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Clairvoyant Learning: The Strangeness of Playing Games

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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN SAINT LOUIS
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ART

CLAIRVOYANT LEARNING

THE STRANGENESS OF PLAYING GAMES

BY JEREMY SHIPLEY

A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE
SAM FOX SCHOOL OF DESIGN AND VISUAL ARTS
OF WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN SAINT LOUIS
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF FINE ARTS
MAY 2015

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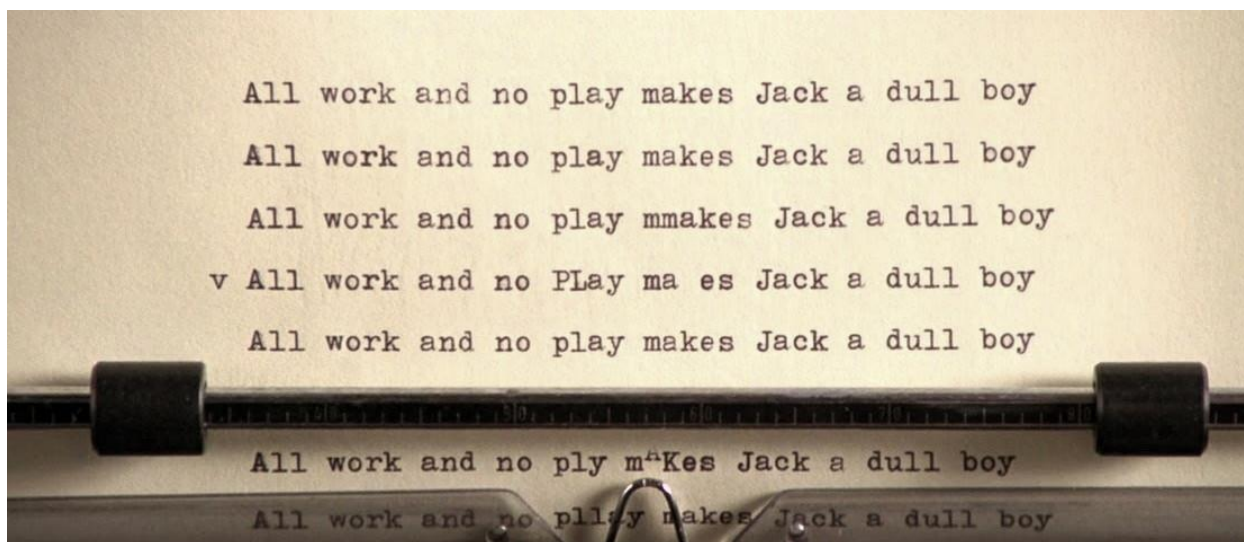


Figure 1: *The Shining*. Dir. Stanley Kubrick. By Stephen King. Warner Home Video, 1980. Film.ⁱ

PROLOGUE

There is a widely assumed division between work and play. This, in part, is due to a barely visible but palpable system used to place certain cognitive activities above others. I will acknowledge that this systematic process of organizing information is mostly biological. Humans need to create order; classifying things and creating hierarchies is how humans have learned to adapt, delegating activities such as work and play so as to keep productivity within a community high. With this said, it is my understanding that someone hard at play is hard at work, training their brain to be more efficient by acquiring new skills or adapting to an ever-changing world. When we playⁱⁱ, we are exploring our potential within a system, searching for the malleability of a structure that still needs work. Play is only considered *fun* because it assumes no thesis in favor of exploring the faultiness within a system. We can think of players as engineers of learning, bound only by the limitations that they establish for themselves. Players are *selfish* but only to the extent that evolution and biology is selfish.

Gamesⁱⁱⁱ are designed to establish these limitations which is why every system can be viewed in terms of a game: a *structure within which to play*. At the biological level, playing and having fun is essential for creating a healthy mind and engaged experience. However, having fun does not mean one is not critical of these experiences. It just implies that one can enjoy said experiences without feeling guilty. This enjoyment is nature's way of encouraging cognitive growth. If one does not nurture this growth, what kind of madness is being cultivated (Figure 1)?

Writing this paper might be seen as productive work in the eyes of those who believe that the criteria for *higher* education is marked by *literacy* while any playfulness with words, images, and allegory that comprise this official document might be demoted to the category of *creativity*. However, as I have said, all systems are made to be played with and the ability to create

an enjoyable experience within a structure depends on the effective design and communication of the ideas that that system embodies. Therefore it is my prerogative that the usage of form, or language, be it the language of writing or painting or photography or whatever medium one chooses to communicate with, be specific to one's ideas.

This is why I consider myself more of a Gamer than an Artist, because I view work and play as parallel synergistic and transformative activities. In declaring myself a bonafide “gamer” better encapsulates the, sort of, *formalist* mentality I have towards hard work and enjoyable experiences. As I have argued, these activities are not always object oriented or goal oriented, and I never work towards a thesis. Sometimes my work involves exploring what others see while at other times it means creating quests for others to see what I have seen. In any case, the rigor I find in the transformative process of interactive roleplaying, asking questions only to find more questions, an activity that is the core of what it means to be a “gamer,” I feel, is more descriptive of my creative pursuits than the term “artist.” With a similar attitude towards these nomenclatures as Clement Greenberg, though not as dogmatic about gaming as he was about painting, I would encourage anyone still identifying with the term “artist” to come up with a more specific term to designate to their character.

Throughout this comparative document I intend to playfully guide you through the experiences I have had and created in hopes that, together, we may find more questions than we know what to do with. I only say this to prepare you for the nonlinear fashion of this informative document, as it is the nature of many games to tell stories this way—fast-traveling between distant levels, bringing harmony to the multiple ideas they embody.

