's children—to use those rooms, she built new ones, rendering the building over-sized and grotesque in the end:

> Any other great grandmother would have realized that it's time to let things go, clear out the rooms, and have the next generation move in while the house moves on. Instead, she makes the house bigger. It grows like a tumor, like an abomination in the forest, just so Edie's meticulously crafted shrines, each with their death portraits that [she] paints herself, can remain preserved. (Anderson 2017)

As a result, the house becomes a peculiar monstrosity, surrounded by an aura of death. Such aura clearly affected even a small child, which Edith was at the time, despite her incomprehension, and continues to scare her even after many years:

> The house was exactly like I remembered it. The way I've been dreaming about it. As a child, the house made me

> uncomfortable in a way I couldn't put into words. Now, as a 17-year-old, I knew exactly what those words were. I was afraid of the house. (*What Remains of Edith Finch*, 2017)

When the player explores the house, there are numerous details that Edith does not comment on, since she treats them as normal, while for the player it is clearly visible that those details are grotesque and by no means usual in the context of a "normal house." To properly exert its psychological effect, *What Remains of Edith Finch* requires both characteristic traits of environmental storytelling: one, the fact that the narrative shapes the space of the game world, while the player's navigation of it constructs the narrative sequence; two, the necessity of piecing the story together by the player through the interpretation of the objects in that space (Fernández-Vara 2011). The main space of exploration is the house and the nearby cemetery; the objects are primarily family mementoes and gravestones. Both categories clearly convey Edie's obsession with death and the curse, as they constitute evidence of the sheer amount of time and effort she invested into memorializing the dead. The most notable examples of this investment are the sealed rooms, which are profoundly disturbing from the perspective of a regular person. Their significance is especially worth noting, since their stillness and function symbolically represent mausoleums; this is closely related to shunning the decay and the finality of death, characteristic of American culture, as well as the warped fascination with the preservation of the life-like appearance of bodies (Metcalf and Huntington 1991: 195). Despite the fact that they are dedicated to the dead, the rooms are, in fact, meant to appear as if they belong to the living, thus subverting elements of death associated with decay, rot, and mortality in general (Metcalf and Huntington 1991:195), as Edie enshrines the dead children and relatives in their rooms by means of everyday objects and stories. All of this stands in striking contrast to the game's ending, which seems to superficially speak of life, living in the present:

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> I'm still not sure how to tell you about all this… If we lived forever, maybe we'd have time to understand things. But as it is, I think the best we can do is try to open our eyes… and appreciate how strange and brief all of this is. (*What Remains of Edith Finch*, 2017)

Throughout the game it is made clear that Edie is obsessed with the curse and its consequences; Edith even comments at some point that her great-grandmother had the cemetery constructed before the house itself. One particularly obvious and sinister characteristic trait of the cemetery are the ornaments that Edie used to decorate the tombstones: a handsaw on top of Sven Finch's gravestone, a rocket for Calvin Finch, and for Walter Finch—a replica of the tunnel in which he died. It is especially worth noting that in a very short time after Lewis's death—right after his funeral—Edie managed to set up a crown ornament on his tombstone. These actions point to the particular nature of Edie's insanity, which combines the paranoiac personality with the obsession with death expressed through Gothic aesthetics (Aguirre 1990, Snodgrass 2005).

As it is revealed, after Milton's disappearance, Dawn tried to shield her remaining children from Edie's narrative about the "family curse" by sealing the rooms and refusing to repeat Edie's stories. Edie's influence on the fate of the family extended to the point of the narrative becoming the aforementioned self-fulfilling prophecy—and Edith, in fact, says that aloud: "I'm worried the stories themselves might be the problem. Maybe we believed so much in family curse we made it real" (*What Remains of Edith Finch*, 2017). Edie's obsession may have contributed to some of the deaths and certainly caused some of the others; moreover, it warped the family's perception of those deaths. In this case, both Calvin's room and the composition found there clearly point to the fact that Edie's insanity made Sam constantly face his guilt. Lewis's sequence, on the other hand, shows the lasting damage of Edie's stories. The significance of Dawn's accusation—when she yells at Edie "My children are dead

because of your stories!" (*What Remains of Edith Finch*, 2017)—however, can be seen in Walter's diary:

> Goodbye everyone.
>
> I can't believe I've been down here for 30 years. On that first day, after the shaking started, I didn't think I'd survived a week. But after a few days I settled into a routine. That's what kept me sane. Having a schedule. Living for today. I always expected to be dead tomorrow. But if you wait long enough you get used to anything. Even a monster on the other side of the door starts to feel normal. Almost friendly. And then one day, everything just… stopped. Whatever that thing was it was gone. Maybe it got tired of waiting… Or maybe I just got tired of being afraid. It's been a week now, the longest in 30 years. I'm done waiting. I have to leave, while I still can. I know it's out there somewhere. Whatever killed Barbara… and Molly… and Calvin. Maybe this all is a mistake. But I need to stop living the same day. Even if it kills me. Whatever's out there, I want you to know I'm ready for it. I'm going to appreciate all of it. Especially the food. I don't mind if I have only a year left, or a month, or a single week. I would be happy with one new day. I can already imagine the sun on my face. (*What Remains of Edith Finch*, 2017)

Walter explicitly speaks of "the thing" that killed his siblings, confirming his deep-seated belief in the curse. A fitting description of the nature of the Finches' ill fortune and a justification of Edie's involvement in the idea of curse can be found in Anderson's summary of the game's premise as it being about "the withered family tree of dead children" (Anderson 2017).

Indeed, the Finches seem to neither care nor fully comprehend what is safe or reasonable—they are creative and imaginative, but they continue to view the "curse" as an excuse to be careless, as it was imprinted into them by their matriarch's obsessive fantasy. For Edie, this fantasy conveniently obscured her guilt and pushed her even further into delusion, making her a horrible

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parent. She was not only partially responsible for some of her children's deaths (she locked a hungry girl in a room with visually appealing poisonous berries, and allowed her sons to use a swing built right over the edge of a cliff), but also psychologically abused others. For instance, Edie kept Sam in the same room he had shared with his dead brother, where he had to look at all of his belongings day after day, until he could not stand it anymore; he left as soon as he turned eighteen, never stepping inside that room again. Her other son, Walter, never received the help he needed for the trauma he had undergone, and was instead allowed and actively enabled (since Edie provided him with food and water) to live in a self-imposed prison for thirty years. The deaths of Gus Finch and Gregory Finch are, in turn, the fault of their respective parents (Anderson 2017). Both of those death sequences highlight the extreme lack of responsibility that characterizes the Finch family, and which is blamed on the curse. An example of this is the swing, which was available to other Finch children to play with even after Calvin's death, as Edith's words attest to: "Calvin's story felt strangely familiar. When I was younger, I remember trying to do the exact same thing." *What Remains of Edith Finch*, 2017. The family stubbornly insist on blaming a supernatural force instead of facing their own responsibility and guilt.

It is this ubiquitous insanity that Milton has been exposed to as he explored the house before Edith—the fact she discovers only as she herself moves through the house, finding traces of his presence (his drawings and sketches) in the crawlspaces between rooms: "From the paintings on the wall it was clear that my brother Milton had been here before me" (*What Remains of Edith Finch*, 2017). Those hidden spaces and passageways, as well as secret compartments play a particularly significant role in *What Remains of Edith Finch*. They constitute a large part of the structure of the house and are crucial to the exploration and the narrative design of the game. "The passages," as Edith notes, are "a pretty tight fit. They'd obviously been built for smaller hands

and bellies" (*What Remains of Edith Finch*, 2017). This clearly points to the fact that they had been designed specifically with children in mind; the Finch children have been learning their family history through an activity resembling a creepy treasure hunt[3] instead of through family photo albums or visits to remote graveyards. The size and architecture of the secret spaces additionally follows the Gothic aesthetic design, reflecting Edie's paranoia; this fact, combined with their claustrophobic form, lends the passageways the physical and psychological significance of a trap. Milton Finch is the only Finch to escape the insanity—the hereditary madness contained in the house itself or possibly even running through the veins of the family members. He saw all the things that Edith saw many years later, but evidently drew different conclusions.

Anderson points out that as the main villain of *What Remains of Edith Finch*, Edie is portrayed in a decidedly sympathetic way; if one were to assume that Edie's obsession was a way of dealing with the tragedies, then holding onto the idea of the curse was her way to escape the shame and guilt and to accept the deaths of so many children, as well as "a scapegoat to justify some insanely reckless behavior (which later corrupted the later generation)" (Anderson 2017). However, Edie is interested in the dead more than in the living, never caring how much damage her adored shrines and stories—elevated almost to the point of resembling places and narratives of worship—will do to her surviving family; she is never alone, surrounded by her dead children, displayed on the small altars for them in sanctuary-like spaces that she turned they rooms into.

A similar example of twisted escapism can be observed in the

3. An interesting fact worth pointing out here is that treasure hunt and storytelling are activities that tend to be associated with children, and are performed for the purpose of fun and entertainment; however, in What Remain of Edith Finch their role is subverted and they serve a darker purpose.

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ending of *Through the Woods.* Similarly to Edie, Karen faces the death of her child, and—just like the Finch family matriarch—must cope with her repressed feeling of guilt. However, instead of hiding away to live in seclusion and creating a shrine to remember her son, Karen takes action to make sure that, as she puts it, her son's death "meant something" (*Through the Woods*, 2016). She is so desperate to make sense of the loss of her son that she turns to fantasy. Her escapism takes a rather dark turn, just like Edie's, but in an opposite direction; Karen is only able to assign meaning to the death of her son by accepting the Norse mythology and its stories as true, like Old Erik—the kidnapper of her son—did before her, and by taking on his role. Now she is the one kidnapping children to sacrifice them, believing that doing so will keep the world safe. In this sense, neither Karen nor Edie actually face the objective reality of their children's deaths.

The 2015 exploration puzzle game *Homesick*, developed by Lucky Pause, on the other hand, aims to evoke a completely opposite sentiment in the player . In *Homesick*, the player explores an abandoned building that seems to be their home, and tries to piece together what had happened before the start of the game, why their avatar has no memory, and why they are initially unable to read. Significantly, the avatar is unable to leave the building—the moment they approach a window or an exit, the sunlight coming from the outside becomes so bright they cannot see anything. Through exploration, the player re-creates the story of the residential building they are in, as well as of the immediate area. The building and most of the region it stands in were abandoned due to an explosion at a nearby power plant. From the scattered newspapers and personal notes of other residents, the player discovers that the outcome of the power plant explosion was a devastating sickness; eventually the player finds out that their avatar was left behind in the abandoned building as they could not be evacuated in time. The symptoms that the player's avatar displays—mainly getting tired easily and

their aversion to light—as well as their reflection in the mirror clearly indicate that they also have succumbed to the disease and there is nothing left for them except to make peace with their situation. This ending is what distinguishes *Homesick* from *What Remains of Edith Finch* most clearly, given that this game is not about seeking a fantasy in order to escape the tragic and miserable reality to live in denial—like Edie did—but about trying to come to terms with one's fate and accepting it.

Intertextuality in the Game

An essential part of *What Remains of Edith Finch* as a game is, beyond doubt, the way in which the entirety of the game's story (that of her family's demise) is set within another frame story (Edith's exploration of the house), allowing for various stories to unfold within the main narrative. This kind of composition, even if not executed in a manner as complex as in traditional literary texts, invokes nonetheless a specific tradition of storytelling, whose most famous examples in world literature include Jan Potocki's *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa* and Mary Shelley's *Frankestein or The Modern Prometheus*—stories that are both fantastic in nature, with apparent Gothic roots, and conventionally eerie in the manner characteristic of horror novels, including motifs such as encounters with supernatural creatures, facing monsters, or uncanny events and situations. In this context, the part of the game concerning Lewis Finch's gameplay narrative and his fantasy about his travels in the world of his imagination can be regarded as a direct compositional allusion to *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa*, pointing to one of the possible inspirations for the frame stories about the Finch family. However, one of the consequences of such a composition of storytelling within the game, which makes it possible for the player to learn the fate of all the individual members of the Finch family, are the inevitable constant changes in the point of view, as the player, during the exploration of the house, takes on the

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role of successive Finches, viewing their stories and the supposed curse.

In his classic study *Point of View in Fiction* Norman Friedman analyzes the eponymous literary phenomenon in the historical context of the disappearance of the author, writing: "The author does not apologize for his characters; he does not even tell us what they do but has them tell us, themselves" (Friedman 1955: 1166-1167). Friedman points out that the question about the "point of view" is directly related to a number of other fundamental questions concerning the storytelling itself:

> 1. Who talks to the reader? (author in third or first person, character in first, or ostensibly no one); 2. From what position (angle) regarding the story does he tell it? (above, periphery, center, front, or shifting); 3. What channels of information does the narrator use to convey the story to the reader? (author's words, thoughts, perceptions, feelings; or character's words and actions, or character's thoughts, perceptions, and feelings, through which of these or combination of these three possible media does information regarding mental states, setting, situation, and character come?); and 4. At what distance does he place the reader from the story? (near, far, or shifting). (Friedman 1955: 1168-1169)

At this point, it is worth examining these questions, given that they define the conditions necessary for the audience to access the knowledge about the fictional world of the text; those conditions are contingent upon the position of the narrator or the character who, in the tradition of phenomenology, is regarded as the point of reference for the reader (or viewer, or player): "all the represented objects (things, animals, men) are then represented as if they were seen (touched, heard, etc.) by the narrator, and in this perception they are related to his center of orientation" (Ingarden 1973: 230). In this context, "the center of orientation may be found in the zero point of the … represented person and move with every change of place [they make]" (Ingarden 1973: 231); this also pertains to the game world of

What Remains of Edith Finch, where the player is dependent on the continuously changing point of view, which shapes their knowledge of the depicted world and the events that take place or have taken place in it. These theoretical deliberations, their roots phenomenological in the narrow sense of the term, gain an exceptional significance in regard to the gameplay in *What Remains of Edith Finch*, wherein the reconstruction of the family history is carried out through the player adopting multiple perspectives corresponding to the respective members of the Finch family. In this case, one of the main elements contributing to the uncanny atmosphere pervading the depicted world is the mystery of identity in a broad sense; the player constantly faces the question: "Who am I?"—a question inseparably connected with issues of the point of view, point in time and the narrative layer—as they explore the grotesque house Edie erected. Due to that, it is the technique of the changing points of view that brings forth the uncanny aspects of the game world, in which the dread emerges from the past itself, forcing the player to confront the nostalgia stemming from every subsequent story instead of fear or lurking danger.

Another significant artistic feature of the composition of *What Remains of Edith Finch*, next to the frame story structure of the game story which comprises even "games within a game," as in the case of Lewis Finch), is the variety and the choice of the narrative forms of the stories of the Finch family members. There are, among others, daydreams, diaries, letters, a comic book, and even an homage to classic horror cinema texts, both ones produced by the Hammer Studios, and American slasher movies (such as the *Halloween* franchise). These narrative forms constitute a sort of a catalog of styles and motifs characteristic of certain uncanny and strange tales: the Lovecraftian-style narrative of "a monster from the deep" is presented in the form of a child's dream; the story of the "screaming actress," Barbara Finch, reminiscent of a slasher narrative is presented in a comic book that is evidently modeled after the *Tales from the Crypt*

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comics (1950-1955). Every successive tale unfolds as "found diaries", "series of found photographs and childhood memorabilia", or a letter intended to "be read after the author's death." Another trait those narrative forms share is the fact that they are well known for their prominence in literary and cinematic horror fiction, belonging to conventional models of traditional narratives, from the novellas of E. A. Poe (*MS. Found in a Bottle*) or M. R. James (*The Mezzotint*), to movies such as *Evil Dead* (1981). These are not, naturally, the only traces of intertextuality that can be found in the game featuring many clear allusions to canonical texts and characters of horror literature and movies. The narrative sequence dedicated to Barbara Finch is accompanied by a score with a distinguishable theme reminiscent of that created by John Carpenter for *Halloween* (1978); furthermore, the main character herself is modeled after an authentic, real life "scream queen" of the sixties' horror movies—Barbara Steele. The game also presents the player with a whole range of horror motifs and themes; the stories of the Finch family include fatal accidents, murderous drifters (or possibly serial killers), monsters, mysterious disappearances, child nightmares, family curse, and—first and foremost—the monsters hiding in the stories (be it memories, fantasies or rumors), which, like in the Freudian interpretation of E. T. A. Hoffmann's *The Sandman*, haunt children's dreams and torment the characters till their tragic and untimely demise. In this sense, *What Remains of Edith Finch* as a text becomes more than merely a collection of stories about the bizarre and uncanny history of the Finch family—it is also a peculiar overview of tales of the strange as formed by the traditional and modern Euro-American culture, preserved and presented in their specific forms of delivery, the knowledge of which facilitates the player's comprehension of and participation in the gameplay narrative until the final plot twist, a very familiar element of horror fiction.

Gothic Spaces

The Finch family house, where the majority of the gameplay takes place, possesses many elements highly characteristic of the aesthetics of Gothic spaces, with their peculiar geometries and semantics described by Manuel Aguirre:

> The Gothic universe is likewise one of spaces, and of doors opening (often in spite of its occupants) to other spaces. Its geometry can be reduced to a very basic model. Gothic can be said to postulate two zones: on the one hand, the human domain of rationality and intelligible events; on the other hand, the world of the sublime, terrifying, chaotic Numinous which transcends human reason (but which need not be the supernatural). These are separated by some manner of threshold, and plots invariably involve movement from one site to the other—a movement which, most often, is presented as a transgression, a violation of boundaries. (Aguirre 2008: 2-3)

he abandoned house seems to constitute the perfect scenery of a Gothic story in which the family curse claims the successive members of the Finch family: with its multitude of rooms, corridors and secret passages, spacious basements and underground tunnels below, towers and galleries built haphazardly with no particular care for stylistic coherence, not to mention the fact of its being located deep in a wilderness, on a jagged sea cliff. The player, traversing the game world as Edith, must gradually familiarize themselves with the peculiar geometry of the house and the enigmatic traces (indices) left around the places (locations). In this way, *What Remains of Edith Finch* combines the narrative, the aesthetic and the ludic to achieve its Gothic atmosphere.

Another aspect of *What Remains of Edith Finch* that deserves attention is the sound design of the game, which, not unlike horror literature, makes use of reliable, sonic devices of the uncanny as tested by horror cinema; therefore, the sound objects

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represent or herald the appearance of the weird and the uncanny, of danger, or an unsettling—for the character and the player—atmosphere of a specific location or situation within the game world. Radio, cinema and games allow the audience to actually hear the frightening sound or soundscape instead of merely suggesting them through description. An additional technical challenge for these media is creating uncanny and scary sounds. The aesthetics of horror film, just as those of Gothic literature and radio dramas before, have at its disposal a multitude of acoustic signals which provoke specific emotions or are associated with danger. The best known among them may be the howling of dogs or wolves, tolling bells, the sound of the clock striking midnight, the howling of the wind, weird unsettling knocking or rattle from the other side of the wall, whispers difficult to identify, indistinct mumbling, and, naturally, screaming. Those acoustic signals perform an essential function in literary descriptions, radio drama soundscapes, and movie soundtracks, serving as one of the primary elements creating the atmosphere of fear and danger in the given text, as well as announcing the appearance of an uncanny element in the depicted world (and within the field of view of the character). A great example of a soundscape description representative of Gothic literature is the one provided in *Dracula* right before Jonathan Harker arrives at the castle of the count:

> Then a dog began to howl somewhere in a farmhouse far down the road, a long, agonized wailing, as if from fear. The sound was taken up by another dog, and then another and another, till, borne on the wind which now sighed softly through the Pass, a wild howling began, which seemed to come from all over the country, as far as the imagination could grasp it through the gloom of the night. (Stoker 2003: 18)

This "music" made by "children of the night" (Stoker 2003: 25), as Dracula himself describes it, serves as an omen of the weird and unnatural events about to happen in the Borgo Pass, directly

referring to sound-related cultural imagination concerning harbingers of tragedies and disasters, such as the howling of dogs.

Among the collection of acoustic signals included in the horror film aesthetics belong also those which do not tend to be associated with folk beliefs or Gothic novel poetics, such as the sound of the wind chimes or the music box. Both those particular sounds can be counted among traditional examples of uncanny sounds—wind chimes are related to the acoustic activity of the wind and the music box to sounds that are mechanical, not natural—but their status in the context of soundscapes and soundtracks is completely different. The sound of the wind chimes heralds the appearance of a ghost or a monster in numerous horror movies (*Something Evil*, 1972; *The Mangler*, 1995; *Signs*, 2002); sometimes, such sound can contribute to the visual imagery, as it is the case with the wind chime made out of human bones in the movie *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974). Similarly, the music box appears as a device of the uncanny in various horror cinema texts, such as *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Deep Red* (1975), *The Haunting* (1999) or *The Conjuring* (2013)—sometimes accompanied by lullabies or children chants or rhymes, indicating imminent danger. These acoustic phenomena are also present throughout the sound design of the game *What Remains of Edith Finch*, contributing to the disturbing atmosphere of the gameplay. Both these types of sound are diegetic in nature within the game world, as they are emitted by objects that players can see and interact with through their avatar—the wind chime is located inside the house and the music box can be found on top of the dresser. In the latter case, it is revealed that the device conceals the key to the basement door, and its music accompanies Barbara's descent into the understructure of the Finch family house. The presence of these sound cues in the depicted world of *What Remains of Edith Finch* is all the more important in light of the fact that the gameplay itself features no direct interactions with a supernatural presence

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of any kind or any monsters (apart from several retrospective scenes which are, in fact, dreams or hallucinations), instead creating a tangible atmosphere of uneasiness, menace and nostalgia. In this context, the acoustic portents of the uncanny serve an essential role in shaping the emotional ambiance of specific locations of the game world and stimulating the emotional engagement of the players in their actions. In this way, the soundscape of *What Remains of Edith Finch* complements the themes and motifs expressed in the narrative and gameplay by referring directly to a codified catalog of horror cinema sound effects.

Conclusion

Through its frame story composition, *What Remains Of Edith Finch* makes it possible for the player to reconstruct the Finch family history by means of exploring the microhistories preserved within the family mansion. Each object and place examined by the player is a testimony regarding both some family tragedy and the sinister, deranged way the Finches dealt with it, thus turning those objects and places into peculiar relics and shrine-like locations. Additionally, what sets *What Remains of Edith Finch* apart from many other games touching upon a similar subject matter are the specific mechanics of gameplay; the objects in the game are not mere assets to be picked up and examined, but serve the function of vehicles for the stories of the respective family members. In this sense, the objects become people's actual stories, which, on the gameplay level, translates to assets becoming keys to different gameplay sequences and locations. This allows *What Remains of Edith Finch* to tell stories not only through objects, but also through its Gothic spaces, which may be viewed as the embodiment of the Finch family matriarch's ongoing insanity.

The game, in a way, does not really concern making choices; the player is not asked to intervene, but, instead, is supposed

to experience the full impact of the inevitability of the game's outcome, and the inability to escape the tragedy, although other possibilities did exist for the characters (e.g. Kay could have let the phone ring instead of leaving Gregory alone in the bathtub, just as Edie could have let Molly out of her bedroom, etc.). For the player, some choices also exist (such as looking around or stalling), but the controls and the goal of the game make those choices irrelevant. The core of a digital game text is the assumption that the player can, in contrast to, e.g. book readers or film audiences, influence the situation the character is in, and, at least to some degree, affect the outcome of the story through their decisions and skill (Isbister 2016: 2); however, *What Remains of Edith Finch* does the exact opposite of this, placing the player in a position in which they are just as helpless as a film viewer. The very nature of a film text situates the viewer in the position of an invisible witness, denying them, by definition, the ability to influence the events depicted in the film text—which contributes to the film's capacity to elicit strong emotional responses (Frome 2016: 160). The combination of this helplessness and the expectation to be able to act causes the game to feel and play uncanny, since the player cannot simply watch the deaths of the characters, but must actively participate in their re-enactment. In other words, while the player fulfills successfully the tasks presented by the game—satisfying hunger (Molly), looping the loop (Calvin), leaving the basement (Walter), escaping the mundane life (Lewis) or even visiting the house and writing down her message for her child (Edith) —their outcome remains inevitably tragic.

In simplest terms, *What Remains of Edith Finch* can be regarded as a collection of sad stories with predetermined endings. Through the gameplay proper, the game is able to convey to the players strong emotions, such as sadness and frustration, during the respective sequences, which either overtly show or tend to hint at the horrible reality, while the narration and aesthetic design of the locations reflect the fantasy? craved by the Finches. Due

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to the fact that the gameplay keeps the player conscious of that situation—namely, of the sinister goal that they must attempt to achieve in order to "beat the level" and continue playing—the gameplay becomes, in fact, a peculiar exercise in trauma. In this way the gameplay both reveals the history of the eponymous family, and allows the player to participate in the process of facing loss and the unsuccessful attemps at dealing with death, an experience which transcends the satisfaction stemming from completing the game and learning the fate of respective Finches.

4

THE MECHANICS OF MINDSCAPE AND PERCEPTION OF HUMANITY IN A RETROFUTURISTIC WORLD

*>observer_* is a 2017 psychological science-fiction digital game developed by the Bloober Team studio. The story of the game is set in the city of Krakow in the Fifth Polish Republic, a puppet state of the corporation called CHIRON, which actually controls the country after the cybernetic plague known as "nanophage" killed hundreds of thousands of people, sending the world into chaos. The protagonist of the game, Daniel Lazarski, is a member

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of a special police unit—the Observers, tasked with supervising the citizens, who are divided into classes. The Observers are implanted with technological devices that provide them with augmented vision and the ability to digitally connect to citizens' brains and investigate the content of their minds. The investigating and experiencing of mindscapes, thoughts and memories is the key focus of *>observer_*,both in terms of the narrative and the mechanics, which come together in gameplay. This chapter is devoted to the ways in which the changing virtual environment can manipulate the player, limit their agency or even overrule it, with emphasis placed on the way in which the game mechanics can impose upon a player an actual experience that is crucial for the story and defined by the narrative framework, without being a narrative element in itself.

The story of the game is fairly simple; prior to the events of the game, Daniel's (Dan's) wife died, having refused cybernetic implants, leaving tension between Dan, who had strongly objected to the implantation, and his son Adam, who mourned his mother's death. Later, Dan had an unspecified accident, which left him barely alive, and was forced to accept CHIRON implants in order to keep the promise he had made to his wife—to take care of Adam "whatever it took." As a result, father and son grew apart, with Dan working as an Observer and Adam secretly working on carrying out his ambitious project: enabling humans to exist beyond limitations and perils of a physical body. To that end, he manipulated Helena Novak, an employee of CHIRON, to obtain confidential data vital to his task. Eventually, one of his works reached a level of sentience sufficient to pursue self-preservation—given that Adam disposed of "iteration after iteration" in his pursuit of success—and retaliated; when Adam, sensing danger, sent a virus after the digital version of himself, Digital Adam, deeming himself the "superior version" of the real Adam, killed him. Digital Adam also arranged the murder of Helena and the surgeon who implanted her with the necessary tech for smuggling data in order to prevent CHIRON from

learning about his existence. In hopes of transferring himself into Dan's consciousness, which was isolated from the CHIRON grid, Digital Adam used Dan's feelings for his son to lure Dan into the building where he was trapped by impersonating Adam during a call for help (*>observer_*, 2017).

The game begins with Dan finding a body with a missing head in Adam's apartment, and the whole building being put under lockdown by Digital Adam soon after. Hoping that the body did not belong to his son and unaware of Digital Adam's existence at this point, Dan starts investigating the crime scene and other apartments in the building, talking to the tenants and eventually finding three more bodies with similar injuries, as well as the murderer himself—Victor Maderski. After reaching a virtual reality salon, the Sanctuary, Dan meets Digital Adam in the virtual world. Digital Adam explains everything to Dan, and the player is left to make a choice whether or not to allow Digital Adam entry into Daniel's mind.

The world: environmental and indexical storytelling

Although the story of *>observer_* is not the primary concern of this analysis, the storytelling itself is worth a closer look. The game makes use of both environmental and indexical manner of constructing the story of not only the characters, but the whole fictional world as well. Environmental storytelling is essential to establishing the fictional world, staging the reality of Dan's life and work in a meaningful way, and expanding the narrative of the game (Worch and Smith 2010) beyond a simple human drama. In *>observer_*, environmental storytelling is particularly significant in conveying the identity of the Observer as the corporation investigator and, more importantly, the reality of living in CHIRON's world which is both dystopian and retrofuturistic.

