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RUNNING SCARED: FEAR, SPACE, AND AFFECT IN *AMNESIA: THE DARK DESCENT*

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## ABSTRACT

Most contemporary 3-D video games provide a wealth of visual information to players to help them navigate the in-game virtual space. Maps, compasses, beacons, and other visual guides are often necessary components of gameplay that help players feel confident and powerful within the virtual world. Conversely, the horror video game *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* uses its claustrophobic configurations of space to reduce the player's visual and auditory awareness. In this paper, I analyze how these disorienting configurations of space threaten the player's sense of individual autonomy by restricting their ability to maintain a safe distance from the dangerous monsters within the game.

## **Introduction**

Recent theoretical discussions on video game immersion emphasize the embodied experiences that players feel as a result of controlling a virtual avatar within the game world. For Daniel Black, interactivity is a key component of video game immersion. When players see their in-game avatars act out the actions that they commanded them to do, they feel like an active participant who is a part of the virtual world they see on the screen. Players are not passive viewers who merely watch the game play out on a monitor. Rather, they actively control their avatars to become an actant within the virtual space who can freely “do” things inside it even if that world is just an illusion on a screen. Therefore, according to Black, players feel immersed in games even if they are clearly disembodied from their avatars. Players know that they are not the fictional characters they see moving on the screen, but they still feel like they are performing the avatar’s actions because it directly follows the player’s intended commands within the game’s virtual world. As Black puts it, “The key factor is not a simultaneity of character point of view and player viewpoint—and in fact such a simultaneity can only ever be imperfect and unstable—but rather a simultaneity of the activity represented in the game and the actions of the player’s body, which are generated in response to that activity in a circular fashion” (194). In short, games are more than just a visual medium. While players often see what their avatars “see” inside of the game, they also use the avatar to do things inside the virtual world that creates an illusion of tactile immersion within the virtual space. Of course, players do not actually touch things in the virtual world, but they also do not just passively view it from a distance like the act of contemplating a still life painting. Players use avatars to do things in the game world and that agency is precisely what gives them that feeling of immersion within the virtual environment.

I intend to build on Black's points on video game immersion by analyzing how games make players feel embodied emotions and affects specifically through configurations of virtual space. If players immerse themselves in virtual worlds by moving through it and interacting with it, then how a player moves within the game will crucially dictate the kinds of immersive embodied experiences they will feel during gameplay. Thus, my analysis focuses on how games can configure space to make the player move and interact with the virtual world in ways that generate embodied sensations and affects that draw players into the virtual experiences that they see playing out on screen.

To do this, I will analyze how the horror game *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* configures space in a way that frightens players by constricting both their movements and their field of view. As we will see, *Amnesia's* restrictive spatial design keeps players unaware of their surroundings and thus makes each encounter with the game's aggressive monsters feel unexpected and frightening. The player's avatar has no means of fighting these enemies and instead survives by hiding and running away. Unfortunately for the player, these enemies move very quickly whilst remaining largely unseen. This sometimes gives players the feeling that these monsters are somehow everywhere at once even if they are just wandering the halls. This keeps players on their toes and keeps them afraid throughout most of the game. *Amnesia* is a great example of a game that effectively elicits physical, embodied affects of fear from the player by configuring its on-screen virtual spaces in a way that makes them feel anxious and insecure. While *Amnesia's* drab yellow walls are not very frightening to look at, their claustrophobic layouts within the game space are a crucial part of the game's oppressively frightening and dreadful atmosphere because they so effectively restrict the player's spatial awareness. This

prevents players from guessing the monster's nearby location, and thus they cannot preemptively move away from the monster to avoid being attacked.

After providing a brief overview of the recent critical literature on horror video games, I will elicit Henri Lefebvre's conceptualization of abstract space to understand the traditional insistence on abstracting space into graphical mathematical diagrams that extricates the subject from immersive embodied experiences with the outer world. Then, I will use Sara Ahmed's theorization on fear along with Heidegger's notion of "passing by" to show how crucial spatial proximity is for generating unpleasant affects of dread and vulnerability. Finally, I will analyze how *Amnesia* illuminates these theorizations by constricting the player's avatar into limited and confusing spaces that force them into close proximity with the game's grotesque and vicious monsters.

### **Gaming Criticism and Horror**

So far, there has been a small handful of critical works that focus on the horror genre of video games. Most of these works justifiably focus on how horror games threaten the feelings of empowerment and dominance that most mainstream action games try to convey to their predominantly young male audience. Steve Spittle evokes Julia Kristeva's formulation of the abject to understand how horror video games generate fear through depictions of erratic femininity. Spittle analyzes how the horror game *F.E.A.R.* uses its grotesque depiction of the paranormal woman named Alma to frighten its typically young, male audience by exploiting their misogynistic and misguided fear of women as a hysterical other. Similarly, Diane Carr argues that the zombie-like necromorphs in the horror video game *Dead Space* also generate this sense of abjection by parasitically invading the in-game avatar's body using their twisted, fleshy



bodies. These critical works mainly focus on what the player sees on-screen and how games visually generate fear through frightening and abject representations of otherness.

