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Astaeria

By Lana Polansky

The structures in *Astaeria* don't look stable. The individual cubes vacillate to and fro as I move my disembodied avatar—what is effectively the camera—backwards and forwards along the z-axis. Often, the structures have holes through which I can fall—luckily there's a jump button—but then, even the largest of these minimalistic grape clusters have their boundaries. Eventually I'm compelled to fall below to another group of cube islands. Sometimes I look up to see the smattering of cubic constellations above me, floating in nothingness while a rainbow of colours cycles endlessly. Sometimes I try to climb up to them, but mostly I stumble and fall again. Falling is an ubiquitous motif: even the confetti pixels that dance to the bottom of the menu screen seem to imply descent.

I find out later that the name “Asteria” roughly translates from Greek to “Falling Star” or “Star-ry”, and belongs to the goddess of astrology, oracles and prophetic dreams. I'm left speculating as to whether or not that has any relationship to Emma Lugo's (aka LycaonTalks') recently released first-person Unity game in which the player navigates procedurally generated mounds of black-outlined cubes in a mostly void environment. I may be reading into things, but there's a repeating undercurrent, like the anaphora of an insistent stanza, that's difficult to deny.

It would be a rather unambitious “freeform minimalist indie platformer” if it weren’t for all the aesthetic “window-dressing” that gives *Astaeria* its central conceit. I’m not just navigating another empty virtual signifier: each world I traipse and fall through is generated based on the poem I’ve chosen to see represented, each line of it appearing in bold, black lettering in the center of the screen, and each caesura a lingering fade-out between each new line. With each poem-generated level comes a moody piano and violin arrangement. Sometimes low notes somberly pound; in other cases, harmonies lilt or triplets dance. And no matter the tune or the poem or the duration of the level (helpfully noted in the menu as an approximate amount of time per poem), the rainbow of colours cycle gently on, fading from yellows to reds to blues and back again.

It’s so simple it’s almost difficult to describe, as if, like the poetry it adapts into a videogame context, *Astaeria* is attempting to suggest a state of feeling or being as something which impresses upon, and perhaps forms, the space one exists in. The objects in that space are important in the process of meaning-making, but no more than the container that holds them. When I say the word “sonnet”, that means more than just a specific stanzaic structure or foot and meter. It means more than just prosody. As Shonté Daniels pointed out in our recent ADAF panel, “Poetry and Games”, the sonnet traditionally refers to some great intimate rupture—like a relationship cut short by tragedy—and the structure of the sonnet is set up for that investment and eventual subversion of the emotions elicited in

the reader. Games arguably have a less-defined taxonomy than poetry does, but nonetheless the term “first-person” implies something much different in terms of the expected experience than, say, “twin-stick shooter” would. In many ways, the conventions of how certain games are structured lend themselves to—literally—certain types of perspectives on whatever situation they’re representing. What would I expect, then, from a procedurally-generated, “minimalist” first-person 3D platformer?

That’s probably already too many terms competing for relevance to mean anything—and this is exactly the problem with videogame terminology—but we do have a few points of reference for what this confluence of formal elements tends to imply. Parkour, rock-climbing, daring roof-top escapes and the like come up in the most literal expressions of these genres, but occasionally we’re also treated to somewhat facile metaphors relating physics puzzles to emotional inner space. And even more occasionally we’re treated to complex, insightful deployments of the same symbolic potential.

But adjacent to all that, the poetic beauty of *Astaeria* resides not just in its aesthetic restraint but in how its unassuming qualities create space for spontaneous impact. There is a certain economy to the cycling colours, the almost-featureless block formations hanging out in virtual space, the moody instrumental art-film music, the centered black font. But then, every once in awhile, a low piano tone will resound, and the world will bleed red, and Lady Lazarus will speak,

Dying

Is an art, like everything else.

I do it exceptionally well.

And I'll be so taken by this immediate confluence of words and sounds and colours that I'll lose my footing and fall. And so the affective space Sylvia Plath is pointing to is, it seems, realized in this artificially synaesthetic way. The system almost seems to interpret the poem for me—the speaker's extreme sadness given way to a darkly wry resignation—yet this isn't a scripted moment. Lugo has created the conditions for such serendipity to occur deeply in the code, but each moment of a playthrough creates the possibility for slightly new "readings."

In his Kill Screen review¹ of the game, Chris Priestman writes:

"Without the knowledge of how this virtual world is assembled, Lugo's effort to tie poetry and videogames may seem perfunctory. It appears clumsy: the text of a poem is overlaid on a videogame world—where's the great marriage of mediums in that? But it's more of a cocktail than it first appears. "The random level generator seed is set to the hash of the poem, and each tall, cubic structure corresponds to a line in the poem, with each cube component being sized according to a word in the line," Lugo explains.

So it is that the poem takes a physical form inside the software. Reading the words as you wander, you can imagine the structures as arches of stone, lakes of voidspace, and caves where creatures corral for warmth. Whatever the poem triggers you to hallu-

ciate can dress this bare bones geometry. If you're reading Lord Dunsany's poem Charon, about the ferryman on the River Styx, perhaps you'll see the endless drops all around you as the deathly river itself. Or maybe the environment twists into fingers of rock where an unspeakable creature lurks if you're experiencing Lewis Carroll's Jabberwocky."

I appreciate Priestman's perspective here, and perhaps he actually did hallucinate adornments on the bare bones space where, it's true, the verse is providing most of the context that makes each playthrough feel unique. But I'm not convinced that there's a clear, one-to-one relationship between the imagery described in each poem and the way the world "takes shape," even given the literal connection between verse and code. I can't honestly say that when Coleridge's rhyme about the salty sea floats into my view, such a vision manifests in the world around it. But something else is happening—perhaps something a little more profound and a little less articulable. In that moment, as if by design or divine providence, the lighting cycles around to an aquamarine, later darkening to navy, indigo, purple...

The whole notes drawl. For a moment, I don't feel marooned at sea exactly, but I do feel sort of lost in space. I suddenly feel trapped by my surroundings, by the precariousness of each cube floor, by the inevitability of falling. Things feel cruelly placid. Indifferent, distant. The cubes wax and wane while I move, each moment as unfixed and ephemeral as the last. For a moment, everything is perfectly unified. Everything is following the same beat—and then

just as suddenly it dissipates again. It isn't as though the imagery or its attendant metaphors become literal. It's more like, the metaphors are being momentarily restated, reconfigured and enacted as well as read. It's like when a statement is rephrased so as to be better understood. *Astaeria* has accomplished something in a relatively abstract game space, then, that I mostly only encounter at random pivots in my life. In a moment of real, lived affect, suddenly a line or a passage or a piece of dialogue that seemed opaque at the time I consumed it becomes clear and hard as a diamond. The meaningful convergence of seemingly-random things in real life allow me to empathize with, and find new power and insight from, the raw emotion of some piece of writing I had locked away in memory.

These spontaneous events might lend *Astaeria* over to the comparison of live, read poetry rather than verse privately read from a book. On the one hand, a live reading is arguably more controlled by the poet, at least in terms of things like pacing and inflection, and even simply the order in which things are read. At the same time, the live performance is a ritualistic space where all sorts of ambient sounds and movements can complicate each reading and make it feel singular and fleeting, whereas the printed page carries connotations of "timelessness" and "fixedness." (Perhaps this is less so in the age of digital archiving, but nonetheless.) The constant motion of a live space creates extra potential for new meaning—new phrasing—to emerge, and I think *Astaeria* captures this conflict between controlled delivery and spontaneous interpretive power in a videogame context. Or at least,

in the context of a videogame which is explicitly engaging with poetry as a medium.

Because Lugo's worlds are literally generated based on a corresponding line in the poem, they argue that the code is itself poetic—a direct 3D rendering thereof. I'm reminded of Claire Hosking's piece, *Not all code is poetry, but some is*. She writes,

"If programmers see a certain amount of parallel between the structure that they're using and the thing it's describing, then those particular examples of code are poetry."

When I made a little animation that caused a dot to spiral about, and saw the same patterns in the looping IF clauses in the code, it had the same sense of satisfaction as onomatopoeia. When I have more than one option for how to structure my code to produce a particular effect, and I pick the one I feel is the most lyrical one, the one that reads most elegantly, the one where following the movement and metamorphosis of the variables through their processes is most satisfying to the mind, what should I call it?"

I'm taking some liberties with Hosking's thesis here: She refers to the writing of code itself as analogous to writing a poem, using an "elegant" economy of phrases for the purpose of conveying some sort of statement or a "particular effect." I can't speak to whether or not Lugo had the same experience when writing her own code; if she had that feeling of finding the *mot juste* in terms of a particular bit of syntax on this or that line. It's clear however from the cen-

tral conceit of *Astaeria* that the poems that the hashes are assigned to are meant to constitute the very structure of the world. The worlds that are constructed are, in a way, virtual visualizations of poetry.