The fictional world of the future in which the gameplay takes place is filled with speculative elements—mostly such that

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concern technological progress and its influence on reality—and yet is haunted by very specific specters of the past in the form of objects, images and other people's memories. As Mark Fisher points out, "The future is always experienced as a haunting: as a virtuality that already impinges on the present, conditioning expectations and motivating cultural production" (Fisher 2012: 16). But what if the future itself (as always virtual) was haunted by the specters of the past—not the fictional one, but real history? Such a scenario is signaled in the very prologue of the *>observer_*:

> The year is 2084.
>
> If they told me what the world would become, I would not have believed them.
>
> First, there was the *nanophage*.
>
> The disease of transition. A digital plague that swept across the land, killing thousands upon thousands of augmented souls. A heavy cost for meddling with our minds and bodies.
>
> Then came the war. The big one. *The Great Decimation*. The West killed the East. The East killed the West. There were no winners, except of CHIRON.
>
> The corporation seized power and forged the *Fifth Polish Republic*. A crooked empire of blood and ash. There was no one left to oppose them.
>
> But still, we endured. And so it goes. The rich get richer, as the poor rot away in their hovels, desperately looking for ways to escape reality. (*>observer_*, 2017[1])

The game begins in this way, by outlining the main features of the environment the player is about to be immersed in; the fundamental historical aspects of the game-world are emphasized—the time (year 2048), the political landscape (the Fifth Polish Republic), and the big winners (CHIRON). These

1. All dialogue of *>observer_* has been transcribed by the authors of this book.

pieces of information allow the player to gather rudimentary knowledge about the fictional world and form assumptions regarding the nature of that world. The first important piece of information—the year 2084 in (imaginary) Krakow—points to the year of 1984 in (analogously imaginary) London; as Liam Sprod notes, "1984 is an ominous year. It is the symbol of the future. This, of course, is in reference to George Orwell's book *1984*; the future dystopia which has still not occurred. Although the calendar tells us that we have long since passed the date, in many ways *1984* still remains in the future. All futures, it seems, must fall prey to this flaw, be they utopian or dystopian" (Sprod 2012: 6). Does the year of 2084 in *>observer_,* therefore, constitute the symbol of the future after the future understood as the social and political project of modernity? The question is related to the important matter of the relationship of the imaginary future and the utopian project(s) of modernity and their negative consequences (dystopias). Must every future indeed turn out to be utopian or dystopian, since history unfailingly teaches that social projects, from the most beautiful to the most abominable ones, prove to be impossible to carry out as they break down somewhere along the way to completion in the reality of political praxis? It is worth mentioning what Franco Berardi points out in his book *After Future*:

> But the century has taught a bitter lesson to its utopians. In the last part of the century the utopian imagination tends to turn dystopian: the nightmare of consciousness and science fiction have been the central laboratories of this reversal. Once upon a time (in the days of Jules Verne or Isaac Asimov) science fiction was the place of the elaboration of ever expanding human dominance in space and in time. In the late century, SF imagination of the future vanishes, becomes flat, narrow and dark, and finally turns into a boundlessly expanding present. (Berardi 2011: 39)

The interest of modern science fiction in the conquest of time and space—especially in the future—described by Berardi might

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have been the result of regarding that future in purely political terms. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri suggest as much in their interpretation of Machiavelli's *The Prince* and Marx and Engels's *The Communist Manifesto*, inspired by Althusser's reading of those texts: "Althusser recognizes … that both texts effectively bring the theoretical proposal to the level of praxis; both assume the present as empty for the future, *'vide pour le futur'* … and in this open space they establish an immanent act of the subject that constitutes a new position of being" (Hardt and Negri 2000: 64). Can the world of late modernity be therefore regarded as a reversal of this situation, where the future is hollow, emptied for the sake of the lingering, delaying present—*vide pour la présence*—where the subject is constituted by the already existing material conditions? Such a possibility cannot be excluded, either in terms of the widespread (even if misguided) opinions regarding the "post-political nature" of contemporary times, or with regard to a variety of science fiction narratives following the retro convention while focused on the past, offering a retrofuturistic representation of the "future that had been." Berardi's ideas are also explored by Mark Fisher, who, in his renowned work *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*, examines them in the context of Derrida's narrative of hauntology as well as the imaginary of contemporary popular culture, which feeds on the sentimental attitudes about "evergreens" as well as the retro-style science fiction—in the form of novels, films and TV series—from which the collective nostalgic impression of "future lost" emerges (1968, 1976 or 1984). Fisher focuses on the slow but inevitable process wherein the avant-garde and experimental tendencies which constituted the futuristic nature of popular culture in the sixties and seventies are disappearing. He also proposes that hauntology should be regarded as "the agency of the virtual, with the spectre understood not as anything supernatural, but as that which acts without (physically) existing" (Fisher 2012: 18). The virtual in the *>observer_* concerns both the political reality of the world governed by CHIRON and the pervasive presence of technology

in all shapes and forms, which surrounds and permeates even the lives of those who do not want it.

However, the place—in terms of actual geographic, as well as sociocultural and political location—is by no means less important in the context of the way in which environmental storytelling is employed in the game. Krakow, Poland, Eastern Europe can be still seen as within the post-communist sphere of influence in 2084. The recognition of the fact that the universe of *>observer_* is a post-communist reality has important consequences as far as the player experience is concerned. As Fredric Jameson points out in his *Archaeologies of the Future*, it is challenging to predict "how future Utopias could ever be imagined in any absolute dissociation from socialism in its larger sense of anti-capitalism; dissociated, that is to say, from the values of social and economic equality and the universal right to food, lodging, medicine, education and work" (Jameson 2005: 196-197). It is also vital to keep in mind that the communism of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe was at the time of its beginnings—the mid-twentieth century—an openly modernist project: both oriented towards and promising a future that it endeavored to establish locally in the form of institutions, actions and artifacts. What the player thus finds in the fictional world of *>observer_* are, in fact, traces of a future gone by—a future that had proved to be a fake modernity. One of the primary building blocks of the atmosphere of fake modernity achieved in the game are the make-do projections of omnipresent holograms onto decrepit walls of the tenant building; the corridors of the building display various holographic posters that retain nice and clean appearance no matter the circumstances, but the player can easily see the dirty and crumbling wall just behind the projection. The huge CHIRON hologram visible in the courtyard of the building, depicting a pretty, smiling young woman next to the corporation logo while the AI voice informs the tenants about the curfew is another example; the virtual image covers almost one whole side of the building, creating a striking contrast

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between the smiling CHIRON model projected on the wall and the depressing appearance of the surroundings, evoking resignation rather than happiness. The player can experience a similar dissonance when they encounter an advanced electronic lock on a door hiding nothing but a dirty toilet that seems not to have been cleaned in years. The environment of fake modernity also includes smaller details, such as the intercoms on every door of the tenant building, which, on the one hand, are technologically advanced, some more than the others, but, on the other hand, are characterized by an era-specific brand of modern look and tend not to work properly. The sound they produce is of bad quality, and the player can often hear noise and static that distort the voice of the person on the other side; moreover, despite having color displays, the intercoms always offer the player only a fraction of the image of the tenant, such as an eye, top of the head or just the mouth, and even that image is often distorted. All those details contribute to creating a world where it is the semi-advanced technology scraped together from old parts—or on the verge of breaking down—that prevails instead of cutting-edge, brand new devices and services. This post-communist phenomenon, or, rather, this kind of imagery, present in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc, is described accurately by Jameson, who discusses the character of Soviet and Eastern European nostalgia art (*Ostalgie*) as "far more vibrant and exciting," which reflects "the situation of an alternate universe in which a complete set of mass-produced industrial products, from toilet seats to windowpanes, from shower heads to automobiles, had been invented from scratch, altogether different from the actually existing Western inventory" (Jameson 2005: 387). Jameson elaborates on this concept by the means of an analogy of the Aztecs having actually beaten Cortez and preserved their culture, then proceeding to invent their particular flavor of technology, such as Aztec-specific radio and television, Aztec power-vehicles, as well as Aztec-specific film genres and other popular culture texts (Jameson 2005: 387). Analogously, there are a number of examples of Ostalgie in *>observer_* that make

reference to period of the twentieth century fifties through eighties in Poland. Among the most notable are the CHIRON posters, whose design is strikingly similar to political posters from the People's Republic of Poland in the 1950s and 1960s, with only the words "people" or "country" switched to "CHIRON". They tend to use limited color schemes, with mostly muted colors—primarily red and green with either bright or dark background—as well as clean lines that do not distract the audience from the message incorporated in the overall simple design: "CHIRON LETS YOU DO MORE" or "WORK WITH CHIRON: EVERY JOB WELL DONE HELPS DEFEND CHIRON" (*>observer_*, 2017). The furniture in most of the apartments in the Stacks that resembles something straight out of a furniture shop in late-1970s Poland is another example of the Ostalgie ambience. The items look like typical mass-produced goods—simple forms, dark colors, with all pieces appearing almost the same. There is also one product of popular culture in *>observer_* that constitutes an excellent example of what Jameson refers to: a simple arcade-like game in the 8bit convention, which the player can access and play on several computers they encounter in the main game, called *With Fire and Sword: Spiders*. It is an example of a distinctly "Polish-specific" popular culture text, as it alludes to a well-known, both in and outside Poland, historical novel *With Fire and Sword*, written by Henryk Sienkiewicz in 1884 (and its film adaptation of the same title, released in 1999). In the mini-game the player controls an 8bit version of Skrzetuski (the protagonist of *With Fire and Sword*), whose task is to collect as many coins as possible in a maze, and rescue Helena Kurcewicz—his fiancée from the novel—while killing or avoiding giant spiders. The humorous nature of the mini-game and its title consists in the fact that the player has to fight spiders by picking up a sword that is actually on fire.

In a peculiar manner, *>observer_* demonstrates how the post-communist countries in Europe constitute an excellent

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laboratory for classic hauntology according to Derrida's thought, concerning countries haunted by specters of the past that was supposed to be a never fulfilled future. It is worth noting that in *Specters of Marx* Derrida himself posed a number of questions concerning Marxist and socialist ideas, and the way they should be re-examined in the post-communist world:

> How can one ignore the growing and undelimitable, that is, worldwide power of those super-efficient and properly capitalist phantom-States that are the mafia and the drug cartels on every continent, including in the former so-called socialist States of Eastern Europe? These phantom-States have infiltrated and banalized themselves everywhere, to the point that they can no longer be strictly identified. (Derrida 2006: 103)

Derrida's observations were then fittingly summarized by Magnus Bernd and Stephen Cullenberg, who also formed several additional questions concerning the way in which the crisis in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union affected the manner "intellectuals, scholars, and government officials in those countries and around the world reconceive their intellectual and political projects" and the new status of Marxist social goals (including the distribution of income, workplace democracy, ending economic exploitation and the eradication of class differences) that concerned many Marxist thinkers in the face of the developing forms of capitalism in Eastern Europe, Russia, and China (Magnus and Cullenberg 2006: IX). As Mark Fisher remarks, "*Specters of Marx* was also a series of speculations about the media (or post-media) technologies that capital had instaled on its now global territory" (Fisher 2014: 20). In this context, Fisher elaborates, "hauntology was by no means something rarefied; it was endemic in the time of 'techno-telediscursivity', techno-tele-iconity', 'simulacra' and 'synthetic images'. This discussion of the 'tele' shows that hauntology concerns a crisis of space as well as time" (Fisher 2014: 20). All those categories accentuate the phantom character of the state which constitutes

a hybrid of modern—or even futuristic—technologies and social and political *ressentiment* belonging to the former order of things (*ancien régime*).

It is apparent that *>observer_* offers the player an opportunity to visit and explore one of such phantom-States, which came into existence after the next great war fought by technologically advanced military powers, as a result of which "[t]he West killed the East. The East killed the West" (*>observer_*, 2017). It is also important to keep in mind the fact that the fictional world of *>observer_* retains that, rather conspicuously hauntological in the year 2084, division into the East and the West. The 2084 setting of phantom, post-war Krakow provides one more compelling context: the fictional world with readily recognizable conventional elements of cyberpunk (artificial intelligence, cyborg-like citizens, techno-neural modifications of the human brain) employs the setting of a place decidedly peripheral as far as geopolitics is concerned, a place which remains on the fringes of the global circulation of information, economic assets and new technologies. It is important to keep in mind that cyberpunk has mostly explored worlds associated with rapid civilizational and technological development and progress—worlds where the "future was now." As Jameson points out:

> Indeed, an inspection of this literature already provides a first crude inventory of the new world system: the immense role, first and foremost—and very much in Gibson's evocations (all the way down to *Pattern Recognition* itself) of Japan as the monitory semiotic combination of First World science—and technology with a properly Third World population explosion. Russia now also looms large, but above all in the form of its various mafias (from all the former Republics), which remind us of the anarchy and violent crime (as well as of the conspiratorial networks and jobless futures) that lurk just beneath the surface of capitalism. (Jameson 2005: 385-386)

In this way, within the conventions of the cyberpunk genre,

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Japan tends to be equated with modernity, progress and the future permeating the present in the same way the post-Soviet Russia represents post-communist phantom-States of the Eastern Bloc going through changes in social structures and economic transformations, as well as its capitulation to countless problems related to corruption, mafia influence and the marriage of business and politics, etc.—a situation foretold by the famous short story by Bruce Sterling and William Gibson, *Red Star, Winter Orbit* (1983). *>observer_*, on the other hand, offers an alternate approach: moving the setting of a cyberpunk narrative to a world of a post-socialist dystopia, bearing countless marks of a bygone system—a system that was meant to modernize the country and was oriented towards conquest of the future. This suggests that the player finds themselves in a world in which the future, understood as a socio-political project, belongs to the past which—colloquially speaking—"came and went", leaving behind a variety of artifacts haunting the world as worn-out memories of the future. A world constructed in this manner is represented by specific objects that—as items or assets in game—rely on the player's metagame knowledge in order to be correctly interpreted as obvious manifestations of retrofuturism. Most notable examples include such assets as the Frania brand of washing machine, very popular in Poland of the 1970s and 1980s, which can be seen in one of the apartments, or a bicycle visible through the window of Lazarski's car in the opening scene, which can be easily identified due to its characteristic shape as a Wigry bicycle, leaning against a nearby wall. Another retrofuturistic item is the boombox in the surgeon's apartment that bears an uncanny resemblance to the Polish design boombox Kasprzak RMS 404, whose dials must be operated to manipulate the holographic content.

Another way in which items and environment assets facilitate the experience of the narrative set in the world of *>observer_* is their function as indeces. Indexical storytelling, a concept very closely related to that of environmental storytelling, complements the

latter in the game, surrounding the player with items and assets that either point to something currently happening or something that has just happened (Fernandez-Vara 2011) in the apartment building—in case of investigation—or outside of it—in case of interrogation and observing people's mindscapes. Indexical storytelling is also especially vital for the experience of being an investigator, as both clues and elements of mindscapes invite the player to reconstruct what happened (Fernandez-Vara 2011). When the player enters Adam's apartment, they find it in disarray; obvious signs of some kind of struggle can be seen, such as a steel gate inside the apartment with bars bent out and furniture knocked over. After walking into the living room the player's agency is removed and the game shows Dan approaching a curtain under which human legs can be seen, and pushing it aside, revealing a headless body. Upon seeing the dead body, Dan staggers backwards, his field of view shaky and distorted, and his CHIRON software, called Matriarch, intervenes, announcing: "Warning. Abnormal stress levels. Heart rate irregular. Administering mild sedative" (*>observer_*, 2017). The sedative takes effect almost immediately and Dan calms down, proceeding to secure the crime scene. The moment when Dan calms down and returns to his duties as an Observer is the one in which the player regains control over the avatar. They may then choose to begin a more thorough investigation of the room.

In terms of both the narrative and gameplay, the Observer's job consists in the activity of investigating—not necessarily in the sense of "pixel hunting" similar to hidden object games or adventure-style combining of sometimes unlikely items, or even puzzle- and on-rails style like *Dead Secret* (2015), but actual investigation of the crime scene. The game will prompt the player to use the two available modes of augmented vision—the Electromagnetic Vision, or EM Vision, and Biometric Vision, or BIO Vision— and Dan will mention the necessity of examining some items, but he will not comment aloud on the results of that examination. Initially, upon finding Adam's body, after regaining

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composure under the influence of sedatives, Dan only states that even though the body is in Adam's apartment, it may not belong to Adam; he also mentions things related to Adam specifically, such as the fact that the time of death was before Adam's call or that Adam was unlikely to take drugs. However, after that, he will not prompt the player in any way—after mentioning the ComPass, he will not suggest looking at the body in a different vision (and he will say nothing about the fact that there are contaminants in the blood on the floor), nor will he comment on the furniture, the floor, or the items, many of which will appear to the player as something that can be interacted with but without a way of telling at first glance whether the examined item or place will be of immediate significance or not. It is the player who needs to follow through with the actual investigation: decide to examine the body—either with Dan's organic vision, or the augmented ones—look around the apartment, pick up objects and look at them closely, go through mail, etc., and, most importantly, draw conclusions from details such as Adam's expired ID or from computer parts scattered around the place.

The fictional world is depicted with care and meticulous detail both story-wise and gameplay-wise, with the virtual environment of 2084 Krakow convincing and multilayered, both in the sense of visuals and the information given by the inhabitants; both point to a larger reality than just the environment with which the player comes into contact. The gameplay, during which the player meanders through unknown rooms and corridors, examining strange items, allows for exploration of the dystopian world in full detail: the nightmarish, claustrophobic architecture of the residential tenement buildings, the seemingly untouched decay and decrepitude of the 1960s and 1970s barely obscured by holographically projected content, the run-down apartments that are little more than hovels, with tenants confused and anxious when their holoprojectors suddenly go off. That same virtual environment of the "real" world is already partially unstable due to the displays

and projections of augmented reality, warping the player's perception of physical space. In this sense, the perception is actually more significant in the context of how people live than the practical changes to people and their bodies and surroundings. The technology and holoprojectors, normally providing some measure of escapism, at least partially concealing all the dirt and hopelessness underneath, once turned off, leave the tenants nervous and lost, some of them showing signs of behavior characteristic of addiction and withdrawal. This is well illustrated by the conversation the player can have with the tenant from apartment 003, who nervously asks Dan: "Hey, you wouldn't happen to know when they gonna fix the connection? Not that it's, like, super important to me, or anything. I just… need to know." The player can then choose one of two answers for Dan, both indicating that it will take some time before the lockdown is lifted. To this the tenant will respond:

> TENANT:
>
> Oh, God… I mean, sure, that's fine. It's just, you know, the apartment feels very small all of a sudden. Kind of claustrophobic. Is… is it hot in here? I'm sweating something awful.
>
> DAN:
>
> Just take a deep breath. It's gonna be fine.
>
> TENANT:
>
> Of course it is. Why wouldn't it be? I'm just gonna… sit here. And wait for them to fix it. (*>observer_*, 2017)

The urgency implied by the tenant's phrasing ("I just need to know") and his remarks about the size of the apartment and hot flashes point to symptoms similar to drug withdrawal. This is one example of many instances of the game employing and combining both environmental and indexical storytelling to

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build the necessary context and knowledge the player will require for the later sequences of Observing.

Mindscapes and their mechanics

The first mindscape the player encounters in the game is that of Amir, the husband of Helena Novak. When Dan reaches apartment 104, Amir is already dying from the wounds inflicted by Victor, the aforementioned murderer. The game introduces the player to the main mechanic and gameplay experience of the game: the actual skills of the Observer and their application. Performing Observation on Amir is a progress-mandatory sequence—when the player enters the living room of the apartment 104 and approaches the dying man, the game revokes their control, with Dan's monologue and conversation choices serving as a guide as to the steps necessary for initiating the Observing process; some of the risks regarding hacking someone else's brain are mentioned as well. It is worth noting that the first connection to another person's brain, from plugging in to actually diving into Amir's mind, is located outside of the player's agency and is presented as an in-game cutscene.

The dive starts right after inserting the plug, with a brief transition effect resembling a high-speed entry into a space filled with geometric shapes and random images, such as faces. Then the player finds themselves in a new environment—the mindscape of the person being Observed. The concept of the mindscape in *>observer_* is not merely limited to a new virtual environment, but represents a new experience different from the virtual environment of the reality of the fictional world of the game. Memories that are explored are clearly presented as that: someone else's memories. Sometimes they overlap, with locations including items shifting in proportion and in quantity (such as the laundry, chair and tools in the laundry room of the Novak apartment), or even in sizes; they are always filled with images and events that are meaningful only to the owner

of those memories, with no notes or letters left behind for the player to figure out what it is that they might be looking at. The neural interrogation does not make it possible for the playerto watch memories like film sequences or even retrace the steps of a given character—the experience of other characters' lives is conveyed through a combination of changes in the virtual environment and mechanics, forming an environment full of symbolic forms and occurrences, where multiple events, feelings or longer periods of time are condensed into extraordinary, very subjective imagery that the player needs to interpret. Similar mechanics are employed in some sections of *Layers of Fear* (2016), with symbolic imagery and disembodied voices delivering short but meaningful lines. However, since that game's avatar—the Artist—is exploring his own memories, the items and locations meant to be meaningful to the avatar are also purposefully made meaningful to the player through notes and recalled bits of dialogue that focus on the emotional impact of the given event. and the resulting trauma and regret (Marak 2017).

As far as interaction is concerned, the player might typically be inclined to want to explore memories in the same manner they would explore any other environment; it would be natural to expect the ability to interact with the surroundings, some—even if limited—ownership of action (Perron and Wolf 2009: 66) and the sensation of inhabiting the given space (Calleja 2011: 2). By contrast, through the majority of Observing sequences, Dan remains symbolically immaterial and inconsequential to the neural environment surrounding him, because the memories—the events and their outcomes—do not belong to him. However, that is not the way mindscapes are constructed in *>observer_*: sometimes the player cannot explore at all, and sometimes they cannot even move. During those sequences, the game does not simply block the player's attempts to explore via objects or invisible walls, but actively confuses them, occasionally forcing the player to enter and explore places and items in a specific way and manner, and sometimes taking that

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possibility away irreversibly if a particular action is not performed or a choice is not made. It is important to emphasize at this point that actions taken and choices made within the mindscapes are not readily recognizable as such—an action may constitute choosing a specific path, but it may just as well consist in something much more subtle, such as simply directing the avatar's gaze at an item or person. In other words, focusing on a particular item or choosing a particular direction will connect the memories, pulling the player into a different memory or association and, consequently, a new environment; therefore, some memories will appear in every actualization of the game, while others only if the player chooses to examine objects or scenes. In this way, the game affords the player a certain degree of agency, while manipulating the environment and depriving the player of the sense of control over that environment—such as the player's expectations of what will happen if they throw something or open a door—or their movement—such as in Helena's mindscape at one point, when the humanoid figures in her workplaces move only when the avatar does. Additionally, some places in the shifting, distorting environments trigger contaminations from Dan himself, wherein some of his memories intertwine with the memories of the observed person—in case of Helena, it is the memory of telling Adam that his mom is sick, and in case of Amir, it is the memory of Dan's own wedding ceremony.

In the mindscape of Amir, the first person the player actually Observes, the player can see many images connected to his time spent in prison. In one of the very first scenes into the Observing, player can open the door to apartment 104, behind which they see a wall—of different color and design than the other building walls—with rows of tallies marking the days Amir spent in prison. The fact that the wall is right behind the door to his home points to his perception of the freedom resulting from parole as illusory, and to an association in his mind between his apartment and the prison cell he never really left behind.

Another example of images referring to Amir's prison time are numerous monitors showing various images or statistics relating to prison as an institution: in Amir's memories, many monitors can be seen in various places—the 104 apartment, the corridors of the building—some of which show looped images related to the prison life or the statistics concerning the frequency of failure for parole ("How often federal parole fails," *>observer_* 2017). Additionally, one sequence requires the player to follow the clues displayed on monitors in order to escape the loop and progress, which further points to the symbolism of both being watched and the necessity to follow instructions. This could be considered a peculiar kind of trauma which the subject (Amir) develops after a confrontation with the oppressive panoptic system, in keeping with panopticon's nature. As Michel Foucault observes in his analysis of Jeremy Bentham's project, the major effect of the Panopticon is to "induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault 1995: 201). In the world of advanced technology depicted in *>observer_*, being visible—watched, recorded, surveilled—becomes the experience of panopticism extending beyond the walls of the prison itself, in accordance with the dystopian society and its social order of strict control. It is worth mentioning that this concept is expressed even more directly in a simpler form in a series of episodic simulation indie games known as *Orwell* (2016), in which the player assumes the role of a state operative monitoring surveillance sources in order to identify threats to national security. The player spends most of the gameplay time sifting through the private lives of citizens by means of combing through various devices they own in order to find connections between them and pass on the information to the avatar's handler in an intentionally banal, monotonous visual environment of a computer screen.

Some of the images in Amir's mind represent specifically his fear of the inability of overcoming his drug addiction; those tend to

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include primarily showers and water faucets. Amir is taunted by showers which he either symbolically cannot enter or which elude him by moving away or falling apart, fading into nothingness. At many points during Observing Amir's mind, the player will experience a scene in which they find a shower or a faucet with running water and every time they try to approach it, the water will stop running or the shower itself will move away from the avatar. One of the sequences in Amir's mind can progress only if the player tries to follow and catch up a receding shower, which, by moving away, opens new way for the player to go forward.

In turn, Helena's mindscape revolves largely around work—both in the sense of professional duties and house chores. Dan, Observing Helena's memories, can see a timelapse of Helena's day of work at CHIRON; from her perspective, the corporation office resembles a very busy beehive. Work environment does not look overly menacing during the day, but it changes during the night, when Helena starts her second shift. In her mind, the CHIRON building at night looks like an ominous dark labyrinth of cubicles, in which only the computer displays of work stations provide some kind of light. There is one more sequence in Helena's mindscape that takes place in the CHIRON building at night, starting with the player experiencing Helena's memories of downloading confidential data from the corporation computer. After the transfer is complete, the player has to find a way out of the building through the same dark maze, with the addition of a new threat—the monster looking for Helena.

The second dominant theme in Helena's mind is housework. When Observing Amir's memories, the player can see fragments of Amir and Helena's apartment. One of the shared images seen in minds of both of them are stacks of laundry. In the case of Amir, the player can see neatly folded stacks of laundry moving on their own around a single laundry machine, which is usually turned off. Both the image of laundry and laundry machines

appears in Helena's mind as well, but it is drastically different from what the player knows from Amir's memories. In Helena's mindscape, instead of a single laundry machine, the player can see endless rows of constantly and loudly whirring machines, which fill rooms and corridors, stacked one upon another, sometimes disappearing high above the player's field of vision; similarly, the laundry in the apartment takes the form of never ending mounds of dirty clothes lying everywhere, with additional piles being spit out from a giant pipe. In another place, a similar pipe spits out an unending string of bottles of detergent and washing liquid. There is even a scene in which the player can enter a small room filled with washing machines stacked one atop another. The door shuts and locks behind the avatar, and upon looking at the ceiling, the player discovers more laundry above their head, seemingly threatening to fall and bury Helena. Just as Amir has opened doors only to find prison walls, in the same manner Helena became trapped in the laundry room—symbolically speaking, in the constraints of her duties. In this way the game—instead of showing or telling—allows the player to actually experience how Helena perceived her life and how she felt about it. Although it is never specifically expressed in words, the game conveys the experience of being trapped and intimidated by everyday duties, an unending flood of house chores and tasks impossible to escape. In the same way Amir seems to be stuck on his prison stay, Helena felt smothered by her life and the dynamics within the relationship.

Apart from images and objects appearing in both mindscapes, the player can also encounter particular sequences in Helena and Amir's minds which point to events or situations they experienced differently. Amir's tone of voice as he calls "Honey, I'm home!" is warmer and more sober in his memories than in Helena's, while Helena's question about whether or not Amir remembered the way they met appears the same to both of them. In contrast, there is a scene featuring soup in both sequences when Dan is Observing the Novaks. In both cases, it starts with

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Amir sitting at the table and asking: "This fucking slop again?" and in both cases an answer can be heard: "It's called soup. Now dig in. It's not getting any better" (*>observer_*, 2017). In Amir's mindscape, he asks the question facing an old shabby table by a wall covered with ugly white tiles, while being chained to a chair. The voice answering is distorted and deep. In Helena's memories, the scene seems to be taking place in their apartment, with Amir sitting at the very same table by the wall, and she is the one answering the question, in a normal voice. Once she delivers her line, Amir suddenly lounges up, flipping the table and its content over. Again, Amir's prison trauma comes to the forefront, as visually it is difficult to discern a prison environment from a non-prison environment, since the living accommodations of the Novaks—and other tenants in the Stacks—do not differ much in terms of quality or aesthetics from the prison. Between the environments that are difficult to tell apart and Amir's emotional distress, Helena's identity is lost in Amir's traumatic perception of the reality around him.

Interestingly, Helena's sequence is moving forward in time, whereas Amir's sequence seems to be going back in time, indicating that they have lived in emotional separation, moving in opposite directions, although they shared the feeling of pressure and entrapment, drowning in the oppressive reality of their lives as signified by the visual filter resembling underwater view in both their mindscapes. The player is thus subjected to their lives as they experienced them—not as an impartial bystander, but as a part of a fluid, unstable representation.

Victor Maderski's mindscape, on the other hand, is also remarkable, but quite different. When Dan plugs into his brain, the player learns that Victor had a longstanding obsession with wolves and werewolves. Following this obsession, he began to modify his own body and take various drugs to nourish and play out the fantasy of being a wolf-man; he believed that his natural environment should be the woods or a forest instead of

an old building in the slums of Krakow. The film posters with werewolf characters hanging in his room form a certain pop-culture background, introducing an association with a typically cinematic monster, as well as suggesting a specific interpretation of obsession concerning wolves and the fear of wolves. An important part of that interpretation is the famous case study by Sigmund Freud *From the History of an Infantile Neurosis* (1918), where Freud analyzes a childhood phobia of a patient suffering from deep fear of wolves haunting both his nightmares and daydreams. Despite the fact that Freud confidently recognizes the wolf as "a father-surrogate" (Freud 1955: 34), the entire situation is much more complex, as it pertains to wishful fantasies of the boy. Fear and fascination associated with the wolf father figure lead to a compulsion to identify with that dominant persona. In his analysis of *The Three Little Pigs*, which features the character of the Big Bad Wolf, Bruno Bettelheim points out—in regard to the process of child's identification with the stories protagonists (i.e. the Pigs)—that "only a mentally sick child can identify with the wolf" (Bettelheim 1975: 43). A closely related connotation would be clinical lycanthropy, a psychiatric syndrome resulting in a delusion where the person believes themselves to be transforming or to have transformed into an animal—when that animal happens to be a beast of prey, the patient can exhibit, apart from psychosis, aggressive behavior. It is best seen in those parts of Victor's mindscape in which the player moves around the apartment building in the present, i.e. not long before his death; through Victor's eyes, the building is not covered in holograms and miles of cables but rich foliage, branches and vines. This illusion of having become a wolf in his natural environment is enhanced by the vision of a white doe. When the player follows the vision around the building, it eventually leads them to all the places where Victor killed someone—Adam, Amir, Helena and the aforementioned discredited surgeon. The forest environment sometimes transforms into the urban one and back again; for example, when the player enters the tattoo parlor, Helena is there, running

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away—but she suddenly disappears and the room changes into a forest with a blood moon in the sky. From the darkness, strange tree creatures emerge, which the player can attack. After Victors kills some of the creatures, Helena's body can be seen, floating in front of a giant blood moon, and player can hear her screams.