The other predominant strain of criticism on horror games recruits affect theory as its critical lens. The critics in this trajectory discuss how games make players feel vulnerable by hindering the player's ability to fight the game's numerous in-game threats. Tanya Krzywinska argues that horror games differ from action games in that they deliberately hamper the player's ability to move and fight. Action games typically let players pilot badass warriors or futuristic robotic suits to make them feel strong and powerful. Conversely, horror games such as *Silent Hill* deliberately impede the player's performance by using excessively dark levels that constrict their view and thus deteriorates their ability to defend themselves when enemies start to attack. The result of these techniques is that "the usual sense of autonomy and self-determination that games promise to create is shaken...it becomes manifest to players that they dance possessed according to the rhythm of the Other – felt perhaps through an experience of a game's 'occulted' programming, as well as the pulse of our not-so-owned corporeality" (Krzywinska 296-297). Like Carr and Spittle, Krzywinska also emphasizes how horror games threaten the player's usual sense of independence and empowerment, but she focuses more on how these games feel scary to play and less on their frightening visual aesthetics. For Krzywinska, horror games are frightening because they make players feel weak in relation to the enemies within the game. Players who cannot capably fight a game's enemies will naturally feel vulnerable and afraid.

Like Krzywinska, my interest is in analyzing how horror games generate affective economies of fear and vulnerability by hampering the player's ability to dominate the game. My own focus, however, is on spatial configurations within games and how they generate the same affective economy of vulnerability that degrade the player's sense of autonomous subjectivity. In

this sense, my approach is closest to the one that Carr takes in her analysis of *Silent Hill* in that we both focus on configurations of space and how they can elicit feelings of fear and tension. For Carr, space generates fear by forcing players to rapidly progress through levels despite their apprehensions towards what might be lurking up ahead. The dark corridors throughout *Silent Hill* are often claustrophobically tight and keep the player moving forward through the game's frightening environments. This fast pace raises tension and prevents players from taking a moment to stop and understand the game's disorienting and surreal narrative (Carr 4)<sup>1</sup>. Carr's work shows how space generates fear through progression: players feel tension while they move forward because it does not give them a chance to slow down and rationalize the events that are occurring on the screen. Carr and I depart, however, in our respective readings of space and how they cause players to feel fear. My argument is that space generates fear and anxiety by obstructing the player's movements, while Carr claims that space generates fear by pushing the player onward into threatening spaces that makes them feel anxious. As I will explore below, *Amnesia* presents numerous roadblocks that halt the player's progress while keeping them in a state of unpleasant uncertainty that heightens their sense of danger and vulnerability.

### **Abstract Spaces**

The traditional Enlightenment conception of subjectivity fashioned rigid boundaries between the mind and the body that created an image of the human subject as one that was impervious to the external forces of nature. “‘I,’ that is to say, the Soul by which I am what I am,” says René Descartes, “is entirely distinct from the body and is even easier to know than the body; and would not stop being everything it is, even if the body were not to exist” (29). While

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<sup>1</sup> See Carr's article “Play Dead Genre and Affect in *Silent Hill* and *Planescape Torment*” for her reading of space in its entirety.

the body provides useful sensory information to the mind, rationalist Enlightenment discourses distrusted the body as a reliable medium for properly understanding the physical world. For example, modern people know that the planet Earth is really a round, rotating globe in space even if our senses judge it to be “immovable and its surface flat” (Descartes 170). Our senses tell us that the ground under our feet is not moving, but abstract mathematics and astronomy has long since discovered otherwise. Thus, abstract science triumphs over sensory intuition and the mind—the seat of reason—becomes the most trustworthy and consistent way to conceptualize our world.

Living according to the senses means one follows a world that could trick and confuse you: the environment that we see, hear, smell, and touch is merely an unreliable excitation of the nerves. To truly understand the world, one has to extricate it from sensory experience and conceptualize it according to abstract mathematic and scientific principles. The Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment subject needed analytical distance between itself and the physical world around it. Instrumental rationality must triumph over excitable and unpredictable felt sensation. As Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno put it, the Enlightenment subject was obsessed with “liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters....Enlightenment’s program was the disenchantment of the world. It wanted to dispel myths, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge....the mind, conquering superstition, is to rule over disenchanted nature” (1-2). The Enlightenment drew a gap between human subjectivity and the material world around it: the world was no longer a “mythic” space that shocked the senses and altered one’s subjective experiences. The material world was now a series of abstract and orderly principles inimical to the irregularity of sensory experience.

Spatial theory in the last forty years has since become critical of the Enlightenment's tendency to conceptualize its environment according to abstract mathematical principles. This is the position that Henri Lefebvre takes in his critique of Cartesian configurations of what he calls "abstract space." Unlike actual physical spaces which are corporeal substrates that people can touch and feel, abstract space is an exclusively visual organization of space that closely follow the principles of Euclidean geometry. We see abstract spaces in maps, charts, and geometrical city layouts. These graphical representations ignore the rough irregularities inherent in actual physical spaces and instead charts these areas out into orderly and homogenous zones designed to maximize capitalist production (Lefebvre 283-288). Abstract space is not itself a form of space but, as Nick Jones puts it, it is a "spatial imagination that reduces the real to a schematic plan...It is difficult to identify precisely because its appeals to neutrality and scientific indifference work to make it invisible" (47). One can only visually apprehend abstract space because two-dimensional geographical diagrams are the only way to properly transcribe and understand it. Abstract space no longer has the raw immediacy of sense perception and is "reduced to an image—and to an icy coldness....By the time this process is complete, space has no social existence independently of an intense, aggressive and repressive visualization" (Lefebvre 286). Because it represents space through homogenous graphical signs unable to capture the diversity inherent in the physical world, abstract space has no intimacy and casts off any of the sensory properties that make it unique to the people that live within it.