But is the poetry of code itself being communicated to the player? Again, I'm more inclined to believe that the honey bunches o' cubes would come off as nothing more than a quaint "avant-garde" platformer aesthetic if it weren't for the bells and whistles that fill the space in. It's the "window-dressing", the light and colour and sounds and the words themselves, that make this game actually feel like it's deliberately saying anything. While I don't think the poem-as-code premise really hurts anything about the game, *Astaeria* as experienced by the player did not read to me as any deeper because of some centrality the code is assumed to bestow on the poems. It's not the code, or for that matter the simple mechanics, or any other signifier of ludic virtuosity mixed with poetry that gives this game its power.

It's the tones, the colours, the hard black typeface. It's the fact that you can slide and toggle seemingly-inconsequential things like vignette lighting, fast or slow text fades, high or low volume, that makes *Astaeria* special. I think it's very telling that almost all the menu options Lugo decided to provide were for aesthetics—not to optimize the gameplay experience, but to mediate the ritual. To make it a bit different, but still so contained, every time. That's the power in repetition. The restating, the rephrasing, always carries a bit of loss and a bit of change.

But before I get ahead of myself, I'm not sure if some of the power in this unification of aesthetics is a result of otherwise over-simplified world architecture. I almost wonder what would have happened if *Astaeria* had even something as simple as configurations made of different shapes. Perhaps one cluster is made of spheres, and another of pyramids. Perhaps one doesn't always have to rise and fall, but one can sometimes bounce or wade. Perhaps this would have created more room for new repetitions to emerge. Or new metaphors altogether.

As it is, *Astaeria* has settled on falling and climbing, which as a piece of visual language fits *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* or *Lady Lazarus* well enough. That's not to mention the emergent dynamics of simply standing still for awhile, being awash in the words and the hues, looking up at the soaring clusters, like cloud vapours rising into eternity. And then a shift in tone: the sky turns red.

So much of a poem is about the space around the words: the white space of the page, the stanzaic structure, the setting for a performance, the digital void around which objects coalesce, an artificial gravity pushing those objects into shape, making holes between them. It is in this sense that *Astaeria* is not just a game made of poems, or a poem visualizer. *Astaeria* is its own poem. It's a poem about falling and getting up again, despite the futility and inescapability of the spaces which constrain us. It's a poem about the small, myriad and magical ways that the elements of life can line up to be beautiful, sublime, teachable, even in an otherwise hostile or

indifferent environment. It's a poem about how context can change meaning, and can make even cliches feel new and fresh and clear. It's a poem about how we're so inclined to make meaning out of nothing, nothing out of void. This drive can imprison us in our comfortable narratives, but it can also allow us to stop, look up at the sky and imagine things a little differently.

American Baseball

By Alex Pieschel

American Baseball is a game posted on Glorious Trainwrecks by user “everythingstaken” that trivializes the sport it simulates, removing all but the most minimal action from a sport that’s already halting and deliberate. There are no stats or runs or strikeouts. Home run wins, and anything else loses. Hitting is really hard, and everyone on the field is just standing around. The fielders don’t have to behave like athletes because it’s enough to be in the right place at the right time.

The title screen of *American Baseball* has white text splattered all over it, “BALL GAME” repeating like steps on a ladder next to the how-to-play instructions, a peculiar description that also outlines the game’s ostensible purpose: “Press [x] to hit the Baseball in the direction of the little ball rotating around the batter when the baseball is over the Homeplate. The goal is to make a home run and to make a home run you have to hit the ball in bounds past all of the ball players.” The complex unfolding syntax, and either a sincere or an affected unfamiliarity with baseball discourse, suggest passing interest in the sport. You “make” instead of “hit” a home run. Your hit must be “in bounds” as opposed to “fair.” This game doesn’t aspire to parody; it just wants to satisfy idle curiosity.

The author has chosen to limit player control and increase probability of failure. There are two baseballs, one literal, one imagined. The actual ball, the one you swing at, flies towards home plate, while the imagined ball, a smaller version of the sprite used for the real one,

rotates around the batter, representing your intent. Unlike in most modern baseball games where the player projects intent onto the batter through the nudge of a joystick, suggesting a push swing towards right field or a pull swing towards left, in *American Baseball* you have very little control over the ball's trajectory. This is because you don't control the imaginary ball, which begins rotating around the batter on its own as soon as the real ball is released by the pitcher. Timing your swing to connect is challenging in itself. But even if you time your swing correctly, you will probably miss or deflect harmlessly on your first few tries because the imaginary ball will end up behind the batter, aiming the trajectory of your hit backwards.

There are no strikes or balls or outs. If you miss, you lose. If you don't swing, you lose. If you hit it foul, you lose. If you hit it to one of the stationary fielders, you lose. Every time you lose, the game stops abruptly and displays a text box, "Haha, get better at baseball," and a dialogue (non)choice between "ok" or "alright," which you have to click before the game will begin anew. Now if you somehow manage to hit it *between* the fielders (not over them, which is impossible because there's no concept of elevation), then you win. *American Baseball* feels like playing as an amateur rather than a professional, like you're in little league, swinging blind and fearful, expecting failure, and hoping that if you time your swing correctly, you might accidentally make contact, even if you close your eyes. But this game isn't antagonistic, as in something like *Dark Souls*, because it clearly doesn't expect more than an amateur performance. The spot-

light is so clearly fixed on this one unfortunate batter who is so unlikely to succeed, the notion that this is supposed to be a team sport becomes part of the joke. There is an art to trivializing something in a way that illuminates it. All team sports make spectators out of some of us.

American Baseball is an argument that baseball casts its players as spectators and sets them up for failure. Defense is mostly standing around, and offense is mostly sitting in the dugout, waiting your turn, checking your Instagram or whatever. When you finally participate in the action, you'll probably make a mistake because you're nervous and out of practice from so much sitting and standing. *American Baseball* is like if every player on an American football team were the kicker, or if every point in basketball had to be scored via hack-a-Shaq free throws. The difference is that baseball *expects* failure when our gaze fixates on and dramatizes the individual. An individual persists despite the odds as teammates and spectators alike look on. In professional baseball, failing seventy percent of the time is probably enough to get you into the Hall of Fame. There's a school of game design that presents individual failure, even of the slow, grating variety, as noble and instructive. But often, failure just feels trivial, like an arbitrary rank or grade. One of the challenges of design is figuring out the difference between failure and productive resistance.

There's another trainwreck game by everything-staken called *Idkabc2* that points out how pointless failure can feel, how unintuitive learning a discourse can be. It looks innocent enough at

first, but then you start trying to do what's expected of you. It's an alphabet game. You're supposed to press the appropriate letter on your keyboard as you move over the appropriate image, and you have to go in order. The first few letters are obvious. "A" for apple. "B" for banana. "C" for cat. "D" for dog. "E" for envelope. Then it stops making sense.

The game progresses according to a rubric of scaling nonsensical associations full of red herrings. Later, you go for the "Q" when you see a picture of Q*bert, but it's actually "R" for "red cartoon." Now you have to assume your first, most natural image association is not going to be the one that works, a realization that makes your brain do some frustrating acrobatics. The images are often a second or third or fourth association, and eventually you'll have to dig even deeper to descriptions you never would have thought of, stretching brain muscles you never use or maybe don't have.

For me, this game resonated as more than a straightforward parody or simple joke because it reminded me that my image associations are just that, potentially exclusive to the inside of my own head. This is an easy one, but I associate "D" with dog for many reasons, some of it probably has to do with previous alphabet memorization exercises and being read to as a kid, and a lot of it has to do with how I've seen enough dogs to be able to identify one as such. I grew up around people who owned dogs. I know people now who own dogs. From what I understand, image association is a real thing that we use to test literacy and intelligence.

For example, I found a practice question online for a test called the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC), one of the most popular standardized intelligence tests in the U.S. for ages 6-16. The test is of course published by the ubiquitous knowledge corporation Pearson. The practice question (not an official Pearson version, as far as I can tell) represents a subset called "picture concepts," which is designed to measure "Fluid Reasoning," one of five primary index scores that contribute to the interpretation of a child's general intellect and ability. Out of two rows of pictures, you have to match one from each row based on some underlying relationship. In this particular question, the first row shows cheese, grapes, and asparagus. The second row has a chicken leg, a hamburger, and a potato. Did you get the answer? Potato goes with asparagus because they're both vegetables. How easy would this question be for the child of a parent who doesn't buy asparagus because it's expensive? Asparagus was never on my school lunch menu. Potatoes were always French and fried.

Even when the WISC is revised between different editions, repackaged to "correct" for this sort of bias, any standardized assessment like this, fundamentally, will test for a specific discourse—a specific kind of literacy—that many will refer to as "intelligence." So the discourse in the ABC game is unintuitive, but what learned discourse isn't? That's the whole reason we go to school, right? To learn an institutionalized, unintuitive discourse. In the U.S., a lot of labor and money is committed to high stakes, no excuses, 'accountability' tests, filters to make sure

we learn this discourse. And, of course, it's more intuitive for some than others, not because of intelligence, but because of the way the deck is stacked.