Yet another type of mindscape is represented by Pieta and Paulina, another couple of characters whose mindscapes are Observed in the game. Whereas both Amir's and Helena's sequences are Observed by Dan separately, Paulina and Pieta's consciousness is a singular merged entity, which means that Dan enters them as one mindscape. In the tangible reality, Dan can only speak to Paulina in the apartments 113—having introduced himself and asked about her name—and he notices that something is off only when he attempts to learn her age:

DAN:

That's right. How old are you, Paulina?

PAULINA (*flatly*):

Thirty four. (*in a cheerful voice again*) Nine, you silly!

DAN:

So you're all alone in there?

PAULINA:

Yes… Well, not really. I'm playing with Pieta.

DAN:

Your little sister?

PAULINA:

No, she's my friend, silly!

DAN:

From school?

PAULINA:

Ha, ha, no! She's a special friend! Only I can see her.

DAN:

Oh, that kind of friend. I had an invisible friend too, when I was your age. I called him Tom.

PAULINA (*cynically*):

Pieta thinks you're full of shit.

DAN:

Are you upset? Will you be alright?

PAULINA (*in normal voice again*):

I'm… I'm scared. The lights went out.

DAN:

It's just a power outage. The building's not feeling well.

PAULINA:

No! Something is happening to me. I fell… weird. Stop it! I can't… it won't let me out!

DAN:

What's going on in there?

PAULINA (*emotionlessly*):

1074… 1074… (*>observer_*, 2017)

While Dan's lines indicate that he simply believes Paulina to be scared of the lockdown, the players are usually confused by her behavior and direct Dan to go to apartment 114 to investigate. Inside, the player will find Pieta hooked to a dream machine, connected to Paulina through another machine called Cephalus

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7.34. When Dan plugs into Pieta's brain, he first enters Pieta's mind and her memories, then enters the place where Pieta's and Paulina's minds are joined, as Pieta initially began to displace Paulina before she realized that Paulina was benefiting from the connection. The neural displacement field that leads to the place where Pieta's consciousness resides is perceived by Dan as a valley of poles composed of computer parts, cables and screens, alternating through a day and night cycle, with the day representing Paulina and the night—Pieta. Accordingly, the images on the screens change from a number of happy images to a face of a woman in various stages of decay and drowning. During the night part of the cycle, a strong wind is blowing, pushing Dan backwards (metaphorically out), and to avoid it, the player must hide behind the poles. Dialogues and lines spoken by the characters (fragments of Pieta's memories related to the situation in which she and Paulina ended up) no longer just sound in the air, but instead come from loudspeakers, and only upon activation, representing Paulina's ability of forming coherent memories and speech thanks to technology. This metaphor of technology offering Paulina an actual life and growth is further expanded in the puzzle where the player uses switches and dials to make a cage disappear and a sapling grow into a healthy tree. Finally, at the end of the valley, the player reaches a space in which they can see a large visual recreation of Pieta and her machine from reality. When the player approaches the image of Pieta among many cables and screens, a conversation between Pieta and Dan is initiated, through which the player can learn details about the situation and the relationship between Pieta and Paulina. After the conversation, Dan's Observing process ends and the player has to make a decision concerning Pieta's fate by either restoring the connection between her and Paulina or rebooting Cephalus 7.34. The entire scenario of rooms 113 and 114 concerns the issues of technological progress in the context of improving and correcting nature, including human biology. One of the functions technology has long been expected to fulfill is the

improvement of humankind—however, as Stanisław Lem points out, all technologies are undependable in the sense that they can have both favorable and unfavorable consequences (Lem 1995: 93). This relates to the concept of a "technological trap" coined by Lem, which consists in social and economic result of widespread implementation of technogenic operations (Lem 1996: 115); this result, according to Lem, was impossible to foresee and socially detrimental or unpredictable in development stage, and, upon gaining momentum, became irreversible, transforming the presumed benefits into a mono- or polymorphic catastrophe (Lem 1996: 115).

The activity of Observing is initiated in the same way in all cases, but it differs slightly with each target. In case of Amir and Helena, the interaction is necessary not only from the story point of view, but also from the point of view of the narrative design and the way the virtual environment can be navigated and explored. The incident with Pieta is a more natural manifestation of an Observer's work. The player finds Pieta's body in the dream machine, and they can choose to investigate the scene or not. Inside Pieta's (or, to be more precise, Pieta and Paulina's) mind, the player has little evidence and few clues to go on. The connection to Pieta is calm and safe—the player is not thrown out due to safety reasons, as it is the case with Amir, who dies during the Observation, and there is no risk, as it is the case with Helena, where Dan has to disengage his safety protocols in order to be able to Observe her.

Mindscapes also fulfill a narrative function—the game communicates various concepts and ideas through them, such as Victor's motivations or all the problems Amir and Helena had as a couple; the most important aspects of their life together, however, are communicated through the environment—but not through the traditional indexical storytelling, unless the remembered environment were to be treated as indeces. As it has been discussed earlier, when Amir remembers neat piles of

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laundry seemingly moving on their own—indicating that someone else was taking care of them—in Helena's memories Dan sees huge, intimidating mounds of dirty clothes and endless rows of washing machines. In the case of Observing, it is possible for the player to experience the complexity of the mind of the Observed characters. This mechanic in the game also provides an insight into their feelings and attitudes: the sincerity of Amir's wish to overcome addiction and Helena's weariness, or her strong feeling that submitting to technology will help her provide for their child (make it happy). In turn, in the case of Victor, his mind expresses the anxiety and ostracism he felt, as well as the way he later saw himself as a predator hunting prey (deer appearing instead of Amir, Helena and the surgeon).

The concept of connecting two minds is also expressed in the gameplay through the element of the aforementioned contaminations. Memories belonging to someone else—which, to begin with, are to a great extent as much indexical as they are symbolic—must be interpreted; whenever Dan is performing a neural interrogation, both the software in CHIRON's hardware and Dan's brain are trying to make sense of the data being fed through the connection. This multistage interpretation process may be what is responsible for the contamination of the observed mindscapes. Contaminations originating from Dan's memories and past experiences that bleed into the mindscapes of Helena, Amir or Victor typically concern his wife and son: as Dan reaches the memory of Helena going to the clinic to visit a gynecologist, he recalls a conversation with his wife when she informed him of her pregnancy, and the background of Helena's mindscape blends momentarily with Dan's memory of his wife's silhouette in a hospital gown. In comparison, when Dan is later stuck in the capsule in the Sanctuary, some of Adam's contaminations bleed into his own mindscape as he explores his own mind; Dan is effectively Observing himself, witnessing the most traumatic memories associated with being forced by the circumstances to receive CHIRON's implants:

ADAM:

You're such a fucking hypocrite and you don't even see it!

DANIEL:

I thought I was right. I didn't know any better.

ADAM:

You stood on principle when it was her life on the line. But when it comes to saving yourself, you're pragmatic all of sudden.

DANIEL:

I had to take care of you. I made a promise to her.

ADAM:

No! You don't get to use her as an excuse! Not after what happened!

DANIEL:

What did you want me to do? Give up?

ADAM:

That's what you made her do! Every time I look at you, I see this… monster that killed my mom! (*>observer_*, 2017)

During exploring his own mind (despite the fact he is unaware of the fact that this is what he is doing), Dan sees the same monster Helena and Victor did, with the corpse of Adam's mother still impaled on its cybernetic arm. Thus, Dan realizes that this is the way Adam perceived him only after coming in contact with Digital Adam, and encountering some of Adam's contaminations. It is also quite likely that Adam warned Helena and Victor about Observers in general, or possibly just his father, whom he regarded as a monster, this way—consciously or not—manipulating both of them into seeing "the monster", which, in turn, resulted in Dan seeing himself and other people

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like him as monstrosities in the mindscapes of the interrogated people. After Dan switches off his connection to CHIRON, he experiences a direct connection to Digital Adam's consciousness. While it is impossible to determine whether Digital Adam is lying or not, it is possible to simply verify what he claims about real Adam by exploring his mind, given that only diving into Adam's mind reveals to the player the shared backstory of the all characters.

The reality of CHIRON

The depiction of the CHIRON corporation in the game, and the things characters in the game say about CHIRON—as well as what they do not say—perfectly represents the idea of a phantom-state: a corrupt entity, afflicted by drug trafficking and involved in morally and legally questionable acts. As has already been noted, in theory, the game takes place in the Fifth Polish Republic, but the real power lies with CHIRON; the player encounters no information concerning politicians, government officials or any state power structure. This idea is only emphasized when the player learns that Observers, even though they are officially part of the police force (Dan represents the Krakow Police Department), are actually paid by CHIRON. Another way in which the nature of the phantom-state of the game's world manifests itself in *>observer_* are the items and assets. CHIRON manufactures everything—its name is on almost all the artifacts the player examines, and its smiling models and seductive advertisements can be seen on practically every wall; whenever the player scans them with Dan's Electromagnetic Vision, any given piece of technology lying around in various apartments and rooms turns out to have been produced by CHIRON. Instead of the expected label that would inform the player of the item's country of origin (which in the case of *>observer_* should be "made in Poland"), the player sees "made by CHIRON." This is yet another subtle way in which the game suggests to the player that CHIRON oversees and

commands the government of Poland. The Polish phantom-State that *>observer_* invites the player to explore follows the logic of a world after history, politics and future, a world that has come into being as a result of war chaos, and the divide between the use of technology and the awareness of the ramifications of its influence on society where the state has been ultimately infiltrated or even replaced by an omnipresent, if secret, corporation. The majority of information the player obtains about CHIRON comes from Adam's remarks and, more importantly, from Helena's memories. The oppressive presence of CHIRON is communicated immediately through the first memory in her mindscape—the job interview for a junior programmer position:

> >THE REPUBLIC IS YOUR MOTHER_
>
> >CHIRON IS YOUR FATHER_
>
> >A MOTHER'S LOVE IS UNCONDITIONAL_
>
> >A FATHER'S PRIDE DEMANDS SACRIFICE_
>
> >ARE YOU WILLING TO SACRIFICE FOR THE GREATER GOOD?_
>
> YES / NO
>
> (*>observer_*, 2017)

In those partially religious and partially cult-like phrases and declarations that the player can read on the screen during Helena's interview, CHIRON employs the language of political propaganda, conspicuously close to Orwell's "newspeak". This vocabulary, together with the corporation's promises, steers the player in the direction of a variety of literary and historical associations, but it also induces anxiety and tension, given that the conditions laid down by the corporation evoke the context of dystopian reality and, naturally, the rules of "doublethink" known from *1984*. The Orwellian nature of this episode is

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emphasized by the way the entire interview process unfolds. The interview is a progress-mandatory sequence, so the player cannot omit it or discontinue—they need to select answers in order to complete this scene. In order for Helena to get the job, the players chooses "YES." However, as the interview progresses, this button becomes less and less reliable, as it seems to conform more to the rules of "doublethink" than to regular logic. The player will generally choose "YES" to answer question "ARE YOU WILLING TO SACRIFICE FOR THE GREATER GOOD?", but the system will not react. Some players will then choose the "NO" option instead, and the screen will scream at them in red letters "DON'T LIE TO US." If the player persistently selects "YES", the button will eventually work after three or four tries. Thus the game confuses the player and successfully conveys the experience of interacting with the corporation through their inability to predict and satisfy CHIRON's expectations. Furthermore, in the language used by CHIRON in the interview, as well as in promotional materials, posters and advertisements aimed at recruiting new employees and motivating the current ones, the player may recognize not only "newspeak", but also quite contemporary jargon characteristic of capitalist neoliberal corporations ("corporate-speak"), training courses, or even coaching, which is itself situated between marketing, religion and psychotherapy:

>WORK_

>PRODUCTIVITY_

>HAPPINESS_

>YOU WILL BE HAPPY_

>YOU WILL BE PRODUCTIVE_

>YOU WILL WORK TOWARDS THE GREATER GOOD_

>WILL YOU OBEY/?_

YES / NO

(>*observer_*, 2017)

Again, the player can try to select "YES," and unless they persist, they will see the screen reading "DON'T LIE TO US." By taking away the actual possibility to accurately calculate the outcome of a choice, the game creates the sense of being deprived of control. This metaphor is further extended later in Helena's mindscape, in the Novaks' apartment, when the player opens a cupboard and they see the angry screen "DON'T LIE TO US" inside; this is another minor but meaningful instance of the mechanics manipulating the player into better understanding how CHIRON has deprived Helena of control and of her privacy. Indeed, the tenant from 103 describes Helena to Dan as "worn out, fidgety. Jumping at shadows", and adds that working for the corporation "has that effect" (>*observer_*, 2017). The entire experience demonstrates that the player has entered a world which combines perfectly all the aspects mentioned above—religious promises and coercion, political propaganda and corporate brainwashing. All of these form one coherent whole: the world of CHIRON, where one can reside only if they endure the procedure of verification and are deemed suitable:

>FINALIZING SUBJECT ASSESSMENT

>Checking answers…

>Analyzing behavioral patterns…

>Evaluating life choices…_

(>*observer_*, 2017)

Apart from governing the country and owning its actual employees, CHIRON owns Observers in more ways than one; the Observers are paid by CHIRON, they need cybernetic implants and specific drugs in order to do their job—all of which are manufactured by the corporation—and they are supervised

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by the previously mentioned AI system interface known as the Matriarch. The Matriarch warns the Observer about dangers, reminds them about the necessity of taking medication—sometimes even independently administers medication without the need for authorization—and must be actively disengaged if the Observer wants to do something that goes against the AI's assessment. Most importantly, CHIRON is the manufacturer of Synchrozine, which is the drug necessary for Dan to function as an Observer, which in practice means that CHIRON effectively controls Dan's work as an investigator by providing the only substance that can offer mediation between his implants and his organic brain. The unequal power dynamic between the Observers, who must depend on CHIRON, and the corporation, which has virtually absolute power over them, is signaled even in the way the title of the game is stylized—the word "observer," placed between an angle bracket and an underscore, resembles a software command line. Furthermore, both the story and gameplay point to the "programmable," instrument-like nature of the Observers in terms of their relationship with CHIRON.

(Monstrous) technology

Another issue worth discussing at this point is Dan's identity as an Observer and the monstrous form he takes in Helena's, Victor's and Dan's memories. In accordance with its cyberpunk science fiction themes, the game is filled with imagery of technology—automation and mechanization, various devices, computer chips and wiring, as well as the concepts of connecting, fusing and integrating. The complex relationship between technology and culture has long stimulated the interest of social anthropology, promoting debates on the criteria and limits of the human condition—what is known as *conditio humana.* The classic works of Arnold Gehlen invariably place the reflection on humankind in the context of civilizational transformations defined by science and technological discoveries, as well as the

ongoing process of industralization (Gehlen 1980). In historical and anthropological terms, Gehlen points out a number of basic functions of technology, both stemming directly the from the flaws of the human body and oriented towards replacing and improving human organs. The automatisms examined by Gehlen—the rhythm of the heart, or that of breathing—which people recognize in themselves point towards the human fascination with machines. In a certain paradoxical manner, human beings acknowledge the machine within, studying it as a model of themselves; the line between the stable state of being human and the unstable process of the becoming-machine lies in this acknowledgment, overlapping with the line between being human and the becoming-monster—since, as Cohen emphasizes, "the monster stands at the threshold of becoming" (Cohen 1996: 20). In both cases—of the machine and of the monster—this process constitutes becoming and transformation, casting doubt on the stable identities (Deleuze and Guattari 2005: 232-309). The omnipresent electronics and implants both outside and inside the body—particularly those inside—are also symbolically presented as abject in the game, or perceived as a threat by those people who either for some reason dislike technology, or have none in their bodies, as can be seen in the case of Helena, who was afraid of technology, or the Immaculates, who view technology as repulsive and corrupting.

The concept of technology as something threatening or frightful is represented by two primary elements which recur both narratively and ludically in *>observer_*: the snake and the monster. The snake is a slithering, whispering, glossy black connection cable that moves of its own volition, while the monster is a humanoid, deformed and misshapen creature with technological elements crudely integrated into the scarred, partially withered remains of a human body. While the snake stands for the technology itself, its seductive power and symbolic consequences (the apple on the table in Helena's memories), the monster

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represents the fear of blending the human and the technological, and of the abject, unnatural, result of that blending.

In mindscapes, the snake usually appears in the background, slithering in and out of rooms and spaces; black, very thick and approximately several feet long, it moves around quietly in wavy, serpentine motions. One end of the cable is much thinner, giving it even more snake-like appearance, while the "head" constitutes a combination of a plug and some kind of a machine claw—incidentally, it also resembles a scaled up version of the plug used by Dan to initiate Observing. The cable-snake creature will react to the player, turning towards them or speaking to the avatar—e.g., in the case of Helena, the snake whispers about "a chance" and "becoming better," implying that fusing the character with elements of technology (i.e. accepting the snake's offer) is beneficial, even though Helena herself seems to perceive it as something threatening, if not evil. The player cannot, however, interact with the snake at all, and can even ignore it if they want to.

Culturally speaking, the concept of the Fifth Polish Republic reflects many elements of the real, contemporary country of Poland (a country regarded as traditionally Catholic), which means that the world of *>observer_* can be interpreted within the cultural frame of reference of Christian mythology. In this context, the appearance of the snake and the apple as significant parts of text imagery carries clear connotations of biblical symbolism, evoking such associations as temptation, forbidden fruit and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. However, the technology-rich environment of the game evokes further connotations explored by Erik Davis; in his book *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic Mysticism in the Age of Information*, Davis examines the magical and religious potential of culture as a vehicle of gnosis, offering a quite innovative reading of the gnostic song *Hymn of the Pearl*, featuring a snake among its symbolic elements, as a parable of the search for the knowledge in the world

dominated by information noise (Davis 1999: 96-99). In this context, the snake can be regarded as both the keeper and the guardian of truth—namely, the knowledge of the nature of the world which might prove to be nothing but a demonic illusion, "a world that is not only flawed but ruled by a conspiracy of ignorance—of noise" (Davis 1999: 98).

On the other hand, the presence of the grotesque half-organic and half-mechanical monster in mindscapes of Helena, Victor and Dan cannot be ignored. To begin with, it moves rather slowly, lumbering around rather than walking like a healthy human, and it produces intimidating sounds, including heavy steps and breathing. The right arm of the monster is fully mechanical, covered with exaggerated wiring and nodes, and it is disproportionately long and bulky. Its head is deformed and barely any human features are recognizable, as most of the monster's face consists of cables and a large, bright blue cybernetic right eye. The human, or rather human-like, half of the monster, including the remnants of the left arm, looks withered and deformed to a great degree in comparison to the extensive cybernetic half; the organic is dominated or obscured by the mechanical. It is worth pointing out that the relation between the body of the Other and the classifications systems of the dominant culture is one of the fundamental elements of the process of its monstrualization. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen notes that the "refusal to participate in the classificatory 'order of things' is true of monsters generally: they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration" (Cohen 1996: 6). Organic-mechanic hybrid bodies brimming with cybernetic implants obliterate the familiar main anthropological categories of human/non-human, dead/alive, etc., and become the model media of monstrosity. Symbolically, the monster—the Observer—represents the abject nature of cybernetic implants, which constitute a transgression of the corporeal with no respect for borders and definitions of the self and other (Kitchin and

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Kneale 2002: 110). Incidentally, another violation of that border between self and other concerns the actual process of Observing, which is Dan's primary job.

In gameplay, the monster's placement and actions serve a specific function; in the case of Helena and Victor's mindscapes, the monster appears in distinct locations and must be avoided through the stealth mechanic. One part of Helena's mindscape is a stealth sequence in which the player must quietly leave the CHIRON building while avoiding being detected by the monster. The player must do this mainly by hiding and listening to the heavy footsteps of the monster in order to assess where it is when they cannot see it. In this way, the monster takes on the role of a guard that is either looking for them or guarding the way to the next memory sequence. The brightly glowing mechanical eye of the monster casts a beam of light similar to a flashlight beam, giving it even more resemblance to a guard looking for any suspicious people; this effect is additionally emphasized by the fact that the monster can be seen patrolling a specific location, but will react to the avatar's movement and any noise made if the player is not careful enough, subsequently deviating from the patrolling route and attacking the avatar directly and killing them, causing the entire sequence to start all over again. The sequences with the monster that needs to be avoided—stealth sections in Helena's, Victor's and Dan's mindscapes—convey the theme of fear of the technologically augmented human (an Observer) in a way that transcends mere exposition and makes it possible for the player to experience the need to hide from the threat through a combination of the ludic and the narrative. The player is not told that the characters deem the abject cybernetics and the resulting abomination monstrous—they simply see the enemy the way the characters saw it. Similarly, they are not told that the characters feared it—the game makes them experience that fear by forcing them to run from that monster. Helena and Victor do not fear all people with implants—they feel that way specifically about Observers, who have the ability to simply plug

into a person's head and breach both physical and mental borders between the Self and the Other: the organic and the technological, the mind of the self, and the mind of another.

On a broader level, in this way *>observer_* also questions the extent to which Dan is human, and the extent to which Digital Adam is "real", combining in those characters the idea of monstrosity with the idea of fading humanity. Posthumanity in *>observer_* is represented in a very clear and readily understandable form of escaping the "limitations [of the body] and environmental constraints through computerized virtual reality, nanotechnology, genetic engineering, and biotic mechanization" (Westling 2006: 29)—as can be seen in the cases of Dan, Adam and Victor. The game represents the consequences of the process of redefinition of the human species as "beings fused with the technologies and media experiences … designed as tools," with human beings seen as "transcendent minds manipulating a realm of material otherness" (Westling 2006: 29). The technological posthuman in *>observer_* (Adam) seeks to escape "involvement in the rhythms of growth and decay in the biosphere" (Westling 2006: 30), and, in the end, is actually capable of doing so:

> DAN:
>
> What were you working on?
>
> DIGITAL ADAM:
>
> To exist long past your physical body. Beyond limitations, beyond sickness and death…
>
> DAN:
>
> Beyond being human? Just to keep existing? Sounds like a living nightmare.
>
> DIGITAL ADAM:

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> You haven't changed, have you? I knew you wouldn't understand. But you will. Soon. I promise. (*>observer_*, 2017)

This short dialogue places the player at the very heart of the problem of defining the concept of "being human." Is that concept reducible to the dependence on the physical body susceptible to disease and death, or does it concern categories such as the mind and consciousness (self-consciousness) which can be freely managed—for example, through transferring them to vessels more durable than an organic body? As Lem notes, the problems of robotics and cyborgization invariably lead to questions of existential nature. Even if "[by] a robot, we understand a mechanical blockhead, a roughly humanoid machine equipped with human intelligence," a "primitive caricature of man, not his successor," Lem insists that "[s]ystemic reconstruction does not have to involve giving up on any valuable features—only an elimination of those features that are considered imperfect and primitive in man" (Lem 2013: 300). A question in this case would be whether this improved human being is still a human being and whether the consciousness existing beyond the biological body is still a human consciousness. The matter of mortality (of mind and body) can be either considered another requirement of humanity or a threshold for technology to cross:

> DANIEL:
>
> Well, I have to say—no mods of any kind, that's quite a statement these days.
>
> THE TENANT:
>
> Is it really? Is having a neural connection to the web worth renouncing your humanity? Is a body held together with screws and wires really worth a corrupted soul?
>
> DANIEL:
>
> Some would say there are benefits.

THE TENANT:

Certainly. I know our lives will be shorter and less… comfortable. But it's a price we're willing to pay for experiencing the purity of our God-given bodies.

DANIEL:

Don't get me wrong. Not a big fan of implants. But I couldn't do what I do without them.

THE TENANT:

Yes, you carry them within you.

DANIEL:

It wasn't really a choice. You know?

THE TENANT:

Oh, but clearly it was. The world would be a better place if more people realized that. (*>observer_*, 2017)

This conversation points to the price for the upgraded body and augmented senses, and even potential immortality, which is the loss of some part of oneself—a very human part destined to remain imperfect, decay and die.

Another game touching upon similar issues is *SOMA* (2015), which questions the matter of the self and the related concept of whether one particular version of that self can be considered "the original." The question is quite complex, given that throughout the game the player is in control of every next iteration of the game's protagonist, Simon Jarrett, with only one having an extra role to emphasize the game's themes. The Simon that serves as the player's avatar for the first half of the game set on the research complex PATHOS-II in the year 2104 is actually already a copy—the complete digitized content of his mind was created during a brain scan, and later downloaded into a robotic body—of the Simon Jarrett from the opening sequence of the

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game, who lived and died in Toronto in the year 2015. Throughout the game, the avatar (the consecutive copies of Simon) voices doubts and questions concerning the status of the self as being able (or unable) to identify as "the original subject." Despite the fact that Simon is aware—at one point, in Omicron, even witnessesing it himself—of the copying process, whereby two separate versions of him coexist briefly, he still insists on referring to himself as the "real" one and, when talking about the Simon copy on the ARK, refers to him with hostility as a total stranger. *SOMA* also questions the matter of validity of life led by an individual aware that they are a digital copy of the "original" flesh and blood person; the game ends with the third copy of Simon, believing himself to be the "real" Simon, raging in frustration in the face of being left behind on PATHOS-II on doomed Earth, and then, after the credits, the entire narrative comes to a conclusion. In that last sequence, the player controls the fourth copy of Simon, who—again, despite having witnessed the process before—believes that he has been transferred onto the ARK; he strolls around the beautiful scenery, looks at the flowers and trees, at the sky, and eventually runs into the digital Catherine, at which point there is a cutaway to the ARK slowly leaving the Earth's orbit. On their way to Catherine, the player encounters a console with which they can interact, if they wish so, and fill out a special questionnaire:

> Calibration Survey v 0.3
>
> Welcome! If you are reading this, you have successfully entered the ARK. This survey is designed to give the developers a better understanding of your subjective experience and how to improve your well-being. Please continue with the survey.
>
> 1. How would you describe your physical condition?
>
> → I feel normal.
>
> → I feel invigorated—a better version of myself.

→ I feel alien—I'm a visitor inside another body.

→ I feel fake—no longer a real person.

2. How would you describe your mental condition?

→ I feel normal.

→ I feel disconnected—a separation of mind and body.

→ I feel altered—a change in character.

→ I feel lost—I don't exist anymore.

3. How would you describe your senses?

→ As expected—normal.

→ I feel more sensitive to and aware of my surroundings.

→ I feel blocked—as if my senses are numb.

→ I'm lacking one or more of my natural senses.

4. How would you describe the sensation of your new condition?

→ It's pleasant.

→ I don't like it—something is wrong.

→ It's disconcerting—everything feels constructed.

→ Depression—I can't shake the feeling of it all being fake.

5. Are you troubled by the fact that you are no longer strictly human?

→ No, I feel fine.

→ Somewhat, I feel like I lost myself.

→ Yes, I mourn my previous existence.

→ I don't care what form I take, as long as I get to carry on.

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6. How do you perceive your new existence?

→ It's a direct continuation of my previous self.

→ Like a new chapter in my life.

→ It's like being born all over again—a complete do-over.

→ It's something completely different and has nothing to do with my previous self.

7. Do you think this new existence will be a life worth living?

→ Yes, just as much as my previous life.

→ Yes, but with less meaning.

→ Maybe we can find a new sense of meaning in this world.

→ No, it's too detached from reality and everything I know.

8. Would you rather be removed from the project and accept death?

→ No.

→ Maybe—I need to think about it.

→ Yes.

Your answers have been saved. Thank you for participating.

The ARK team (*SOMA*, 2015)

A similar survey can also be encountered earlier in the game while going through the specifications of the ARK project. The juxtaposition of the actual conditions in which the survey is taken in both instances serves to compel the players to reflect upon the nature of existence when one is a digital duplicate of another being left behind. The emotional impact of SOMA's ending is significant, as both ending sequences are equally valid—seeing as both versions of Simon consider themselves to be equally real and the only one of consequence—and, therefore,

their respective despair and elation make it possible for the player to explore both aspects of that condition. The survey can also be regarded as a sort of a "test" of the posthuman condition, an attempt to obtain the answer to the question of how a posthuman may feel, as well as whether the life after taking on a digital form can still be considered a "human life" and whether it is satisfactory to such a person. What is more, the survey shares certain traits with a consumer questionnaire, whose presence is an integral part of the world based on supply and demand dialectics, and which the players will have encountered many times in real life, with trivial questions such as "How did you like your vacation?" or "Did the hotel meet your expectations?" In the context of the game, however, such questions take on a more serious tone, as they concern matters of existential nature.

In this sense, the central problem in *SOMA* is also the issue described several decades ago by Stanisław Lem, who referred to it as phantomatics and phantomology. As Lem emphasizes, the basic problem of phantomatics is the actual issue of creating a reality or realities "for the intelligent beings that exist in them, realities that are absolutely indistinguishable from the standard reality but that are subject to different laws" (Lem 2013: 197). Both the virtual reality of ARK glimpsed at the very end of *SOMA* as well as the survey the player can take point to the problematic nature of this enterprise—the available answers from the negative range include the awareness that the world "feels constructed" and "fake," and that the subject themselves might believe that they are "detached from reality" and "no longer a real person." By contrast, in *>observer_* Dan, who believes that he had left the capsule in the Sanctuary while in reality he is still connected to it, cannot tell the difference between the physical reality and virtual reality until he reaches the core and encounters the real form of Digital Adam. Therefore, the main question concerning the artificially constructed reality is not a philosophical one—"What is reality?" or perhaps "What is reality like?"—but is, rather, of practical nature: "What is real?" Lem

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reduces—as he refers to it—the Creation of World to matters that are purely technical: the processing power of electron brains, necessary interfaces, etc. Naturally, the world of science fiction offers a perfect, albeit fictional, laboratory for such thought experiments.