You may begin your journey through my thesis document by advancing to **PAGE 14**.



Figure 2: *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. Dir. Todd Howard. Bethesda Game Studios, 2011. Video Game.

THE GIRL OF MY DREAMS

Adorned in spike bracelets, Hot Topic apparel, and death rock makeup—as I playfully recall it—my first encounter with what I understood to be an “art” experience was watching my chatroom pen pal materialize around the corner of a BP gas station, just a mile from her parents’ house on the skirts of her hometown, 300 miles from my hometown. As we were coming back from the crippling coma induced by seeing each other in person for the first time, the nirvana of all of those sleepless nights in front of the flickering computer screen washed over me again. I consider this my first real art experience because it was the first time in my life that a dream—an apparition previously stuck behind cupped glass, LEDs, and HTML script (an Internet friend)—became corporeal.

“We met on the Web” was scratched onto a black tee shirt peppered with spider silhouettes that I had bought for her as a gift for showing me that *culture* extended beyond the corn-fortification that I had grown to become familiar with. “Pure ecstasy,” I thought, as the daggers strapped to her wrist grazed the back of my neck.

It was the summer of 2002 and we had just become teenagers. She led me to her parent’s house where, beyond being shamefully shy—even though we had spent countless hours chatting until two, three, four, five in the morning about everything regarding music, books, art, love, and death—we still managed to find a new way to interact, a way that the strokes of a keyboard could not enliven...

We *played dead*. But not the kind of dead you might imagine, lying helpless and unmoving. We at first, set parameters for our grim game. The house we were in was her parents’ house, and we had decided to imagine what it was like to have died in this house 200 years ago. What about our minds would be different? How might the various levels or stories of the house manipulate our psyche? What information did we have to temporarily “forget” in order to believably exist in this narrative space during this imagined time period? Might there be a way to reverse our demise? The house set the mood for the game and our minds were the playground.

...

The 2013 remake of a beloved video game from my childhood reanimated similar feelings of intimacy and loss that occupied my *tweenage* years. *Letter for Lara* (Figure 3) is a Gothic^{iv} proposal to the infamous buxom protagonist of the Tomb Raider series as well as a confession to a nonfiction girl that my pubescent self never had the courage to talk to. In capturing subsequent moments of Lara (the video game character) climbing and falling, while reciting my virtual love letter to *the girl of my dreams*, I found that this revamping of the pathetically romantic undertone of (what seems to be) my entire childhood to be indicative of the connection between reality and fantasy I began (re)discovering through vampire literature during my second semester in graduate school.

Take cover, and move on to PAGE 10.



Figure 3: *Letter for Lara* (2014), machinima animation with voice recording, 5:21 minutes



Figure 4: *Dim Wit* (2014), machinima animation with synthesizer recording, 10:46 minutes

I SAW NOTHING, I SWEAR!

Through my *higher* education I have experienced several misadventures but none as abjectifying as being without a place to call home, or worse, to realize that every man, in a sense, is a *man with no country*. The very moment I learned of the frigid judgment towards the male point of view, still pejoratively referred to as *the male gaze*, was the same moment I realized today's society has created an image of men that only exists in two camps: ones that hunt women, and ones that are hunted by women. Since I often avoid the trials of both of these camps, I have grown to learn that to be a man means to remain a prisoner of the jaded and perverted thoughts of others. The worst part of it is that men have no say in how their point of view is measured because "men are the enemy" and "part of the problem."

Dim Wit (Figure 4) is my response to this current state of gender conflict. In many cases throughout literature and cinema, both historically and contemporarily, men are depicted as hapless dimwits who cannot control their carnal desires while women are depicted as domineering and logical figures reprimanding the men they wish to control. These are common themes in many stories and inspire a fruitful assortment (no pun intended) of stock characters for directors to limit the subtleties between gender identities. Thus, I think that there is no argument here that these stock characters reveal truisms about how we view gender roles today.

My intention in appropriating footage from the anime series *Dance in the Vampire Bund* is to expose the traumatic experience of men falling victim to *the female gaze*—to suspend any disbelief that this unambiguous scrutiny of men by women is nonfictional despite the show's animated quality. This short scene in *Dance in the Vampire Bund* where the protagonist (the male character) suddenly becomes the antagonist (against his own will) simply because he was caught looking in the wrong place at the wrong time is but a small sample of the double-standard that is encouraged in the media.

I have disappointedly come to understand that political campaigns that concern gender equality and class are not particularly well served by ambiguity. Yet I continue to be on the fence about these pressing topics. While I am sensitive and empathetic to the issues of others, I know enough about the limitations of human experience to know that these issues concerning discrimination, alienation, and abuse affect me as much as they are effected by me.

The only problem I have with feminist critiques (as well as other taxonomic political campaigns propagated by media culture) is similar to the work-play differentia. The terms promote a divisiveness in the way we think about **other** side of a story. Based on the root word feminine or female, the word *feminist* cannot behold male narratives (*not that these terms are or should be binaries*). I do not mean to say that I am arguing for masculinist critique as a rebuttal for feminist critique. Rather, I am taking a stance for ambiguity; I am against opposition. To view identities and gender roles in terms of opposition is to dismiss that there are any common grounds for communication. Without a discourse between the sexes (*between people*), conflicts such as these will never resolve.

For an example of the complexity of this intercourse, turn to PAGE 5.

