

Penning the Ghosts of Ourselves: An Exploration Into Spectral Play

by
Sebastian Pines

A thesis presented to OCAD University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Interdisciplinary Master's in Art, Media, and Design
Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2021

Copyright Notice

This document is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0).

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

You are free to:

Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format.

Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material.

Under the following conditions:

Attribution — You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.

NonCommercial — You may not use the material for commercial purposes.

Abstract

Penning the Ghosts of Ourselves: An Exploration Into Spectral Play presents my experiments into the creation of spectres through autobiographical game design. This supplemental document explores my interdisciplinary process in game design, creative writing, and book illustration and design which resulted in the physical publication of the solo role-playing game in *Dwelling*. In *Penning the Ghosts of Ourselves*, I present the research, documentation, and reflection on this process of self-interment through autobiography, as it is undertaken through both players of *Dwelling*, and myself as its creator.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my primary advisor Cindy Poremba and secondary advisor Derek Sullivan for their guidance, feedback, and care in helping make this project a reality.

I would like to thank my partner for their unending support through this process of making, shifting lives, and unexpected circumstances.

I would like to thank the cohort of IAMD '21 and the IAMD part-time students for their insight, encouragement, and camaraderie during our final years within the program and for everything that came before that.

Table of Contents

Abstract Acknowledgements	3
Table of Contents	4
List of Figures	5
Setting off into the	7
Unknown The Phantasm of	8
Theory	10
Ghosts of Myself	10
Affective Force and Intangible Emotions	12
Affective Phenomenology of the Dream House	14
How to Summon Spectres: Methods of Approach	17
Writing the Self: Autobiography	17
A Voice to Follow in the Dark: Autobiographical Game Design	17
The Spectral Celluloid Image: Iterative Design	19
A Hall of Mirrors: Reflective Design	19
Research as Relating to the Spectre	21
Reading the Self in Autobiographical Games	21
Embarking on a Lonely Journey into Solitary Role-Playing Games	22
Considerations for Phantom Bleed	24
Summoning the Spectral Game	26
The Book as Artifact	26
Designing Games for Ghosts	29
Early Experimentations with Spectres	29
Field Notes from Seeking out Spectres	31
Found Parts by Taylor Smith	31
Thousand Year Old Vampire by Tim Hutchings	32
Building a Haunted Dwelling	35
Dwelling upon Dwelling	41
Dwelling on the Making	41
Dwelling on the Reception	41
Dwelling on the Final Outcome	42
Works Cited	44

List of Figures

Figure 1	Two page illustration and text spread from <i>Dwelling</i>	27
Figure 2	The Safety Flower safety tool	33
Figure 3	Keyhole safety tool and spread from <i>Dwelling</i>	38

Setting off into the Unknown

My current motivations for *Dwelling* came through my fascination with hauntology, as a lens for media analysis. Reading through Mark Fisher's introductory writings on the subject (2012), I expanded my research base with the analytical writings of Jacques Derrida, Michal Krzykowski, Colin Davis, and Jodey Castricano. This research rounded out my understanding how the spectre manifests in literary, sociological, and psychological texts.

Building upon this research I also sought out the emotive capacity of hauntological works. Spectres present within media have the potential to reach out and make contact with those experiencing it and I wanted to understand the effect of that experience. It is through affect theory that I sought to determine how much force is needed for those spectres to breach a text and make contact with a reader. Incorporating affect theory with specific focuses on affective narratology and empathy driven design in games, I built my theoretical foundation for this work. Connecting affect theory to embodied narratives I sought out the affective potential of phenomenology and the experiences of embodied places. Incorporating the phenomenology of homes and spaces through the *Poetics of Space* by Gaston Bachelard connected both the affective experience of the home and the hauntological potential of the home as it exists within memory and nostalgia.

I began considering my methods in design and how they would apply to this type of project and what creative approaches would be needed to reach my desired outcome. Understanding what was within the realm of my practice as an artist and the approaches needed for this project I formed my methodological approach rooted in autobiography (spanning literary autobiography, critical autobiography, and autobiographical game design), as well as iterative design, and reflective design.

The ambition of my project became an investigation into how role-playing games can be read and analyzed as hauntological forms of media through creating one designed to be experienced as spectral. With a desire to evoke the spectral, I began my experimentation into how to facilitate the creation and summoning of spectres within a role-playing game. My main design and research interests involve how the spectral could manifest in narrative, experience of play, and in the tangible artifacts of a play experience. Employing my research into hauntology and affect theory to guide my experimentations I used my own analysis of my experimentation attempts to inform the iterative process. It's from this motivating force of experimentation and reflection that I formed my research questions to contextualize my design:

How can game design use affect theory to create an introspective emotional experience through play and evoke an embodied experience of memory? How can I incorporate these ideas of fractured selves, the hunting of oneself, into play using affect theory and ways of relating fiction or immersive simulated experiences to emotion and lived experience?

How can the creation of artifacts of play through gameplay become pieces of hauntological media? How can the physical manifestations of play create products of play that are both archival and ephemeral? How can these pieces of recorded play exist as examples a moment unstuck in time, a manifestation of an interrupted future?

What is the hauntological potential of autobiography in the creation of spectral selves through guided writing? Can guiding players into self-reflection and writing about their own experiences help facilitate the kind of writing that can be autobiographical and in turn, become writing of a fractured spectral self?

With these guiding research questions in my mind I began building my creation framework of replicating hauntings and the hauntological experience within solo role-playing games using the informing theory principles of affect and hauntology. This approach to creating role-playing to evoke a hauntological experience during play seeks to engage role-playing games and enter them into the dialogue of what is considered hauntological media. My ambitions with this project are to create a game text and resultant artifacts of game play that contain fragments of a narrative of both designer and player suspended timelessly within them. These suspended writings of the self by both designer and player exist as futureless recreations of the self and in turn take on the role of spectre haunting the game and the remnants of play.

The Phantasm of Theory

Ghosts of Myself

*"In this breathtaking display, ghosts progress rapidly from being one theme amongst others to being the ungrounded grounding of representation and a key to all forms of storytelling."
(Davis 378)*

Using this approach of creating from my personal experiences and drawing on my experiences during the making process it occurred to me that this mode of creation would result in many parts of myself being left within whatever I make. Writing from my own experiences and replicating a narrative from my own history would in turn generate facsimile versions of myself all suspended within the moment they are reliving in my autobiographical writing.

Seeing the spectral potential for these fractured pieces of myself is where I sought out the intersections of hauntology and autobiography, the study of the written spectral self. This connection was succinctly made in Michal Krzykowski's analysis of Derrida's autobiographical writing in his essay "J'Accepte", "One of Derrida's permanent obsessions might be rendered in these terms: my proper language will have never belonged to me. It expropriates me every time I come to life through my writing. I am my own ghost" (40). The concept expanded within "J'Accepte" was ruminating on the hauntological nature of autobiographical writing through analyzing both Derrida's theory of the "spectre" in *The Specter of Marx* and his autobiographical writings. That the self written into being becomes a spectre the moment it is finished being written becoming a version of ourselves with its future interrupted. This interrupted self contains the lifetime of our past but does not continue with our living selves into the future (Krzykowski 39). I found more analysis of Derrida's writing and where the spectre can be found in autobiography in Jodey Castricano's analysis, elaborating:

To begin (writing, living) we must have death. We must have death because it is "only from the other and by death" (xviii) says Derrida that we come into the configuration of "ourselves." To understand this, however, we must "learn to live with ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship" (xvii). (18)

In writing about ourselves we experience these small deaths that help us understand the conceptualization of our "self" as it becomes an "other" when it is

distanced from our internal dialogues and direct experiences. The spectral self is separated from the living self once committed to text and it is after that purposeful death that we can begin to reflect on the life lived of the spectral self and how the living self can incorporate this into its being. Castricano continues making these connections of writing as a death to develop the concept of cryptomimesis—a form of autobiographical writing—that directly evokes the spectral, saying that:

By drawing upon such figures as the crypt, the phantom, and the living-dead, cryptomimesis utilizes and foregrounds the dynamics of haunting and mourning to produce an autobiographical deconstructive writing through the trope of “live burial,” a trope that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes as “a structural name for the Gothic salience of ‘within’” [5]. (8)

Creating this imagery of autobiography as a live burial reinforces the idea that each time you write about yourself you are committing some living part of yourself to the grave through the act of writing. That each act of writing about the self commits that part of you to an archival suspended existence that is denied a future due to its suspended state. We can even see how we must reckon with hauntings when reading texts that we feel connected to; in turn asking “[w]hen texts call to us, what do they say and in whose voice do they speak? What calls to us in secret always takes the form of (a) haunting, especially as it concerns the other “in us” living on – so to speak – as a spectral effect of the text” (Castricano 4). A text that calls to us—that feels close enough to reflect some aspect of ourselves within it—then haunts us as it works its way within through that reflection. That haunting reflection is even possible through the act of retrospection to a self that feels unrecognizable. Enough distance and time between your current self and the written words of a past version of yourself can conjure spectral imaginings that you are reading the words of the ghost of a person you once were. Through those impressions of us left in our writing about how we write ourselves there is always a direct line to that past spectral self, available for a brief haunting of a text and summoned at each moment of being read.