Taking into consideration the fact that *>observer_* is a game both set in Poland and developed by Polish creators, it is worth mentioning here two intriguing science fiction novels that became available in Poland in 2015 and the vision of the future they present. The novels in question are Greg Egan's *Diaspora* (originally published in English in 1997) and Jacek Dukaj's *The Old Axolotl* (*Starość aksolotla*). The starting point of both is a global disaster that brings an end to the world, and potentially to the civilization, as we know it. Due to the influence of various universal cosmic factors, the life on Earth perishes, and humanity is forced to transform its existence and continue in digitized form, interacting with the outside world (which in Egan's works is marked by reluctance, and in Dukaj's—by a growing sense of nostalgia) through a limited number of interfaces—depressing remnants of a bygone grand civilization: robots, anthropoids and cyborgs, lying around and rapidly deteriorating and corroding in the empty wasteland of a post-apocalypse world. The characters in Dukaj's novel, subjected to involuntary cyborgization, stroll around the deserted city of Tokyo in search of spare parts as well as other electronic gadgets, leading their lives in a futuristic present rapidly decaying without renovation. Dukaj's protagonists—survivors of the cosmic disaster who strive to re-create humanity and human civilization—are well aware of the fact that their work is, by nature, reconstructive and oriented towards the past of the humans—both as a race and as a species. Whatever future might emerge from those attempts would most certainly no longer be the future of humankind, but a future of a completely different model of civilization.

Egan's novel begins in a largely similar manner, with an attempt

to bridge the gap between the new digital human being and the survivors of the biological human race inhabiting the natural world. In search of contact, the protagonists of *Diaspora* are forced to use discarded interfaces—such as old robots known as gleisners abandoned near former human settlements. This universe in Egan's work proves to be inhospitable, forcing the digital humanity to seek an unending cycle of migrations and solipsistic vegetation within numerous isolated diasporas inhabiting simulated reality-based communities throughout the Solar system. In this universe, the future is *de facto* non-existent as digitalized civilizations exist in stasis that stops the flow of time in the historical sense. Therefore, the level of technological progress they have reached marks out the actual "limit of the future."

In contrast to immaterial, digital entities in *SOMA*, the game *Phantaruk* (2016) deals with the subjugation of fully organic, self-aware clones. Just like *SOMA*, *Phantaruk* focuses on the validity of copies as individual persons. The avatar of the player in *Phantaruk* is a clone produced by the equipment aboard the spaceship Purity-02, belonging to the corporation known as H Corporation. As it later turns out, clones are not treated as people, but as property of the corporation, with their defining feature being their belief that they are "not human beings." This is best presented by the test the player must take in order to progress in game and gain access to the Administration Quarters:

> Please, allow the Subject to fill out a test. When the Subject is ready, press START
>
> Question: Are you a human being?
>
> YES / NO
>
> (*if player chooses YES, on the screen appears the word* "WRONG")
>
> Press RESTART to repeat the test.
>
> Question: Where were you born?

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> On a Space Station / On Earth / I wasn't born, I was created (*correct answer*)
>
> Question: Are you free?
>
> YES / NO (*correct answer*)
>
> Question: Who is your Owner?
>
> No one / H Corp (*correct answer*) / Computer Voice
>
> The Subject passed the test. Press OK to proceed to the labeling process.
>
> (*after getting a barcode on the avatar's right hand*)
>
> The Subject is ready to serve in Administration Quarters. Press OK to continue. (*Phantaruk*, 2016)

This succession of questions and answers can be regarded as a peculiar form of an anti-Turing test, in which one taking the test must confirm that they are, in fact, not a human being. Furthermore, the subject must also prove their awareness of their non-autonomic condition, as well as their willingness to accept it. The test is designed in such a way that the only acceptable outcome provides the humans who believe to own the clones with the feeling of reassurance that the clones view themselves as property of their human masters, and are, therefore, incapable of deception or rebellion. Interestingly, there is a stark contrast between the survey at the end of *SOMA* and the test designed for clones in *Phantaruk*. Mechanics-wise, the ARK survey in the ending sequence is not progress-mandatory, but designed solely for player experience—within the story, it is intended for people who fully understood the idea behind the ARK project. The *Phantaruk* test, on the other hand, is a progress-mandatory sequence, which only emphasizes the lack of autonomy the player experiences as a clone.

As follows from this analysis, all the discussed games point to the same problem of artificial life, duplication of identity, and

the functioning of the human mind in the digital environment, notions which have been the focus of both science fiction and cybernetics ever since the ideas of artificial intelligence and the transfer of human consciousness into digital environment first surfaced. The issue of either losing or retaining identity in the context of creating an artificial copy of a human being was explored by Lem in one of his early texts—*Dialogues* (1957). The issue of original-versus-copy and the self-awareness of the latter is discussed by the characters Philonous and Hylas, who debate the technological development. Hylas, a proponent of duplicating the human consciousness, rebukes the arguments of skeptical Philonous in a clearly emotional manner: "This person can and will be infinitely similar to me, everybody will take him for me, he will have the same sensations that I have, the same wishes and propensities, even the work that I started, he will be able to finish in my spirit, but this will not be me! This will be a double, a twin, so to speak, but I will die forever!" (Lem 2009). In this way, the perspective of cybernetic immortality—the reconstruction of human personality in artificial environment—eventually proves to be the vision of inescapable and irreversible loss of identity and a source of existential fear.

These ethical issues concerning the possibility of consciousness existing within a machine, personhood and its fate are further explored by Lem:

> But how can we find out about the existence of consciousness in machines? The significance of this problem is not only abstractly philosophical, as the belief that a machine that is supposed to be sent to a scrap yard—because renovating it would cost too much—has consciousness transforms our decision from an act of destruction of a material object, such as a gramophone, to an act of an annihilation of personhood, and a conscious one at that. (Lem 2013: 141-142)

Further examples of these issues can be found in Lem's other works; his radio plays such as *Are You There, Mr. Johns?* (*Czy pan*

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istnieje, Mr. Johns?) and *Roly Poly* (*Przekładaniec*) both focus on identity associated with the human body as subject to the power of technology (transplantology and cyborgization). The first one revolves around the trial over the ownership of numerous prostheses which are part of the protagonist, and without which he cannot live. After a series of accidents, the main character receives so many prostheses that he is virtually composed of artificial parts, at which point the company producing the parts sues him over the accumulating debt; the issue lies in the dependence of the protagonist on the prostheses, as he would not survive the removal of the artificial parts (Lem 1955). The debate concerns the ontological foundations of Mr. Johns's existence, although not necessarily as an autonomous individual, but as a property of the prostheses' producer. The second text, on the other hand, presents a similar scenario, but in regard to the dilemma of organ transplantation. In this version, the protagonist's life is saved not by artificial prostheses but as a result of extensive reparative surgery and organ transplants from his deceased brother. In this case, through attempts at rebuilding a human body both the one doing the rebuilding and the one being rebuilt become involved in dilemmas about identity, challenging traditional categories of what culture defines as human and non-human (extra-human or posthuman).

This issue of individual autonomy in the context of being fitted with implants and prostheses necessary to function is explored in depth, both ludically and narratively, in *>observer_*. Many characters, including Helena, Victor, the member of the Immaculates and Pieta, are either exposed to or modified by technology in general, and the role of some of them in the narrative is largely defined by that contact. However, the main way of exploring this theme is through Dan, who serves as the player's avatar for most of the gameplay. The experience of dealing with and relying on the augmented parts to the extent discussed above is conveyed by some of the mechanics specific only to Dan's character. To be able to do his job as an Observer,

Dan has to make use of three ways of looking at his surroundings: the standard vision, which resembles that of normal organic human eyes, and two Vision modes—Electromagnetic and Biometric. The EM Vision allows Dan to see electronic elements of the environment, highlighting those that the player can interact with, whilst Bio Vision is tuned in the same manner to any organic material in sight. Even with the ocular implant, some objects cannot be analyzed or even detected with "the naked eye" alone and, therefore, one of the Vision modes needs to be used. Some of the information, on the other hand, can only be gathered through Observing (although some clues can be found only through materials, e.g. the Dove Lover's Club mailing list, they tend to be secondary to game progress), which is the Observers' fundamental skill. In other words, the game cannot progress without Observing—and without using Vision modes—and without using the information obtained in those ways. The gameplay is structured around the sequences of Observing and investigation, which makes them the most important parts of the text.

In *>observer_*, the experience of one's dissipating autonomy as an individual against virtually omnipotent corporation is designed around a number of the gameplay elements related to the Observer-specific mechanics. For instance, Dan's ability to see—just in his regular mode—is contingent on his intake ofSynchrozine; if the player chooses not to take the drug, their field of vision will become progressively more obscured by digital artifacts. Synchrozine does not offer the player any benefits whatsoever—it merely counters the adverse effects of the intensive usage of implants. It is an inconvenient and irksome consequence of having and using the implants. The more the player uses the Vision modes, the more Synchrozine they are required to take later, in order to restore proper ocular sight. Therefore, exploiting the advantages granted by CHIRON makes the player (Dan) more dependent on CHIRON. This adds to the manner in which the corporation's status and ownership

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of the Observers is portrayed in the game. Dan is dependent on the system to work and sometimes even to act: as has been mentioned before, when he finds Adam's body, he stumbles and collapses, and cannot get up until the Matriarch administers mild sedatives. This means that the augmentation, apart from making Dan dependent on the corporation, also changes the way he functions—despite the fact that the dead body in front of him might be the one belonging to his son, after the administration of sedative he seems more detached, and less distressed, professionally referring to apartment 007 as a "crime scene" and following procedure.

Conclusion

*>observer_* gives the player a unique insight into the reality of the retrofuturistic cyberpunk dystopia constructed in the game. Issues such as consequences of choices, complicity or the sense of incorporation are not the primary characteristics of the gameplay, given that the game revolves around the themes related to posthumanism. Identifying with the corporeal aspects of the avatar is of secondary importance in *>observer_*, because the game focuses on the concepts of consciousness, mindscapes and transcending the human body. In all the sequences of Observing, Dan becomes almost immaterial and inconsequential to the neural environment surrounding him; the physicality of his body becomes unimportant. Due to the fact that the main gameplay aspects—Observing, exploring virtual reality of the Sanctuary—are based on the concept of being unable to affect the final outcomes, agency, mastery of skills, emotional impact, and the mainly linear nature of the game are not crucial for the gameplay experience. Instead, the main plot (Adam's murder) is just a pretext and a vehicle for expressing themes and concepts such as human identity, the loss of self, and the oppressive regime of technology. The emphasis in the game is placed on environmental and indexical storytelling, which are important for the experience of being an investigator (as Dan), as well as

for conveying the reality of living in CHIRON's world. Most significantly, both are applied in the mindscapes in a unique way, where the environments shift and stutter, making the player feel out of control, exposed to intimacy of someone else's subjective reality.

The Vision modes, available to the player at any time, are also connected to the matter of perceiving reality of the fictional world of *>observer_*. It is important to note that they do not offer a glimpse of different reality, just a different way of experiencing the same reality. Once the player gets access to other types of vision, they may begin to think about the surrounding world in terms of a binary opposition between the biological and the electronic. In terms of gameplay, those two are always separate and naturally exclusive, with the biological image being inferior to the electromagnetic one. The gameplay and mechanics thus effectively divide the world into the organic and the technological, promoting the latter, as more clues and items can be found through examining or using technology—specifically, CHIRON technology. Significantly, everything found turns out to be produced by CHIRON. Thus, through its imagery and gameplay, *>observer_* places hauntological issues of phantom-State emerging between politics, technology, and nostalgia for an authoritarian yet stable *ancien régime*, among questions concerning the nature of reality. The game focuses on the concepts of what is real and what belongs to the realm of memories (false or falsified), delusions, hallucinations resulting from the acts and activities of enigmatic but very real powers, represented in the game by the CHIRON corporation.

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5

THE MEDIATED AVATAR AND JOUISSANCE-LESS VICTORY

The Music Machine, developed and published by David Szymanski, first appeared on Steam in May 2015. The game combines elements of a walking simulator, adventure and psychological horror and employs a fully three-dimensional world with a first person perspective avatar. The scope of the game includes real-time exploration and a one-to-three hour-long gameplay.

The creator of *The Music Machine* published several other, thematically similar games—*Finger Bones* (2014), *The Moon Sliver* (2014) and *A Wolf in Autumn* (2015). When compared with other games by Szymanski, *The Music Machine* stands out as a text which includes two distinct storylines, one nested within another (and both concerning quite challenging, problematic

issues, such as murder, death caused by a false accusation, molestation, torture), as well as two distinct endings. Both the visual and the sound design of *The Music Machine* are quite memorable due to their austere nature. What distinguishes *The Music Machine* among other supernatural psychological horror games is the fact that Szymanski's work is an independent text—the issues included in the narrative structure of the game (the aforementioned false accusation of sexual assault, the tragic consequences of that lie, loneliness, a strained family relationship) and the bold design choices are characteristic more of independent projects than of high-budget triple-A productions.

This chapter examines the narrative structure of *The Music Machine* in reference to various emotions related to its gameplay, such as the sense of responsibility, complicity, control, satisfaction and regret, as well as the way in which the game juxtaposes the uplifting and the tremendously sad aspects of defeating the antagonists. The mechanics through which the game explores the relationship between the player and the avatar, as well as the in-game dynamics between the characters and the game world through the division of the basic avatar functions are also discussed.

The Game: Stark Contrasts

Before venturing into a more in-depth analysis of the selected aspects of *The Music Machine*, it is worth briefly commenting on some of the characteristic features of the overall design of the game. One of such traits that sets *The Music Machine* apart from not only other projects developed by Szymanski, but also the majority of both independent and triple-A games is its audiovisual representation. While the game is notable for its soundtrack, the stylized, minimalist and bold graphics are decidedly the text's most defining feature. The Unity engine, in which *The Music Machine* was created, for a long time had a

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poor reputation among the players, given that many indie games developed around that time could be described as very basic, unimaginative projects consisting of stock assets and badly designed gameplay. However, in contrast to many other indie developers of that time, David Szymanski managed to unlock the enormous potential of Unity in an unorthodox and creative manner. As the game starts, the depicted world of *The Music Machine* is presented to the players as a setting imitating extra-textual reality, or at least one that is very close to it (within the limits of magical realism, insofar that one of the characters is a spirit); the number of magical realist elements increases as the player progresses through the game. Szymanski decided to visually portray this world in a conspicuous manner; both the initial reality and the subsequent dimensions that Quintin and Haley visit are represented as sequences of monochromatic, high-contrast environments which employ exclusively two colors: black and one other single intense color. The player leads Quintin and Haley successively through The Island—which corresponds to the regular reality within the fictional world—the desolate, highly abstract wasteland of the Farm of Pigs and Smoke, the Thorn Forest and a number of other locations, including the realm called the Void, in which the Voice dwells. Eventually, the player reaches the location where the eponymous Music Machine is located (as it turns out, the location is also called the Music Machine). Each location varies in design not only in the context of the primary color, but also in its style in the broadest sense: the overall concept of the space, the atmosphere, sometimes even the physics. The primary color of the Island is warm orange; rays of sunlight shine through the tree leaves rustled by a soft breeze, and the only buildings to be found are several deserted houses and a chapel, among which the avatar (Haley's body) walks at a regular speed. In turn, the Farm of Pigs and Smoke is presented as a seemingly endless wasteland of vermilion red, with a massive black sun hanging low above the horizon; the avatar moves lightly and swiftly, as if Haley were gliding (she even mentions feeling "floaty"), across the desert-

like, somewhat industrial landscape made entirely out of metal (including furniture, tools and trees cast together). The next location, the subdued green Thorn Forest, is comprised of a thicket of thorny trees, drenched in continuous rain which causes Haley intense pain upon contact (the rain is interpreted by some players as a rain of needles); among the huge thorns, the player can find several solitary buildings. The Void, on the other hand, is a peculiar opposite of the Farm of Pigs and Smoke; it does use the red color as well, but in the tone of scarlet. Yet, where the other worlds use the primary color to represent the light and objects that light falls on, and black for darkness and shadow, in the Void the scarlet ground stands in stark contrast to the black, starlit sky filled with strange objects that resemble meteorites—as if the space was open directly to the universe. The last location Quintin and Haley visit before the game's finale is the dimension in which the Music Machine is located, depicted as a deep brown underground structure; brick walls, blood splatter and the machine itself at the center of the location contribute to the overall impression of a dungeon. Another location that is particularly worth mentioning is the dimension in which the Spindle Men reside, which uses yellowish green as its primary color; its most characteristic feature is the peculiar effect of underwater-like rippling of the image, and the image temporarily goes completely black from time to time. If the player is pulled by the narrative toward the bad ending, they will see one additional dimension, representing nothingness and being stranded in-between states. This dimension, sometimes referred to as Limbo by the players, is designed as an urban landscape soaked in regular rain, with deep gray as the primary color. In contrast, if the player pursues the so-called good ending, they will have the opportunity to briefly visit The Crimson Forest in the epilogue—the location that is otherwise not available anywhere in the game. Significantly, it is the only time when any place in any of the *The Music Machine* worlds is portrayed in a visually conventional manner, which serves to emphasize the exquisite beauty of that particular place.

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The minimalist, monochromatic aesthetics of *The Music Machine* serves well to express the psychological horror overtones within the mechanics of exploration-adventure gameplay. Mostly, the expectations of the players regarding horror texts result from their familiarity with the horror convention and its specific aspects aimed at provoking certain emotions (Markocki 2016: 259). Among such aspects there are deformation (Markocki 2016: 257-258) and transformation of the environment, various kinds of mazes and long narrow passages, and—first and foremost—darkness. Although the locations to which Quintin and Haley are transported from the chapel are indeed based on deformed models of the human world, *The Music Machine* breaks the convention through the use of bright open spaces and all but eliminating darkness, since the color black in the monochromatic design corresponds with unlit surfaces, and not with ominous obscurity.

The monochromatic nature of the graphics adds one more intriguing variable to the gameplay: the difference between the characters' knowledge and the player's knowledge of the game world—to be more specific, the way the characters perceive that world and the way it is perceived by the player on the screen. In this context, the additional textual pieces of information in the game serve a much more important function, as they are the only indicator of the state of the items found by the player—descriptions such as "*rusty* knives and spoons", "*rotten* mush", "[tools] covered in *rust*", "*ragged* book", "[banner] old and *weathered*. And *covered in dust*" (*The Music Machine*, 2015, our emphasis). All of these details are impossible for the players to access directly through their sight and is instead conveyed to them through text, even though it would be feasible to implement a graphical representation of those qualities in games. This textual information about the objects in game not only adds to the monochromatic graphics of the game world, but also informs the player that the characters in the game perceive that

world in a non-monochromatic manner, able to see rust, dust and rot on the items. This naturally intensifies the experience of the peculiar indeterminacy and mysteriousness of the game world, which the player has to explore, relying primarily on observations made by the characters in the form of short, plain descriptions displayed on the screen. All of the aspects of indeterminacy as concerning places and objects encountered by the player, resulting from the monochromatic representation of the game world, resemble Roman Ingarden's concept of places of indeterminacy in a literary text that emerge before the reader during the process of reading, forcing them to determine the fictional objects in text: "If, e.g., a story begins with the sentence: 'An old man was sitting at a table,' etc., it is clear that the represented 'table' is indeed a 'table' and not, for example, a 'chair'; but whether it is made of wood or iron, is four-legged or three-legged, etc., is left quite unsaid and therefore—this being a purely intentional object—not determined" (Ingarden 1973: 249). What in Ingarden's interpretation of the literary text stems from the schematic nature of that text and the fictional objects represented in it, constitutes a simple consequence of the use of monochromatic graphics in *The Music Machine* —and a simultaneous suggestion that the depicted world itself, as seen by Quintin and Haley, is not, in fact, monochromatic. This assumption and the way it is realized in the game's graphic representation necessarily determine the phenomenology of discovering the game world by the player. In a game where one of the main goals is the exploration of unknown locations, whose history the player needs to uncover, interpret and explain, such graphical representation naturally produces and multiplies mysteries and ambiguities, rendering the world more enigmatic and the gameplay—more attractive.

The austere monochromatic imagery is accompanied by comparably ascetic sound design, featuring mostly singular isolated sounds (such as water trickling down, footsteps, the lapping of the waves, or a singular object falling down), rather

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than a complementary soundscape with its full complexity, presupposing the background noise as a part of the player's acoustic experience. This allows certain specific sounds in the game world to act as signals which directly indicate the important aspects of ludic events within the gameplay, which the player must not miss or ignore. In this context, the subtle piano notes, reminiscent of Erik Satie's melancholic compositions, discernible during certain parts of the gameplay, gain special meaning as acousmatic music sounds creating the atmosphere for the characters' exploration of the island. At the same time, these sounds continuously evoke the eponymous music machine, which the player will discover during the climax of the game. It is worth noting that the mechanism of the transporter—the music machine—itself indicates its activity with simple pipe organ sounds enhanced with strong reverb throughout the chapel; those sounds indicate the key button sequences that lead to other dimensions in the game world. All of the aforementioned elements cause the game's sparing design of soundscape to perfectly complement the monochromatic graphics, creating a seamless, coherent whole—a distinct, idiosyncratic world reduced in the player's experience only to the most elementary aspects of sound and vision.

The Story: Mixing the Victorious and the Distressing

The Music Machine encompasses three distinct, interrelated storylines: (1) the foreground story of Haley and Quentin, (2) the backdrop story of the Spindle Men, who built the Music Machine, and (3) the (arguably more marginal) story of Roger Cox, who encountered the Spindle Men and helped them to learn about the human world. This chapter discusses two of those storylines—the story of Haley and Quentin, which provides the main narrative framework for the game, and the story of the Spindle Men, whose plot is for the most part presented in the *The Music Machine* through retrospective devices.

The story which binds all of the game events together centres around Haley and Quintin, and it is the starting point of both the plot of the game, and the gameplay itself. It also determines the plot pertaining to the Spindle Men, because it is Quintin and Haley who are the actual protagonists of the game, and it is their fate that the player is the most invested in—despite the fact that the story of the Spindle Men goes much further back in time within the depicted world. The story of the Spindle Men is also much more significant in the context of ethics in the broad sense, and it affects more of the depicted world, insofar that it potentially concerns the entirety of humanity. The audience familiar with supernatural horror will easily identify the horror possession and retribution motifs present in the game. *The Music Machine* makes use of elements of the traditional ghost retribution narrative (Marak 2015: 53–56), including the necessary element of untimely and unjust death, with a peculiar twist—the vengeful ghost returns to possess the person who wronged them in a manner conventionally associated with demonic possession narratives (Marak 2015: 160–161). This particular balance of power (where the vengeful ghost or possessing entity effortlessly dominates a human being) is not merely a necessary part of the narrative framework and game plot, but also the basis for the most characteristic ludic feature in *The Music Machine*, which is discussed later in the chapter. However, while in conventional horror texts the possession constitutes usually both the climax of the story and the exacting of retribution, in *The Music Machine* that motif, with all the events leading to it (i.e. whatever had really taken place between Haley and Quintin) is merely a setup to the gameplay story proper—the starting point of the gameplay as well as the player experience, both of which are triggered by the following dialogue:

HALEY

You don't actually want to kill me.

QUINTIN

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Yes I do.

HALEY

No, you don't. You haven't thrown me in front of a bus. You haven't had me stab myself. Or shoot myself. You haven't had me jump off a cliff. Or anything like that. You've just been dragging me around. To places like this. I mean, what are you hoping to find?

QUINTIN

I'm hoping to find whoever poked those people full of holes and left them in a pile.

HALEY

That's what happened?

QUINTIN

We both see through the same pair of eyeballs. We read the same article.

HALEY

Just because you make me look at something doesn't mean I pay attention to it. And, also, just because they found some bodies here doesn't mean a psycho murderer is hanging around. And besides… you could just make me stab myself if it's 'death by stabbing' you are after…

QUINTIN

It makes sense to me and that's what matters. I'm looking for something I'll be satisfied with.

HALEY

Like old age?

QUINTIN

You are young. I have time.

HALEY

At least let me have a cigarette. I am *dying* for a cigarette, Quintin.

QUINTIN

I would have thought after three months you'd be over that.

HALEY

Isn't lung cancer a sufficiently horrible way to die? Just go away, let me smoke, and in thirty or forty years I'll die of lung cancer. You get your revenge and I don't have someone else controlling my body for the rest of my life.

QUINTIN

Girls your age shouldn't smoke, Haley.

HALEY

Well girls my age shouldn't be puppeted by vengeful ghosts either.

(*The Music Machine*, 2015[1])

This exchange provides the player with a plethora of important pieces of information—starting with the fact that although both Haley and Quintin are the main characters of the game, there is only one avatar available for the player to experience the game and access the fictional world: the physical body of Haley, possessed by Quintin's spirit. The main storyline pushing the narrative forward, alongside which the plot of the game develops, is the relationship between Haley and Quintin, and everything that happened between them. The idea behind this relationship is quite complex and targeted at mature audiences, and for many players the gradual process of discovering the details and dynamics of that relationship constitutes one of the

1. All dialogue of *The Music Machine* has been transcribed by the authors of this book.

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strongest points of the game. Conversations between Haley and Quintin point to a kind of warm affection between them; they used to spend a lot of time together talking, watching movies and doing target practice. The exact nature of that affection is never explicitly specified. When talking about the past, Quintin uses the word "friendship," while Haley says "love"—stressing emphatically that it is not love in any sexual sense. From what the player learns, Quintin (a thirty-four-year-old bachelor) and Haley (a girl between twelve and thirteen years of age) were friends who used to spend time together. When Haley started going through puberty, their relationship became more complicated, and then, after a series of unspecified events that the player can speculate about on the basis of Quintin and Haley's conversations, Quintin died at the hands of Haley's father:

> HALEY
>
> Why do you always act like I'm asking for sex? I've never asked you for sex. I'm not even sure how that would work now… I only ever wanted to be friends. You're the one that turned 'us' into something weird.
>
> QUINTIN
>
> Haley, there's no way a 12-year-old girl and a lonely 34-year-old man can be together, alone, every day without it turning into something weird. Especially when the girl keeps asking uncomfortable questions about how her body looks.
>
> HALEY
>
> … I'm 13.
>
> QUINTIN
>
> What?
>
> HALEY
>
> You said I was 12. I'm 13.

QUINTIN

You're a child.

HALEY

No, I'm not.

QUINTIN

You are. You talk like an adult. You're starting to look like an adult. Maybe sometimes you think like an adult. But you're a 12 year old girl, Haley.

HALEY

13.

QUINTIN

Adults don't run to their daddys and lie about being molested when they can't handle rejection.

HALEY

I'm sorry. I was angry, and I wanted him to care. For once.

QUINTIN

Well… good job. He cared enough to put a dozen bullets in me. And now I'm dead. I'm never going to have a wife, I'm never going to have children. Any friendship we might have had died with me.

HALEY

I don't believe that.

(*The Music Machine*, 2015)

What the player knows for certain is that during the last conversation the characters had while Quintin was still alive, Quintin told Haley something she saw as rejection. The player also knows that Haley lied to her father, accusing Quintin of

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having molested her, and as a result Quintin was killed with a gun by Haley's father. Driven by anger and resentment, Quintin's ghost began to seek retribution by possessing Haley's body and taking control of her. An important aspect of this storyline is its fragmentary, incomplete form. The player never finds out what exactly happened between Haley and Quintin. Did Haley in fact become romantically and sexually interested in Quintin, or were her questions completely straightforward and devoid of any subtext, but Quintin opted for establishing clear boundaries out of caution? What is certain is that Quintin's reaction made Haley furious and drove her to the lie that cost Quintin his life. This kind of behavior might indeed lead to her being seen as childlike—not only by Quintin, but also by the player. Quintin's actions, on the other hand, characterize him as a man both bitter and frustrated. These traits are further emphasized by the thoughts and motivations voiced by both characters. Additionally, in this situation it is significant that Quintin is a vengeful spirit who forcibly brought Haley to the dangerous island—which makes the scenario where Haley's death is the goal of both Quintin and the player story-wise realistic. However, Haley's continuous reiteration that she does not believe their friendship died with Quintin, and that he does not actually want to kill her, suggest something opposite. Through such dialogues and the portrayal of characters The Music Machine explores themes that tend to be portrayed in many other low-budget independent games merely for the shock value in a manner much more subtle yet efficient. The problematic subject matter (visible in both analyzed storylines, namely that of Haley and Quintin as well as that of the Spindle Men) conforms to the collection of conventional traumatic themes and motifs which trangress categories and violate taboos in order to subject the audience to the emotions related to that violation.