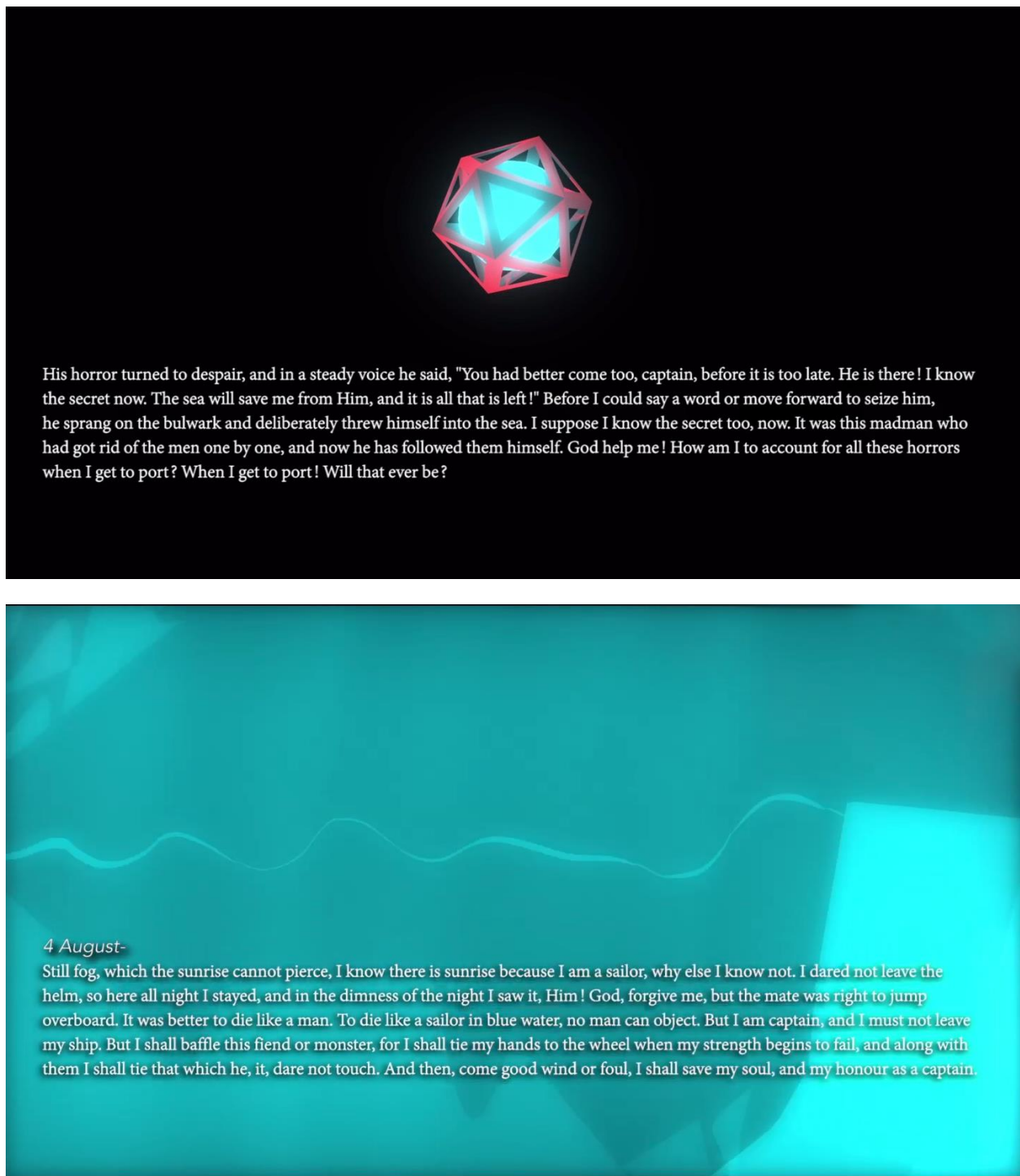


Figure 5: *Mystery of the Sea* (2014), 3D animation with subtitles, 16:09 minutes

PLAYING DEAD

It seems that we are always stuck in some sort of extreme weather when we read about vampires. Vicious ocean waves. An impenetrable fog. A blustering blizzard. A dousing downpour. And the more extreme the elements, the more aware we are of the impending bodily horror and sublime terror sealing our fate.

Despite being a nineteenth century legend, vampirism is undoubtedly hurtling into the twenty-first century with more fervor and bloodlust than ever with the syndication of television shows like *True Blood* and *The Vampire Diaries* on the rise, the mass fandom surrounding the *Twilight* series, the featuring of vampires in low-budget anime such as *Dance in the Vampire Bund*, and the appearances of vampires in high-budget video games such as *The Elder Scrolls IV-V* and *Fallout 3*. This contemporary plague that is forming around the eye of this Gothic storm is a cultural zeitgeist that seems to be repeating itself like a tornado siren.

Being some kind of creature of tradition while also wanting to excavate an origin of this mythology, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* has been a particularly moving text for me lately not only because of the weathered symbolism that this mythical figure continues to embody, but also how *Dracula* and his supporting characters represent a totality of the contentious issues that I have brought to light thus far. *Dracula*'s insistent possession of men and women represents an asexual anxiety towards losing control over one's identity while his antiquity reveals a deeper fear of losing control over one's possessions.^v

While ownership and control might seem undesirable in today's cultural expanse, the loss of it speaks to a fear of the unknown and death, which is unavoidable. Vampire mythology continues to represent our collective need for this classic allegory for it is through these stories that we deal with the human condition.

Mystery of the Sea (Figure 5) arrives at this allegory through investigation of shape, movement, and time. It represents a deeper exploration of abstraction and language using the imagery of a specific passage in *Dracula* that vivifies the elements of vampirism to evoke the macabre. The three-dimensional icosahedron with a glowing aquatic nucleus alludes to something viral, magical, logical, and impending. Inspired by a 20-sided dice common in tabletop role-playing games, for me, its ascension represents multiplicity in terms of narrative, while the text reveals a division in terms of knowledge.