As a visual representation of space that relies on abstract geometrical graphics, abstract space has become increasingly prevalent in video games as large, explorable open worlds grow in popularity with many mainstream game developers. Abstract graphical representations of space such as maps and compasses are practically necessary to help players navigate these

massive virtual worlds so that they do not become lost and eventually quit the game out of frustration. Ian Bogost and Dan Klainbaum both note this trend in most 3-D open world games such as *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* that use geometrical depictions and configurations of space to help players easily navigate the in-game environment: “In Grand Theft Auto games, as with most contemporary videogames, space is defined in the Newtonian sense; as an absolute grid...The development of computer graphics is a visual implementation of this definition through the use of Cartesian geometry as the screen’s coordinate axis representing this absolute grid” (3084). Luke Arnett also points out that games rely on these geometrical depictions of space to help players navigate the large and complex virtual spaces within many modern adventure and action video games (13). According to Arnett, abstract representations of space in video games enhance the player’s confidence by giving them a very precise visualization of the spaces around them via graphical layouts such as little maps that update in real-time according to the avatar’s movements. Maps help players build a sense of what Arnett calls “spatial mastery,” that is, they help the player understand the locations of all the valuable power-ups and items. Maps also let players chart out the most efficient pathways to these key locations so that they can save time and avoid becoming lost (18). Abstract space in the virtual world is not that different from its real-world counterpart because it engenders the belief that one has genuinely mastered the space around them and knows how to exploit it to maximize their own personal gain. However, horror games provide a very different understanding of subjectivity that does not give players the same sense of overpowering mastery over the in-game world. The abject fear and vulnerability that horror games force players to feel facilitates an uncomfortable relationship to space that is very different from the one created in many popular action games such as *Metroid Prime* or *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*.

## **From Space to Affect, and Back Again**

As we discussed, abstract space—whether in games or in real life—is about establishing distance between the subject and the material world around them. Abstract space is an exclusively conceptual and graphical depiction of space. It homogenizes any irregularities that could confuse or muddle subjective experience by boiling space down to its most abstract geometric parts. In short, experiencing abstract space is a purely cognitive experience: it does not arouse the senses, and it remains a passive visualization of space unable to act on the subject in any direct or immediate way. Affect theory, however, envisions space in much more intimate and sensuous terms. If Descartes' goal was to extricate the subject from the senses using rationalized abstraction, then affect theory brings subjectivity back to the intimacy of raw felt sensations such as fear or anxiety. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed theorizes fear as an abject feeling or affect that arises when one feels a bit too close to a threatening alien other. As Ahmed puts it, fear:

Re-establishes distance between bodies whose difference is read off the surface....Fear involves relationships of proximity, which are crucial to establishing the 'apartness' of...bodies....Such a cannibalistic fantasy, of being incorporated into the body of the other, is crucial to the politics of fear: fear works by establishing others as fearsome insofar as they *threaten to take the self in*. Such fantasies construct the other as a danger not only to one's self, but to one's very life, to one's very existence as a separate being with a life of its own. (63-64)

Fear is thus a primarily spatial relationship between the self and the other. The subject feels fear when someone or something unfamiliar gains an uncomfortable closeness to them and intrudes on the imagined boundaries of personal space it needs to maintain a sense of autonomous individuality. Space in the moment of fear is no longer a passive abstraction, but a charge of raw sensory affect that strives to push the threatening other away at all costs.

Again, this is why Descartes places such a heavy emphasis on abstracting space through Euclidean geometrical principles: it helps the subject maintain safe and manageable boundaries of distance from the outer world by abstracting it into harmless graphics that the subject cannot physically touch or feel. The subject wants to avoid what Ahmed calls an “openness of the body to the world” (69). The self wants to create distance between itself and the world to maintain an appearance of individual autonomy, but something eventually violates those spatial boundaries and intrudes upon the subject. At this moment, the illusion of being an individual with discrete, personal boundaries wears off, and the subject becomes cognizant of their intense vulnerability to the proximal world around them. Fear is thus an affective desperation to regain the normative spatial boundaries that help the subject maintain the appearance of self-sufficient autonomy away from the material world. Such desperation is precisely what *Amnesia* aims to elicit through its spatial design. The game is arguably at its most frightening when the monsters finally find the player’s avatar and start to rapidly chase them down. These chases bring the monster close to the player’s avatar and thus violates the personal space they need to maintain a sense of safe, individualized subjectivity. A point we will explore later on is how *Amnesia* configures space to maximize the number of times players encounter the in-game monsters in places that force them into close proximity with one another. *Amnesia* places the player in close contact with the monsters and occludes much of the necessary information that players would need to properly evade the monsters and escape without incident.

According to Ahmed, closeness between the self and the other is a key way to incite affects of fear, but of course one can still feel afraid even if the threat is far away. Ahmed addresses this point by evoking one of Martin Heidegger’s conceptualizations of fear in *Being and Time*:

If, however, that which is detrimental draws close and is close by, then it is threatening: it can reach us, and yet it may not. As it draws close, this ‘it can and yet in the end it may not’ becomes aggravated. We say, “it is fearsome.” This implies that what was detrimental as coming close by carries with it the patent possibility that it may stay away and pass us by; but instead of lessening or extinguishing our fearing, this enhances it. In *fearing as such*, what we have thus characterized as threatening is freed and allowed to matter to us. (4918)

Like Ahmed, Heidegger posits that fear often comes when one discovers and sees the threat nearby (Heidegger called this type of fear “alarm”). However, Heidegger also observes that people who perceive something harmful around them feel afraid even if that threat has yet to reveal itself. For Heidegger, the anticipation of harm is what mainly generates this type of fear. One feels afraid because they feel that something dangerous is nearby even if they only capture a fleeting glimpse of that threat somewhere in the distance. In this case, fear is a form of heightened anticipation that triggers once the subject feels as if a threat is encroaching upon their individualized allotment of personal space.