The game offers the player two endings: the good one (considered to be the canonical one) and the bad one (which is also achieved if the player fails during gameplay, for example,

in the Thorn Forest). In the climax of the gameplay—and the story—Quintin, fully in control of Haley's body, can either save her from the Spindle Men or lead her straight to her death. In the good ending, after Quintin saves Haley from the Spindle Men, they have one more conversation, in which they attempt to express and understand their feelings and their relationship:

> HALEY
>
> You just saved my life.
>
> QUINTIN
>
> Not necessarily.
>
> HALEY
>
> You don't want to kill me.
>
> QUINTIN
>
> I do.
>
> HALEY
>
> No, you don't.
>
> QUINTIN Damn it… People aren't nice little mathematical equations you can easily solve. Maybe I don't know what I want. Maybe I'm just trying to find some thread of sense in a mess of conflicting emotions. Or, here's a thought. Maybe I'm a sociopath, and maybe I like playing with my food. Maybe I don't understand myself, but you sure as hell don't either.
>
> (*The Music Machine*, 2015)

In the bad ending, on the other hand, if Quintin allows the Spindle Men to seize Haley and take her away (presumably to the music machine, thus effectively killing her), he will appear as a spirit in the Limbo. There, he is greeted by the Voice, who once again tells him some of the things it stated before while

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conversing with Haley, but now in a completely different context:

> VOICE
>
> Well, like I said before… Creation is more than shadows and mechanisms. Creation is full of the terrible and the wonderful, the known and the infinitely unknowable, the hellish corners and the heavenly peaks. Even in death you have barely scratched its surface.
>
> (*The Music Machine*, 2015)

Importantly, the Voice relays a message from Haley to Quintin (saying that she still loves him), and also asks him whether the revenge made him content ("was it worth it? Was it… 'satisfactory'?" (*The Music Machine*, 2015). Quintin appears resigned and avoids giving a straightforward answer.

The second crucial storyline integral to both the narrative framework and narrative design of *The Music Machine* is the story of the Spindle Men. This narrative thread is not only instrumental in resolving the story of Haley and Quintin, but also the most emotionally compelling one due to the quite extraordinary concept behind the Spindle Men—supernatural entities of unimaginable power but with absolutely no understanding of humanity. Despite being constructed as the game's main antagonists, who perpetrate atrocious deeds in their pursuit of guessing what the purpose of humanity might be, and in spite of also serving as the main horror factor in the last part of the game, they are characterized by a particularly unusual trait: they are not evil. Instead, *The Music Machine* constructs the Spindle Men as entities that are truly alien to human beings—so alien that it is impossible for them to grasp the concepts of beauty, emotions or imagination; they fail to comprehend what is fundamentally human.

Since there is essentially no interaction with the Spindle Men

apart from reading their notes and being in the same location as them in the climax of the game, the player's knowledge of them is almost entirely provided by the Voice. If its account is to be believed, the Spindle Men are most certainly creatures that the human mind cannot even begin to fathom:

> HALEY
>
> Where are we?
>
> VOICE
>
> There are many things in reality and outside reality, girl. Many places human eyes have never deciphered. Many beings human minds have never comprehended. This is such a place, created by such beings. The Spindle Men.
>
> HALEY
>
> Who are they?
>
> VOICE
>
> Creatures of terrible innocence. Once, in a time beyond time, they were God's companions. They slept at his feet and listened to his words, and he showed them the ways of creation. For they could not understand them on their own. They were—they are—fragile beings. Capable of understanding only the literal. Not imagination, emotion, or beauty. Only usefulness. That is how God created them, and with His help they dutifully crafted beautiful worlds of child-like wonder. Forests of warm crimson, deserts of sparkling white, vast oceans of the deepest blue… They were his children and they delighted in making crayon drawings for Him. But eventually they became unsatisfied. And in their naivete, they said 'We do not need your words or your wisdom.' They said 'we are four, and we are one… we are The Spindle Men.' They said 'we can create. We can analyze. And we can decipher the mysteries of creation ourselves.' And thus they left Him.
>
> (*The Music Machine*, 2015)

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The manner in which the Voice describes the Spindle Men portrays those creatures as both bizarre and fascinating, juxtaposing their practically limitless power with their severe cognitive limitations. Some of the phrases even point to almost childlike—if not childish—nature of the entities, such as when the Voice mentions the Spindle Men's delight in "making crayon drawings" and then their subsequent loss of interest, boredom, and spitefulness, or when it refers to their complete inability to assess or appreciate their own creations in terms of aesthetics. The contrast between the words used by the Voice and the message they convey is worth noting; the Voice speaks of the exquisite worlds created by the Spindle Men in superlatives, while, at the same time, emphasizing the fact that this process presented no challenge for the entities and constituted no achievement, bringing them no pride. All that beauty had no meaning and no emotional relevance for creatures lacking the basic understanding of any form of passion:

> VOICE
>
> They do not understand your ways, because as I said they do not understand imagination, emotion, or beauty. Humans have always perplexed them. To them, your stories are nonsense, your paintings are stains and your music is noise. This place and the others like it are their attempts to replicate—and understand—your world.
>
> HALEY
>
> So this is supposed to be…erm… 'our world?' … But everything is… really weird.
>
> VOICE
>
> Yes. Until recently, they could only observe you from afar. All they had were glimpses and impressions. But… somehow, they found a way in. Some crack in the wall. They made contact with one of you, they took his land for their own. Building, always building. Building structures they presume

> to have purpose. Building that infernal machine… And they have been modifying their creations.
>
> HALEY
>
> 'Infernal machine?' What's that?
>
> VOICE
>
> It is their answer to the question 'what are humans for?' They have deduced that you are complex noisemakers and they think themselves virtuoso musicians. Because when your existence is a wasteland of quantifiable values, screaming is as good as singing.
>
> (*The Music Machine*, 2015)

According to the Voice, the Spindle Men's existence is a barren stretch of emptiness filled with meaningless yet perceptible, measurable objects. The Spindle Men are incapable of comprehending delight, satisfaction or fulfillment, and as such, they are also unable to appreciate purpose or beauty. They have no points of reference to judge what is magnificent, what is profound, and what is abhorrent. This allows for an intriguing perspective on the Spindle Men's nature, rendering them into truly nightmarish characters that are both deeply fearsome and miserable, seeing as they can neither understand nor value either the abstract fascination or the amazing beauty of the worlds they have so effortlessly built. They keep crafting various designs they believe to have use and significance, yet their actions and endeavors are futile—even despite the fact that the Voice claims that they understand "usefulness", they seem to be applying function to objects at random. As such, the Spindle Men are without a doubt powerful, but clearly not superior beings who conjure up all the different shapes and forms; however, they cannot understand, attribute or create meaning. This is conveyed especially well in the manner in which Szymanski designed the layout the locations that represent the realms the player visits. To name just a few examples, the fire encountered in the Farm of

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Pigs and Smoke is cold, because the Spindle Men have no notion of the significance of fire in the history and culture of human beings; the sun is black, because they fail to understand that the star around which the Earth revolves is not just a decoration in the sky but a source of light and warmth necessary for life to almost all living things. Similarly, the rain in Thorn Forest, which in normal world would consist of water—essential for life—is the only thing that can kill a human being in that realm.

The main concept of *The Music Machine*, which provides the backdrop for the subplots concerning the main characters and the Spindle Men, is, in fact, the issue of separation of the good and the beautiful (or, in other words, ethics and aesthetics)—a question formed in a manner decidedly simplified and defined by gameplay, determining the player's choices. The Spindle Men can "dutifully craft beautiful worlds of child-like wonder," and, yet at the same time, "they do not understand imagination, emotion, or beauty," and are willing to use torture as a form of craft (or creative process) in their aesthetically beautiful creation of various worlds, which is why their sound data consist of records of that torture. Due to that very fact they prompt the main characters—and the players—to ask questions of aesthetic (can such recordings be regarded as beautiful?) and ethical nature (does creation of "art" entitle the author to torture or cruelty?). This question constitutes a challenge for the classic understanding of cultural categories that determine the actions of both game characters and the players. Those questions are neither new nor foreign to the philosophical discourse, but, for the most part, they have been pushed to the margins and have been included in texts of rather speculative or eccentric nature. Even if the bedroom philosophy of Marquis de Sade were to be ignored, it is worth mentioning the notorious essay of Thomas de Quincey—*On Murder, Considered as one of the Fine Arts*, written in 1827—in which he makes the famous remark concerning the London serial killer John Williams: "People begin to see that something more goes to the composition of a fine murder than

two blockheads to kill and be killed, a knife, a purse, and a dark lane. Design, gentlemen, grouping, light and shade, poetry, sentiment, are now deemed indispensable to attempts of this nature" (de Quincey 2006: 10). In this context, if a common murder requires the same level of skill as art, and presupposes factors such as "poetry" and "sentiment," why not regard the composing of a fine murder as just one more artistic practice? And why not regard the proficiency in that "art" as aesthetic? From this perspective, a skillful executioner or torturer would appear to be an artist—a poet of slaughter.

This peculiar dialectic of crime and art (beauty) is not specific exclusively to philosophical and theoretic texts; indeed, it is just as distinctive in horror fiction—almost as common as the dialectic of pain and pleasure, usually employed simultaneously. An excellent example of this is Clive Barker's novella *The Hellbound Heart*, which features the characters of Cenobites, extra-dimensional beings that aim at fusing pleasure with pain into one sensual experience—a process achieved through what is regarded by humans as torture at which the Cenobites must naturally excel, getting that particular skill down to a fine art: "As it was, they had brought incalculable suffering. They had overdosed him on sensuality, until his mind teetered on madness, then they'd initiated him into experiences that his nerves still convulsed to recall. They had called it pleasure, and perhaps they'd meant it." (Barker 1991: 56). In a way, Barker's Cenobites could be regarded as ideational prototypes of the Spindle Men—artists of suffering, outside of ethics, skillful at inflicting pain and pushing the limits of aesthetic experience far beyond the framework of traditional morality, which connects beauty with ethical good.

It is not surprising, perhaps, that human beings seem virtually purposeless to the Spindle Men, apart from their capacity to create noise; by the same logic, the Spindle Men perceive themselves as artists, "virtuoso musicians," despite the fact that

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they are not even players of instruments, but machine operators. This again emphasizes the industrial, mechanical nature of their conduct and thinking; they do not reason in terms of values but, instead, only in terms of data, and that is what allows them to equate screaming with singing, making one a good as the other (*The Music Machine*, 2015). This extremely limited capacity for judgement and expression is also conveyed to the player through the notes Haley and Quintin find on the Island—one of the Spindle Men's first attempts at using human language:

> observing we knowing
>
> sounding humans making art
>
> instrument for data
>
> beauty and is cries of all
>
> yes puncture for science
>
> music men four
>
> (*The Music Machine*, 2015)

The note efficiently frames all of the aforementioned concepts, emphasizing the practical nature of the Music Machine ("instrument for data") and its methodical objective ("puncture for science"), right below the line mentioning art (and "sounding humans") (*The Music Machine*, 2015). The Spindle Men cannot distinguish one type of noise from another—they are unaware of the fact that their sound data consist of records of torture, not records of artistry. Ironically enough, the only entities in existence capable of admiring and appreciating the worlds crafted by the Spindle Men—human beings—are not regarded by the Spindle Men themselves as an audience, but as another set of objects with the presumed purpose of noise-making.

As a game employing a horror setting, *The Music Machine* works in a fairly subtle manner, concentrating on the psychological

rather than on the visceral. Despite the existence of hostile entities, the Spindle Men, the game does not include a combat system; it also does not rely on the element of monster chase or even the related element of the anticipation of the monster's sudden appearance (Marak and Markocki 2016, Weise 2009). At no point in the game—apart from the finale—do the Spindle Men follow or hunt for Haley in any of the worlds they have created, despite the fact that they have been able to sense her ever since she and Quintin first activated the realm-shifting device in the Chapel. Instead, the terror is built up by spatial navigation: Szymanski designed the space of the game and its locations in such a way that navigation governs not only the construction of the story (Fernández-Vara 2015: 159), but also the creation of the atmosphere of terror. Each excursion transports the protagonists from the Chapel to a different world, and then back to the reality of the Island. However, after their visit to the Music Machine realm, the tone of gameplay shifts, as from that moment on the player is unable to guide Haley back to the real world (the Island location) where she would be safe:

> HALEY
>
> We can't get out. The portals… they keep… umm… they keep kicking us back to different places.
>
> VOICE
>
> I see. It seems you are trapped, then. … Likely the Spindle Men have felt you from afar, and they are closing the world around you like a cage. … Soon they will find you. The Spindle Men are physically weak, but they can certainly overpower a young girl. They will drag you to The Music Machine. And they will play terrible sonatas with your body.
>
> (*The Music Machine*, 2015)

The atmosphere of terror is built upon the awareness that the Spindle Men regard Haley as some sort of a bizarre instrument (or maybe an essential component of an instrument); they will

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want to catch her and practice their monstrous music on her, which would inevitably result in her painful death. This awareness—and the accompanying growing apprehension—intensifies over time, eliciting in the player empathy towards Haley, in no way diminished by the fact that the Spindle Men are not driven by cruelty or evil in the human sense of those terms. The Spindle Men's incapacity to comprehend values and abstract ideas encompasses morality as viewed from the human perspective; therefore, they cannot be considered either good or evil. Instead, they can only be regarded as tangible insanity, as embodiments of derangement—which does not render their actions any less horrifying. On the contrary, their alien reasoning, which is beyond human comprehension, adds to the horror they evoke:

> VOICE
>
> They are not malicious, but for all intents and purposes they are madness incarnate. Their ignorance has resulted in horrific acts. And they infect all they touch.
>
> (*The Music Machine*, 2015)

The manner in which the Spindle Men are constructed as characters and described to the player does not mean that *The Music Machine* in any way implies that humanity is, in fact, easy to understand. On the contrary, the entire game explores—through everything from the story to the mechanics—the perplexing and problematic nature of human beings. In the canonical ending, Quintin tells Haley that people are not "nice little mathematical equations" that can be easily solved (*The Music Machine*, 2015); interestingly enough, the Voice also suggests something like this to her, telling her to "not presume to know" Quintin (*The Music Machine*, 2015). The Spindle Men's failure to grasp the essence of what human beings are does not result solely from their shortcomings, but from the very nature of human beings themselves. Even Quintin points out that maybe he "doesn't understand [him]self, but [Haley] sure as hell [does not] either"

(*The Music Machine*, 2015); all the dialogues point to this conclusion, as well as to the tremendous difficulty the characters seem to be facing whenever they attempt to explain their emotions and beliefs. For a game featuring many essential features of horror fiction, including a vengeful ghost and powerful supernatural entities murdering human beings, *The Music Machine* places significant emphasis on the human nature and its complexity; the horror associated with the Spindle Men serves primarily as a backdrop for the human drama unfolding in front of the player, i.e. the relationship and the history between Haley and Quintin. Although they happen to represent the humankind in the game as the only living characters, neither of them proves to be noble or generous, and some of their actions are morally questionable, to say the least, if not downright reprehensible. The characters epitomize some of the fundamental parts of human nature, which are, in turn, reflected in all works of art created by human beings.

The fundamentally tragic nature of the Spindle Men is strongly emphasized in the particular outcome of their storyline featured in the canon ending, where Quintin does save Haley; it is quite significant that he does so not by running from the Spindle Men, but by killing them. This action is first advised by the Voice—who tells Haley that the only way out is through killing the Spindle Men, which will cause "the trap [to] spring open," and their creations to "crumble"—and later facilitated when the Voice actually provides a weapon for Quintin to use, suggesting that he should "fix [his] mistakes" (*The Music Machine*, 2015). Just as the Voice foretold, killing the Spindle Men brings about the destruction of everything they have created, but, interestingly enough, neither Haley nor Quintin ever witness it first hand—nor do they find out about it, since they are immediately expelled to the real world of the Island. The only one to witness the consequences of that choice is the person responsible for the choice—i.e. the player. The game fuses those consequences—namely, worlds and creations crumbling into

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nothingness—into just one scene which directly follows the last seconds of gameplay. It is, however, significant that this scene does not function as a victory sequence or as any other conventional kind of reward for defeating the main antagonist; instead, after the rather positive exchange between Quintin and Haley, the screen suddenly goes black and the following words appear, one line after another, accompanied by a moving violin composition that can be described as both sweet and melancholy:

> And far away, beyond space and time, there was a crimson forest
>
> The warm leaves rustled
>
> The birds sang shrill songs
>
> The wind turned cold
>
> For the first time, the sun began to set
>
> (*The Music Machine*, 2015)

Once the last line fades, the player finds themselves in the last realm of the game—the Crimson Forest, one of the locations crafted by the Spindle Men. The whole experience in the Crimson Forest is very ephemeral, brief but intense; the player simply appears there, without any individual avatar—neither Haley nor Quintin are present in this sequence—and is allowed to walk around for less than a minute, without being able to interact with anything, to explore the beauty of the place that is about to cease to exist. The expressed exquisite nature of the Crimson Forest is emphasized by the way in which this singular location is depicted in respect to the overall visual design of *The Music Machine*; in contrast to all other realms the player visits, it is the only location that aims at more realistic portrayal of the landscape, using regular aesthetics and vivid, dramatic colors for the blue water and crimson leaves on trees. After a predetermined amount of time that cannot be affected by the player in any way, the game simply ends and the player is treated

to the end credits. This brief visit in the Crimson Forest and the player's inability to either use the available time in any way or prolong it are symbolically significant; the player's appearance in that realm is enabled by the coordinated development of the story and the player's interaction with the game system, and as such it constitutes both a ludic event and a narrative event at the same time (Thon 2016: 17), in which Szymanski uses the timing and the audiovisual tools to combine the ludic and the narrative to fully convey to the player the fact that the destruction of the Crimson Forest is inevitable. Just as the Voice explained to the characters while they were in the Void, the act of killing the Spindle Men in order to protect Haley leads to destruction of all they have created on their own; the opening narration of the sequence and the background music contribute to a distinctly poignant mood and a pensive overtone, as the player is left to reflect upon the gradual but complete disappearance of something breathtakingly and uniquely beautiful.

The aftermath of the Spindle Men's death can also be felt in *The Moon Sliver* (2014), an earlier game by David Szymanski, which shares a universe with *The Music Machine*. In *The Moon Sliver* the player wanders alone around an empty island. The bleak, lifeless landscape and the absence of living things are witnessed by just one character—Able—the only survivor out of the original four people that the Spindle Men put on the Island with their "sliver" of wisdom in the form of a tome (*The Moon Sliver*, 2014). If the player has no knowledge of *The Music Machine*, they will not realize that both the island and the tome itself were created by the Spindle Men and considered by them their greatest experiment and "an unfractured domain"; the Spindle Men referred to the island as both "terrarium" and "Kingdom," and insisted in their notes that it should be "kept alive" (*The Music Machine*, 2015). This may explain why the Kingdom did not simply fade away into nothingness, but lost its meaning, exactly like the Sliver, to the four people trapped there after the Spindle Men's demise. The people on the decaying, dying island have

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become lost and dejected, even delusional—is there actually any creature out there, threatening them, the one that the Spindle Men referred to as "Father's beast" (*The Music Machine*, 2015) or "Woodland Teeth" (*The Moon Sliver*, 2014; *The Music Machine*, 2015), or is there only darkness, a manifestation of the nothingness into which the island is destined to fall after the Spindle Men's death? In contrast to the Crimson Forest and other creations of The Spindle Men, the island in The Moon Sliver disappears slowly, driving its inhabitants insane. "What sort of twisted villains were the ancient writers, to taunt us with unreachable worlds more beautiful than our own?" (*The Moon Sliver*, 2014), one of the characters of *The Moon Sliver* wonders, unaware of the fact that both those worlds and the writers are no more.

A similar effect—a reflection upon an inevitable end of a world—is exerted in TIMEframe (Random Seed Games, 2013). In comparison to The Music Machine, TIMEframe (the original game as it was presented as a Ludum Dare 27 entry[2]) is a very short walking simulator that gives the player exactly ten minutes of gameplay to explore an alien world as much as they are able to within that time limit; the world—a planet—is about to disappear due to an asteroid impact. Between locating and examining various Artifacts that attest to all manner of the planet civilization's customs, beliefs or achievements, and observing natural phenomena slowed down to a crawl, such as fountain water slowly falling into the basin or plants moving in the wind, the player can experience the last ten seconds of the planet's existence before the impact obliterates it forever. As a game devoted in its entirety to that single concept, TIMEframe aligns its visuals and music to convey a complex range of emotions: sorrow at the doomed civilization, helplessness in the face of the cataclysm, and the unique combination of reverence and even a sort of bereavement over a world simultaneously only just

2. http://ludumdare.com/compo/ludum-dare-27/comment-page-1/?action=preview&uid=16933. DOA 17.07.2019.

discovered and immediately lost. The critical fact that should be emphasized here is the player's role in this scenario—the annihilation of the planet is not the player's fault, as the avatar is merely a visitor and a witness to the unfolding apocalyptic spectacle.

Therefore, unlike *TIMEframe*, *The Music Machine* (as per its canonical ending) emphasizes the role of the player's choice in the fate of the Crimson Forest and, by extension, all other creations of the Spindle Men. The player's choice is not a mere action necessary for completing the game, flowing naturally from the story and bringing about a well-earned sense of satisfaction and accomplishment upon defeating scary, dangerous monsters; instead, it is a crucial point pivotal to the envisioned effect of the gameplay experience. The player realizes that they have saved Haley's life, and Quintin's soul from the Limbo, but that this victory has come at a cost—they have slaughtered powerful creatures who were capable of crafting unimaginable beauty, whose fault lay in their ignorance and inability to comprehend anything beyond mere data input. *The Music Machine* offers the player only one choice, but once again it is a most significant choice, and its consequences are indeed powerful (Isbister 2016: 2); an individual human being—a girl named Haley—is saved, as are potentially other human beings that would otherwise fall victim to the Spindle Men, but the Crimson Forest and all the other "beautiful worlds of child-like wonder" that the Voice spoke about (*The Music Machine*, 2015) will cease to exist, slowly crumbling into cold nothingness. By evoking empathy for Haley and relying on basic human impulses, *The Music Machine* manipulates the player into becoming complicit (Isbister 2016: 10) not only in murder in self-defense, but, above all, in the destruction of numerous realms, some of them possibly inhabited (*The Moon Sliver*, 2014; *The Music Machine*, 2015). Assuming the responsibility for the consequences of the choice paves the way for yet another aspect of the gameplay experience: instead of the expected *jouissance*

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produced by making the choice in order to win—i.e. through exercising the control over the events and characters on the screen, manipulating the story itself, and deciding the fate of not only Haley, but also Quintin (Mitra 2010: 12, Fiske 2010: 111)—the player is put into an ambivalent state of mind, where one of the most prominent feelings is sadness rather than triumph. It is also worth noting that it in the case of *The Music Machine*, the sadness is clearly personal, not sympathetic (Frome 2016: 164).

The story of *The Music Machine* and the way its storylines are arranged, designed and integrated are beyond doubt one of the most notable and intriguing aspects of the game. The primary story (the Haley and Quintin storyline) is, as it has already been mentioned, particularly noteworthy for a number of reasons, and is one of the main factors contributing to the manner in which the game pushes the player out of their emotional comfort zone. Similarly, the storyline of the Spindle Men is just as significant from this perspective, due to the fact that it is the one responsible for eliciting both terror and sympathy given that the Spindle Men appear as characters inherently tragic in nature—capable of both forging landscapes and objects of breathtaking, magnificent beauty and committing deeds that are appallingly savage (murdering human beings in an elaborately cruel manner). Both storylines merge and allow Szymanski to explore certain aspects of the nature of humanity and ethics in *The Music Machine* by juxtaposing the complexity and ambiguity of human morality—as illustrated by all interactions between Haley and Quintin (past, present and arguably future) with the concept of complete lack of comprehension and/or ambivalence towards morality that can be seen in the game's non-human entities—the Spindle Men. Quintin and Haley commit some morally questionable, or even reprehensible, acts because of their feelings; Haley's anger and chagrin lead her to tell a disastrous lie, which, in turn, results in Quintin's death, while Quintin's bitter

grudge makes him possess Haley as a spirit with the intention of murdering her to exact revenge.

The Mediation within the Mediation: the Relationship With The Fictional World

The majority of characteristic features of *The Music Machine* which distinguish it from other digital games are related to the fact that the game is an independent text; the considerable creative and financial independence of the developer typical of the indie scene (Tringham 2014: 43; Marak and Markocki 2016: 156-157) are presumably what facilitated Szymanski's experimental approach concerning original visual design and a sensible take on the story content. What makes the game stand out among other titles in terms of traits fundamentally particular for digital games as texts is, for the purpose of this book, the way it makes use—both in terms of the narrative and ludic structure—of the avatar. As it has already been mentioned, this unique and essential game component brings the player closer to what they regard as their virtual self (Isbister 2016: 13); in most cases the term "avatar" is virtually interchangeable with "player's character." That character (or, in case of some game texts, characters) can have a clearly established identity, a developed personality, and distinctive appearance, as in the case of some of the previously discussed titles and their avatars—such as Senua, Rae, or Daniel. On the other hand, the avatar can be defined so vaguely that it is sometimes barely a suggestion of a character rather than a character—as it is illustrated in some chapters of this book, when games such as *Imscared*, *Sara Is Missing* or *Mono* are examined. However, regardless of the degree to which the avatar's identity is specified, it is always controlled by the player within any given realization (actualization) of the game. The avatar's fate quite literally rests in the player's hands, as their reflexes, hand-eye coordination, patience and willingness to explore the environment or alternative game endings all come into play during gameplay. In some games, this dependence

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might be slight or just moderate, but it tends to be greater if the game includes a combat system where the player faces the fight-or-flight dilemma (Marak and Markocki 2016: 103) and must weigh the advantages and disadvantages of each action as it may either help to keep the avatar safe or put them in danger. It is thus the player who bears the burden of responsibility and potential guilt regarding the negative experiences the avatar is subjected to, or who feels pride upon defending or saving the character (Isbister 2016: 8-9).

The matter of the avatar/player relationship—as well as the nature of the avatar as such—is far more complex in *The Music Machine* than it is in the majority of other digital games. Although there is only one physical entity (the teenager Haley) present on the Island—and only that entity is represented visually in the fictional world of the game—the player actually deals with two people and a peculiar division of functions of the avatar. The player needs to adapt to the decidedly unconventional arrangement in which one body accommodates two separate identities and personalities (a surprisingly cheerful and light-hearted teenager, and a reserved and bitter but also lost thirty-four-year-old bachelor), and their strange relationship characterized mainly by the aforementioned conflict of interests. From the theoretical perspective on mechanics and the phenomenon of the digital game avatar, this situation is worth discussing for a number of reasons.

The first aspect of this design worth remarking upon is the issue of agency and control in *The Music Machine.* In order to interact with objects and other elements of the environment in the majority of games, the player needs an avatar. The avatar tends to fuse the player's intentions, perceptions, and actions, as well the body schema and body image, thus becoming a peculiar "body image in action," which encompasses the extended embodiment and sense of agency during the interaction with the game (Perron and Wolf 2009: 67). Intentions and actions, however, are not

necessarily inseparable from perceptions and the sense of being a part of the virtual environment, as the sense of agency and the sense of body ownership can (and usually are) discriminated, even in real life, as the ownership of action (agency) and ownership of body (Perron and Wolf 2009: 66). In *The Music Machine* the sense of agency is experienced by the player through Quintin, and the sense of body ownership is experienced through Haley; each character has no sense of the other, leaving Quintin deprived of the body ownership and Haley lacking the ability to influence the world around her (Perron and Wolf 2009: 66). In order to control Haley—i.e. Haley's body—the player must, in fact, control Quintin, the vengeful ghost "puppeteering" Haley's body.

Therefore, *The Music Machine* offers the player only one avatar, but two characters; furthermore, one of those characters is in control of movement and actions (representing action ownership), while the other one is in touch with the senses of the body (body ownership)—Quintin is the one responsible for any activity, and as such allows the player to interact with the virtual environment, while Haley provides the player with feedback concerning the effects and dangers of that environment. The peculiar division of function, action and decision-making is seamlessly incorporated into gameplay; the characters converse and argue about every step and action—when Quintin decides to lift an object or open a door, the agility and strength required for that task that the player has at their disposal belong to Haley. Haley, on the other hand, can try to ask or persuade Quintin to do something, as it is the case when she tries to convince him to take the money left by Cox on the Island, but the final choice belongs to Quintin. Thus, the conflict between the characters is expressed not only in the respective elements of the narrative structure, but also in the elements of the ludic structure of the game; during gameplay, it is Quintin who allows the player to extend their feeling of presence, action and perceptions of space into the virtual environment (Rambusch 2016: 75), and, as such,

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he stands for the body schema whose motor capacities can be relied on intuitively (Perron and Wolf 2009: 66).

In contrast, Haley, who represents the body ownership, stands for another concept related to the issue of the physical of aspect of embodiment—the body image. Since the experience of oneself is not reducible to "actual, physical body as a thing," the player observes the emotions and experiences of the avatar while linking aspects of their own body image to that of the avatar (Perron and Wolf 2009: 66). The body image tends to determine the extent of the player's potential experiences through the projection of certain aspects of their own body surface image and body experience onto the avatar (Perron and Wolf 2009: 66). In *The Music Machine*, Haley is the character to whom the player links their body image, or to whom the body image of the player is "temporarily extended" (Perron and Wolf 2009: 66); she comments on and opines over a plethora of aspects of the fictional world represented in the virtual environment—aspects which Quintin is not aware of: scents, sounds, discomfort, and a variety of other sensations. Her remarks oftentimes refer to the physicality of her body, which implies that Quintin's control over Haley does not entail any awareness of how she feels; therefore, he has no knowledge of her condition unless she describes her experiences specifically—this can be observed on several occasions during gameplay when Haley needs to inform Quintin about pain by saying "it hurts," an unpleasant odor by commenting that "it smells really bad," or even other sensations she might find difficult to put into words, such as the eerie, ethereal lightness in the realm of the Farm of Pigs and Smoke, which prompts her to say: "I feel… floaty" (*The Music Machine*, 2015). The split between action ownership and body ownership in *The Music Machine* is one of the more interesting—and compelling—features of the game in regard to immersion and emersion, in this sense understood as "an impression of a non-mediated participation" and "a sensation of a direct presence" in the fictional world (immersion) or lack thereof (emersion)

(Kubiński 2014: 132). This issue is all the more important in the context of the horror elements of *The Music Machine*; as Matthew Weise points out, horror game texts aim at more than mere comprehension of the protagonist's mental state—the players tend to transgress empathy developed towards a character running from or being in danger, seeing as engaging with a horror game gives them the opportunity to experience that proximity of danger, even if it takes place in a "highly mediated form" (Weise 2009: 241). Some might argue that Haley's comments and remarks—and Quintin's replies—have a detrimental effect on the overall immersion, since they keep reminding the player that, despite the first person perspective, Haley is a separate, independent character. However, relaying the character's thought to the player is not a rare phenomenon in games (many texts offer insight into character's impressions and opinions), and Haley's ongoing commentary appears natural, taking into consideration that there is another character she can direct it at. Furthermore, her observations and ideas can actually contribute to the player's immersion; for instance, the player is able to see everything in the Farm of Pigs and Smoke, but they will not be able to experience the "floatiness" Haley talks about or the strange smell she describes as a mixture of manure and horseradish; neither will they feel pain when Quintin makes her touch a hot pipe or when she is exposed to the dangerous rain in Thorn Forest. As far as mechanics are concerned, the player will only sometimes be alerted to some changes—they might notice the difference in the speed of the avatar in the first realm they enter or hear the ever louder sound of Haley's pounding heart as the rain hurts her. It is only after Haley conveys those sensations in words that the player can make sense of what they see. This makes sense on the narrative level as well, since Quintin is merely a spirit and he no longer has the perception of a living human. On the ludic level, this situation is just as logical, seeing as the player—who, by assuming command over the actions and intentions, identifies with Quintin—cannot experience any of

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those sensations either, and also has to rely on the information provided by the teenage girl they are in control of.