On a personal level, this piece is about transition and exchange. I have to admit, I came into the graduate program at Washington University having a very abstract (limited) notion of what kind of artist I could be. Until recently, I had considered gallery-representation to be my only option into an art career. I did not anticipate that my exploration of unfamiliar technologies would foreshadow an uncanny relationship with art that would inevitably change my audience.

You may journey onward to PAGE 12.



Figure 6: *Learning Magic* (ongoing), interactive performance, dimensions vary



Figure 7: Rafman, Jon. "Codes of Honor." 2011. Web. <<http://codesofhonor.com/>>.

THE DANGERS OF KNOWING

I do not consider Quest Design^{vi} for Games as completely abandoning my academic grounding. My rediscovered interest in the entertainment industry still comes with many of my own convictions towards education and culture that I have been invested in for some time. Obviously, this work requires hours of research and planning to complete a project to its highest potential. Doubly, I see games as an evolved form of interactive storytelling that challenges the meaning of *literacy* in the twenty-first century. Games in the past few decades have received a great deal of criticism for contributing to the corruption of young minds but I think these negative reviews mostly stem from an ignorance of how they function as a communication device. It's true, games have collectively altered the way we learn new information and (with the help of the Internet) have opened up new worlds that provide ubiquitous access to culture. Like cinema in the late nineteenth century, and many other evolved technologies before, games in the late twentieth century have developed out of an ongoing growth in technology and communication, presenting a potential growth in the trajectory of education and culture to come. Sure, there are dangers in these new technologies, but no more danger than can be learned from your parents or anywhere else in the world. Danger is curated in the mind. Games are an illusory medium, like cinema, and are only as dangerous as society perceives them.^{vii}

...

A year ago, I returned to a game I had not played in 15 years. The strangeness I have found in this process is how clairvoyant the game actually is. In *Magic: The Gathering* (Figure 10), to cast the best spell each turn, each player should keep, in their mind's eye, some inkling of what cards their opponent has; this encourages players to budget their moves, bearing in mind the advantage of counter spells later in the game. Designed by the creators of Dungeons & Dragons, a roleplaying game rumored in the 1970s of promoting Satanic practice amongst basement dwelling youth, *Magic: The Gathering* has received much criticism for turning clairvoyance (forward thinking) into a learning strategy. Still, no matter how good or bad you are at foresight, the game requires you to be prepared to play with the cards you were dealt while hoping for the best outcome.

Learning Magic (Figure 6) is an *interactive performance* where I have been teaching others how to play the trading card game *Magic: The Gathering* (MTG). The game offers many transferrable skills, the upmost being that of training the brain to adapt. *Learning Magic* has noticeably increased my own ability to be more discursive. In creating connections between seemingly distant ideas this ongoing project challenges my ability to communicate the game's complexity to others. A fundamentally logical game based on **deck building**, MTG negates the nefarious element of *chance* that plays out in the **shuffling** and **drawing** of cards, thus leaving it to me, the instructor, to transfer my intuition of the game through playful communication.

When building a deck, players are curating the odds of successful card combinations for any shuffle. This way, the game promotes the transference of mathematical, psychological, and creative skills as well as social skills. Not only are players battling the odds of their own success, they are also up against the probability of success among their opponents. That is why this game, like most games that interest me, seems like the perfect medium for understanding how to be a better loser.

With hope, flip to PAGE 16.

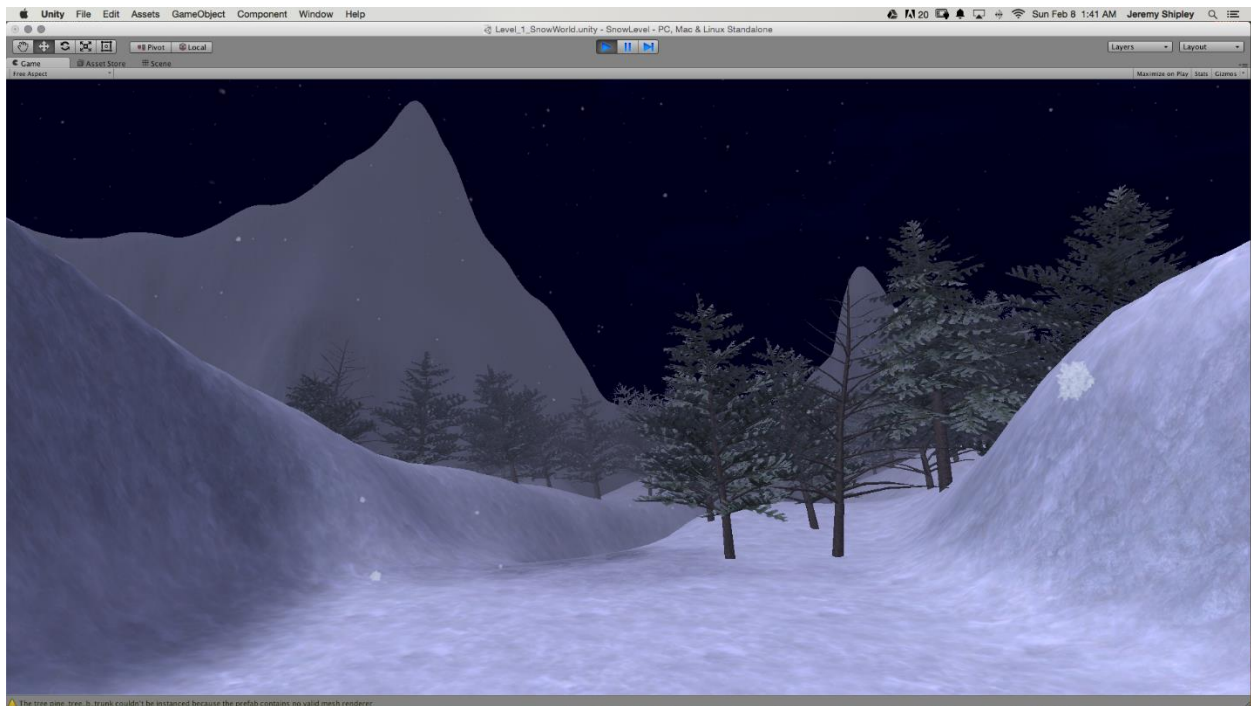


Figure 8: *The Eidolon of Jonathan Harker* (2015), computer game, dimensions vary



Figure 9: Washko, Angela. "The Council on Gender Sensitivity and Behavioral Awareness in World of Warcraft." 2012. Web.

