Volume 27 (2012)

Smearing the Medieval: Architectural Objects and Time Travel in Amnesia: The Dark Descent

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In late 2010, a small game development company known as Frictional Games launched Amnesia: The Dark Descent, a survival horror game fixated upon medieval and Renaissance traditions. Having experienced the vicissitudes of the independent game development process, Frictional Games lurched through their planned launch date, battered, bruised, and maimed by financial hardship, broken contracts, and enervating usage of newly conceived game distribution platforms.

Amnesia, although not an immediate financial success, became something of an instant classic. Heavyweight review hub IGN awarded it a coveted Editor's Choice award at a moment almost simultaneous with release; various other review outlets praised the game for its impregnable atmosphere, more-than-competent design, and whatever unremitting terror that seemed to be aroused consistently within eclectic player demographics. Amnesia, it seemed, was sent to interrupt the weary heritage of medieval-tinged Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games that valued mechanistic form over content and money-to-online-currency economics over coherent universes. Existing solely as a single-player game, Amnesia allowed the player to take control over Daniel, an unwilling victim of stalking, vaguely Lovecraftian forces that drive him into Brennenburg, an ancient castle located in 19th-century Poland.

Amnesia appeared to be something special; Frictional Games has moved over 350,000 units since release,[1] and multiple reviewers have tossed around the title of "most successfully frightening game"[2] ever produced. Amnesia possesses a sort of allure, not due only to its nebulous combination of medieval and Renaissance thought and tradition, but because it masterfully combines this surface-level ornamentation with trends found in contemporary single-player and cinematic game design.

It is my intent here to show that this pattern is not wholly unique but part of a broader trend in recent game design—and that studying this broader trend allows one to understand what

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[1] Thomas Grip, "The Terrifying Tale of Amnesia," The Escapist, http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/features/9011-The-Terrifying-Tale-of-Amnesia.5 (accessed 18 Feb. 2013).

[2] John Walker, "Wot I Think: Amnesia –The Dark Descent," Rock, Paper Shotgun, http://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2010/09/07/wot-i-think-amnesia-the-dark-descent/ (accessed 18 Feb. 2013).

Amnesia really has to say about the medieval. I identify Amnesia to be one game in a small but burgeoning group of interactive time-traveler fiction—a group not identified by its use of science-fiction temporal leaping, but by the shared narrative device of exile into a deteriorating and antiquated architecture forgotten by the center mass of society. Different from the obsession with expansionism and Manifest Destiny, as espoused by games such as Dead Space and the Doom series, this fixation on societies and histories past (often medieval) creates a model based upon banishment, one in which a person is sent from a larger society to the wilderness to wander, sometimes aimlessly, terrorized by the realization, capitulated to long ago, that a return to the previous reality is not an option.

Games which enroll in this trope (I hesitate to call it a genre) seem to fetishize an invented past as their wilderness. Primary examples are Bioshock, in which a seeming Everyman descends from the modern 1960s to an underwater kingdom of re-imagined Randians and Objectivists; a fanciful free-market and art-deco cloister, the imagined city of Rapture suffered steroidal growth in the biological and market sciences, leading to a city-wide addiction to body-enhancing compounds, mutations, and insane violence. This wilderness coalesces such that the protagonist may pick through it, bereft of any terminal that would lead back to the surface world. Similarly, Fallout 3 chooses to exploit reliquaries of the humanist and atomic 40s and 50s; in a post-nuclear war world, the (once again) seeming Everyman hurtles his way through a blasted American landscape, pausing to inspect the failed bomb shelters in which miniature societies, fearing that exact cataclysm visited upon the landscape, were bred hundreds of years before. To enter a township-sized bomb shelter is to face dilapidated hallways, hellish animals, visual and auditory hallucinations, and, most likely, a reloading of the saved game file upon death. Although methods vary, these sorts of pseudo-time-travel games encapsulate histories and experiences into easily consumable wholes—Bioshock has its mammoth mascot and optional antagonist, the Big Daddy, a transfigured humanoid clothed in a heavy diving suit, an icon of the age of mutation; Fallout 3 has a literal mascot, the PIP-Boy, a latter-day cold-war propaganda-poster cartoon character, presenting non-diegetic information in a ribald manner. Through these spaces in which the player is stranded, the leftovers of modernist humanism and post-war paranoia are inverted, invented, and left supine (but not unarmed) such that the passer-by may inspect them.