Every snippet of text that contains a remnant of ourselves is a spectre in waiting, a text that haunts itself and will be summoned upon reading. It is this basis of the suspended spectral selves that we create, bury, and entomb in our autobiographical texts. Each piece of text is its own tomb holding a fractioned version of ourselves. Haunted texts rife with spectres also invite us to interact with them, to read and summon the spectres written within them. Castricano speaks on these motivations of spectral texts in that “[w]henever a text “calls” to us, it is for the purpose of (doing) dreamwork with ghosts, phantoms, spectres, revenants: all those whose return prompts us to remember that dreamwork is also memory work which manifests itself in terms of

haunting” (17). *Dwelling* is based on this invitation to do dreamwork with spectres through the prompting of players to recall memories and embed them within the narrative. My embedded spectres in the text call to players to engage in memory work of their own, and in turn create their own spectres that they can revisit when reviewing the resultant changes in the book from play. In the waking dream narrative of *Dwelling* I invite players to join me and my spectres along with their own in a process of collaborative memory work to build our shared story of a haunting. To which the format of role-playing games help facilitate this invitation on behalf of the spectres and myself. The game itself is the time and the place for memory work with spectres and each moment of play is an acceptance of that invitation and to become a collaborator in the daydream of memory work with spectres.

Affective Force and Intangible Emotions

Along with a spectral experience within my game I am also looking to evoke an emotional experience, similarly intangible and personified by in-betweens. When considering how to entangle the emotional with my work I must first understand the place of affect and how I can situate it within my narrative and the consequent experience created by the game.

Affect and the mechanizations of how it is manifested are best described by Melissa Gregg and Gergory J. Seigworth in their introduction to *Affect Theory: A Reader*:

(A)ffect is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves. Affect, at its most anthropomorphic, is the name we give to those forces—visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion—that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world’s apparent intractability. (1)

Gregg and Seigworth continue on to describe the effects of affect in macro and micro scales, and how the forces that enact a sense of resonance of movement within an individual can vary in intensity, showing the variety affect can have on the body and consequently the individual belonging to the experiencing body. These forces acted upon a body can take multiple forms, in emotional response, physiological response, and

psychological response, all in one way or another connected (Gregg & Seigworth 2-3). Taking this basis of affect and the use of forces enacted on a body and the resultant effect of those forces I began analyzing what those forces are and what form they take and how the form can produce varying levels of affect within a player.

The first form is that of affective narratology, the use of narratives and stories as the force acting between bodies, in this case the body of an author and that of their reader. As an introduction to *Affective Narratology*, Patrick Colm Hogan speaks on the place of emotions in a story. Emotions become the motivations for an author to write or for a character within the story to act and drive forward the plot, but also how they can be used as story structures themselves (Hogan 2). Using the correlation between the experience of an emotion and that of narrative structure, one can situate inciting events, outcomes, reactions, and the phenomenological experience of the emotion to the same counterpoints within a narrative structure (Hogan 3).

Using the structure and the paces of emotions as narrative structures, an author can intensify the experience of that emotion for the reader as there is a greater exertion of force between these two bodies based on the author's curated narrative structure and writing. Stories can evoke the more internal workings of emotion within us while engaging with us, and the external physiological experiences a consequent result of the effective force of the story in question (Hogan 4).

Games also utilize this form of affective narratology as they often use narrative as another form of interaction and engagement between player and game. Games are stories but they are also systems, sets of constraints and rules that a player will interact with, be restricted by, and negotiate the boundaries of in their own experience of play. Systems act as another body, outside of the bodies of the creators making the game, that can enact force on a player and guide and motivate their movements and the resultant experiences of those movements. Games are systems that are a dialogue, and that offer more agency to a player to make choices, and it is those weighted choices that help make games act more as examples of "immersive empathy" (Sampat 11). The force of an emotion becomes wielded by a player but also integrated within their own body and experience with a game based on agency they have in the game and the systems that still dictate what they can and cannot do within that experience. In games there is potential for the emotional force from a well-written story, but also from a well designed system that helps force an embodiment of the story into the player and their experience of the game.

Affective Phenomenology of the Dream House

"I called this oneiric house the crypt of the house[...]" (Bachelard 13).

A house is a collection of rooms within a structure: a house can be a home but a home exists as more than a structure or a collection of rooms. As an extension of affect theory, I considered the intersections of affect as informed by phenomenology in the specific case of how nostalgia of a home is informed by our emotional experiences of the home. In turn our own memories become an "affecting" force on the memory of the home, reshaping it in our memories based on our experiences within. A home as we experience it is remembered by how our experiences change its structure, each room giving its own feeling, it's own place. Personality and emotion ascribed to corners, nooks, windows, and stairs. The home as we remember it, a place we have departed from, is never remembered as a series of rooms but as a series of afterimages of the layered memories taking place in those rooms. The home remembered becomes a home defined by its oneirism, every image of the structure viewed through a haze of daydream. The reality of the home always skewed by the experiences contained within and the home as remembered will not be a representative of the actual structure of the building (Bachelard 15). The hierarchy of experiencing a home is memory and feeling first, its structures and membranes second.

Gaston Bachelard in his book *The Poetics of Space* elaborates on the poetic phenomenology of the home and the concept of the oneiric house, detailing how rooms and spaces and the structures of the home are changed by the associations we have with them (15). It is these malleable and dreamlike qualities of the home remembered that I used as the foundation of building the haunted house in *Dwelling*.

Cellars and basements in all their dark subterranean stylings are home to our most irrational thoughts, the birthplace of the horrors from a childhood imagination (Bachelard 23). Attics are places of rational fear, existing in polarity to the cellar, both structurally and psychically, a place where fears and horrors can be explained away in concrete terms grounded within reality. Stairs although their nature of transporting both up and down floors, some have singular purposes. Stairs down into a cellar have all the heaviness of gravity pulling us down into the dark, the lightness of the flight back upward. The slow crawl into an attic is a more belaboured process into a space that can feel otherworldly even when contained within the same structure. The stairs that bring us between first and second floors are the only ones with some sense of salience, and equal flow in how we move both up and down (Bachelard 24).

This salience afforded by the dream house is one that I wish to utilize to set the scene for the mediumship, creating a house that exists as fractions of images from memories, allowing the disparate pieces to shift and make room for the day dream of a house to haunt to take place. My construction process is spirited by Bachelard as he instructs “Sometimes the house grows and spreads so that, in order to live in it, greater elasticity of daydreaming, a daydream that is less clearly outlined, are needed” (51). A house with shifting and changing rooms and doors that lock and doors that lead to nowhere or somewhere just not yet, are crucial to give space for the imagination to take hold and fill in the gaps of the home, recreating the space and the structure in their mind with the fragments of their own home.

