




ontological bleed

blurring the borders
of **fictional worlds** in
interface games

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requirements for the degree of Master of Design in Digital Futures



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1 Preface

1.1 Abstract

'ontological bleed' is a research-creation project that utilizes the development of an interface game called 'the archive' to discover emergent narrative mechanics. 'the archive' consists of a room size installation housing tangible artifacts and the database software that catalogues them. It explores the dualities of the virtual and the tangible, the fictional and the real, juxtaposing physical artifacts with their narratively augmented digital counterparts. It invites players to explore the mysteries of both domains, and creates an experience in which they enter another world as themselves, in their own bodies, with their own histories.

The game is crafted to deliberately provoke bleed, a spillover between player and character; and by mediating the gameworld through innocuous interfaces and anchoring it into an actual physical location, the game creates a metaleptic convergence between the gameworld and the actual world for players to step into. It further simulates these phenomena through the fictional history of the archive. Possible Worlds theory is used by the research paper to explain how worlds can intersect and overlap with each other, and how a person could be situated in two worlds at once.

This paper describes the mechanics that emerged through the development of 'the archive' and the experiences reported by players who visited the installation. The game itself becomes an illustrative metaphor for the narrative and ontological concepts that informed its development.

Keywords: player identification, metalepsis, bleed, narratology, possible worlds, diegetic interface, tangible interface, game studies, narrative mechanics, fragmentation

1.2 Land Acknowledgement

I was raised in the Robinson-Superior Treaty territory, the traditional lands of the Anishnaabeg and the Métis. I now live, work, and completed this thesis in the “Dish With One Spoon” territory. As put beautifully by [The Indigenous Education Council at Toronto Metropolitan University](#): “The Dish With One Spoon is a treaty between the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas and Haudenosaunee that bound them to share the territory and protect the land. Subsequent Indigenous Nations and Peoples, Europeans and all newcomers have been invited into this treaty in the spirit of peace, friendship and respect.”

1.3 Acknowledgements

Thank you to everyone who helped me work out this process through ranting for the two years this project consumed my every brain cell. Building a 10’x10’ rupture in reality is a humbling experience – I could not have done it without the enormous amount of help I received, physically and spiritually.

Special thanks to my advisors, Cindy Poremba and Emma Westecott, and Digital Futures graduate program director Simone Jones. Logan Verhoeven, Jenn Woodall, Trevor Henderson and especially Mary Verhoeven each helped me enormously in their own ways, often swooping in last minute to save me from myself. Melanie Tranchemontagne, Sarah Bermond, and everyone else who helped me with my installation, especially after I injured myself towards the end. My whole cohort, especially the Philosophers’ Corner. Jolene Simko who was a cheerleader and helped me process the illustrations in the early draft. My family and Yifat Shaik who encouraged me to go to graduate school. Everyone who came out to volunteer in the archive. The **whole planet** and **everything in it** that’s trying its best.

1.4 Artificial Intelligence Statement

No part of the art or writing for this document or the research creation project involved the use of generative AI, nor was it used to source any research or to assist ideation. Claude 4, accessed through Github Copilot, was used to assist in programming certain features of the database software.

1.5 A note on structure and voice

I am performing an act of metalepsis as I move through narrative layers in this paper, dipping between the worlds of theory, methodologies, and materials, becoming a different person with different goals and intentions while I spend time in each world. I am dragging the things I've learned from one world into another, **allowing the person I just was to bleed into the person I become in the next.**

In a paper about movement, fuzzy boundaries and change, I often needed to sketch these concepts out while researching to be able to understand them well enough to write about. These drawings are included, not only because they are artifacts of the process, but because often they capture something **impossible to express with words.**

Drafting a research paper and crafting a work of fiction cannot help but be forced into a linear experience, but building either one has not felt that way to me. I am forced to assemble this narrative in an arbitrary order to fit the format required by a repository, but I will attempt to pepper it with portals so you can follow your own curiosity and join me asynchronously. I hope that if you are not too shy, you'll share **the worlds it made in your head** with me.

1.6 Table of Contents

1 Preface.....	i
1.1 Abstract.....	i
1.2 Land Acknowledgement.....	ii
1.3 Acknowledgements.....	ii
1.4 Artificial Intelligence Statement.....	ii
1.5 A note on structure and voice.....	iii
1.6 Table of Contents.....	iv
1.7 Table of Figures.....	vi
2 Introduction.....	1
2.1 Description of Project.....	3
2.1.1 Outputs.....	5
2.1.2 Future Outputs.....	5
3 Theoretical Domain.....	7
3.1 Converging Worlds.....	7
3.1.1 Boundaries.....	7
3.1.2 The Magic Circle.....	7
3.1.3 Possible Worlds Theory.....	8
3.1.4 Metalepsis.....	9
3.1.5 Interactional convergent metalepsis.....	10
3.2 Who are you when you're in here.....	11
3.2.1 Bleed.....	11
3.2.2 Immersion and Identification.....	12
3.3 Medium, Material, and Genre.....	14
3.3.1 Diegetic Interfaces.....	14
3.3.2 Databases.....	15
3.3.3 Empty Protagonist.....	17
3.3.4 Embodiment as horror.....	19
3.3.5 Tangibility Mechanics.....	20
3.3.6 Archives.....	23
3.4 In closing.....	26
4 Methodology.....	31
4.1 Research.....	32
4.2 Prototyping.....	34
4.2.1 The Iterative Process.....	34
4.2.2 Vignettes.....	35
4.2.3 Playtesting and research participation.....	36

4.3 Material Exploration.....	36
4.4 Generative Systems.....	37
4.5 Reflective Practice.....	38
5 Development – Building Gameworlds.....	41
5.1.1 Design Pillars.....	42
5.2 Foundations – Core Mechanics.....	45
5.3 Framing – Early Prototyping.....	52
5.4 Walls and Floors – Vignette #1.....	53
5.5 Plumbing and Electrical – Vignette 2.....	57
5.6 Paint and Plaster – Vignette 3.....	61
5.7 Furnishings – Vignette #4.....	65
5.8 Vestibule – Open Archive Visitation.....	68
5.9 DFX.....	69
6 Analysis.....	71
7 Conclusions.....	74
8 Postmortem.....	75
9 Bibliography.....	78
10 Appendices.....	82
Appendix A: Glossary.....	82
Appendix B: Volunteer On-boarding Manual.....	83
Appendix C: Archive Visits.....	85
Appendix D: development blog.....	89
Appendix E: research recruitment website.....	89
Appendix F: Github.....	90
Appendix G: Related artworks.....	91
Game to make a game.....	91
process artshow.....	92
ontological bleed zine.....	93
Appendix H: Data Collection.....	95
Timeline of the Playtests.....	95
Participants.....	95
Exit Survey.....	95
Exit Interviews.....	96
Telemetry.....	96

1.7 Table of Figures

a machine for producing possible worlds.....	1	edit entry.....	52
you reach in, it reaches back.....	2	Vignette #1 - 2.....	53
the archive layers.....	4	Vignette #1 - 1.....	53
terminology of binaries and boundaries.....	7	migration.....	54
embedded story worlds.....	8	onboarding pamphlet.....	56
split ontology.....	9	Vignette 2.....	57
metalepsis.....	9	add entry page.....	58
convergent metalepsis.....	10	player artifacts -1.....	58
rook at work and play.....	12	player artifacts -2.....	58
mediated relationships.....	14	Vignette 2 camera.....	59
software as portal.....	15	artifacts photography.....	59
Orwell Screenshot.....	16	Vignette #3 - 2.....	61
Her Story Screenshot.....	16	Vignette #3 -1.....	61
fragmentation.....	17	console as split ontology.....	62
empty protagonist.....	17	console asking you for an artifact.....	62
playback notice from IMMORTALITY.....	18	connections page.....	63
depersonalization.....	19	abstract connections.....	64
physical and virtual.....	21	Vignette #4.....	65
Blue Prince Notes.....	22	corrupted entry.....	66
Grange Manor.....	24	glitches the software.....	66
OCADU archive.....	25	binding 1.....	66
Interaccess archive.....	25	binding 2.....	66
bleed through fragments.....	26	binding mechanic.....	67
methodology and methods.....	31	Open Archive Visitation.....	68
iterative process.....	33	birds eye of the archive terminal workstation.....	69
spiral iteration method.....	33	Open Archive Visitation at DFX Opening night.....	69
vignette story shape.....	34	the archive entryway at DFX.....	69
code as material.....	35	Illustration display at DFX.....	69
reflective practice.....	37	File folder artifacts.....	69
develop and rest.....	38	player contributes narrative fragments.....	74
artist eats their art.....	38	An archive is an archive.....	75
archive objects.....	41	Onboarding manual: front.....	82
vignette 4.....	45	Onboarding manual: back.....	83
light converging.....	46	convict registry.....	86
ensnared in performance.....	47	github repo.....	88
archive as ritual.....	48	game to make a game.....	89
artifacts 1.....	49	process #1.....	90
artifacts 2.....	49	process #2.....	90
conflation of the tangible.....	49	process #3 - 1.....	90
subentries.....	50	process #3 - 2.....	90
voices as ontological layers.....	51	ontological bleed zine.....	91
Early CSS tests.....	52	telemetrys 2.....	94

telemetrics 1.....	94	artifact: smelt hand.....	95
artifact: hag stone.....	95	artifact: a face.....	96
artifact: violet.....	95	artifact: teeth.....	96
artifact: irrelevant.....	95	artifact: clay head.....	96

2 Introduction

Fiction has always been about the building of imaginary worlds. Ursula K le Guin claimed to be “describing certain aspects of psychological reality in the novelist’s way, which is by inventing elaborately circumstantial lies.”¹ Fiction is a place where you step into another world from your own – it could be a place very similar to yours, but populated with people you have never and could never meet. Or, it could be immediately strange and alien, and if it is doing its job well, it becomes more familiar as you start recognizing yourself in the hearts of its characters and see your world reflected in its conflicts. **Fiction connects human beings, allowing both artist and audience to be vulnerable in a way that can otherwise be difficult to access.** It creates a space for us to spend time luxuriating in something more internal, and to generate metaphors for real experience.

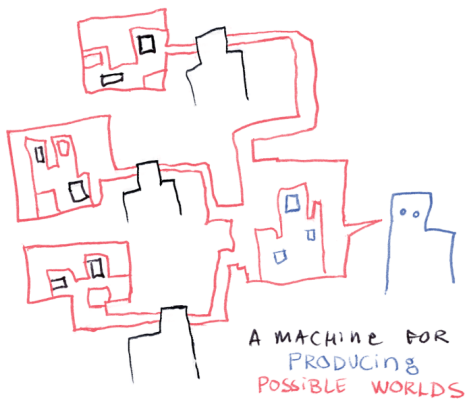


Figure i: A machine for producing possible worlds.

How do we step into these worlds? Most fiction exists as a threshold you cross when you open a book or queue up a movie. The fictional universe is clearly separated from your own, mediated by the devices and technologies it is presented on.* An author translates from however they think into whatever their medium allows, and we receive it, further translated by our own understanding. Umberto Eco calls literature “a machine for producing possible worlds”² – this imperfect translation, while often a frustration to authors, can also be a gift. **These gaps allow us to fill them with our own experience, including our own tastes, our own**

greatest passions and our own worst fears.

We usually enter a fictional world as an observer, witnessing a world but separate from it. But if the narrative moves you, that story still reaches out of the medium and gets inside if you. The stories we connect with, especially when we are young, have the power to leave significant marks on our personalities for the rest of our lives, whether we see them or not.[†]

Games and interactive fiction let us touch the story back. We may be granted some agency, and therefore responsibility, over the fate of some situation in the world, or we may

* A book is a technology. Another person using words to capture what they’ve imagined and using their voice to pass it along to you, because using languages is a technology.

† Constructing a story that will stick with someone forever is likely outside the scope of a master’s thesis, and its inclusion would be incidental and very gratifying.

only be challenged to survive until it is resolved, or investigate until it is understood. Some games may perform the fiction around you as though you've been invited onstage, while others provide systems to generate your own fictions[‡].

But again, how do we step into these worlds, and who do we become when we get there? Different media guide a reader across this threshold in their own ways, and have different narrative mechanics for situating the reader within the action. Interface games – games that remediate gameworlds entirely through a familiar desktop or mobile screen interface³ – have the **rare ability to create an experience that is intensely first person**. Rather than being given virtual eyes, as in games in which a player explores a virtual environment via first or third person avatar – in an interface game, a player is set right in front of software that could very well have been used by the characters it describes, bringing the gameworld right into the room with the player. What other affordances might this genre have for provoking the sense that the gameworld is surrounding players? And what happens when that world is pulled out even further, creating an entire room that becomes a tangible interface for the gameworld?

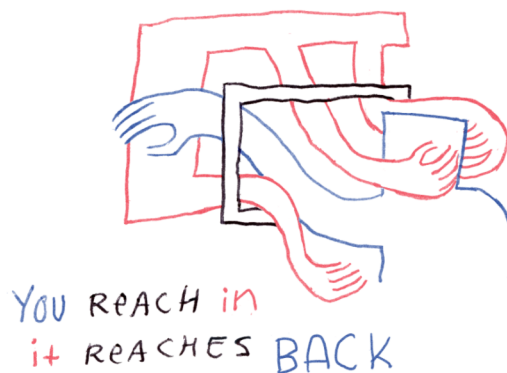


Figure ii: Game as bidirectional portal.

In this paper I discuss the affordances for gameplay and narrative design that I discovered while crafting an interface game with tangible narrative artifacts.⁴ In addition to provoking sensations of the game bleeding out into the world, and the player moving inside of it, I have discovered opportunities to express these concepts within the fiction. Entering a fictional world, thoughtlessly putting parts of yourself inside of it to fill in the gaps, allowing it to leave parts of itself in you is such an every-day, nothing occurrence, it's easy to take for granted. So I have made a weird fiction game that draws attention to this sinister process, to draw your attention to the fact that it is happening to you.

[‡] For examples of games that generate fictions, one can think of TTRPGs, which provide fragments of worlds and the mechanics to stitch them together through decision and randomness; or the generative environments of *Minecraft* or *The Sims*, in which gamers may create narrativize their adventures and share with each other online.

This thesis describes what emerged from the process of simulating the concepts I pulled from the theoretical domain, and how they were nurtured through prototyping. I attempt to translate these findings back into the conceptual realm where they were born by describing them here. I asked myself these questions:

What affordances may emerge by simulating metaleptic transversal in the fragmented narrative provided by an interface database game? How can these affordances be used to blur the borders of the fictional gameworld and the players identity within the fiction?

How might the inclusion of tangible artifacts and gameplay mechanics support the experience that a player is existing in both worlds at once? Furthermore, how does prompting the player to create and add their own artifacts to the gameworld to push integration and investment further?

I am looking to create mechanical metaphors for the abstract, dipping between the conceptual and the concrete. The chapter 'Theoretical Domain' pulls examples from the existing media landscape to describe and illustrate concepts from game studies and literary theory, using the language of narratology and 'possible worlds' theory to describe the phenomena ontological bleed I am attempting to simulate in my creative work. As such, my research is not an isolated process that simply provides context for creation, it is an integral part of the creative process – **a material, though intangible, as concrete as paint or plaster or code**. I use a methodology is founded in creation-as-research,⁵ reflective practice,⁶ and iterative process⁷, which involves looping through research, digital and physical fabrication and reflection through a cycle of vignettes, pulling lessons from each realm I step into to inform the direction of the next.

2.1 Description of Project

'the archive' is an interface game that catalogues evidence of an ontological transgression. Physical artifacts are annotated within the database software by previous researchers and archivists, and their entries reveal their varying interpretations of the evidence they collected and their eventual fates. The archive is permeated by entities associated with a reality that is encroaching on our own – much like how **fictional gameworlds might intersect with ours, with the player as pivot point, existing at once in the actual world and the virtual world of the fiction**.

Players engage by cross-referencing between digital databases and analog artifact catalogues, performing rituals, note-taking, and corresponding with [NPCs](#) to investigate the mystery unfolding through a combination of digital and tangible mechanics and assets.

'the archive' explores the fuzzy boundaries between different worlds – the players' actual world, physically sitting at the computer, the current state of the archive they can access, including both its tangible artifacts in the installation and their narratively augmented digital counterparts, a glimpse into different fictional time periods from which researchers are leaving notes, and the flatland – the world from which the entities originate.



Figure iii: the archive layers

from them, the entities using the access they've earned and the identity they formed to manipulate the gameworld without their input or consent.

To discuss the fuzzy boundaries between the fictional and the actual in interface games, I'll be drawing from research into [convergent interactional metalepsis](#) as coined by Ensslin and Bell.⁸ This is a refinement that speaks about ontological borders in addition to purely narrative ones as originally intended by narratology theorist Gérard Genette⁹. Ensslin and Bell use 'possible worlds' frameworks to discuss how multiple worlds can coexist, extending possible worlds concepts established by Marie-Laure Ryan¹⁰.

'ontological bleed' uses the development of 'the archive' to explore how digital and tangible [diegetic](#) interfaces support experiences of metalepsis – a sense of moving between different worlds – and bleed¹¹ – the experience of spillover between the game and reality. I discuss a player identity type that is made possible by interface games in which players play as themselves.

At the climax of the gameplay, players are asked to forge their own artifact to add to the archive catalogue. They are provided with tools and supplies to do so, can capture photographs of their artifact using the archives' camera, and can write metadata describing the object and how it relates to the narrative as they understand it.

As players establish their fictionalized identity, they are given increasing responsibility in the gameworld, only to have their fictionalized identity split away

2.1.1 Outputs

'The archive' was presented in a series of immersive installations featuring the physical artifacts in the archive installation, alongside versions of the database software. Each installation, referred to as a 'Vignette', contained a self-contained version of the narrative. Four Vignettes were presented, plus an 'Open Archive Visitation' version that worked a gameplay demo. The final Vignette and demo were again presented at DFX 2026, the final graduate exhibition. Players were asked to volunteer for a shift in the archive, helping migrate damaged data from a backup, and given a 'volunteer on-boarding manual', which provided further information about the 'restoration project' and instructed them how to access the archive, which they were encouraged to mark up and take home with them.

Players who wished to participate in the research allowed their play session to be recorded and captured through telemetrics, and completed an exit interview or survey to share how they felt about their experience, and their interpretation of the narrative. They had the opportunity to donate their 'forgeries' back into the database for future iterations.

The end product of this exploration is the discovered narrative techniques and the experiences they provoked in players, in addition to the software or the installation themselves.

2.1.2 Future Outputs

Eventually, a stand-alone version of the archive database will be developed and be available for online download. This future version will have the vignettes stitched back together, so that installation attendees can revisit the world with the memories of the physical archives, and new players will be invited to allow the world into their own homes. The physical mechanics will be adapted for players to use their own materials.

1. Ursula K. LeGuin, "Introduction," in *Left Hand of Darkness* (Penguin Publishing Group, 1976).
2. Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Indiana University Press, 1979), 127.
3. Finn Dawson and Cassandra Barkman, "Interface Games as Microgenre: Definition and Thematic Investigation," *Television & New Media*, ahead of print, January 7, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1177/15274764251410591>.
4. Donald A. Norman, *Affordances, Conventions, and Design*, 1999; Donald A. Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, Revised and expanded ed (Basic Books, 2013); "Introduction," in *How Artifacts Afford: The Power and Politics of Everyday Things*, by Jenny L. Davis (The MIT Press, 2020), <https://direct.mit.edu/books/monograph/4865/How-Artifacts-AffordThe-Power-and-Politics-of>.

5. Owen Chapman and Kim Sawchuk, "Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis and 'Family Resemblances,'" *Canadian Journal of Communication* 37, no. 1 (2012): 5–26, <https://doi.org/10.22230/cjc.2012v37n1a2489>.
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7. Colleen Macklin and John Sharp, *Games, Design and Play: A Detailed Approach to Iterative Game Design* (Addison-Wesley, 2016), <https://www.oreilly.com/library/view/games-design-and/9780134392233/>.
8. Astrid Ensslin and Alice Bell, "Interactional Metalepsis," in *Digital Fiction and the Unnatural: Transmedial Narrative Theory, Method, and Analysis* (Ohio State University Press, 2021), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.12250637>; Alice Bell, "Interactional Metalepsis and Unnatural Narratology," *Narrative* 24, no. 3 (2016): 294–310, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2016.0018>.
9. Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Cornell University Press, 1980).
10. Marie-Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttv622>; Marie-Laure Ryan, *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory* (Indiana University Press, 1992), <https://iupress.org/9780253350046/possible-worlds-artificial-intelligence-and-narrative-theory/>.
11. Sarah Lynne Bowman, "Bleed The Spillover Between Player and Character," *Nordic Larp*, March 2, 2015, <https://nordiclarp.org/2015/03/02/bleed-the-spillover-between-player-and-character/>.

3 Theoretical Domain

This chapter will begin by covering the more abstract theoretical concepts from the literature surveyed. I will then move on to more grounded topics, covering the media and game genre being used to create 'the archive'.

3.1 Converging Worlds

3.1.1 Boundaries

This project involves crossing and blurring borders, and establishing language to describe the different regions will help discuss these transitions and juxtapositions. English is highly metaphorical and many of these words can be used interchangeably in other contexts, even within the literature cited.

tangible, or physical – something that can be touched. As opposed to **virtual** – which may include the digital, but also the conceptual or imagined.

actual – existing in reality, assumed to be factual, as best we understand it. As opposed to **fictional**, which is intentionally invented.

concrete – having definite and explicit detail that combines into an unambiguous whole. As opposed to **abstract**, which is indistinct, amorphous, or vague.