For Ahmed, this fear towards things that are not quite present turns into what she calls “anxiety” when one fixates their fear upon an imaginary threat that they think is in the near vicinity. The object never has to fully appear to frighten the subject because it will automatically generate its own imaginary threat even if nothing is actually there to begin with. This is why Ahmed calls anxiety an “*approach to objects* rather than, as with fear, *being produced by an object’s approach*” (66). Anxiety is a persistent, self-imposed state of being fearful that lingers as long as one remains uncertain about the potential threats residing nearby. The lack of absolute knowledge is what generates suspense and gives one the feeling that something is threatening their individual subjectivity. Thus, configurations of space in horror games can also generate affects of anxiety from players if it can keep the player unaware of the monsters’ whereabouts at any given moment. Again, we will also see *Amnesia* use space in connection with its



intentionally cumbersome user interface to keep players disoriented and unaware of their surroundings. This, in turn, generates anxiety from the player by keeping them unaware of the monster's whereabouts so that they constantly imagine a threat nearby even when they are safe with nothing around to hurt them.

### **Running Around Corners**

Frictional Games's *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* is a 2010 first-person horror video game set within a period that resembles Victorian England. The player controls the main character Daniel on a quest to find and kill the mysterious antagonist Alexander. The entirety of *Amnesia* occurs within the Brennanburg Castle, a shady and gothic stronghold filled with grotesque monsters, dead bodies, and bloody torture rooms. The player's goal is to navigate Daniel through the castle without getting caught by the numerous monsters that stalk the halls. This is difficult, however, because the monsters are usually much faster than Daniel and can quickly kill him with only a few hits. There is not much players can do when they are caught besides running away and finding a place to hide. Daniel cannot fight the monsters in the castle, and thus most of the gameplay involves avoiding the monsters as much as possible and finding secluded places to hide away from monsters once they start chasing you.

At the very beginning of *Amnesia*, the game suggests to the player that "Amnesia should not be played to win....The world of Amnesia is a dangerous place and you are extremely vulnerable. Do not try to fight the enemies encountered. Instead, use your wits. Hide, or even run if necessary" (*Amnesia*). The first two sentences in this brief preface is basically a much more sober version of taunts that many popular video games make about their challenging, even punishing, levels of difficulty to rile players up and get them excited to prove their skills in the game. Action games such as *Halo: Combat Evolved* proudly display the difficulty of their

gameplay and boldly challenge the player to, “face opponents who have never known defeat. Who laugh in alien tongues at your efforts to survive” (Halo). Such challenges often mirror the boastful and hyper-masculinist discourse shared by many “hardcore” gamers who enjoy proving these games wrong through their supposedly overwhelming skill at efficiently shooting, slicing, and otherwise brutalizing their virtual foes<sup>2</sup>.

*Amnesia*, conversely, does not offer players the opportunity to fight their way out of a bad situation. Grotesque and powerful monsters stalk the halls of this castle, but Daniel has neither the speed or the strength to fight off their vicious attacks. The player’s only means of survival is therefore to play scared and hole themselves up in the castle’s numerous tucked-away spaces in a frightening game of hide-and-seek with a monster that is significantly stronger and faster than them. Players need to tread the castle grounds as quietly and discreetly as they can to avoid making sounds that could alert these frightening creatures. They need to walk very lightly, peer around corners carefully before moving around them, and they should avoid treading in well-lit areas when monsters are nearby to avoid being seen by them. *Amnesia*’s gameplay is in many ways a reversal of the typical action game tropes that places the player in a predatory position of power over their enemies.<sup>3</sup> The player is not so much the hunter in this game as much as they are the vulnerable one being hunted.

To heighten the player’s feeling of vulnerability, Frictional Games designed much of the castle’s corridors to be as dark as possible while having numerous sharp turns to disorient the player and hinder their overall sense of direction. This significantly heightens the tension of the

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<sup>2</sup> See Matthew Thomas Payne’s “F\*ck You, Noob Tube!’ Learning the Art of Ludic LAN War” for a detailed ethnographic study on the “hardcore” gamer demographic and their aggressive, masculinist ways of speaking and playing games.

<sup>3</sup> For more on “predatory” styles of actions games, see Elena Bertozzi’s “The Feeling of Being Hunted: Pleasures and Potentialities of Predation Play.”

gameplay when monsters are nearby because the player remains largely unaware of the creature's location until they become dangerously close by. The northern block of the prison level midway through the game is a perfect example of this disorienting design philosophy. Thomas Grip, the creative director at Frictional Games, expressed surprise in his commentary in the game at how easy it is to become lost in the northern block of the prison despite its relatively simple and straightforward layout, "It is very dark and can be hard to find your way. Which is actually kind of surprising since the level has a really simple design. But because of some dead ends and similar looking locations, it can quite hard to navigate" (Grip). Indeed, the layout of the prison ward is rather simple: it only contains three intersecting rectangular corridors with a few short dead ends. The only points of interest in this simple area are a few drab rooms that players can use to hide from the monsters that stalk the halls.

Rather than relying upon complex, mazelike designs, *Amnesia's* northern prison ward confuses players by including many corners in the level that only further limits the already truncated field of view that players can see through the game's first-person camera. While the rectangular corridors of the prison ward are geometrically simple, they have numerous ninety-degree turns that prevent players from getting a good view of the things that are ahead. Players must turn around the corner to progress, but there is always a chance that a monster will be right around the corner waiting to attack the player. This presents the player with a dilemma: they need to turn around these numerous corners to eventually find the exit in the level, but doing so could potentially put the player in very close proximity with a monster that they cannot see. The limited field of view that players have access to while they navigate the north prison ward lends a sense of helplessness as they progress through the level. Since players cannot see what lies

beyond every corner, they are always unaware of the space around them and the potential threats inhabiting these unseen areas.

