Chapter 2

The Dungeon Mode

> The toddler, taking its first steps as an organism-that-persons, drags its whole world along as pull-toy.
>
> *Arakawa and Ginz, The Architectural Body, 2002*

In dungeon exploration videogames, a shifting ontology (game world and architecture) and epistemology (player/player-character knowledge of that game world) can both distract from and expose a system of ethics embedded in a game's rules. A dungeon raid is a violent archaeology carried out within a hostile system of architecture rather than in a specific place. The "place" of a videogame dungeon lies in a form of visionary architecture, created by some imperial force positioned in a hierarchy of power that is part of a fantasy world. "Marvelous" and "Faery" Fantasy media—the kind in which dungeons might be found—drag with them the moribund ideas of rightful hereditary rule, patriarchy, and biological essentialism as a spectral counterpoint to modern values. Adjacent to fantasy and architecture, dungeon games have an opportunity to critique history, power, place, and orientation.

2.1 Game Modes

Videogames are studied across many academic fields, including game studies, computer science, psychology, anthropology, sociology, media studies, and cultural studies. Each field approaches videogames from a unique perspective, and theoretical approaches differ. As an artist, I approach the study and production of videogames from a personal perspective—I have "inhabited" them at specific times in my life and brought external situations and emotions with me. I have made videogames a memory palace, ritual space, and an interzone of

mindfulness/mindlessness over the years.[1] In the debate on how best to critically engage with videogames, I position myself closest to authors like Miguel Sicart, who proposes that rather than being understood by their rules or their narratives, games are best understood as a complex interplay between all of their elements and the player's own context (Sicart 2011).

In the past I found it cumbersome to try to talk about this subjective, holistic view of games because no word seemed broad-yet-meaningful enough to usefully refer to it. I have finally settled on *mode* as my way of referring to a lens through which one may understand the formal qualities and contexts of a game. It is a way of looking at a cluster of features rather than a classification—one game could, for example, be played and examined in more than one mode. It is true that the word "mode" is already used in game design (indicating a modality of play). It has also been used in literary criticism to imply a working method, mood or style beyond the more specific boundaries of literary genre. However, I use "mode" here to include features and contexts of both game play and game creation. A game can be made in the Dungeon Mode, inheriting all the context, history, genre trappings, imagined "game-self", expected play mechanics, and player affiliations implied therein. I can also take all of those expectations and methods of game-world apprehension and transfer them to non-game-world experiences—e.g. , the terror of navigating the US healthcare system considered in the Dungeon Mode. An important feature of game modes, as I present them, is that each mode has an imagined architecture, and an imagined game-self that relates to that architecture. By examining this relationship we can infer embedded ideas about how a subject relates to the world and to hierarchies of power and force.

As a "mode", dungeon games preoccupy me for reasons that have only recently become clear. Below, I will trace their parameters and pull at the associations that connect them to my own ideas and memories as well as their use and meaning in culture at large. In doing so, I find

1. Memory Palaces, also known as the Method of Loci, is a mnemonic technique that has been used since ancient times to improve memory and recall. It involves creating a mental construct of a familiar environment and associating specific pieces of information with distinct locations within that space. By mentally navigating through the environment and visualizing the associations, individuals can enhance their ability to remember and retrieve information.

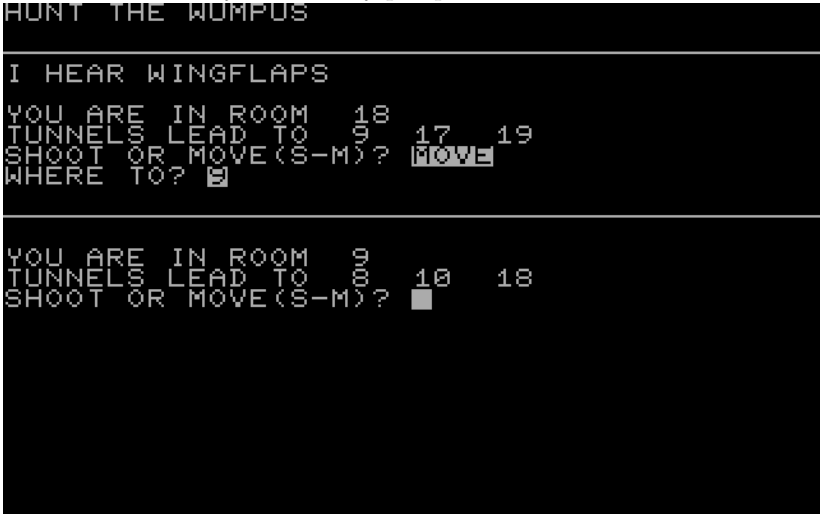
I am pulling out an unruly hairball of interconnected subjects, ranging from visionary architecture, nationalism, intergenerational trauma, a history of hobbyist software and internet affinity groups, speleology, phenomenology, epistemology, genealogy, mythology, religion, and J.R.R Tolkien. This network of subjects, while at times unwieldy, has been generative for me as an artist, as a background for using the idea of dungeons as an explorable place to symbolize my relationship to history and my position as an historical subject. The dungeon mode is subterranean, mazelike, and dark. I am stuck inside it, continually trying to find a vantage point from where my hand-scrawled map makes some kind of sense.

2.2 Horror

My first clear memories of interacting with digital games involve traversing dungeons. Videogame dungeons are imagined underground worlds separated from natural resources—darkness, traps, and hunger are often incorporated as game elements. As a player explores a dungeon, a maplike screen is often filled in one room or hallway at a time. My first exposure to a computer was the Texas Instruments TI-99/4A version of the game *Hunt The Wumpus*. It was one of a handful of games included in a first-grade class meant to expose children to home computers, which were still a novelty at the time. This version of *Wumpus* was one of many derivations of the 1973 original *Hunt the Wumpus*–a text-based game made by Gregory Yob.[2] The TI-99/4A was a slab of chromed plastic connected to a boxy CRT monitor. The blank white expanse of a new map on its screen was a dangerous territory to explore, one choice at a time. Each new cavern was represented as a circle, and the player as a stick figure within. One cave held a monster called the Wumpus. This expanse was understood from above but experienced from an occluded, perspectiveless, first-person view seen only in the mind's eye. Carelessly pressing keys, I wandered

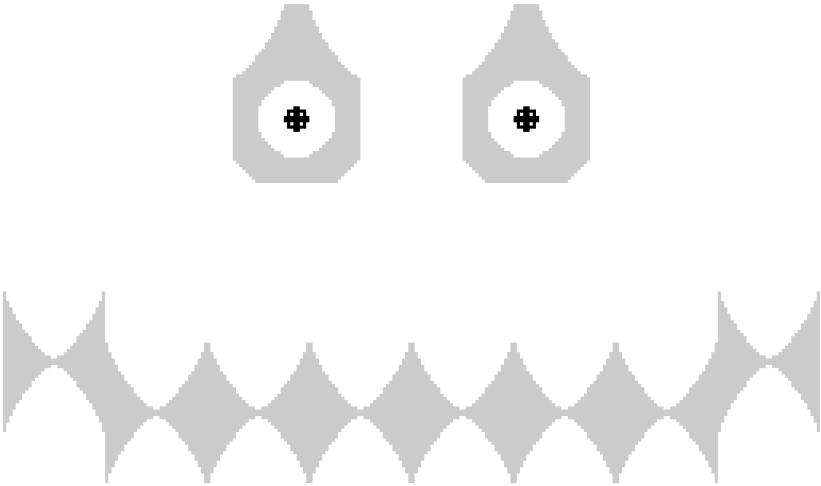
2. The later graphical versions flattened the architecture of Yob's original text-only game. Unbounded by the need to represent the caverns on a 2d plane, Yob's map could be imagined as a three dimensional dodecahedron–twenty caves, each with three exits, interconnected in a way that was radically different than the common ten by ten grid-based strategy games of the time. Without graphics, a good memory (or pencil and paper) were needed to play effectively.

through the Wumpus's cave unaware, resulting in an animation of closing jaws and bleated notes from Chopin's *Piano Sonata No. 2 in B♭ minor* —identifiable to a child only as the "you are dead" song. The screen had suddenly become my perspective as I had been eaten alive.



Hunt the Wumpus for The Commodore PET (Gregory Yob 1978)

Stunned by my "fatal" experience with the Wumpus, I raised my hand to ask if I could use the restroom. Stepping out from the computer room in a still-unfamiliar school, I was immediately lost. In the many dreams inspired by that situation that have followed, the school has grown larger and larger. The hallways are branching out in an infinitely-generative pattern. What has carried over from this childhood experience into adulthood was a certainty that videogames exist as shadow extensions of the spaces in which they are played. The well-lit classroom where children were seated in rows and given commands by an adult was connected, as through a door, to a dark labyrinth that was home to a ravenous minotaur.



