

The Dungeon Mode

Research Proposal – Concordia Humanities PhD

To represent the horrid and the demonic means to give a language to that which in reality eludes a rationalization of a classic type; it means to change the linear concepts of time and space.

—Manfredo Tafuri, *The Sphere and The Labyrinth*

Project Overview

The Dungeon Mode is a media-archaeological study of the mode of game-world apprehension characteristic of videogames set in dungeons, joined to a historical montage of dungeon topoi across cultural, natural, and architectural history, pursued through a creation practice that locates new allegorical uses of old forms.

The time-share terminal, home computer, and game console share a long, overlapping history with programmatic dungeons. From the early 1970s onward, the dungeon became one of the first speculative spaces repeatedly simulated on computers. This overlap is not merely a whole-cloth inheritance from role-playing games and fantasy media in popular culture. Two of the earliest creators of digital dungeons were spelunkers as well as hobbyists and university programmers, resulting in cave maps, maze structures, and a phenomenology of cave exploration acting as inspiration for their designs (Craddock 2015). As computing spread from institutions to the home, the dungeon persisted as a template for games across genres and technologies, and a way of orienting oneself and acting within these game-worlds developed.

The Dungeon Mode is one of three modes of game world apprehension that I outlined in my MFA written thesis *Grotto: Game Modes and Visionary Architecture*. I am expanding that writing with a survey of relevant games and precedents across cultural, natural, and architectural history, culminating in a series of experimental game prototypes, each on a separate aspect of this posited mode.

Videogame dungeons are more than fantasy obstacle courses. They combine carceral, hellish, and pseudo-medieval motifs that circulate widely in contemporary media, usually without attention to their origins. They also repeat and refine a small set of mechanics—mapping, searching, collecting, assessing, risk-taking, experimenting, clearing, descending—beginning with “roguelike” games, text

adventures, first-person mazes, and developing through to modern descendents such as the action RPG. This project examines the persistence of these aesthetic, formal, and architectural attributes, as well as the relationship between the imagined architecture of the dungeon and the game-self that acts within it. I'm interested in a genealogy of attributes, in the cultural precedents that they draw from, the technological and material conditions that shaped them, and the ways they continue to inform how players navigate and interpret constrained digital spaces.

The *fantasy dungeon* is a curious artifact of gothic fiction: an exaggeration of real-world architectural forms like prisons, catacombs, sewers and mines, as well as religious conceptions of an underworld. Manfredo Tafuri's description of Giambattista Piranesi's speculative architectural etchings of prisons—"this universe is both that of republican justice and that of imperial cruelty"—also describes the absurd, space-filling hostile architecture of the videogame dungeon (Tafuri 1987). These architectures point backwards to some fantasy conception of the middle ages as their gothic literature counterparts did, one era conjuring a proxy for the preceding era that incubated it, emblemizing historical anxieties that are otherwise difficult to name. In my research I have located a cluster of historical sites in Czechia that not only work as real world counterparts to the mode I am working to establish, but also have personal ancestral significance which has woven itself through my existing writing on the subject. The fullest version of this writing would include a survey of these sites and the folklore associated with them, especially as material inspiration for the creation portion of the project.

Several seminal game genres foreground different facets of design within The Dungeon Mode:

- **Roguelikes** explore the epistemology of mapping, the partial, shifting and unreliable knowledge of space, of the schism between things and their names (such as the 'greeked' names of unknown and potentially dangerous items). Roguelikes have both continued in a highly formalized version—as game design experiments shared between hobbyist developers and communities of players (such as Brian Walker's *Brogue*) and a vast efflorescence of commercial games that test the genre's limits of recognizability by grafting a single original feature onto every other kind of game style imaginable.
- **First-person dungeons** experiment with orientation and disorientation in early pseudo-3D space, culminating in contemporary works like *Catacombs of Solaris*, where perspective becomes unstable to the point of abstraction.
- **Text adventures and interactive fiction** rely on descriptive language rather than images, using text as both a promise of open interaction and a mechanism that restricts it. LLM-driven descendents like *AI Dungeon*

expand interaction possibilities, while melting the actual ontology of the game world, like a dream that loses coherence as the dreamer gains more lucid agency within it.