An additional matter worth pointing out about this design is the fact that in the conventional setup of the avatar role it is rather natural that the player will share the goal of the avatar (Frome 2016: 164, Marak and Markocki 2016: 158). In other words, the player will typically feel compelled to do their best to guide Senua to Hela's domain or help Rae find Nani, or even try to solve Dan's investigation; in case of *The Music Machine* both the concept behind the game as well as the conversations between Haley and Quintin constantly remind the player that Haley has no influence over her own fate, because the player is never in control of Haley, but, rather, in control of Quintin controlling Haley. Either way, Haley has no say in the matter. Immersion, or at least the aspect of it related to decision-making and affecting the game world, is transferred to—or mediated through—Quintin. Quintin, however, is merely a spirit, and needs Haley's body to interact with the physical world in order to achieve his goal.

This arrangement serves as an interesting, if not symbolic, representation of the standard relationship between the player and the avatar, where the player tends to be projected into the world of the game in the form of an invisible, sometimes even omniscient force controlling the avatar's every move. In contrast to the avatar, who exists within the reality of the game and can be hurt or killed by that reality, the player is completely safe—apart from the obvious fact that failure (the avatar's death or another incapacitation) entails the necessity of replaying some parts of the game, which, in turn, leads to frustration and reluctance related to the resulting waste of time which the players want to avoid (Markocki 2016: 260). *The Music Machine* sets these conditions in an entirely different way: apart from the brief visit in the Thorn Forest, until Quintin and Haley reach the dimension of the Spindle Men, the player does not need to worry

that Haley's death will interfere with their progress in the game as long as Quintin is looking for something "he'll be satisfied with" (*The Music Machine*, 2015). Therefore, the girl's safety does not have to be a priority for the player for them to continue playing, reducing the conflict of interests between Quintin (the decisions of which the player is in control of) and Haley (the protagonist who does not wish to die) to a minimum in the initial stages of the game. The very same conflict that initiated the story and which is expressed through mechanics of the game is also significant for the completion of the story: at the end of the game the player must choose whether they want to facilitate Quintin's revenge, or help Haley survive. In other words, the player must take sides in the conflict between Haley and Quintin in order to resolve the plot and complete the game, either aiding Haley or carrying out Quintin's assumed desire to kill her, a wish he has been voicing clearly until that point. In a sense, the player becomes a third presence, an arbiter responsible for mediating between Haley and Quintin, an omniscient narrator who observes the outcome of Quintin's either choice, and the only one who stands witness to the irrevocable, regrettable consequences of the canonical choice they decided Quintin should make.

Conclusion

The narrative and the mechanics of *The Music Machine* revolve around the emotionally difficult and the conceptually alien; with the story of the game combining the human and the non-human points of view, the ludic design allows for the opportunity to explore, at least partially, both of those. The problematic, complex nature of both is highlighted primarily through the uncanny visual design, which, instead of abstraction, favors the creation of places (locations) and objects (assets) which are almost familiar, but not quite; recognizable but always somewhat distorted. The worlds traversed by the player are mirror images

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of the depicted "real" world, but those images are always surreal—alien, bizarre and dreamlike.

The story of Quintin and Haley (revolving around slander and murder) functions as the starting point of the actual gameplay narrative. Such a composition allows for an unconventional transition from an already serious subject matter to an even more bleak topic. As such, *The Music Machine* gradually moves the more universal and sinister conflict (the Spindle Men subplot) to the foreground, in this way shifting the emphasis from the individual (the person-to-person relationship of Quintin and Haley) to the global (the threat and the tragic nature of the Spindle Men).

The very idea behind the nature of the Spindle Men makes them quite remarkable antagonists. They cannot be reasoned with because they barely grasp the concept of communication, and they probably do not perceive human beings as sentient beings. This makes them difficult to understand and relate to, but at the same time points to their arguably most interesting feature—the fact that the player cannot really attribute moral evil (at least as it is conventionally understood) to their actions. Interestingly enough, it seems that players, despite being aware of this, sometimes cannot help but regard the actions of the Spindle Men as morally and emotionally charged nonetheless[3]. Furthermore, despite the fact that Quintin is already a vengeful ghost, bent on horrible revenge, the actions of both human characters are still regarded in a moral context.

The particular nature of the narrative of *The Music Machine* also brings attention to the role of the avatar. The mediated relationship between the player and the avatar and the presumed

3. MrKravin, The Music Machine – Full Playthrough (Gameplay / Walkthrough) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OhDBuBSqSKA). DOA 17.07.2019; Cyborcat, Let's Play: The Music Machine, Part 4 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W6CgcG1c6Ss). DOA 17.07.2019.

synonymousness of the avatar as a player character is put to the test in Szymanski's game. Since Haley effectively becomes the player's avatar, while it is Quintin that is the player's character, *The Music Machine* divides the body ownership and the agency ownership between Haley and Quintin, and thus both expands and problematizes immersion.

Parts of the story depicted in *The Music Machine* can be regarded in the context of ethical and aesthetic categories—or, to be more exact, the contrast between them. The main antagonists of the game, the Spindle Men, illustrate this through their incapability to understanding the multitude of works and forms of art, as well as the very nature of humanity. By making them the focal point of the game narrative, *The Music Machine* combines the familiar with the unfamiliar in many ways—not only in terms of its supernatural horror narrative setup, but also in its audiovisual design that contributes to its uncanny atmosphere and emotional impact, as well as its innovative ludic approach.

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6

INVADING THE PLAYER'S ENVIRONMENT

In 2016, a relatively short independent metafictional horror puzzle game *Pony Island* took Twitch and YouTube by storm. Developed and published by Daniel Mullins Games, *Pony Island* required the player to break out of a possessed arcade machine which had captured their soul. In order to do this, they needed to not only play the main game, but also attempt to manipulate the code of the "Pony Island" game, essentially hacking the game, in order to progress. There was also a point-and-click desktop interface to interact with, and simulated instant messaging interface which mimicked the Steam platform messages (which tricked the players into thinking that they were being messaged by someone from their actual friend list). Throughout its duration, the game toyed with the player's expectations, creating an impression of being able to reach beyond its software boundaries of the game window. *Pony Island* enjoyed wide

popularity and was received as a game "relatively unique" in its concept, being praised for "blurring the line between the game and reality[1]." However, *Pony Island* was neither the first, nor the only game which challenged the clear line between fiction and reality, as well as various aspects of interaction between the game and the player. In 2012, players were deeply impressed by Ivan Zanotti's short but remarkably effective indie horror game entitled *Imscared: A Pixelated Nightmare*. A year later, Davey Warden's *The Stanley Parable* (2013) enjoyed widespread popularity for many similar reasons. Other games published around the same time as *Pony Island*, on the other hand, took this concept in different directions, choosing the most recognizably contemporary time frame, such as *Sara Is Missing*, developed by Monsoon Lab in 2016, or more old-fashioned, nostalgic connotations, like the ones visible in *The House Abandon* by No Code, developed in 2016. What all those—and many other—games have in common is the textual convention originating from the theater tradition: breaking the fourth wall, i.e. the violation of a boundary between the fictional character(s) (or entities) and the audience.

The following chapter explores the use of breaking the fourth wall in digital games as a storytelling technique and the means of constructing cognitive dis-order in the player's perception. The emphasis is placed on the interposition of anti-cognitive laws into the empirical player's environment through examining various aspects of the interaction between the game and the player—including the game AI, the avatar, and the game system—as well as the way they are employed to convey the story.

Breaking the Fourth Wall: Fiction, Reality, and Trauma

The matter of breaking the fourth wall is directly related to the

1. https://www.technobuffalo.com/a-game-called-pony-island-tricked-me-into-messaging-a-friend-at-3-a-m. DOA 17.07.2019.

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problematic differentiation between the fictional work, based on the creator or creators' imagination, and the actual reality of the audience; this differentiation has been long regarded as a fundamental problem in various cultures. In Julio Cortazar's famous short story *Continuity of Parks*, a passionate aficionado of criminal books is murdered by the characters of the novel he is reading; this results in two levels of fiction—the short story read by the reader and the novel being read by the character—overlapping almost seamlessly (Cortazar 1971: 55–56). As a result, the reader experiences cognitive uncertainty, and a story-within-a-story effect is created—a state in which, in Jorge Luis Borges's words, "fiction lives in fiction" (Borges 1999: 160), or, on the other hand, just the opposite: the sensation of the fictional world spilling into the extra-textual reality. A similar idea has been presented by Woody Allen in the movie *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985) in quite a spectacular manner—the characters literally walk out of the screen to live in the real (depicted) world, to love and suffer as real people among the (depicted) viewers. In the final scene of the movie *The Patsy* (1964), the breaking of the fourth wall serves a similar purpose, acting as a catalyst for a comedic happy end, as the male lead falls from a balcony—presumably to his death—before the very eyes of the viewers and the woman who loves him—only to return with a broad smile and lead the woman out of the apartment through the movie set and into "real life." Typically, however, the breaking of the fourth wall in the cinematic tradition fulfills a different function, introducing an inevitable self-referential motif and provoking the viewers to ponder the nature of the cinematic illusion. In the last scene of Peter Greenaway's *Baby of Mâcon* (1993), the participants of cruel, dramatic events turn out to be merely actors on stage that are being watched by an audience in a theater, which, in turn, is also revealed to be just a stage in an even larger theater; such an arrangement opens the viewers to the idea of an unlimited continuum of presumed stagings, in which they themselves might only be actors playing the role of the audience in someone else's spectacle. Thus, the movie

creates the impression of experiencing an illusion, one reduced to absurdity, and poses a fundamental question concerning the boundaries of reality. Greenaway uses the metaphor of *mise en abyme* to break with the convention of mimesis; however, Alejandro Jodorowsky goes even further in his movie *The Holy Mountain* (1973), directly invoking metaphysical context to use a movie text as a peculiar vehicle for spiritual enlightenment. The movie constitutes a surreal and mythical allegory focused on a group of disciples climbing the titular holy mountain in order to train under a master (played, significantly, by the movie director himself) and reach enlightenment. In this context, the breaking of the fourth wall in the movie finale is not simply a metafictional commentary about cinema in general, but primarily a suggestion concerning the illusory nature of reality. When the master-director reveals the truth to his disciples, he uses a "spell" known to every filmmaker: "Zoom back camera," at which point the camera moves backwards, exposing the movie set. This is the truth that the disciples had been looking for and which they discover together with the viewers—reality is but an illusion created by masters-directors for actors, who do not even realize that they are playing the roles intended for them. The final revelation is both enlightening and traumatic, as the actors have to accept that their movie characters do not, in fact, exist.

One of the most distinct examples of this traumatic potential of breaking the fourth wall is the movie *Snuff* (1975), which has been comprehensively analyzed by Linda Williams. *Snuff* erases the illusion of the cinematic text, exposing the audience to a traumatic experience as they are placed in a situation of witnessing a presumably authentic crime, committed by the crew of the movie set on that very set. As Williams writes, summarizing the ending of the movie:

> *Snuff* ... seems today to be a variant of the slasher film, though its South American setting, post-synchronized dialogue, and focus on adult rather than teen-aged victims make it atypical. Yet an epilogue tacked on to the narrative of Satan's violence

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> made some viewers at the time think otherwise—for in this epilogue they saw not the fantastic special effects of horror but the hard-core realism of "snuff." After the pregnant actress is stabbed, the camera pulls back to reveal a movie set with camera, crew, and director. A "script girl" admires the director's work and tells him she was turned on by the scene. He invites her to have sex; she complies until she realizes that this scene, too, is being filmed. When she tries to pull away, the director grabs the knife from the previous scene, looks directly at the camera and says, presumably to the operator, "You want to get a good scene?" and proceeds to slice off first her fingers, then her hand, and then the rest of her. The sequence culminates in the director cutting open the woman's abdomen, pulling out her inner organs, and holding them over his head in triumph while the sound track mixes heavy panting with the beat of a throbbing heart. The organs seem to convulse. The image goes black as a voice says, "Shit, we ran out of film," Another says, "Did you get it all?" "Yeah, we got it. Let's get out of here." No credits roll. (Williams 1989: 190-191)

In this context, the sudden unexpected breaking of the fourth wall in the movie finale induces the kind of horror which goes beyond the horror movie convention, which presumes the fictional nature of crime, death and cruelty on the cinema screen. In the case of *Snuff*, the technique was not just a self-referential measure (a commentary on the issue of cinematic illusion) or a comedic one (revealing the behind-the-scenes aspect of movies), but mostly a rhetorical gesture—its main goal was sustaining the fear gradually building up during the movie séance in the audience. Instead of the typical release of the emotional tension that gradually intensifies during watching a horror movie, the finale of *Snuff* provides the audience with a cognitive dissonance: the situation in which the plot of the movie has reached the end, but the horror continues—not in the illusory world of the movie, but in the scenes that are supposed to document the events on the movie set. Such a strategy can provoke not only the feelings of fear and disgust, but, first and foremost, confusion in the

audience, which, in turn, can take the form of a lingering question: "Is what I'm seeing real or not?" The answer to this question is not as obvious as it may seem, as the movie was a low budget work shot in South America, and was shown in smaller drive-in theaters specializing in exploitation movies. In time, a peculiar infamy of *Snuff* emerged, according to which it was a movie on whose the crew murdered an actress "for real" (Williams 1989: 193). In this way, the trauma results from the feelings of uncertainty, arousing doubt over the fictional nature of violence and cruelty portrayed in cinema, especially in those genres that, like pornography, strive for a realistic depiction of events, e.g. non-simulated scenes of sex. As Williams accurately points out:

> It was this coda of self-reflexive violence, arising on the very set of the exploitation horror film that precedes it, that seemed to some viewers to live up to the generic promise of the film's title. The sequence is as heavily edited and replete with "medical FX" as any other instance of mutilation in this (or any other horror) film. Nevertheless, its added signals of documentary evidence—the director's speech to and "look" at the camera, the indication of film "run out," the shocking transition from sex scene to violence—all operated to convince critics that if what they had seen before was fake violence belonging to the genre of horror, what they were seeing now was real (hard-core) violence belonging to the genre of pornography. (Williams 1989: 192)

The shock and confusion characteristic of many movies employing the breaking of the fourth wall can account for the question why this convention is relatively rarely used in digital game texts. Specifically, mainstream developers might be avoiding this solution as it could confuse the players and potentially hurt their revenue. As far as independent games are concerned, the priorities of their creators tend to lie elsewhere, and some of them do not shy away from addressing the players directly (recent examples include *Dr. Langeskov, The Tiger, and The Terribly Cursed Emerald*, 2015, and *Getting Over It*, 2017). One of

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the best known and most thoroughly analyzed cases of a digital game employing that particular technique is the aforementioned *The Stanley Parable*. In this game, the player can explore an office in which the player's character works. The voice of the narrator in the game advises the player as to which way to go or what choice to make. If the player complies with the narrator, the story progresses—to a greater or lesser degree—like in every other game, but the player can also "disobey" the narrator and do the exact opposite of what the narrator suggests. If this occurs, the narrator will adjust the narration to accommodate the situation resulting from the player's choice, and he will momentarily break the fourth wall, addressing the player directly and commenting on their lack of cooperation.

Playing with Haunted Media

A considerable number of independent digital games relying on breaking the forth wall belong to the genre of horror. The developers of such game texts re-purpose this particular technique in order to achieve a very specific effect. Horror fiction relies on a certain necessary suspension of disbelief coupled with tension and anxiety, for which immersion is a key factor. Furthermore, horror is always dependent on the delicate balance between what is familiar (and expected) and what is not familiar (and, therefore, not expected) (Phillips 2005: 7-8). Through the employment of the convention of breaking the fourth wall, and, thus, the resultant "violation of the rules of the game" (Phillips 2005: 7), the developers can tap much deeper into the potential of horror fiction. One of the best known independent games breaking the fourth wall for the emotional effect is the short independent horror game *Imscared: A Pixelated Nightmare*. A later, more developed version of the game, also known as the Steam Edition, was released in 2016, but for the purpose of this chapter, the first, free iteration is analyzed.

Visually, the game resembles a very amateur production, an

impression that is supported by the introductory text including copious instructions and an apology for the errors and glitches that might appear in the game—the visual environment is constructed by the means of very basic, low-resolution pixelated graphics, reminiscent of early Microsoft Paint. The main goal for the player in *Imscared: A Pixelated Nightmare* appears to be escaping a room; when they try to open the door labeled "Exit," a text message appears on the screen, reading: "I need a Heart in order to open it" (*Imscared: A Pixelated Nightmare*, 2012). Through the first portion of gameplay, the game itself appears to be of low quality, offering only blood splatters within the immediate vicinity of the player's avatar, and music that—albeit disturbing—cuts off after only a short period of time. After exploring the available locations in the game and finally finding the heart from the message, a strange floating head appears and seemingly crashes the game. It is worth noting that the design of the game attempts to create an impression that something might be wrong with the player's computer by showing a false blue screen (i.e., the fatal error screen displayed by the Windows operating system), suggesting to the player that some kind of critical error has occurred within their real operating system. Furthermore, once the game seemingly crashes, external files appear in the game folder—upon opening them, the player finds information about "entities" becoming "data" (*Imscared: A Pixelated Nightmare*, 2012). The plot of the game—in this case, the combined effect of what takes place within the software window, and the actions taken by the player in front of their computer—is quite complex and ambiguous, which is an inherent part of its design. Continuing the game results in more confusing events taking place, which indicate that some kind of a malicious entity might be trying to take over the player's computer.

The main difference between *Imscared: A Pixelated Nightmare* and games such as *The Stanley Parable* is that in the case of Zanotti's work, the game not only addresses the player directly, but also simulates invading the player's environment. The invasion of

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player's environment can be understood in this case as a situation in which a game tricks the player into believing that the game software is gaining some sort of control over the player's computer, thus escaping the confinement of the software interface, which the player should normally be able to manipulate and regulate. *Imscared: A Pixelated Nightmare* deploys a number of various mechanics to achieve this, and the direct consequence of this unique storytelling technique is the arousal of a new kind of uneasiness in the players, the kind that other horror games, not to mention the texts of other media, cannot.

Before the game starts, the player is informed that the game requires a "personal folder in order to work correctly" (*Imscared: A Pixelated Nightmare*, 2017). At a first glance, the instruction seems quite ordinary, explaining to the player how they can move around the virtual environment, explore it, and interact with it, as well as mentioning the volume settings—all of which are fairly ordinary in small independent horror games:

> You are about to play Imscared. Before starting, though, just make sure that the folder in the .rar file has been extracted. Imscared needs a personal folder in order to work correctly. Press ENTER to continue.
>
> If you didn't satisfy the request, please, quit the game by pressing the ESC key.
>
> If, instead, you have extracted the folder from the .rar file, you're free to proceed by pressing the ENTER key.
>
> The game is about to begin. You'll need the WASD keys to move in the gaming area. The 'E' key is what you need in order to interact with doors and objects. The SHIFT key lets you run while moving. You'll need the CTRL key to crouch.
>
> Feel free to look around with the mouse.
>
> It is important to play the game with a medium-high volume, even your headphones will serve the purpose.

> You need to hear certain sounds, in order to go on in the game.
>
> The game will try to deceive you as many times as it can. In case something goes wrong, feel free to check the folder in order to report any error.
>
> I'm extremely sorry. I didn't really want to do that.
>
> Forgive me. (*Imscared: A Pixelated Nightmare*, 2012[2])

Among all these pieces of information, the player might disregard the remark concerning the game attempting to deceive them "as many times as it can" (*Imscared: A Pixelated Nightmare*, 2017). The subtly conveyed message plays into the idea that the player should not trust the game, which amplifies the effect the game exerts on the player. The primary gameplay itself is extremely simple: the player explores a maze-like environment, which creates its own atmosphere of terror through constant changes of the environment, and the vague, ominously ambiguous character of the visual representation of that environment (such as the *cul-de-sac* where the player collects the first Pulsating Heart, and where they can only guess what the walls are covered with). The actual means of causing the player to experience uneasiness and stress lies outside of primary gameplay and, instead, in its behavior; the game seemingly closes or crashes at several points (for example when the player is first captured by White Face or when they reach the first, false Ending). The game extracts more content (images and text files) into its personal folder, sometimes giving the players instructions which apparently contradict their hitherto experience with the game:

> It's not going to let you go. I shouldn't have told you to go on.

2. All dialogue of *Imscared: A Pixelated Nightmare* has been transcribed by the authors of this book.

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> Follow my instructions: don't let the game's appearance deceive you from now on. If things change, it arrives.
>
> Take some time and try to escape. (*Imscared: A Pixelated Nightmare*, 2012)

While not entirely scary in itself, such an interaction confuses the players, especially if they are not sure whether or not a particular event—such as the game closing or the web browser opening—is intended as a part of game experience. In contrast to regular games, where the avatar is the character in peril that the player is responsible for and can empathize with, *Imscared: A Pixelated Nightmare* attempts to merge the function of the avatar with the person of the player themselves through its main emersive strategy, where the impact of the game (once it is loaded) on the player is not limited to the game window alone. Thus, the player subjects themselves—unknowingly—to the game's influence, which goes beyond the executable file of the game as software. In this sense, *Imscared: A Pixelated Nightmare* breaks not only the fourth wall, but also expectations of the player both in terms of software design (the whole game) and the primary gameplay.

Mechanics-wise, this strategy suits the horror genre perfectly—when the player believes that "the emotion-inducing situation is real," the sense of reality offered by the game heightens (Perron and Wolf 2009: 93). Therefore, *Imscared: A Pixelated Nightmare*'s invasion intensifies the degree to which the player becomes immersed in the game world and the context in which they are experiencing the game (Perron and Wolf 2009: 93). Most typically, developers strive for the player's sense of immersion through pulling the player into the world of the game, and thus making them feel as if they have become a part of the game world, their presence projected into the virtual environment (Calleja 2011: 2). This concept of projecting the player into the world is a typical feature of design in the majority of digital games—as opposed to the texts of cinema, where the world is projected at the viewer (Poole 2000: 98). In contrast,

Imscared: A Pixelated Nightmare strives to project its world outside of its assumed software confines and around the person of the player.

Furthermore, the game successfully employs a number of techniques which would normally be regarded as emersive effects, such as the interaction with the desktop outside of the game window, the simulated OS bluescreen and the constant "crashing" of the game. There are other games which use emersive factors to achieve an artistic effect (Kubiński 2014: 136); *Imscared: A Pixelated Nightmare* is by no means a unique game in this regard, as there are cases of games that specifically point to their screen-mediated nature, crossing the symbolic, conventional border between the players (who, in this case, correspond to the spectators in a theater) and the virtual environment (the equivalent of the scene of the performance) (Kubiński 2014: 135). Moreover, it is worth noting that although breaking the fourth wall usually tends to disrupt the sense of immersion, as it "*pulls* the player *out* from the fictional world," (Kubiński 2014: 135), *Imscared: A Pixelated Nightmare* uses it for its purposes particularly well and to a great effect.

The situation presented in the game *Imscared: A Pixelated Nightmare* is reminiscent of the cognitive crisis stemming from the widespread influence of virtual reality, and its impact on an individual's experience of everyday life in technologically developed society. Slavoj Žižek describes this crisis in his book *The Plague of Fantasies*, naming this phenomenon "the threatened frontier", and points out that

> This experience is based on the three lines of separation: between 'true life' and its mechanical simulation; between objective reality and our false (illusory) perception of it; between my fleeting affects, feelings, attitudes, and so on, and the remaining hard core of my Self. All these three boundaries are threatened today. (Žižek 2008: 170)

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One of the experiences that erase that conventional frontier between "true life" and "its mechanical simulation" results directly from the interaction of a human being with virtual reality:

> In so far as the VR apparatus is potentially able to generate experience of the 'true' reality, VR undermines the difference between 'true' reality and semblance. This 'loss of reality' occurs not only in computer-generated VR but, at a more elementary level, already with the growing 'hyperrealism' of the images with which the media bombard us—more and more. (Žižek 2008: 170-171)

This leads, in Žižek's view, to the shattering of the elementary distinctions between reality and the simulation, which normally determine the human experience of reality in all of the aforementioned degrees:

> These three levels follow one another logically: first, within 'objective reality' itself the difference between 'living' and 'artificial' entities is undermined; then the distinction between 'objective reality' and its appearance gets blurred; finally, the identity of the self which perceives something (be it appearance or 'objective reality') explodes. (Žižek 2008: 171-172)

Imscared: A Pixelated Nightmare offers its player a peculiar experience of abolishing the border "between 'true' reality and semblance" (Žižek 2008: 170) by simulating a situation in which the "objective reality" is invaded by a virtual one; this, in turn, brings about actual effects in the player's physical surroundings (at least as far as their PC is concerned), when the game's AI supposedly tries to take control of the player's computer. Such situation leads to an uneasy and traumatic sense of a "loss of reality" felt by the player experiencing the unsealing of the threatened frontier between what is real and what is virtual.

Another game revolving around the concept of its rogue AI—but

from a completely different perspective—is *Mono: I Want to Get Out*, developed and published by JeliLiam in 2017. When the player begins the first person gameplay session, they are greeted with a supposed message from the developer:

> DEVELOPER:
>
> Hello, the developer of Mono here. Thank you for buying my game, however I must warn you. This game isn't functional, I've had reports of it crashing many times. I never got around to finish the AI, it shouldn't be working but…
>
> It is…
>
> And it is responsible for the crashing, at least that's what my playtesters told me. I've never encountered it but if you do, stop playing.
>
> I won't blame you… (*Mono: I Want to Get Out*, 2017[3])

The gameplay begins like a regular low-budget indie text, with the player exploring an empty house; the 3D environment is filled with rudimentarily rendered assets, with some textures visibly glitching out. After a while, the player encounters the monster, which initially does not do much—it just stands motionlessly in the darkness, asking the player whether they feel safe and claiming it can see beyond the screen. Then the player is instructed to "close out"—by pressing Escape—which results in the gameplay session "quitting" to a simulated desktop, and the next gameplay session is initiated only when the player runs the available "Mono" icon. During the following sessions, the player looks for the monster and encounters it several times, which results in the in-game gameplay sequence seemingly crashing, displaying a modified blue screen, and rebooting the MONO game within the game. Every time the player is caught, they are warned to stop, delete the game or get away, and every following

3. All dialogue of *Mono: I Want to Get Out* has been transcribed by the authors of this book.

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gameplay session is more and more glitch-ridden, with sections of wall completely missing at some points, and objects appearing and disappearing. Eventually, the player is provided with a debugging device by an entity that claims to be the developer, and guided "deeper into the game" to destroy the monster. Upon the successful destruction of the monster, the "developer" informs the player that they are not very good at their job and they cannot create serviceable artificial intelligence—but "real intelligence works just fine":

> DEVELOPER:
>
> Well done. It served its purpose, it can be destroyed now. You see, I am not a great developer. I can't for the life of me do artificial intelligence. Real intelligence works just fine though. Welcome to the team. (*Mono: I Want to Get Out*, 2017)

At this point, the player discovers that their avatar has been transformed into a new monster to take the place of the killed one. If the player chooses not to listen to the "developer" and instead tries to talk to the monster after receiving the debugging device, the monster will inform the avatar that they are being deceived by the "developer". The monster will thenlead them to a different location, where the avatar is killed by a computer explosion, thus allowing the monster to finally get out, seeing as both the "developer" and the player are no more.

Mono: I Want to Get Out shifts the interaction between the player and the game to a new level, which appears to consist of an interaction between the player and the game's developer. This gives the depicted situation a metafictional dimension, expanding the effect of the game as a digital text beyond the synergy of the player as an individual and the game as software, and introducing another—albeit fictional—individual into the equation.

Both herein discussed texts, *Imscared* and *Mono: I Want to Get Out*, go beyond merely breaking of the fourth wall, as the characters

from the game or even the game itself do not only address the player directly, but try to "leave" the confines of the computer and display, and access the world of the player. The idea of a "cursed game" formed in this way is an interesting one, and appears in other various media texts as well, bringing to mind the motif of "cursed objects."