Jaws closed- the death screen of Hunt the Wumpus for the TI-994A Home Computer (Texas Instruments 1981)

It took time before I had a computer or a game console in my home. I gained all of my early experiences of videogames at the homes of relatives or friends, which might have made the experiences seem more exciting. When I was around eight years old, my then-childless aunt and uncle bought a Sears Telegames console (a clone of an Atari 2600) to occupy my cousins and me when we visited. My grandmother and her husband followed suit, and playing games became part of holiday visits for the children in my extended family.

The Atari 2600 (also known as Atari VCS, or "Video Computer System"), was an early commercial home videogame console, first released in 1977. It was extremely popular and sold over 30 million units worldwide. The quality of the games made for Atari 2600 varied wildly– at its worst, it was a platform for inferior home-versions of popular arcade games, at its best, it was a space for experimenting with new kinds of play styles, working within hardware constraints, and engaging

with a wide audience. One game for the Atari 2600, Warren Robinett's *Adventure* (1979) is often singled out as an important milestone in computer gaming (Montfort and Bogost 2009, 5).[3] It introduced a play area that spanned multiple connected screen-spaces filled with traversable mazes, monsters that exhibited simple behaviors, and tool-like objects with properties: a dragon-killing sword, gate-opening keys and a game-ending golden grail. The game included the first documented "easter egg" in a commercial game– Robinett's name hidden in a normally inaccessible game-area.[4] *Adventure* conjured up an unseen world represented by glyph-like symbols. Its dragons roared a harsh, staccato machine-sound that I found terrifying. I found death in *Adventure* particularly disturbing—to be swallowed by a dragon resulted in imprisonment inside the walls of the dragon's transparent belly. In this state, moving the joystick still visibly caused the block that represented the player to twitch—spasming in-place inside the now satiated and inert dragon. Horror, before I had any conception of horror in movies or literature, was now a part of this new world of games that I was experiencing.

Following the success of *Adventure*, Atari planned what was originally intended as its sequel. *Swordquest* was a series of four action-adventure games released for Atari 2600 between 1982 and 1984. *Swordquest: Fireworld* was one of a handful of games in my uncle Ron's collection. When I encountered it, the instruction manual had been lost. I only had a vague understanding from playground rumors that there was some sort of real-life golden sword that could be won if I could beat the game. I found it almost indecipherable. Like *Adventure*, the *Swordquest* games stretched across multiple screens (a programming feat given the constraints of the hardware) and presented an occluded dungeon without a map. Folded within each 'room' were two additional hidden play layers—a challenge area and a treasure room. These spaces were

3. Robinett became one of the pioneers of Virtual Reality, like others, such as Scott Fisher, who had worked at Atari. Robinett's *Adventure* is not related to the landmark text-based adventure game *Adventure* (1977) by Donald Wood, which was inspired by *Colossal Cave Adventure* (1975), and was notable for its innovative use of ASCII graphics and its non-linear gameplay.

4. As a game produced by Atari for its own console, *Adventure* was not officially permitted to list individual creator credits, and hiding his name within the game (colloquially an "easter egg" in gaming) was the only way Robinett could credit himself.

visualized in the crudest possible iconography, and lacked the built-in affordances of modern games, such as tutorial levels or descriptive text.[5] The simple graphics of the Atari fell into reference-less abstraction without the supporting packaging, manuals, or (in *Swordquest*'s case) comic books. I found the game frightening and impossibly difficult, but, playing in a dark room, I became fixated on it.

I have found, counterintuitively, that specificity of sound and images in games of the dungeon mode is inversely proportional to the amount of fear and suspense I feel playing them. A subjective glyph seems to have more of an effect on me than a 3D rendered monster. Likewise, the idea of darkness represented as a blank area of a map can induce more anxiety in me than the unrendered darkness of a first-person perspective game. The difference is between what is unknown and what is simply unseen. I've struggled to understand why I am currently gravitating towards symbolic representation of spaces rather than specific views, as I consider myself a highly visually oriented person. Rautzenberg perhaps does a better job of explaining how symbolic spaces create affect in dungeon games—

> Images, symbols, names and finally notions are media in which the harsh urgency of reality could be represented; a reality that one could withdraw from because of those very media ... The breadth of reality could be imagined as potentiality.' Image, symbol, name, notion: according to Blumenberg, this is the evolution of medial world apprehension. At the beginning there is the image (not the word!) as a first distancing between mind and world, the basic condition for differentiations between illusion and truth, map and territory. But this sequence is not to be understood as hierarchal. Images are not 'weaker' than symbols, names or notions (that would be blatant Platonism), they are just the first way of distancing from reality. Images come first because, for Blumenberg, humans are defined as 'emphatically

5. An affordance is a relationship between an individual and the surrounding environment that enables them to perform certain actions. For example, a chair affords sitting, a door handle affords grasping and turning, and a staircase affords climbing (Gibson 2015). Contemporary commercial videogame design depends heavily on these sorts of affordances in order to rapidly orient a player to a game space while retaining attention and engagement.

> visible beings' and it is because of this that the visual sense plays such a primary role in human evolution. (Rautzenberg 2020, 132)

2.3 The Invisible Hiding Place

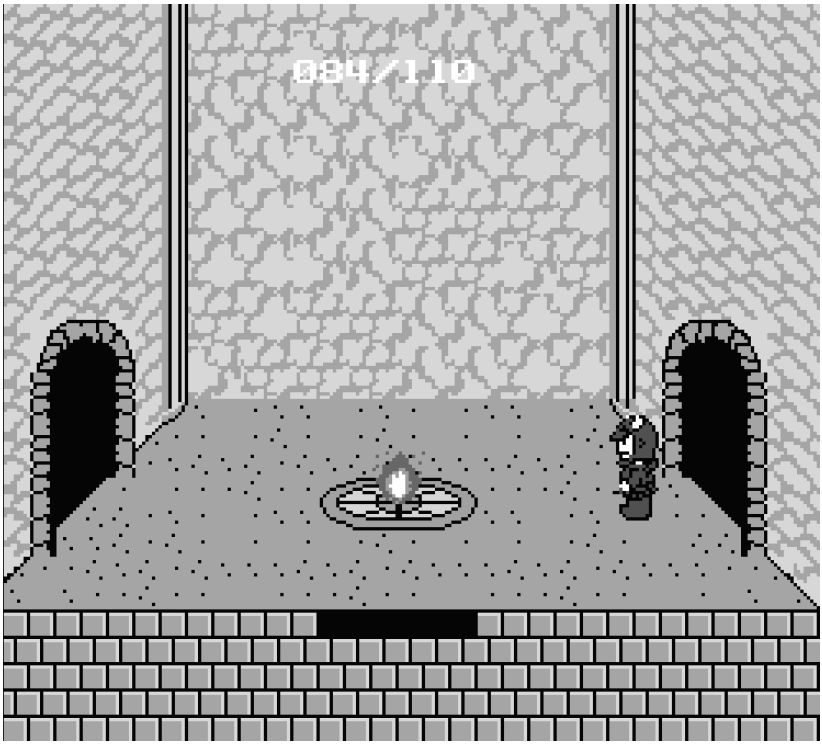
Gaston Bachelard, a French philosopher and poet, explored the importance of hidden spaces in domestic architecture in his book *The Poetics of Space*. Bachelard argued that hidden spaces, such as attics, cellars, closets, and even wardrobes and drawers, hold a special significance in the human psyche, serving as places of refuge, secrecy, and imagination. Bachelard's hidden spaces are often intimate and joyous, such as the opening of a treasure box or secret drawer. A closed and hidden space is a seed of imaginative, potential energy:

> Sometimes, a lovingly fashioned casket has interior perspectives that change constantly as a result of daydream. We open it and discover that it is a dwelling-place, that a house is hidden in it. (Bachelard and Jolas 1994, 86)

In both my aunt and uncle's home and my grandparents' home, videogames became a sort of extra-domestic space—a crack in a wall that could be passed through to a variable architecture that was connected to and dependent on the 'real' house. In both homes there were good reasons to keep children inhabiting their own separate space. My uncle, who struggled with alcoholism, later took his own life. When I was eight years old, my maternal grandmother's husband—whom I called my grandfather—shot himself in the room where the Atari was kept. After being diagnosed with bone cancer, his employer had terminated his health insurance coverage. That room was called the "mud room" in my family. It was a transitional space between indoors and outdoors—a space where muddy boots were quarantined, paperwork was done (in a locked roll-top desk) and where children played. It was also a transitional space from the home into the places accessed via the game console. It was also a transitional space from life to the hidden space of death.