While these game forms are important to this study, The Dungeon Mode is not a cataloging of mechanical features or aesthetic elements of dungeon games. It is a mode of game-world apprehension, created by the sum of those elements, and the actions of an imagined game-self within, which produces meaning as the player filters that performance through their own milieu. The creation aspect of this project, in conjunction with a media archaeology study of existing games and a constellation of material precedents for the topos of the dungeon itself, aims to bring forward a *dialectic image* that I believe is formed by the dungeon and the computer—the forward-looking myth of technological progress and the backward-facing pull of ruins, repetitions, and a phantasmagoria of the past. The Dungeon Mode of play is a way of inhabiting the tension between an image of the future and a fantasy proxy for a violent past which that progress claims as necessary. I believe that there are opportunities for creating works that utilize this mode to unseat its own implicit assumptions—those of *inevitability* within a game form which is built on ideas of *uncertainty*.

Literature Review and Research Questions

This project is situated at the intersection of critical game studies, media archaeology, and research-creation. Its questions emerge where these fields overlap—where design, embodiment, and historical imagination meet in the experience of navigating a videogame dungeon. The project draws on multiple scholarly traditions to investigate the dungeon as both cultural topos and mode of game-world apprehension.

- I've found Craddock's research on early roguelike games (2015) a very valuable starting point for adding context to my playthroughs of other dungeon games, and I'd like to connect those histories to parallel histories of perspective games and early text adventures, especially less-documented games like the player-created *Eamon* series for Apple II computers. Rather than create an exhaustive cataloging of dungeon games, I am tracing inheritance between early experiments and contemporary descendants to understand where now-implicit (or forgotten) features originated, enabling new critical perspectives on their function, contexts, and meaning. Additional existing literature for a Media Archaeology (or in Laine Nooney's view, a *speleology*) of videogames include *Archaeogaming* (Reinhard 2018) and "A Pedestal, A Table, A Love Letter," (Nooney 2013).
- Markus Rautzenberg's *Framing Uncertainty: Computer Game Epistemologies* lays compelling groundwork for understanding how games work as epistemic and affective structures, ways of organizing uncertainty, revealing and withholding knowledge, and trading space for place. I've inherited some of Rautzenberg's terminology as I investigate more games, especially games beyond a handful of canonized commodities, and as I test new variations in the creation portion of the project. I also extend

the act of creating a mental model of game worlds to an allegory of our exploration of history, as in my previous dungeon game experiment *Grotto*, which turned genealogical data into an explorable maze, with stairways delving back generation by generation. A web API allowed this game to be interacted-with in different ways through successive experiments: a 3D game built in the game engine Unity, a hypertext essay, and through experiments with physical objects and mechanical displays.

- The Dungeon is a fantasy trope with material precedents in architecture and nature. Williams' *Notes on the Underground* (2008) establishes how nineteenth-century underground spaces became sites where anxieties about technology, labor, and modernity crystallized. Jan Spee and Sven Gerhardt's *The Mountain's Breath* (2025) models an exhaustive exploration of cave systems that reveal strata of evidence of human traces reaching back hundreds of years. Lewis Mumford's *Technics and Civilization* (1934) positions Bohemian Joachimsthal (Jáchymov) as the birthplace of modern capitalist mining, the site of the first standardized European currency (the 'Thaler,' origin of the word 'Dollar') and the location of the discovery of uranium, creating a hugely conceptually loaded exemplar of the mine, including the etymology of the fantasy creature the *Kobold*. *De Re Metallica* is a comprehensive text on mining and metallurgy, written by the German proto-scientist Georgius Agricola, and published posthumously in 1556. It is considered one of the most important works on the subject during the Renaissance, offering detailed insights into mining techniques, metallurgical processes, and the practical aspects of mining life of the 16th century. Robert Kulmiński's work on Jáchymov as a site of memory (2023) connects these mines to uranium extraction and labor camp histories. Jáchymov operates as a ruin (now a tourist destination) that mirrors its twin Shinkolobwe in the Congo, invoking the two nuclear stockpiles they fed and drawing a line through to contemporary rare-earth extraction for the technological substrate on which videogames are built. These real world precedents contextualize dungeons as fantasy emblems for real sites of extraction, enslavement, and a lingering violence that has not ended, and which backgrounds our quotidian existence (Kara 2023). I am actively researching additional culturally important subterranean sites, including ancient sewers, ossuaries and the Macocha abyss, the deepest natural gorge in central Europe, located some 80 miles from the village that my ancestors emigrated from in the nineteenth century.
- Walter Benjamin's technique of historical montage provides a template for my inclusion of historical sources outside of the typical realm of games studies and his writings on allegory and the dialectical image provide a precedent for reading videogame dungeons as artifacts that enshrine historical processes without didactic intent. When I use the term 'allegory' in my writing, I am working within Benjamin's idiosyncratic use of the term. Darren Wershler and Bart Simon's forthcoming work on videogames

and allegory will provide crucial contemporary framing for this project, situating game mechanics and architectures within broader questions of representation and historical imagination. Their research at Concordia will directly inform this project’s approach to reading dungeon games allegorically.