I find such analyses of these non-medieval games to be helpful in understanding the general theme of the exile in works such as Amnesia, which proves to be challenging to approach without a knowledge of the traditions surrounding its release (Bioshock was released in 2007; Fallout 3 was released in 2008). To be clear, Amnesia treads its own ground by inspecting a non-American, non-merchandized past. Amnesia possesses no object which has resonated with the fan base in quite the same way that PIP-Boy does, nor any one salient character or event that allows for easy summation of the whole. Nor does it showcase an architectural feature readily viewable, as a Behemoth, from its outside. However, Amnesia's purpose is the same: by placing a rotted, immutable, mysterious castle in the midst of 19th-century attitudes of positivism and enlightenment, Amnesia creates a

unified architectural spectacle that serves as both actor and object for the creation of the exile experience. This focus on architecture provides a clear material interior and exterior that through mimesis outlines a moral or spiritual dichotomy. As a central milieu for both the exile and confused timelines, this architectural trope is one not contained by all video games commonly cited as exponents of medievalism. The Blizzard franchises (Diablo, Warcraft, and World of Warcraft), Assassin's Creed, and many others, although still engaged in problems of landscape, wilderness, and backwards projections of the romantic sublime on medieval locales,[3] lack a central sprawling architectural feature that acts as both segregating backdrop and monster—one that underscores a certain fascination with times past.

The player begins a new game; a cut-scene commences. Unlike other games in which the dominant perspective is that of the main character (called a first-person perspective), Amnesia offers few clues as to how to interact with the world. This is for good reason: there are no standard weapons in the game, nothing to really kill, no shields to brandish. The small kit offered to the player may carry tinder boxes to light torches; later on, a lantern, healing vials of laudanum, and other utilities. The sound of drizzling rain and ghostly whispers waken the protagonist from unconsciousness. With neither explanation nor exposition, the player is urged to explore the dark, dank corners of a massive castle, one that is as ornate as it is dilapidated. Castle Brennenburg, it is understood, has been standing for a long, long time.

Exactly how long is difficult to ascertain. Daniel, our silent protagonist, offers no knowledge as to his whereabouts. He's there, struck by the titular memory condition, guided by notes left previously by his own hand, to confront his once-mentor, an aristocrat, magician, and apparent otherworldly being who has been kidnapping and torturing civilians for centuries in order to fuel his dark spells. The spirit of the late Middle Ages' persona Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa makes an appearance late in the game, as does the quickly coagulating shadowy malevolence that stalks Daniel, motivating his search for the heart of the castle.

However, for much of the game, the protagonist is alone, wandering, and antagonism comes not from any expansive set of fantastical creatures with clearly defined hit-points but from the architecture of the castle itself. Doors open unaided, howling winds are placated just as quickly as they are raised from some unseen source, and malice seems to pulsate from every shadowed corner. These details are more than just expressive mis-en-scene; Daniel lays claim to a "sanity meter" alongside the compulsory "health bar." As the player leads Daniel into physical danger, points are removed from the health bar. As the player leads Daniel into darkness, or into unnecessary conflict with the few monsters roaming the halls of Brennenburg, points are removed from the sanity meter while the screen warps and high-pressure heart pumps are heard in the stereo field. Too many hits to the sanity meter too quickly and Daniel will be ushered into frenetic panic, suffering aural and visual hallucinations; a drained meter will reduce mobility to the point of being killed and ending

[3] Paul Martin, "The Pastoral and the Sublime in Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion," Game Studies, http://gamestudies.org/1103/articles/martin (accessed 18 Feb. 2013).

the game prematurely.

This relatively simple mechanic crafts the primary conflict engendered in the world of Amnesia. Focus is not placed on the most efficient ways to destroy enemies; tactics of stealth and hiding are encouraged, if not necessary—there exists no apparatus with which to confront the violent sentries of the castle. The true monster is architecture, the enclosures that silently guide Daniel and deplete him of his last stocks of sanity. The trouble with Amnesia, as with most games of the invented-zeitgeist ilk, is treating its sampled architecture as a synecdoche for a specific time. From which time period may we claim Amnesia's fevered vision of the past is drawn?