Of course, corners in this game force players into the kinds of anxious fear that Heidegger discusses in *Being and Time*. Corners in *Amnesia* triggers the player's anxieties by restricting their ability to see if a threat is approaching them around the corner. This keeps players guessing whether a monster is around the corner and thus exacerbates their fear for those things that might pass them by. Furthermore, corners intensify the player's fears when they do encounter a monster because they increase the likelihood that players will bump into them when they are already very nearby and ready to attack. As Ahmed reminds us, fear occurs when something alien becomes too close to the subject, and *Amnesia's* expert use of corners ensures that these monsters tend to appear when they are already much too close to the player's avatar to feel unthreatening.

Corners have played a large part in other games such as the stealth action game *Metal Gear Solid*, but they use corners in space as a means of empowering the players. According to Michael Nitsche, *MGS* empowers players hiding in a corner by placing the avatar in the foreground of the action to imply their greater spatial awareness over their patrolling adversaries who wander in the background:

the camera moves down to eye height and behind the main hero whenever they player-avatar hides behind a wall...the player-avatar is the highly skilled character hiding in the foreground to avoid the unaware guards and succeed in his stealth mission. Suspense ultimately depends on an unequal distribution of information about a dramatic event....The player in the foreground knows more about the danger of the situation than the possible victim in the back. (86)

According to Nitsche's description, walls and corners in *MGS* are essentially prosthetics that give the player a firm advantage over their AI enemies. By themselves, the player's avatar in *MGS* is exposed and completely vulnerable to attack, but corners enable the player to hide and

safely evade and locate their enemies. As Nitsche claims, this has the effect of empowering players: they are the badass spy agent hiding in the shadows and duping their comparably stupid AI enemies. Conversely, corners in *Amnesia* restrict the player's available field of view and thus makes the player feel vulnerable instead of empowered.

This is not to say that *Amnesia* never gives the player any hints of the monster's location. Players might not be able to see the monsters in the game, but they can certainly hear them stalking the halls. The monsters usually let out a strange growl or hiss when they are nearby, and the larger creatures make frightening thumping sounds each time they step on the ground. Players hearing these noises gain the vague awareness that the monster is dangerously close, but they can never see the creature's precise location because of the game's restrictive spatial and visual layout. Players are always painfully aware of their vulnerability because they can hear the monster moving around nearby, but they lack the precise visual awareness of the beast's location to devise a clear route of escape that will allow them to avoid the monster entirely. For Julian Hanich, this imperfect knowledge is what instills a sense of dread for the player that makes them question their ability to protect themselves in moments of danger: "In a state of dread we never know if the danger might not potentially exceed our psychic means of self-protection—precisely because we cannot perceive it and thus mentally categorize it yet. Thus, our epistemic deficit in dread scenes creates an expectation of the worst" (159). In *MGS* corners give the player confidence by giving them plenty of time to plan out their optimal escape without putting themselves in danger. Players can remain confident in very dangerous situation because they always know where their enemies are and how they can escape from them.

Phenomenologist and philosopher of science, Gaston Bachelard also thinks rather fondly of corners, and he views them as a refuge where one can momentarily feel safe between the

corner's cozy walls: "the corner is a haven that ensures us one of the things we prize most highly—immobility. The corner is a sort of half-box, part walls, part door....An imaginary room rises up around our bodies, which think that they are well hidden when we take refuge in a corner" (156). For Bachelard, corners are spaces of seclusion and comfort. Corners shelter people off from the broader outside world and thus allows them to "be themselves" whilst it protects them with its enveloping walls. We should note here that Bachelard focuses on concave corners that securely envelop those within them, but the corners in *Amnesia* are convex, pointed walls that rigidly cuts space off into disparate, unconnected regions. Corners wedge space off and prevent players from properly seeing what is in front of them.

Thus, corners in *Amnesia* make the player feel perpetually vulnerable by forcing them to anticipate that a monster is around the corner even when one might not actually be there. The player's fears are always partially self-inflicted. Players will scare themselves through their anticipation of seeing a monster even if a monster was never there in the first place. Such fear resembles the paranoid self-inflicted fear that Brian Massumi emphasizes as a potent driver for action in a post-9/11 world: "Fear is the anticipatory reality in the present of a threatening future. It is the felt reality of the nonexistent, looming present as the *affective* fact of the matter" (750). *Amnesia's* use of corners is frightening because it so severely limits the player's available field of view. The monster does not even need to be nearby for the player to feel afraid. With their constricted field of view, players will naturally anticipate the worst even when they are safe because they lack the spatial awareness to know that a monster is not nearby. In *MGS*, corners help the player indulge their fantasies of being an empowered super soldier. The advantageous view that players receive while hiding behind a corner accentuates their avatar's superior skill and heightened battlefield awareness. For Bachelard, corners were pockets of safety that

enveloped people and guaranteed their safety so long as they remained inside. Conversely, *Amnesia*'s use of corners actively hamstring the players spatial awareness and thus heighten their overall sense of anxiety. Since players cannot see what is coming around the corner, they remain in a period of spatial ignorance that will only exacerbate the fearful anticipation that a monster will be around the corner. Furthermore, corners enhance the fear of encountering a monster when players unexpectedly run into a monster at the corner's apex. Since corners cut the player's view off, players will likely only see a monster once they are right in front of their faces as they turn around the bend. This puts the player in extremely close proximity to the monster, and thus the fear of losing one's independent subjectivity only becomes stronger when players maneuver around these corners.