Shortly after my grandfather's death I remember one day of being back in the (now cleaned and emptied) mud room playing another

Atari game, *Sneak n' Peek* (1982). In my mind it was another dungeon, mapped on the iconography of a family home. The videogame is a version of Hide and Seek, where hiding places (invisible, enterable pockets of space) riddle a house. The visible topology of the environment must be tested (by slowly moving the stick-figure-like player character into each pixel) in order to find the location of hiding places. Two children could take turns hiding and testing the skein of the house for invisible folds. One child playing alone could only search for a computer player over and over. As a child playing alone, it was never your turn to hide. I imagined that this was because the computer already knew where everything was hidden. Just as the house in *Sneak n' Peek* had permeable walls, the Atari was a portal to other spaces in my grandparents' home. Somewhere beyond the closed door of the mud room, adults were planning my grandfather's funeral. "Thank God for Pac-Man," I remember my grandmother saying through a closed door. The Dungeon Mode is hidden on the other side of a crack in our world, and inside it we still must painstakingly test the walls of the dungeon in order to understand it. In table-top roleplaying games and in dungeon videogames, secret doors must be searched out on every surface, portals may exist in the floors. I spent hours combing every pixel of the walls and floors of the 1986 adventure video game *Deadly Towers*, a near-universally panned title for the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) because of its invisible tesseracts between dungeons. There was no warning and no visible crack at the sites of these slippages, just a sudden fade to black and the occasional menacing subtitle "Parallel Zone" when one was touched by the player character, whisking them to a new and unfamiliar depth of catacombs.



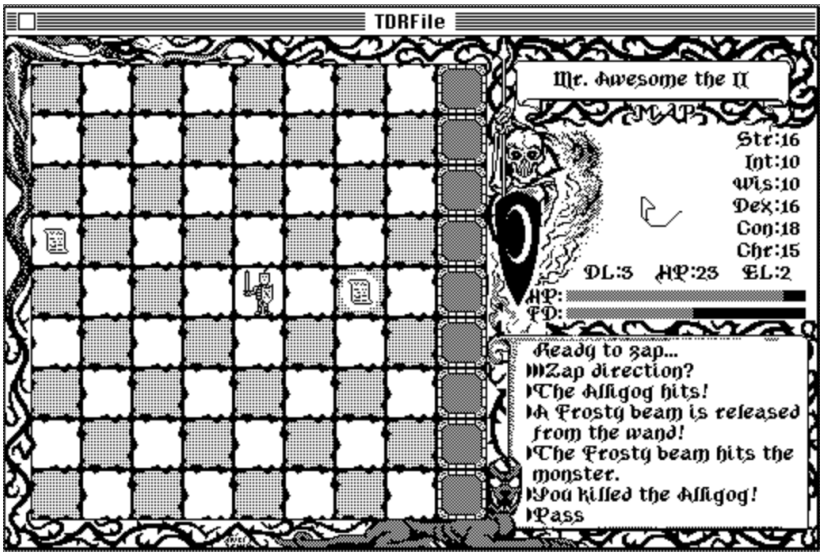
Deadly Towers, NES (Broderbund 1986)

For some, the hidden space of the dungeon is where secret selves can be embodied. A "dungeon" in contemporary terms outside of fantasy games could recall a space of sex play, where roles are assumed and power relations may be inverted. The "closet" and the "dungeon" are both places, figurative or real, where forbidden selves might be compartmentalized away from quotidian spaces.

2.4 The Dungeon Revealed: Exploration-as-epistemology

The early iterations of the beige, all-in-one Apple Macintosh computer were fetish objects to me as I entered my tweens. I glimpsed and briefly interacted with these computers in a few places—the offices of my step-father and the state-employee father of a friend, and in the study of a school acquaintance during a slumber party. The Macintosh was unlike the other computers I had seen—boxy but oddly anthropomorphic, displaying an icon of itself with a smiling screen every time it powered up. It had (for the time) high resolution graphics in 1-bit dithered black and white, and a graphical user interface that used visual metaphors like documents and folders—a fully symbolic space.

It was on the Macintosh that I first played what came to be known as *Roguelike* videogames. They were mechanically similar in various ways to *Rogue*, a popular dungeon crawl game originally developed by Michael Toy, Glenn Wichman and Ken Arnold while students at UC Santa Cruz (c. 1980). Roguelikes are usually characterized by randomly-generated levels, turn-based gameplay, and permadeath (the player's character dies and the game must start over from the beginning) (Lait 2008). *Rogue* was heavily influenced by the play mechanics, characters and situations of the Table-top role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* (Craddock 2015, 42). As in the roleplaying games that preceded them, Roguelike videogames are more often than not set in dungeons, often with the barest hint of a world that might lie outside. More advanced roguelike games included a perspective-based fog-of-war feature, sometimes simulating line-of-sight, allowing walls and obstacles to partially obscure the player's surroundings. The Macintosh was last-in-line to receive these sorts of games, which originated mostly on time-shared institutional computers, and used alphanumeric characters rather than pixelated graphics to symbolize in-game environments, creatures and objects.



The Dungeon Revealed (Woodrose Editions 1987)

The Macintosh game in question was John Raymond's 1986 game *Dungeon of Doom* (and its accompanying, expanded version, *The Dungeon Revealed*). In keeping with the interface conventions of the Macintosh, *Dungeon of Doom* figured its environments with a pictographic language of pixel-art icons rather than with crude ASCII characters, but its gameplay mirrored other games in the genre; The player descends floor by floor, searching for a magical object that will allow them to re-ascend and exit through an otherwise locked door. During the journey they collect food, weapons and potentially dangerous magical items that must be tested to be understood.

Each new play-session re-jumbles the level layouts and pseudo-magical object names so that every playthrough is different and fresh. Level layouts begin as simple open spaces and become increasingly maze-like and byzantine at deeper levels. There were trappings of fantasy role playing games here, like player classes (Knights, Wizards, Alchemists and the nondescript "Jones", each with their own advantages). What felt very new to me was the corner of the game screen that was devoted to a "map"—really just a blank area that each player movement would

fill in with a single pixel line. This turned the act of playing the game into a sort of etch-a-sketch-style drawing. The game seemed defined by what was known and unknown to the player—the map, the items.

In an article that trots through a history of speleological aesthetics in games (while positing that *most* games are essentially 'caves' by virtue of the enclosure of their skyboxes[6]), media theorist Markus Rautzenberg writes–

> Computer games literally and figuratively mediate between map and territory by continuously transforming them into one another, and this is the iconic mode, the ludic condition of interactive digital images. During exploration, map becomes territory, 'place' becomes 'space' and vice versa. But it is one of the defining aspects of ludic mediality that these differences do not become blurred during the performativity of gaming, but on the contrary become perceivable as gameplay devices. (Rautzenberg 2020, 126)

This tells us something specific about the Dungeon Mode, granted we can distinguish between 'space' and 'place'. According to Michel de Certeau (who Rautzenberg quotes at length) 'space' refers to the system of signs and symbols that govern our understanding of the world, while 'place' is the site of lived experience, where people engage with and make meaning from their surroundings (Certeau, Rendall, and Certeau 1984). Many games that I view in the Dungeon mode *are* essentially playable maps that hide and expose themselves, but some include additional representations of what is known about the dungeon, ("mini-maps") as in the game *Dungeon of Doom*. There is a fluid exchange between a game world (territory) and what we know of it (map). Many games have a permanent compendium of monsters and items encountered over the history of all play-sessions, while information that reconfigures from one individual play-session to another—such as the architecture of the dungeon maze, or the randomized 'greeked' names of items not yet used within the play-session—is not preserved. Two kinds of knowledge/memory are created in this schism—the knowledge of the

6. In 3D game development, a skybox is a technique used to create the illusion of a large and expansive sky in a 3D game world. The skybox is positioned around the game world so that it appears to be infinitely far away, giving the illusion of a vast and open sky.

individual player character and a history that spans across play-sessions, something institutional, encyclopedic, but still bounded by the collected experiences of the player.

2.5 Caverns and Shadows

Hans Blumenberg was a German philosopher who explored the role of the cave in human history and philosophical thought. In his work *Höhlenausgänge* (Cave Exits), he argues that caves provided shelter and served as sites for religious and spiritual rituals. They also allowed humans to contemplate their place in the world free from the demands of the outside world.