It's difficult to tell from merely playing the game. Although the characters present seem aligned with a Paracelsus-infused sense of the occult—of an ordered, mathematical pulse of hidden energy accessible to the gifted—careful examination of Brennenburg's bowels unveils someone's discursive fascination with relics of violence from both Classical and medieval Inquisition eras (brazen bulls and wheels of torture are notable discoveries, both freshly used). The actual methods used to instill terror within the player/character are, similarly, of a nature presented as more primordial than the rational worldview undergirding Daniel's temperance. The shadowy monsters traipsing about the castle, for instance, appear as one of two character models deployed by the game's programming, calling into question the actual number of creatures to be avoided. Each parodies the human form, all sagging skin and lacerated flesh, immensely strong, destructive upon the castle's woodwork while in pursuit of Daniel, and constantly fading back into night—much as Grendel, of Beowulf fame, stands as a hidden yet monumental menace (as we are told of Grendel, "In off the moors, down through the mist bands God-cursed Grendel came greedily loping. The bane of the race of men roamed forth...he ripped open the mouth of the building, maddening for blood, pacing the length of the patterned floor with his loathsome tread, while a baleful light, flame more than light, flared from his eyes"[4]). One monster model, more elusive in the castle, boasts a vertical mouth that appears both raw and vaginal in nature, eliciting a passing comparison to Grendel's equally rapacious mother, reminiscent of unbridled violence and sinister, if desiccated, organicism (Of Grendel's mother's hiding place: "Everybody gazed as the hot gore kept wallowing up and an urgent war-horn repeated its notes...."[5]).

The castle itself transforms into a more earthy reality, emitting a choking fog the deeper one descends, bringing to mind the fog of the Mabinogi's otherworld. In the medieval Welsh imagination, the delicate border between material reality and the realm of overseeing fairies was broken only by visitation to a site that was both itself and its antithesis. As one sat in a forest clearing, the poles of "forest" and "not forest" would suffer great torque and a trip to an unreality would commence. In Amnesia, the same process occurs, but only due to constructions laid down by man's hand. The fog of Amnesia does not refer to an already-codified knowledge of an otherworld, but to a shapeless, ancient blueprint that stretches far before Daniel's 19th century trappings while

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[4] Seamus Heaney, Beowulf (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 49.

[5] Heaney, Beowulf, 99.

never going so far as to lose grip on cobblestones. One room in particular, referred to as the chancel, is a literal bottomless pit, so large as to preclude inclusion within or below the castle walls without magical intervention. The castle exists as a hyperbolic extension of medieval cathedrals whose floor plans are disparate in their various modes of representation, "combined not in a systematic but in an artistic unity."[6] As architecture of the medieval period survives depiction in multiple perspectives in order to point to a grounding center, so, too, does this castle succumb to a hierarchy of representations such that all rooms may, through a progression of sanity-draining power, point toward an ineluctable and impossible center of origin deep underground.

These medieval elements are plucked from their various contexts in such a manner as to contrast with other game elements framed as more "mystical" or "modern" in their countenance: the landscape outside the castle has already been mentioned, as well as the scientific ceremonial magic invented and vaguely alluded to in order to introduce a middle ground of natural philosophy into the mix. Through this eclecticism a past is properly invented, introduced, and immediately alienated from the player. Medievalism, as a field of study, is offered by the Medieval Electronic Multimedia Organization as "the study of responses to the Middle Ages at all periods since a sense of the mediaeval began to develop."[7] Here the puzzle of Brennenburg is that the sense of a discrete medieval period is never solidified; the castle represents a smeared timeline, where the occult leanings of the Renaissance interchange comfortably within tropes hundreds of years older. The castle might sit in a politically and temporally situated context, but the interior of the castle—the true enemy of the game—is a confused pastiche of times, places, and persons, an amnesia regarding the true nature of temporality, locating the medieval as a seed of the inaccessible and inimical. I noted that Agrippa surfaces at some point during the narrative. It is not accidental that he is crucial to Daniel's mission, for his life straddled the edges of the chronological Middle Ages and what came after. He is the liminal soul of a video game that is all about liminality, one that bridges between medieval and Renaissance, old and new, "primal" and "mystic."