Even the oneiric house is one that is meant to be haunted, Bachelard himself calling the oneiric house the crypt of the house (15). The dream house itself is a mausoleum of the spectres of disparate rooms from one house or many, all contained within and haunting in tandem in one space. The house as a concept is known to be subject to hauntings, but it is with these blurring of lines of the interiority/exteriority of the house and the outside, the real and the unreal, and what is inside and outside the self is where I want to set the stage for multiplicity in hauntings. Castricano makes these connections for me between the house and the self and the positionality of hauntings:

It would be appropriate at this time to recall Derrida’s contention that “it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept” [Specters 161]. On the one hand, the word haunting is, as Mark Wigley points out, “etymologically bound to that of ‘house’” [163]. On the other hand, the comment suggests that haunting is to concept as haunting is to house. That is, the notion of haunting involves the “construction” or creation of an inside. This is what Mark Wigley implies when he claims that haunting is “always the haunting of a house,” or of a “space” since, he continues, “space is understood as that which houses” [163]. Haunting, then, implies interiority: the necessary construction of an “inside” whether of a house, a text, a thesis, a system of representation, or a “subject.” (Castricano 22-23)

The haunted house in *Dwelling* is both a house that houses other houses and a house that houses the self of me the designer and the self of the players, and our subsequent spectres summoned through writing and play. The house is meant to exist in simple images, small pieces of representation of what a house is or contains, but leaving out the structures and the details for the player’s mind to fill in the gaps. Utilizing Bachelard’s approach in using the simple image as representation of the house, due to the nature that “[...], simple images reveal a psychic state. The house, even more than the landscape, is a “psychic state,” and even when reproduced as it appears from the outside,

it bespeaks intimacy” (72). The house is simple in its presentation as it aims to only be a representation, a mirror to a memory for the player, for which in the gaps they can insert their own memories of a home and also small pieces of themselves.

One other aspect of the dream designed home informed by the *Poetics of Space* is that by creating a home that exists as layered memories but does not communicate enough detail to situate itself in a specific time period, it becomes a timeless still of a place that could exist at any point in the past and possible present. Since these memories exist cut off from reality and instead exist as intangible impressions of a home, it leads Bachelard to refer to the oneiric house as the “crypt of the house” (92). Each room itself a spectre of all that it contained but cut off from the living memory of a home no longer inhabited. These spectral impressions of spaces and the memories we have associated with them are forever suspended in their descriptions and in our minds as we fill in the gaps to another place, to another time that becomes timeless as it exists only in memory.

How to Summon Spectres: Methods of Approach

Writing the Self: Autobiography

My methods in designing and creating *Dwelling* are heavily reliant on autobiography utilized in a dual nature approach for both creation and research.

The bulk of the narrative in *Dwelling* is written in a semi-fictionalized autobiographical literary format (“Autobiography”). The story that is detailed within the game is extracted from my lived experiences and memories, but marginally fictionalized for the mechanical purposes of gameplay.

My approaches to research are informed by the usage of critical autobiography as research as outlined by Anthony Walker in *The Qualitative Report*. In “Critical Autobiography as Research” Walker affirms that autobiographical stories are more than just personal narratives and that each person’s story contains the context in which it was written as informed by their lived experiences within society, their ways of learning, and sense of logic (1896). It is using this method of narrative inquiry of the autobiographical to extract data about a situation or experience from an autobiographical retelling of the experience (Walker 1897). Utilizing the reflection of critical autobiography I am using my own experiences in approaching making and throughout the process of making to inform my design considerations for *Dwelling*. My experiences in reflecting on past experiments, as a player, and as a designer all inform my basis in making and as each step of the making develops I examine my own reflections and iterate from there.

My methods in autobiography are also informed approaches to autobiographical design for games outlined by Elizabeth Sampat in *Empathy Engines*. Understanding that games are systems and that these systems are heavily informed by my own biases as a designer and player, rather than opting for neutrality and removing myself from the design I instead integrate myself into the design (Sampat 24), both in the form of the narrative but also the considerations of mechanics and play experience.

A Voice to Follow in the Dark: Autobiographical Game Design

Autobiography in the literary convention is a translatable experience to other creative mediums, but where games intersect multiple modalities of creation and interaction other approaches to autobiography become prevalent. In the case of

autobiographical game design one can utilize their own life experiences for both the narrative and interactive elements within play, using lived experiences as source material for a game's functional elements. As well, autobiography in game design requires some level of critical autobiography in its approach to making. Using critical analysis of one's experiences in the past and present with games helps inform your design ethos and priorities when designing.

Through the chapters in *Empathy Engines* on "Minimalism & Autobiography" and "Extinguishing Neutrality" I took the core design lessons from each chapter to help formalize my design ethos when approaching *Dwelling*. Autobiography as it relates to my methodology in making but from a design perspective of utilizing minimalistic approaches to autobiography. The narrative not being a verbatim retelling of life events from my life but simplified moments that leave room for player interaction and interpretation (Sampat 32). Even in non-autobiographical writing I acknowledge that neutrality is not present within the narrative in moments where I may want to distance myself from my work to design for a perceived "universal narrative" which is non-existent (Sampat 27). My experiences of play and approaches to design will always be informed by my own perception and so I kept that in mind and instead utilized it as a strength in my process, allowing my perception of the experience to guide my feedback and iteration. Delving into my own experiences and using my own memories as a basis for prompting others to connect to their own does run the risk of not being able to find connection with some players, but that is a risk I am willing to take in my design. It is better to create a narrative that helps facilitate stronger connections to some players as they are able to relate better to the narrative than to attempt for neutrality and instead have weaker connections with more players, creating a less impactful and potentially boring experience.

One part of autobiographical design in game design is not just using parts of my own story to weave into the narrative of the game but to use my own experiences and motivations as a person who also plays solo games to inform my design. Approaching the process of making a game as a way of learning about games I want to play, "Just as a game is a dialogue between the player and the designer, the process of creating a game can be a dialogue between the designer and the prototype. In this way, then, perhaps personal design can be educational— at least to one's self" (Sampat 37 - 38). Through the iterative design process of designing, editing, and rewriting my game I played it and looked at its disparate pieces if I was creating the ideal experience for myself if I wanted to play this game, and it is this level of aspirational self-satisfaction that helped drive my iterative prototype process in regards to writing and design.

The Spectral Celluloid Image: Iterative Design

Another form of making is that of iterative design informing my final product of *Dwelling*. Iterative design in the process of game design involving cyclical re-examinations of the work to improve upon the body of work through repeated examinations of the game by myself and others (Macklin and Sharp 298). Each repeating of this cyclical process involves critical analysis of the game text at its current state, assessing its playability and mechanics, processing the feedback given and incorporating the changes into the design to refine the mechanics and narrative.

This iterative design process was highly self-reflective and worked in tandem with my autobiographical methodologies in that I utilized my critical analysis of my own experiences while play-testing and reviewing my own work to create the consequent versions of the game. Additional feedback in consequent design cycles was provided by my primary advisor Cindy Poremba, and a select group of individuals who played the near final version of the game and gave a retelling of their experience while playing as a form of feedback.

A Hall of Mirrors: Reflective Design

A similar approach to my other methodologies but differing in execution is the process of reflective design, namely the iteration of reflective design as outlined by Donald A. Schön as “Design as a Reflective Conversation with the Situation”. Schön in a case study of approaches to design and problem solving in architectural schools details a process in which designing something is a conversation one has with the place, the context, and the functionality of it (85). Approaching the architectural design process as each component it will be in dialogue with not only the space the building it is built, the people who interact with it, but also the other other buildings, the urban landscape, the societal desires at the time, and the current trends and experimentations in architecture (Schön 85). Taking this concept from architecture it is easy to adapt it to other design professions and industries where all creative outputs and contributions through making and existing contribute to a larger dialogue about the medium and its place in the world. Viewing the approaches to design contributions to a certain field as statements or rebuttals or even the beginning of a conversation and allowing that to drive you motivations in working.

My approaches to design are a dialogue with myself and the resultant game I want it to be but also with the genres of solo games, autobiographical games, and role-playing games at large. I am designing *Dwelling* in mind as something that exists in a larger design conversation within role-playing games, and so my considerations in how I

approach those designs are in dialogue with existing games and hopefully beginning a different conversation for other games to come to join in with.

Research as Relating to the Spectre

As part of my approach in reflective design and how my work exists as a contribution to these larger dialogues within role-playing games and autobiographical games, I wanted to survey examples of games and gameplay to better understand them and connect them to my work.