### **Frightening User Interfaces (UI)**

I have so far discussed how *Amnesia* uses corners to constrict space to exacerbate the player's unpleasant feelings of fear and dread. However, the game's user interface (UI) also accentuates the player's natural vulnerabilities when the game does not actively try to assist the player. Unlike the clear maps and visual grids in games such as *Metroid: Prime* that aid the player's traversal of the virtual space, *Amnesia*'s UI is deliberately cumbersome to use and only intensifies their disorientation. This in turn heightens the player's fear and anxiety by increasing the likelihood that they will unwittingly enter a dangerous situation. Frictional Games designed *Amnesia*'s UI to hide crucial information about the passage of time that could otherwise help the player survive the dangerous castle. Typically, game and software developers carefully design their UI to maximize visual clarity and ease of use. As Kristine Jørgensen writes, game UI must be intuitive because it is: "the closest players get to the actual game system... Intuitiveness and ease of use are essential in this respect, and the game should be understood as a complex system

in need of an easy functionality through the interface” (147-148). Without a proper UI to guide them, the player could easily become lost or confused by the complex network of rules and interactions occurring around them within the game. The goal of a good UI is to take the game’s complex virtual rules and present them in a visually attractive layout that the player can quickly understand without learning the inner workings of the game’s code.

A good UI is thus a translation of sorts. While the game tacitly functions according to a conglomeration of digital code, the UI presents the inner-workings of that code in a manner that is intuitive and easy to comprehend. According to J. David Bolter and Richard Grusin, this is the reason software developers in the last twenty years tend to favor graphical user interfaces (GUI) modelled after work “desktops” over the older, solely textual, command line interfaces that most computer operating systems once utilized. Users tend to work better and faster with well-organized graphical interfaces that they can manipulate with a mouse instead of the large, confusing blocks of text that fill older command-line interfaces (23). Good UI should make code feel ergonomic to use—that is, it should allow the user to access important programs and bits of information quickly and efficiently to save time and prevent frustration.

Good interface design is particularly important in fast-paced action video games because players must navigate the game’s interface while they undergo high-pressure battles and obstacle courses that strain the player’s dexterity. Typically, games always keep vital information about the game on-screen and organize it into a clear on-screen dashboard. Dashboards usually include important graphical elements such as health bars, compasses, and maps that allow the player to understand where they are going in the virtual world and whether they are under attack. For game developer Jesse Schell, an effective dashboard typically devotes large quantities of screen



space to these graphical UI elements and they should always be visible during gameplay so that the player can quickly glance at it while they are in the thick of the action.

Schell praises the dashboard in Nintendo's *The Legend of Zelda* as an example of good interface design that conveniently organizes all the information the player needs to know in order to effectively play the game. Crucial information such as the avatar's remaining available health and the items that they currently have equipped take up large and prominent compartments of the dashboard so that the player can quickly glance at it anytime during gameplay (270). This ensures that the player always understands the vital information that they need to survive such as their health or their current position within the game space. In short, game interfaces help players keep track of the resources available to them in the game. Players should know how much damage their avatar can sustain before they die, they should know what items they are bringing along with them, and they should know if they are about to run out of vital ammunition or fuel. The dashboard ensures that all this information is readily available to the player throughout the heat of gameplay.

*Amnesia* does not follow these dashboard design conventions because its dashboard—if one could even call it that—hardly shows any information at all. The only abstract icon that players will see on screen is a small hand that will pop up to indicating that they can pick up or manipulate the object in some way. The game has no other abstract UI elements besides this graphical representation of a hand. There is no traditional dashboard to mediate the player's view of the game's 3D virtual world. The player essentially sees the world as Daniel might see it if he were a real person in a haunted castle. This has the effect of heightening the immersive realism of the game because it accentuates the illusion that the screen is extending outward to the virtual world unmediated by a graphical UI. As Martti Lahti explains, 3-D graphics heighten the

player's sense of immersion by giving the illusion that the game's virtual world extends outward beyond the flat screen that is rendering it. This illusion gives the player the sense that "virtual space begins to seem continuous with the player's space rather than sharply delimited by the frame of the monitor...Our sense of movement and relation to the screen has thus similarly changed. 3-D games...brought with them a sense of limitless space opening behind the screen" (Lahti 161). *Amnesia* heightens this effect by omitting an interface that could remind the player that they are viewing a virtual fantasy world on a monitor or television screen. This heightens the illusion that the gothic, virtual castle in *Amnesia* seamlessly flows beyond the screen into the actual physical world.

This blurs the separation the player draws between themselves and their virtual avatar within the game. The player only sees what Daniel sees in the game, and thus the monsters chasing Daniel feel like they are actually chasing the real-world player. This enhances what Julian Hanich calls the feeling of 3-D shock that occurs when monsters in horror film—or in this case, a horror video game—leap or run directly at the camera to give the impression that the monster is running directly at the viewer or the player (131). 3-D shocks in *Amnesia* generally occur in two different ways. The monster could chase the player head on, or the monster could surprise the player by attacking them from behind. Monsters also tend to spawn in the world right after players have completed a task that forces them to face a certain direction. This increases the likelihood that the monster will catch the player by surprise just as they are about to turn around. In either case, the effect is the same: players will panic and scramble in unplanned directions in a desperate attempt to escape the pursuing monster. The frenzied responses that these monsters elicit as they rapidly approach the player resembles the hair-raising somatic

experiences that Xavier Aldana Reyes points out in his analysis of horror movies that use 3D effects to make threats within the film appear as if they are hurtling towards the audience:

The fact that, experientially, we know that approximation means contact and that an object fast heading towards us can be dangerous and painful...The less time offered to process the threat, the less likely it is that viewers will be able to recognize the threat as not actually dangerous...3D in these instances aids sound and image to strengthen or create the startle, and thus, becomes a somatic source of affect. (159)

Monsters in *Amnesia* rush the player too quickly to give them a chance to process what is going on around them. This puts the player in a state of intense vulnerability because they do not have the time to devise a planned-out response that is likely to keep them safe. Videos of streamers playing the game show their frantic and helpless reactions to seeing a monster in the game<sup>4</sup>. Like the corners we discussed earlier, the affective fear that players experience in reaction to seeing a monster charging them puts them in a state of helpless vulnerability. *Amnesia*'s nearly non-existent dashboard design is—like the corners that I discuss above—an example of the game denying the player any kind of prosthetic mediation that could help them understand and react to a dangerous situation in the game. The player lacks the standard maps, compasses, and detectors that many video games give players to help them formulate an escape plan should they ever encounter an enemy within the game.