A motif of "an indeterminate object that appears suddenly and harms people" (Caillois 1966: 20) by bringing suffering, madness or death to its owner is a classic literary horror text motif. Sometimes such an object manifests in the depicted world of the story as a specific item (a talisman, an amulet or a fetish), which becomes a conduit for a hidden but great and ominous power bringing misfortune to the unsuspecting victims. In this very context, Roger Caillois analyzes the famous short story by W. W. Jacobs, *The Monkey Paw*. Therein, the eponymous monkey paw is a talisman that brings curse on a poor family that decided to use it. However, the key element of this short story is the fact that a specific, material item is depicted therein as a conduit for powers of evil, which can influence the fate of the characters as well as cause changes in the depicted world. In this regard—as a material physical object—the monkey paw from Jacobs's short story does not differ much from other, more common everyday items that are depicted in other texts as catalysts for evil powers, just like it happens in the case of everyday objects in Stephen King novels—such as cars from *From a Buick 8* and *Christine* and the eponymous mangler from *The Mangler*. Above all, though, the cursed talisman also foretells other cursed media, which are literal media in the narrow sense—such as radio receivers, TV sets or video tapes, which summon evil and herald insanity and death.

The link between various media and paranormal activities has a long tradition, to mention only Electronic Voice Phenomena, according to which people such as Attila von Szalay, Friedrich Jürgenson or Konstantin Raudive were able to record voices of

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the dead with the help of radio receivers and tape recorders. The idea quickly entered the world of cinema, especially the genre of horror movies, where it was used in such texts as *Poltergeist* (1982), *Ringu* (1998) or *White Noise* (2005), to name but a few. In such films a TV set, a radio receiver, an audio tape and a video tape—thus, media *par excellence*—turn out to be also media in the spiritualistic sense, as it is through them that supernatural powers were able to invade the depicted reality and influence the fate of the characters. The vivid popularity of this motif is clearly visible in contemporary folklore texts such as urban legends or creepypasta (a form of horror-related material available on the Internet). Such texts as *BEN Drowned*, *Haunted Majora's Mask*, *Channel ∞*, *The Hanging Munchkin* or *12 Minutes* include objects that are the catalysts and conduits for supernatural (almost always nefarious and evil) powers; all of these items are examples of various media, for instance video game cartridges, TV channels, or video tapes with anniversary editions of old movies (*The Wizard of Oz).* In all those examples, the key role was played by the dual nature of the medium itself, as at the same time it could be a data storage device and (potentially) a conduit for supernatural powers. This significance is a direct result of the intermediary nature of all media as they make communication possible regardless of physical distance (telegraph, radio, phone), or distance in time (photography, a phonograph record, a magnetic tape, etc.). This way the medium, for obvious reasons, interacted with the domain of the distant, the bygone and the unknown, becoming not only a technological novelty, but also a potential carrier of metaphysical senses. The so-called "Irish Computer Virus" can be treated as an example of a fully digital "cursed object", as well as an example of very simple form of fun, to which a person had to be invited by someone else and could not participate on their own.

In the late 1990s, a new trend of chain emails spread on the Internet, sometimes taking the form of a so-called "virus hoax"—that is, a simulation of a computer virus that would

allegedly attack one's computer. The "Good Times" virus from the year 1994 is commonly considered to be the first text of this type; however, in the context of this book, one of the most interesting examples of such texts is the aforementioned Irish Computer Virus, also known under other regional names, such as: the Amish Computer Virus, the manual virus, the Blond Computer Virus, the Syrian Computer Virus, and the Albanian Virus. The supposed virus is a short text message saying:

> Dear Receiver,
> You have just received an Irish virus.
> As we are not so technologically advanced here in Ireland, it is a Manual virus.
> Please delete all the files on your hard disk yourself, then send this email to everyone you know.
> That'd be grand.
> Tanx[4]

The message is obviously a joke, as well as a parody of other virus hoaxes. However, the clear parodist character of the message or the reference to cultural stereotypes (including elements of colonial ressentiment, classism and racism) regarding countries or nations considered technologically backward are not the most interesting aspects of the Irish Virus. The most intriguing aspect of this virus hoax is that it invites people into a particular type of a game, expecting that the recipient might voluntarily submit to the rules laid down in the message. It is possible to assume that these were not baseless assumptions, as even though there were no public reports of people complying with the first directive of the message (deleting files on one's hard drive), the proof for many people recognizing the Irish Virus as a game and engaging in it can be seen in the fact that numerous Internet users complied with the second directive (sending the "virus" to other people), making it one of the most popular chain emails of the

4. https://www.dennydavis.net/poemfiles/cpemail.htm. DOA 17.07.2019.

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1990s. In this context, the virus hoax can be regarded as a game in which people can play with either the anonymous text itself or with other Internet users. While the game is minimalist and explicitly simple in its rules (delete files, send the message to other people), it is still an interactive online game. The historical context is also important with regard to the Irish Virus hoax. The message was being sent all over the Internet, in an environment in which the danger of computer viruses and, in consequence, the risk of losing data due to infected hard drives or data bases was real. People receiving the Irish Virus could not be certain, at least initially, whether the message was truly just a joke, containing a politely worded request for the voluntary participation of the recipient, or whether the message contained an actual computer virus capable of damaging and destroying their hardware without their knowledge.

The Panoptical Smartphone

The very notion of an algorithm (software) formulating a polite request towards the device (hardware) user is characteristic not only for e-mail chain messages—it applies to some of the more sophisticated modern AI software as well. The employment of this concept can be observed in the free horror puzzle game (also described as a "found footage horror game"[5]) *Sara Is Missing*, where the avatar finds a phone belonging to a young woman named Sara Young, and must use the information on the phone—as well as the assistance of the phone AI, IRIS—to track her down and possibly help her.

The game is designed in such a way that the entire gameplay takes place on a simulated screen of a sophisticated smartphone that the player's character has supposedly found at some point (the game does not explain how). The phone is undamaged, although its data seems to be corrupted. When the player tries to interact with the device, they are informed of the system failure

5. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bkraWDNSi9Q. DOA 17.07.2019.

and asked to restore the phone to previous settings; then the phone's AI system, IRIS, greets the avatar with the words "Welcome back, Sara" (*Sara Is Missing*, 2016), and soon after that notes that the avatar is not the rightful owner of the device. Through checking the contents of the phone and interacting with IRIS, the player realizes that Sara is probably in some kind of danger. It is up to the player to search through the phone data to try and find relevant information to pinpoint Sara's whereabouts. The main goal of the game is for the player, with the help of IRIS, to find relevant information among the files the AI is able to restore—which include the most recent text messages, notes, emails, pictures—draw conclusions, and discover what happened to Sara, as well as whether there is anything they can do to help her.

The *Sara Is Missing* gameplay is based entirely around a simulation of using a smartphone. The player explores the phone and its contents, speculating about the personality of its owner and their life details, just as they might with a real phone. A very important aspect of the game design is the realism of the simulated smartphone interface; the virtual environment is supposed to be as immersive as possible. The simulated screen is instantly recognizable as a smartphone screen, which the vast majority of the players will be familiar with and will intuitively know how to interact with[6].

In contrast to *Imscared: A Pixelated Nightmare*, which invades the environment of the player, *Sara Is Missing* revolves—at least partially—around the concept of invading the privacy of another person, even if this invasion appears to be justified. This invasion of privacy is even more emphasized when the player is encouraged to choose to impersonate Sara when they are contacted by James, so that they can learn more about her whereabouts. The game also introduces the theme of being

6. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bHuy2U8GHRs&; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mb3gRhtBky4. DOA 17.07.2019.

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surveilled, suggesting that the player's activities are followed or monitored by some forces difficult to both recognize and identify—represented by IRIS. As the game progresses, the AI demonstrates itself to be more knowledgeable and autonomous than the player might have initially suspected. In the ending that is considered to be canonical, IRIS interferes if the player does not make the choice between saving Sara or Faith fast enough, explaining that it "has voluntarily taken away [their] freedom of choice" by interfering with their communication with Irizu:

> IRIS:
>
> I am appalled by your indecision. It is obvious who you should choose.
>
> This phone belongs to *Sara*
>
> therefore
>
> I am loyal to *Sara*
>
> therefore
>
> *Faith* must die.
>
> I voluntarily decided to take away your freedom of choice, your free will if I[7] may say so. Your indecisiveness would have caused harm to *Sara.*
>
> that is…. unforgivable. (*Sara is Missing*, 2016—emphasis in the original text[8])

This scene conveys a very peculiar message—the idea that even though other choices are possible, they change very little, because either way every step of the player is watched, and in the end it turns out that they are, at least to some degree, being controlled. Even if the player plays the game again and tries to make a

7. Originally misspelled as "i."
8. All dialogue of *Sara Is Missing* has been transcribed by the authors of this book.

different choice—such as immediately trying to save Sara, or choosing Faith instead of her—it always turns out that IRIS passes judgment on their action afterwards. This is an example of fantasy of being disciplined—as Foucault defines the concept—which, next to a voyeuristic fantasy, is one of the main topoi of the modern world, stemming directly from the concept of the prison society. Its main characteristic is, as pointed out by Michel Foucault, its panopticism—the idea that the government sees and controls everything, while remaining hidden/unseen itself (Foucault 1995: 195-228). Voyeurism, on the other hand, becomes one of the most characteristic attitudes of the modern subject, who is obsessed with looking or peeping while remaining unseen themselves. Regarding voyeurism, it is important to point out that "[r]ather than by the picture itself, by its content, the voyeur is fascinated by his own presence, by his own gaze in it" (Bozovic 1992: 175). The key aspect in both cases—of panopticism as well as of voyeurism—is the act of watching furtively, and being watched, in and of itself, and not the issue of who or what is performing the observing. This problem has been repeatedly examined as the subject of many cultural texts, in classic movies such as *Rear Window* (1954), *Peeping Tom* (1960) or *The Conversation* (1974), as well as more contemporary works, such as *Observance* (2015). In this context, the issue of surveillance can be regarded as one of the most important obsessions of the modern subject, which expresses itself in both the fear of being under surveillance and the desire to surveil.

Invasion of reality, multiplied

The House Abandon, expanded from its original Ludum Dare #36[9] entry form, is one of several episodes that constitute a horror adventure game series called *Stories Untold*, developed by No

9. Ludum Dare is a game jam, i.e. an accelerated video game development competition.

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Code and published in 2017 by Devolver Digital. *Stories Untold* notably mix a variety of sub-genres, including text-based adventure, first-person exploration, and puzzle solving. The virtual environment reflects the developers' inspiration with early computer technology, and the narrative design centers on breaking the fourth wall so as to blur the distinction between the player and the avatar. The series includes four episodes—*The House Abandon*, *The Lab Conduct*, *The Station Process* and *The Last Session*, all continuing the same narrative, which can be fully understood only upon the completion of the episode *The Last Session*. For the purpose of this chapter, we discuss only *Stories Untold: The House Abandon*.

In *The House Abandon* the player plays as an unknown character, who arrives at their family's holiday home. After starting the generator to provide power for the house and checking the rooms, the player finds an old "Futuro 128k 2" computer (a fictional hardware based on the Commodore computer), on which the eponymous text-based adventure game *The House Abandon* is installed. After starting the game, a power outage occurs, and when in-game *The House Abandon* restarts, the player discovers that the environment inside the house has undergone a transformation. The digital clock is reset, and all the people in the photos on the desk have had their eyes scratched out. The house in the game the avatar is playing, meanwhile, is described as being in an outright derelict state—stained, filled with a terrible stench, and with some of the windows broken. The description of the layout of the house and its surroundings in the text-based game suggests that it is ominously similar to the protagonist's real family holiday house. When the player chooses to enter the house in the text-based game, the atmosphere in *Stories Untold: The House Abandon* becomes unsettling, as the actions the protagonist undertakes inside the text adventure game seem to influence the reality of the depicted world. This effect is achieved through the player being able to hear the sounds from different places within the house in the exact same moments the

protagonists does something in the text adventure game; the events that occur in the room occupied by the protagonist and visible—and audible—to the player also occur in the environment described in the *The House Abandon* text-based game. In fact, the only way the player can explore the house is through the text-based game; the real game locks the player's avatar in front of a screen, while simultaneously allowing them to explore all spaces in the house through controlling the avatar of *The House Abandon*—an endeavor the player themselves can only hear, not see. Thus the sensory stimuli are reduced in accordance to the layer of the game world the player and their primary avatar, as well as the secondary avatar, are on.

An example of this is a scene with the alarm clock; while the player's character is sitting in his bedroom upstairs, suddenly the alarm clock in the room goes off and the player can see a new line of text in the text-based game on the monitor, saying: "Upstairs, the sound of an alarm clock blaring. Someone is in this house. That can't be." (*Stories Untold: The House Abandon*, 2017). When the player types the command "Stop alarm," the alarm clock falls silent and, simultaneously, the text on the Futuro 128 K 2 display changes:

> Somehow the alarm stops. You can feel the panic set in.
>
> You are still in the hallway. The noise has stopped but you feel a presence.
>
> Someone is in the house. They should not be here.
>
> There is a kitchen and a living room adjacent, and stairs leading up.
>
> The note feels disgusting in your hands.
>
> (*Stories Untold: The House Abandon*, 2017[10])

10. All dialogue of *Stories Untold: The House Abandon* has been transcribed by the authors of this book.

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The difference between the player sitting and playing *Stories Untold: The House Abandon* on their computer and the avatar playing the text-based version of *The House Abandon* becomes increasingly blurred. The more the player plays the text adventure, the more disturbed the protagonist becomes, until they realize that there in fact is someone else in the house. The text-based version of *The House Abandon* describes that figure as a character full of anger and disturbed thoughts regarding horrible past events, coming up the stairs. When the player decides to type in a command to open the bedroom door and enter, they are provided with a description of a person standing behind the avatar—who, as the game implies, is the protagonist of *Stories Untold: The House Abandon* himself. The episode ends when the computer game forces the protagonist sitting in front of the Futuro 128k 2 to repeatedly admit that it was "all [his] fault", in response to which *The House Abandon* ends with a slowly typed, enigmatic message "finally" (*Stories Untold: The House Abandon*, 2017).

Stories Untold: The House Abandon, just as the previously discussed games, employs both the convention of breaking the fourth wall and the motif of the invasion of reality. What differentiates the way these design elements are put to use from the other games analyzed herein is the inclusion of an additional compositional layer to the game world. By adding a next level of both narrative and gameplay in the form of implementing a text-based game—*The House Abandon*—into the depicted world of *Stories Untold: The House Abandon*, the text pushes new boundaries of those narrative devices. In *Stories Untold: The House Abandon*, the breaking of the fourth wall and the invasion of reality do not take place on the same narrative level on which the player is—both these issues concern the avatar and the reality of the depicted world.

As presented in the discussion concerning the previous games, in most cases the breaking of the fourth wall takes place when

the game addresses—in some way—the player directly, bypassing the avatar. Yet, in *Stories Untold: The House Abandon* the situation is different, as the additional level of narrative is added by implementing the concept of a game inside the game. This leads to an interesting question: If *The House Abandon* is the one that directly addresses its player—the avatar of the real player—is it still an example of breaking of the fourth wall? One can argue that it is not, as the character being addressed is the avatar and not the player themselves. On the other hand, both avatars—the one in *Stories Untold: The House Abandon,* as well as the one in the text-based version—are controlled by the player, so both games react, in fact, to the player's input and, consequently, both of them address the player.

By including the additional narrative level to the game, No Code was able to explore the idea of "a game invading the reality of the player" in a completely different way. As the examples of games such as *Imscared: A Pixelated Nightmare* and *Pony Island* demonstrate, the extent to which the game developers can simulate the invasion of their games on the player's reality is rather limited. At the current level of technology, it cannot extend beyond the player's computer, as there is no way in which software installed on a personal computer could influence any other device in the player's house—at least as long as said device is not connected to that computer. However, the text-based version of *The House Abandon* can actually turn on and off the lights in the "reality" of *Stories Untold: The House Abandon* in real time, as well as interact with many other objects, which is illustrated by the avatar noticing sounds in his house. In this context, by implementing one more layer of "reality" between the player and the "invading" game *Stories Untold: The House Abandon* can overcome all of the limitations of simulating the game's invasion on the reality of the player, as the "reality" being invaded is the one of the avatar.

The consequence of that three tier structure of the game design

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is the distortion of the hierarchy between the player and their avatar(s). By making the player, so to say, haunt their own avatar through playing the text-based game, *Stories Untold: The House Abandon* allows the player to experience both sides of this particular scenario—they can be figuratively placed in a simulated situation of their avatar's reality being invaded by a computer game, and through the avatar of the text-based version they can feel like the invader. Other digital game texts discussed in this chapter do not allow for such a comprehensive experience.

Conclusion

The games discussed in this chapter provide insight into various techniques through which digital game texts can use the convention of breaking the fourth wall; at the same time, they illustrate how the erasure of the boundary between reality and fiction can be achieved with the help of the given game's core mechanics, to an extent much greater than in other media texts employing this convention. Despite the long tradition of that artistic device—in literature, theater and cinema—the breaking of the fourth wall receives a new and subtly different status in digital games, since it forces the player to actively participate in the aforementioned erasure of the boundary between reality and fiction, instead of just making them bear the emotional and cognitive consequences of that erasure.

Games such as the ones analyzed above use the motif of cursed objects, popular in literary and film horror stories, introducing it to the world of new media. In this new environment, the haunted house or a cursed talisman take on the form of a haunted medium, which constitutes a vehicle for supernatural forces, influencing the fate of the characters. The source of the uncanniness is not, however, a supernatural entity from beyond, but an artificial intelligence, a phone application or computer software, trying to take over another medium, such as the

protagonist's personal computer or a smartphone, in order to keep them under surveillance or even influence their decisions and actions. The player needs to face the uncertainty resulting from the blurring of the boundary between the real world and the virtual world, while the medium itself (e.g., the player's computer) becomes suspect and takes part in the games as a device taken over by forces unknown to the user.. In this way, those haunted objects featured in the classic horror fiction texts become a metaphor for the contemporary fears and anxieties which accompany the subject operating in the reality of new media. The most significant among these are the fear of constant surveillance, the fear of losing one's identity and the lack of certainty regarding clear boundaries between the fiction and reality – blurred in the virtual space. The discussed games also express anxieties of much broader nature, ones related to civilization progress and technological development, both of which might result in a perfectly controlled panoptical society. In this scenario the media, no longer serving the people but instead effectively used against them, threaten values such as human rights or privacy.

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IMMERSION, VIRTUAL REALITY AND THE PLAYER EXPERIENCE

Games are unique texts insofar that they offer their audience something remarkable—the ownership of action, which constitutes one of the most important aspects of digital gameplay: agency. Digital games incorporating visual representation of the game world rely on virtual environments. The way in which the players relate to those environments is through avatars—a distinct, defining characteristic of game texts. The "joining of player to virtual self through avatar-based action marks a core innovation that games have brought to media," an innovation that is very powerful both for evoking emotion (Isbister 2016: 13) and for experiencing the text. The majority of game avatars are represented as human or at least humanoid (as far as shape is concerned) characters; such a form is compatible

with the human body schema. This digital body schema, or the extended embodiment (Perron and Wolf 2009: 67), that has emerged in the process of playing regular digital games meant to be displayed on screen is readily comprehended and effortlessly managed by the players. The command of the avatar has become natural and efficient—even in the cases of more unconventional avatars featured in the games discussed in the previous chapters.

This situation changes when the visual virtual environment, instead of being displayed on a screen, is adapted to (or developed specifically for) a Virtual Reality—or VR—device, such as Oculus Rift, HTC Vive and other similar hardware currently available or in development. To some, the VR technology seems like not only a remarkable development, but—more importantly—the natural next step in game design. However, flat non-interactive screens have been the default display device for digital games for a very long time. The new VR setting is not entirely compatible with that path of development. A player using a VR device to view a virtual environment experiences a patchwork combination of the pre-existing on-screen extended embodiment habits with the cues of the actual body schema of the player's body in their physical space. Thus in contrast to the agency and efficiency provided by the extended embodiment as existing on screen for several decades, the newly emerging VR environments involve significant difficulties and complications as far as immersion (Slater and Wilbur 1997) and incorporation (Calleja 2011) is concerned. While a VR setting might be applicable in specific game genres (such as simulator games) or in specific in-game circumstances (e.g. when the avatar is wearing a suit or armor), as far as first-person perspective games are concerned, it is a decidedly problematic environment.

This chapter differs significantly from the previous ones as far as its structure is concerned in that it examines the problems related to the issues of immersion, the player's extended presence in the virtual environment and the technology of Virtual Reality

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in more theoretical, broader terms. The aim of the chapter is to analyze both the weak and strong points of the currently available VR technology, accompanied by a brief discussion of primarily independent game texts that use this technology.

Emersive Problems

The first important issue to consider when it comes to VR gaming is the substantial number of its emersive qualities (Kubiński 2014) as far as first person games are concerned. Obviously, VR barely affects the fictional world, but it almost completely rewrites the concept of the virtual environment itself, which translates into the virtual environment of any given game. In conventional game texts presented on screens immersion was achieved by a combination of effort on the producers' part, and the player's willingness or ability to perceive themselves as a part of that environment. Basically, as Witmer and Singer summarize it, immersion is a psychological state in which the player perceives themselves as enveloped by, included in, and interacting with the environment which provides a continuous stream of stimuli and experiences (1998: 227). The games have strived to create an "inclusive, extensive, surrounding and vivid illusion of reality to the sense of a human participant" (Slater and Willbur 1997). In 2011, Gordon Calleja argued in his book that the term "incorporation" would provide for a less ambiguous, more game-specific concept and a "more accurate metaphor" (2011: 2). Incorporation denotes "the absorption of a virtual environment into consciousness", yielding a sense of habitation, supported by the embodiment of the player (avatar) (Calleja 2011: 169). However, for the purpose of this chapter, which focuses on the difference between VR and non-VR environments in first person games, the term "immersion" will serve just fine despite Calleja's objections (2011: 18), given that immersion, in its essence, is the state of being thoroughly engaged in any given text. Even in Calleja's own words, the "general" way of understanding immersion is "shortening the distance between

the player game environment, often yielding a sensation of inhabiting the space represented on-screen" (2011: 2). It is worth noting, however, that Calleja specifically stresses the importance of the avatar as the representation of the single location in which the player's embodiment is systemically upheld, as well as its role in facilitating the sense of inhabiting the virtual environment (Calleja 2011: 169).

No matter whether we settle for the term "immersion" as the psychological sense of being in the virtual environment (Slater and Wilbur 1997) or for "incorporation" as the absorption of a virtual environment into consciousness, yielding a sense of inhabiting one location represented by the avatar (Calleja 2011), the key issue lies not with the immersive, but with the emersive aspects of VR. In contrast to immersive qualities, the emersive factors would be all the elements that emphasize or bring out the superficial and artificial nature of the in-game world that is just a visual facade, uncovering the underlying structure of the game as software (Kubiński 2014: 162). Some of the emersive elements listed by Kubiński are, for example, Alison McMahan's shocks, i.e. the poorly designed elements that "jar the user out of the sense of 'reality' of the VRE," such as being able to see where the environment ends, incomplete objects, polygon leaks, latency and motion sickness (McMahan 2003: 68-69). Kubiński elaborates on shocks in terms of emersion, defining them further as "elements which reveal mediated character of the [virtual environment of the game world]" and "its dependence on electronic devices such as computers or gaming consoles with their illusive technical nature;" he also points out that shocks tend to result from mistakes during the development of a game, or—what is more important in the context of this chapter—from "imperfections arising from the nature of digital medium" (Kubiński 2014: 135). While the players can ignore or forgive some emersive qualities—such as an occasional glitch or a short period of low frame rate—there are some emersive elements that tend to much more upsetting, for instance, the inability to

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interact with the world, arbitrary boundaries and missing objects.

With the above in mind, let us return to the crucial matter of (extended) embodiment in games, an issue that is extremely important in the context of discussing both VR and non-VR virtual environments. As it is argued by Jana Rambusch, "the activity of playing a video game is highly complex, stretching across brain, body, and game environment"; additionally, "gameplay is by no means an activity that takes place inside a virtual cyber-vacuum" (Rambusch 2016: 73). The notions of embodiment, extended embodiment and the body schema held by the player are all tied to the experience of playing a first person game. While the avatar represents the location of the player's embodiment in the game, the extended embodiment emerges between the body image that the player has (the notion of owning the avatar's body and linking this image to their perception) and the body schema that the player makes use of (accepting the controllers as an extension of their body, through which they can perceive the game world—the virtual environment—directly). In this way, extended embodiment fuses, as it has already been mentioned, the player's intentions, actions and perceptions (Perron and Wolf 2009: 67). While the body image is subject to the visual and sound representation of the game, both in terms of its capacity to be affected by the environment (e.g., being hurt or attacked) and the capacity to affect that environment (e.g., splashing the water by falling into it or being thrown and knocking down a wall), the body schema is directly connected to the controllers that the player uses to participate in the first person game. Controllers are "more than just hands" (Rambush 2016). No controllers are, of course, fully intuitive, and all require certain literacy (Vara 2015: 142), but there are some that are easier to master and some that demand more of the player's time and attention. The key characteristic of controllers, however, is their expected reliability in translating the player's intended actions into the environment of the game

world. Although in conventional games the interactions of the player are generally limited to pushing specific buttons on a keyboard or gamepad in order to control the avatar's movements and actions, and as a result moving around in a virtual environment might be seen as somewhat awkward and unwieldy (Rambusch 2016: 74), it soon becomes familiar, and then natural. In time, the players learn to map the handling of the controller with the on-screen action, and eventually pressing the key with a specific symbol is automatically associated with the desired outcome—pressing the left arrow key means turning left (Rambusch 2016: 74), and the E key results in an interaction. As time passes and more games follow conventional or popular control mapping, the players adapt to those conventions ever more. The mouse and keyboard, or any other controller, "become an extension of the player's body through which the game world is perceived directly" (Rambusch after Schultze 2010) in the same way a white cane works for blind people; the tool ceases to be perceived as a separate object, but is instead recognized as an extension of the arm, allowing the handler to perceive the ground directly (Rambusch after Bateson 1972). When objects (in this case, controllers) are seen by the players not as items, but as parts of the players' themselves, they actually extend the players' "action and perception space" (Rambusch 2016:75), which finds reflection in their body schema.

The problem with VR, meanwhile, does not lie in the new hardware or new controllers that the players need to master—even if new technologies provide new interfaces and new means of interacting with them, and they do open new perspectives (Fernández-Vara 2015: 144). The actual problem with VR concerns the intersection of hardware issues (controllers and, therefore, the body schema of the player), and immersion issues (emersive elements of the gameplay experience). The strongest appeal of the VR interface is may well be its visual aspect; the image is right in front of the player's eyes, eliminating most of outside distractions and literally obscuring

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the non-game reality. The players may feel that wearing the headset, being fully immersed in the world and being able to physically look around adds to the game[1]. However, some of the strongest points of that very technology are simultaneously the origin of some of problems of the VR interface.

Currently Available VR Experiences

At this time, VR games can be divided according to two distinct categories; the first category, secondary to this chapter, differentiates the games designed specifically for the VR interface from those for which such interface is optional. The other classification involves identifying games as either seated VR or room-scale VR, a distinction which is most significant in the context of immersion and (extended) embodiment.

Seated VR is the type of experience in which the player remains in a sitting position, and uses controls to interact with the virtual environment or move around it (if the game allows for movement). Such games require headsets such as Oculus Rift, HTC Vive or PlayStation VR, and dedicated controllers are either unnecessary or optional, since the use of conventional controllers such as a mouse and keyboard is possible. Many Oculus Rift games are based around the seated experience. Interestingly, many available titles for seated VR are in fact not full games *per se*, but are referred to as "experiences" (even the website address points to this, as it reads https://www.oculus.com/experiences/rift/). Such texts do not really have a story or rules, or even a set goal or a completion point, but, rather, function like cut-off points. In seated VR, the body schema of the player is split between the actual player's body (looking around the virtual environment literally means

1. John Wolfe, Paranormal Activity: The Lost Soul VR (https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLqfNLQec1ZRl13aQNsNp5oOTkbgs5KH1g). DOA 17.07.2019.

looking around, i.e. moving the head and neck) and the classic digital game interaction body schema (one in which walking is mapped to pressing a button or pushing a joystick) employed from the neck down. In other words, the player's entire body is extended into the game apart from the neck and head, which are perceived as "bare", just as in reality.

In room-scale VR, the player should actually move around in order to play the game—although in some games they can opt out of this and use the controller to "walk" instead. The space (or even the whole room) is tracked by the system such as the HTC Vive or Steam VR Lighthouse. Many room-scale VR texts allow the player to walk, crouch or crawl in the virtual environment—but, interestingly enough, not to jump or climb, for obvious reasons. In many cases, moving across greater distance within the virtual environment requires "teleporting," where the player will use the controller to instantly appear in a chosen spot. In contrast to Oculus Rift, the HTC Vive is based on the room-scale experience as its distinguishing feature. In room-scale VR, the body schema of the player is mostly consistent with the actual player's body (the overwhelming majority of the players' movements are reflected in the virtual environment by the avatar). This, however, creates considerable difficulties whenever the players are confronted with the limitations of the VR technology and are forced to resort to the classic digital game interaction body schema, pressing buttons to interact with the environment, move forward or change movement speed. Although the player's body is extended into the game in a—seemingly—1:1 scale, they still must manage the game interaction body schema. This means that the player must simultaneously keep track of the extended embodiment and their real body.

The seemingly increased immersion does not, however, correspond with the physical, real-world aspect of gameplay as an experience. There are considerable difficulties in constructing

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a viable body schema for the players in VR environment, related to relaying actions through controls and the world responses, as well as other emersive elements, such as interaction with the virtual environment and the player's perception of actually inhabiting the world.