To best understand the context in which I am situation myself and my work alongside the work of others, two definitions need to be established:

Role-Playing Games (RPGs) in the broader genre context of the game form are games in which a number of players take on the roles of a character within a narrative. The player characters then generate and drive a narrative within the story they are collaboratively/competitively participating in. There are constraints placed upon the narrative based on the rules present within the game, chance through randomization, or through the decisions of a player who acts as lead generator of story and plot (Deterding and Sagal 22-23).

Live Action Role-Playing (LARP) games are a subsection of role-playing games with their defining characteristic being that live action games are played within an environment that acts as a stage as players role-play out characters. This more embodied mode of play has a heavier emphasis on story and less reliability on chance and hierarchies of play, and have players instead acting out the actions of their characters in real-time. Live action role-playing games rely on high embodiment of characters by their players and it is that embodiment in-game character interaction that drives the narratives and resultant gameplay (Deterding and Sagal 34-35).

Reading the Self in Autobiographical Games

With one of my driving methodologies being autobiography and a supplementary methodology being reflective design I wanted to contextualize my work in autobiography alongside other autobiographical games.

For the most direct parallel to the work I am seeking to create, autobiographical role-playing games designed in an academic context, I looked at the collection of games created by Allison Cole and collaborators in the *Anthology of Intimacy*. *Anthology of Intimacy* was a cumulative project in Cole's pursuit of an MFA in Interactive Digital Media and Game Design at New York University.

Anthology of Intimacy is a collection of five Live Action Role-Playing games created with collaborators who were close and distant friends of Cole's. Each game a collaboration of their creative approaches as designers but also an artistic manifestation of the unique relationship shared between collaborators and the intricacies of that relationship reflected in the resultant gameplay.

Cole's *Anthology of Intimacy* is an autobiographical exploration of capturing the emotions and sensibilities of two or more designers in the moments they are collaborating, that foundation of collaboration being built from years of connection distinct to the individuals involved. Each game is an autobiographical expression of the intimacy of creating with one another and the building and strengthening of those relationships that is possible through creative collaboration.

While Cole's work is autobiographical in nature, it does involve multiple collaborators and is reliant upon collaboration with another to create the game: no game is made singularly alone by Cole. This is where her work deviates from mine in intentions and executions. My work in *Dwelling* while autobiographical is a singular endeavour as myself as the only creator of the piece and the connections to others that may be present within the work only capture my perspective in a larger dialogue. *Dwelling* is removed from the direct influence of others, outside influence only acting as impressions that may echo in work but do not shape it.

Ultimately my decision to work alone serves my purpose in design much as Cole's work in collaboration best serves the design in her games. Cole works collaboratively with other designers that she shares a level of intimate connection with helps create the desired experience of play during the making process. The level of intimacy and communication is consistent and constant through the art of collaboration with one another and so the resulting game experience will capture that energy that is present in the making process. While my work into solitary creative endeavours and autobiography require the level of constant deep reflection of both myself and the experience I am designing that is the desired experience of gameplay. In order to best create the conditions in which the game unfolds, mirroring the making process to the playing process helps for a congruity in considerations of design.

Embarking on a Lonely Journey into Solitary Role-Playing Games

To situate *Dwelling* in dialogue with like games, a survey of the current and past trends within solo role-playing games was needed to bring myself up to speed in the conversation.

Solitary play in role-playing games has been a pervasive consideration since the conception of role-playing games with *Tunnels & Trolls* first edition released in 1975 having a wealth of solo dungeon crawling adventures that a singular player could embark as well as group adventures for multiple players (“Tunnels and Trolls”).

From these inspirations of solo adventures in dungeon crawling was born the *Choose Your Own Adventure* book format that provided readers an interactive story experience by choosing what happened next in a narrative through multiple branching story paths. Not containing the randomization and chance present in questing style solo adventures but providing more of an immersive story experience that despite its limited interactivity afforded some agency and customization of outcome to the reader.

We see this continued tradition of solo adventure style questing games in contemporary independent games such as *Ironsworn* by Shawn Tomkin or *We Forest Three* by Jamila R. Nedjadi that seeses singular player characters on an adventure facing obstacles and that useuses the chance of dice rolls to interpret how player characters overcome those challenges and gauge their eventual success in these guided quests.

Branching off from these formats of highly guided experiences provided to players by designers we see solitary game play exist more of a generative action, the rules of a game instead to facilitate the act of guided generative creative work.

In this category one iteration is the work of mapmaking or worldbuilding games. Examples of this kind of play are *Delve* by Anna Blackwell and *A Land Once Magic* by Viditya Voleti. Players are given sets of rules but little to no narrative, the breadth of the gameplay experience is creating a world for potential characters to inhabit, either through the form of drawing a map, or through detailing the micro and macro manifestations of a world without explicit character creation or interaction.

Character role-playing is a genre of its own within solo games, this form of role-playing is manifested through role-playing as fictional journaling. Examples of this include *Thousand Year Old Vampire* by Tim Hutchings and *The Adventurer* by James Chirp. These games provide context for a narrative and the means for a player to create a character and the wealth of gameplay is spent writing journal entries in character as the character being role-played.

There are a subsection of games that offer more open ended storytelling as a game play experience. Without focusing on playing a specific character or building a world without an attached narrative, the games allow you to build up a narrative through

disparate events and prompts and guide you in writing your own forms of fiction. Examples of this include *Alone Among the Stars* by Takuma Okada and *Artefact* by Jack Harrison.

Throughout the iterations solo games have taken two facets remain constant, their purpose as guided solitary experiences propelled by the player/reader's imagination and also the format they have been written. *Choose Your Own Adventure* books and solitary role-playing games alike address the player/reader in the second person. Always referring to them as the "you" within a narrative or the "you" that must take action through the rules of the games. As contemporary iterations vary in how the eventual playstyle manifests, whether it be reading, journaling, writing, or drawing, they all have a connecting purpose of being a guided generative experience. Solo games exist as curated and guided exercises in creation for a player, often resulting in a piece of fiction in the end or some sort of artifact that belays a story through its creation. The player themselves and their own imagination fueling the experience, purely guided by points of inspiration and constraints of a format.

It is understanding these hybridities of form of stories with interaction and games built to generate stories is where I begin to situate my approaches to game design and look to create a game that facilitates all these kinds of play while still having its own narrative and own story to tell.

Considerations for Phantom Bleed

As part of my contextual research into games I put consideration into the affective after effects of embodied types of play, this type of residual affective experience of gameplay is known as "bleed". Bleed as a concept is something that is referred to heavily in Live Action Role-Playing games that see players engaging with a higher level of embodiment in role-playing, but is something that should also be considered in all role-playing game design that asks players to engage with retrospection and in some way, role-playing replaying past experiences. The concept of bleed as defined by the We Åker Jeep LARPing community in their LARP Dictionary is as follows:

Bleed is experienced by a player when her thoughts and feelings are influenced by those of her character, or vice versa. With increasing bleed, the border between player and character becomes more and more transparent. It makes sense to think of the degree of bleed as a measure of how separated different levels of play (actual/inner/meta) are. (2010)

When asking players to delve back into their own memories or to even role-play a character that is different than themselves but utilizes their own experiences to flesh out that character, those lines between player and character become blurred. Without proper separation from the experience of playing a character, players are likely to process the emotions a character experiences in play as their own after the game has ceased.

While the nature of reading a narrative and performing acts of creative writing and drawing may not be the level of embodiment experienced in LARPing it still involves some level of connecting to oneself and since I directly ask players to call upon unpleasant memories and emotions, I want to ensure that that level of separation is possible for players and give avenues of debriefing through the structure of the game. My approaches and intentions with that better detailed in the section [***Building a Haunted Dwelling***](#) as I detail the safety tool design process and the inclusion of an epilogue.

Summoning the Spectral Game

The Book as Artifact

For all my work into the design of *Dwelling* it still needed a physical form to help mediate the process of interaction between the gameplay, narrative and the player. Approaching *Dwelling* as an interdisciplinary approach between the game text, the narrative, and the physical form of a printed book I began considering the interactions of all the elements of the project with one another.