When players have this information available to them within the games such as *Metal Gear Solid*, it gives them the opportunity to master each scenario through practice, experience, and rational decision making. This is typically what makes games satisfying to play. The sense of mastering a game and overcoming its various challenges should empower the player and make them feel capable and skillful. Jesper Juul says it nicely in his book *The Art of Failure*: “the

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<sup>4</sup> See the end of part 16 in YouTuber PewDiePie's stream of *Amnesia* to see a player panic in reaction to the game's use of 3-D shock. A monster sneaks up on PewDiePie from behind and does not give him any time to properly react to its attacks. PewDiePie humorously reacts to this by wildly shaking his camera while he screams out in fear.

feeling of escaping failure (often by improving our skills) is central to the enjoyment of games. Games promise us a fair chance of redeeming ourselves....good games tend to offer well-defined goals and clear feedback. This gives us an objective measure of our performance and allows us to optimize our strategies” (7). When players receive clear feedback from a game, they can use that information to make winning strategies that bring them success. Conversely, *Amnesia* deliberately withholds this information from the player to prevent them from creating strategies that would help them avoid the monsters more consistently. Furthermore, the game’s lack of a UI strengthens the illusion that the monsters in the game could pop out of the screen when they get too close. This makes the player more afraid and forces them into struggling for greater distance away from the monsters even if they are not actual threats that can threaten their actual personal space in the real world.

### **Burning the Midnight Oil**

Like most video game avatars, Daniel still has a series of important resources that the player needs to properly manage in order to survive. In *Amnesia*, the player must keep three separate resource meters full or they will quickly die. First, Daniel has health that the player needs to maintain. Monsters within the game deplete this bar when they attack Daniel, and he will die if his health fully depletes. Second, Daniel has a sanity meter that decreases every moment that he spends within the dark. Daniel will go insane and quickly die if he stays in the dark for too long, so the player needs to keep Daniel’s path lit by using a lantern that they find early in the game or by using tinderboxes that can light stationary torches scattered throughout the castle. The lantern is important because it is the only light source that he can pick up and move around with. While the player can light torches with the aforementioned tinderboxes, they provide very little light and many corridors do not even have any hanging on their walls. This

forces the player to use the lantern in these spaces, but the lantern needs oil to remain alight. If the player runs out of oil, the lantern will fade, and Daniel will quickly go insane and die. The third meter shows the oil required to keep his lantern lit. The player keeps their lantern full by finding little pots of oil hidden away in places that are difficult to see. These little pots usually sit beneath pieces of debris or in shady corners that the dark-colored pots easily blend in with.

From a game design perspective, oil is *Amnesia*'s version of the stars in *Super Mario 64* or the hidden treasure chests in *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*. It is a desirable item within the game that motivates the player to scout out the virtual world and traverse as much of its terrain as possible. As Steve Swink puts it, "The intrinsic pleasure of learning and doing may be the fundamental appeal, but it's the carrot of the stars that gets you moving" (98). These items are usually in plain sight, promising the player a tangible reward for traversing a dangerous dungeon or fighting a powerful monster. Oil in *Amnesia* differs from these rewarding items simply by existing in hidden locations that are often dark and sometimes difficult to access. Whereas the chests in *The Legend of Zelda* give players direction towards a clear and attainable goal, the pots in *Amnesia* force the player to stoop and scrounge through the level's darkest corners. This can make players desperate for oil because it often requires players to burn oil to illuminate the dark or hidden areas where jars of oil might be. This puts the player in the difficult position of burning the precious oil they need just so they can some more to remain safe for a little while longer.

*Amnesia* makes managing oil even more difficult by forcing the player to check their remaining reserves within the game's pause menu instead of having a persistent chart or bar on-screen that players can keep tabs on during gameplay. As I mentioned before, *Amnesia* lacks a persistent in-game dashboard the player can use to keep track of their resources while they play

the game. The player needs to pause the game and look at the pause menu in order to check important statistics such as Daniel's remaining health, sanity, and oil. Daniel's health and sanity are still easy to maintain despite this quirk because the game cleverly gives the player very clear hints to communicate that these two meters are decreasing. Red splotches of blood cover the screen when Daniel loses health, and he starts to hear and see frightening hallucinations when his sanity begins to decrease.