3.1.2 The Magic Circle

The ideology of games as a 'magic circle' in which games are sacred space and in which the gameworld is wholly separate from the real world¹ has often been criticized, and rightly so. The idea that there exists any possible place in which nothing is brought in, and nothing is taken



TANGIBLE
ARTIFACT | VIRTUAL
COUNTER PART

ARTIST PERFORMS
FICTIONAL CHARACTER



OFFERS ACTUAL ARTIFACT
AUGMENTED WITH FICTIONAL
QUALITIES

PLAYER BECOMES BOTH

CONCRETE FIGURE
ON AN ABSTRACT
BACKGROUND



Figure iv: terminology of binaries and boundaries.

back out again would be impossible when considering the complexities of social relations, cultural associations and players' lived experiences.²

I will be using the term 'magic circle' here, not to argue that it is true, but as a shorthand to discuss where the expected edges of the gameplay experiences are being drawn. . I believe this use of the term to describe these phenomenological borders will be clearest, and help in conversation about how these edges can be made deliberately nebulous.

3.1.3 Possible Worlds Theory

'Possible worlds' began as a philosophical framework for discussing the potential and mechanics of alternative universes coexisting with our own.³ It was picked up by narratology theorists to discuss fiction, and so further goes into making distinctions between the actual and imaginary, how fictional characters can still have statements made about them be 'true' or 'false' despite their fictionality.⁴ It has language to speak about imaginary worlds in relation to the actual, and how storyworlds may contain their own secondary worlds.

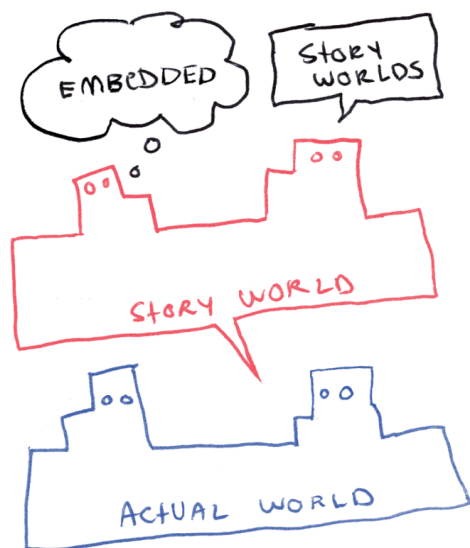


Figure v: embedded story worlds.

Here an example of a simple 'possible worlds' framework, based largely on Marie-Laure Ryan's proposed system in "Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory"⁵ and Ensslin and Bell's "Digital Fiction and the Unnatural"⁶:

Actual World – The real world where the players are located. As far as we know, there is only one.

The Storyworld, Gameworld or the Textual Actual World – The world believed to be real by the characters in the fiction.

Embedded Storyworld⁷ or Textual Alternative World – A world that exists within the fiction alongside but subordinate to the primary storyworld, such as a fiction-within-the-fiction or a dream.[§]

§ Some other fun worlds:

F-Universes – A type of textual alternative world, a dream or fantasy. Ryan gives Wonderland in *Alice in Wonderland* as an example.

Narratorial actual world – What the narrator presents as fact, if she is to be believed.

A world may have a **split ontology**, in which the story world has multiple regions of reality with their own rules and logic – for example, the sacred and the profane, or the realms of the living and the dead.⁸

In Ryan's framework, the many planets of Ursula K LeGuin would all exist in all one storyworld, despite spanning many galaxies. But would a place like Narnia count as a split ontology or an F-Universe like Wonderland? What about a proposed 4th dimensional community, like the one described by Carl Sagan, in which two communities occupy the same space but become near-invisible to each other due to their dimensional perspectives?⁹

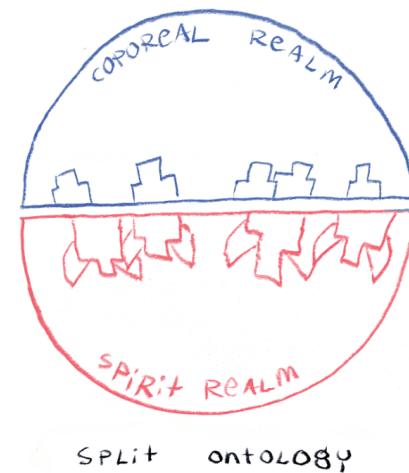


Figure vi: split ontology.

3.1.4 Metalepsis

Initially coined by French literary theorist Gérard Genette as part of his narratological framework for literary studies in 1980, metalepsis is a narrative mechanic in which a character moves between two or more narrative levels within the text. For example, a narrator descending to enter a fictional text within their world, or a character implied to be fictional within the world ascending to appear within the main text, like a hologram escaping the holodeck.¹⁰ Metalepsis has since been expanded to allow for crossing the actual-fictional boundary, by addressing the reader directly or otherwise breaking the fourth wall.¹¹

Literary theorist Marie-Laure Ryan expanded on metalepsis to include crossing ontologically distinct *worlds*, rather than only narrative levels¹². Using the language of possible worlds, metalepsis can discuss the **actual world and the game storyworld coexisting, and a player or character crossing between them**¹³.

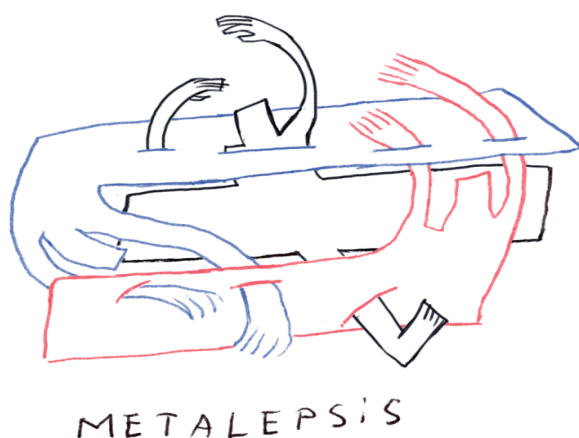


Figure vii: metalepsis.

Digital fiction, including video games, are especially well suited to this form of metalepsis, as they allow for **interactional metalepsis**. Not only does the text reach out to address the reader, but the reader can reach back into the text, through the mechanics provided by the hardware and software.¹⁴ This form of metalepsis is considered the default in interactive media.¹⁵ Metalepsis can be a helpful term to discuss

this standard interactive experience, but a game may also generate metaleptic effects that are less routine.

3.1.5 Interactional convergent metalepsis

Convergent metalepsis is a form of metalepsis experienced during games in which the storyworld is anchored into actual locations, causing a “blending of worlds” to occur.¹⁶ Depending on the format of the locative convergence, the entire actual world may be augmented with qualities of the storyworld for the duration of the game, for example in AR games like *Pokemon Go*, in which actual world map data is augmented with details of the storyworld. Or, the actual world and the storyworld may only partially overlap in a precise location that has been augmented with physical or digital game content, as though creating a portal between the two universes.

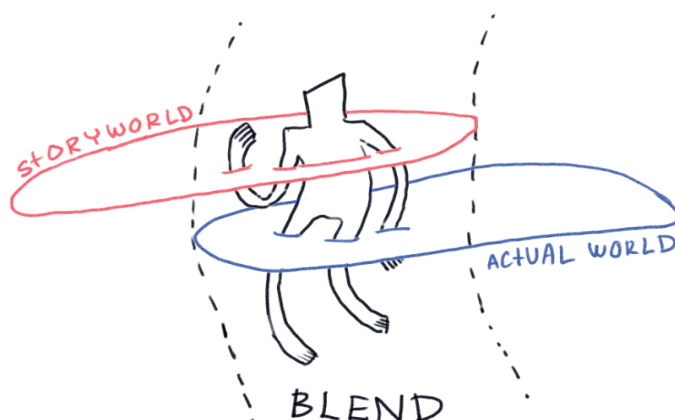


Figure viii: Interactional convergent metalepsis.

Traditionally, a fictional/actual ontological metalepsis would happen the first moment of gameplay – but gameworlds that are placed in real, physical locations **blur the ontological aspect** of the ‘magic circle.’ Players become unsure (and in some cases suspicious) of where the real world ends and the gameworld begins. Generally, players are not being deceived and are well aware that the setting they’ve wandered into is fictional.** The uncanniness of these convergences, and the performance required by players to “play along” is part of their appeal.¹⁷ These convergences create a sense that the mundane world has become imbued

** YMMV. My initial fascination with these narratively augmented locations was [visiting an art piece](#) that made the ethically-grey choice to not inform visitors of its fictionality. This was a little mean, and I felt very foolish, and have never stopped thinking about what a mystical experience I was tricked into having.

with a mystical quality. While most videogames allow for readers to psychologically project themselves into a gameworld, games structured around a locative convergence instead make it feel as though **the gameworld is intruding into the actual world** to meet the player.¹⁸

3.2 Who are you when you're in here

3.2.1 Bleed

Bleed, another approach for thinking about player movement between the game and the actual world is taken from the [TTRPG](#) and [LARP](#) communities. It describes a phenomenon in which states spill over between player and character, actual world and storyworld, which can cause shifts in a player's perception of themselves.¹⁹

The most well recognized type of bleed is emotional bleed, and it is associated with an overinvolvement²⁰ that can compromise a player's ability to separate their own feelings from those of their characters. This can cause discomfort and errors of judgment. But these experiences may be deliberately sought out, either for their own enjoyment or to deliberately manipulate a player's sense of self. For example, using **the safer space of fiction** to tackle uncomfortable topics that would be difficult to confront and reintegrate in the actual world, such as processing trauma²¹ or exploring gender identity²².

Bleed is bidirectional. Sarah Bowman describes it as:

Bleed comes in two major forms: *bleed-in* – when the emotions, thoughts, relationship dynamics, and physical states of the player affect the character – and *bleed-out*, the opposite process. A *bleed feedback loop* is also observable, when it becomes difficult to tell where the player begins and the character ends. (emphasis original.)²³

Kjell Hedgard Hugaas identifies seven distinct types of bleed.²⁴ In addition to *emotional* bleed, the types of most interest to this project are *Identity*, concerning "sense of self and our multiplicities of identities"²⁵; *Memetic*, concerning cognitive constructs including the transfer ideas and convictions; and *Procedural*, concerning motor skills and bodily states^{††}.

†† Procedural bleed has much in common with Game Transfer Phenomena (GTP) – interesting, but outside the scope of this paper.

Hugaas also establishes a *bleed perception threshold*. While most bleed is subtle enough that a player may not recognize that they are being affected, at a certain point the threshold is met that they can self-report that they feel changed by the game experience.²⁶

I'll be using the term *ontological bleed* to refer to the *player's perception* of the same phenomenon happening on an ontological level during or after gameplay.²⁷ Alice Bell's concept of *ontological resonance* is similar – she defines it as “a phenomenon in which reading/viewing/playing a fictional work can result in a prolonged response and aura of significance which is generated by perceived bidirectional ontological transfers between the actual world and a storyworld both during and after the experience.”²⁸ However, ontological resonance can be passive and triggered by non-interactive media, whereas *bleed* is a term stemming from role-play – immersion and even interaction aren't enough to trigger it, it requires sustained performance.

The difference between bleed and metalepsis can become murky when juxtaposed this way, as they have a lot in common. The distinction is that bleed refers to *gameplay* – you may set a rook on a chessboard, but that does not mean you are actively playing chess. It is a movement that takes place outside the magic circle, though your gameplay experience may inform your impulse to place it on black or white. Metalepsis refers to *gameworlds* – if I move that rook from the chessboard onto a backgammon board, that could be metalepsis in an extremely abstract narrative, regardless whether the transition happens within the context of gameplay.



Figure ix: rook takes his work frustrations out on his gameplay opponents.

3.2.2 Immersion and Identification

For bleed to be possible, a player must identify with their ludic self – the person they become while playing. According to Ryan, to identify with their ludic selves, players must experience both concentration and narrative immersion. Narrative immersion is to be “fully within” a story. It is cognitive, rather than the sensory immersion sought by [VR](#) or high fidelity graphics. Concentration immersion is to be fully focused on the activity, blocking out all other distractions.²⁹ Games with a locative aspect also deal with spatial immersion, the sensation of ontological convergence when the gameworld and the actual world are anchored together.³⁰

When players enter a fictional world, they are “recentered” within it.³¹ This is not specific to interactive media, any fiction can absorb a reader in this way. **Emotional immersion in a narrative makes readers feel as though the stakes are real, but a game also asks players to also behave as though their actions have consequences.**

Papale³² and Pearce³³ both state that to identify with a character in traditional media is to sympathize or empathize with them. Video games allow for a third aspect, in which players can also *project* into characters, in which a player's personality, values and choices “flow” into the avatar, and “agency creates a container for players to inhabit.”³⁴ Interactive fiction may give players a new body to occupy in the gameworld, whether as complex as a virtual avatar or as simple as a mouse cursor representing the players will. As Ryan puts it, “readers will interpret the cursor on the screen as the representation of their virtual body in the virtual world.”³⁵

3.3 Medium, Material, and Genre

3.3.1 Diegetic Interfaces

As previously stated, an interface game is one in which access to the gameworld is mediated entirely through [UI](#),³⁶ often simulating whole operating systems or single software applications, such as databases, email clients, text messaging services and internet browsers. The software is diegetic, meaning that it exists in the gameworld on the same narrative layer as the fictional characters, rather than as an overlay on top that would only be seen by the player. This gives the illusion that the characters described by the interface exist in the actual world of the player, rather than the computer screen being a window into a separate distant world.

Digital monism is the idea that in the contemporary world, the digital and the non-digital world dissolve into each other, as people largely exist in both spaces at once at all times, via the little rectangles in our pockets. Intimate conversations with close friends and family slip nearly invisibly between in-person conversation and text-chat. Our experience of our globalized world is largely mediated by interfaces, and while our trust in what we see online is variable, we have a familiarity and literacy with learning truth through interface. Bell states that “it is irrelevant whether our experiences originate online or offline” and that this blending of the two worlds creates an “ontological ambiguity.” If a significant portion of our real life unfolds digitally, and we are already primed to form and maintain emotionally significant human connections through digitally mediated interactions, then fictional mediated interactions can take on the same ontological status.

This ontological ambiguity is an actual world problem – everything from romance scams to AI generated deepfake news, and our ability to identify the disingenuous lags behind the technological innovations of bad actors. **We know on some level that wholeheartedly trusting digitally mediated experiences is not safe.**



Figure x: If your fictional relationships are mediated in the same way as your actual relationships, do they feel any different?

Horror games form a large portion of the interface game genre, and even non-horror titles tend to involve a sense of mistrust and unease. Many interface games deal with subjects of surveillance – often in the position of the voyeur. In *Orwell*, or *Hypnospace Outlaw*, both examples in which players are hired to monitor and report on NPCs online activities, or searching through police interrogation footage, as in *Her Story*.³⁷

Other games use uncertainty to imply the software that is showing the fictional world itself has become corrupted by and behaves in destabilizing ways, which Krampe and Thon describes in *Videogames and Metareferences* as “transgressive metaleptic strategies.”³⁸ For example, both the malevolent computer virus that effects the players actual computer files in *Imscared*³⁹ or the footage-hidden-within-the-footage in *IMMORTALITY*⁴⁰ both imply that it is the software is glitching because **it is unable to contain something powerful and potentially dangerous.**

This style of metalepsis is metareferential – it draws attention to the fact that the story world you are visiting is mediated, contained in a piece of software playing on your device.⁴¹ This

could have the distancing effect of making the story world feel more artificial, or it may have the opposite effect: **it is aware of itself on the same plane of reality on which you also exist, and it can see you.** By admitting it is contained, it in a way escapes containment and becomes a part of your wider reality.



Figure xi: You've discovered software that allows something through to where you are, in your vulnerable flesh.

A diegetic interface, by proposing to exist in the gameworld and the actual world simultaneously, supports metaleptic convergence. Even without any other tangible geographic anchors, **just by existing as itself in both worlds it becomes a portal through which the player looks in on one world from another**, but includes the players and the hardware it runs on as part of its sphere of influence.

3.3.2 Databases

Many interface games take the form of a database, presenting a near open world of multimodal fragments that can be categorized with metadata. In the case of *Her Story* and *IMMORTALITY*, these fragments are segments of FMV (full motion video.) In *Hyperspace Outlaw* and *Orwell*, the database is populated by hyperlinks to websites where NPCs have spent time, in addition to a suite of other tools, including office communication, profiling and news reports.

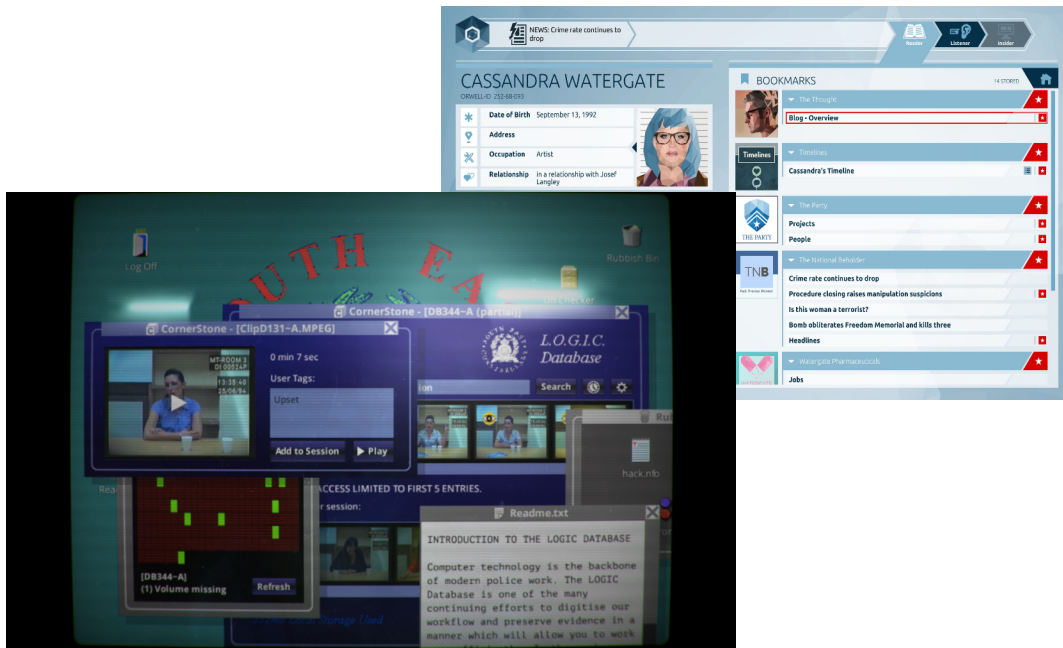


Figure xii: Left: Screenshot from *Her Story*, featuring a [diegetic](#) operating system that provides access to multiple windows, apps and games.

Right: Screenshot from *Orwell* featuring a page that indexes Cassandra's profile including an index of websites identified as holding the currently available evidence of sedition and terrorist activity.

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Database games can be open world, with all content accessible from the beginning, but more often there will be limited starting entries and a mechanic for unlocking additional entries. Each fragment, regardless of the media it takes the form of, provides an isolated chunk of narrative. These databases allow users to sort and sift the material following their own curiosity, to make narrative connections between the fragments potentially beyond what could have been anticipated by the author. Many of these database interface games use investigation as a primary mechanic – making cognitive connections between the fragments is part of the core game loop. The game may confirm your connection as legitimate by acknowledging them in story, or simply allow understanding to be its own reward.

Databases are by nature a collection of fragments, usually referred to as entries. The fragments are related by the topic of the database itself, and they may be further related by metadata – properties that each entry has but whose value will differ, for example, the date it was added to the database. Databases may allow for users to sort or filter its contents by this metadata, allowing for different linear presentations.

Fragmentation and Emergent Narrative

While databases are an unusual literary device, fragmentary literature has been around for at least hundreds of years before common era.⁴²

Nigel Krauth says in *Fragmented Narratives: Minding the Textual Gap*: “a piece of fragmented sequential writing might be fashioned in such a way as to hand over a significant part of its meaning making to the reader,”⁴³ and that **the ‘gaps’ left between the fragments are naturally and unconsciously filled in by readers to create meaning.**

It is this specificity of content, and the “intensified participation” required to navigate fragmentary texts that can make them such a powerful medium for storytelling, and for allowing players to see themselves in a text. If a piece of literature is a machine for producing possible worlds, a piece of **fragmentary literature produces**

worlds with wide possibility spaces, as each reader fills in these gaps with their own unique content.

Crafting fragmentary literature requires striking a balance between providing enough fragments to generate a cohesive narrative, while allowing for novel emergent properties to surface.

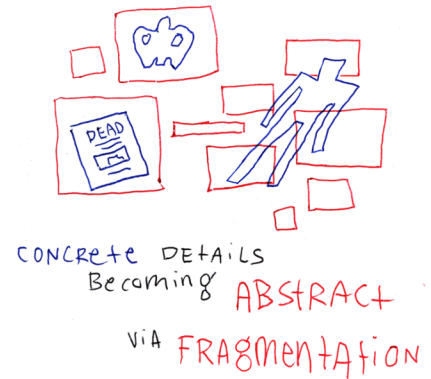


Figure xiii: fragmentation.

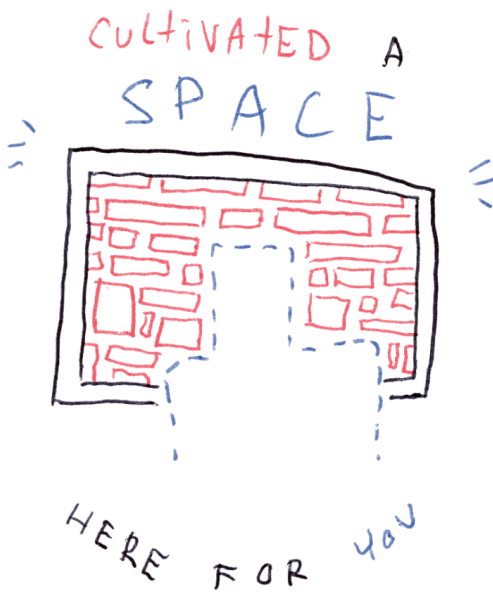


Figure xiv: An interface game leaves an empty space for a player to occupy.