Methodological Correspondences

The project’s research questions each align with methodological approaches drawn from game studies, media archaeology, critical theory, and research-creation. These approaches are not separate tracks but overlapping lenses; their value lies in how they clarify different facets of the dungeon’s form and its cultural work.

Media archaeology offers a way of tracing how specific topoi—such as the dungeon—recur across different epochs of technological mediation. My work with Erkki Huhtamo helped me develop a media-archaeological approach to game studies, one that situates recurring aesthetic and spatial motifs within longer genealogies of cultural and technical imagination. This framework highlights how the architectural logics of the dungeon—containment, descent, recursion—reappear in contemporary digital structures, from databases to procedural worlds. However, I hope to extend media archaeology’s archival focus toward a more embodied understanding of how such architectures are inhabited and reimagined through play.

Media archaeology can most productively be read as an alternative to the dominant writing of media history, whose implicit construction of a unitary narrative of progress—the idea that the course of technological development over time in and of itself equals progress, the predominant orientation regarding the realized and successful media forms and apparatuses—tends to marginalize the significance of failed projects, the shards of media history, and to exclude the role of the phantasmatic in media culture. Media archaeology should be seen primarily as a critique of progress, yet it is also *Zeitkritik*: it speaks to the present and critiques the present in examining its historical objects. It does this primarily by imposing limits on the viability of linear extrapolation of perceived (and imagined) conditions into the future.

—Eric Kluitenberg, *On the Archaeology of Imaginary Media* from *Media archaeology: approaches, applications, and implications*

In regards to a practice of Media Archaeology—during my time at UCLA I worked as an assistant to Professor Huhtamo, restoring vintage computers to working order for use in the MARS media lab. Prior to this experience I assisted with the acquisition and operation of a collection of early microcomputers for Andrew Bujalski’s feature *Computer Chess*, which I also performed in as an actor. *Computer Chess* received the Alfred P. Sloan award for science in film in 2013.

A second methodological layer involves the cluster of frameworks—phenomenology or epistemology of play, infrastructural, or even ruin-oriented—that will be tested over the course of the research. Each offers a way of answering questions about what the dungeon *does*: how it organizes (and forgets) knowledge, how it models hidden or extractive systems, or how it produces a sense of historical depth through decay, repetition, and debris. Keeping these frameworks in dialogue allows the project to examine the dungeon as an aesthetic arrangement, epistemic device, an infrastructural diagram, or a ruin-form without prematurely committing to a single interpretive mode.

The third methodological component is research-creation, which anchors the project’s analytical claims in practice. Each chapter pairs with an experimental prototype that materializes a specific architectural or historical question in playable form. These prototypes act as tests: they expose theoretical assumptions to the pressures of design and player experience, and they permit insights to emerge through the material constraints of building. This recursive movement between writing and prototyping ensures that the project’s arguments are not merely applied to games but developed through them. Through these experiments I am also producing reusable code tooling, *Dungeon Mode Kit*, to facilitate fast and flexible prototyping, based on my experience teaching an undergraduate “game-a-week” prototyping class.

Taken together, these correspondences position *The Dungeon Mode* as a study grounded in historical inquiry, conceptual experimentation, and critical practice—an approach attentive to how dungeons are built, how they are played, and what kinds of historical imagination they make possible.

Structure and Method

The written and creative components of *The Dungeon Mode* will develop in parallel, each informing and revising the other. The project is conceived as a research-creation inquiry in which writing, game design, and historical analysis function together to examine how the dungeon operates as both a spatial topos and a mode of perception and action. Rather than producing a single linear argument, the structure will take the form of interrelated studies, each exploring a distinct aspect of the dungeon’s architecture, atmosphere, and cultural resonance.

Each section will correspond to a conceptual motif—such as *Horror*, *The Invisible Hiding Place*, *Disorientation*, *The Map*, *Caverns and Shadows*, or *The Labyrinth and Viscera/Writing*—that isolates a recurring pattern in how dungeons are imagined, navigated, and known. These chapters or “levels” will combine analytical writing with creative experiments: short game prototypes, visual mappings, or performative texts that materialize theoretical insights through play.

The written component will situate these experiments within broader historical and philosophical contexts, drawing on media archaeology, critical game studies, and historical montage (natural, cultural, architectural). The creative component

will test those ideas through speculative design—developing small, self-contained game environments or interactive fragments that foreground specific mechanics of perception, constraint, risk, and orientation. This iterative process will allow theoretical questions to emerge from practice, treating gameplay itself as a mode of thought.