Considering the book as the home of the game text, it helped me to approach the process as integrating the physical book as the structure of the haunted house in which the narrative takes place. The book in its physical form exists as two-fold suggestions of what it represents. The first being the considered size and design of the printed book, a 6" x 9" softcover, is a suggestion of the standard trade fiction format for published books. This choice in format was intentional to have it blend in on a bookshelf alongside other fiction books and to hint at the narrative heavy gameplay the book contains. My approaches in typesetting and illustrative layout were done to mimic those of illustrative fiction paperbacks allowing an unknowing interested reader to flip through the book and not realize it to be a game book and instead a somewhat unconventional fiction novel.

The second suggestion in form is in approaching the book as a house, I situated the illustrations within the book so that the spreads and pages of the book functioning as walls within a room. Through the layout and design of the form I wanted the holding of the book to replicate the structure of the rooms contained within the house. The act of turning a page translating the movement of walking from one room to another.



Figure 1: Two page illustration and text spread from *Dwelling* exhibiting how each side of the page is utilized to represent walls of a room, making the book part of the structure of the house

The use of the physical printed safety tools and their design was also part of the process of using the suggestive elements present in the physical material to make connections to literature and homes. The use of the key check-in safety tool structured as a bookmark clues readers in the narrative elements of the game and the use of the bookmark to pause and resume play at a later date much like its use with reading. The use of the keyhole cards that provided keyhole windows to look through and frame their interactions is suggestive of the peering through a keyhole in a door, seeing only snippets of the room and text and the suggestion of what the room contains being the propulsion of the narrative and interaction.

With those two suggestive elements in mind the process of layout and illustrating the game book became one that ensured the ability for the text to be read, for it to suggest to players where moments of interaction and play are taking place within the narrative, and giving players the space to draw within the pages of the book. Each element of the design of the book and the interaction between the book and the reader was considered to

be suggestive of the kind of work contained within and to replicate the experience of wandering through a dreamy shifting haunted house.

Designing Games for Ghosts

“At times, too, the phantasm that impels us to live in corners comes into being by the grace of a mere drawing.” (Bachelard 145).

With my theoretical framework being constructed and reinforced, the conceptual research being pursued to help situate my game process within, and its modes of interaction set as design goals, I began cultivating my approach to designing “spectral” experiences in games.

Seeking out spectrality in games I gave them the criteria of engaging autobiography to create “spectral selves” and having an element of ephemerality within/as a result of play that is highly suggestive of unseen/unread narratives. Intrinsic to my formulation of the design ethos for *Dwelling* was my early experiments in trying to evoke spectrality in game experiences and close research of my own experiences of playing two games that I felt were closest in experiential outcomes to the kind of game I wished to design.

Early Experimentations with Spectres

My first iteration into designing games as generative spectral media was my prototype game *Portrait in a Room of Mirrors* and ultimately the most successful of my prototypes in evoking the spectral in autobiographical games. The game's minimalistic narrative positions you entering a room filled with mirrors, each one reflecting a different moment in time associated with a sense memory. Each mirror exists as a writing prompt for the players to write a memory that would be reflected back at them. Players moving through each mirror would write a total of 13 memories. Coming to the ending of the game only one memory remains a static portrait, a stable image, while all other reflections fade away, in turn asking the players to erase all prompts but one. Each mirror acting as a conjuring point for a fractured spectre, a suspended looping moment in time from the player's life and only one remained in stasis, while the others faded away but the impressions of their words remained in the page. The impressions hinting at a story, at a process that has taken place but to which no record exists.

The second experiment in spectral game design was less successful. In my solo game *What will become of you* I incorporated the narrative of *Alice in Wonderland* to connect these spectral approaches of play to the body. Using the narrative of the moment she grows too big to fit in Mr. Rabbit's house, the game begins with players role-playing Alice as she is stuck but no easy solution is found, and instead must get unstuck by force. Play asks players to list limbs and valuables all continued within the house and make

decisions on what are acceptable losses at the cost of freedom, the functionality of limbs or the destruction of possible heirlooms or items of high sentimental value. While it was more successful as a potential mediation between the body and emotions ascribed to surrounds outside of it, finding a bridge between body and feeling, it did not evoke any feeling of spectrality though play.

Finally I did some creative research into ephemerality in play through a book project during my independent study. This project was an exercise in puzzle design through the physical medium of books, booklets, and paper ephemera. Through the collected pieces in the package a story was told in snippets through communications that this package was a test of sleuthing skills and through the disparate pieces in the package. The player would utilize each piece to solve riddles and puzzles but through the process leave many of the pieces permanently changed through the interaction. The resultant piece being a completed short narrative but each piece ultimately changed by the interaction, a gesture at the actions taken to reach the conclusion but at the cost of rewriting the story through finishing it.

Each of these experiments helped inform me of disparate facets when approaching *Dwelling* on how to consider spectrality in interaction and narrative, medium, and where the body can be connected to play in all of this.

Field Notes from Seeking out Spectres

In the course of my research of surveying what solo role-playing games can look like but also in research of what I desired from an experience of role-playing games there were two that their approaches to design and the remnants of play I found inspiring for my own approach to design.

Found Parts by Taylor Smith

Found Parts by Taylor Smith who publishes under the name Whimsy Machine is a short and simple solo game about taking stock of parts of your body and being chased by something horrible and unknowable.

You begin play by listing body parts, emotions, and parts of your mental faculty into one list of things that all feel fine. Over the course of play as you are being chased you cross off things on the list that get compromised in the stress and harm incurred during the chase, but also add in other things that are strengthened in the process.

In the end with the list you have you are given the choice to confront the thing chasing you or surrender to it. In confronting it you recover parts similar to those that you have lost in the chase, but not entirely. In surrendering, you lose one last part of yourself, the impact of that loss marked by crossing it off your list and allowing the line to trail off the page, hinting at the part of you that is lost and dragged away but you can still feel.

Found Parts' minimalistic design approach to interaction of listing and crossing things off leaves you with a simple artifact of gameplay that hints at the larger narrative and the horrors experienced during play, that body parts are lost and gained, and some can even be felt as shown through a warbling trailing line off a page.

It is these approaches to writing and mark making for simple impactful play that helped me form my thoughts on how to simplify my game design and interactive elements into something more minimal, leaving room for creativity in the interaction without asking the player to replicate complex series of tasks.

The inclusion of a choice as a way to end the game was one that stood out to me as dissimilar to other solo role-playing games that often lack concrete ways of ending a game or ending play. It is this option of posing a choice to the player and the difference in choice in the resultant last prompt was something that inspired me to implement a choice at the end of *Dwelling*. In all my other playthroughs of solo games I felt dissatisfied with the way

games ended abruptly or either encouraged you to play until all desire to play would leave you upon which the game would “end”. Choice helps players feel like they have more agency in an outcome and also helps contextualize the entirety of the play experience up until that point.

Thousand Year Old Vampire by Tim Hutchings

Thousand Year Old Vampire by Tim Hutchings is a journaling role-playing game that has players creating the memories of a centuries old vampire and their actions and misdeeds throughout time. Play lasts anywhere from a few hours to a few days depending on the amount of prompts a player ends up writing and also pacing they choose for their own play session. Players will create their vampire and their origin story before embarking on creating the barrage of memories that their vampire will experience and then eventually forget.

Thousand Year Old Vampire was a great experience for me in creating longform solitary play. The formula is simple in that it asks to create memories for your vampire while at the same time altering what they have as resources, relationships, and skills, showing how one undead person could change over the span of so many years. This was all cemented within the act of writing and creating stories about your vampire. The large amount of things you needed to keep track was unfortunately a bit clumsy while playing in an actual notebook, as lists grew longer than sectioned off pages would allow and keeping track of loose papers of memories meant I felt like I was more likely to lose memories accidentally through disorganization in play than actual progression of time in game. I also at times struggled with the language of the prompts, the many repeated actions the game was asking me to do and keep in the forefront of my mind, and being able to keep myself in character to write first person accounts of my vampires actions and sometimes found myself summarizing in the third person, no longer playing but acting as more of a historian.

Overall I enjoyed the ups and downs I would narrate for my vampire through the course of her lifetime, and while I chanced upon an ending prompt that allowed some level of brevity in my vampire’s demise, I ultimately did not enjoy the approach to end such a long game. I had hoped a game with so much writing and creative thinking in making this narrative happen, it would’ve posed a different interactive element to ease me out of play and feel like my story had an end without me briefly writing it and declaring it done.