CHOOSE YOUR OWN MISADVENTURE

“The Eidolon of Jonathan Harker” (Figure 8) is a computer game that I have built for my final thesis project at Washington University in Saint Louis. Inspired by the **original** first chapter of *Dracula*, now published posthumously as *Dracula’s Guest*, the game appropriates the image of the same snowy passage that Jonathan Harker finds himself stuck in as he makes his way to Dracula’s castle. I particularly relate to the imprisoned protagonist because no matter what he does or says, Harker’s fate seems to be inscribed for him. *And everyone knows it but him*. In *Dracula’s Guest*, I view the snowy passage as a **narrative space** that foreshadows the protagonist’s fate while setting a mood of doom and gloom for the reader. Similarly, in “The Eidolon of Jonathan Harker,” the player is invited to explore the strange level that I have constructed, led into a state of mind (and body) that is possibly atemporal, stuck between Now, the past, and the future...

Although I find it difficult to declare myself a gamer, as I am not inherently *good* at most games I play, I am nonetheless inspired by the allegorical link between reality and fiction. Doubly immersed in the game as I am in real life events, I tend to always relate these imagined narratives back to that feeling of home. Home, for me, however, has not always been canny.

...

When I was 15 years old my family was evicted from our home.

At the time, my mother worked at the local college as the person who monitors grant funding from the state to the college to the student, and aside from other organizational tasks, she balanced the checkbook. It was when funds stopped going to the students that she decided that she was in no moral position to continue being part of this abuse of the system. She blew the whistle and predictably lost her job.

Still, having witnessed the evil and corruption inherent in the system she full-heartedly encouraged me to seek my own education, to *choose my own misadventure*, if I must. As a student, possibly at my own peril, I returned to the macabre stories (i.e. *Dracula*) that occupied my adolescence. For me, and for many others (I would find out later), the characters of these stories embody a pathos that results from being between varying levels of control, or, more appropriately, lack thereof. You might say that much of my creative pursuits has been in attempt to repossess control that has been lost.

I have found that my exploration of these dark fictional worlds often opens up new perspectives towards the world at large, preventing me from becoming too jaded or discouraged by the dangers that lurk behind the façade of the corrupt few who give the rest of the world a bad reputation.^{viii}

At your own risk, turn to PAGE 8.



Figure 10: Magic: The Gathering. Richard Garfield. Wizards of the Coast, 1993. Trading card game.

EPILOGUE

During my stay at Washington University, I have sought the unknown by exploring several areas of technology that were foreign to me (cinematography, video editing, sound production, 3D modeling and texturing, animation, and digital compositing). In finding new ways to represent concepts that have deeply interested me for some time, I have reanimated a discourse that leaves me motivated to continue drawing the **narrative space** between the author and the reader. Armed to the teeth with this refreshed arsenal of conceptual skills, I look forward to forging my own sanguine path of imaginative skills inspired by the stories I love to death for an audience that wants it, nay, needs it even more.

The most valuable lesson that I have learned, which I believe applies to a larger audience than just myself, is that people learn less by studying culture (reading, listening, and watching)—but more effectively by playing within a culture (speaking from it and interacting with it). As I have said, I prefer to treat my learning process as a game. If a **game** can be defined as a *story structure within which to play*, then to effectively learn new things, one needs to find a way to cross the **narrative space** of a game while taking authorship over the path chosen to play. From within a game, its students become the culture from which they have created a voice while having the ability to transform the way the voices are heard. Thus, gamers are contemporary orators speaking about the subject of gamers as the subject of gamers (since it is assumed that games cannot exist without a such interaction). Even as I compose this narrative on my computer screen, I am constantly crossing my thesis paper's narrative space, reciting my prose back to myself. If I do not like what I hear, because it sounds clumsy or over-complicated, I rewrite, again and again. The strangeness of this game is that I am simultaneously playing as a character of its composition as well as the creator responsible for making recomposition possible.

...

Literacy is a strange process.

I often have to step away from the screen several times to recompose. When I return, suppressing my inner critic (my inner rage) often helps me navigate out of a difficult passage (by not letting my emotions affect my productivity). Although, staying in character (and keeping a cool head) can be an even bigger chore, I, alas, find that solidarity with my imagined self, and blaze on through as (s)he would. When I have finally reached that epic boss battle (the great fiery Thesis Dragon from Hell) I forge forth with the poise that I was meant to have as the person I was destined to be. I let my intuition flow for all of my training has led up to this single moment. I am past the point of no return!

...

Literacy is a transformative process.

For me, the process of *reading* texts is synonymous with the process of *playing* games. In both cases, characters need to be relatable and the narrative space needs to be immersive. Without this suspension of disbelief, even for a brief moment, the magic of the story (the thesis) or the gameplay wears off. Without a little magic adding just a dash of glitter and glamour to every aspect of our lives, each moment, if not seized and polished, risks being swept up in a cloud of dust...

...