The way to win *ldkabc2* is to stop trying to feel your way through the images and words, which I imagine is virtually impossible except through a really persistent process of elimination, failing over and over again until you simply realize the correct answer by virtue of having tried all the wrong ones. It's more likely that you'll give up before you get there. The way to win the game is to open up the .txt file in the folder you downloaded, where you'll find the game's Works Cited page (as it were), another nod towards learned discourse conventions. Authors should demonstrate credibility by citing their sources, and in order to test the author's credibility, the audience should check up on the author's sources. Each image URL is listed in alphabetical order, but often you can't just look at the URL and tell which image you should pick. This means you have to copy and paste each URL in your browser and open up the website associated with each clipart image. The game reveals itself not as a test of intelligence or skill, but as a scavenger hunt, an exercise in persistence, a test of your willingness to participate in its conventions. Upon replaying, it becomes a memorization game to see if you have internalized those conventions. Learn a discourse, recycle it, demonstrate your mastery of that discourse to signal your membership to the initiated and talk past the uninitiated.

HOT DATE

By Gita Jackson

Dating is horrible. I put off breaking up with my last boyfriend, as a lot of people do, because I was thinking about having to meet people again. It's a miserable experience, trying to put forth your best self while sniffing out the insecurities of everyone else. Being open and guarded at the same time. Being vulnerable and impenetrable. Trying to guess the code words that mean "He'll be good for me," or alternatively, "He's going to ruin my life."

It's amazing, then, that I loved playing *Hot Date*. George Bachelor's game is simple: you are speed dating a bunch of hot pink pugs. You give your name, they give theirs and you ask them questions. The answers seem to be random. Sometimes you can follow up, which elicits additional random responses.

I have played dating sims, eroge, and visual novels. If a game has a relationship or romance system, I'm on it like white on rice. None of them have accurately represented the acute horror of dating like *Hot Date* has.

For each speed dating session, nothing is preset, and nothing carries over from previous encounters. You can choose a different name each time. You can say you like a band, then say you dislike the same band on the next go around and no one will call you on it. You can act sweet as pie or react aggressively. Only one thing is guaranteed: there's nothing, nothing you can do

that will make these fucking pugs like you.

The palette is pinker than a Valentine's display at a department store. The pugs (my favorite kind of dog) are absolutely fucking adorable, all too-big eyes and protruding tongues. There's a nifty little nested menu system that's fun to navigate - you can start with "What" and it will lead you to another prompt like, "do you think about" and then it gives you options to choose from to finish your sentence.

And yet talking to these pugs is fucking insufferable because it's just too goddamn real. In the past year I've been on precisely one date. I liked the guy, but even then, it is was so stilted and awkward. Every sentence was secretly a test: How will they respond? Are they gonna hate what you like? Will they be rude or blatantly pander? And what's the point of all this struggle - is anything even going to happen? At one point he asked me where I bought my groceries, and knowing he was basically as leftist as me, I had to consider whether or not I should lie and say I go to the farmer's market more than I actually do.

You could play *Hot Date* forever, and I played it for about as long as I could stand. The pugs just keep coming, one after another, ad infinitum. The experience can come off as a little shallow - there's very little variation between each interaction and the next - but I feel like that's the point. Dating is shallow. Dating is a slog. Dating is a painful human ritual that, for some reason, we force ourselves to endure.

I went on a few more dates with that guy and it seemed to be going really well, until very suddenly he called me to break things off. I'm fine, really, I actually have a boyfriend now, basically by accident. But I look back on myself from a month ago, a girl who was head over heels for that guy I went on dates with, who thought of him so often, who wanted to be his girlfriend so badly. I barely think of him now. This is all so unpredictable it might as well be randomly generated.

You can't please these pugs by figuring out a strategy, by saying the right things. Each one will react, even to innocuous small talk like comments on the weather, in different ways. *Hot Date* captures dating so well because it presents itself as a game, but then revokes almost all player control as soon as you begin. You make statements, ask questions and hope for the best. You can't win *Hot Date*. You kind of just endure it.

You do find yourself getting fond of those pugs. Most tend to have a pretty hostile or dismissive attitude, but a few I actually wanted to get to know. They keep a consistent personality throughout dates, so often just from the way they say their name to you, you know you're just gonna fucking hate them. A few, though, are as stilted, hesitating and shy as I would be in real life. These encounters felt like maybe, just a little bit, I had figured this game out. I was getting somewhere. And then the game would announce that our time was up, and I was on to the next one.



Her Story

By Edmund Chu

In Satoshi Kon's *Millennium Actress*, a TV reporter and his cameraman (Genya and Kyoji, respectively) track down a reclusive, retired actress and interview her on her long career. Interviewer and subject dive into the filmography—they playfully re-enact famous scenes, and through the miracle of cinema, what the audience mostly sees is not the absurd play-acting, but their fantasy worlds made real. It becomes clear that the actress, Chiyoko, has spent much of her life chasing after a mysterious artist she met and fell in love with as a young woman; her acting career was, she says plainly, a beacon to the artist: here I am. And that longing is a running thread through her films: there's always someone gone missing, someone just out of reach, someone who's just disappeared around the corner. Kon's work is often dreamy and surreal, and *Millennium Actress* is no exception. As Chiyoko's tale goes on, reality slips away—we see less of the documentarians' camera equipment, less of the sitting room in Chiyoko's home, and more scenes from her movies. Metaphors turn into reality, or maybe the other way around.¹

Watching *Millennium Actress* is kind of like doing free-association with your eyeballs: each little transition makes perfect sense in and of itself. It has just this wonderful sense of continuity (if not linearity) despite depicting seven or so distinct periods in history, and much of that is owed simply to Kon's knack in matching scene transitions; even if we're jumping all the way from a vignette in feudal Japan to a sci-fi moon base, Chiyoko acts as the center of gravity, both visually and narratively, around which the whole movie rotates. Without her in such a prominent position, the movie would just turn into a pastiche of costume dramas. It really should be a mess. In Satoshi Kon's hands, it's elegant, sweeping, deeply heartfelt, and romantic.

Here, I want to switch to talking about Sam Barlow's game *Her Story* for a bit. *Her Story* presents players with a database of police interrogation videos, all of a woman—Hannah—whose husband has apparently been murdered. The database is searchable—so, type in “Simon” (the husband's name), and you get back clips where the woman has said “Simon.” You never hear the police or their questions. Players are limited to viewing the first five results, and each video is *maybe* two minutes long, tops. Nor can players watch any whole interrogation straight through, so they need to start searching the database for connective tissue: interesting phrases, key words, related concepts they want to learn more about. If one hasn't read the ad copy, it might not even be totally clear what the 'objective' is; the searchbox comes pre-populated with the word “murder,” but otherwise

the player is on their own.

It is, basically, a game of free-association.² Emily Short describes it³ as having a surprising amount in common with parser-based interactive fiction: much of what's compelling about *Her Story* (and much parser IF) is external to the game.³ The player's process of logic and deduction acts as the hook, not the execution of any particular action within the UI. Much like how the scenes of *Millennium Actress* move from one to the next with obvious logic but little respect for chronology, players explore the videos of *Her Story* not linearly, or by going down branches of a tree, but as something like a cycle graph: any one video suggests many others; following any particular thread of logic from that one video will eventually lead back to where one started. This (lack of) structure feels like it should be a mess, but a common point of praise is that the story remains gripping and propulsive and cohesive; there's always enough new information to set off a new line of inquiry.

Not that *Her Story* is just a front-end to a truckload of information, either; there's particular attention paid to its staging, its user interface, and the player's place in it. The interface simulates a Windows 98-era CRT monitor, and we can see the glare of overhead fluorescents. At conveniently dramatic moments, the lights might flare and pop, or a police cruiser might zoom past the window with its lights and sirens blaring, and we can see a face dimly reflected in the glass. One might be tempted, even, to call the staging fairly realistic. Don't, though. We'll get to that.

There's something else to be said about Satoshi Kon's style, especially in *Millennium Actress*: he loved to inflict tunnel vision on his audience. We barrel through scenes and ideas and images, one after another, and we usually just have to take the scene for what it is. Kon sometimes likes to turn this on its head and play kind of a visual prank, zooming out his camera by increments, each step recontextualizing the scene, a domestic argument becomes a movie scene becomes an on-set argument, a constant shift of point-of-view, and when he finally stops, we're not always ready. Are we sure we're seeing the whole picture at this point? Can we zoom out even more? What would we see if we did?

For all the sweep and scope of Chiyoko's love story, *Millennium Actress*³ is also an attempt to understand Chiyoko herself. Each film of hers that we see, each new "world" that we see her in, widens the shot. But we still have tunnel vision—we see Chiyoko through her movies, but what if we took a step back from all of that? What if we step back from *Millennium Actress* itself? The audience learns, near the end of the movie, the untimely fate of the mysterious young artist; Chiyoko intuits it, but never knows the whole story. Our field of view is a little larger than hers, for a moment. Yet mere minutes later, Chiyoko moves from her deathbed to a spaceship and rockets off to a distant star to look for the young artist again. Her parting words put her ostensibly doomed romance in a completely different light: "It's the chasing I truly love." She leaves us there, already light-years away, unknowable once again.