This way of ending without exactly easing out of play narratively or mechanically is something that made me really consider how bleed is experience in solo games. Since the

The Safety Flower safety tool provides three tiers of engagement for players to compare their experiences while playing *Thousand Year Old Vampire*. The green leaves are examples of highly engaged and enjoyable play experiences, the yellow petals examples of engaged and enjoyable/neutral play experiences, and the red petals examples of disconnected and unenjoyable/unsafe play experiences. Players are meant to compare their thoughts and actions while playing the game to the provided examples and decide for themselves if they need to take breaks, employ other safety tools, or stop playing the game altogether.

While I loved this consideration of adapting a collaborative check-in tool among two or more players to be more a self-reflective tool for players to check in with themselves during solo play there were two big issues I had with it. The first being that the safety tool is in the appendix at the back of the book. In order for players to utilize it in a meaningful way they would need to be constantly flipping to the back of the book to check in with their current state. The process of needing to flip between play along with the way it was designed makes it hard to read and difficult to use in a way that meant to foster consistent mindful checking in with the player. The other issue being the way the categories of checking in with yourself are arranged. Green leaves and yellow petal factors seem to denote a good time up until the sudden escalation to it being bad with the red petal prompts. This lack of a potential leading up to that escalation to be considered as a way to pace yourself should have been included. The best way to reduce emotional distress is recognize it as it is leading up to the distress manifesting in a more obvious way, rather than waiting for a crisis to emerge and then act on distress tolerance.

I took this basis of the flower safety tool to create my own safety tool for the key. These considerations of having it something the players could have on hand and would be instrumental to checking in with players meant I adapted it to be a bookmark, both functional in keeping place in the game's progression but a physical reminder of a self check in for the player. As well with the prompts on the key I considered a more grey area that could lead up to emotional distress and including leading check in prompts about thought patterns, physical sensations, and general feelings. Allowing the player to check in with themselves on multiple levels and ensure they are aware of their own headspace while playing.

Building a Haunted Dwelling

Dwelling in its final iteration is a solo role-playing game and *Choose Your Own Adventure* hybrid interactive book. The game begins with a small snippet of narrative before explaining how the game asks you to play it, how to perform the actions the game asks of you, and considerations about story content and safety tools. The interactions of play in *Dwelling* ask you to draw spectres based on descriptive prompts directly in the book, write a memory on a scrap piece of paper to later be discarded, and mark yourself with an abstract marking on your body with a marker as a physical manifestation of the encounters you have with the spectres. Following another thematic setting narrative prompt the game begins into the hybrid story and game prompts writing. The interaction with the player is embedded into the narrative with the way the meandering thought process of our unknown protagonist leads them to conjure ghosts in shadows and empty spaces and their interactions with said spectres leave them recalling a memory and being marked by that interaction and the loss of that memory as it is incorporated into the ghost. The narrative of the story continues as they wander through their home at night. Encountering various spectres that bring up specific memories in different rooms in the home, with differing spectres showing up once the protagonist back tracks through the house after visiting the basement. Eventually the protagonist returns to their bedroom where the night began only to seem themselves asleep within bed, having the realization that the whole process has been a dream, and all the spectres conjured are now moving through the home towards them. The player then is given a choice to try to wake up or be found by the spectres. Whichever choice the player takes allows for a different sort of reflection as they go through and modify past interactions in the game, and end up in a place of waking up in the recurring dream framework of the game. The game then has an epilogue to help ease player's out of the interactive game headspace and also suggest the replayability of the game as the game functions as a recurring dream. It also includes an appendix with detailed content warnings for each interactive part of the game and alternative prompts that allow players to engage with content that makes them uncomfortable in a more distanced and controlled manner.

Dwelling has gone through many iterations before getting to this finalized version. The first version was written with the narrative and prompts in the second person, but I felt dissatisfied with this form of writing as I felt like I wasn't able to put the "I" of myself into the writing without creating some distance between myself and the narrative. As well I didn't like the initial disconnect between the narrative and the resultant writing that had players being addressed in the narrative as "you" but writing as "I". This disconnect didn't have the seamless quality between narrative and resultant writing from play that I

wanted and I felt using the more instructional second person tense also took away much of the potential daydream stream of conscious style of writing that would help players in the mindset of the game. My affirmation of the use of “I” came also from Castricano’s writing on the first person tense, saying that “I” holds a “ghostly inheritance and an unresolved debt or promise” (10). That the act of writing in the first person is an act of speculation on a future spectre. Framing my work within the first person I was also able to commit more fully to the act of cryptomimetic writing the Castricano also connected to autobiographical writing. *Dwelling* in each room and each described embodied connection to memory is a small live burial of a part of myself and my past embedded within the text. By choosing to speak as “I” I am able to embed myself “within” the text, but the resultant evocations of my autobiography only manifest as spectres leading the players in their own self-reflection.

From there I wrote a finalized first draft of the game that had players exploring each room in the house and then backtracking through the same rooms, visiting all of them twice. This winding approach to the path through the dream house and its matching prose heavy descriptions of sights and sounds was an informed choice based on Bachelard’s comments on the oneiric house. That to describe a daydream objectively interrupts it (Bachelard 152) and so I opted for a freeform writing style and description and interaction with the home. While the stream of conscious writing worked well for the narrative of dreamily wandering through a house at night, the game felt too long and had strange pacing with too many intense emotion rooms clustered together. I added in interstitial narrative moments, small interactions that acted as grounding exercises by just having players list things, but also just small moments of story allowing the player to pause. With these breaks included in the game the pacing felt more varied and less tense than the previous iteration so I did extensive edits and cut out multiple rooms to make the initial story shorter, and went with the rooms that I felt had the most evocative interactive elements. At this iteration the game had players stumbling into a room, recalling a memory based on involuntary emotional reactions they had to sensations in the room, and then seeing a spectre and drawing its shape. Both writing and drawing within the game book.

After that iteration I began playtesting the game myself and found I struggled with the game action language feeling too passive, and began rewriting it to be more assertive in how it engaged the player. Based on feedback from my primary advisor I considered how to forefront the spectrality of the game and include some aspect of embodiment into play. At this point I changed the order of interactions, instead now having players enter a room to be faced with a spectre being summoned into the space through how they process the sensations they encounter in the room. They in turn draw that spectre based on provided descriptions and the spectre within the narrative reaches out to make contact

with the player, which then triggers the recollection interaction, having players write a memory that comes to mind from this interaction with another. The writing is done on a separate piece of paper and then discarded, as this memory now fades from the player and is incorporated within the spectre. The player is then left with a mark, which they mark themselves with a marker in the place of contact with the spectre. This mark as a lasting and fading interaction they had with the spectre and for the loss of the memory. Asking the player to discard their memory was to add to the spectral/ephemeral mode of play, having them name a time and place and an event that happened and subject it to exist as a timeless echo when it no longer is a part of them but they are left with the memory of how they lost it. The mark as well adds to the spectrality of play, leaving the player with an impermanent artifact of play that will fade from their skin just like their memories.

In addition to the reworking of interaction and mechanics of the game I included two endings to the game that would allow the players a choice in how they wished their story to end. Through my own research into the format and interactivity in solo games I found the closure I desired from stories and from games was not present and began to imagine what it would look like for myself. Taking inspiration from Taylor Smith's *Found Parts* I included a choice of two endings for the player. One to wake up and their final interactive moment with the narrative being hearing their own words to the sleeping self echoing through the house and the dream and into the past of them waking up in the beginning of the game. This is represented by players writing in those words throughout the book to the beginning. Players may also instead choose to be found by the spectres who in turn each take a piece of the player and stretch them throughout the house, each bit of shadow present in the rooms in the house now looking like a distorted piece of the player. This interaction takes place by places going back through the house and drawing a small bit of themselves into the shadows alongside the spectres in the rooms they have visited.

After this final choice and interaction allows for a moment of reflection but also disruption of the timeline of the dream as the present meets past and pulls it into a simultaneously existing time, the player wakes up from their dream. To help ease players out of play and allow some feeling of closure to the game I included an epilogue that talks about how the dream eventually fades but also has the potential to return, as recurring dreams do.