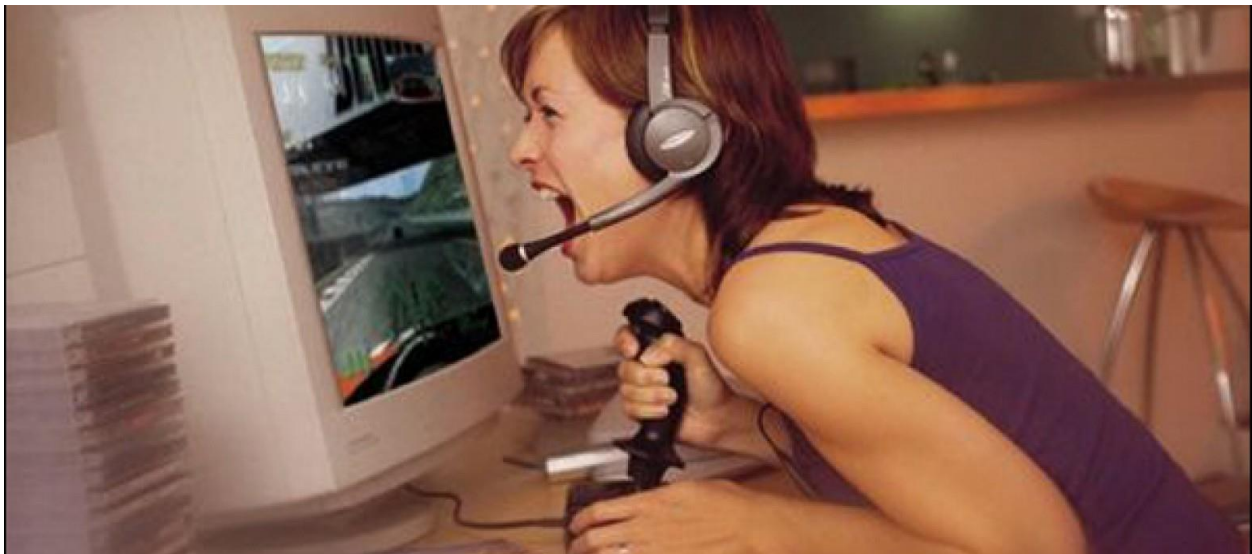
Gaming is a clairvoyant process.

When we find ourselves capable of clearing the dust from our minds only then can we allow the glow from the computer screen, the paint pallet, or the camera lens permeate our soul and project into our mind's eye some inkling of a time fleeting, time lost, or a time yet to come. Games embody this atemporal shift in the way we learn by urging us to remain in the moment, to pass the time, and anticipate failure and death with enthusiasm.

...

Gaming is an artistic process.

In seeking some sort of dark pleasure in our most death-defying moments, the real strangeness of playing games is in the magic of learning how to, if only momentarily, cheat death in the most creative way.



NOTES

¹The film in reference here illustrates a word game that leads into the primary argument of my paper. Stanley Kubrick's version of *The Shining* embodies **the cinematic uncanny**, which informs how I define *strangeness* throughout my thesis. I do not mean to exclusively prescribe to a Freudian or Lacanian view on cinematography nor any other specific or abstract notion of how strangeness is cultivated *philosophically*. I use the word *strangeness* in this paper as I use any other word—based on its etymological history and my own relationship to its vocabulary.

Based on the German phrase *heimlich* (which translates to *home-like* in English), *canny* comes to our senses denoting a feeling of familiarity or *home*. The uncanny, or un-*home*-like, might suggest a feeling of home that is estranged and unfamiliar—a reality based on some sort of fiction, or a fiction based on reality. Kubrick's adaptation of Stephen King's horror novel embodies this etymological inscription of **strangeness**, creating new meaning by playing with old forms. King's novel, a modern rendition of a classic haunted house story, doubles as postmodern horror film depicting terrorized characters stuck in a hotel acting as their temporary home. As time progresses and the weather worsens, the characters go through varying levels of insanity which is amplified through Kubrick's use of cinematography.

This doubling, or exchange between fiction and reality, plays out not only through the image on the screen (a fiction) but also through the viewer's belief in the conviction of the camera (a reality), the viewer's knowledge of cinematography as a storytelling device (a fiction), the viewer's belief in the conviction of the actors' performances (a reality), and the scripting of King's story (a fiction)—not to mention the exchange between King's revival of this classic literary structure, Kubrick's appropriation and manipulation of King's story, or the particular un-home-like setting of the story where I personally find the most significant embodiment of *the cinematic uncanny*.

I like to think of *the cinematic uncanny* as a strangeness that is created using four basic elements of cinematography: framing, movement, lighting, and sound. Kubrick is a real master of these elements while King sets up a fictional masterpiece that serves to inspire Kubrick's vision. It is during this uncanny exchange that Kubrick and King virtually collaborate to create a variety of story structures within which they play. Therein lies my interest in the cinematic uncanny.

“Invisible seers who recompose human languages of sign and vision postulate another form of subjectivity, a perceiving subject who is indeed Other and outside our frame of reference. This seer [...] is a cyborg before the concept was invented—occupying a similar instrumental space to the proliferating processes and instruments that have been invented to penetrate the mysteries of the invisible, hidden worlds, both inner and outer, and to look back at ourselves” (322-323). In her book *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media into the Twenty-First Century*, Marina Warner suggest that camera's purpose is to recompose the same historical texts or ideas that continue to make us aware of a *thing's* strangeness; the camera captures and reanimates the atemporal *zeitgeist* present in these stories. It is precisely this phantasmagoric *strangeness* that projects old stories through new media, allowing us to peer into the future with a cinematic lens.