Her Story, too, forces tunnel vision on its audience. The player starts with a single word to search on, but with each video clip, gains a wider perspective, and a new context for clues they've gathered. A statement becomes a lie becomes some version of the truth again. Yet we're constrained to five videos. For example, we can never see everything about "Simon" at once. *Her Story* has so much fondness for this conceit, in fact, that even when the player can access "administrator mode," there's still a limit; seeing and knowing the whole story is always going to be just out of reach.

Eventually it emerges that the player has been watching twin sisters, Hannah and Eve, who've been taking turns leading Hannah's life. It's a plot twist that is liable to undermine pretty much every clue that the player has gathered up to that point. Truth in *Her Story* is not just too big to view all at once, but subjective as well.

Much of the negative criticism of the game touches on this point one way or another; the mistaken identity trope is, no matter how much spin one puts on it, still a trope. As Jed Pressgrove observes, the story that follows from it—one sister becomes jealous of the other and murders the husband—seems to harmfully "play off the overused 'crazy bitch' trope."⁵ Stuart at Soledad Honrado notes the same problem, and finds another:

"For a game so desperate in presenting itself as an artifact of reality, so desperate to make itself feel like an experience that unravels in our reality, in our own minds... Her Story doesn't show any of

*that in its main character. Instead, much like David Fincher, it is merely interested in having the audience look at people as things, as distillations of people, subjects."*⁶

And Shut Up Video Games pulls it all together:

*"There is a crime being committed in Her Story, but it isn't Hannah's. It's that of yet another crime fiction writer, conflating melodrama with found-footage, documentary, or any otherwise "real" aesthetic, and in doing so helping affirm the idea that society should lock up its criminals and throw away the key...it has sympathy for its two criminals, and invites you to empathise with them, despite their crime. But aside from gleaning the raw facts of the murder, mostly through clumsily placed visual nuggets, you don't journey with Hannah or Eve. When you start the game they both seem suspicious and guilty. When you end the game, they both seem suspicious and guilty."*⁷

There's much to recommend these criticisms; just because something is a common trope doesn't mean the trope is harmless; *Her Story* pushes players to buy into the plot more than the people; David Fincher kind of is an asshole; and Hannah and Eve are undeniably suspicious, guilty people.

Yet I think there's a tension these criticisms hint at but don't address: for all the trappings of reality that the game presents—the CRT monitor, the buzzing overhead lights, the muddy interview videos—it is all also blatantly fiction. Viva Seifert, who plays Hannah and Eve, chews a glorious amount of scenery, and she does it with

gusto. The story of Eve's childhood is as gothic as they come. The circumstances of Simon's murder are so absurd and convoluted that they resemble nothing if not a hall of mirrors: Hannah, dressed as Eve, slashes his throat with a shard of silvered glass (...itself the remnants of a mirror Simon meant to give to Eve, but identical to a mirror he'd given Hannah prior).

Even the supposed realistic staging of the game is undone once the player starts interacting with it. The UI is reminiscent of a '90s Windows desktop, but its "operating system" and "database software" are so artificially constrained that you can never quite forget it's a simulacrum. The game emits typing and clicking sounds on top of whatever typing/clicking sounds the player is making in the real world. One might find this either cutesy or maddening, either way, it's an artifice that highlights the distance between the player and the game. And the game, as mentioned, occasionally shows a reflection in the simulated monitor—and while the reflection is dim, it obviously isn't the player's face that one sees. These moments of discord and distancing come when the player is most likely to be engaged in the story: for example, after a startling revelation, like when Eve's name first comes up, or when a character shares a secret about their childhood.

And this tension between the unreal and the real, what we're presented (a gothic melodrama) and how it's presented to us (via a faithfully recreated Windows desktop), sits at the heart of *Her Story*. Satoshi Kon engaged with this idea throughout his work, observing that fiction and

reality are two sides of the same coin:

*"There's a 'main' reality, but then there's the Internet, TV, our own memories, these things we experience together. I think it isn't good to stress the divisions between them too much, because an important part of the human can be misplaced that way. Fiction relates to the real. The unreal comes from the real and there's a dialectic between them."*⁸

Millennium Actress reconciles the real and unreal by seamlessly fusing them; Chiyoko off-screen is inseparable from Chiyoko on-screen. *Her Story*, though, presents itself as being anything but harmonious. It contradicts itself by its presentation; Hannah and Eve contradict each other, even while they're supposed to be playing the same person. Reality and fiction combine, but not seamlessly; they're impossibly confused. We catch a glimpse of the human within all of Chiyoko's personas, yet *Her Story* obscures its people within a tangle of plot threads. What emerges from all of this interplay is a crime story with elements so fantastical that it becomes spectacle. And if what Kon says about shared realities is true, how are we supposed to approach the fact that our shared experience from *Her Story*—our collective reference point—depicts crime-as-spectacle and hides so much from us?

Her Story never quite clarifies who "her" refers to. Eve and Hannah are the most obvious candidates, and I'd make the case that even the persona that Eve and Hannah constructed together is a consideration. But there's also Eve's daughter, who is revealed to be the player character;

she's trawling through all this police footage in an attempt to understand her mother's actions decades prior. All of this is explained in a little chat window with the daughter's friend at the police station, who asks if "you understand why your mother did what she did."

This twist comes late in the game, only after the mystery is largely solved; and because it's preceded with only the slightest foreshadowing—the blurry reflections in the monitor—the reveal feels unearned. But it does force us to examine what we expected to discover. We might want to find something in Hannah and Eve that redeems them—something that gives us a reason not to pity them; basically, we might want them to have character arcs that free us of any narrative responsibility. But that doesn't happen: we're left complicit in seeing crime as a spectacle. That the question is posed at all suggests something very sympathetic, though: we might have all the clues and plot threads and facts and lies all laid bare. Yet none of that is necessarily the truth about a person. And it is not an excuse to stop searching for the human hidden beneath the artifice.



A Personal Archaeology of “Girls’ Games”: On Rhizome’s Theresa Duncan Conservation Efforts

By Emilie Reed

I don’t share much of the childhood that mainstream nostalgia taps and that conventional gaming history draws from. I never owned a SNES, Dreamcast, or Playstation. The only arcade game I regularly interacted with was a *Street Fighter II* machine in my church’s basement. My nostalgia, my perspective on which games are canonical, is my own. Of course, this is true for everyone, but when I read books or visit exhibitions that attempt to establish a history of gaming, I feel especially left out. I wasn’t a gamer during my childhood. I played games extensively during my childhood.

There’s proof that I was already using my dad’s PC before I can remember. This photo is proudly displayed on my dad’s desk: me seated at the first computer my family owned, completely

bald, wearing nothing but a diaper. All the software ran on floppy discs, sometimes sets of five or six for one game. I played with Disney math and ABC programs, and had one multi-floppy game I still can’t recall the name of, involving some kind of train going through a zoo, commandeered by a purple creature. Of course, all these games had a clear educational bent, and my parents hoped they would help me learn to read and count sooner than my peers.

The photo was probably taken in 1992 at our home in Hallam, PA. Hallam is a township that Google will tell you is primarily known for a house that’s shaped like a shoe; less than 3000 people live there. It’s primarily rural, but in a bit of a quirky way. A guy who owned emus lived down the street from us. In 1992, there was not

much of a tech or gaming community, and I imagine this is still true. The fact that I had access to a computer so young was simply a happy accident of my dad's profession at the time, testing electronics.

When we upgraded to a PC with a CD-ROM drive, my horizons expanded even further. Not only did this one have games already built in (I spent hours trudging horizontally and uphill in an attempt to explore the forests of *Skii Free*), but cheap CD-ROMS were now everywhere, Toys-R-Us, Wal-Mart, Office Max. I got the full set of Jumpstart games from 1st to 5th grade, both Busytown games, a variety of *Magic School Bus* titles, and *The Oregon Trail*.

There were also some that encouraged more creative skills, like *KidPix* and *American Girls Premiere*, and gradually, my parents' strict educational requirement began to loosen. I got the *Dogz* and *Catz* games in lieu of an actual pet, then bargain Maxis bundles of their more obscure titles like *SimPark*, *SimTunes*, and *SimCopter* because they were cheap. Among the titles I could pick up at places like Wal-Mart and Office Max were games specifically made to appeal to me, a girl in elementary or middle school with an interest in computers.

They didn't always succeed. *Barbie Riding Club* and *Hair Stylist* were far more likely to become targets of derision. My little sister and I would giggle as we dressed Barbie up in jarring, clownish makeup, or made her horse stumble aimlessly around the course. We knew these games were mawkishly over-concerned with their

ability to connect to "girls like us," with Barbie chirpily praising everything we did as "cool!" and "awesome!" and so they triggered a slight, vengeful streak in us. We wanted them to fail.