These visual tricks clearly communicate to the player that they either need to heal with a potion or get into the light without using abstract meters or dials. However, managing Daniel's oil meter is much more difficult than managing his health or sanity because the game does not give the player any hints indicating how much remaining oil they currently have. The lantern simply goes dark without any warning once the player runs out. This is very bad because it only takes about thirty seconds for Daniel to go completely insane once he is caught in the dark without a light source. The monsters in the game make this even more difficult because they monopolize the player's attention and distract them from keeping track of their oil reserves during gameplay. During my playthrough of *Amnesia*, I would often pause the game to take a break, only to witness, with horror, at how much oil I had burned through in what felt like a relatively short amount of time. Running out of oil forces the player to traverse the darkness to quickly find a brightly-lit refuge, but the noise Daniel makes when he runs also alerts the monsters and draws them towards his current location. The lamp is essentially a device that creates distance between the player's avatar and the threatening darkness that surrounds him, but that resource is severely limited and difficult for the player to keep track of. Players who manage their oil well by only burning it when it is absolutely necessary will keep darkness away at a safe distance but doing so also restricts the player's field of view even if the game has a feature that

lets Daniel's eyes slightly adjust to the darkness to faintly see with no light. Without oil, darkness—like any of the monsters within the game—rapidly creeps up on the player and threatens their comfortable boundaries of personal space.

Running out of oil does not happen very often if the player remembers to spend the extra time to look for oil pots whenever they enter a new room, but the way Frictional Games designed the lantern still sets the player up for what Julian Hanich called the “deliberate distraction” scare. As the name implies, the deliberate distraction uses a red herring to make the viewer believe that the scare is coming later than it really will. For Hanich, this could be a sudden sound in the distance, or it could be a fake threat that distracts the viewer from the real danger approaching victim out of sight. Regardless of the technique, the point is that “we concentrate on something still *in the act* of approaching, we expect the shocking moment to take place *later* in time—which is, again, a mistake” (Hanich 141). The deliberate distraction is a common tactic used in horror films, but the concept neatly applies to the sorts of unexpected jump scares that frequently occur in *Amnesia* as well. In *Amnesia*, the monsters are usually the main cause of the player's fear, but they can also distract the player enough to make them forget that their oil is gradually burning away. In oppressively dark areas such as the castle cellar that contain very few oil pots for the player to scavenge, it becomes easy for the player to suddenly run out of oil and in turn lose the light they need to survive.

Most action video games try to maintain a degree of fairness in their gameplay by keeping the player well-informed about the virtual world around them. If the game is designed well, then this should set the player up to gradually build their skills up in the game until they master the game entirely. *Amnesia*, however, does not try to hold the player's hand through its levels and it can even be unfair to play when it occasionally positions the monsters in the best

places to ambush the player. But this is precisely what makes *Amnesia* so good at breaking down the masculine empowerment that many typical action games try to give their mostly young male audiences. Rather than set the player up for mastery and dominance over their virtual enemies, *Amnesia* reminds the player that in-game mediation can also evoke affects of dread and terror that defies the player's ability to plan and make sense of their current situation. Players in *Amnesia* must rely on their intuition and instincts in order to survive. Players have neither the time nor the resources to plan their moves out and properly rationalize their situation. In other words, *Amnesia* does not afford players the intellectual luxuries of abstraction or passive rationalization. Players only have time to follow their natural urge to run away when monsters eventually find and chase them. Therefore, *Amnesia* erodes the player's stable sense of secluded individualistic subjectivity and pushes the player into an affective economy characterized by fear and vulnerability.

### **Conclusion**

*Amnesia* shows us how important instinct and felt sensation is for gameplay and immersive experiences within games. Unlike games such as *The Legend of Zelda* that give players a wealth of abstract information that allows players to methodically plan out their moves in a logical way, *Amnesia's* spatial and UI design restricts the player's access to this crucial information. This forces players into making gut decisions in the heat of the moment as they run away from game's frightening monsters. Since players have no maps or compasses to help them visualize the broader spatial layout around them, their only option is to follow their gut and take whatever path they can find amongst all threats that surround them. In other words, *Amnesia's* player has no time to contemplate what they are seeing on screen. Instead, they are, as Walter Benjamin would call it, distracted players who understand the game more through habit than



through focused and thoughtful contemplation.<sup>5</sup> For Benjamin, the distracted person perceived art in a tactile and habitual way. Art to the distracted observer was an intuitive and felt experience that one utilized without contemplating it to find a “deeper” meaning of some sort. The observer simply put the art to use without thinking about it. Such “tactile appropriation” of art was, according to Benjamin, “accomplished not so much by attention as by habit....Distraction as provided by art presents a covert control of the extent to which new tasks have become soluble by apperception” (240). Similarly, players in *Amnesia* do not have to conceptualize their current predicament to run away or navigate a particularly labyrinthine level. Instead, they simply follow their guts and keep moving despite the very limited information available to them to help them safely navigate the game’s unfamiliar virtual spaces. Players who try to strategize will only find themselves wasting time they could spend running and hiding. Players cannot think about their actions, they merely do them as fast as they can in the spur of the moment.

This could also help us build upon Black’s initial conceptualization on game immersion. If Black emphasized interactivity as a crucial component to immersion in a video game, then that feeling will only intensify once players start playing it through habit. Players do not always have to stop and conceptualize their play. Instead they can follow their instincts and act according to the embodied affects they feel as a result of using an avatar that follows their commands within the game. Interacting with virtual worlds is thus something players naturally do through habit once they start following the embodied gut instincts they get from controlling an avatar in the game. *Amnesia* helps us see games as a tactile medium. Running away from an in-game monster takes about as much thought as running away from any real-life threat. While games often do

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<sup>5</sup> This is the crucial difference that Benjamin makes between his famous category of “aura”—distanced viewing that makes a subject contemplate—versus the more tactile perception necessitated by “distraction.”

provide abstract information to the player to help them conceptualize their play in logical and strategic ways, *Amnesia* shows that virtual space is not just an abstract grid that happens to contain the gameplay on-screen. Virtual space is also something that the player can intuitively feel and habitually use without having to fully conceptualize it. Players feel immersed in virtual spaces because those spaces often engender physical affects such as fear that make players do things even when they are not thinking about what they are doing.

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