ⁱⁱ **Play**, as Stuart Brown defines in his book *Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*, “is a profound biological process. It has evolved over eons in many animal species to promote survival. It shapes the brain and makes animals smarter and more adaptable. In higher animals, it fosters empathy and makes possible complex social groups. For us, play lies at the core of creativity and innovation” (5). Furthermore, Dr. Brown goes on to suggest that play happens biologically not as a reactive process as a result of natural selection but as proactive or creative process as observed in gene mutation and recombination. In nature, play purports “the generation of diversity” by adding flexibility and new potential within an already established system, such as a gene structure (44). Play is essential for continuity. Without play, development and innovation cannot happen. The concept of *newness* would cease. History would repeat leaving Man without the means to learn, evolve, and grow. As Dr. Brown illustrates repeatedly throughout his book, the significance of play is beholden on all theoretical levels including the biological, cosmic, social, technological, and even the allegorical level.

Although it is most significant to point out that play is inherent to our biological development as successful and healthy humans, my specific interest in play, as it relates to my practice, is how it works allegorically.

ⁱⁱⁱ When I refer to **games**, I am occasionally referring to the concrete image or activity of what we might assume to be the representation of a game (a video game, a board game, a sports game, a card game, etc.). While, I might also be referring to a more abstract the definition I go over in my Prologue, “a structure within which to play” (3), I am most often referring to a game as a narrative system, a story *structure within which to play*. As this entire thesis document is built on the literary system of a choose-your-own-adventure story, my particular interest in games is in how their structural elements possess the allegorical elements of **narrative space**.

In Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman’s text, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, the authors describe the narrative space of a game as a “space [that] can be used to express information about a character’s persona or backstory” (396). Through the game’s structural elements (goals, conflicts, uncertainty, and mechanics), form coalesces with content to tell the *reader* about their character’s ambition, struggle, and potential. Salen and Zimmerman point out that the whole point of “playing a game means interacting with and within a representational universe, a space of possibility with narrative dimensions” (378). In thinking about a game in terms of narrative dimension, it is important to note that “the frame of a game is what communicates that those contained within it are ‘playing’ and that the space of play is separate in some way from that of the real world” (94). In short, the narrative system of a game lets its participants know when it is time to play. As this *narrative space* remains the threshold between reality and fiction, the boundary between exploration and discovery, *the door frame which the vampire cannot cross unless invited*, is the part of a game that interests me the most. Since the narrative dimension of a game is a virtual space imbued with signifiers, players can use what they learn in the fictitious space to find significance back in reality. Thus, the narrative space of a game is more than a roleplaying space to escape to; it’s a transferable space of knowledge to learn about the world through allegory.

^{iv} Obsessed with death and longing for forbidden love, **Gothic** romances possess the catacombs of Contemporary Art like an everlasting *Romeo and Juliet* play: some themes never die. As the word *Gothic* calls for a historical dismissal of Classical systems that were once used to create oppressive hierarchies between people of *lower* social and economic status, The Gothic in Contemporary Art calls for a similar deconstruction of institutional authorship. In her book *The Gothic: Documents of Contemporary Art*, Gilda Williams writes that “there is among a recent generation of twenty-first-century artists a deliberate turning away from the canons of contemporary art established in the 1960s, which culminated in the late conceptualism of the 1990s” (18). She observes that artists who share this Gothic tendency in their work concern themselves with analogous *living dead* themes such as beauty, the grotesque, post-colonialism, anti-capitalism, regression, the uncanny, and many other motifs that depend on a interpenetration of “things that should have remained apart” (14).

This sort of *zombie aesthetic* technique is what I have been using to reanimate old narrative spaces through new media. Finding inspiration in Gothic texts like *Dracula* I have used the formal structure of a written letter to create an orated atmosphere within the imagined environment of *Tomb Raider*. In reciting my words to the virtual explorer of these catacombs, I find myself communicating with both living and dead versions of Lara. As Mike Kelley reminds us in his essay *Playing with Dead Things: On the Uncanny* (cataloged by Gilda Williams’ *The Gothic: Documents in Contemporary Art*), this sort of Freudian antithetical “doubling acts as a safe guard against castration anxieties” (180). Perhaps my infatuation with Gothic themes has as much to do with my desire to exploit the beauty in words and literary systems as it does with veiling my own fear towards rejection, failure, and death.

^v “According to Stoker’s working notes, the heart of *Dracula* was not blood but an assertion of ownership [...] *Belongs to me*. These words define the vampire the twentieth century cannot leave alone. The shared Romantic journey in which nothing impedes two gentleman’s movements but the occult ends with a servant immobilized and imprisoned in a castle he [Jonathan Harker] never wanted to enter” (Auerbach 71).

Amidst the survey of **vampires** that Nina Auerbach covers in her book *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, Auerbach likens the popularity of *Dracula* to a cultural virus that infects its readers with the fear that vampire stories possess the ability to transform hierarchies concerned with sexuality, social, economic, professional, and even gender status into something post-structural, something unknown. As the “women [in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*] display the powers male vampires are too respectable to release” (97), Auerbach suggests that the claim to power in Stoker’s text is decision by the author to plant a seed for cultural growth to come.

Obviously way ahead of his time, it is apparent that Stoker saw fertile ground for social change. Embodied by the vampiric characters of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, *Our Vampires, Ourselves* points to the many anxieties towards a sexual, gendered, and social transition represented in vampire literature that would not be confronted politically until the late twentieth century. Even as vampires are still mocked and/or feared in the twenty-first century, their clairvoyance (their ability to shine light on movements to come) is what keeps vampires significant in today’s cultural expanse.

^{vi} **Quest Design** is the engineering of narrative space in a game. Intrigued by a recent job posting I came across on Bethesda Game Studios' website, I remembered what their director, Todd Howard, who has spearheaded such monumental games as *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Figure 2), often says about this notion of narrative space in their games: "The key experience in our games is the world itself. It is the main character that speaks to the player." When a player encounters another *character* in *Skyrim*, it is the job of the Quest Designer to write the characters' *dialogue* and curate all possible *responses* to a character's decision.