With this realized iteration existing as the final version of the game I finished up the safety tools that I had been developing alongside the game text to compliment it. The safety tools are a two part process to help players stay present and engaged with the story and give alternatives to content that may be uncomfortable or harmful to play through.

The first safety tool is the key which takes inspiration from Tim Hutchings solo play adaptation of the *Non-Verbal Affirmative Consent Tool* by Taylor Stokes. The key includes thoughts, emotions, and sensations that may align with “enjoyable”, “neutral”, and “unenjoyable” experiences while playing with the game. This breakdown of thoughts one may have while playing as well as physical sensations to enjoying a game, mild agitation or dissociation, or emotional distress offer a multi-modal way for players to check in with themselves while playing. These lists of experiences are taken from my own personal experiences and knowledge of distress tolerance through therapeutic models of self-intervention. With the model of helping players to check in with themselves, neutral play advised caution and breaks and suggested use of the “keyhole” safety tool while unenjoyable play advised for stopping playing until ready once more and highly suggested use of content warnings and using the “keyhole” safety tool.

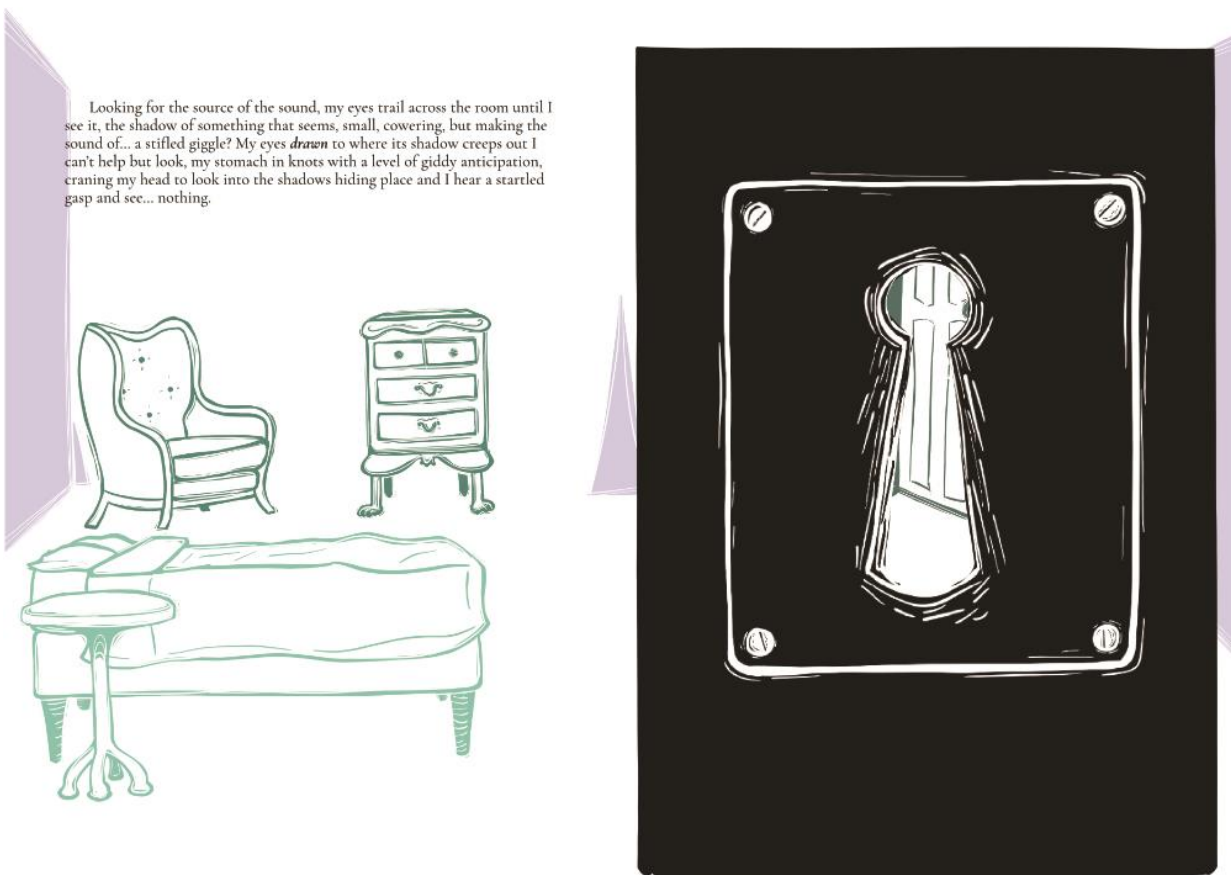


Figure 3: Example of game book spread and utilization of the “keyhole” safety tool

This second safety tool, the locked doors work in tandem with the key. If players ever feel like there is content they don’t want to engage with in advance or as playing finds they are not enjoying specific rooms, can “lock the door” using the key and instead opt to look through the “keyhole” instead. The keyhole is a simple card with a keyhole

opening that can be placed over pages of the story that players don't wish to engage with. With the alternative prompts in the appendix of the book and the keyholes they instead can draw a small suggestion of what may be in the room and speculate as to what may happen if they were to enter without ever entering. This allows players to still interact with every room in the house but in a manner that affords them more distance and control of what they see and do, as well as omit as interaction with their own memories whatsoever. This implementation came from my own experiences in playing solo games that looked to engage with potentially uncomfortable subjects but gave lackluster options to players on how to navigate engaging with uncomfortable content in a game. The most common approach I've seen is "skip it or make up your own prompt to answer" and while those are fine options to acknowledge that some content can be uncomfortable for a player to engage with and that players are not obligated or forced to engage with it, it doesn't provide players meaningful alternatives. Skipping a prompt can lead to potentially missing out on large chunks of gameplay that leaves players unfulfilled with their experience. Suggesting players come up with their own alternatives may put some players in an awkward position of trying to conjure up a suitable substitution for what the designer expected from this interaction in the game. It as well shows a lack of foresight in anticipating a player's needs and responding to them in a way that keeps them engaged and not feel left out or punished with lack of play experiences for prioritizing their safety and comfort while engaging with a game. It is with these frustrations in mind from my own experiences in mind that I wanted to create alternatives that allowed players to opt out of potential difficult memory work while still being engaged in play and contributing to the narrative in a cohesive way that prioritized their safety.

As for the physical manifestation of the game the finalized game text is incorporated into the print layout of a softcover book. Initially I wanted the game to exist as a saddle stitched booklet to encourage players to add to the game through writing and drawing and not feel as hesitant to do so due to the assumed higher monetary and design value a softcover has over a saddle stitched booklet. The resultant text and illustrations to create the complete experience of the game were unfortunately too long to stay within the limits of saddle stitched binding techniques and so I have now opted to have them printed as a softcover.

Another design consideration for the book layout was to create simplified illustrations of a room that would gesture at a room but also leave room for the text and also allow for player interaction by drawing on top of them. Part of this consideration was treating the pages of the book as if they were two walls of a room themselves and laying out the disparate room elements on them to gesture at a room through the way the book folds as well. The book became part of the construction of the dream house as much as the illustrations and the text descriptions.

The book is accompanied by the printed key bookmark and multiple printed cards of the keyholes, resulting in a complete experience package for players of the game and physical versions of the safety tools. This package of the game and game tools help facilitate all modes of play the player may want or need to engage in and exist as a cohesive curated experience of narrative and interaction for the player.

Once the game was in a playable state I sent the game document and complimentary safety tools to a small group of interested individuals who wanted to play the game. The group spanned experiences with RPGs and specifically solo RPGs to get a good breadth of reflections based on familiarity with the genre. The players were given four weeks to play the game and then provided me with their feedback in email or text form about their experiences while playing the game.

Reflecting on the varied experiences of gameplay of the group of players and my own experiences of play while testing my game, I made some slight adjustments to the writing of the game to offer more flexibility in play. With the final changes in design and game narrative done I sent the game text off to an editor in order to ensure a cohesive narrative and understandable instructions leading up to gameplay.

With the game text being edited I moved to structuring the layout of the book and preparing the illustrations and formatting for the final printed edition of the book. During the layout process I considered how the illustrations would connect and conform with the text while also leaving room within the book for players to draw and create their spectres to add to the illustration of the book.