As a **research-creation methodology**, *The Dungeon Mode* treats creative practice as both method and outcome. The making of prototypes functions as an investigative process through which theoretical insights are tested, refined, and materialized.

Integration of the Three Fields:

This project’s interdisciplinarity lies in its integration of (1) media-archaeological analysis of the genealogy of dungeon topoi across history, (2) game-studies/holistic inquiry into orientation of game-self and game-architecture, and (3) research-creation methodologies in experimental game design. These fields converge in their shared concern with how perception and history are mediated through technological form. The project thus situates itself within the humanities while expanding its methods through creative practice.

Methodological Approach:

The project will employ:

- Historical montage and comparative analysis, tracing how motifs of the dungeon appear across cultural, natural and architectural history.
- Media archaeological and genealogical methods specific to games, historicizing the creation and inheritance of game forms along with their material contexts, tracing lines to contemporary forms.
- Research-creation, using prototyping as a means of theorizing through practice.
- An exploration of other frameworks for understanding *The Dungeon Mode*, with possibilities in a phenomenology of play, cultural studies, or a theory of ruins.

The overall structure will therefore function less as a progression toward closure than as a recursive exploration. Each study will act as both excavation and construction, producing a layered account of how the dungeon persists as a metaphor for knowledge, history, and our subjective relationship with history.

Program of Study and Faculty Advisors

Pippin Barr’s expertise in experimental game design and critical play directly supports the project’s creation aspect, where prototypes function as conceptual tools. His perspective helps frame the dungeon as an expressive form whose

mechanics and interfaces can be interrogated through design practice and with an understanding of conceptual art, guiding the project's iterative interplay between theory and experimentation.

Minor Field: Media History & Poetics

Media history and poetics provide the basis for understanding the dungeon as a recurring and culturally persistent form. Darren Wershler's work on media archaeology, obsolete technologies, and experimental textual practices informs the project's attention to how older representational and architectural logics reappear in contemporary games. His perspective helps situate the dungeon within longer histories of technical form, cultural imagination, and the material traces that persist across media transitions.

Minor Field: Science & Technology Studies / Sociology of Digital Culture

Science and technology studies and cultural sociology offer tools for examining the dungeon as part of broader technological and social systems. Bart Simon's work on games as cultural techniques supports the project's interest in the dungeon as a prototype for infrastructural or disciplinary spaces—which organize movement, agency, access and labor. His perspective helps connect the project's architectural and historical analyses to questions about how technological systems shape social relations and cultural imaginaries.

Feasibility and Timeline:

Following the Humanities PhD framework, I will complete coursework and directed study in the first year; comprehensive examinations in the second; the thesis proposal, research travel and prototype development in the third; and iterative writing and creative refinement in years four and five, culminating in the defense. This trajectory aligns with the program's five-year average and integrates creative production throughout the process.

Czech Research Context

While much of this project's analysis unfolds through digital prototypes, its material and historical grounding will be deepened through on-site research in Central Europe. A research trip to Czechia will support both the creative and scholarly dimensions of this project. The mine at Jáchymov (Jochimsthal) marks an early site of capitalist enterprise, where silver and later uranium were extracted—linking the origins of standardized currency, industrial labor, and ultimately, the atomic bomb. The Sedlec Ossuary, a chapel constructed from human bones, serves as a striking locus for cultural reflections on death and memory. The Macocha Abyss, a natural karst chasm in Moravia and a site of ancestral significance, offers an emblem of descent and the sublime

and is associated with a local folk tale that I plan to explore in a dungeon-game prototype. Together, these sites provide material anchors for the project, grounding its interactive experiments and theoretical investigations in the lived and imagined landscapes of Czech history and culture. Czechia also offers valuable opportunities for media-archaeological research: Prague hosts the GAME INDEX project at Charles University, an initiative cataloguing local game production, and is home to scholars such as Jaroslav Švelch, who is an expert in *Textova*, an early, regional form of text adventure that I am investigating.

Concordia Context

Concordia University's Humanities PhD program, housed in the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Society and Culture (CISSC), provides an ideal environment for this project, given its emphasis on interdisciplinary inquiry across media, philosophy, and cultural history. The program's research-creation community and faculty expertise in experimental media and critical theory offer the intellectual and practical conditions through which *The Dungeon Mode* can unfold. The project aligns with the program's mission to integrate scholarly and creative approaches in the pursuit of new forms of knowledge.

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