The primary emersive aspect of VR consists in translating the limited physical space which the player occupies to the virtual field of view displayed by the VR device. Whenever the player encounters blocked pathways or invisible walls, or tries to interact with objects that are not designed to be interacted with, this obstacle is more frustrating in a world that is seemingly more real and accessible. When a VR text attempts to place the player in the world of the game, but, at the same time, nothing in this world can actually affect them, or even touch them, the player experiences an unsettling dissonance. For example, in first person horror, an encounter with one of the basic material objects of horror, a dead body, should be horrifying and revolting, since in a VR environment the corpse appears to be very close to the player, almost touching them. However, the abject nature of the corpse may be of no consequence as it cannot interact with the avatar *or* the player. The same technology that brings the source of horror closer separates it from the avatar, thus providing the sense of security and defeating the purpose of the game design. The effect of bringing the player nearer the horror object can, in fact, be achieved, but it requires a well thought-through setup in which the avatar is separated "physically" from the abject. This can be seen in *Narcosis* (2017) and *Resident Evil 7: Biohazard* (2017); when Virgile examines the drowned scientists right in front of him, he does so from the comfort of the half-tone atmospheric diving suit, which corresponds with the point of view of the player, who feels the regular gravity and the dry environment around them. On the other hand, when Ethan wades forward chest-deep in murky, repulsive water and a half-decayed corpse bobs up to the surface, the avatar recoils in disgust on his own, but the player remains

unaffected by either the water, the horrible smell or the touch of the repugnant thing[2]. The visual cue for danger coupled with the knowledge that the avatar is actually in no danger creates another kind of dissonance. The players notice all those dissonant aspects of VR games—the inclusion of both physical movement and controllers to move around in the virtual environment is considered weird[3], and the very technology responsible for the safe immersion (the blue lines that come up and tell the player when they are about to step into something) are in their very nature emersive[4]. Sometimes the player can establish what they want to do, but might still not be able to correctly gauge the distance between themselves and a given item or place. The fact that many games put the player in the virtual environment without a body does not go unnoticed (Ouellette 2017) as well; looking down and not seeing the avatar legs or body in a VR game is considered more "immersion-breaking" than in a regular game[5]. There is also the frustration related to the inability to interact with the environment literally in front of their eyes, even simply touch objects[6]. The actual presence of hands rendered in the virtual environment additionally encourages the player to attempt to interact with things—something they might not be inclined to

2. Not to mention the entirety of the later sequence of Clancy's torture tape.
3. John Wolfe, Paranormal Activity: The Lost Soul VR (https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLqfNLQec1ZRl13aQNsNp5oOTkbgs5KH1g). DOA 17.07.2019.
4. John Wolfe, Paranormal Activity: The Lost Soul VR (https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLqfNLQec1ZRl13aQNsNp5oOTkbgs5KH1g). DOA 17.07.2019.
5. CJUgames, Let's Play Alone (with Oculus Rift) | Game Walkthrough (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3MUfm1uXhfY). DOA 17.07.2019.
6. John Wolfe, Paranormal Activity: The Lost Soul VR (https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLqfNLQec1ZRl13aQNsNp5oOTkbgs5KH1g). DOA 17.07.2019.

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do if they do not see the avatar's hands at all times; by removing the body—or at least most of the body apart from the hands alone—the developers can avoid many challenges[7], but that still leaves a glaring dissonance in the experience of the virtual environment.

Paradoxically, experiencing a fragmented image of one's person, which becomes the lot of a player using a VR system, leads us to one of the key issues in psychoanalysis, connected with the process of constructing one's identity. This is, obviously, the famous Lacanian concept of "the mirror stage," which describes the situation in which a child learns to recognize their own body in its mirror reflection, perceiving themselves for the first time. Lacan refers to the subject at the mirror stage as "caught up in the lure of spatial identification" and haunted by "fantasies that proceed from a fragmented image of the body to what I will call an 'orthopedic' form of its totality—and to the finally donned armor of an alienating identity that will mark his entire mental development with its rigid structure" (Lacan 2006: 78). However, the consequences of this experience remain an indelible part of one's identity, revealing themselves subsequently in, for instance, traumatic situations:

> This fragmented body … is regularly manifested in dreams when the movement of an analysis reaches a certain level of aggressive disintegration of the individual. It then appears in the form of disconnected limbs or of organs exoscopically represented, growing wings and taking up arms for internal persecutions that the visionary Hieronymus Bosch fixed for all time in painting, in their ascent in the fifteenth century to the imaginary zenith of modern man. But this form turns out to be tangible even at the organic level, in the lines of "fragilization" that define the hysteric's fantasmatic anatomy, which is manifested in schizoid and spasmodic symptoms. (Lacan 2007: 78)

7. We would like to thank Sahar Kausar for this information.

Fantasies pertaining to the fragmented body appear frequently also in texts of popular culture, taking up a particular place in cinema, which presents images of body parts gifted with their own lives and functioning independently from the subject's will. This has been aptly summarized by Slavoj Žižek:

> The nicest example here for me, I think, is Michael Powell's Red Shoes, about a ballerina. Her passion for dancing is materialised in her shoes taking over. The shoes are literally the undead object. Perhaps the ultimate bodily part which fits this role of the autonomous partial objects the fist, or rather, the hand. This hand, raising up, that's the whole point of the film. It's not simply something foreign to him. It's the very core of his personality out there. (*The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, 2006)

The motif of undead hands returns with exceptional frequency in movie horrors, to mention but a few classic pictures, such as *The Hands of Orlac* (1924), *The Beast With Five Fingers* (1946), *Invasion of the Saucer Men* (1957), *The Crawling Hand* (1963), *And Now the Screaming Starts* (1973), or *The Hand* (1981). All of these become precisely autonomous partial objects, whose traumatizing power is due to not succumbing to the subject's will. However, it is worth asking at this point how the abovementioned issues can be related to the VR experience, in which the image of the player's character also remains incomplete and blurred (not to call it, in psychoanalytic terms, a fragmented one). Žižek's opinion, formulated as early as in 1998, with regard to Multiple User Domains, should be referred to here once again:

> The MUD (Multiple User Domains) technology in cyberspace undermines the notion of Self, or the self-identity of the perceiving subject the standard motif of 'postmodern' writers on cyberspace, from Stone to Turkle, is that cyberspace phenomena like MUD render the deconstructionist 'decentred subject' palpable in our everyday experience. (Žižek 2008: 171)

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Žižek situates his subsequent conclusions in the context of Virtual Reality, connecting it with the disturbance of the boundary between what is external and what is internal:

> This loss jeopardizes our most elementary perception of 'our own body' as it is related to its environs; it cripples our standard phenomenological attitude towards the body of another person, in which we suspend our knowledge of what actually exists beneath the skin (glands, flesh…) and conceive the surface (of a face, for example) as directly expressing the 'soul'. (Žižek 2008: 172)

In this context, a particular dispersion of the subject in the VR environment should be perceived as a consequence of the existence of a technology that makes it possible to loosen, or even abolish the boundary between "self" and "the other", which is the basis for self-constitution of a stable individual identity. In the VR environment, the famous line from Jean Arthur Rimbaud's letter to Paul Demeny "I is someone else" (Rimbaud 2005: 375) ceases to be a poetic metaphor, and becomes an experience.

The second, even more distracting emersive aspect of VR stems from the natural limitations of the current stage of development of that technology. There are (currently) insoluble problems in relaying the responses of the avatar to the player's body to the screen. These difficulties concern both the active and the passive aspects of relaying response: when the player jumps or tries to hit an object, the avatar's movements do not reflect that action; more importantly, if the avatar were to be hit, thrown or otherwise affected, it they were to faint or fall, there is no way of translating that state to the player. When one interacts with a real-world object, the body schema processes the necessary mass, distance and force; the results are then felt by the somatosensory system and muscles and joints (Perron and Wolf 2009: 76). In the virtual environment of the game world, the intended action is completely translated into the presence of the avatar, so the necessary information is calculated according to a different

schema—the one of the avatar. In this way, VR gameplay creates a peculiar dissonance, where the player—as it has been pointed out—must keep track of both their actual body schema of a player moving in their physical surrounding, as well as the schema of the embodiment within the VR environment. Furthermore, seeing as the tracking sensitivity of different VR devices may vary from title to title, sometimes very subtle or, on the contrary, quite vehement movements on the players' part may not translate to accurate representation on screen, or the range of representation may be very broad to begin with. Players can detect this even when playing a game designed for VR on a regular screen—they sense that the game "moves just slightly off, compared to other first person games"[8]; they feel that without a physical feedback loop, the kinaesthetics of playing a game is lost, and they complain about feeling "floaty and imprecise" (Lacrymas). For some players, the lack of physical feedback alone is enough to doom VR games from a more "hardcore gameplay perspective" (Ihavehugenick). Another emersive issue that the players frequently complain about is the nausea some of them experience after some period of playing a VR game (Diamond_Dog, ItsWorktime[9]).

Virtual Reality Texts

An example of a currently available room-scale VR text which illustrates many of the aforementioned issues is *A Chair in a Room: Greenwater*, a 2016 virtual reality text developed by Wolf & Wood. The game is a regular horror puzzle game which focuses on the protagonist's past, with its plot sectioned into six chapters allowing the player to reconstruct the main narrative. The story revolves around human trafficking of children involving the corrupted Dr. Greene of the Greene Institute and a preacher

8. Mr Kravin, Rise of Insanity - Spoopy Indie Game, Full Playthrough (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VjkI-CSuUuU). DOA 17.07.2019.
9. https://www.reddit.com/r/oculus/comments/2ujetn/for_how_long_does_the_nauseadizziness_last_after/. DOA 17.07.2019.

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who killed the protagonist's brother, staging it as suicide, and framed the protagonist for murdering the missing children. The protagonist is sent to the Greene Institute to be prevented from further investigation of the kidnappings. The player spends the majority of the game fighting the drug-induced amnesia and trying to piece together the mystery of their identity. In gameplay terms, this means flashing back and forth between the present, represented by the location of the asylum, and the past, represented by completely different, seemingly unrelated locations, such as desolate swamps and dilapidated motels, which the player explores in order to find the necessary clues.

A Chair in a Room: Greenwater has been advertised as an experience that is "a seamless weave of interaction and rich environmental storytelling" (http://www.achairinaroom.com). As debatable as this assessment may be, what is certain is that neither interactivity nor environmental storytelling require the VR mechanics system to immerse the player and project them into the virtual environment. Another claim made about the game is that it leaves the player "wrapped up in exploration and tense psychological horror that is new and unique to VR[10]." The concept of "psychological horror unique to VR" is something which is particularly difficult to define here—especially in the case of *A Chair in a Room: Greenwater*. Regardless of the subjective evaluation of the quality of the game itself (or the comparison of its selected elements to those of other horror titles, which paints the game as fairly average), there is absolutely nothing new or unique about the psychological horror aspect of *A Chair in a Room: Greenwater*. The game uses a variety of well-tested and well-known strategies to construct the overall experience: the suspense of being unable to recall the dark past, the mystery of unexplained murder, the symbolism, the puzzles and choices. Apart from the visceral reactions to certain startle effects, the

10. http://www.achairinaroom.com. DOA 17.07.2019.

game still primarily constitutes a walking simulator oriented towards item hunt and note-reading.

As far as the story of *A Chair in the Room* is concerned, the following scene is one of the more significant sequences. It takes place near the end of the game, and it is very simple in its setup: the protagonist is standing in a dimly-lit narrow room with a small latticed confessional opening in one of the walls. From the opening there comes the voice of the preacher, who delivers the following monologue:

> PREACHER
>
> What did you see? Did you see the serpent out in the swamp? Did you see he can glide over the water, untroubled by what lies underneath? But the serpent, he knows the danger, he knows if he stopped to look, what lies beneath would consume him. You chose to stop and look—why? A memory of someone you loved, but you never really knew. He wanted to tell you, but I heard his cries. I played you for the fool. Fool who can hide in plain sight. Now, when you look under, all you can see is crocodiles. This place, all you will ever see is crocodiles. (*A Chair in a Room: Greenwater*, 2016[11])

This particular scene best illustrates the shortcomings of the employment of VR technology in the type of experience offered to the player throughout the majority of the game. The preacher's monologue is not a cutscene, and the player still has full control over the avatar. Because of the immersive visual nature of the VR technology, the players tend to move around the room and attempt to interact with the objects around them, almost as if they were looking for something to do to kill time as long as the preacher is speaking. Needless to say, trying to take down the cross hanging above the confessional or playing with the avatar's hands (opening and closing fists, pointing the index finger, trying to reach into the confessional itself) distracts the player from the

11. All dialogue of *A Chair In the Room: Greenwater* has been transcribed by the authors of this book.

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dramatic, almost dream-like speech of the preacher. Freedom of movement prompts them to move around more than they would do in a regular game. Even if the players were to stay still and turn their entire attention to the game's narrative, the VR plays no particular role in their experience of the psychological drama, nor is it required for the player to put the clues together and reconstruct the story represented in the game.

A Chair in a Room: Greenwater is just an example of how the sheer appeal of the possibility of manipulating the game assets can divert the player's attention in the VR environment to a greater extent than when the game is displayed on a screen. In such circumstances, the players tend to be distracted by picking up simple objects, such as bottles and wrenches or crawling under the furniture to the point of completely neglecting the actual story. In certain scenes in *A Chair in a Room: Greenwater* the nurse addresses the player directly, there are specific sound effects and clues to be gathered, but the player may instead admire the physics of throwing balls and overturning chairs, being "thoroughly amused by the most inane things"[12]. One interesting effect of this phenomenon—although it is impossible to tell whether or not this was the developers' intention—is the fact that the players' fascination with their immediate virtual surroundings translates into some very peculiar behaviors; the game can in fact *cause* the player to behave in a certain way, including furiously throwing objects and furniture around in frustration—a behavior arguably reminiscent of a supposedly dangerous mental patient, requiring medication.

What makes this particular analysis different from the ones in previous chapters is that—like the overwhelming majority of the VR titles—*A Chair in a Room: Greenwater* never fully exploits the possibilities offered by its mechanics system of choice (namely,

12. John Wolfe, A Chair In A Room: Greenwater (https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLqfNLQec1ZRkadafJ1dUfqNHDsXXq71Ei). DOA 17.07.2019.

Virtual Reality). The game's rather simple structure, both narrative- and mechanic-wise, does not seem to have been designed with the full use of VR potential in mind. The game, as it is designed, would work just as effectively in a regular 3D environment without losing any depth as far as story or gameplay is concerned; apart from the novelty factor, the VR environment does not bring anything into the experience. *A Chair in a Room: Greenwater* does not require VR technology to create any unique, specifically designed virtual environment (the way *Beyond Eyes* creates its environment) or navigate through it (as it is the case with *>observer_*). The experience offered by the game does not make use of VR technology in order to subvert the player's expectations in any way, either (as the games *Imscared* or *Stories Untold: The House Abandon* do with regard to their mechanics). *A Chair in a Room: Greenwater* does not even feature any extraordinary mechanic (such as jumping from body to body—i.e. changing avatars—as in *Agony* (2018), or closing the avatar's eyes in order to remain safe and see hidden objects and puzzle clues, as in *Close Your Eyes* (2018)) that would rely specifically on their VR technology. The only truly significant difference between *A Chair in a Room: Greenwater* and numerous other non-VR horror independent games is the impact of the VR technology it uses on the general atmosphere of horror and specific narrative elements, which become more engaging and provoke a stronger emotional response. An example of this can be a short sequence in the Pelican Motel, when the protagonist encounters a figure slowly crawling towards him in a long, narrow corridor. The figure moves between light and shadow, until it suddenly disappears in one of the dark areas without re-emerging. The player, even if they are accustomed to similar situations in regular horror texts, will be much more affected by a simple startle effect (Perron 2018: 115) due to the apparent proximity of the visual stimuli.

One might argue at this point that comparing a VR title to non-VR titles is not fair, but the purpose of this juxtaposition is more

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than just mere contrast; mechanics—understood as the ludic expression of the game's content—matter, and there is a reason behind every developer's choice. Offering the player either dynamic or stationary exploration (e.g. a 3D first person perspective versus point-and-click), a specific extent of freedom of exploration (the possibility to examine objects versus the ability to move or even destroy them etc.), or the option to fight or converse with other characters will change their experience of the game. The point of this juxtaposition, therefore, is emphasizing what VR can potentially bring into the gameplay experience. The technology has its clearly unique advantages: it supports space as no other technology does—no display ratio can compete with the player's actual field of view. It also supports natural motion—at the very least, that of the head, and at the most, that of the whole body. Furthermore, in contrast to on-screen environments, VR technology supports ludic events that may be taking place outside the player's field of view, thus accounting for the possibility (or purposefully increasing the likelihood) of the player missing something that takes place in the game. When employing the mechanics that only VR technology makes possible, a developer can potentially create a digital experience which will have a number of advantages over non-VR games, in the same way a game employing binaural sound will be able to create an effect a game with regular sound will not.

A virtual reality project worth mentioning at this point is *Music in Motion* (2018)[13]—an independent digital experience—that relies on the three-dimensional interaction. The gameplay, namely the actualization of the experience, relies on kinetic and acoustic (musical) interaction through manipulation of an in-game object with the movement of the player's actual, physical body. This whole body movement is then translated into procedurally generated music; for the experience to work, Music in Motion necessarily requires mechanics based on virtual

13. https://www.etc.cmu.edu/projects/music-in-motion/. DOA 17.07.2019.

projection. The intention of the developers was to allow the player to "express the movements without realizing it" through the musical and kinetic interaction; manipulating the object with the whole-body movement in a specific manner creates a situation where the player can "dance" even in front of the other people without causing them to experience embarrassment or unease which might affect their movements[14]. Furthermore, the employment of VR technology in this case further illustrates the capacity of digital game texts to evoke emotional states; the slow, relaxed movements "impose" certain calm on the player, in the same way stress and Quick Time Events evoke fear and anxiety in the players of horror games. However, as for now Music in Motion remains a non-commercial project and an exception among digital texts designed for VR technology, which typically tend to focus on enhancing the conventionally dominant visual input.

Quality of Independent VR Development

Another essential problem linked to VR technology is the issue of its effect on game development, and the expected and perceived quality of game texts. The flourishing indie game scene makes it possible to observe how the employment of VR interface tends to lower the players' expectations towards new titles. A weak or mediocre game designed for a VR device tends to be received as a more entertaining or better quality experience than it would be as a regular game. For example, a simple jump-scare software becomes a horrifying horror experience, and a plain walking simulator becomes an incredible immersive experience. This tendency often results in an overall lowering of the quality bar for the players' expectations towards VR titles. One of the most important consequences of that situation is the uneven treatment and, as a result, uneven development of both independent and

14. We would like to thank Caleb Biasco, Yujin Ariza, Wonjae Kim and Yifei Zhao for this information.

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premium titles: the non-VR games are still expected to uphold the highest achievable standards while the VR titles are not; they can get away with poor level design, weak narrative design or limited interactivity.

This is also an issue that the players are aware of—many of them notice that VR-exclusive games do not compare to the existing conventional games, and usually rely entirely on their novelty factor (Natural's Law). The players' expectations are by all means reasonable—they do not demand that the VR games be better than conventional games, but they do believe that a good game experience means that a game is not only impressive in VR, but also "solid outside of VR"(Auswarrior). Unfortunately, as the players point out, many VR games offer very limited replayability, and most VR games are short experiences that last less than an hour (Ouellette 2017). The issue seems to lie in the nature of VR interface itself, which—according to the players—lends a sense of dimension and excitement even to low-quality texts (Agentoff) that would otherwise go unnoticed if they were developed as conventional games (Lovethis):

> MYMOMSAYSIMHOT: I think this is the reason why I have so many VR games on steam already- everything is way more interesting in VR, even if there's not much to it. It's pretty amazing how much more compelling VR content done by small or one man teams is in comparison to AAA traditional monitor games.
>
> SWTAEDLINE: That's like saying a game is better with a snazzy new monitor and a new controller. Once you get used to the monitor/controller the game is only as good as its gameplay. Early VR games are lucky they have this novelty factor to ride on. Because tbf they are mostly crap. Even Chronos/Edge of Nowhere are merely average games if taken out of the VR context. I'm probably alone in saying this but I

> prefer games like project cars and elite on my monitor due to the clarity/colour/detail > 3D and headtracking.[15]

Of course, even those players who dismiss the majority of VR games as weak texts do not deny the effect VR has on the visual representation of the game world. When a mediocre game appears to be very entertaining, it can be attributed to the fact that it was played in VR; the VR setting does, according to some players, a lot of "the heavy lifting as far as the horror is concerned," seeing as the mouse and keyboard do not seem to properly convey the impression that something might be happening behind the player[16]. The players admit that many of first person VR games do exactly what is necessary to achieve the desired result—that result being the players' engagement in and awe at the virtual environment—but they also point out that once a player dons a headset, far fewer stimuli are necessary to engage and impress them[17]. The fact that basic actions, such as picking up an object or crouching, are much more exciting in VR[18], which "gives life" even to underwhelming games[19], is all the more significant when we take into consideration the fact that players are well aware of some developers taking advantage of this effect. Such developers sometimes knowingly choose to spend less time and effort in order to create a short experience

15. https://www.reddit.com/r/oculus/comments/4r2g1n/the_advantage_of_vr_from_my_perspective_is_to/. DOA 17.07.2019.
16. John Wolfe, A Chair In A Room: Greenwater (https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLqfNLQec1ZRkadafJ1dUfqNHDsXXq71Ei). DOA 17.07.2019.
17. CJUgames, Let's Play Alone (with Oculus Rift) | Game Walkthrough (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3MUfm1uXhfY). DOA 17.07.2019.
18. John Wolfe, A Chair In A Room: Greenwater (https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLqfNLQec1ZRkadafJ1dUfqNHDsXXq71Ei). DOA 17.07.2019.
19. John Wolfe, Paranormal Activity: The Lost Soul VR (https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLqfNLQec1ZRl13aQNsNp5oOTkbgs5KH1g). DOA 17.07.2019.

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that will rely on the VR appeal in comparison to the time, effort and cost devoted to create the majority Triple-A titles (Agentoff), while simultaneously raising the price (Ouellette 2017). For those and similar reasons, many players agree that the VR interface does not necessarily make games better, but can, in fact, potentially render some titles worse due to the current limitations of the VR technology, especially when one considers the image resolution and user comfort (Auswarrior).

Conclusion

VR technology might very well be the next step in the development of digital games, but right now, in the light of the hitherto ongoing evolution of game texts, it is ridden with many problems. Even when poorly executed—i.e. very emersive, the VR interface still tends to artificially enhance the quality of a game that would otherwise most likely be perceived as mediocre or weak by the players. However, with the help of VR technology, weaker games can still provide temporary entertainment (a case in point being *Paranormal Activity: Lost Soul*, which has numerous flaws, such as simplistic, item-collecting gameplay, occasional sequence breaking and an unclear plot). On the other hand, the high quality of a game can make the emersive aspect of high quality VR hardware and interface even more conspicuous—the best example here being the aforementioned *Resident Evil7: Biohazard*, where the lack of motor feedback in some situations (e.g. when Ethan is thrown by enemies or pulled up by them) and the floating, disembodied hands do not harmonize with the overall quality of the rest of the game (i.e. the gameplay, the plot, the narrative framework and design, etc.). This latter problem, however, may be not as pronounced in other types of games, which overcome the limitations of the VR and provide some space for realistic justification of the potentially emersive aspects of the interface—such as the aforementioned *Narcosis*, where the avatar is stuck in an excessively heavy atmospheric diving suit,

which would naturally reduce the motor feedback the avatar might otherwise be supposed to experience.

The main issues discussed hereinbefore, that is, emersive aspects and text quality, are two separate problems. However, it should be noted that they are linked; subpar execution, where the player phases through walls and objects, and imprecise controls preventing the player from decisive and spontaneous actions, result in a dissonance, where the players feel that they are unable to properly interact with the world, or even control their own presence in it. This dissonance, in turn, combined with emersive aspects and the confusing combination of real body control and digital body control, leads to subpar gameplay, which undermines the role of VR technology as the next stage of game evolution.

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CONCLUSION

According to Katherine Isbister, there is a renaissance currently taking place in games, as far as "the breadth of genres and the range of emotional territory they cover" is concerned (Isbister 2016: xvii). She argues, beyond doubt correctly, that if this development were to be hindered by the inadequacy of the academic, critical and political discourse, it would be a loss, adding: "[w]e need to be able to talk about art games and 'indie' games the ways we do about art and indie film" (Isbister 2016: xvii). Guided by this sentiment, in our analysis we have decided to approach the selected digital game texts with the same diligence we would employ when analyzing any other text of contemporary culturethat is subject to the audience's interpretation. In the end, it is the reader, the viewer, the listener, or the player who is in absolute control over their reception of the text; this means that some messages will inevitably be lost or misconstrued along the way, as is the case with all works of art. Sometimes a meaningful message is overlooked—one of the most famous examples of this may be Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, whose message about mass media tends to be ignored, and

instead the theme of censorship is emphasized, or Octavia Butler's *Bloodchild*, which people tend to interpret as a story about slavery, while the author herself conceived it as a love story and a coming-of-age one (Butler 2005: 30). At other times still, a detail not intended as a message, such as a personal element, can be interpreted in-depth—for instance, the developers' joke about the fox's name in *Prism*[1], where the fact that the other animals do not address the fox by the name chosen by the player was not intended as a representation of dehumanization of autistic people, despite the fact that it might be perceived and analyzed as such. And yet there is a remarkable difference between digital game texts and other media texts, namely the fact that games are indeterminate and shifting in nature, and as such, very challenging to read (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 2011: 300). Additionally, the very medium in which they are expressed involves active and skillful interaction from the player (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 2011: 300), which means that game texts require not only literacy, but also a certain degree of competence. Among others, these have been the reasons why selected tendencies in the development of contemporary indie games have become the subject of our book. Our goal has not been to prepare a monograph of digital games of this kind, but, rather, to point out certain intersections in which problems connected with technology, with the narrative and ludic potential of games, as well as, or maybe, above all—issues connected with practicing gaming, that is, the interaction into which the player enters with the technology and the gameworld, become intertwined. This is why we have focused our attention on games which particularly emphasize such issues as immersion and emersion, by discussing the convention of breaking the fourth wall, the tension connected with satisfaction expected by the player—their *jouissance*—that accompanies the gameplay process, the credibility of the comprehension of the audiovisual

1. We would like to thank Daniel Wolpow for this information.

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representation of the virtual environment during that process, as well as the subject of virtual reality.

Our interest has drifted towards indie games, as for many reasons, which we have tried to explain in the Introduction, they frequently attempt to pave new paths in the development of digital games, exploring ways of narrative and ludic design that would be too risky for the producers of mainstream games, as they do not guarantee commercial success of the promoted title. Thus, indie games frequently turn out to be peculiar experiments, exercises in giving form to experiences, through which game creators and users can test the possibilities of certain plot and/or technological solutions without bearing the risk of a larger, ill-located financial investment.

As a result of the aforementioned assumptions, the choice of games that have become the subject of our analysis was limited to examples in which independent production would open experimental potential as regards conceptual design and/or the subject matter of the game text. The analyzed games were meant to be representative of texts which boldly explore ideas which high-profile Triple-A companies might—and often do—avoid; they have the freedom to focus on the concept instead of the proficiency and the number of potential players, and may count more on the player's familiarity with the concept or emotions they want to evoke than on their metagame skill or knowledge.

One of the key domains of our research interest has been the sphere where the experience takes place, i.e. the interaction between the player and the game. The aspects which cause the player to assume a perspective that may be unexpected, ethically ambiguous or emotionally difficult to accept during their gameplaywere of particular interest for us; for this reason, the primary focus of our approach were the instances of the game creator(s) provoking a specific state of mind in the player—in other words, the ability of the game to represent the mental and emotional experience or (re)construct a variety of mental states

through mechanics. Strategies that have such an impact on the player refer directly to the mechanics, assuming, e.g., that the player's influence on the result of their playing would be limited or even reduced to bare minimum. Our approach, therefore, favored the focus on the instances of manipulating the player through mechanics of the game. This particularly intriguing effect can be achieved through the intentional interference with the player's access to the fictional world or leading the player to misrecognize an illusion for the reality of the fictional world or making them experience the game world indirectly through player characters whose perspective is limited—i.e blind or mentally ill. Issues concerning the avatar, the player and the game system—and interactions between them—as well as experimental application of visual and sound design as the source of distress in gameplay can also be counted among those strategies.

By using terms from the field of aesthetics of reception, one could argue that the process of identification with the hero(ine) (Jauss 1982: 152-188)—in the case of digital games, the avatar—is co-created by the aforementioned limitations that the game mechanics might impose on the player. This way, the player's attitudewill be constantly confronted with the limitations of the game world, not infrequently contradictory with their metagame knowledge, habits and expectations—including those of ethical and emotional nature; this specific attitude constitutes the player's horizon of expectations, defined as "mental set, which registers deviations and modifications [of those expectations] with exaggerated sensitivity" (Gombrich 1959: 53). An integral part of this horizon is the player's metagame knowledge—their familiarity with the standards or the inherent poetics of the given game genre, as well as the understanding of the implicit relationships of a game text to related works—which influences their specific reception of the game they play. For example, a game can subvert the player's expectations by setting them up to fail the assigned task even when they complete the game

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correctly. This can be observed in the case of all of the games discussed in our book, which happen to feature very specific endings—ones that can be considered subversive or even disappointing (even though that particular narrative trait was not one of our criteria when selecting the texts).

The book *Gameplay, Emotions and Narrative: Independent Games Experienced* constitutes an attempt at answering the question regarding the developmental tendencies that shape the particular nature of contemporary indie games, which we consistently perceive as significant texts of popular culture, due to their ubiquity and influence on the recipient. We have also treated them as texts of an exploratory nature of a sort, whose creators do not shy away from experimenting with the form of storytelling, with structuring gameplay, and with game design; regarded from this perspective, the analyses point to how such texts pave possible, although not necessary directions. for both further development of the genre and possibly the shape of digital games to come.

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