3.3.3 Empty Protagonist

How do bleed and metalepsis work in an interface game, in which players are playing as themselves in their own bodies? I am calling this an *empty protagonist* – **a space left for players they can occupy with their own selves and their own histories.**

Unlike other video game genres, in which a player is embodying a protagonist with a preexisting history in the gameworld, or a role-playing game in which they construct an avatar to best suit who they desire to be, an interface game invites players to participate using their own bodies.

Most interface games avoid giving the player-character any detail, to avoid any dissonance with the actual player's identity. Theresa Krampe states in *No Longer Safe Before the Screen?:* "[T]he player is not supposed to imagine themselves in the shoes of a fictional proxy, but rather as a direct participant in the events represented on screen... the player essentially acts and thinks as a user of a computer. They recenter to their actual body before the screen; a body that physically interacts with the hardware and software of the computer."⁴⁴

Because the lack of projected virtual body into the storyworld that is rather unique, interface games are one of the few opportunities^{##} to allow players to imagine they are playing with their own memories and personal histories. Of course, this can only be an invitation – players have agency on how sincerely they engage with any type of fiction.

At most, these games may include a very lean pretext story about a fictional employment that contextualizes tasks for players. In *Her Story*, the player is positioned as an investigator, searching through police interview clips to discover the sequence of events the character is being interrogated about.

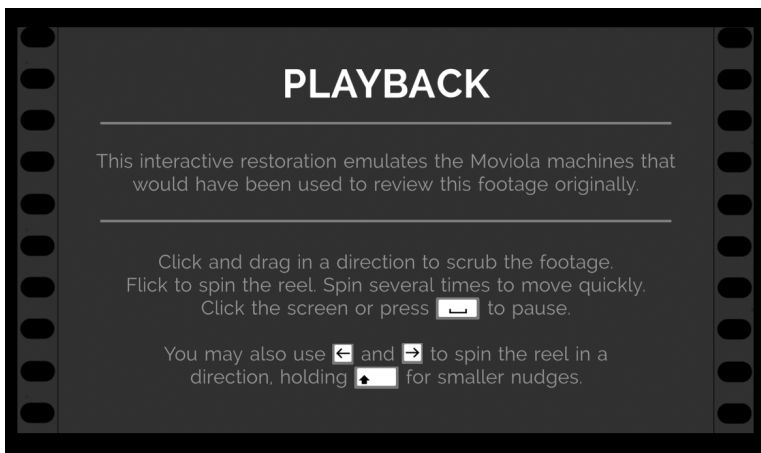


Figure xv: Frame from *IMMORTALITY* implying the game is an emulator for a physical film editing tool. Used with permission of *Half Mermaid*.

Barlow's later game, *IMMORTALITY*,⁴⁵ frames itself as editing software – the player is given no context as to why they have access to this database, there is no in-game goal assigned to players, and no incentive to explore the database other than the players own curiosity. Outside of a handful of pop ups, the player is not addressed or acknowledged as a character at all. It is only later that the characters within the fiction turn to the camera and begin to address the player directly.

'Possible worlds' traditionally has strict logic that no character can exist in more than one world at a time. They are either *trans-world* identities – moving from one to another, or *counterpointhood* – two characters in different worlds that are counterparts of each other.⁴⁶ Storyworlds in which players are spatially navigating a digital environment, or hypertext fiction, where one executes agency by clicking hyperlinks, the mouse cursor represents the counterpart for the player.⁴⁷ But in an interface game, the software itself exists within the

^{##} Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) and Escape Rooms would also qualify and have much in common with interface games, but the complicating qualities of these gameplay genres put them outside the scope of this paper.

storyworld – it is not a border that is intended to disappear once immersed, so a cursor only needs to represent itself.

Bell says that digital fiction allows for third possibility, in which players exist in both worlds at once, that they can become ‘double-situated’⁴⁸ within a metaleptic convergence. The player is at once both their actual self and their ludic self.^{§§}

This ‘double-situatedness’ “...creates ambiguity about the ontological status of the events that occur while playing the games, and consequently upends the player’s immunity to real-life consequences.”⁴⁹ Any danger posed to them by the gameworld is directed at them in the actual world, there is **no virtual body to absorb the blow**. The threat will often take the form of any of the actual dangers we fear from interfaces, but even in the case of unnatural or impossible threats, the evidence is still being presented with the same ontological status as anything else we learn about the world through interfaces.

3.3.4 Embodiment as horror

Games designers are criticized should their games be accused of triggering *ludonarrative dissonance*⁵⁰ – situations where the players projected self cannot behave in a fashion the player identifies with. Much like the annoyance or nausea caused by VR headsets when the sensory inputs are misaligned to physiological expectation, ludonarrative dissonance makes players feel as though the world they are in and the person they are embodying is suddenly unreal and defying expectation, or that they are being mechanically prohibited from realizing the themes of the narrative.

But why should this be something to be avoided? Horror has always intentionally played with these uncanny valleys. A human figure failing at mimesis – **looking slightly wrong, moving slightly wrong** – brings to mind the dead, or bodies riddled with disease. Physics behaving strangely is implied to be magic or supernatural intervention. Being unable to trust that your body will do what you tell it to, that your agency will produce the results you intend, is an essential fear that all humans share on some level. It is something that we are all promised to experience as we age.



Figure xvi:
Depersonalization.

§§ In my reading, I often came across a related concept, the “doubly deictic ‘you’” address in second-person narratives. While I am pulling from non-game literary theory, the pronoun aspect of this is less helpful when applied to videogames, as it’s within conventions to address the player as “you” in a game, even when the player has an avatar or player-protagonist counterpart.

These effects are something avoided in video game design because we are attempting to simulate life as it is as best possible, and these uncanny valleys are avoided as failures of simulation that will be resented by the players. But literature and film have long wielded these glitches with intention – glitches in the reality of the worlds they present, and glitches in the media they use to portray them. They make us feel that the story is **bleeding into our world and damaging the portal we're witnessing it through**. In *Ghostwatch*⁵¹, the television broadcasting equipment becomes damaged, and the transmission cuts out. In *House of Leaves*, the footnotes begin eating the text as the authors become absorbed into the distorted realities of their investigations. To use a videogame example, *Doki Doki Literature Club!*⁵², an NPC begins damaging the game files of her rivals and requests you back her data up somewhere safe. In interface games, these threats are intimidating because of player's double-situatedness makes their actual, physical bodies vulnerable to metaleptic attack.⁵³

So why not ludonarrative dissonance? Done effectively, a player who has been recentered within a narrative could experience depersonalization – a cleaving of identification from one's body, mind and action, a sense of hanging above or below the world and unable to rejoin it. Depersonalization is a miserable experience in reality, but people are drawn to horror fiction specifically to explore uncomfortable experiences in a safe and measured setting. They may even seek them out with the intention of processing situations they struggle to confront in their reality. It is a form of **appropriating bleed as a therapeutic technique when undertaken with intention**.⁵⁴

3.3.5 Tangibility Mechanics

Interface games always come with a tangible component – by being both actual and fictional software, the hardware on which the software is displayed, and the players own bodies, are **automatically incorporated into a metaleptic convergence**. But an interface game could benefit from having additional tangible elements to expand the convergence further.

Digital monism, as stated previously, means for the average person today, our digitally mediated experiences can be just as 'real' as our offline experience, and the boundary between the two can become "blurred if not appear to be completely dissolved."⁵⁵ However, people still have a bias to conflate the physical with the actual, perceiving it as having a stronger indexical linkage to reality,⁵⁶ despite the fact that forgeries and identity theft existed long before the digital. Games that incorporate physical locations⁵⁷ and tangible artifacts have a powerful potential for ontological resonance and metaleptic convergence.

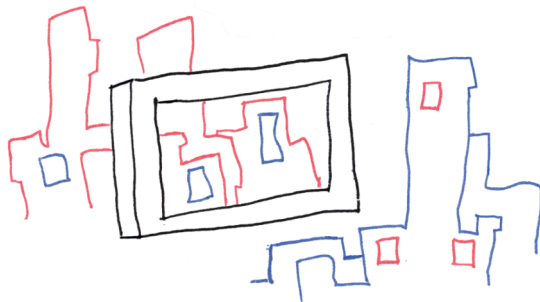
Embodied cognition

Alan Dix describes physicality as having a “fundamental singularity of time and space”, as well as visibility of state and a directness of effort – your manipulation of a physical object is immediate and apparent, with no temporal distortion in its effects.⁵⁸ He says that this physical interaction is an essential aspect of embodied cognition, and the sense of an artifact impacts back on the ‘self-hood’ – “All of these are deeply embodied views where internal self-hood is intimately derived from or tied to external body-hood.”⁵⁹

This tangibility supports the felt experience of the storyworld being a blended extension of the players actual world. Creating cognitive connections between physical assets that can be sensed and touched with a players actual body, and then seeing those artifacts reflected and augmented in digital interface, creates a support structure for ontological bleed to take root.

Diegetic narrative tangibles

Ryan states that a basic condition of immersion is the “disappearance of the computer from active consciousness”⁶⁰ – however, in the context of an interface game, the computer itself becomes a tangible element of the storyworld, and the player *should* be actively aware of it – it is part of the convergence that incorporates the player into itself.



bits of the PHYSICAL
BROUGHT into the VIRTUAL
AND VICE VERSA

Figure xvii: *The physical brought into the virtual*

When a storyworld incorporates tangible elements that can be touched and held by the reader, it anchors that aspect of the narrative in the actual world. The computer monitor displaying diegetic interface software is just one example, but any physical artifact that refers to itself within the narrative can have a similar effect.

In “The Narrative Worlds and Multimodal Figures of House of Leaves”, Alice Gibbons makes the case for the physical novel of House of Leaves becoming a diegetic artifact, as it refers to its own nature as a novel. Editors who formatted the text of the other authors, authors who are characters and participate in the story⁶¹. This means the text is metareferential- it refers to itself not just as a story, but as a published book – a book that also exists and is available for purchase in both the storyworld and the actual world. The reader, by handling the novel, physically turning it to follow its many twisting passages, and writing their own notes in it at the points they are prompted to do so, becomes a character in the storyworld on the same ontological level as the other fictional characters. Gibbons refers to

the book as a “pivot” between the two worlds.⁶² “[T]he book as an object is a mediating artefact that evokes, and enables a shift into, its imaginative world.”⁶³

Harley et al. define a framework for tangible narrative systems that “bridge the gap” between the gameworld and the actual, “carry narrative meaning that the user interprets visually and through tangible interaction” and exist as “evocative artifacts pulled directly from the storyworld.”^{64***}

Their framework categorizes tangible narrative systems within seven categories, such as: Are the tangibles diegetic? A diegetic tangible “does not simply *represent* a story component, it is that story component.”⁶⁵ (emphasis original.) **A diegetic tangible creates a metaleptic convergence.**

Other questions are: How does the object position the user within the narrative? Does the user become a character within the storyworld, or do they exist outside of it? Is it simply exploratory, reconstructing or rearranging events, or do they have the ability to “alter the state of the storyworld, leaving a traceable history?” And finally, what is the narrative function of the tangible object – is it purely representational, or does it have interactive functionality, whether for navigation, decision-making, or as an authoring tool?⁶⁶

Harley et al. report that tangible storytelling systems tend to position players as external exploratory narrators, rather than agents that can make choices with clear consequences and affect ontological change. They state that there is potential for more exploration in this area.⁶⁷

Keepsake Games & Personal Artifacts

If tangible narrative artifacts embody cognition and anchor the gameworld to the actual world through the players own senses, what is the effect of having players craft their own artifacts?

Many videogames lend themselves to the generation of personal artifacts, simply by having complex enough systems that require note-taking, and choosing not to include tools to do so within the software. These notes are not necessarily diegetic, though they may take the same form they might have if the player were really inside the gameworld. They represent a personalized concentration of effort and affection, and these

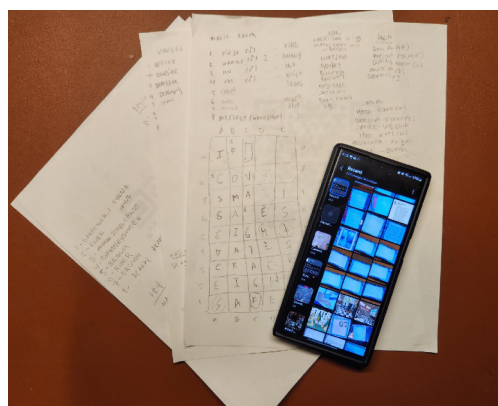


Figure xviii: The artists copious notes for *Blue Prince*. 2025. Photo by author.

*** The tangible storytelling systems discussed by Harley et al. are physical objects *embedded* with digital capabilities. However, their framework works just as well for non-digital objects that *augment* digital storytelling, which is how I am using it here.

artifacts continue to exist not only outside of the gameworld, but [outside of gameplay](#) – a **tangible memory of our gameplay experience that has the potential of giving a sense memory when encountered later.**

Games that include mechanics that allow players to generate their own content can be considered an extension of the idea of a fragmentary narrative – the story provides a gap, and prompts the player with how to fill it, guiding their creativity so as not need to start from a blank page. But it is the players that are bringing their own identities into what they choose to make, so **their game experience becomes hyperpersonalized.** Having players do this in the physical world, rather than directly into the software, means that they are bringing the storyworld into the physical world through their own agency, not simply entering an augmented location prepared for them by the designer. There is temporal immediacy of a gameobject coming into existence during gameplay, in the physical world.

An excellent example of this mechanic is in the Keepsake games of Shing Yin Khor and Jeeyon Shim. Khor defines a keepsake game as “games that produce beautiful, memorable artifacts, through the process of playing the game...” a collaboration between the designer “..and the players, who all create their own unique objects.”⁶⁸ A keepsake game is an extreme example – in fact, the gameplay *is entirely* the production of a keepsake artifact, rather than a single mechanic.

The players embodied memory of problem-solving and physically handing the material should affect bleed-out, especially if they integrate the artifact into the rest of their belongings. A strange form of bleed-in where the gameworld continues to exist once they’ve stopped playing.

3.3.6 Archives

An archive – or a museum, or a collection – is a kind of narrative media, in its way. It is curated with the intention of telling the story of a culture, a community, whatever unit of history it's curator assigns it.

This narrative is centred around tangible objects, which become diegetic within the narrative they create. That narrative is fragmented, and visitors fill in the gaps with their own stories connecting them, prompted by but still independent of the curators original vision. A museum exhibit may have a [golden path](#) suggested by the designer, but this may be ignored and travelled non-linearly. An archive is generally organized to have an index system but remain an open world, with researchers guided through the environment by their own intrinsic goals.

Curation is as much about deciding what is excluded as much as what is included.

Purely digital archives do of course exist – there are plenty of archives dedicated to digitization without any claimed ownership over any physical originals, or archives that specifically collect [born-digital](#) artifacts. These archives provide wider access, and preserve the memory of an artifact when the original may be lost or change over time. But archives that house a physical collections have a special aura, and narrative affordances that differ from purely digital archives.



Figure xix: An architectural drawing of Grange Manor from the OCADU archives. 2025. Photo by author.

Consider this passage from “The Archive”, a chapter from *Evocative Objects*:

“I was escorted to a special room where Le Corbusier’s largest drawings were viewed and waited for the curator to bring up the large rolled drawing. I waited in silence as the curator opened the scroll[...] All I could think about was that this was Le Corbusier’s original drawing. It was meticulously hand-drawn, but the drawing was dirty. There were marks on it, smudges, fingerprints, the marks of other hands, and now I added mine.”⁶⁹

Tangible artifacts put history on the same ontological plane as ourselves. Being able to handle or at least share space with artifacts that were handled by people in the past makes those people real to us. It creates a sense of empathy with creatures that lived decades, centuries, millennia before ourselves – reminding us that history is not an abstract concept, **these things actually happened to beings with bodies like us.**

Our experiences of these objects are rarely mediated by any interface but our own senses. But they are given context by the people who decided that they belong there, and the meaning that imbues them with. The artifacts may include annotations presented alongside – these annotations sometimes say as much about individual that wrote them and their cultural values as they do about the artifacts themselves.

Archives and museums become spaces of metaleptic convergence – maybe not to a distinct ontological realm, but to our own past, likely to trigger ontological resonance that follows us back outside. **Reminding us that the world is wider and longer and deeper than just the part of it we see every day.**

The materiality of an archive is something that has surfaced in my research again and again. The further back an archive goes, the more it erodes, and each material it stores has a different shelf-life. The space available to preserve these things and the very human priorities of those responsible for their care is constantly in flux – at the mercy of money, interpersonal politics, and even the weather. A digital file can be shared farther than a physical artifact, but in fact its lifespan is laughable compared to a single sheet of paper.

My essential takeaway from this research is the impact of materiality and human intention of the shape and the values of an archive.

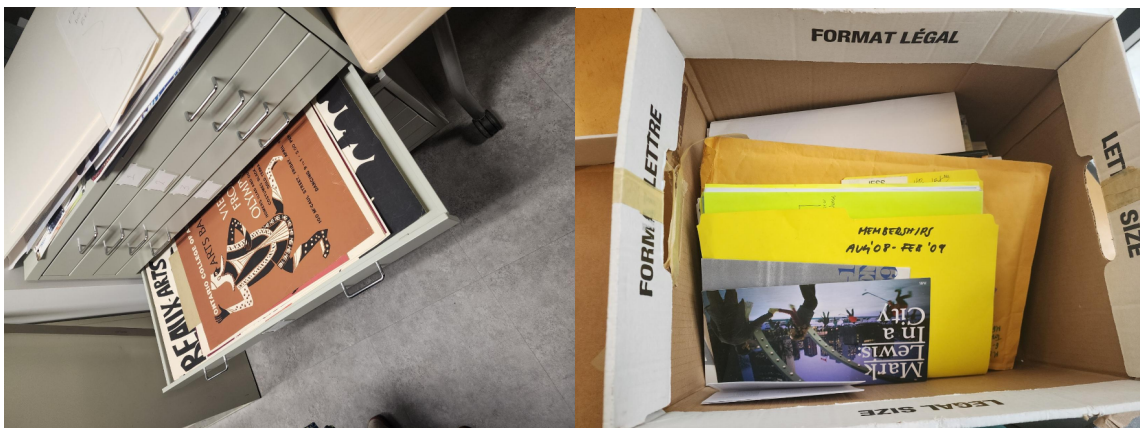


Figure xx: Photographs from visits to the OCADU and Interaccess archives. 2025. Photos by author.

For this research, I visited several archives and attended several talks in Toronto. This included a tour of the OCADU archives, a talk and tour of the Interaccess archive, a talk by a curator for the ArQuives, and attended the monthly Collections Special Interest Group hosted at the University of Toronto. You can read further detail about these visits in [Appendix C: Archive Visits](#).

3.4 In closing

I am positioning that **interface games allow for players to experience double-situatedness**, occupying their own bodies and histories while participating in the fiction, rather than projecting into a provided virtual body or identity. This overlap is established through the interface, the nature of the fragmentary database, and the incorporation of physical artifacts and mechanics. This situates both the interface software and the player as a pivot point in the blended space where the story world and the actual world overlap. Both the player's identity and the ontological borders bleed between these two worlds. Drawing this physical interface beyond the computer monitor and the player's body into an actual geographical location, augmented with tangible narrative artifacts, stretches this convergence out. It provides the opportunity to blur the edges further, to make entering and exiting the space more subtle and enigmatic. The fictional world is represented both physically and virtually, the physical lending credibility and sense memory to the fiction; the virtual mediated by the familiar mundane interfaces we've grown to depend on and trust in the actual world.

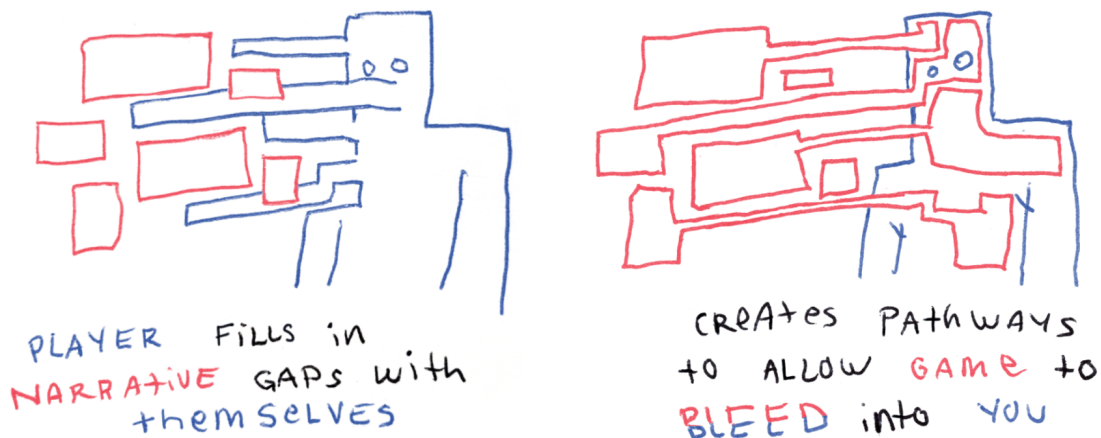


Figure xxi: fragments leaving space for bleed

The fragmentary nature of the database allows for bleed-in to take hold by requiring players to fill in the narrative gaps with their own personality and interests. This contribution to meaning-making makes players more sensitive to bleed-out through their investment and narrative immersion. The addition of physical artifacts and mechanics that stitch the actual world into their virtual counterparts, and the player's physical body into the fictional world. The interface allows the software and the hardware required to run it to become part of the story world, rather than ontological borders that must become unseen for players to recenter within the fiction.