Now I consider myself super lucky to have owned, at one point, a game from one of the companies associated with the Girl Games movement that didn't have a major Barbie or Disney Princess affiliation. *Rocket's New School*, developed by Purple Moon, was probably my first foray into the visual novel format, where a story unfolds and the player is given choices that create branching narrative paths. To me, the plot, minigames, and journaling activities were compelling reasons to keep playing, even if Purple Moon would eventually receive flack for the essentialist assumptions that informed their development process, that girls played games "horizontally," focusing on friendship and social elements, while boys were attracted to "hierarchical" play structures (eg. Competition, score, conquering, battle, etc).¹

Theresa Duncan's games are at once both a part of the Girl Games movement, and something of their own. While *Chop Suey*, *Smarty*, and *Zero Zero* also play like branching storybooks, they are clearly the product of a single auteur, and not the result of a research-based consensus. Theresa Duncan was a writer who also worked in animation and film, but the CD-ROM games she designed have left the most lasting impact. Each game presents a map world from which the player can click on points of interest and explore the characters and objects found therein. Gradually, a non-linear story, a weekend with

Aunt Vera, a childhood summer vacation, or the turn of the century, emerges.

I didn't experience Theresa Duncan's work in my childhood, even though I was playing similar games and in the target demographic around the time they were initially released. I first heard about them when Rhizome launched a modest Kickstarter looking to fund a cloud emulation platform that would host Duncan's three titles. At the time, I was more interested in the possibilities of online emulation platforms, since I knew from my own frustrations that individually setting up virtual boxes to run older software is far from an elegant solution to the problem of accessing the conserved files.

When the games were released on the cloud emulation platform in Mid-April of 2015, I recorded and streamed a full playthrough of all three games, which ended up being some of the most exciting experiences I had that year. The premise is deceptively simple. Like the Busytown games that inspired her, Theresa Duncan's games all start with a brief storybook intro, narrated to text that lights up as each word is spoken. Then the player finds themselves in a hub world, usually representing different points of interest in a town or neighbourhood. You can use the mouse to navigate to these places in any order, and the first time you visit you'll get another short narrated introduction. In children's software, this was not new.

What felt fresh, however, was the faith Duncan had in her young audience. Barbie's girl games offered a fairly sanitized view of feminine top-

ics, filled with what felt like hollow encouragement and praise. Likewise, the Busytown games and other similar educational titles seem to me now, in hindsight, more like training software, of both knowledge and attitudes, designed to mould children into good computer workstation users.

The world Theresa Duncan creates within all three of these games is not the controlled, carefully regulated utopia of educational games. There is always a surprising darkness or silliness a few clicks away. In *Chop Suey*, a tattooed man in denim overalls runs a candy store with lit cigarettes hanging on some of the racks. Lily and Junebugg can visit the home of Dooner, a graffitied up apartment where chip bags and records cover the floor, and a Black Revolvers poster hangs on the wall. The map connecting these areas is not a schematized perspective of a town, but a swirling abstract evocation of wandering around on a hazy afternoon, from freak show to Chinese restaurant and back to your aunt's house.

Similarly, *Smarty* follows a young girl named Mimi Smartypants, who loves the "mysteries of mathematics, the beauty of books, and the glamour of grammar," who goes to live with Aunt Olive and her roommate Rose while school's out for the summer. The multitude of sites to visit includes a movie theatre that shows remixed classical animation and film clips, a literal vegetable cellar where humanoid vegetables come alive to drink booze and play cards, and a pancake restaurant patronized by flirty cats and scored by surprisingly well-produced novelty

songs about pancakes.

Zero Zero takes a step away from the brightly coloured, folksy doodle aesthetic of the first few games to tell a short historical fiction of a girl acrobat named Pinkee who is making her rounds, delivering firewood to homes and businesses in her neighbourhood on the eve of the 20th Century. The palette is more muted, and the setting is rendered more concretely, but as you visit each location and hear the inhabitants' dreams for the new century, there are still plenty of surreal surprises, like a matching game played with funny looking pairs of underwear, a cheese shop where anthropomorphized cheeses re-enact the French revolution to a punk rock soundtrack, and an old man named Benjamin Walter outlining his vision for the 20th Century in a huge tome.

While looking towards the future is a theme most explicit in *Zero Zero*, it is present across all the games. These stories are inherently transient, set on a long weekend or a childhood summer vacation, and the freeform narrative, where the player can select, repeat or avoid altogether any parts of the story and still reach the same ending, creates a sense of personal ownership about one's adventure. *Smarty* and *Chop Suey* both end with the protagonist returning to her normal life, leaving the funky and surreal adventure behind. The player can end the play session by clicking "exit" whenever they want to return to their own world, which activates a fitting transition between computer fantasy and reality. This strange alternative to the Barbie-pink worlds, and the apparent ease with which

Duncan works unusual play styles and complex themes into games aimed at young girls, is what makes her work so vital to the often untold side of gaming history.

Looking towards the future for these games also means thinking about their long term viability and accessibility. Rhizome's end goal in online emulation is universal access to the preserved files for anyone with an internet connection, but their emulation platform still has some hiccups. I ran the games with a fairly average Wi-Fi connection in Pennsylvania, a few hundred miles away from where I presume Rhizome's servers are in New York City. I experienced mild audio lag and a few freezes. However, those in other countries and on the west coast of the United States reported more serious issues with lag that made the games almost unplayable. While this may be a resource issue for Rhizome, it is something that needs to be addressed if this cloud emulation approach is to be a useful tool for scholars, conservationists, and gaming history enthusiasts.

Despite some stutters, these experiments in conserving and running digital data in a way that is accessible beyond the increasingly outmoded CD-ROM (or floppy) hardware, and beyond the often complex software required to run older programs, has the potential to open up a history of gaming that is so often seen as disposable. When I asked my mom if any of these discs were still around, she thought for a moment before replying, "No, I'm pretty sure I gave them away, or just threw them out."

The same person who asked for my permission

before lending a doll I hadn't played with for at least fifteen years to a young neighbour didn't think twice before getting rid of the digital playthings I had spent most of my childhood with. This seems to be a pretty accurate example of our attitude towards digital data in general. Because it is so easily copied and transferred, it's hard to attribute the same value to the collection of data that makes up a cherished childhood videogame as we do to the material that made up my first baby doll.

This hits hardest at CD-ROM and other early PC titles, those parts of gaming history already at highest risk of being forgotten. Console gaming is overwhelmingly represented in most exhibitions and publications that claim to represent a history of gaming. Consoles and cartridges move more gracefully into the status of artefact than freeware or CD-ROM games rapidly obsolescing in the filing cabinet next to my dad's desk.

While obsolescence seems to drive rarity and prestige for gaming consoles and their titles,

PCs and their early games are not only haunted by how they evoke the sterility of the workstation rather than the excitement of the game console (attached to TV) or arcade, they're also seen as much more disposable. This leaves them comparatively hampered in those processes of historical recognition, conservation, and serious attention. But this is a part of my history, and the history of many other little girls from the 90s, just as worthy of exhibition and study.

Projects like the FEMICOM museum, online DOS archives, and of course Rhizome's online emulation attempts are important steps towards writing a more comprehensive and inclusive history of gaming. They are saving valuable and innovative work that speaks to me, when so often in the territorial world of gaming I felt rejected or overlooked for not cutting my teeth on the right games. To me, the Rhizome conservation of Theresa Duncan's games is not just about my own childhood nostalgia, but about asserting an overlooked part of history, so that someday its inclusion will be seen as matter of fact.

Dust City

By Owen Vince

Roadside Picnic is a 1971 Science-Fiction novel by Russian authors Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, and within its pages are described “Visitation Zones”: loci of a strange and fleeting moment of extraterrestrial visitation, wherein each area has become deranged. Space and time within them bend; the dead can be brought back to life. And in the book, the dead indeed return – silent, distracted – to the homes they had once inhabited. These “Zones” are also littered with the debris of the once visiting “aliens”; technology which con-

fers undoubted and inexplicable benefits to those who find them. Nobody knows their original function. These tubes of glowing light, “Bracelets”, “Needles” - the writers refuse often to describe their physical appearance - are simply dangerous, killing those who come into contact with them. There's always the sense that the “Zones” are both a blessing and a curse. And yet, someone must investigate them.

Roadside Picnic provides a kind of textual ci-

pher to Kitty Horrorshow's own *Dust City*. *Dust City* has a lot of parallels with *Roadside Picnic*, intentioned or not I don't know. As Kitty puts it on the site's Itch.io page:

"A CITY HAS APPEARED IN THE 'CRATER'

Satellite imagery verifies that the city had not existed within the crater prior to 12 hours ago.