Blumenberg saw Plato's allegory of the cave as a powerful metaphor for the way humans come to understand reality, but *Höhlenausgänge* inverts the platonic story. In the Platonic cave allegory, prisoners occupying fixed positions in a cave perceive shadows on a wall as the entirety of reality, without ever understanding that the shadows are cast by three dimensional figures beyond the scope of their vision. But the cave in Blumenberg's retelling, is a place where symbols are not merely degraded versions of a hidden reality, but a respite from that reality. Blumenberg's cave is a space where humans can engage in contemplation and reflection, producing an archetype that he calls the "non-hero". Rautzenberg provides us the following translation from *Höhlenausgänge*:

> Culture is and always will be a conspiracy against the exclusive standardization of humanity through the example of the strongest, the most useful and efficient members of society—albeit knowing that without them, nothing would work [...]

Blumenberg's cave provides some respite from survival of the fittest, a place where physically weaker humans can hone other talents:

> Those who are excluded from the hunt become dreamers, storytellers, tricksters, imagemakers, fools, who provide enrichment and entertainment during times between hunting sessions ... Fiction and compensation originate from the same source.

While I am fairly uneasy with sorting people into separate classes of workers and dreamers (even in some allegorical past) I am fascinated by the imaginative power of the cave. There is a strong but possibly under-researched relationship between the subcultures of the 1960's and 1970's, cave exploration, and fantasy media. Both of my parents were also spelunkers—hangers-on of the Texas Speleological Society in the 1960's (local chapters of the Speleological Society are known as *Grottos*). My parents' involvement with the Texas Grotto during those years resulted in a font of stories of exploration and adventure starring a cast of hippy scientists, artists and recreational drug users in caves across the US and Mexico. 1960's-western-youth-culture's preoccupations with pastoralism and pre-industrial life is not something I have personally researched. I think, however, that there is a strong and self-evident connection between that questioning of modernity and a period fascination with fantasy media like the books of J.R.R. Tolkien, who positioned himself in many ways as opposed to modernism (Stuart 175). The cave is a place outside of time where dreams can occur, but it's also a place inhabited by the troglodyte, the cave-dweller, like Tolkien's character Gollum– a hobbit-like creature who devolved as a result of his long-term possession of a cursed ring of power. One can stay inside the cave too long.

Rosalind Williams writes in *Notes on the Underground*:

> If we imagine going underground, we not only imagine an environment where organic nature is largely absent; we also retrace a journey that is one of the most enduring and powerful cultural traditions of humankind, a metaphorical journey of discovery through descent below the surface. The primary documents for this study will be nineteenth-century fictional narratives that imagine human life in subterranean space. Before looking at these narratives, though, we need to look at the cultural tradition from which they emerge. Long before Virgil's Aeneas was guided by a Sibyl to the infernal regions through a cave on the leaden Lake Avernus, long before stories of Proserpine's abduction to the underworld by Pluto or of Orpheus' descent to the Stygian realm to bring back Eurydice, and long before recorded history, when the earliest humans drew the bison and bears they hunted on

> the walls and ceilings of caves, they must have told stories about the dark underworld lying even deeper within the earth. Even in environments that lack caves-the Kalahari Desert, and the flat open landscapes of Siberia and Central Asia-the preliterate inhabitants assumed a vertical cosmos: sky, earth, and underworld. The underworld might be a region of water, or fire, or a counterheaven (suggested by the way the sun and stars dip below the horizon), but in any case nature was assumed to be as deep as it was high, its major axis vertical. In this richly symbolic universe of the past, vertical movement was far more significant than movement in the horizontal axis. Narratives about journeys to the world below were inherently sacred. (Williams 2008, 7)

After *Dungeon of Doom*, the next roguelike game I was exposed to was *Moria* (1983) by Robert Koeneke (1957-2022). In the progression of Roguelike games, *Moria* was the first to feature mazes that extended beyond the edges of a single screen (as *Adventure* had). Like other early videogame dungeons, *Moria's* subterranean architecture serves no purpose but to obstruct, detour and torture. The creatures that do seem to dwell there seem to wait their whole lives for a trespasser to attack.

The Grey Mushroom patch:

At least 2 of these creatures have been killed by contributors to your monster memory. It is normally found at depths of 50 feet, and moves at normal speed, but does not deign to chase intruders. A kill of this creature is worth 0.50 points for a 2nd level character. Nothing is known about its attack.

Mac UMoria 5.5.2 (Koeneke-Wilson 1987)

The videogame dungeon is often reflected in a primitive epistemology of known and unknown spaces and items, light and shadow. The mazes of *Moria* can't be learned, as they are reconfigured in each new play session, maps wiped clean, knowledge of magic items forgotten. Koeneke was both a computer scientist and a spelunker—his experiences as a real-life cave explorer informed how darkness was represented in the game. *Moria* was the first Roguelike to employ line-of-sight mechanics that modeled darkness and occlusion, creating the feeling of rounding-a-corner to be confronted with the unknown that one might experience in a network of caves. *Colossal Cave Adventure*, the seminal 1975 text-based computer game, was also created by a cave explorer—William Crowther (Crowther's game is cited by Toy and Wichman as an inspiration for *Rogue*, although the games are very different).

2.6 The Grail

Games within the Dungeon Mode often feature a quest as primary motivation for play, in harmony with the fantasy media they inherit from. Intentionally or unintentionally, meaning accompanies the quest item or act chosen for a game backdrop. Along with that meaning is a certain amount of affect, as a player brings their own context into the stated quest.

Modern videogames have their roots in a few core structures, many of which originate from tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs). The thematic elements of a dungeon crawl and the dice-based mechanics of simulated combat, central to many Dungeon Mode games, trace their lineage back to TTRPGs like Dungeons & Dragons. As Espen Aarseth, a noted game scholar, points out, digitizing these role-playing mechanics introduces challenges to player motivation. Quests, which mimic elements of narrative, are introduced to boost player motivation, mitigating the issues arising from the absence of direct referee-player interaction (Aarseth 2005, 503).

Michael Rideout, winner of 'the Chalice of Light'. (Grundhauser 2016)

The *Swordquest* series of Atari 2600 games was part of a larger promotional contest called the "Swordquest Challenge." Each game was centered on a different element ("Fireworld", "Earthworld", "Waterworld", and "Airworld"), and players embodied a warrior on a mission to overcome various challenges and puzzles to win the ultimate prize—a real-life, solid-gold Sword. The series was marketed as featuring a grand prize pool of over $150,000 in cash and gold objects, crafted by the renowned commemorative coin manufacturer, The Franklin Mint. Despite heavy advertising in Atari's publications, the fourth game, Airworld, was never officially released due to Atari's financial struggles

in 1983 and 1984. Consequently, the promotion was discontinued and the remaining prizes were never awarded. They were likely returned to The Franklin Mint and melted down (Grundhauser 2016). [7]

While playing *Swordquest* as a child, I don't remember being joyfully enticed by a possible prize, but there was some sort of gravity added by it to the act of play. The possibility of winning gold somehow made playing the game a kind of child's pantomime version of work.[8] Reaching the prize would link it to the real world in a way that I could only imagine as a sort of eschaton where neither the game world nor the world of my life would need to continue. I imagined here the same sort of abrupt fantasy ending in which Arthur is taken to Avalon or Frodo to Valinor. I could also imagine the inverse—to grasp the prize might be to suffocate under the weight of the dungeon. To dematerialize or to become immeasurably heavy. To reach the dungeon's goal would mean to gain total knowledge of it—to ascend from being a microbe in its gut to becoming its new architect, to exit Plato's cave, blinded by the sun.

While *Moria* ends with a confrontation with the Balrog (a monster at the lower depths of Tolkien's mines of Moria), most classic roguelikes have a magic object as their primary goal.[9] Many roguelike games, such as the influential *Nethack* and the streamlined modern roguelike *Brogue* have included 'The Amulet of Yendor' as their ultimate prize, adopted from Toy and Wichman's *Rogue*. Be it treasure or confrontation with power, the quest object of roguelike games lies at the bottom of the dungeon. In many roguelikes, the player must then ascend back through the levels with their prize to win the game. If we imagine a journey to the bottom of a Dungeon as a trip into the past, the quest object serves as a point of origin, a final piece of knowledge, or a talisman of the power that built the dungeon. The Orb, the Sword of Fargoal, the Amulet of Yendor, are all also keys to escape the dungeon. In *Moria*

7. In 2022 a recreated version of the final game was produced by developer Digital Eclipse for an Atari retrospective collection called *Atari 50*.

8. Looking back at that experience I wonder about the contested border between play and work, especially in light of games like *Roblox*– a multiuser game construction set tied to a real world economy by way of an in-game marketplace. *Roblox* is a powerful creative tool, but it is targeted specifically at, and depends on, the labor of children.