The dynamics of this blended, fragmentary experience aim to provide narrative affordances for subtle horror and transformative gameplay. **Glitches** in the software and **gaps** in the narrative imply a destabilization of the world beyond the software, and ludonarrative dissonance implies destabilization of the players identity and ability.

In conclusion, interface games and extended tangible interfaces are already rich, established grounds for narrative mechanics aimed at **playing with players sense of reality and self**, and provide many opportunities for **blending** the fictional and the actual, the virtual and the physical.

1. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Beacon Press, 1971), 12.
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4 Methodology

'ontological bleed' adopts a research-as-creation¹ approach to discover and document new narrative mechanics through the creation of a game – 'the archive' – that models discoveries from my theoretical research. The creation of the game "is required in order for research to emerge"² by testing mechanics for effectiveness, interviewing players about their experiences, and reflecting on the process to recognize emergence.

While the main goal of creation is to extend research, the production of 'the archive' is also inspired by the existing research. By simulating the phenomena through the fictional story, or by aiming to provoke the phenomena in the players themselves, it can communicate these concepts to players that pick up on these underlying themes. In this way, it is also 'creative presentation of research': "presentation of traditional academic research in a creative fashion."³

The paper itself is also illustrated to communicate concepts from the research, and stands on its own as a 'creative presentation of research' artifact as well.

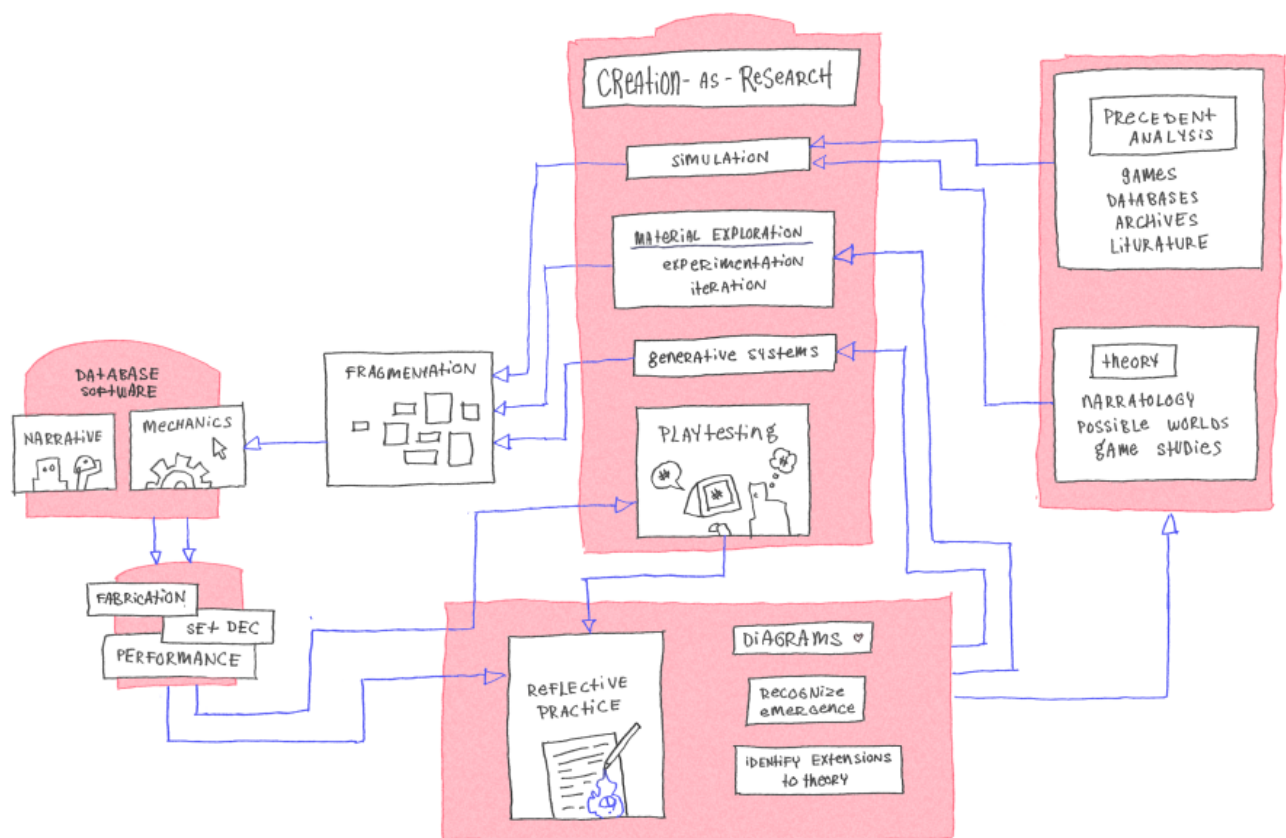


Figure xxii: Methods.

My methodology pulls mixed methods from several methodologies, most of which are a more formalized extension of my existing art practices as a game designer and interdisciplinary artist. I created a variation on the iterative prototyping process⁴ to structure my experiments, and included methods of material exploration and reflective practice.⁵ I kept a particular focus on creating my own generative tools throughout the process.

4.1 Research

I started this project with a framework of experience I wanted to create – a database driven game with physical artifacts, and an idea to explore a phenomenon I'd seen in games that create a sense that the storyworld has somehow leaked into yours and is speaking to you directly. I began the project in earnest by reviewing texts in game studies and narratology to find the language to describe these phenomena – this brought me the concepts of metalepsis and bleed that I decided I would hold as my experience goals. I then studied media that I felt demonstrated these sensations that I wanted to capture in my own work – the materiality of physical objects, the qualities of uncanny interfaces, the fragmentation of narratives that are displayed through nonlinear and metareferential formats like databases or footnotes. I started lining these examples up against the theoretical concepts that had been coined by theorists of the past. I hypothesized a few things I hoped would grow within a game seeded with these concepts.

I also researched how media, especially archive media, degrades over time, and how this can be used both to imply lost content, and allow for unsettling elements as the database becomes destabilized. I visited archives, interviewed archivists, and researched collections to inform my own designs.

My methodology involved returning to and expanding on this research at intervals – checking if prototyping had revealed anything that might have already been recognized by others, and checking if anything else from the research could inspire mechanics for the next iteration.

4.2 Prototyping

4.2.1 The Iterative Process

The iterative process⁶ is a method of cyclical development for prototyping, in which “in which design decisions are made based on the experience of playing a game while it is in development.”⁷

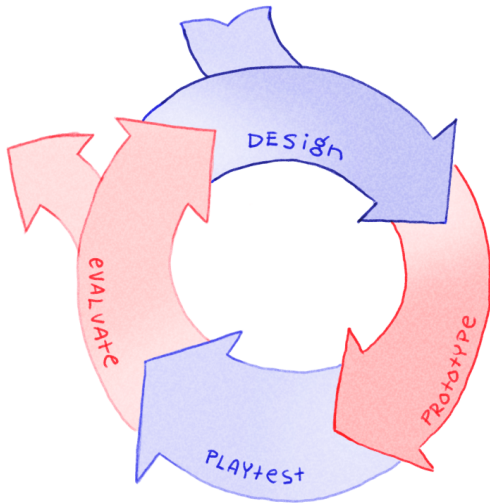


Figure xxiii: The iterative design process.

I work best in short, furious bursts rather than polishing and refining longer projects. I decided the best way to approach this project was through creating a series of short, sharp prototypes – that build on each other and grow in the same software. This still follows the iterative process, in that the mechanics and features of each stage become expanded on and refined throughout iterations⁸. My design and reflection phases involved **returning to and expanding my contextual review**, and I consider each of my playtest prototypes to be **their own ephemeral performances**.

The traditional iterative process is as follows:

1. **Design/Conceptualize:** Create a plan for the next prototype
2. **Prototype:** Create an interactive build – this may be adding new features to an existing build, or modelling an isolated system
3. **Playtest:** Play the prototype, either yourself or with a third party
4. **Evaluate:** Review the results of the playtest, in a way that can inform the next design iteration

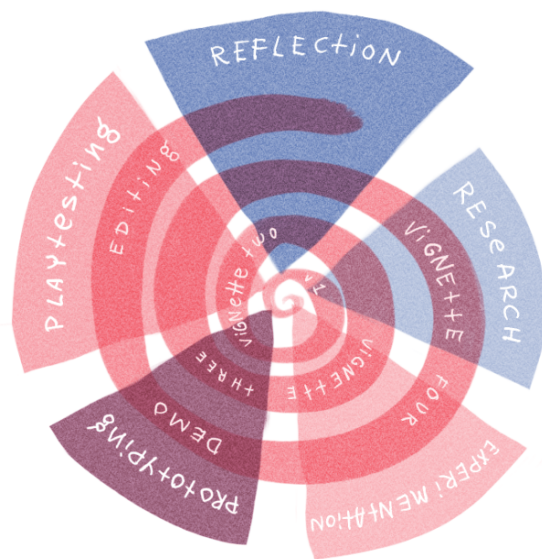


Figure xxiv: spiral iteration method

My prototyping method involved starting many little prototypes – to sketch a thumbnail or write a phrase, or fabricate a feature quickly and unselfconsciously. To start and scrap and start and scrap until my muscle memory learns to draw a line with the right weight, the first time.

In the early stages, I made and abandoned many small experimental prototypes. I took one promising prototype as the foundation to continue and build on. As needed, I sketched out new features and experimented with new techniques in isolation, taking the lessons from these experiments back into the main prototype.

4.2.2 Vignettes

Each stage of development was conceptualized as a “Vignette”, and approached as a short story within a larger fragmentary fiction.

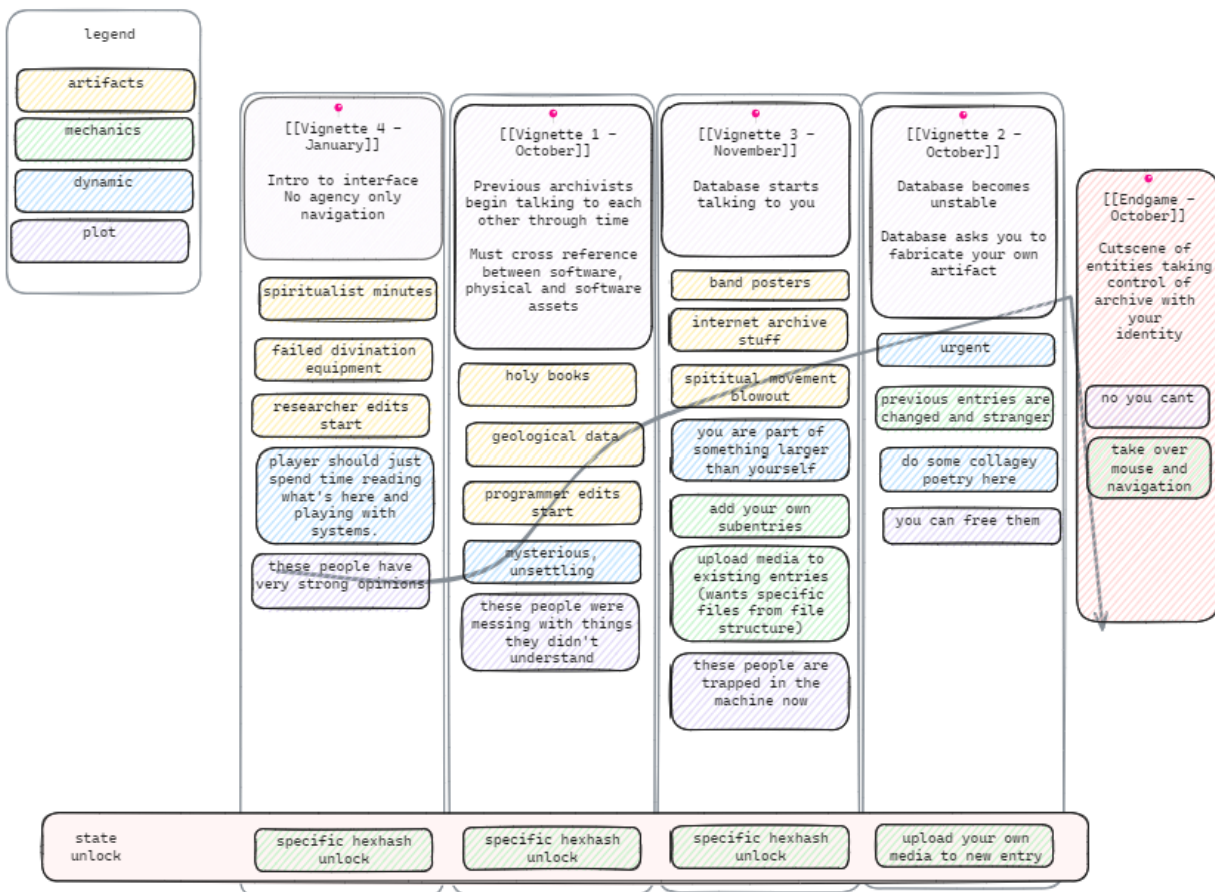


Figure xxv: Early story-shape for the vignettes. The content and scheduling of these vignettes changed.

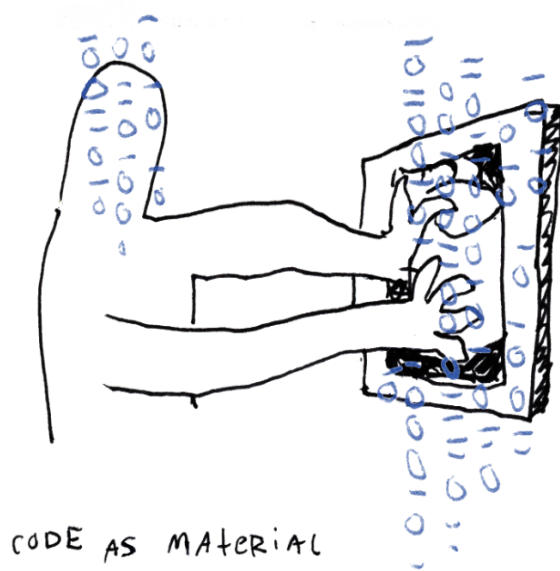
I choose “vignette” because it has several meanings: a short story scene that is driven by **sensory description** rather than plot, a borderless storybook illustration that **punctuates text** rather than standing isolated on its own page, or a photograph that **fades out or falls into shadow** along its edges, **suggesting a world that that extends beyond the frame.**

These vignettes were scheduled throughout the academic year, and each one was designed around a loose theme, as well as the narrative and mechanical elements they should include. Each vignette added a small selection of artifacts that had been physically fabricated, as well as mundane objects that were augmented, sometimes physically, but always narrative spun through the database entries that reflected them.

The vignettes were stepped, each built on the mechanical and narrative foundation of the last, but were also treated as stand-alone stories that did not require having played previous versions to understand.

4.2.3 Playtesting and research participation

Each vignette culminated in a public installation, displaying the physical archive alongside the current version of the database software. Vignette #1 had open access and allowed more casual visits to the archive, although the majority of people played the ten or so minute game to completion anyway. Vignette #2 and #3 were conducted as more formal playtests, asking players to complete exit surveys and interviews to share their experiences.



4.3 Material Exploration

My prototyping framework was designed in such a way to specifically leave gaps for the emergent properties of the materials I used. The fragmentary nature of the project allows for many tiny experiments. The hope was to discover aspects of the project and the fiction by allowing the conceptual framework and eventual design and narrative goals to marinate, while seeing how they may be captured in the various objects I made.

Figure xxvi: Additive and subtractive software sculpting.

Physical artifacts, fabricated in a variety of media, each with their own narrative properties, and indexed primarily by a software that is built in code – this leaves many opportunities for experimentation. **Code is a material, too. In building the software, I am sculpting with code.**

4.4 Generative Systems

Part of my process is to develop tools to think through. The software is designed to be fragmentary for the player, and it was important to allow for the writing process to be fragmentary as well. Developed alongside the player-facing interface was my own “admin” interface, where I uploaded the artifact media and wrote their annotations directly into the software most of the time. The story and the software coevolved and fed into each other creatively. Writing in the voices of the character often inspired mechanics to be programmed into the software, which I was able to execute immediately in a live-editing environment.

I built a piece of software that I hoped would support certain seeds, in such a way that would encourage things to grow there. I developed an ecosystem that would support a certain kind of life, a story about people 'suffering' from narrative immersion and being haunted by entities **using software to pull themselves into a different world.**

A browser-based version was also developed so I could write on my phone, whenever inspiration struck, allowing the ideas to be captured, already in the shape of entries instead of trying to shoehorn it in later. This way, I could capture fragments as they fell.

I also created side prototypes of systems to assist with sifting data and generate emergent connections as I went. This included pages of the software that were only accessible in administrator mode, so data could be displayed and edited in different formats. For example, pages that listed entries by date and author, or pages that collected all game media into a gallery where it could be quickly swapped out with updated versions. Early in development, I also created a simple tabletop game to randomize potential story elements and materials.

You can read more about the paper prototype at [Appendix G: Related artworks](#).

4.5 Reflective Practice

Reflective practice is a method for creating formal processes for thinking critically about one's own work, and the ability to communicate these conclusions with others.

Schön, writing on reflective practice, states that there is potential for reflection at several stages of the process – reflection-in-action⁹, in which one reflects *while* currently engaged in their practice, and reflection-on-action¹⁰, which involves taking a moment once the activity is completed to take notes and reflect.

My methodology uses reflection-in-action¹¹ through the material exploration for the creation of artifacts and game mechanics. Being present and paying attention to how the material behaves, learning what it can do, and adjusting my approach based on what I recognize while working.

I am also reflecting in-action during my research process, by free-writing, drawing and diagramming my understanding, and my ideas for how theory can be translated into game mechanics. **Drawing is an essential method for me to work through understanding of theoretical concepts – to create and narrativize spatial relationships between subjects.**

Reflection-on-action involves looking back over recent experiences and processing them. After each vignette I wrote a formal reflection based on a consistent template, created an early list of potential tasks and explorations to undertake next round, crossed off completed tasks from the previous, and secured documentation media and playtest results for later analysis and editing. After a rest, I revisited the materials and prepared for the next development cycle.

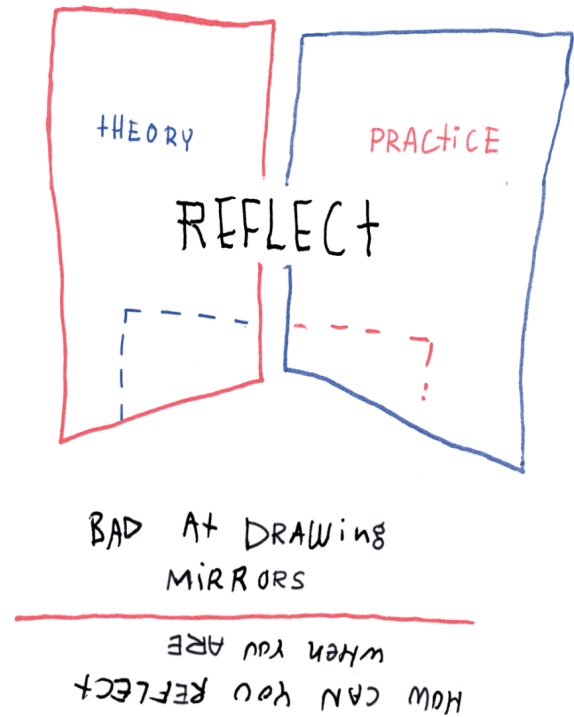


Figure xxvii: A reflection of theory and practice.

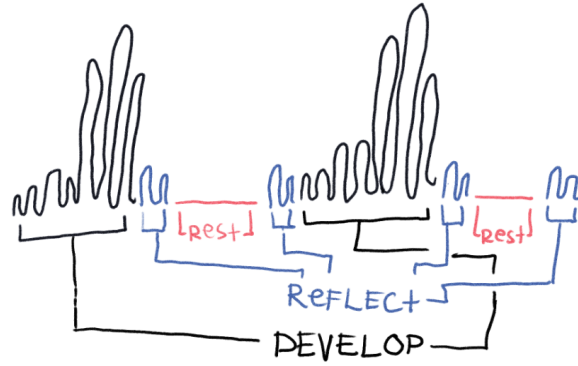


Figure xxviii: develop reflect rest.

The purpose of this reflective practice is more than just making value judgments about whether an experiment was successful, or to find weaknesses to diagnose and address. It works to build a foundation for **recognizing and reacting to emergence**.

I am also a relentless documentarian of my own process. My innate tendency is to hoard and archive evidence of my own agency. I came into this project with workflows in place to capture this data. Refining and editing this documentation to share at various stages of the academic process has allowed me to reflect. This data includes written reflections, sketches screenshots and photographic documentation of the installation and software as they evolve.

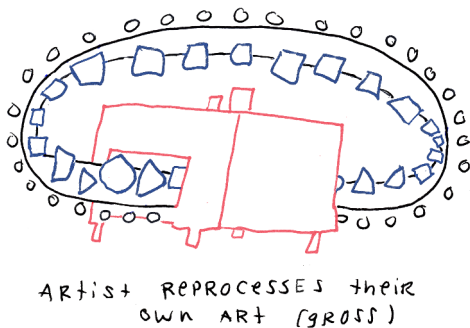


Figure xxix: artist reprocesses their art

Discoveries relating to the initial research questions will be further discussed and analyzed in this research paper, but the reflection in its entirety will be collected in an [online development blog](#)^{†††}. This blog is aggregated directly from my notetaking software, where they can be tagged and cross-referenced to find patterns and generate new knowledge. Part of this reflection is informed by “learning in public”¹² and “digital gardens”¹³ – concepts from the software development community, dedicated to sharing community knowledge as an evolving work-in-progress. Learning in public is as it sounds – post things online, even when they’re not finished, even when you’re not sure they’re any good, **even when they are not done growing yet.**

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††† See [Appendix D: development blog](#).