You have been randomly selected to investigate in the crater to search for anomalies, artifacts, or clues as to the nature of the city"

Like *Roadside Picnic*, *Dust City* is about encounter; the potentials and problematics, the anxieties, of encountering and making sense of a seemingly alien environment with little more than symbols, space (and the architecture which occupies it), and intuition. This sudden City will both welcome and resist our attempt to recognise and "pin it down". In that sense, *Dust City* is an encounter with "the alien". But it's also a product of human engineering and creativity; it is a city designed and coded, reproduced, within the contexts of human perceptions and responses to urbanism and cities as a cultural signifier. *Dust City* is, undoubtedly, an alien artefact. It is confusing, distracting, and playfully obtuse. But that also makes it very familiar; cities are nothing if not enigmas that we live in. As *Dust City* resists and also welcomes us, we are forced to think about the nature and the unnatural of what cities are to us in our landscapes – as homes, places of work, cultural playgrounds, yet also as sites for resistance and oppression. *Dust City* is abandoned, or seems

to be abandoned. It's a "ruin". But what is it exactly that attracts us to ruins, and turns us into "hauntologists"? What is so terrifying about abandonment, yet also so alluring?

As a "dead" or abandoned city, we must encounter first the creeping terror of deindustrialisation, the horror-show of the City as a mausoleum which plagued both the Romantic and Modern imagination. The Grand Tour in 18th century Europe was also primarily a tour of burial sites, cities such as Baltimore and Detroit, once powerhouses of American Industrial might, are given to us as objects of the pornographic "ruin gaze", or "ruin porn". The aesthetics of abandonment serve only to neutralise the conditions of poverty, racism, and political indifference which gave rise to such inner-city deprivation (or, ruination). Photographs of the abandoned metropolis rarely mention or hint that these cities are still occupied. We are given the lie of the dead Washington of Logan's Run. 700,000 people still live in Detroit. It is not a "lost city", but is found again and again – day by day – through its inhabitants.

And so it is not shocking that French architect Le Corbusier, turning his hand from designing houses to cities, imagined that he was creating, ultimately, an Akropolis. Similarly, the architect of the Nazi third reich, Albert Speer, designed a grotesque monumentalism that was actually meant to become a striking ruin – built with ruination in mind, such that even when the regime had long passed away – its archaeology would be encountered, instilling awe. Speer was not to anticipate that many of his buildings would be

ground to dust by saturation bombing, or demolished by the governments of East and West Germany after 1945 in an attempt to absolve the built environment itself of its participation and complicity in murder. Yet ruins and the horror-attraction which they convey are ever present in our physical environments; as Comaroff and Ker-Shing put it, in their sublime "Horror in Architecture", ruins "are immanent in the modern, and problematically so". They are not simply disorganised space. They are a part of the project of the modern imagination. The horror of ruins, and our attention to them, "reveals blind spots, cataracts - things that we are not properly supposed to find". Abandoned, dysmorphic places are never easy. They continually jolt and shake-up our expectations.

Dust City is about abandonment - about abandoned ruins. It involves a sort of extraterrestrial archaeology. But, properly, this is a game about an encounter. An encounter between an explorer - the player - and a City. Yet that city is not ready to yield its secrets and imaginations to the player. From the outset, the city is shielded; it is literally a city of Dust that emerges from a screen of swirling, glitchy static. Its primary design references are Quake, Morrowind; the same sickly looming vast and arcane architectures, bent trees, cuboid landscapes which appear from the particle rendering of mist and swirling chaos. We're actually at home in such places, and already, as it were, on the lip of nostalgia. But we also have to make our way to Dust City. It is in part an open-world, in so far as we can move laterally. We are an investigator, and so can investigate in radii that we feel are ap-

propriate. We can follow our curiosity, or even deny it. And yet, when the game actually begins we cannot make out the city from among this visual noise. We must walk blindly toward and into it, trusting - beyond hope - that the city will appear around us. Built into this, is the possibility that we may never encounter the city, either willingly or unwillingly. It contains the possibility for its own evaporation. Exploration always contains the tension of luck. There is no sequence of coherent progress.

What we notice first are ugly and familiar architectures; black blocks of housing with irregular windows which do not allow us to peer in - they are obscured by a smear of slimy green translucence. A kind of necrotic looking glass which seems to say, "this is a window. It is not a window". We get used to such things. The only moving part here is a sigil - a kind of wavering and glitchy rune that fizzles and gyrates. We approach it - why not? When we interact with it using our only piece of equipment, the "Esotech Arcanodex 5", we hear a sort of massive electronic screeching. It's horrible. Our EA5 translates -

"all the METAL in the world was ... HOWLING at ONCE like ... the CRIES of ... a WOUNDED TITAN"

Later, another sigil is less mythic and more blunt, more frightened. It says - "shit the INTERNET is ... OUT again ... say it's happening EVERYWHERE". Are these the last spoken anxieties of a population moments before its eradication? Are we, too, at risk? Are we walking over graves?

The game uses these fragments of text not to simply to confuse us (though I think that's one purpose), but also to key us in to an investigative state of mind. Ruination is not about emptiness it's about what was emptied from.

We are solving puzzles. We're asked (and asking), "what happened here?" Each sigil communicates a destruction horizon, an event that took place, to which we are crash-site investigators, arriving amidst the rubble, searching for its "black box". The city is dead. Why? Are we being warned, educated, or simply played with? At moments it is terrifying, and in others – others – it is almost consoling. In one building we are bathed in a blue-purple light. The gravity enables us to leap gracefully from platform to platform. We don't fear death or any kind of destruction. We glide. We are uplifted by a soft, ambient music.

Another space – within another corrupted building – is misty, monochrome, and brutal. It is constituted of grating black and grey blocks which rise and fall like some endless and patient machinery. We do our best to navigate the space, following our pattern language of how to do a platform game. We tumble, get stuck. I get the feeling that the glitching and framing in this room has been left intentionally rough. It doesn't want to be used like this. We feel very small. We feel transparent. Again, in another room, we are led to feel unusually haunted. It is dark, for starters. Red and black. We can't make out anything more than the mucky, blocky interior of a house. A chair and table have been overturned. The air in here is damp. In this lev-

el, we have to climb a narrow raised platform and jump across a giant, rumbling gear in order to reach the MA (Mysterious Artefact), which is the "objective" of each space that we enter through the city's building's doorways. When we get there, the space isn't done (with us?). Another platform leads to a second, raised house. Inside, on the top floor, we see another MA. Green this time, rather than red. When we approach it the thing screams and spins, shudders and then disappears. Everything falls quiet. It actually made me jump, feel a little uncomfortable. I opened the window. Everything that the sigils suggests was not some city-rending catastrophe (though the place is clearly abandoned) but a more domestic story of sorrow and pain. The proximity has increased. This is a sad place, but also a tragic one.

That these spaces exist within structures is obviously absurd. From the outside they are small but conventionally familiar, yet when we pass through each Door, we are entering a space that is larger, and does not conform at all with the physics and materialities of the external space. One building contains – in its interior - a rocky landscape, ringed in by black hills which rise suddenly at the edges of the horizon of the room. Another contains a space-like blue air through which we float. These are impossible architectures, peculiar geometries and geologies.

But at another level, all cities surprise us. How many buildings in a city have you entered? Can you say what takes place in an office block, a row of houses, a warehouse? As Comaroff and Ker-

Shing point out, “we live in an era when market forces are pushing familiar objects toward extremes of dimension. All is elastic”. Form does not necessarily pursue function. Function is not the product of form. In *Roadside Picnic*, there are similar buildings; “the houses in the Plague Quarter were chipped and dead. However, the windows weren't broken. Only they were so dirty that they looked blind. At night, when you crawl past, you can see the glow inside, like alcohol burning with blue tongues”. It betrays the unusual, alien substance - “Witch's Jelly” - that grows and glows inside of them.

But the game isn't simply one of hide and seek. The codes we collect when at last reaching each Mysterious Artefact have a purpose. But the purpose isn't obvious. After a time we've gathered three, four, five of these. Each Artefact has a name, each a code. What do we do with the codes, seeing as there's nowhere to input them? The game's solution is very simple and neat and I kind of tutted at myself for not clicking with it before. Go outside of the game (you did, after all, drop *in* to the city, right?), to the directory folder. There, with the standard installation files, you'll find a group of other files named after each of the MAs. Click on them and – naturally – you'll be asked for a password, and a code-word gathered during *Dust City's* interior levels. The game sprawls out into the intuitive and the non-gamed. It becomes about an interrogation of your hard drive, your directory files, of BIOS and DOS. It's a lot like the broken-up “Memory of a Broken Dimension”, in which you have to utilise a non-game function in order to enter the game proper. In the case of MOABD,

you have to navigate a simplified and glitching DOS command interface, described as an “emulator of obscure research software [...] spreading across the internet” where “following a trail of files littering the R E L I C S virtual desktop; you trespass into the ruins of a fragmented world”. Eventually, having imputed the right commands, you're drawn into the game's actual “game-like” landscapes. In both games, we're being asked to think of exploration and encounter as a systemic, total thing – an experience rather than a simple gamified event. We think beyond the “level”, with clear and unbiased victory conditions, toward a form of active, critical perception. The actual structure and boundaries of the game are porous, and have conditions and environments which expand beyond the spaces we would normally think of as “Game” and “Not Game”.