9. *Angband*, another influential roguelike descended from Moria, also culminates with a battle rather than the acquisition of an artifact- this time with Tolkien's evil god Morgoth.

and *Angband* and many of their descendents, the player is free to exit the dungeon to a "town" level where supplies can be purchased. The goal of those games is to attack and unseat some great power, not simply to escape.

In fantasy literature there are countless examples of quests for magic objects. I am most interested in the object as a talisman and a symbol of power, and what the story implies about power and hierarchy. In Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* and other retellings of the Arthurian myths, the sword *Excalibur* is a symbol of the divine right of kings– invincible in battle (when used justly). Wounded in battle, King Arthur returns the sword to the Lady of the Lake, with the decree that it would reveal itself again to another divinely ordained king of Britain in the future.

Libuše (The Prophetess) (Vitezlav Karel Masek, 1893)

The Golden Cradle, an emblem of divine knowledge and prophecy, figures prominently in the mythologies of several Eurasian cultures. In Bohemian (and later Czech) mythology, the Golden Cradle was used by the prophetess and princess Libuše, who was said to have predicted the founding of Prague and the discovery of silver in the northern Ore Mountains (which led to innovations in mining, metallurgy and the minting of coinage). The cradle symbolized the legitimacy of the ruling dynasty that she would found with her husband Přemysl. Unlike Excalibur, it is not a weapon and does not confer power in battle. Instead, it represents the power of prophecy and divine knowledge. On suffering

a vision of a future filled with ruin and bloodshed because Libuše had surrendered rule to a man, she sank the cradle of her firstborn to the depths of the Vltava river, prophesying that it would return when a just ruler of the Czech people was born. Both of these myths have been used to evoke a shared national identity and a mythological background to accept a pre-ordained ruler.

The myth of Libuše was one of the many folk tales assembled into the book *Staré pověsti české* (Ancient Bohemian Tales) by Alois Jirásek. It was assembled as part of a post-Austro-Hungarian Empire Czech nation building project, which involved codifying a literary written language from spoken Bohemian and Old Czech orthography, as well as cementing pre and post Christian myths that could form the foundation for a national identity[10]. Jirásek's Libuše is just one of many variations, and her cradle of power is not a fixture in all of those retellings, but one of many insertions in a patchwork assemblage. The thematic use of the Golden Cradle myth in the context of the Czech legend of Libuše resonates with similar narratives found elsewhere. In Crimea, the Golden Cradle Myths have evolved in modern times, incorporating Soviet and Nazi searches for mystical objects and even engaging world leaders like Stalin, Hitler, and Putin. These legends have been further embellished by popular media, claiming the cradle holds a key to humanity's origins or a portal to other worlds. Notably, the Golden Cradle's latest appearance in popular culture involved a symbolic gift to Vladimir Putin, hinting at its continuing role in symbolizing power and sovereignty over Crimea. This living myth, deeply intertwined with regional and global history, has spurred a tourist industry of would-be treasure hunters, searching the mountain caves of the Crimean region for the imagined artifact (Zherdieva 2017).

10. The branch of my family that I have had the most personal interaction with were Czech immigrants to Texas, farmers who left Moravia during the wars of revolution that led to the formation of the Czechoslovak state. My family spoke a dialect of Moravian "Texas Czech" that prefigured the codification of the Czech language exemplified by Jirásek's book, but which they spoke as a primary language, along with other Texas Moravians, until my grandmother's generation.

In a moment that stirred outrage among ethnic Tatars, Russian President Vladimir Putin is presented with the sacramental object "Altyn Beshik" - a golden cradle, which is a symbol for the Crimean Tatars. (Vannek 2015)

These myths are frequently adapted and rewritten to reflect changing identities and power dynamics. In Crimea, variants of the Golden Cradle legend emphasize the cradle as a symbol of hope and continuity for various ethnic groups, and their connection and prophesied return to a homeland, each adapting the myth to affirm their historical presence and rights in the region (Zherdieva 2017). Jirásek, in assembling the *Staré pověsti české* (Ancient Bohemian Tales), might have been influenced by a similar motive—to use the cradle as a nationalistic symbol, embodying the foundational myths of a nascent Czech identity. The Libuše myths themselves have gone through as many permutations and allegorical reversals of meaning as the pan-Eurasian tales of the Golden Cradle have. In Alfred Thomas's *Prague Palimpsest: Writing, Memory, and the City*, the Libuše myths are revealed as a dynamic tapestry of cultural memory that has been repeatedly reimagined to serve the shifting ideological needs of Prague's rulers and residents through the ages (Thomas 2010). Thomas highlights the myth's transformation from a representation of matriarchal power and prophecy to a tool for legitimizing patriarchal sovereignty, reflecting broader societal changes

in perceptions of gender, power, and nationalism. The myth's various retellings, from its earliest iterations to its reappropriation in nationalist narratives and feminist movements, underscore the complexities of historical memory and the role of myth in shaping collective identity. This evolution, Thomas argues, is not just a reflection of the past but a continuous negotiation with the present, demonstrating how cultural myths like that of Libuše serve as palimpsests—layers of memory and meaning that are written, overwritten, and read anew in the light of contemporary values and understandings.

2.7 Fantasy

Named after the underground dwarven ruins of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* books, *Moria, (*and its successor *Angband*) adopted nearly all of their fantasy elements directly from Tolkien. Tolkien's Hobbit books have had an oversized influence on other fantasy media.

That influence increased through the 1960's and 1970's, and became a constant presence in the development of tabletop gaming and then digital games, movies, and toys. In a passage of her book *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature,* Helen Young notes:

> The influence of Tolkien's writing, particularly The Lord of the Rings, on Fantasy role-playing games is likewise immense. Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson's 1974 Dungeons & Dragons imitated Tolkien's work so closely that it infringed copyright and elements had to be changed for later editions under threat of legal action. (Young 2015, 18)

There is a bottomless well of derivative knock-offs and uncritical lookalikes of Tolkien's fantasy works. As a child, my mother read *The Hobbit* aloud to me, despite her acute dyslexia.[11] As a result, the trappings of Tolkien's fantasy world seemed part of the unquestioned foundation of imaginative play to me when I was a child.

Dr. Rosemary Jackson's book *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* explores the idea that fantasy is not just a genre of literature, but

11. "I may have skipped over some dwarf songs," my mother has admitted of her otherwise heroic feat.

a distinct literary "mode" that serves a particular cultural function. According to Jackson, a literary mode is a way of organizing cultural and imaginative practices that shapes the way we think about and understand the world.[12]

In conceptualizing my game 'modes' for this study, I wanted to make a similar proposition to Dr Jackson's—that, like fantasy literature, videogames can be a subversive space that challenges dominant cultural assumptions and values. However, games can (and do) also conform to the status quo—reinforcing dominant values and assumptions in the immutable rules of a game world or backgrounding them in aesthetic and narrative cues. The performance of games, their mechanics, the interactions of their communities, embedded story elements like quests, character representations, and player contexts, all brew a complex soup where meaning is encoded and decoded.

Fantasy as a literary mode is essentially bottomless, and each work of fantasy is conditioned by the values and intentions of their authors. Yet, as scholars like Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco have demonstrated, the decoding process is essentially open. Our position as readers, just as our position as players, creates something new when we encounter a fantasy work, situated somewhere between the author's situation and intent and our own. The fantasy of the Dungeon Mode is a specific subset of Fantasy. Heavily influenced (or burdened) by Tolkien, it brings us into an encounter with Tolkien's specific situation and his ideals.

Jackson (using terminology established by philologist and literary critic Tzvetan Todorov) places the fantasy works of Tolkien and his contemporary C.S. Lewis as "marvelous" or "faery" narratives. Jackson finds these works particularly repressed and filled with nostalgia and "religious longing"(Jackson 2008, 5):

> The current popularity of J.R.R.Tolkien's The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings indicates the strength of a romance tradition supporting a ruling ideology. Tolkien is nostalgic for a pre-Industrial, indeed a pre-Norman Conquest, feudal order. He makes a naive equation of industry with evil, referring with disgust to the 'materialism of a Robot Age'

12. Jackson's usage of the word mode compliments my usage, but is not its source. She stresses that fantasy as a mode is defined in its relation to the real, whereas genre is a schema limited to specific themes, plot structures, and conventions.