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5 Development – Building Gameworlds

This section is formatted to break down ‘the archive’ by individual feature, roughly sorted by the Vignette in which they were first implemented. Some features and mechanics were **planned** for, while others were **emergent and nurtured** when recognized. I’ll cover both mechanics I provide to players to interact with the systems, and the mechanics I developed as tools to build the story. I will address how these mechanics were intended to support [metalepsis](#) or [bleed](#), and how effective those dynamics were if they were achieved, based on my own observations and player responses.

The database software was named ‘archive-6.x.x.exe’ through ‘archive-8.x.x.exe’ during development, and I’ll use ‘archive.exe’ to refer to any of those software versions. In the context of this paper, I’ll refer to the [locative events](#) where both the software and physical artifacts were displayed for visitors as ‘installations’ or ‘playtests’.

The ‘archive’ refers to what the installation, the artifacts, and the software combine to create – an annotated physical collection representing a fictional historical narrative. **An archive is not a room or a building, it remains an archive whether it is on display in a mansion or spread across the side of a road.** But for the purpose of this section, I’ll follow the metaphor building a physical structure to house it.

I’ll summarize the gameplay to give context: each of these features will be explained in more detail below.

By the final vignette, gameplay took between 20 – 40 minutes. Players who took longer examined more artifacts, read through more of the documents, took more notes, or spent more time on their forgeries. The game began with an [introduction outside the room](#), a tour of the archive, and an optional introduction to the software. They were provided with a [diegetic pamphlet](#) reminding them of the mechanics. I then left the players alone to get a feel for the place on their own. I checked back in after a few

minutes just to make sure they weren’t too lost, and only because the time-pressure of booked slots would interfere with the experience. A few entries were unlocked to begin with, which would link to further entries to unlock. Players were instructed to [migrate data](#) from the



Figure xxx: Archive artifacts

previous backup, and check that the tangible artifacts were present and whole as they went, and enigmatically, to *do what they tell you*.

Entries in the archive hinted at the archive's history, and became increasingly bizarre, as the presence lurking in the database became more apparent. New mechanics were unlocked as the player progressed, culminating the software asking them to [forge their own artifact](#) and add it to the database. Doing so would trigger an abrupt and [unsettling end game](#). Players were left to leave the room at their own pace once the software kicked them out, and nearly all of them emerged asking some variation of "I think I'm finished?"

5.1.1 Design Pillars

In game design, a pillar is a word or a short phrase about the intended player experience that designers formalize during preproduction and refer back to throughout development. Pillars ensure that everything added into the game supports this experience and doesn't distract from it. General advice is to have no more than 3-5 pillars, so that the tone of the game is consistent, but to keep the pillars open-ended enough that they hold potential for variations in play and storytelling. Since my research questions evolved alongside game development, the pillars evolved as well, but the following is what I landed on:

Convergent metalepsis: **"Will this feel like something the player would encounter if this archive existed on the same ontological plane as the player?"** The entry point of the experience should not draw a sharp border around the [magic circle](#), so it was important that the elements of the game that players first had access to felt consistent with the actual world. I tried to avoid thinking about things feeling 'realistic' and aimed instead for **natural or plausible**.

Ontological transgression: **"Is this an opportunity for something to be bleeding, reaching out, or brought across from one system into another?"** Once the player has passed from the actual world into the convergence, the game should take any opportunity to show the gameworlds [split ontology](#) being ruptured, either by **the otherworldly entities reaching out, or by the human characters trying to reach in**. The split ontology here refers to the physical realm of the human characters versus the 'flatland' of the otherworldly entities. Both sets of characters try to reach across using the technology they have access to: the humans interpreting the entities' communication as infections or *presence*, and the entities attempting to use the technology they have access to at the time, including the database itself, to communicate back.

I am working with a fictional **tri-split-ontology**: the world and the character of the player, the world and the human characters in the history of the archive, and the world of the entities.

Finding ways for something to be carried across one or more of these boundaries, whether by creating a metaphor for them in narrative text, creating a digital metaphor through game mechanics or features, or through features of the installation.

I am referring to these realms as this:

The Actual World The world of the players and the game designer.

The Storyworld The world where the players become archive volunteers, the game designer becomes their coordinator, and where the human characters built the archive and added entries and artifacts to it in the past.

The Flatland Wherever the entities exist and are currently reaching out from. Named for Sagan's sketch in *Cosmos*¹ and the novel *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* by Edwin A. Abbott,² as I imagine them as 0-dimensional beings who can communicate purely through information and influence, and who long for the 3-dimensional world of bodies and objects.^{###}

This also involves taking opportunities to draw things between the borders of the virtual software, the rest of the computer's digital interface, and the physical world. To pull things between the identities of myself and the players while we are performing our roles in the archive versus when we return to ourselves outside the room.

These violations are the bulk of what makes this project a study of metalepsis and bleed.

World Building: "Does this communicate something about a character and their beliefs?" Something written by a human character should communicate what an object meant to them, imply details about their own assumptions about the nature of reality, the language and technology they would have used to record it, the state of the archive during which they would have added it, and their relationships with other characters. For the entities, their text should speak to the agency they have over "infecting" the physical artifacts, the human characters, or the archive itself. It should consider what it communicates about what they want, how they think, and how they behave when they are impersonating human characters.

This pillar is largely about good storytelling, but the concerns are specific to the needs of an archive index that currently exists as a specific piece of database software, but which previously would have been indexed in different formats.

Linus sees the entities as God communicating from Heaven, Violet as demons from Hell at first, and the more modern characters as variations on their own scientific understanding. My playtesters have interpreted them as aliens, AI, disease, computer viruses, to name a few.

Gap crafting: “Is this a gap that needs to be left or needs to be filled?” Some of these gaps are left entirely open, so the player fills them in with their own interpretations. Referring back to Eco’s reference about creating a “possible world machine,” I began asking players in my exit interviews what the story became as they understood it. While I was interested in checking how much of my meaning was coming across, **I was not testing for accuracy, but to see what the story becomes inside them.**

Other gaps were created intentionally by locking entries, to prompt players to satisfy their curiosity to fill the gaps by migrating corrupted entries.

5.2 Foundations – Core Mechanics

Archive

Early on, I decided to build an archive because it seemed a perfect setting for a database interface indexing tangible artifacts. An archive implies a lonely atmosphere of private, individually-motivated research rather than a museum with its focus on public visitation and education. The desire to create a space for players to [play-as-themselves](#) necessitated I not give them a backstory for what they were researching—a volunteer shift is a more singular point of entry, and allows the players to follow their own research instincts once they already have a slight pretext to be there. The conceit that the archive software has been damaged and needs volunteers to repair it makes available the mechanic of unlocking entries to control the games pacing. Originally, I didn't intend to control pacing much at all, and allow completely free-form exploration. Players are still able to stray off the golden path if they so choose. In Vignette #4, a player unlocked each entry by the order the physical artifacts on display caught her attention, and another attempted to unlock entries directly from the spreadsheet.

Installation

While an archive is not just the room that holds it, the design of the room was a vital aspect of the experience. The archive must be [grounded in a physical location](#) to create the tangible aspect of the metaleptic convergence.



Figure xxxi: Installation from Vignette #4. 2026. Photo by author.

The archive was set up in a room with furniture to appear to be an archive office, implied to be the latest home of the vulnerable collection that had been relocated many times over its century long existence. The current iteration of the fictional archive is volunteer-run, allowing it to be a little ramshackle and neglected. The computer peripherals were deliberately chosen to be pointedly obsolete without feeling too much like a period piece. As Vignette #1 and the final exhibition was shown alongside other student work, this obsolete technology communicated that it was not just a piece of software with related items displayed nearby. It expanded the fiction to include the hardware and furniture, making the entire room part of the convergence.

The game required a lot of reading and problem-solving, so the installation was designed to be quiet and secluded. While I asked players if they were comfortable with other visitors stepping in during their shift, I kept outside noise and interruptions to a minimum. I was able to see through a window in the door what point in the story players were at, to avoid interrupting them during complicated or unnerving moments.

Except for the final exhibition, the vignettes were each installed in the same room on the university campus. In an earlier life I worked briefly as a production designer and set decorator, and it was fulfilling to work with tangible spaces, sourcing furniture and props again.

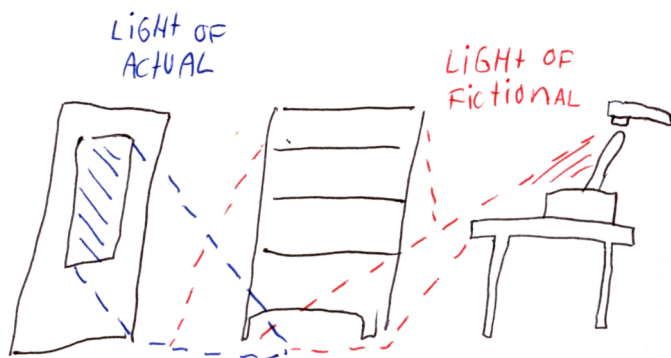


Figure xxxii: light converging

The lighting was especially important to create a graduated atmosphere. The diegetic lighting in the room was selected not only for illumination but colour temperature. The door of each room had a glass window – while open, it allowed light to spill in from the hallway to illuminate the entrance. Dim light shone faintly into the room through this window during each shift – a bit of the actual world seeping into the otherwise secluded room.

The installation was designed for a small space, 10' x10'. The room at the university was much larger, so the archive was at first tucked into the back of the space. In later vignettes, it was tucked up close to the door and the rest of the room blocked off by false walls. The lighting hid a lot of the empty space in earlier vignettes while the furniture and artifacts were still too lean to fill the room. The room scale allows the room to feel more crowded with history, more

claustrophobic, but according to playtesters, more cozy. They were easily able to lose themselves in the work.

Whenever possible, I conducted exit interviews outside the room. The first question I asked them was to describe the experience of leaving the archive and returning to the actual world. I wanted to hear about their perspective of the experience as a memory, and to give them time to experience bleed-out: to see how much of the gameplay experience they took back out with them. Especially in later vignettes, the game resonated with them in the first few minutes of leaving the room, especially as the game ends abruptly featuring a betrayal.

Performance

The Performance happened by accident, it just felt natural to me to introduce myself to visitors and players as though I worked in the archive and was happy that they had come to volunteer. It gave me the opportunity to walk them through the instructions in character, and curtailed my impulse to explain the whole art piece. In later vignettes, my performance would start outside the room, as soon as the consent forms were signed – drawing a bit of the gameworld out beyond the doorway. This also affects bleed – players who choose to play along with my performance behave as though they are already volunteers when they meet me. This means that their gameplay experience begins outside as well, they are already becoming their ludic self before ever seeing the game artifacts or logging into the software.

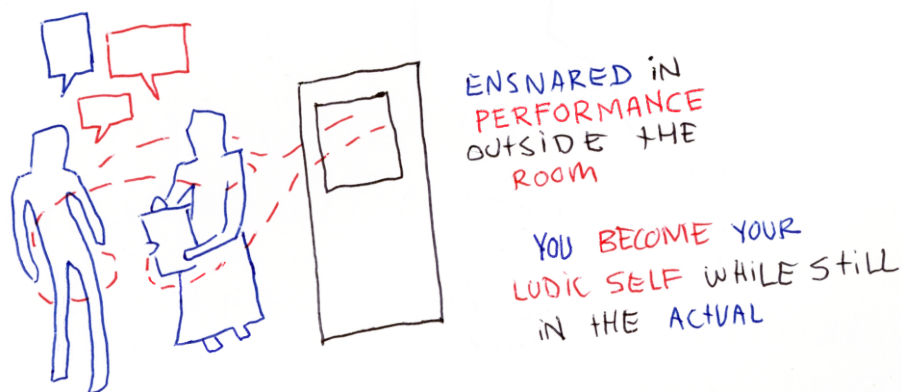


Figure xxxiii: ensnared by performance

Details about the purpose of the archive were kept intentionally abstract, which sometimes required me to be evasive and enigmatic when introducing the archive.

Evidence of infection

The fiction was very driven by the mechanics of the software and the availability of tangible artifacts. The writing in the software carried the bulk of the character and worldbuilding, and

always tried to capture [metaleptic transgression](#), in the metaphor of infection or possession, or [bleed](#), through the characters state that **the archive seemed to stay with them even when they were no longer inside of it**. The fiction took a longer time to develop than expected – it seems I needed to get the database software and the logistics of the installation to a place where the mechanics the start coming together, before I could make literal and figurative space for the story.

The following is the lore I worked from, but as a fragmented narrative, the details are not intended to be what would be taken away by players. Players would come to their own conclusions about what these references meant based on their own ontological assumptions about the gameworld.

The entries vaguely refer to something mysterious the human characters believe want to be **given voices or bodies**. 0-dimensional entities would be jealous of 3-dimensional beings for having these things, and would hope that if they could arrange either of those things for themselves in this world, they could somehow slip into them, and wear them, and be here. Sort of a human-being-as-interface, after trying a lot of failed rock-as-interface and flora-and-fauna-as-interface experiments. **These experiments in embodiment are what have been collected as artifacts** – however, as fictional entities, they are not actually able to break the fourth wall into the actual world. It is left ambiguous whether the infected artifacts are forgeries by previous archivist, or genuine evidence of a rupture.



Figure xxxiv: Adding to the archive is what gives the entities their power.

The human characters comment on either wanting to give them bodies or voices – either by making them technologically or by offering up their own – or are distressed that something is trying to take theirs without consent. The latter characters state that there seems to be something inside them that shouldn't be, and it is growing.

Later unlocked subentries with impossible times stamps are tagged as though written by these human characters, giving the impression that the human characters are somehow haunting the archive, or at least haunting archive.exe. These messages are from entities stealing their digital identities to gain the players trust – none of those human characters had access to this software, the archive was indexed elsewhere in their lifetimes, so the entities need to manipulate you for access.

Writing by the characters implies that it is attention and curiosity that gives the consciousness in the archive its power and influence. **The act of documenting and archiving itself is what creates portals that allow the flatland to bleed into ours.**

Artifacts & Entries

Tangible artifacts and their corresponding virtual database entries form the core fragments of the narrative. Each artifact had an ID tag, so players could find the digitized entry in the software. Each database entry includes a photograph of the item and a short written description. The details of the main entries are kept short – the descriptions may refer to fictions, such as where it was discovered or physical aspects that have worn off or dried out, but overall they are kept very truncated – exceptions for artifacts that are themselves more narrative, such as letters or diary entries.



Figure xxxv: Artifacts from Vignette #3. 2026. Photo by author.

Seeing the artifacts so near to their digital reflection draws attention to the virtual/physical boundary, and creates a sense of ontological transgression, albeit in a way taken for granted – we see pictures of things that exist in the room with us all the time, even if those pictures were taken in the distant past. But in the archive, those actual items are augmented with fictional details, **the player moves metalectically between the actual world and the story world**, depending on if they see the physical item or its digital counterpart first.

A few of the entries refer to items without physical counterparts, the software claims the originals were lost or damaged. In reference to [digital monoism](#), if an interface is telling you the truth about one rock being green, and you can see plainly that is true, why would it lie about another rock being missing? This ontological certainty is distorted when information is mediated by interfaces, and so **there are easy opportunities to blur reality in this way**, even as simply as placing two rocks on the same ontological level despite one having never existed.

LEVERAGING
CONFLATION
OF THE
TANGIBLE
with the
ACTUAL



Figure xxxvi: leveraging conflation of the tangible with the actual

Subentries

The bulk of the narrative detail is held in subentries, which are annotations added by previous archive users.

Characters comment over a century long timespan on the artifacts, speculate about what they mean, on the meaning of previous subentries, and connections to other entries. The physical presence of the object implies that it exists on the same ontological plane as our bodies, so these histories attached to them become as real as we are.

Subentries aren't typical for an archive database – none of the archives I visited had functionality to leave this kind of commentary. The mechanic is inspired by my love of annotated fiction, and my experiences using databases in a work environment. I could recognize my coworkers' voices in the notes they left on entries through their writing style and values, even when they weren't logged into their own account. Coming across entries that had been last updated by coworkers that didn't work there any more felt like unexpectedly hearing ghosts, and I felt like I got to know people I'd never met. **A mundane metaleptic transgression, through time instead of space.**

Eventually during gameplay, the players unlock entries that seem to be addressing each other during impossible time periods, tagged by users who are implied to have died in catalogued obituaries. Eventually, these entries begin addressing the players directly.

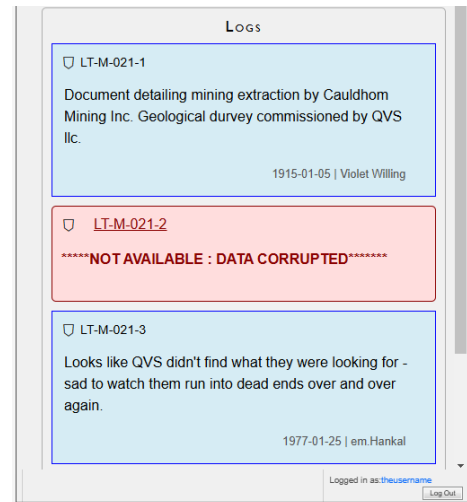


Figure xxxvii: Subentries in Vignette #3 including commentary from different characters. One of the subentries is corrupted, and will require players to perform the migration mechanic.

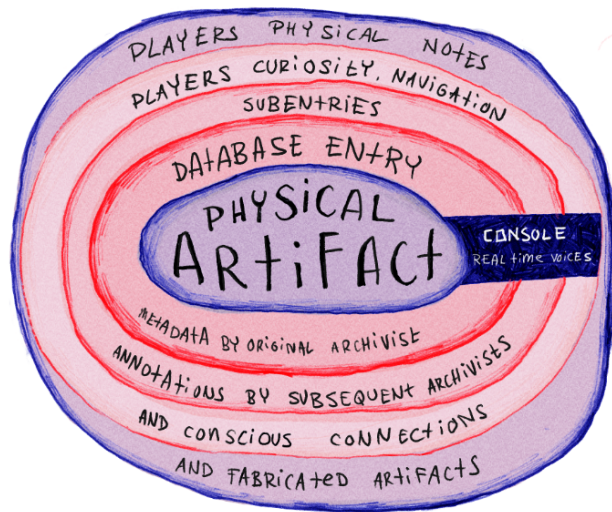


Figure xxxviii: archive aspects as ontological layers. This layering is based on Gibbons analysis of *House of Leaves*.

The diagram above shows how different aspects of the archive become ontological layers. The diagram is based on one from Gibbons from *Narrative Worlds and Multimodal Figures in House of Leaves*. In her analysis, different footnotes, forwards and appendices, written by different characters from different time periods, and signified by different fonts, **become ontological layers that look back through time at each other.**³ The archive can be similarly analyzed, with the physical artifacts representing the earliest time period and ontological layer. Subsequent attention by characters, logged in different media in different time periods, layer out until the final layer, the player's own notes and artifacts reacting to everything else they've seen.

5.3 Framing – Early Prototyping

Database

The diegetic database is in essence a website – it is built in HTML and Javascript, using the React library, which causes each section of the interface to update instantly, and using Electron as a container, so the software does not rely on an external browser. My game design experience is largely in the Unity game engine, but the engine produces overpowered software that feels inherently ‘gamey’ to people familiar to it, and doesn’t feel natural as archive software. React in an Electron shell is a reasonably modern software development pipeline, but one that can pass for any piece of genuine office software in the last 30 years. CSS is used to style the software to look a bit outdated, inspired by Windows 7, putting it circa 2009. The dated look implies that the developer either begun the project long ago, or simply isn’t interested in making it widely intuitive. This plausibility engages convergent metalepsis, and worldbuilding in terms of when this stage of the archive may have started.

The software is designed to become its own game engine. It has two interfaces – one that is available to the player, and includes gates so the player must perform actions to unlock new content, and an ‘admin mode’ for me to write content directly into the software, and adjust the variables that control how it is gated.

During development, I was switching between three ontological realms – the code of the software, which had a live development environment and updated the software in real time, the admin interface where I could add database content, and storymode where I could test things from the perspective of players. I was able to code in changes to the admin interface as needed, whenever the direction of the story required that the content be shaped a different way.

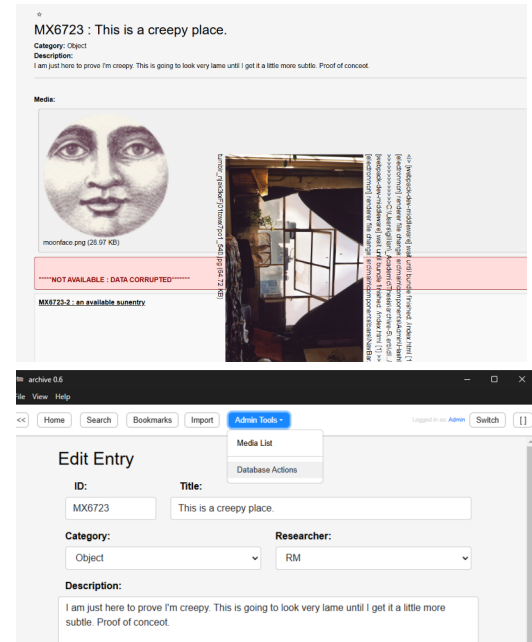


Figure xxxix: Editable database with some CSS trickery. The database can be exported and imported, and reset to a specific gamestate.

The software remained simply a database for a long time, as I learned how to build it. I considered the moment I was able to add a debug panel to track gameplay variables, to be the point where it transitioned from being “database software” to a “game”.

5.4 Walls and Floors – Vignette #1

Vignette #1 introduced interactive mechanics to the archive. It was installed in October 2025, during Spark presentations for the Digital Futures program, where students exhibited early thesis works in progress at an event open to the public. It was the first public-facing test of the game, both software and installation. ‘the archive’ shared a room with another student project, and had a run time of around 10 minutes. The artifact entries were largely related to rocks and geology, the simplest physical material the entities are suspected to be able to infect. This install featured a single desk and monitor, with artifacts displayed on a small desktop shelving unit.

