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Everybody's Gone to the Rapture, 2015, still.

Environments that learn

At first, the player finds themselves in a yet unknown place. They learn how to move, how to interact with items and the environment. There is no one else around. They are alone in a place filled with clues.

Walking around the village in Everybody's Gone to the Rapture, we find items left behind. The objects that witnessed the disturbance that took place in this rural village. The clues that the player collects throughout the game invoke ghostly figures that reenact past events.

The investigation starts with learning how the player can communicate with the environments, what tools they have. They look around and see the various objects: some are props, some are there for you to pick up, some are integral for the story to continue, some are mere artefacts, while some are the fuel to maintain your vitals. Each object will have a purpose. Each will take part in the play.

In the case of *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*, there are no objects you require to pick up or interact with in order to proceed with the story. Instead, the player finds themselves in the space filled with invisible triggers, which push the narrative further upon activation. The space, as the array of objects sewn together, itself becomes a resource: the source of triggers to push the story forward, the source of obstacles and challenges that shape our experience as players.

Equipped with rules and mechanics, the player now navigates the space, while gathering pieces of evidence and signs of the narrative, to mine their own story and build their own experience.

We learn from the environment.

Gameworlds bear a similar premise to an exhibition. Exhibition spaces, however intricate, offer an experience that is similar to the gaming experience. Both are defined by the agreed conditions or set of rules that constitute the reality. Both explicitly or implicitly offer to route your own trajectory. By interpreting the space, we build personal narratives.

Both offer a nonlinear kind of experience, a place one can revisit, replay and reread. Both are subject to interpretation. Perhaps the exhibition practices bear closer similarities to the Alternative Reality Games — the special mode of play that operates in the subtle shifts of reality, creating fictions in a distorted reality. As the title suggests, it creates a kind of a doppelgänger of the reality we live in, one that occupies the same media spaces where we consume information. The urge to solve a puzzle invokes analytical or investigative optics, sometimes to the point that one starts to see things that aren't there. The scavenger hunt optics can overflow from the realm of the videogame, or even from speculative spaces of reenacted fictions. In his article 'What ARGs Can Teach Us About QAnon', Adrian Hon points out how the investigative nature of games can balance investigative journalism and the production of conspiracy theories. Likewise, it underlines how the users of imageboards forgot they were larping, giving birth

to a contagious outbreak of QAnon.

In this manner, the latest installment of *Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War* plays directly into the demand for conspiracies within explosively volatile political landscapes. Ghosts of personal stories transform into the shadows of ideologies. At this point, we can witness how games are acquiring their own imagination, and finally we hear someone else's voice narrating our own story.

We have to start from the beginning.

Environments resisting transformation

The nature of play requires repetition. With each new iteration, we learn something. Repetition is an essential part of both designing games and playing them. In their recent book, *Iterate: Ten Lessons in Design and Failure*, John Sharp and Colleen Macklin Coleen find the traces of game design prototyping in other creative practices. Ultimately raising the question: what else can games teach us? The practice associated with games overflows the limits of its field, and now as shown in their book, seeps through virtually any kind of creative practice.

The closing case study in this book is the story of the artist Miranda July as an example of divergent outcomes, as she thoroughly investigates an idea by exploiting the specific features of the range of media. It is noteworthy that the exploration of artistic method crowns a book about iteration. It also nods to an earlier book by John Sharp, *Works of Game: On the Aesthetics of Games and Art*, in which he applies the vocabulary associated with contemporary art to videogames, bringing the two closer together through the same language. The marriage of artistic practice and games is thus brought to tackle the ghosts of narratives that don't work anymore.

But if we return to repetition in games, from the point of view of the player, the purpose of repetition is twofold. One is to become acquainted with the mechanics and the rules, through endless dying and starting again, perfecting the skills needed to stay alive longer and more efficiently, or just to familiarise ourselves with the environment. On the other hand, repeating the same actions or recreating the same environments could also invoke a sense of

alienation towards the norms inherited by the game from their creators. The status quo is now brought under a critical spotlight, creating a zone of unlearning.

This critical look shining through the cracks of game design, cast onto the biased and harmful tropes and ideologies hidden in plain sight, is embedded in games. What agents are rendered expendable? How does the game relate to or rely on lethal weapons? Whose interests are represented in the game space? Who is given access and who is left out? The way games tweak reality or recreate the same ones can be viewed as a political readymade.

There are numerous examples where games recreate real cities adding some twist: Los Santos of *GTA V* is a version of Los Angeles, where everyone is so bad, it relieves players from feeling any remorse towards them. *The Watch Dogs* series brings London, San Francisco and Chicago with a touch of techno dystopia, trivialising the urge for social change and numbing the issues we are dealing with today: hey, the de-facto house arrests are handed out simply for voicing one's opinions, but our streets are not filled with surveillance drones — it's not so bad yet.

Yet even with repetition, the given in-game environment keeps resisting transformation: everything that is ever dismantled will appear again. No matter how many private military bases that unlawfully took over the city you destroy in the *Just Cause* series, they grow back once more, now governed by allied forces. No matter how many surveillance drones you crash in *Watch Dogs: Legion*, they keep reappearing. This kind of persistence is simply a design feature, a formal execution of how the gameworld is coded, yet this is very telling. The degree to which a player can shape the in-game world is restricted, both in terms of the performed narratives and the limitations of game mechanics. But if we have speculative fiction in our inventory, could we not invent something completely different?

Environments that learn

Hopefully, through our newly acquired critical vision, we can now

rewire the existing narratives to disarm harmful tropes and bias by turning videogames into a place for the reimagined collectivity. Once rigid structures resisting transformation can turn into environments that learn.

Now we are not completely alone in the in-game world even though you don't particularly share the space with other players. Instead, we share the personal experience across various instances and copies of the game. In this manner, *Death Stranding*, in its modest visual concision, becomes enriched with a new sense of collectivity. The notes of encouragement, special symbols that boost your vital signs, or warnings of looming dangers — all of that embodies the failures and successes of other players. The collective effort in building the infrastructure and narrating the in-game landscape makes the space resourceful to the player again. Although the *Death Stranding* universe still inherits some persistent narratives as the core mechanics of the game is the endless, mindless exchange of goods, it still ushers in the possibility of reshaping the post-apocalyptic landscape into something better.