The layout of the book was highly considered in its design to maximize playability, readability, and as well use the illustrations and layout motifs to lead the player in how to read and interact with the game. The additional printed ephemera of the bookmark and the postcards of keyholes factor into the structure of gameplay and use of the book. Bookmarks allow for consistent check-ins with the player by a present physical reminder of their state of being and functioning as a way to “pause” the game and narrative by using the bookmark as intended. Keyhole cards allow players to not view a room and instead make a physical manifestation of the alternative narrative prompts that allow for distance from the game and story but still encouragement and narrative continuation.

My considered design, iterative process, reflection on play experiences from myself, design of the book and ephemera all contributed to the finalized work and game experience that is *Dwelling*.

Dwelling upon Dwelling

Dwelling on the Making

Creating *Dwelling* has shown me the potential of iterative autobiographical design. Throughout this process the most meaningful feedback on how I wanted the design to be shaped and the resultant play experience came from my own experiences with reading and playing the game as well as others. My own thoughts and feelings about how a game should play, curiosity in alternative modalities to bring about different and new play experiences, and care in anticipating the player's needs and stumbling blocks informed the design and are embedded within it.

Dwelling has become a hauntological artifact of myself as a person in that it takes inspiration from my own memories to build up its narrative but it also holds so much of myself as a designer within it as well. Every aspect of thought and consideration in the process has left its own impression on the game forming it into its final shape. Each considered interaction and way of engaging the player has come from my own fumbings, desires, and setbacks in playing and designing games. They hold the experiences of me as a player and designer within each part of it but does not show so in overt or literal ways. The impressions of me are spectral, and a flattening of time spent in playing, designing, editing, and giving great consideration of the work. *Dwelling* at its most base result is a hauntological object of me and my intentions and desires as a designer and role-player.

Dwelling on the Reception

While the final reception of the game is not yet known as the printed book versions of the game are still in the process of being printed, I can analyze the reception of the game based on the finalized version of game text and accompanying illustration and layout that offered the full experience to players while still not being a finalized book. Due to the nature of remote playtesting I also was not able to view the resultant experience players had unless they decided to share images with me and so my analysis is largely based on their reflections of the play experience.

Reading through the play reflections of the initial group of players for the game there was a high level of connection and immersion within the game. While there were some initial issues for a small number of players with navigating narrative and interaction due to the unfamiliar structure of the game, players noted quick adaptation of the rules

and a mostly seamless experience of playing and staying connected with the story and themselves present in the story while playing.

Players noted a strong connection to the autobiographical prompts and ease of adapting the mindset and story of the character within the story, finding themselves embodying the thoughts and actions of the character with ease. The inclusion of connecting with their own bodies was a divided experience for some players, some finding it intensifying the embodied experience of the narrative and others finding it somewhat distracting.

The only criticisms of the game were for more flexibility in options for designing their summoned spectres and marks left by the spectres, wishing for more creativity in how they were able to draw. The narrative, connection to memory, and retelling of experiences being the strongest aspects of the gameplay as noted in the reflections of the players.

Based on this initial reception from players I believe I was successful in my research question of if I would be able to facilitate embodied play through my design choices as informed by affect theory. While there were some difficulties for players to connect to the mechanical approaches to affective design, the affective narratological approach to my game design was a universal success in engaging players and keeping them connected and immersed within the story and the character they played within it.

Further experimentation into connecting the embodied mechanical game approach to the embodied narrative approach may help aid seamlessness in play and help facilitate full immersion. At this current state of iteration and development in my design process, I am happy in the success of narrative embodiment and player connection to story and gameplay around memory recollection.

Dwelling on the Final Outcome

With my process at its end and the initial reception of the game text and play received and analyzed, I can take a moment to reflect on the process as a whole. Much like my methodologies in designing and analyzing my own experiences while playing my own game I will utilize critical autobiography in reflecting on the entirety of the project.

The process of constant iterative design and reflection on my choices and the impacts of my choices was a difficult one given the circumstances I was working in. Working without active collaborators and instead spending time with constant critical

reflection on myself and my work led to a lot of difficulties in creating due to isolation and lack of confidence in my own work. Working in a highly self-reflective practice while incredibly useful to create the same experience in gameplay, is incredibly detrimental to one's mental health and creative practice. My self-scrutinizing process did lead to highly curated narrative experiences, considerations of safety, and enough emotionally evocative writing that create an immersive and embodied experience of play for my players.

My autobiographical process of pouring as much of myself and only myself into the game meant the resultant narrative character in the story had enough internal workings that players were able to become them with ease, adapt to their anxieties and experiences and integrate their own into the story. I became more of the nervous uneasy main character in my story than I like to admit and I feel at least comforted in knowing that late at night in wandering at home, I am accompanied by a number of players walking by my side through the night, telling me their memories to keep me company amongst our shared ghosts.

Dwelling managed to become an autobiographical story of me and the players together, and the journey we both take in the night, me narrating where we are going and what we see, and the players telling me what it reminds them of. Parts of both myself and players will always be locked away in the game, myself as the character they take on, and their memories creating the ghosts in the game and fleshing out the life of the character if it was them wandering through the house at night. Each different game being played holding a different host of ghosts, whether they write in the book, discard their memories, or utilize the keyholes, each playthrough results in a different story that is unstuck in time and doomed to repeat, only fragments of it remain as suggestions of what has transgressed in the moments of play.

Dwelling exists as a shared dream between me and the player, with the potential to recur, details changing each time but some aspects always remaining the same. Each new dream contains the ever present spectre of myself as the designer and each new playthrough contains more and more ghosts of the players, adding in new life experiences of a life lived up until that moment. A home always waiting, empty, ready to be filled with new spectres from new memories.

Dwelling for me was a challenge in design and production, but an overwhelming success in its reception and its function as spectre generating media.

Works Cited

"Autobiography." *Literary Devices*. <https://literarydevices.net/autobiography/>, 2021.

Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Penguin, 1965.

Castricano, Jodey. *Cryptomimesis: The Gothic and Jacques Derrida's Ghost Writing*. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001.

Cole, Allison. *Anthology of Intimacy*. E-book, n.p., 2018.

Davis, Colin. "État Pré'sent: Hauntology, Spectres and Phantoms." *French Studies*, vol. LIX, no. 3, 2005, pp 373 - 379.

Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx*. Routledge, 1994.

Fisher, Mark. "What is Hauntology?", *Film Quarterly*, vol. 66, no. 1, 2012, pp. 16-24.

Gregg, Melissa and Gregory J. Seigworth, editors. "An Inventory of Shimmers." *The Affect Reader*. Duke University Press, 2010, pp. 1 - 25.

"History of CYOA." *Choose Your Own Adventure*, 2021, <https://www.cyoa.com/pages/history-of-CYOA>.

Hogan, Patrick Colm. *Affective Narratology: The Emotional Structure of Stories*. University of Nebraska Press, 2011.

Krzykawski, Michał. "J'accepte: Jacques Derrida's Cryptic Love by Unsealed Writing." *AVANT*, vol. VIII, no. 2, 2017, pp. 39-50.

Macklin, Colleen and John Sharp. *Game, Design, and Play: A Detailed Approach to Iterative Game Design*. Pearson Education, 2016.

Sampat, Elizabeth. *Empathy Engines*. E-book, n.p., 2016.

Schön, Donald A. *The Reflective Practitioner*. Basic Books, 1983.

“Tunnels & Trolls.” *Wikipedia*, 22 December 2020,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tunnels_%26_Trolls . Accessed 27 January 2021.

“The Dictionary.” *We Åker Jeep*, 2010. jeepen.org/dict/. Accessed January 27, 2021.

Walker, Anthony. “Critical Autobiography as Research.” *The Qualitative Report*, vol. 22, no. 7, 2017, pp. 1896 - 1908.

Ludography

Blackwell, Anna. *Delve*. 2020.

Chirp, James. *The Adventurer*. 2019.

Cole, Allison. *Anthology of Intimacy*. 2018.

Harrison, Jack. *Artefact*. 2019.

Hutchings, Tim. *Thousand Year Old Vampire*. 2019.

Okada, Takuma. *Alone Among the Stars*. 2018.

Smith, Taylor. *Found Parts*. 2019.

Voleti, Viditya. *A Land Once Magic*. 2020.