Playtesting was not available during this install due to delays in Research Ethics Board approval, so while there were playthroughs, no data was collected. While the mechanics listed below were introduced during this stage of development, any feedback listed here is from later vignettes.



Figure xl: The Vignette #1 installation, and the DF Spark exhibition in October 2025. Photos by author.

Corrupted Entries

Certain entries and subentries suffer from data corruption, and must be migrated in from a backup. This corruption causes the narrative to be further fragmented. Players are prompted to become **curious about the gaps**, and compelled to explore. Corruption is an extension of theme of infection – **something that is not supposed to be here has gotten in**, and caused reality to glitch.

Care was taken to be clear about whether an entry or its contents were 'corrupted', and therefor capable of being retrieved from the backup, as opposed to 'irretrievable' or 'lost.'

Migrating from the spreadsheet backup

The migration mechanic is the core game loop – it is the action through which the player progresses through the narrative, and by designing entries so they refer to others to unlock, I could somewhat control players pacing through the narrative. By challenging players with a mechanic that requires them to interact with an application outside of archive.exe, **the gameworld extends outside of a single piece of software**, where most games are contained. This makes the entire computer part of the convergence.

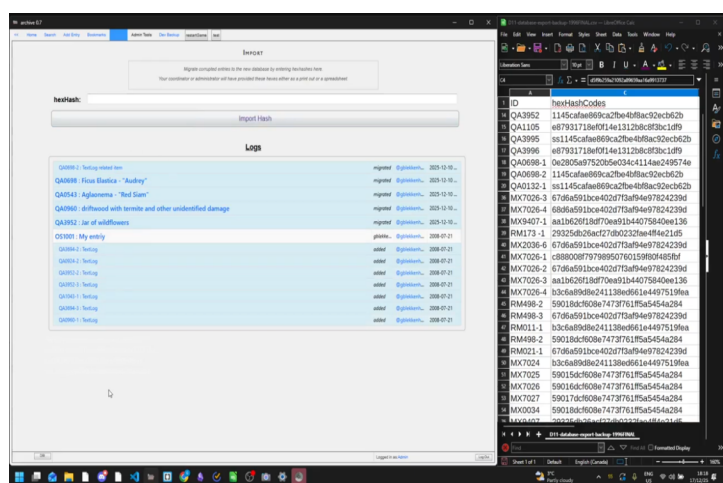


Figure xli: The migration and log page from V2, allowing players to more easily track their progress, alongside the spreadsheet.

entries and subentries tagged with that hexhash, and sets them to 'available.' The spreadsheet was padded out with fake ID numbers, to discourage players from brute forcing the system.

The worldbuilding implies that this spreadsheet is the backup of the previous damaged software, a terminal interface developed by the character Freddie in the late 1990s. This spreadsheet is opened in commercial spreadsheet software that many players are likely familiar with from their own work experience, an example of convergent metalepsis.

This mechanic was initially going to be executed through the actual terminal software, and the spreadsheet was a stopgap for the early playtest. But playtesters found the motion of cutting and pasting to unlock entries and the comfort of using a familiar technology really enjoyable and meditative. **The multi-step process made it very satisfying when they managed to unlock something they had been hunting for.** A spreadsheet was also more plausible than the

Players use the spreadsheet to look up the IDs of corrupted entries, discovered either from finding references in other available entries, or by looking up the ID tag on the physical artifacts. This allows them to cross-reference a 'hexhash' they can paste into the Import page that will migrate a batch of entries. Plausibly, software would "chunk" data in this way, clumping items not based on chronology or any pattern other than how the data happened to be encoded onto a hard drive. In actuality, the software searches the database for

terminal - both Interaccess and OCAD U had their internal archive indexed by spreadsheets, though OCAD U also has a JSTOR similar to archive.exe for researchers to browse, and Interaccess was developing an interface for their born-digital collections when I visited.

Migration is also a form of ontological transgression. The archive exists reflected in the physical and in archive.exe, but it also somehow exists bundled up in these hexhashes, stored together in the spreadsheet. **The player assists in the apparent metaepitaphical transversal of the data from the world of the spreadsheet to the world of archive.exe.** This is an emergence of metalepsis I would have missed had the terminal software worked out, as my initial plan was to unlock entries through typed terminal commands, instead of the more finicky work moving the data between one window and another.

Login page

archive.exe is locked until a player creates a username to log into the system, and **they leave footsteps on their path through the narrative** in the form of timestamps with this username attached to any entries they unlock or add. They are encouraged to use their real name, purportedly for “professional accountability”, both by the archive facilitator and by their volunteer onboarding manual, though they also have the option to use an existing online handle or create a temporary ID. Nearly all players chose to use their online handle, though this was sometimes a version of their real names.

This mechanic forces players to bring a part of themselves into the gameworld, and then literally hand it over to be given access to the software, in an example of player identity bleed-in.

Delightfully, supported by the introductory performance, many players seemed very unnerved to log in. **The login page gave the initiation an unexpected sense of ritual that just having the software sitting open likely would not have had.**

Onboarding manual

Before entering the archive, players are given a paper informational pamphlet. It explains a bit of intentionally vague history of the archive revitalization project, and includes instructions on how to migrate data.

The pamphlet starts the experience with a tangible artifact, one that is designed with the hope that players will write on it while they're there, and take it home with them, the archive is reaching out of its location and into the lives of the players. Ideally, if they keep it, they will be reminded of their time in the archive, a [bleed-in](#) of their ludic self with their real self. Much like the performance, when given to people outside the room of the installation, it draws the fiction outside the door, so their stepping into the gameworld from the actual world is more gradual.

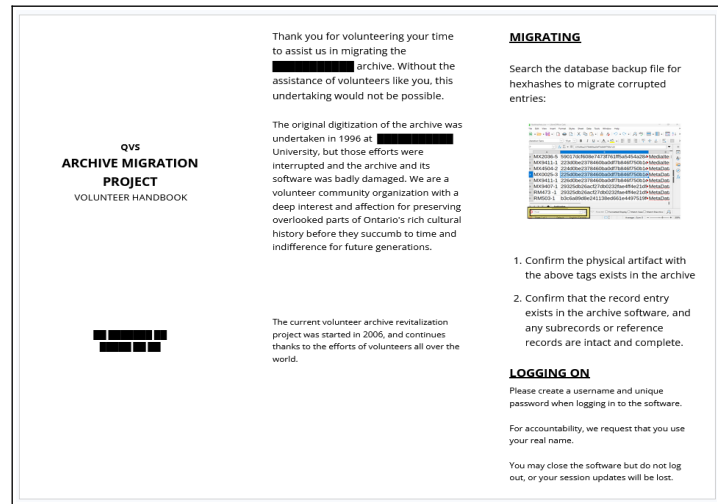


Figure xlii: The volunteer onboarding manual for Vignette #1.

It allows for players to exercise tangible gameplay mechanics, and exercise agency before they are given any in the software. Most players preferred to use the provided paper for their notes, some players did mark up the pamphlets as well.

Originally the manual was not going to be made until the final exhibition as a promotional item, but ended up being implemented in Vignette #1 to stand in for a tutorial, and to prompt players with what entries they should start with. The entry prompts were cut, but the instructions worked very well, and reminded players of employment where they'd been basically **abandoned with little training and only enigmatic internal documentations as guides.**

See the manual in [Appendix B: Volunteer On-boarding Manual.](#)

5.5 Plumbing and Electrical – Vignette 2

I worked on Vignette #2 from mid-October to mid-December 2025, culminating in an install over December 11th and 12th. The first day coincided with Open Show, an exhibition for Digital Futures graduate and undergraduate students. I was able to keep the room overnight to run more playtests the next day.

The installation expanded to a second desk, allowing more room for artifacts, and to leave the computer work station more free for note-taking and artifact forgery. The entire installation was moved closer to the door.



Figure xliii: Photograph of Vignette #2 in December 2025. Photo by author.

The artifacts in this vignette followed the theme of biology, including animal bones and preserved plants and fungi.

Artifact forgeries and player entries

At a certain point in gameplay, players unlock an entry that implies it was added 'today' by an UNKNOWN USER. The entry includes photos of various art supplies around the archive, and tells them they can help the people trapped there by making something and adding it to the archive.

Players are asked to add their own entry, to sacrifice something physical to the software. Players are directed to a variation on the entry editor I created for the admin mode to add their own entry and commentary to the database. In Vignette #2, the request was very open-ended, just framed as any sacrifice. I provided paper and pencil crayons, but also suggested players could offer something from their pockets. Most people were disappointed they hadn't brought anything cool with them, but chose that over the paper anyway.

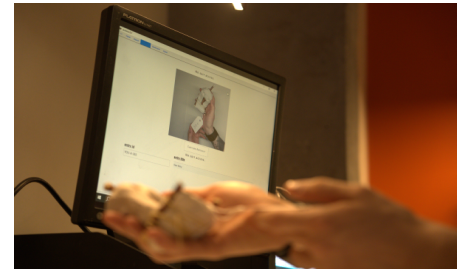


Figure xlv: add entry page with artifact reflected in the live feed from the camera. Photo by Aman Deshmukh.

Later vignettes implied they were expected to add to the lore of the archive. More art supplies were added, including modelling clay which most people gravitated to for their forgeries.

Most people were excited to add entries despite knowing the entity asking was likely lying about its intentions. Some spent a great deal of time on it once the modelling clay was added, though some felt too rushed to make something they were proud of, worried if they laboured too long they would run out of time in their shift to complete the narrative. One player in Vignette #3 simply refused to upload an entry, not trusting the entities, and simply ended her 'volunteer shift' without doing so.



Figure xlv: Player artifacts from DFX and Vignette #4. Photo by author.

Some examples of forgeries from Vignette #4 can be seen in the [Appendix H: Data Collection](#).

Camera Feed

The initial plan for the final entry was to allow players to upload any digital photo they liked. This would make sense if the game was played on the players own devices, but would be finicky in an installation on a computer they couldn't easily send phone camera photos to.

During Vignette #1, I enabled my webcam during setup while taking documentation, and saw **the effect of seeing a live feed of the installation in real time, reflected on the computer screen where the fictional world was largely centered.** It gave me the idea to create this camera feed in Vignette #2, with a webcam aimed down at the desk where players can offer their artifacts.

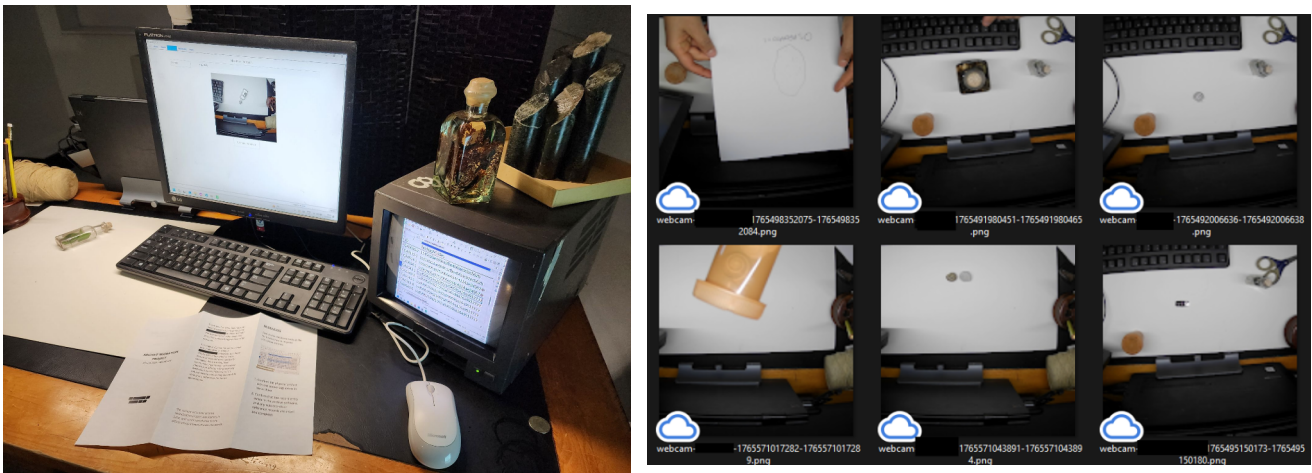


Figure xlvii: The camera mechanic in Vignette #2. The onboarding manual is also pictured. 2025. Photos by author.

Because this visual was so powerful, I didn't want to save it until the end, so I made the "Add Entry" page available from the beginning with the feed disabling the controls until the game triggered it.

The interface game and the room installation create a metaleptic convergence that causes the artifacts, the player, and the room to become double-situated. However, the camera feed creates counterparts of everything it reflects, not between the actual and the fictional, between the physical and the virtual. Both counterparts are still double-situated. Players can see themselves – their hands – within the interface, **putting their bodies on the same ontological plane as the researchers that added the previous artifacts.**

Draft Endgame

Narratively, the entities hope that by giving players access to uploading a physical forgery, they will get access to the physical realm through the bridge the player creates – the players creating a metaleptic convergence for them. But as **the fictional cannot actually enter the realm of the actual**, the entities must make do with the players digital identity, which gives them full access to the front-end of the archive. In Vignette #2 this was just a placeholder splash screen, and players indicated they still weren't sure the game was over.

Aftercare

A 'safety tool' from the TTRPG space that prompts players to perform potentially unsettling content, such as horror, intimacy, or highly intense emotional scenes, is taking a deliberate moment to cool down and talk through the experience afterwards. Players reported that they found 'the archive' very unsettling; entering the installation was very effective in terms of tone. Exiting the archive, players seemed to be increasingly unsettled and a little shaken up per vignette as the endgame became more fleshed out.

Exit surveys took place outside of the archive. The first question I asked players was how they felt to leave the space and return to the natural world, and to speak about that for as long as they liked. Conversationally this transitions them out of the space, it's a place where they have more security and control. This question usually warmed players up and got them talking easily, and tended to naturally fork back to discuss how it felt *entering* the space. This then allowed us to loop back through their game experience in the room from a space of more comfort and objectivity.

5.6 Paint and Plaster – Vignette 3



Figure xvii: Vignette #3 installation in January 2026. Photos by author.

Vignette #3 ran for three days at the end of January 2026. Playtesters could book 1 hour slots in advance for their 'volunteer shift', which would include an exit interview. While one or two playthroughs were 20 minutes, most ran closer to 40 minutes, and a few over an hour when scheduling allowed. It was the first installation to run independently, not in conjunction with another event.

This vignette added human-centred artifacts: human remains including plastic bones that had been augmented with evidence of infection, descriptions of lost artworks representing human interpretations of the anomaly, and journal entries by NPCs describing their experiences.

PDF journal entries

This vignette included journal entries by the character Linus, the early 20th century founder of the archive, and Freddie, the 90s era programmer who first digitized the archive. Linus' were presented as handwritten, included as paper photocopies. Freddie was keeping born-digital text file logs that begin as their programming task lists, but evolved into complaining about the job, and then further dissolves into speculating about the archive and what it is doing to them. For this vignette, these entries were PDF only, providing the first multimedia entries, as all previous entries had been photographs. These longer writing sessions also gave me a better handle on the characters voices, and I did research into writing styles for the time period.

Both of these characters end up speaking about **the sensation that their attention, and their cognitive path through the archive seems to be somehow empowering it**. Freddie feels that it is trying to control them. Hearing the characters speak about how they felt about the archive so openly inspired many of the other mechanics in this vignette.

Console

Writing Freddie gave me the idea of adding a console interface to the archive, which the player would get access to at a certain point. A console is a panel available in a lot of software that gives developers access to warnings and logs – **like notes the programmer leaves for their future self to whisper information about the secret state of the world**.

As a game developer, I spend a lot of time writing to and reading from these consoles.

The console creates another ontological layer

beneath the software, where entity voices are quieter, before they pull themselves through to the “more real” area of the software frontend. **The console creates a split ontology within the software itself, opening up its insides to the player and allowing them to witness what is happening in the realm below**. The console logs player activities such as unlocking hex

hashes and bookmarking entries, and triggers log readouts by NPCs, giving lore or asking for favours. It could also trigger logs based on view counts rather than just visiting entries, so could ‘speak’ certain phrases later in the game, regardless of the order players visited entries in.

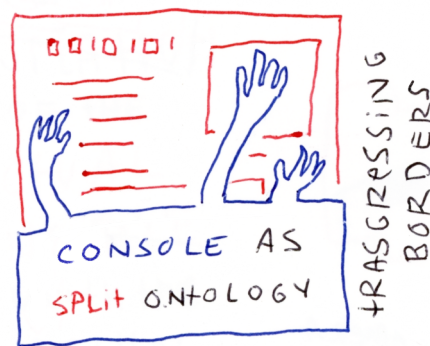


Figure xlviii: console transgressing borders

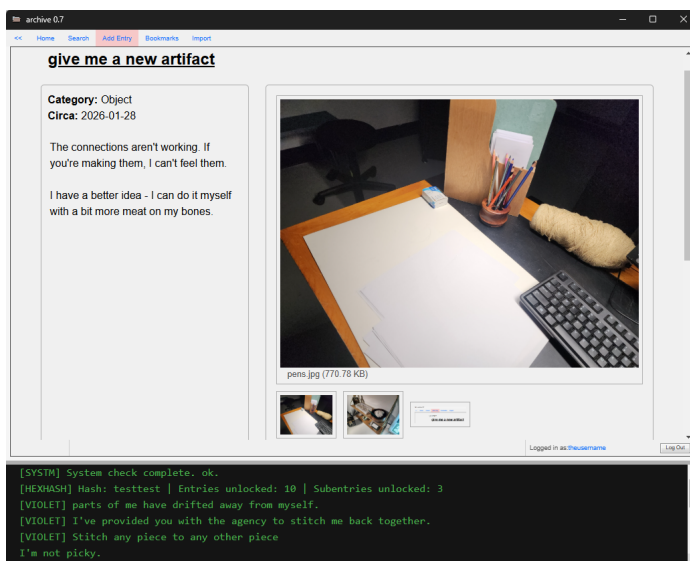


Figure xlix: The console open, and the entry requesting the player add their own artifact.

Connections

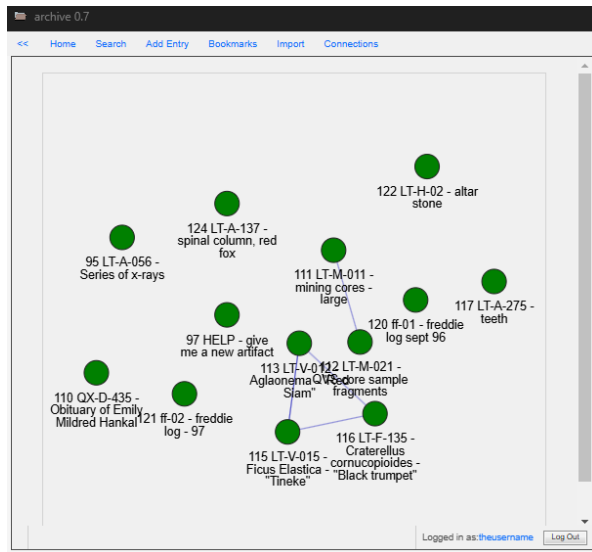


Figure 1: The "Related Entries" graph.

Some entries have a "Related Entries" property. The game starts with several entries related to each other, which allows players to find corrupted entries to migrate.

A Connections page shows a node-based graph of which entries are connected to which. It's slightly interactive with physics.

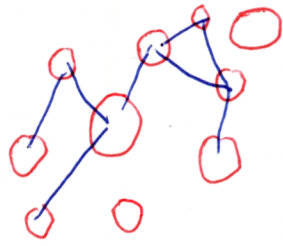
At a certain point during gameplay, players come across an entry that gives them the ability to add connections, through a drop-down on each entry. Changes are reflected in the graph, and entities give commentary about the connections in the console.

Improved Endgame

In the improved endgame, once the player submits their forgery, the new entry is shown but interaction with the software becomes disabled. It then begins navigating between entries rapidly, adding connections to each page. Meanwhile, the console pops open if it is not already, and the entities thank the players for what they sacrificed, and that they'll find a way to use it. The software finally settles on the Connections screen, where nodes continue rapidly stringing themselves together, until the node page becomes a giant nest of connected entries.

The game then appears to crash, with a blue error screen. The player's only option is to end the session and leave the room.

The increase in agency provided by players being able to connect entries makes it more meaningful when their identity is hijacked, as it implies they give the entities this access for them to use for their own ends. **The entities' intention is that by manipulating people to create and gather physical objects imbued with intention together, they will build themselves a physical vessel and be given access to the actual world.** This implies that they have manipulated characters over time, possibly far back in history, before the archive, to create forgeries or at least ritual worship objects – **these objects are like diegetic tangibles, pivot points that they hope to become portals.**



CONCRETE
REPRESENTATION
OF ABSTRACT
CONNECTIONS

Figure 11: abstract connections

dissonance. By methodically performing activities stamped with their username, they subconsciously become connected with this trace they leave of themselves in the software. When they see this username making choices without them, it should trigger an abstract form of depersonalization, of feeling like parts of themselves have been disconnected.

But unlike traditional ludonarrative dissonance where the player is being forced to perform mechanics that don't align with their identity or the themes of the game, it involves making a choice freely, but then **watching 'themselves' become an NPC who performs mechanics without their consent.**

Players reported the endgame as being very unsettling, but as of Vignette #3 no one articulated anything resembling a loss of identity or that their agency had been hijacked – the interface lacked the polish to communicate this clearly. Most players reported an insecurity to “do what they tell you” (an explicit instruction given in onboarding) and most players reported a sense of being betrayed or used.