> and looking backwards to a medieval paradise, his secondary worlds providing coherence and unity. An Oxford professor of philology, Tolkien allies morality and aesthetics: virtue lies with a beautiful Elvish Speech, evil with an ugly Black Speech. [...] For Tolkien, the only way is backwards: the chauvinistic, totalitarian effects of his vision are conveniently removed from present material conditions, by providing an 'escape' from them. He is repelled (like [Lewis] Carroll) by the physical and material. (Jackson 2008, 91)

Contemporary American fantasy media—Movies, television, games, often ape Tolkien directly rather than the Norse myths that his books drew inspiration from.[13] This might serve as a starting point for understanding the preponderance of English accents in fantasy media like television, film and games. Even in worlds completely secondary to our own, the English accent somehow means fantasy for Americans. Popular explanations for this tend to suggest that the English accent seems exotic yet accessible to Americans (Wheeler), that it lends an air of sophistication to narratives that might otherwise be considered low-brow or juvenile. It may be a foregone conclusion that American Fantasy media set in a Medieval feudal society might be filled with English accents, but even representations of the Roman Empire (Such as HBO's series *Rome*) are filled with English accents.[14] Englishness has somehow become a proxy for some sort of imagined classical past.

Like many European-Americans, I find it difficult to trace my ancestry back much further than a handful of immigrant passages from Europe. That transition has symbolically become a horizon between a modern conception of time and some fantasy pre-history filled with knights and basilisks.

Fantasy media is based on the manipulation of myths. It quietly alters some unspoken fairy tale to produce a substitute for concrete material origins for who European Americans really are, how they got

13. Much can be said about the different approaches that Tolkien and Richard Wagner took to adapting these myths, but I'll leave this to more qualified scholars.

14. Since much contemporary prestige television has worked to give an air of class to violent and explicit genre fiction that might otherwise be considered exploitation media, *Rome* may be borrowing heavily from the BBC's series *I, Claudius*—hence the presumed acceptability of English-accented Romans, even when produced by macho American filmmaker John Milius.

here, and by what means they inherited the positions they now hold. Imperial feudalism and a preoccupation with kings and hierarchies are prominently embedded in fantasy worldbuilding. [15] They have, as a result, become an assumed backdrop to the Dungeon Mode of games. A journey to the depths of a dungeon can be imagined as a transgression either against, or at the behest of a king. Such a journey is an invasion of a dark and inhospitable past with the intention to righteously loot treasure and learn secrets. In chapter four, I explore how I have applied the Dungeon Mode to an exploration of my own family history

The Tombs of Atuan by Ursula K. Le Guin (the second book in her fantasy series *Earthsea*) operates well within the boundaries of Jackson's "marvelous" subcategory of fantasy, but with a substantially different perspective and style than Tolkien. The book follows a young girl, Tenar, who is taken from her family and raised to become the high priestess of the eponymous tombs—a labyrinthine network of tunnels and chambers, filled with darkness and shadow, home to the "Nameless Ones".

Darkness is a constant presence in the *Tombs of Atuan*. The tunnels and chambers are poorly lit, and Tenar spends much of her time in the dark. The darkness is both a source of fear and a source of power. The Nameless Ones are able to move through the darkness with ease and can use it to hide from their enemies. Tenar, as the high priestess, is also able to use the darkness to her advantage. She is trained to move through the Tombs with confidence, and she is able to use the shadows to hide and observe her surroundings. The darkness in the Tombs is not just a physical presence but also a metaphor for the unknown and the unknowable. Tenar's entire life is shrouded in darkness, both literal and metaphorical. Tenar is exalted and idolized, but knows nothing of life outside the tombs and its surrounding citadel. While she has some power as a priestess, she is a slave to the religious order that forced her title upon her.

The *Earthsea* books inhabit the same "Marvelous" subgenre of Jack-

15. Zach Blas is an artist whose work often explores the intersections of technology, power, and the body. In his piece "Metric Mysticism," Blas critiques the technology company Palantir (named after an all-seeing magical crystal ball from Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*) and its role in creating surveillance technologies for government agencies. Blas shows how data is recast as a transcendental truth accessed by corporate and state power by evoking fantasy names and tropes (*Zach Blas Performance Lecture*).

son's Fantasy mode—they take place in a "second" world, with feudal nations in conflict, ruled by kings, filled with magic and supernatural beings like dragons. They do provide a texture of internal candor and characterizations that feel more visceral and immediate than Tolkien's. I found *Tombs of Atuan* interesting because much of the novel was spent in a subterranean labyrinth. I was also especially intrigued by how it backgrounded the hero of the first book and told the story through the eyes of Tenar, who moves through the dungeons with assured ease while the primary hero of the series, the wizard Ged, lies trapped within it, wholly at her mercy. *Tombs of Atuan* is so strikingly similar to Roguelike games (especially in its narrative usage of hunger and darkness) that it was the topic of a talk at the 2021 Roguelike Celebration conference (*Noah Swartz - The Tombs of Atuan*). I am struck by the perspective of Tenar, a child who has mastered her corner of the dark but is helpless outside it. It's an unusual position for a child—one that harmonizes neatly with my childhood experiences of digital games.[16] It's curious that features of the Dungeon Mode, copied whole cloth from Tolkien, find instead a closer relative in *Tombs of Atuan*, a later work that contrasts texturally so much with Tolkien, while dealing with the same genre conventions. I think this is a subtle effect of taking an adventure story in which danger is constantly signposted but safety is assured and turning it into a game performance that almost always ends in failure and death of the player. In the case of games with permadeath as a feature, this carries some weight as well. We can say as a result of this dramatic shift in affect from these same-genre works that, while a dungeon videogame can be played in the Dungeon Mode, *The Lord of the Rings* would be very difficult to *read* in the Dungeon Mode.

2.8 Disorientation and Darkness

Phenomenology, as defined by the Moravian philosopher Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and others, is the study of appearances or sense impressions– "the experience of experience." Humans seem to be oriented certain ways towards some objects (expressing awe

16. John Williams Gardner's novel *Grendel*, a retelling of the epic poem *Beowulf* from the perspective of its eponymous monster, is another interesting literary example of a phenomenology of darkness and otherness.

or sublimity towards a mountain or storm for example, or toward a tool). In Husserl's view, all consciousness is intentional, meaning that consciousness is always directed towards something. This intentional orientation is fundamental to our experience of the world, and it allows us to make sense of the objects around us. Husserl believes that this intentional orientation is what distinguishes conscious experience from mere sensation or perception (Husserl 1980, 1:64).
For Husserl, disorientation is a state in which the intentional orientation between the subject and the object of consciousness is disrupted or disturbed. This can happen when there is a breakdown in the normal flow of conscious experience, such as when we encounter something that doesn't fit into our existing categories or expectations, or when we experience a strong emotional response that overwhelms our ability to understand or make sense of what is happening.

This might happen, for example, when we encounter a new and unfamiliar situation, or when we are confronted with information that challenges our preconceived ideas and beliefs. On the one hand, it can be a deeply unsettling experience, as we struggle to make sense of things that we previously took for granted. On the other hand, however, it can also be an opportunity for growth and discovery, as we are forced to confront our assumptions and rethink our understanding of the world.

The Dungeon Mode of gaming includes the domestic spaces in which the games are played, extending outside of the frame of the screen to include the viewer. Disorientation occurs when the normal flow of conscious experience is disrupted, leading to a breakdown in understanding. The Dungeon Mode is a perpetual state of disorientation, always seemingly resolving before it is once again destabilized. Having this space of disorientation linked to a quotidian space is somewhat like discovering a new and unfamiliar door in a home. Entering the dark passage beyond it and looking back can create a sense of *Jamais Vu*.

Queer Phenomenology is an interdisciplinary look at the phenomena of disorientation and how it is semantically and experientially linked to otherness and queer and minoritized identities (Ahmed 2006). Ahmed's work has been referenced in games studies texts before (Ruberg 2020), and her painstaking inventory of perspectives in the domestic space have been valuable to my personal conception of the Dungeon Mode. Ahmed critiques Husserl's phenomenology as assuming a heterosexual cis-male subject that is situated in a world that is already pre-given

and fixed. In her view, it is a phenomenology that assumes an able (male, white) body, privileges vision, the availability of its objects, and disappears history and materiality.