This same concern undergirds other temporality-obsessed video games such as the aforementioned Bioshock and Fallout series. Medievalism disputes or studies the perception of the Middle Ages as a singular object "that can somehow be reconstituted through careful study and contextualization,"[8] but this category can be extended to other histories, even wholly fictional ones. An architecture of exploration that punishes, rather than rewards, by depicting veritable dig sites as something better left alone must necessarily transform potential histories into single objects with purposes, contexts, and reasons for being, many of them being sinister. Peter Johnsson reads Fallout 3's vaults, in which human societies ride out the nuclear apocalypse, as the place where people "wait

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[6] Helen Rosenau, "Cathedral Designs of Medieval England," The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs 66, no. 384. (1935), 132.

[7] Carol L. Robinson, "Some Basic Definitions," Medieval Electronic Multimedia Organization, http://www.medievalelectronicmultimedia.org/definitions (accessed 18 Feb. 2013).

[8] Elizabeth Emery, "Medievalism and the Middle Ages," Studies in Medievalism 17 (2005), 80.

for salvation."[9] That was certainly their intent within the game's narrative. However, given that the vaults of the Fallout universe suffer a nearly 100-percent failure rate, and that the post-American wasteland is the default arena of play, I argue that Fallout aligns with Amnesia. The past, as a place of both origin and foreignness, is codified into an architecture which must be left behind if the game is to be resolved, making Fallout's vaults a place where salvation can never be found. Juul's Half-Real applies the balance of form and content to the video game binary of rules and stories; in it he argues that programmed rules may alter the deep structure of whatever story is being presented.[10] Although his focus is on multiplayer shooter games, his principles apply to narrative-driven games. A certain space may demand that a player's inventory be limited, or that hallucinatory effects occur, but these effects are hardly novelties. Rather, the architectures in question represent a very real way in which player movement and reward is limited, transforming what could be a representative of a robust history into an objectified system of cause and effect. It matters little if the oppressive object in question is a smeared version of the medieval or a smeared version of 1950's utopia—it is a site that collapses the tics and turns of a specific time into a specific object, which may provide lurid entertainment (after all, these are video games) but will, without question, at some point in the game be dropped and buried. Upon successful completion of Amnesia, Daniel surfaces from Brennenburg, relating his lack of fear of the dank halls to the successful fulfillment of his "purgatory,"[11] the abandonment of a discrete process, not a history.

It is admittedly difficult to make in-game landscapes more than two-dimensional sites of action; games of meditation seem to be the business of small indie studios, not multi-million dollar digital media empires, although this binary is becoming more diffused as time moves on. The binary of interior-exterior architectural relations dissolves in some points, as well; Fallout 3's many vaults contain artifacts, journals, and other detritus that would warrant an imaginative acknowledgement of a simulated past enriched with experiences, if only there weren't so many dangers that motivate frantic shooting.

The repeated production of sequels to games such as Fallout and Bioshock, though, functions in a way similar to World of Warcraft's endless fields and mythologies. Instead of drawing critical focus to a central puzzle of interior relations, the universe of these games is expanded, made more fragmented and less monolithic (Bioshock's spiritual sequel Bioshock Infinite concerns a renegade, floating city hidden in the clouds. This unsettled settlement is likewise a dystopia, but its location in a different game and a different universe than the original implies a broader span of human experiences that can lead to such societal decay). In this struggle between microscopic and the macroscopic computations and their impacts Amnesia, and the rest of the video game industry, finds its locus. At what point does a video game forsake process-oriented challenge for fleshed-out

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[9] Peter Johnsson, "Purged by Fire: The Influence of Medieval Visionary Literature on Post-Apocalyptic Science Fiction," The Year's Work in Medievalism 25 (2010), 126.
[10] Jesper Juul, Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds (Boston: MIT Press, 2011), 2.
[11] Amnesia: The Dark Descent (Frictional Games, 2010).

landscapes? The latter doesn't always concern the player/character directly, similar to the real world, and it appears in many medieval games such as Oblivion, where roaming and exploring are central goals. How are rules and stories balanced to create a compelling product, and which factors promote objectification of any real-life element? The validity of these questions is much of what video game scholars wrestle with. Amnesia, meanwhile, is content to pursue the objectification of history to the ends of a microscopic engagement with one character. The exile of Daniel into the medieval is a small enough motion to base a single game upon it, but also a large enough motion to encapsulate how the fear of a medieval planet is brought to life in popular media.