Dust City is an entry-point, an Encounter, but also a type of gaze. There's a reason that we're assigned to record – to “see”. Remember that “you have been randomly selected to investigate the city in the crater to search for anomalies, artifacts, or clues as to the nature of the city”. But isn't there a presumption here, that the city will indeed yield anomalies, and that its nature can be understood? The Gaze is ever present. We are its agent. In writing about critical theory, aesthetics, and material cultures, Svetlana Boym has called for a “critical ruin gaze”, which annexes the ruin-gaze from this more pornographical and theatrical “peaking” (the aesthetics of blasted or emptied buildings in city downtowns), toward a gaze “that does not look solely towards the past, indulging in nostalgia, yearn-

ing after some lost, imagined totality. Rather, it uses the ruin as an opportunity to make us speculate about the relationship between material and digital reality, about the place of the human, and human imagination and creativity, in the face of decay and destruction" (p. 185). Obviously in *Dust City* we are precisely gazing at a form of abandonment, a past, a ruination event. But in order to actually unlock what has happened we have to be creative, intuitive, and take side steps and lateral movements in order to excavate its secrets. It's right there in the game's instructions, that we'll need "pencil and paper (not included)". Easy to overlook, but this was - I suppose - our first proper clue. But it was a clue about how we interact with and encounter games.

I think this is the recognition and the shock of un-recognition that we have in any built environment. It's undoubtedly really important; we are encountering a kind of horror which we are both drawn to and yet despise. At this very moment I'm sitting in a strangely modernist library with chairs lifted from the 1970s. Beyond the wall-sized windows are trees; endless trees, even despite the city, the university campus, the ring-roads. Before me - the only visible building - is a sort of white space-ship shaped pillar. All around me I can hear not birds or the wind - it's a disappointingly overcast day - but the smashing and rummaging of machines and giant extractor fans. What even is this? It comes back to Boym's argument that "there is a distinctiveness to the ruin gaze that can be understood as the particular optics framing our relationship to ruins". This too is an abandoned place. I'm here

alone. And so too for video games, where there are landscapes and landscapes of destroyed and disarticulated buildings, cities, houses. And yet, they are not the product of material decay or erosion but of specific design choices. A ruin is perhaps more work for a designer than a completed and coherent building with straight or smooth planes. We can think of Midgar, or the evacuated Raccoon City. Ruination is itself a design choice, a means of communicating. "Blast damage" is communicated to us by destructible walls. Games that allow us not simply to shoot at a wall, but to derange it, and deform it. Often we are the agent of abandonment, the cause of evacuation. And yet, this time, we are merely visitors. Clueless, and afraid.

Dust City makes intelligent and considered use of game and "non-game" elements to both wrong-foot and allure us. It is constituted of moments and references to design that are both familiar and jarringly unfamiliar. It is a "city". It has buildings, rooms, streets. But its design elements, its built environment, is chaotic, and fragmentary. Buildings loom from the ground, but also hover, with impossible entrances and planes. It's a sickly utopia in which the architect imagined floating tower blocks and hovering walkways. In their place, we're given the metastasis of the Utopian imagination in its horror and abjection. It is an impossible architecture, geared at once both to strike us as familiar, but also to challenge and to undermine the ideas we have about space and our in-habitation of it. Kitty Horrorshow does precisely the same through the use of conventional gameish references; coins we can collect but which we have

no purpose for. Levels and platforms which lead us nowhere. Codes we collect that have no seeming, actual purpose in the game world. We must look beyond its borders. Our exploration actually takes us away from Dust City. So we catch the first bus out of town... but, to where?



Tetrageddon

By Ansh Patel

Rhizome, Net Art and Tetrageddon

“The rhizome connects any point to any other point [...] It is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overflows.”

- Deleuze & Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus

The myriad ways we perceive, process and interpret information around us forms the basis of countless theories in academia. For many academics, particularly in the field of literary theory and semiotics, attaining a better understanding of how we perceive signs has become a Holy Grail of sorts.

What makes such dissemination of meaning-making systems of our minds interesting is the traversal of the spaces between the “sign” and its meaning. Some consider this space to be made up of paths shaped by our cultural upbringing. Others consider this space to be a void, one where the “sign” and the “meaning” can never coalesce at a common point. The search for the sign’s meaning becomes an endless search that never yields.

You are pursuing a meaning of signs that constantly “defers” its meaning to another sign, and your search doesn’t have a single end point, which is part of what makes Deleuze and Guattari’s “rhizome” a fascinating theoretical construct. It does not adhere to any uniform stem or central axis to which all other points can be referred. There is no main artery for a rhizome, so terms like “fixed” and “constant” don’t hold the same meaning any more.

Everything is relative and based on your point of reference. There are only lines connecting independent points in the rhizome—called “nodes”, which represent a unity of the signs and their meanings. A rhizome is *acentered*, signifying a duality where there is no single centre and every node is a centre in itself.

Made up of millions of connected complex networks, the Internet serves for many, as the best example of a physical manifestation of the rhizome. Like the tuberous network its theory is inspired from, the Internet has the acentered quality of a rhizome. There is no one true 'center' of the Internet. Each computer that can access the Internet acts as a node and can very well serve as a center when taken as a point of reference. But more importantly, just like rhizome, the Internet serves as a space composed of countless complex, connected networks.

Space, as a concept, exists *within* itself. It doesn't need a point of reference to base its actuality on. In contrast, the Internet's meaning-making systems are often thought of as directed pathways. Ones where we traverse from point A to B, always moving towards a specific destination. The space merely serves as the medium for our passage. If we think of a word, we implicitly refer to its meaning. If we click on a link, we are going to the next page. The space which connects the word to its meaning, one web page to another, is reduced to pure abstraction.

This is carried over when we experience media or play games. What we see on the screen and what we interpret are the two points of a net-

work connection – the sign and the perceived meaning. We abstract these intangible connections and instead focus on an endless pursuit of the signs.

A link on a webpage guides us to another page. The simple rules which establish this connection are abstracted out with our familiarity of browsing on the Internet. Everytime we see a link, we see it as a portal to another “node” on the Internet's rhizomatic network.

We click, blink and land on another page. The relation between the signs are established and are stashed aside. How our minds relate and associate them rarely interests us.

Our navigation across the Internet becomes our second nature.

net.art and JODI

Art steps in to shake and challenge some of these fundamental notions and constructs. On the Internet, some of the most important examples of this come from the net.art movement in the 90s. Some works from this movement confronted the growing familiarity of the Internet and its “rhizomatic” networks by imploding how we relate and associate data.

A popular example of net.art is the Dutch-Belgian art duo JODI's website (their homepage), which serves as a great example of the critical intersection and deconstruction of the discourses that were prevalent in the movement. The site draws attention to our navigation of networks shape how we associate and under-

stand signs on the Internet. JODI's deconstruction was confrontational because they tore the rigidity and simple A-to-B relation of hyperlinks apart. Without the directional pathway to guide or even serve as a reference to us, our navigation and thus our meaning-making processes are challenged.

JODI's labyrinthine design shifts the focus into the territory of digital interaction and re-organisation of how the user interacts with a web page. JODI's deconstructionist experiments push forth the idea that Interactivity can also be thought of as rhizomatic. As Deleuze & Guattari say, "*the characteristics or 'traits' of a rhizome are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even non-sign states*". JODI's works form these rhizomatic lines connecting states which are unlike each other in their 'nature'.

In simpler words, by making the website confusing to navigate, JODI make us think about the purpose and structure of websites and links as a whole. They directly play with the contexts, our frame of reference in the rhizome.

Different Contexts

Contexts matter. Besides offering a temporary, decentralized perspective on the rhizomatic connections of our meaning-making processes, contexts also shape how these connections are perceived. Every new perspective is a reconfiguration of how we traditionally understand and relate and associate meaning.

While net.art's experiments weren't simply lim-

ited to browser, one can question why games have rarely been collated with Net Art. After all, many freeware games share the same context as many Net Art works – the browser. They often share many similar sensibilities, as having niche origins which were sustained largely by online forums and communities during their formative years. Moreover, many artists who were part of the net.art scene, particularly JODI and Alexei Shulgin, have dabbled with games. *untitled*, JODI's collection of Quake III mods, for example, challenges how we perceive virtual space from a first-person perspective.

This however begs the question is there any difference, on an abstract level, between a virtual space inside a game and the networks which make up the "webscape" of the Internet? More importantly, does how we perceive and process information change between these contexts?

At the Intersection of Net Art and Games

Nathalie Lawhead's *Tetrageddon* is an idiosyncratic creature. Overflowing to the brim with absurdity, it stands at the intersection of Net Art and labels, openly discarding genre labels with a wink, nudge and a grin. Composed as a site that serves as a hub for different mini-games, its creator has termed *Tetrageddon* as a suite of anti-games net art.