> I have noted that phenomenology is full of moments of disorientation. And yet, such moments are often moments that "point" toward becoming orientated. As noted earlier, Merleau-Ponty, following Husserl, suggests that the "I can" proceeds from overcoming disorientation, from reorienting the body so that the line of the body follows the vertical and horizontal axes. Such a body is 'one that is upright, straight, and in line. The straight body is not simply in a "neutral" position: or if it is the neutral position, then this alignment is only an effect of the repetition of past gestures, which give the body its contours and the "impression" of its skin. In a way, the utterance "I can" points to the future only insofar as it inherits the past, as the accumulation of what the body has already done, as well as what is "behind" the body, the conditions of its arrival. The body emerges from this history of doing, which is also a history of not doing, of paths not taken, which also involves the loss, impossible to know or even to register, of what might have followed from such paths. As such, the body is directed as a condition of its arrival, as a direction that gives the body its line. And yet we can still ask, what happens if the orientation of the body is not restored? What happens when disorientation cannot simply be overcome by the "force" of the vertical? What do we do, if disorientation itself becomes worldly or becomes what is given? (Ahmed, 2006, p. 84)

Disorientation is not experienced in a universal way– some bodies are given affordances to spaces that others are not, even in darkness, even in a place where one does not know the language. What does it mean to enter a space where a mental model of a new 'self' must be constructed in concert with a model of a new space? It would be a mistake to frame this experience as being separate from the orientation and body of the player who reaches into this new and unfamiliar space, like a child reaching into a Halloween-box to imagine the noodles and

peeled grapes they touch are eyes and worms. Through imaginative play we do not escape ourselves and our situations, but we may be several steps removed from simply being in a dark room in a familiar home. For many, childhood can be its own form of disorientation, a game, even one that intermittently and cruelly tips itself back over into incomprehensibility, is still a solvable puzzle.

Disorientation in roguelike games takes on specific forms—while the dungeon space is understood as a map being progressively drawn out as the player character traverses it, the function of death in the game means that in each playthrough the dungeon has rearranged itself, and must be relearned. Drug effects are playfully included in the mechanics of many roguelikes, from *Angband* to the modern *Brogue*—a sampled potion may be a potion of hallucination that throws the symbol-set of the game into upheaval, each glyph representing a monster or item changes each turn, representing things the player may not have ever encountered. A rat might turn into a dragon for a moment, making strategizing difficult. A toad monster in *Brogue* induces these effects as an attack. The contemporary 3D maze exploration game *Catacombs of Solaris* by Ian MacLarty does away with all trappings of game mechanics (such as enemies or goals) and instead periodically paints the plane of the game screen back to the surfaces of the 3d objects that project upon it. This creates a queasy, mind-bending, psychedelic effect that reminds the player that even a three-dimensional game is a collapsed two-dimensional illusion when played on a single screen. The constant swapping of what-projects with what-is-projected upon is so disorienting that simply stumbling through an empty maze– or rather a maze that is filled with itself—is more than a player can comfortably handle.

The gulf between *Rogue* and *Catacombs of Solaris* is 40 years wide and filled with thousands (if not uncountable) "dungeon" games that experiment with perspective and mechanics in as many different ways. What we see more often that not across them is an attempt to rationalize a space that defies and disorients the player. Players attempt to traverse, map, catalog, clear and loot a folded, dark, reconfiguring space that interferes with their efforts. A sort of cellular logic of active learning enacted by the player is counteracted by an entropic noisy active forgetting enacted by the dungeon.

2.9 Hunger

Roguelikes, starting with the 1985 update (version 1.0.3) of the game *Hack* (Craddock 123), often include hunger as a game mechanic. Previously, videogames had often used a health meter—reduced by damage from enemies and restored by collecting food items. Roguelikes like *Hack* and it's famous successor *Nethack*, used hunger as a separate quantity from health, one that ticked down with time and could be held at bay by collecting food. *Nethack* innovated on this mechanic by causing the rate of hunger to increase as a character becomes more powerful, balancing difficulty and strength. *Dungeon of Doom* was the first game I had played in which a small thermometer-style bar measured how close to starving the player character was. Since escape in the game was impossible until the goal was reached, scattered bundles of food had to be found to survive. Food scarcity became a sort of clock—the player had to balance the advantages of carefully combing each level for useful items against the fixed amount of food (and its increasing scarcity at lower levels).

Dr. Rosalind Williams' book *Notes on the Underground: An Essay on Technology, Society, and the Imagination* explores the relationship between technology and society, and how the imagination shapes our understanding of both. In her text, Williams argues that hunger, both physical and metaphorical, is a key theme that runs through many literary works that explore the idea of an underground world:

> Subterranean surroundings, whether real or imaginary, furnish a model of an artificial environment from which nature has been effectively banished. Human beings who live underground must use mechanical devices to provide the necessities of life: food, light, even air. Nature provides only space. The underworld setting therefore takes to an extreme the displacement of the natural environment by a technological one. It hypothesizes human life in a manufactured world. What would human personality and society look like then? (Williams 2008, 5)

For Williams, underground worlds, which were a preoccupation of early fantastic literature, could be seen as a vision of a technological

future in which humanity is encapsulated and separated from the natural world. Williams sees the future in popular conceptions of subterranean worlds, whereas I see an equally inhospitable past.

Hunger is not necessarily the primary motivation of games played in the Dungeon Mode, but rather a timer that gives urgency to the player's quest. Thorough sweeps of dungeon levels are measured against a slowly dwindling hunger meter that presses the player on. Scarcity defines the dungeon though, it is completely separate from natural resources, unlike games of the *Frontier Mode*, which often allow for hunting or even farming. Hunger modulates the way that a player acts in a dungeon, encouraging risk-taking, increasing the stakes of play-choices. A dungeon raider is a desperate armed scavenger with a Sword of Damocles dangling overhead. To extrapolate this play mechanic to our wider lens of the Dungeon Mode (which overlays a symbology of exploring the past over the rhythms of dungeon exploration)—hunger is a privation that changes how we access and engage with the past. For me, the ticking clock of play-hunger is simply an attention to time itself, the overwhelming feeling, when surveying hundreds of lives collapsed into points on a map, that my own life is rushing past, and that I will never realistically reach any understanding of history and my own relationship to it.

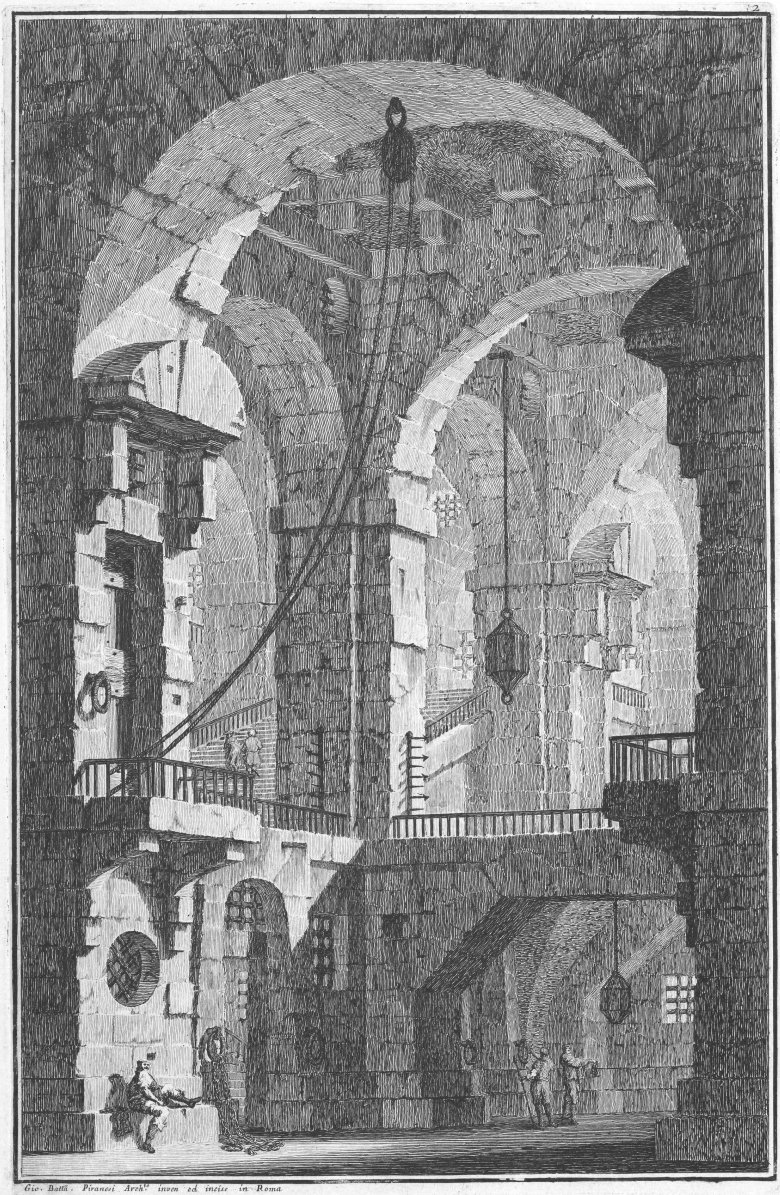
2.10 The Visionary Architecture of the Dungeon

Visionary Architecture is architectural imagining, a proposition of place, often positioned as futuristic or utopian. Some famous examples of these sorts of visionary projects are Étienne-Louis Boullée's *Cenotaph to Newton*, a proposed 500-foot concrete spherical planetarium, and the work of Brodsky & Utkin, Soviet era Russian architects who produced a series of hand-drawn, ink-on-paper architectural fantasies featuring whimsical and often absurd elements, such as a palace that sits atop a giant human hand or a lighthouse that is perched on the back of a giant fish. In chapter two of this text, "The Arcology Mode", I'll explore a few examples of modernist visionary architecture that has shaped the popular conception of the future, binding visionary architecture

science fiction tropes, utopianism and often authoritarianism. Numerous visionary architectural projects compare to videogames in illuminating ways, such as the unusual work of Arakawa and Gins, who proposed baffling, inaccessible obstacle-course-like structures that they suggested would extend the lives of their inhabitants. For our model of the Dungeon Mode of games however, the work of Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778) seems especially relevant.