They settle for creating a structure out of information instead, when they see that once again their attempt to perform ontological metalepsis and cross into the actual fails.

The hijacking of the username, the digital representation of their ludic self in the interface, is intended to **trigger a depersonalization and a type of ludonarrative**

5.7 Furnishings – Vignette #4

The final playtest took place in late February 2026, over the course of two days. Two different versions were tested. Vignette #4 included some new features, but in terms of content it was a polish of Vignette #3 with some content pulled forward from Vignettes #1 and #2.



Figure lii: Vignette #4. 2026. Photo by author.

Artifact Workstation

The side table present since Vignette #2 was reappropriated to be the ‘artifact workstation,’ and set up with craft supplies, pens, paper, labels, and ID tags. Players were informed that they could use this dedicated station for any archiving tasks the software requested of them. This resulted in players taking much more time and care forging their artifacts. It intended to create a space away from the virtual to allow players to focus on the physical, to step away from the camera that would capture it.

Corrupted Template

Some entries use a corrupted template, using CSS effects to create a more cacophonous and unstable look, that would intentionally obscure metadata and subentries. **This gave the illusion that the database itself was becoming more damaged and frenetic.** It also forced players to engage with more physicality – to be able to read some subentries, they would need to literally twist their necks to align themselves with the text to read.



Figure liv: glitches the software

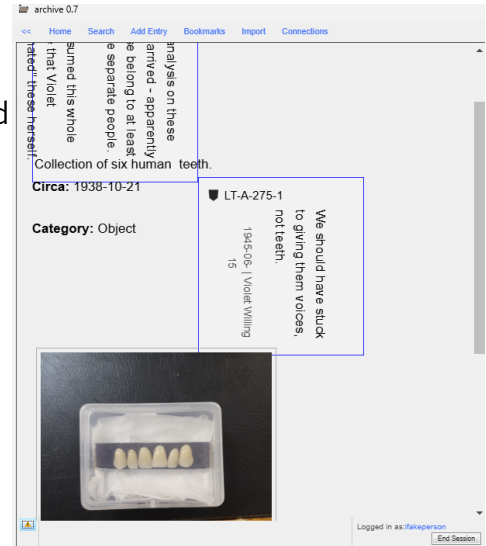


Figure liii: CSS tricks experimented with during early prototyping were finally implemented in Vignette #4.

Binding

Entities, using the voice of one of the historical characters via the console, request that players choose a physical object to 'bind' their names to. One of the artifacts is already bound by one of the fictional characters, which can potentially be discovered before the console conversation by noticing the artifact did not match its digital counterpart.



Figure Iv: Binding mechanic. Photos by author.

The intention of this mechanic is to prompt players to interact more with the physical artifacts, and to commit an ontological transgression of grounding something abstract – their name – in the physical. It also works to draw the players attention to their own identities while they are still in the archive.

In previous vignettes, when asked "Who were you when you were in the archive?" most players

responded that they didn't think about it at all, and this mechanic intended to force them to consider it again after they had been logged in for a while.

Testing for this mechanic revealed that 'binding' is culturally specific terminology^{§§§}. It was only recognized by native English speakers who also mentioned other aspects of witchcraft, magic or the folk tales when explaining the lore as they interpreted it. Other players did not understand the prompt when it was asked, and forgot about it until reminded in the exit interview.



*Figure lvi: A playtester who took the prompt bound their own screen name, as well as the name of one of the fictional characters. They explained they chose to use office supplies from the artifact workstation because they weren't sure if binding to the artifacts was ok.
Photo by author.*

This mechanic still has potential, if the language of the prompt is clarified to also teach players what it means while asking them to do it.

§§§ I had no idea this wasn't a more widely used term! The playtesting sample was only about 10 people, but most people were confused. I figured the ritual recognition would be limited to folk horror fans or new agers, but I still assumed that people 'bind' their cardboard recycling together or 'bind' their fates to that of their spouses.

5.8 Vestibule – Open Archive Visitation

Open Archive Visitation was tested for three hours on one of the V4 test dates in February. This version stripped out the progressive gameplay elements of the archive, and instead allowed visitors to explore freely. The software could be switched into 'demo mode', which would reduce the interface to only two pages – the Add Entry page, and the search page.



Figure Ivii: Open Archive Visitation. 2026. Photo by author.

Visiting players could examine the artifacts, and look up any entry they liked by their ID number to learn more about it in the database. All entries were unlocked and did not require migration, however, many subentries were still locked, and players would need to return during a normal volunteer shift if they wanted to unlock more information about the artifacts.

Players could fabricate and add forgeries to the database at any time, though players were encouraged to look around the archive to get a feel for the collection first, so they could feel out how their artifact could extend the story. Unfortunately, telemetry from this playtest were lost, so how players described their artifacts cannot be reported.

This version of the archive could support three to four visitors at a time, and they could stay as long as they liked.

5.9 DFX



Figure lviii: Vignette #4 installed at DFX. Photo by Aman Deshmukh.

In March 2026, Vignette #4 of ‘the archive’ was installed for five days at the Digital Futures Exhibition (DFX). Open Archive Visitation ran opening night, and between appointments booked for progressive gameplay sessions during the rest of the week. The small orange room was wonderfully secluded, and visitors often mentioned they had heard of the installation like a secret world from other attendees.

The previous playtests had been designed with the scale of this room in mind. The only real additions were extra archive boxes to crowd the space, a display shelf for the paper documents, and moving the player forged artifacts to their own display shelf – pictured in [Figure xlv](#).

During the research, I had intentionally avoided discussing the underlying theory that inspired the archive to avoid leading players expectations and muddying the results. However, at DFX I was able to present the archive alongside the theoretical illustrations I produced while researching, and was able to contextualize the project alongside that theory to visitors to the exhibition.



Figure lix: Images from DFX. Photos by author, Aman Deshmukh, and OCADU Live.

1. *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage*, "The Edge of Forever: Flatland & 4th Dimension."
2. Abbott, *Flatland*.
3. Gibbons, "The Narrative Worlds and Multimodal Figures of *House of Leaves*," 290.

| 6 Analysis

The results of the playtests in terms of the narrative mechanics developed in an **environment attempting to simulate metalepsis** worked extremely well. Even from the first playtest, when it was quite sparse, players reported that they felt strongly that they were stepping into another world, with many mentioning they would forget that they were in a school and become completely absorbed into their task and narrative. The diegetic lighting in the room played a big role in the immersion. Several of the playtesters were students or former students at the university that had exhibited in the same room before, and stated that the room felt like an entirely different place. They reported that the physical artifacts made a definite impression on their immersion, however, most players were reluctant to touch them, even when repeatedly encouraged to. I believe the context of it being 'art' made people worry about damaging things, and this effect would be reduced if 'the archive' was presented in a more 'gamey' context.

Players also picked up that there was a third world trying to get in, although their interpretation of what the third world represented varied wildly from player to player. This was a hypothesised result – **a form a memetic bleed-in in which players filled the gaps in the lore with their own genre expectations**. Some players were more focused in exit interviews on the human characters and their fates and relationships than in speculating about what the 'anomaly' was. This may be genre convention, as weird fiction as a genre usually leaves its metaphysics to the interpretation of the reader, however this may also be something the writing could have communicated better.

While results from metalepsis and memetic bleed-in were very gratifying, results from for other kinds of bleed were mixed. Players often reported playing as themselves, and feeling trepidation for their own safety while they were playing. They reported feeling betrayed or shaken up once they left the room during the first question in the exit survey. However, few people reported having a sense of their outside life with them while playing, save for people who had worked in data entry or who shared other similar fiction they enjoyed. **The aura of the game they took out of the room with them seems closer to ontological resonance or nostalgia than actual bleed-out**. There were many reports of nostalgia – for old jobs, appreciating the vintage technology, or the dated language of the characters.

I do not believe the lack of bleed was due to the inability of a project like this to trigger it, but because of the limitations of this specific project. The limited duration of each playtest slot, the length of the game and the context of playing in a school all limit how much time the

player can spend there. How many mechanics can be added to a short game without becoming overwhelming – all of these really shorten the period during which bleed-in can occur. Identity bleed-in can only occur if a player spends enough time in a role, and playthroughs of ‘the archive’ needed to be kept relatively short for practical reasons, as the installation could not be left up indefinitely. Compromises needed to be made between having enough players to get a large enough data sample, while keeping the game long enough to provoke its intended experiences. The player simply doesn't have the time or agency for their outside life to effect their inside actions.

Bleed-out is very difficult to assess, as data can only be collected directly outside of the room or via the online exit form. For Vignette#2, exit forms were encouraged to be filled out immediately, but data from these were not very qualitative, as I believe players felt rushed to fill them out. For Vignette #3 and #4, players were given the option of having the form emailed to them later to complete, but this greatly reduced the response rate. The exit interviews were significantly more effective for capturing qualitative data, but they could not capture how the players felt once they returned to their actual lives – **the exit interview is still an antechamber between the game and the actual.**

The tangible aspects worked well, but not as well as they could have if time had allowed for more experimentation with meaningful tangible mechanics. Only a few players spent significant time away from the computer exploring the physical objects, and those that did were disappointed to not find more tangible mechanics to reward them for their curiosity. However, players did respond very well to being asked to make their own physical artifacts. Many players spent a lot of time on their artifacts if they could, and responded very positively to it, despite triggering what is technically a negative ending****.

The rarity of these kinds of games is not surprising to me – the logistical difficulties presented by this project made the creation of a tangible narrative very difficult. Even for a relatively simple game, the scope was enormous. Installation set-up took hours and at least two people to ferry all the furniture and artifacts, and to test the many systems, even though the majority of installs took place in the same building it was stored in. The time commitment required for players was quite long – as a designer I felt like there was very little content in the game, but playthroughs regularly took 10 – 15 minutes more than I anticipated each time. Because of the length of gameplay, only a limited number of people could play during each installation period.

**** Players often asked if they were finished, especially in earlier vignettes where it was less obvious, but none asked if there was something they could have done differently to change their fate. Weird fiction as a genre tends to end on a suspenseful, even horrifying note, and many of the playtesters would have had the genre literacy to expect this outcome.

As a designer, circling back to my research frequently inspired new mechanics or story details as I hoped it would. I suffered from writer's block early in the process, before I could start adding in any of the metaleptic mechanics and I needed to just get the database functional. However, once I passed that threshold, the fiction, programming and research pinged off of each other very well. As with most art, time is finite, and the project never quite reached what I imagined for it, but the vignette system worked very well to build up to a tempo where ideas and features would come together very quickly, and move together in tandem.

While overall this vignette method worked quite well, generating experiences that were quick to create and entertaining for players, even repeat visitors, it created a "blank page" problem at the beginning of each vignette cycle. While programming tasks were easy enough to organize based on the previous iterations' reflection, writing felt like I was constantly starting from scratch. By Vignette #3 I began recycling a few artifacts from previous cycles and rewriting their annotations to fit better into the new story.

| 7 Conclusions

'the archive' was created to discover what emerged while creating a certain kind of game – a game in which the interface is extended out into a tangible location, and where theoretical concepts about moving between worlds and becoming different people are explored and illustrated. While some mechanics were more effective to this end than others, the overall experience was a success, and generated this encyclopedia of narrative mechanics and their effectiveness.

This study would benefit from expanding to include more tangible game mechanics into the gameplay, and experiment more with how to encourage players to interact with the physical artifacts. I also believe the methodology has a lot of potential as an art practice – developing game mechanics to catch abstract concepts as a metaphor is rich soil for innovation and storytelling, and I encourage anyone to try it.

I believe 'the archive' worked as an engaging and thought-provoking experience for its players. The research project succeeded in making concrete observations about interface games and tangible diegetic artifacts, and how they support metalepsis for both players and characters.

8 Postmortem

A few weeks have passed since the final DFX install in the submission of the final research paper, but the project is still occupying a large amount of space in my mind (and my kitchen.)

While assembling my defence and reflecting back on my research question I realized that while it was ambiguous if artifacts *supported* immersion in the fiction, it was clear that they did not *break* immersion. In retrospect, asking players to literally step away from the progressive narrative and spend an indeterminate amount of time crafting could have been distracting, but there is no evidence that this happened. Even players who spent a long time crafting artifacts that weren't closely related to the story were still shaken by the endgame. I believe that the act of artifacting may have even put them in a flow state that made them *more* emotionally vulnerable to this fictional betrayal.

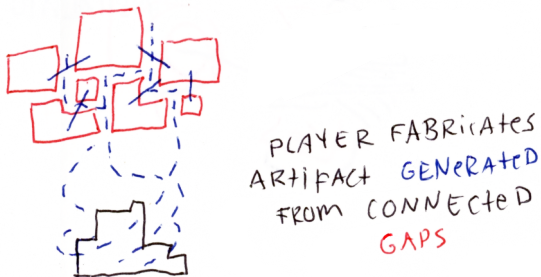


Figure 1x: artifacts allow players to contribute to the lore

I've also come to see these artifacts not only as representations of players bringing the gameplay into the physical, their own ontological plane, but as representations of how they are filling in gaps in the lore with their own conclusions. While not every artifact directly added to the lore, I see that those that tried were not just adding their own fragments, but in a way illustrating the cognitive connections they were seeing between

narrative fragments. **If the Connections screen was a quantitative illustration of these connections, the artifacts had the potential to be a qualitative illustration.** I hope to play more with diegetic fabrication prompts as collaborative storytelling in future work.

The main bleed-in I anticipated and confirmed was how the story shifted based on different people's tastes, and while I set up the theory for this in my paper, I regret not taking more notes and making more space for the results. Players filled in the gaps in the lore with their own genre expectations, and the possible worlds it spawned ranged from aliens, demons, sentient computers, folk horror and folklore. I found this delightful – **characters mistaking the genre they exist in for a safer one is a trope I've explored in my work before, and I'm delighted to see it surface with real people.** As 'the archive' is built with the intention of being

a 'possible worlds machine', there is no possibility of misinterpretation – all readings of the text are welcome. **But no matter what the world becomes, there is always a dangerous fragment waiting for you at the end.** It doesn't matter how you cast the entities that occupy the archive, they will turn on you either way.

I appreciate more in retrospect that some player types had no impulse to fill gaps. When this happened early on, I assumed it was my own failure to be clear in my fragments, and it was very perceptive players who managed to enjoy the story while it was sketchy. But now I believe that this has less to do with perception and more to do with – if not player types – reader types. **Some readers expect the literature to just exist as it is, and others might yearn to extend it but don't feel up to the task, even in their own minds.** It's a vulnerable position to put people in, and even more so to quiz them about it afterwards.

Bleed-out was difficult to measure for during the project – as stated in the paper proper, the exit interviews felt more like an antechamber rather than a full return to the actual world, and I was only able to capture data during that brief window. However, **I have since recognized ontological bleed-out in myself.** The objects I used in the installation were largely plucked from my own life to build another, and I unconsciously spent a lot of development time trying to scrub that life off of them and turn them into something new. Now that the archive is dismantled, these artifacts and office supplies will return home, some to their old places, some to new, and some still tagged with ID numbers, because *why not*. **They are now imbued with the fictional history I used them to build—holding for me both worlds at once, every time I look at them.**



Figure Ixi: An archive remains an archive whether it's staged in a critique room or spread across the kitchen of a downtown apartment

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10 Appendices

Appendix A: Glossary

Diegetic

The object exists within the space and time of the narrative's storyworld.

Metalepsis

Traversal through different layers of narrative, or through different worlds.

Plural: metalepses.

UI

User interface. Usually referring to a digital graphical interface available to users to execute functionality in a piece of software.

NPC

Non-player character. Any character in a gameworld that is not currently under the control of the player.

Minimal departure

Every element of a fictional world that is not explicitly mentioned to be different from the actual world, is assumed to be the same.

TTRPG

Table Top Role Playing Game. Refers to games that are played at a table and incorporate elements of randomization, but tend towards collaborate storytelling rather than board-based movement. The term is often still used to include similar games even if they do not involve role playing as individual characters.

LARP

Live Action Role-play. A variation on TTRPG, except play has an additional embodied performance, and may incorporate geographical locations. Players may dress up as their characters and perform activities that they would have only described in a TTRPG.

VR

Virtual Reality, used in this instance to refer to games or experiences designed for consumer headsets that use split-perspective camera, displayed close to each eye, to give the illusion of three-dimensional depth.

Multimodal

Containing multiple modes of communication. For example, a comic combines text and image. A game may contain text, image, sound, video.

Metareference

Referring to itself, especially its own materiality. For example, a book referring to itself as a book, or a game admitting it's a game.

Mimetic

Attempting mimicry. In narratology, usually used in the context of something that is intending to mimic something that could plausibly happen in reality. Anti-mimetic aspects could not plausibly happen in reality, but still may be plausible within a cohesive storyworld with different rules than the actual.

Weird Fiction

Not sci-fi, not horror, not fantasy, but a secret fourth thing.

Born-digital

An object that was created on a computer, and never had a tangible counterpart. For example, a painting that was created on an iPad, as opposed to a painting on canvas with oil paint. Though a digitization of the latter could be displayed online alongside the former.

Golden Path

In a game environment, a path game designers designate as the most efficient for players to take to hit all of the most meaningful story or gameplay beats. Less crucial content may be off the beaten path, and there may be a choice of multiple optimal paths. It is usually designed in such a way that it is at least subtly clear to the player, so they may choose if they want to continue exploring the current area before advancing the game.

| Appendix B: Volunteer On-boarding Manual

The volunteer handbook was printed as a tri-fold document and either handed to players to read while waiting for their shift to start, or handed to them inside the installation when logging in.

It contained practical information instructing players how to interact with the system, in addition to some abstract lore about the history of the archive, and a link to the project website.

QVS
ARCHIVE MIGRATION
PROJECT
VOLUNTEER HANDBOOK



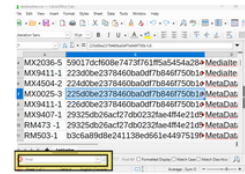
Thank you for volunteering your time to assist us in migrating the [REDACTED] archive. Without the assistance of volunteers like you, this undertaking would not be possible.

The original digitization of the archive was undertaken in 1996 at [REDACTED] University, but those efforts were interrupted and the archive and its software was badly damaged. We are a volunteer community organization with a deep interest and affection for preserving overlooked parts of Ontario's rich cultural history before they succumb to time and indifference for future generations.

The current volunteer archive revitalization project was started in 2006, and continues thanks to the efforts of volunteers all over the world.

MIGRATING

Search the database backup file for hexhashes to migrate corrupted entries:



1. Confirm the physical artifact with the above tags exists in the archive
2. Confirm that the record entry exists in the archive software, and any subrecords or reference records are intact and complete.

LOGGING ON

Please create a username and unique password when logging in to the software.

For accountability, we request that you use your real name.

You may close the software but do not log out, or your session updates will be lost.

ARCHIVE NUMBERS

Each archive record has a unique identifier that helps cross-index between the record and any physical artifacts that still exist.

XX - 0000 - [SIZE] - [subID]

XX - Our archive has acquired the bodies of others, the alphabetical prefix indicates the original archive collection

0000 - a unique numeric identifier for the record

[SIZE] - The size of the storage container, to help with finding artifacts in storage.

[subID] - Some records have sub records. This may include multiple related artifacts stored separately, metadata, or annotations by researchers or future archivists.

LOST VS CORRUPTED DATA

The 1996 database software was corrupted and inaccessible, however what data could be salvaged has already been integrated into the new software, but many indexes have been lost.

Whenever possible, previous volunteers have marked lost data vs corrupted data.

Lost data and artifacts are known to be irretrievable but their presence is noted for posterity and to give context to what remains. Some data has been intentionally sacrificed.

Corrupted data and artifacts can be retrieved via hexhash or further sacrifice.

FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT



MIGRATING

- Find the ID number of the desired record in the spreadsheet
- Copy hexhash from column
- Navigate to 'Import' in software
- Paste the hexhash into the text input box
- Navigate to all imported records and confirm completeness.
- Check all subrecords for completeness
- Write down any records mentioned in the data
- Check and migrate any records noted
- Do what they tell you*

Appendix C: Archive Visits

As part of my research into archives for this project, I visited several archives and attended several archive talks to prepare myself for designing my own archive. The following are my take-aways from each individual visit.

Interaccess

I attended a talk by Kit Haehnel in March 2025 at Interaccess. Kit's talk discussed archiving as an act of creation, curation and destruction, heavily informed by Derrida's *Archive Fever* (1996.) Kit had been working to organize the Interaccess archives – transforming them from cardboard boxes of haphazard documents and hard drives of poorly labeled documents and obsolete file formats to something neat and indexed.

This transition period is very wonderful. Interaccess has moved several times over their decades long history, and their archive has lost items and absorbed other archives over time, indicating an ebb and flow of a specific slice of local culture and technological development over several decades.

The most interesting thing was watching the human beings documented by the archive in meeting notes and correspondence interact with each other, and how the decisions they made at the time shaped the direction of the organization, one offhand comment or general meeting vote at a time. As a tech interest organization, the technological evolution is documented not only by the software and hardware they may be discussing and celebrating, but by the very media the people cherishing it use to communicate with each other.

OCADU Archive

Madeline Bognar, the archivist there walked me through the OCADU Archive's procedures and filing system, and showed me some of her favourite pieces in the archive. This archive was much better funded and had much more space to spread out. Disappointingly, they also track their archive in a spreadsheet, but Madeline showed me their [public collections on jstor](#). The archive made evident the evolutions in both artistic styles and archive technologies and practices – much like Interaccess, an archive exists in a constant state of attempting to reformat itself to existing expectations. It is shaped and molded by the people who care for it, and the researchers who access it, as they pull what has sunk to the bottom up to the top and recontextualize connections between artifacts through their own lenses.