Anti-games convey a rejection of the principles and conventions of the medium rather than of the "game" label itself. It's a conscious decision because *Tetrageddon* embraces the kitsch and draws a great deal of its humor from subverting the familiarity with those signs from

gaming's "retro" era. But more importantly, it marries Net Art and games into a single chaotic work that disregards conventions while offering a humorous throwback to early 1990s computer aesthetics, one reminiscent of early online communities. In doing so, *Tetrageddon* is able to merge the virtual space into the networked space of the Internet. While it may be made up of distinct mini-games that all exist in their own separate "spheres", navigating through *Tetrageddon* is a game in itself. Clicking on a screen results in unexpected activities: a pop-up may appear giving an insight into the "back end" server containing all the GIFs and image files, or it may transition the whole site to a different "vignette". Much like JODI's experiments, it severs the familiar association of space that we adopt while browsing. And in doing so, it removes many of the foundational elements our mind's meaning-making processes utilize when we browse the Internet.

Even an average page of *Tetrageddon* is bursting with wild, exuberant and unrestrained energy that we often lose in the sterilized, and "cleanly" designed, sites of today. It disregards all the rules of "Good Design" that modern Web 2.0 has and offers a playful look at how design aesthetics have evolved. It brings back the notion of an uncertainty while navigating a web site which has slipped away from us with our increasing familiarity with our web and its navigational structures. When clicking on a harmless sprite results in the screen bursting in spastic animations in glorious 2D pixel art, or when a popup of "/porn" opens up with an archive of images, *Tetrageddon* reminds us of a time when the web

used to be a Wild West frontier. Nested deep inside your powerful, modern browser *Tetrageddon* comes across as a defiantly retro homage to the jokes and aesthetics that were celebrated in the formative years of the Internet culture. But more importantly, *Tetrageddon* manages to go beyond mere retro homages and remind us of an adventurous feeling of browsing the web that seems so alien to us.

Browsing has itself turned into a whimsical, playful activity. *Tetrageddon* manages to challenge the notions of how we perceive and interact with a web page, but conceals it inside the nostalgic iconography and humorous diversions. Unlike JODI's confrontational work, *Tetrageddon* subverts the experience of browsing by serving the "pop art" aesthetics and early computer culture as decoys reconfiguring those connections in the background.

It helps to look at Nathalie's statement on the "About" section of *Tetrageddon* where the line: "*Games are my expression and the web is my outlet*" draws your attention as the most explicit statement of intent by its creator. It's a strong statement and one that *Tetrageddon* fully merits because it's the sort of playful expression that games are exceptionally good at. But this expression is also made through the medium of the web which merges two different contextual frames we think of in separate terms. The virtual space we obsessively analyse in a game is the networked space of the Internet in *Tetrageddon*. By merging the two contexts that are distinct in modern discourse, the player of *Tetrageddon* is situated in a unique place – a node that ex-

ists in a duality. And by doing so, *Tetrageddon* becomes a deconstruction of how we navigate web and its culture.

Internet Kitsch

Kitsch plays an important role in Net Art. The accessibility of the Internet has resulted in a fairly common set of signs and lexicon. A great deal of Net Art works use the familiarity of signs to play around with different conceptual or aesthetic ideas.

JODI's website feels particularly alien and obtuse. In contrast, *Tetrageddon* utilizes familiar UI popups and error messages from Windows 95/98, with the kind of absurd, inane humor we have often come to associate with Internet subcultures. Kitsch is often relegated to "low-brow art" by art critics and academics, generally because its immediacy invites the average layman and discourages deeper analysis and involvement of the intelligentsia. But as Net Art has shown, kitsch can also serve as a gateway to analysing cultural and societal aspects from a broader perspective.

Tetrageddon's humor may come across as childish or even puerile, but it immediately connects with a brand of humor that's born from and associated with the Internet culture.

The familiarity of signs draws the player into comfort as *Tetrageddon* creates a whimsical carnival of retro-homages and pop culture jokes ranging from Star Wars to arcade games like Defender. This comfort is an important first step because it creates a bizarre-world fuelled

on nostalgia that doesn't quite fit together. The sense of uncertainty is hinted at when the landing page of *Tetrageddon* is loaded, but you don't fully face it until you interact with it.

A Pathway Eternally "Under Construction"

There was a running joke in the formative years of the Internet, in the mid 1990s, around the time of the rise of the dot-com bubble, of the web always being "under construction". Many new sites were springing up and while they were being built, they would often put up "Site Under Construction" on their Home Page to greet curious visitors. Since real estate is infinite on the Internet and new sites are always springing up, the joke of the web always being "under construction" caught on.

But another thing about the Internet is that its underlying architectures are also evolving. Whether it is the network protocols (most networks use IPv4 addresses, but IPv6, which offers a mathematically larger variation of addresses, is slowly being transitioned to), web languages (hypertext, HTML and its different variations) or media plugins. While many net.art works played with the idea of the Internet being an ephemeral place, JODI's site serves as another good reminder of the changing technologies and architectures, both in the foreground and background of the Internet we use. The site is a worn down relic from the 90s, which only looks vaguely like it once did.

So even if theoretically the Internet resembles the rhizome in many ways, it doesn't always have the same set of technologies defining each

node or connection. There are hundreds of sites built from the 90s that are rendered unviewable because the technologies they were built upon are no longer supported by the modern browsers.

Tetrageddon, and Nathalie Lawhead's background as an artist who primarily develops using Flash, has interesting connotations because it has always been the media player that has seemingly been under some form of threat. Whether it is from corporate politics or withdrawal of support from browsers, Flash has faced persistent threats to its existence. While it has been sustained by a faithful community of developers, Flash remains a vital framework which contains countless interactive applications and games. The fact that *Tetrageddon* was built on something whose existence has always been at risk serves as another reminder of the ephemerality of Internet art and media. The decision by Lawhead to make *Tetrageddon* a com-

pletely open-source project further reinforces the importance of sustaining the communities which keep development on such frameworks alive. There's a DIY and amateur quality that's often associated with Flash development, and *Tetrageddon's* vibrantly retro cultural homages and familiar icons serve as strong invitations to modify such a world.

By open-sourcing its project on an eternally threatened framework, *Tetrageddon* evolves further into both an homage to the nostalgic past, a reminder of the ephemerality of the Internet, and a call to sustain one of its most important media frameworks. It serves as both a love letter and a subtle call to arms infusing DIY aesthetics back into the mystified and walled-off web development. In more than a few ways, it harkens back to an era of the Internet where uncertainty and thrill are brought back into navigating the Web by reconfiguring our relations and associations with these nostalgic symbols.

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Astaeria

Lycaon

2015

[Play it Here]

1. Chris Priestman, *Astaeria Turns Classic Poetry Into Videogame Worlds For Us To Wander*. Kill Screen Daily, 2015
2. Claire Hosking, *Not all code is poetry, but some is*.

American Baseball / idkabc2

everythingstaken

2014

[Play American Baseball Here] - [Play idkabc2 Here]

Her Story

Sam Barlow

2015

[Play it Here]

1. I referred extensively to Andrew Osmond's book Satoshi Kon: The Illusionist, for pretty much everything I say about Satoshi Kon. The book is broad in scope, but an easy read. Or for something more immediate, Tony Zhou, who produces the series Every Frame a Painting (though I assume everyone on the Internet these days is aware of Every Frame a Painting), has an episode discussing Kon's editing style.
2. Incidentally, anybody who has enjoyed the simple consume-analyze-lookup cycle of Her Story would probably appreciate Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective, which is more or less the same game and thoroughly slays at boardgame nights.
3. Readers familiar with Kon are probably saying, "What?! Why isn't he talking about Perfect Blue?!" I'm going to freely concede that Perfect Blue has a lot—a lot—of surface similarities: there's murder, mirrors (so many mirrors), general identity confusion...I suppose, though, that the reason I'm not going to talk a whole lot about it has more to do with structure than anything. It's an issue of who knows what: in Perfect Blue, we basically take Mima's point of view, and generally speaking, what she knows (or doesn't), we know (or don't); but in Millennium Actress and Her Story, we're outsiders. Chiyoko, Hannah, and Eve are, they remain elusive.

4. Emily Short, *Her Story*
5. Jed Pessgrove, *Game Review: Her Story*. Slant Magazine
6. Stuart Arias, *Her Story, His Clichés*
7. Ed Smith, *Shut Up, Her Story*

Hot Date

George Bachelor

2015

[Play it Here]

Theresa Duncan CD-ROM Collection

The Rhizhome Organization

2015

[Play it Here]

1. Patricia Hernandez, *She Tried To Make Good Video Games For Girls, Whatever That Meant*, Kotaku, 2012.

Dust City

kittyhorrorshow

2014

[Play it Here]

1. Comaroff, Joshua and Ker-Shing, Ong. *Horror in Architecture*. ORO Editions, 2013
2. Partington, Gillian and Smyth, Adam. *Book Destruction from the Medieval to the Contemporary*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014
3. Hell, Julia and Schonle, Andreas. *Ruins of Modernity*. Duke University Press, 2010

Tetrageddon

Nathalie Lawhead

2014

[Play it Here]



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