Piranesi was an Italian artist and architect who is known for his series of etchings of Roman ruins, and for a series of visionary architectural etchings called *Carceri d'Invenzione* (Imaginary Prisons). These etchings depict vast, labyrinthine structures with towering, intricate columns, staircases, and bridges. The prisons are often devoid of human figures, giving them a sense of eerie emptiness and abandonment. The etchings have been interpreted in many different ways, with some seeing them as a commentary on the social and political systems of Piranesi's time, while others view them as purely imaginative works of art. Aldous Huxley felt their pointlessness brought them close to abstraction, and that they represented some internal psychological state (Roncato 2006, 7). Piranesi's structures are a hostile architecture that exist to strike-with-awe, entrap, torture, and disappear their tiny inhabitants, just as a videogame dungeon might. In addition to being a tomb, vault, or fortress, we imagine the dungeon as a carceral space, a place of punishment and confinement, a prison. When we think of *visionary prison architecture* we think of an architecture of both containment and exposure—of the Panopticon.[17] But the visionary architecture of the dungeon is an architecture of losing, of darkness, of occlusion, it is the architecture of the oubliette, of the pit. A dungeon, completed by some great power, has fallen to ruin and been forgotten. Those who live within it are subterranean, animalistic, practitioners of strange doctrines. Cave-dwelling albinos who work, insect-like towards meaningless goals, hoarding wealth that can have no value, for it is never spent.

17. The term "panopticon" was first introduced by the English philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham in the late 18th century. The panopticon was originally conceived as a type of prison design in which a central watchtower could observe all of the prisoners in their cells, without the prisoners being able to see the observer. Bentham saw the panopticon as a way to create a more efficient and cost-effective prison system, as well as a means of controlling and reforming prisoners.



Gio. Batta. Piranesi Archto. inven ed incise in Roma.

Carcere oscura con Antenna pel suplizio de malfatori. Sonvi da lungi le Scale, che conducono al piano e vi si vedono pure all' intorno altre chiuse carceri.

Opposite page: Dark prison with a courtyard for the punishment of criminals... (Carcere oscura con Antenna pel suplizio dè malfatori...), from "Prima Parte di Architettura, e Prospettive", Giambattista Piranesi, Holdings of the Metropolitan Museum of Art

It may be hard for some to imagine a dungeon as a visionary architectural project. In fantasy literature, dungeons are often ancient ruins rather than futuristic spaces, and why should an architect want to invent an inhospitable, ruined past in any detail beyond the facade of a movie set? Even in asking this question we have linked the dungeon to the past—and as a result we have spatialized time—to descend into the dungeon is to descend into the past (with unsure footing). Stratas of mined time filled with fossilized records present themselves to us as they might to an archaeologist. This is the domain of videogames within the Dungeon Mode.

Manfredo Tafuri (1935-1994) was an Italian architect and architectural historian known for his critical analysis of architecture and its role in society. As a Marxist, Tafuri emphasized the importance of understanding the historical and social context of architecture in his writings, and he often focused on the relationship between architecture and power. Tafuri was interested in the ways in which architecture can serve as a means of social control and the ways in which it can be used to reflect and reinforce dominant ideologies. I find Tafuri to be a challenging writer, but with some careful readings he offers a lens on architectural avant gardes and visionary architectural projects—which have also become a preoccupation of my model of game modes.

Piranesi was among the architects and artists that Tafuri wrote about. The neo-classical architectural forms of Piranesi's dungeons suggest to Tafuri, "that this universe is both that of republican justice and that of imperial cruelty" (Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* 49). In my view, their romanesque arches and imposing-but-pointlessly-intersecting facades suggest some infinitely vast storage space of ancient architectural shapes left to crumble in the dark, waiting for the coronation of some new emperor cruel enough to unleash them on the world once again. Piranesi is discussed at length in games studies writing and may be the first to spring to mind when discussing videogames and visionary architecture in the same breath. Ario Barzan, writing for *Killscreen*, says of *Carceri d'invenzione*:

> [...] Piranesi's prisons, crudely masoned, fragmented, providing no comforts, and spotted by minor, shaded figures—dig at a deeper notion. They confront us with a worldview that disassembles the European Renaissance's anthropocentrism,

> exemplified in Perugino's painting, "Delivery of the Keys," whose symmetries and centralized perspective assure us of a fundamental, logical order in which humans play a part. [18] Conversely, to look at these prisons and their inhabitants is to sense that this world's forces are guided by the architecture and its mechanisms, rather than by the people who've been reduced to objects themselves. (Barzan 2015, 4)

Dungeon Mode videogames, while inheriting the trappings of marvelous fantasy literature, unbalance the optimistic proposition of their source material—that heroes, representing an underlying order and goodness in the universe, will prevail. To finish the proposed quest of a game within the Dungeon Mode is a near impossibility. In most dungeon mode games the developer is not the god or king that a hero quests on behalf of, they are a demiurge, a flawed architect that delights in the hero's torture.[19] In this architectural pessimism we can see a counterpoint to a utopia different from the one proposed by modernism—a medieval fantasy utopia that never existed but reifies itself over and over in popular culture. One of Tafuri's critiques of Utopian currents in modernist architectural avant-gardes was that they were motivated by fear, hoping that rationality could create a stable future in which the present is projected, delivered from risk (Tafuri 1976, 52). The dungeon is the mine, prison and crypt dug in order to produce the regressive utopia of the righteous fantasy empire. A utopia where risk is mythopoetic rather than real, and always resolves in favor of cosmically ordained, hereditary power. In the dungeon mode, the exact same fantasy is given counterpoint simply by ending the story in failure. In giving over the narrative control from a storyteller to a system that accepts the proposition of risk and danger at face value, and plays it out as such.

Foucault introduced the concept of *heterotopias* in his 1967 lecture "Of Other Spaces." Heterotopias refer to spaces that are "neither here

18. Perugino was an Italian Renaissance painter who is best known for his frescoes and altarpieces. One of his most famous works is the painting "Delivery of the Keys," which depicts the moment when Jesus gives the keys to the kingdom of heaven to Saint Peter.

19. With the notable exception of the *Ultima* series of games, in which the developer, Richard Garriott, inserted himself as king.

nor there," meaning that they are neither a part of the ordinary world nor a part of the imaginary world.

According to Foucault, heterotopias are "counter-sites," (Foucault 2019, 24) meaning that they exist in opposition to the dominant social order. They are places that function outside of the usual norms and rules of society and allow for alternative possibilities to emerge.

It's not new ground to talk about the general heterotopic nature of videogames (see the excellent "Heterotopias" digital zine (Priestman and Martin)), but returning to this idea is useful when considering the Dungeon Mode. Before I had been introduced to the concept, I had already conceived of my own dungeon game as being carceral, a ritual space, and a space outside of time, all at once—fulfilling criteria for several of the different types of heterotopias that Foucault identifies in his text [20].

Tafuri found Piranesi's *Carceri* etchings to be explicitly heterotopic (Tafuri 1987, 40). Their montage of discontinuous forms extend into infinite space, enveloping the spectator, divorced from meaning or usefulness, a tectonic uplift of jumbled history that smashes utopian dreams into valuelessness, opening an unmendable fissure between signifier and signified.

Analyzing games through the perspective of Dungeon Mode provides insight into the meanings of their interactive architecture and exposes their inherent ethical systems, power hierarchies, and both individual and collective histories. By combining fantasy elements with intricate ethics and power structures, dungeon games open doors for critiquing and reevaluating concepts such as legitimate hereditary rule, patriarchy, and biological essentialism. By reconnecting fantasy games to the societal and cultural context they originate from, and understanding the borrowed fantasy tropes and their inherent, often unquestioned ideas, we enhance the creative potential of our symbolic interactions within these virtual worlds. Specifically, videogame dungeons can serve as influential metaphors for our understanding of power and history, and our relationships to these concepts.

20. See chapter 4: *Grotto*

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