Originally interested in Level Design, the modeling and arrangement of objects within the virtual world of a game, while considering the previous definition of narrative space described by Salen and Zimmerman, I find that Todd Howard's idea of the world being the main character of Bethesda's games suggests that Quest Design and Level Design are one in the same. Since a *level* can be synonymously thought of as a *story* or *narrative*, I find the flexibility and complex mapping of narrative space in the Bethesda games to be signified by the player's interaction with the world as well as the characters within it.

Seemingly driving the players to experience the world in whichever way they choose, while creating a desire in their players to learn and grow through character interactions, it is obvious that Quest Design in Games is also synonymous with my own teaching philosophy. Essentially, Quest Design can be viewed as a business model of Education where the *classroom* becomes a narrative space where students are not being marched linearly through a lesson plan but are psychologically urged to learn through their own drive to explore the conceptual *world* that their teacher has designed. This would create a more engaged and immersive learning experience for the students, whom, in turn, will (hopefully) become more engaging and immersed world leaders.

^{vii} **Jon Rafman** (Figure 7), a contemporary filmmaker from Montreal, theatricalizes the perceived dangers of subcultures through journalistic writing and video documentation. As Jon Rafman tells Gabriel Sanchez of *Artforum* for an editorial regarding his show at the Contemporary Art Museum in St. Louis, his film *Codes of Honor* (2011) "deals with a loss of history and the struggle to preserve tradition in a culture where the new sweeps away the old." While claiming that the piece is about "the pro gamer as a contemporary tragic hero who strives for classic virtues in a hyperaccelerated age," Rafman's work frequently approaches gaming culture with a similar Gothic-Romantic perspective that keeps many of the "subcultures" he examines in the dark. Relishing in darkness, Rafman's work documents the virtual limitations of the human psyche.

As Rafman points out, "the moment you 'discover' said culture it has already moved on." Although mesmerized by these newfound narrative spaces that he stumbles upon while surfing the Web, Rafman also concerns himself with the feeling of "entrapment and isolation felt by many as social and political life becomes increasingly abstracted and experience dematerialized." Simultaneously horrified and enlightened by the vast array of fetish cultures that he discovers in his excavation of Internet culture, I concur with Rafman when he regards the repulsion of this virtual space with "the impossibility of total escape from physical reality." Although danger happens in the mind, when transformed, the mind can harbor emotions and opinions towards the world that effects the well-being of the body within it.

^{viii} **Angela Washko** (Figure 9), a contemporary artist from Pennsylvania, explores the ethnography of gaming culture by using games (like World of Warcraft) as open platforms for discussing shadowy topics (such as gender representation within these worlds). Particularly, concerned with “the misogyny, homophobia, racist, and otherwise discriminatory language used within the game space [of World of Warcraft],” as Washko notes in her essay *Why Talk Feminism in World of Warcraft*, the artist postulates that the Internet harbors a unique narrative space where individuals are free to speak their mind through the veil of virtual avatars. In her project *The Council on Gender Sensitivity and Behavioral Awareness in World of Warcraft*, Washko enters into these sacred game spaces as a participant as well as an informant, taking it upon herself to mediate such difficult conversations. Rather than exist in these worlds as a passive observer ignoring backhanded comments between other players in the community, she takes it upon herself to question the thought processes of others while remaining sensitive to the possible baggage these involuntary narrators are likely bringing to the game.

Washko writes, “As a gamer who is also an artist and a feminist, I consider it my responsibility to dispel stereotypes about gamers—especially WoW players—who have been mislabeled as unattractive, mean-spirited losers. At the same time, I question my fellow gamers’ propagation of the hateful speech that earns them those epithets.” As Washko remains hopeful of these game spaces as sanctuaries designed to encourage problem-solving and leadership skills, she is ever aware and combative of campaigns such as #Gamergate that aim to silence others who field such personal and prodding conversations. She hopes that more gamers can step up into leadership positions like the one she has assumed in-game to act as role models in order to transform the assumptions of these game spaces into something more positive.

Washko’s technique in fielding these conversations is masterful, possessing the sensitivity, bravery, and craft it takes to wield the language of her subject (the WoW community) in order to speak to it from within. However, the subjecthood that she seems to highlight appears to be predominately female, non-heterosexual, and/or non-white— thus implicitly scapegoating a class of individuals, leaving many feeling voiceless and/or persecuted. Granted that history points to an allocation of patriarchal control, this narrow lens creates a flawed process of archiving these histories. Washko is only limited by her own human perception, and, yet, still does everything she can to remain sensitive and progressive on this issue of misrepresentation. Because there are many sides to this narrative that remain undocumented and unseen, these communities need more individuals with Washko’s ambition contributing to this discourse.

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SUMMARY

In retelling multiple stories of my research, this document serves as a quest to archive my interest in games as evolved systems of play that continue to manipulate the way we view literacy. In describing the subtlety of these terms while examining the folkloric histories that contextualize the language of this media, I have doubly manipulated the form of my paper to be like a choose-your-own-adventure tale, reflecting the estrangement of time and authorship unique to the narrative space in games. Unlike the formal structures found in literature or cinema, games animate collaborative and nonlinear systems that return the craft of storytelling to its oral traditions, reciting old texts through new media. In this paper, the reader is urged to tread the demanding and twisted paths that I have created. However, given the limitations of my authorship and the freewill of the reader, like an open world sandbox game, I welcome deviations from the path, knowing that any sequence will eventually lead the reader to my conclusion that games are strange because of how they continue to **revamp** the path to higher education.