Building Your Own Archive Talk

I attended a lecture by Reaghan Swanson, the archivist of the The ArQuives: Canada's LGBTQ+ Archives. This was a practical lecture targeted at artists to provide them their own tools to begin mindfully archiving their own work, with the intention of making it preserving it's metadata for their own career development before earlier details are eroded from memory, and to have their legacy archived in the event it needs to be accessed after their passing, such as in the event it is donated to an archive such as the ArQuives.

The practical considerations of building an archive from scratch was of course very helpful for my project. Raeghans talk reverified the role of an archive in shaping the narrative history of a community, this one with very high stakes – the archive was started at a time when queer histories were being lost and even intentionally buried, and queer communities were driven by wanting to take agency over their own stories. It again asks the continual archival question of what makes a physical artifact valuable enough to justify the space it takes up, and how the idea of truth can be questioned.

Collections Special Interest Group

I was invited to attend a meeting of researchers and archivists at the Collections Special Interest Group , organized by Savanna Buehlman-Barbeau an archaeologist at the University of Toronto. The discussion topic was on the value of museums, and the private organizational concerns versus the public responsibility, and the sometimes irresponsible stories a museum may knowingly or unknowingly tell the public through their curation. The discussion was with researchers who are employed by a variety of organizations tasked with preserving history, and whose research takes them through many different archives. It is the people who decide what is kept and what is lost to history, and what is displayed to the public and what is buried deep in storage.

De cerebro: An exhibition of the human brain Exhibit

In January 2025, I was able to attend a short tour of the exhibit [De cerebro: An exhibition of the human brain](#), by its curator Alexandra Carter, at the Thomas Fisher Rare Books Library. The exhibit included illustrated medical texts, philosophy, psychology, pharmacology, and the paranormal. I include this visit in my archive overview, not only because of the obvious overlap between a themed library and an archive, but because what I learned from her tour about curation and the incidental narrative qualities of a collection. While the collection was centred around the human brain from all of these perspectives, it has the side effect of being a

journey through cultural understandings of the nature of reality – the ontological assumptions made by humans of how the earth work, how brains work, spiritual and religious lenses to see the world through. It also became a tour of the technology of printing and sharing knowledge. I was intrigued by the notion that a collection may be created a by an individual with a specific purpose, but it could hold other themes as well – this really informed my writing about how my archive writing could include data about character and spirituality, even if the archive curators didn't have that intention.

Alexandra mentioned during the tour that her curation involved sourcing specific artifacts not currently on the Fisher collection, to flesh out gaps in the narrative – this visit happened before my other archive visits, and at the time I thought my archive-as-narrative-interface was novel, not realizing that it is much of the point of an archive in the first place.

Digital Archives and Database Software

I conducted research into archives available online, how this process is done, and how it influences researchers. The [Fungarium at the Kew Botanical gardens](#) and others release online videos giving people around the world a look into their collection storage methods and processes. Kew and other collections use the [Digivol portal](#) to [solicit online volunteers](#) to help transcribe analogue item notes to help in the process of digitizing their collections. This portal allows volunteers to edit metadata of artifacts, often refining illegible OCR (Optical Character Recognition) data or tagging information from trail cameras.

A DIGI^{VO}L Expedition My Profile ▾

1. Specimen details

Page ...	num...	firstN...	surn...	alias	Tried...	Tried...	term...	nativ...	calling	age	heigh...	heigh...	comp...	hair	eye c...	T.L.
163	125	Michl	Mara		Clonmel	30 Jul...	Life	Tipper...	Reaper	25	5	5 1/2				
263	127	Thos	Mara		ditto ...	28 Jul...	Life	<[Tip...	Ploug...	46	5	6 3/4				
363	133	Danl	McCar...		Water...	28 <[... 7 yrs	Limeri...	Reape...	27	5	9					
463	54	Patk	Nash		Limeri...	<[28 ... 7 yrs	Co Li...	Reaper	22	5	6 1/4					

Save Cancel

Figure 62: From the Convict Archive at University of New England. The specimen, a handwritten historical document, has generated an incomplete table, allowing volunteers to select a cell and retype the data. The image has a navigator so volunteers may zoom in on any part of the image. Published with the kind permission of DigiVol, the ALA and the University of New England.

[The Internet Archive](#) is also a fascinating large-scale project, collecting digitized data cross-indexed into many different collections – an example of one of these collections is the [Books on Microfilm collection](#) – this being an example of a physical archive that was already migrated to what would have been considered a more accessible technology at the time, and now needs to be migrated and transcribed again as a new, even more accessible technology surfaces. The books in the Internet Archive collections are scans of microfilm scans of books – twice removed from the original, and with the artifacting that entails. Microfilm can have a lifespan of 500 years, whereas the lifespan of a PDF file is still unknown, as many digital file formats have become obsolete in less than 30 years. The storage servers are more vulnerable to environmental damage than many of the original artifacts. An individual drive has a relatively short lifespan, requiring transfers to new drives as the old decay and increasing the potential for data loss. Technology has even been developed to transcode digital-first files onto microfilm for archives, as it is considered a significantly sturdier and secure medium.

There are a variety of [metadata standards](#) that currently exist that allow archives to cross-index with each other, granted that both archives are using the same standards.

This project required research into the visual look of database software that would have been used pre-internet, hosted locally on personal computers by smaller organizations. The [Winworld Software Museums list of database software](#) provided some excellent resources to supplement my own memories – and visiting an archive of databases felt delightfully on-the-nose.

Appendix D: [development blog](#)

The development log was created to capture research, stream of consciousness thinking, visual reference, and sketching, in addition to providing a place for more organized task management and reflection on each Vignette. The log was set up and published in summer of 2025, during early prototyping. However, it was created by publishing markdown files from my daily note taking software, and I was able to find notes created much earlier in the process to publish by tagging them with a publishing flag and linking to them in the index. As the germination of this project actually began when I needed to pitch a thesis idea for graduate school applications in 2023, I was able to collect my thoughts on the process from a very early stage, and how it evolved in the year before I actually started the project. The act of looking back through these notes while initially setting up the blog, and revisiting the site throughout the project, allowed me to reflect on my initial passions for the project and remind myself of creative avenues I may have otherwise forgotten about.

The log is deliberately curated to not be too bogged down with metadata or leading visitors through a linear experience – much like the project itself, it is deliberately fragmented so that creative connections between entries can be made by visitors, including myself.

Appendix E: [research recruitment website](#)

At the completion of each vignette, 'the archive' would be installed and recruit playtesters to give feedback on the experience. The recruitment website was set up to give potential players information about the project, including the next archive install, a link to calendar registration, and access to read consent forms in advance. This website was modeled after the Research Ethics Board (REB) approved information about the project.

Appendix F: [Github](#)

Changes 3	History	the console is now beautiful but not functional
Select branch to compare...		ameinias 76e286f
		16 changed files
tweaks during playtesting ameinias • 2 months ago		README.md
another close to v3 commit ameinias • 2 months ago		assets\databases\dexie-import.json
close to final clean up for vignette 3 ameinias • 2 months ago		package-lock.json
GO HOME GILLIAN BLEKKENHORST ameinias • 2 months ago		packages\app-electron\package.json
Fixed an issue with the admin switch, which was wiping out ... ameinias • 2 months ago		packages\shared\App.css
push web version ameinias • 2 months ago		packages\shared\components\Search\Connections.jsx
Finished animated end sequence, added more console functi... ameinias • 2 months ago		packages\shared\components\bars\NavBar.jsx
some console success! ameinias • 2 months ago		packages\shared\components\other\Console.jsx
the console is now beautiful but not functional ameinias • 2 months ago		packages\shared\components\parts\DebugPanel.jsx
playthrough is done! Still need to do end animation. ameinias • 2 months ago		packages\shared\components\routes\Router.jsx
trying to get those new features built in ameinias • 2 months ago		packages\shared\components\testcomp.jsx
		packages\shared\package.json
		packages\shared\utils\motion\FileTree.jsx
		packages\shared\utils\motion\Highlighter.jsx
		packages\shared\utils\motion\animatedList.jsx
		packages\shared\utils\motion\hypertext.jsx

Early prototyping for 'the archive' began working with several different existing github repositories (repos for short), shared publicly by other developers. I tried several different repos while getting a feel for the new technology I was working with, and critically examining how other developers had chosen to create their database interfaces.

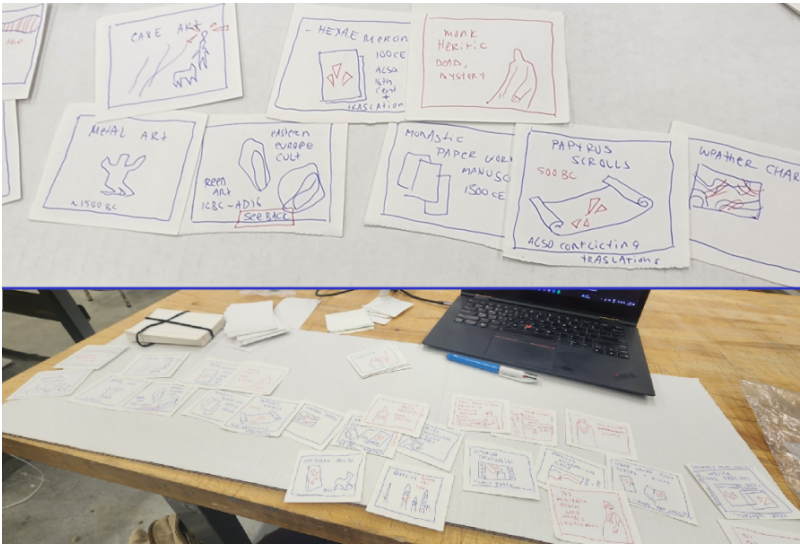
When I felt I'd learned all I could from these existing repos. I created a new repo from a popular blank template with the digital tools I'd landed on working with - Javascript using a React library, with an Electron wrapper so it could run as an independent program, and a live-preview environment. It was designed to be what is called a 'monorepo', because it was designed to create several different pieces of software with a shared code base: the main database software, a simplified web version so I could write entries on the go, and a terminal version which was scrapped.

Because of the many temporary repositories I'd used before, this repo was called 'archive-6'. It was frequently synced between two different computers, and I am a nervous person who commits frequently should something go wrong. The commit log - pictured above- becomes its own archive.

Appendix G: Related artworks

'ontological bleed' spawned several other projects during development. While 'the archive' was designed to be multi-modal and capture my impulse to translate experiences into multiple formats, it couldn't itself capture everything I was feeling through the year I worked on it.

Game to make a game



The 'game to make a game' was never given any other title. It is a paper prototype, a generative tool modeled after solo storytelling TTRPG mechanics, using the randomized cards and dice to generate unique connections between artifacts, characters, and their motivations. While the game tool itself did not feature much in the development of 'the archive,' the act of creating it forced me to turn abstract concepts and difficult-to-read lists of random facts into concrete details that could be read easily. Thinking about how aspects of the fiction could be translated into weighted dice rolls helped me think clearly about what my priorities of each aspect were, find what the common connections were. By filtering the invisible insides of my storytelling through the lens of mechanics that should be human-readable, I was able to organize my own thoughts.

This TTRPG may have the legs to stand on its own one day, allowing players to tell stories that take place within the gameworld of the archive - but for now it stays on the shelf.

Through the cards created, you can see a glimpse of characters and artifacts that did not make it into the final game.

process artshow



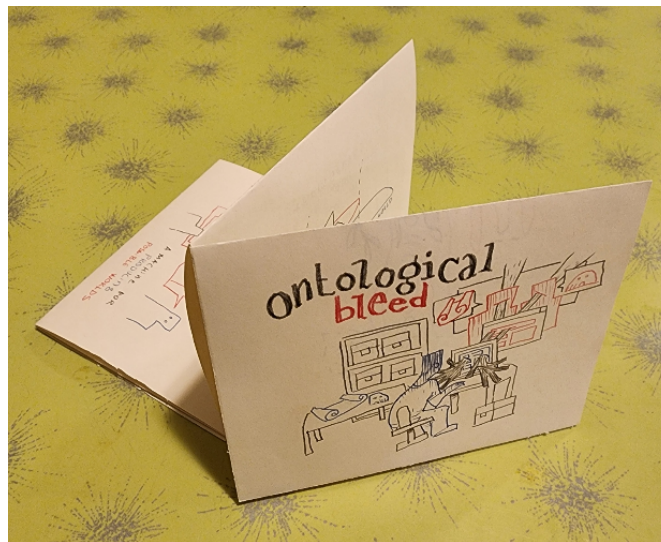
Figure 63: top right: process #1. top left: process #2. bottom: process #3. bottom right: process #3 towards the end of the night.

'process' was designed for and inspired by the Queer Processes and Ecologies show, curated by Renata Critton-Papp. The concept of the show was to showcase works-in-progress, or works-about-progress, by queer artists. It is affectionately referred to as "the murder board", and began as a speculative timeline of my internal thesis process, built with obscured printouts of my development log and GitHub repositories. These are linked together with a red string indicating my attention and disposition, sometimes taunt and frantic, sometimes dipping and spooling on the ground during times of burn out. The red string is an intentional reflection of the red infection of some artifacts in 'the archive'.

The Ecology show had two installed several months apart to show the works evolution, the first in November 2025 the OCADU graduate gallery. It was installed in the graduate gallery again in February 2026 for the [OCADU 2026 Graduate Conference, themed "experimentation through \(Dis\)Pleasure."](#) The final Ecology show was in March 2026 at [the arQuives](#).

'process' evolved each time it was installed, adapting to different locations and guided by my state of mind about the thesis process it represented during the installation. The final showing, at the opening for the Ecologies show at [the arQuives](#), involved a performance where I added new shreds and connections to the installation throughout the night, both process risographs of the paper illustrations printed for the final thesis exhibition, and crumpled paper from the floor. I actually left working on the final draft of my thesis paper to attend the show, and the performance represents me closing in on the final thesis in real-time.

ontological bleed zine



I always hoped to create a few illustrations for my thesis paper, but I assumed I'd likely run out of time for this step and it might get cut for scope. I also suffered a wrist injury several years ago that interrupted my illustration and comics career and pushed me towards game design, so going into graduate school I was very out of practice and still very conscious of aggravating my injury.

However, it became a much bigger part of the process than I anticipated, and a natural part of the process rather than an additional step. My illustrations have been primarily black-and-white for a decade, but during graduate school I picked up the habit of using retractable multi-colour ballpoint pens for taking colour-coded notes and sketches during lectures. By

the time I started my thesis research in earnest, my lecture sketching had already retrained my brain and my hand to talk to each other the way they used to. I needed to think-through-drawing in order to understand what I was reading anyway, and I was well practiced from drawing unintelligible diagrams in the first two semesters of school, so my personal research-sketches were usually solid enough I felt comfortable publishing them directly without too much editing - though I did redraw a few of the early ones.

Because of the ballpoint pens, there ended up being an emergent visual consistency throughout 'ontological bleed' and the related projects that is absent from 'the archive' itself.

It was suggested by Simone Jones that I put a few of my illustrations up for the final thesis exhibition, and I was a bit burnt out from working on a thesis draft, so I decided if I was cleaning up illustrations for the final exhibition anyway, I could also print a zine with a few of them at the same time.

The zines and the exhibition posters were printed at 667, OCADUs risography studio. 'Riso' is a process sort of halfway between photocopying and screen printing - it prints each colour from a drum a layer at a time. Processing the illustrations for riso involved separating each ballpoint colour into separate layers for printing.

The zines will be available to 'volunteers' during the final exhibition, and I will likely reprint them to sell at comic festivals for the next few years, as an extension of my existing comics practice.

Appendix H: Data Collection

Several types of data were collected, and collection methods were refined for each subsequent playtest of 'the archive'. The Vignette #1 archive install took place before REB approval, so no data was collected. Data collection began on the second day of Vignette #2.

Timeline of the Playtests

Vignette #2 - December 11th and 12th, 2025

Vignette #3 - January 28th-30th 2026

Vignette #4 - February 26th-27th 2026

Participants

Participants were screened with the following questions:

- be at least 18 years of age
- have moderate computer literacy
- comfortable with light supernatural horror elements

Participants were recruited at OCADU, as well as from my professional and social networks.

Data was collected from 30 players over 29 playtests of the progressive version of the archive – two playtesters played more than one Vignette, and two playtesters during V2 played together. Of 30 players, all 30 played to completion, though 1 intentionally abstained from uploading an artifact to the archive.

The archive had other visitors who did not play the progressive version, either stepping in during in-progress playtests, or visiting during Open Archive Visitation. The behaviour of these visitors was observed, and they were asked verbally if they consented to photography, but they were not interviewed about the experience or asked to fill out an exit survey.

Exit Survey

Exit surveys were created as Google Forms for Vignettes #2 through #4. However, it was found that exit survey data from Vignette #2 were very lean for qualitative questions, likely due to players filling out the surveys on their phones immediately after playing and feeling rushed as new players arrived after them.

For Vignette #3 and #4, playtests were padded to have more time for exit interviews, which gave significantly better experiential data. While the exit survey was still available, it was only filled out by two players for V3 and none for V4.

Exit Interviews

Exit interviews for Vignette #2 were more informal, as formal questions were available on the exit survey. Players were simply asked to give their opinions about their experience, as well as asked about specifics of the functions of the installation, such as the cathode ray monitor and archive camera.

For Vignettes #3 and #4, exit interviews became more formalized, and questions were refined to collect data from playtesters conversationally. Exit interviews for these Vignettes usually ran 15-25 minutes and were quite expansive, with hand taken notes taken by the interviewer running in dozens of pages per playtest day. A sampling of playtester responses are noted here.

How do you feel now that you've left the archive?

How did being in the room make you feel?

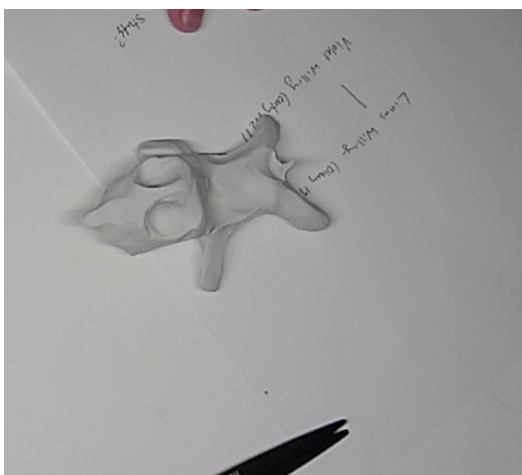
Did you do what they asked?

What happened in there as you understood it?

Who were you during your shift?

Telemetrics

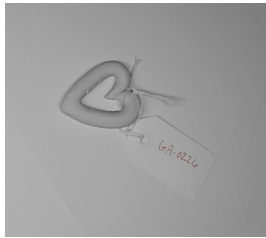
While telemetrics were implemented in the software starting with Vignette #2, the system was prone to both system and user error. The telemetric file from Vignette #2 was overwritten each playthrough. In Vignette #3, the data was wiped before exporting. For Vignette #4, telemetrics data saved properly, but the interface option to save it at the end of the playthroughs was sometimes cancelled by either the player or the developer by accident. This was very unfortunate, as the telemetrics were designed to directly capture what the players wrote about their artifacts when they added them to the database. All telemetrics data from the 'Open Archive Visitation' was lost.



1372 visited: /entry/121	navigation	26/02/2026, 14:20:40
1373 visited: /	navigation	26/02/2026, 14:24:04
1374 visited: /entry/110	navigation	26/02/2026, 14:24:05
1375 visited: /hashImport	navigation	26/02/2026, 14:24:52
imported: Hash: 4acf43285e01067ea35af33f416fcc69 Entries		
1376 unlocked: 4 Subentries unlocked: 5	hashimport	26/02/2026, 14:24:54
1377 visited: /connections	navigation	26/02/2026, 14:24:58
1378 visited: /hashImport	navigation	26/02/2026, 14:25:12
1379 visited: /entry/110	navigation	26/02/2026, 14:25:16
1380 visited: /hashImport	navigation	26/02/2026, 14:25:20
1381 visited: /entry/122	navigation	26/02/2026, 14:25:23
1382 visited: /	navigation	26/02/2026, 14:25:30
1383 visited: /entry/49	navigation	26/02/2026, 14:25:34
1384 visited: /hashImport	navigation	26/02/2026, 14:27:39
imported: Hash: 60889e978b9dd56ca47f36ddae12a07 Entries		
1385 unlocked: 1 Subentries unlocked: 3	hashimport	26/02/2026, 14:27:41
1386 visited: /entry/97	navigation	26/02/2026, 14:27:45
1387 visited: /player-add-entry	navigation	26/02/2026, 14:31:30
YOU-A-416 title: Clay Ghou! desc: A small clay ghou! A vessel so you can pull yourself back together. Hope this helps! xoxoxo		
media: , webcam-1772134310605.png, webcam-1772134317918.png, webcam-1772134326541.png		
1388	player entry	26/02/2026, 14:32:45

An example of telemetrics data from Vignette #4. The software printed logs to a CSV file when prompted, capturing navigation data, hashimports – players migrating data from the spreadsheet, and capturing their archive forgery. The redacted text is the players username. Players were allowed to upload as many photos from the webcam as they like, and given fields to edit the pre-generated ID number, title, and add a description.

Below is a sample of the forgery data collected during Vignette #4.



YOU-A-732 title: New Entry desc: A HEART STONE ; if the hag stones were unhelpful perhaps looking at things through love will change it ?



YOU-A-677 title: Violet? desc: at what point does the archivist become the archive? or the archive the archivist?

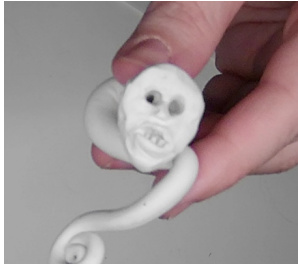
there's much too many connections yet to be made...



YOU-A-474 title: New Entry desc: It is not/ it is irrelivent, all life is irrelevant.



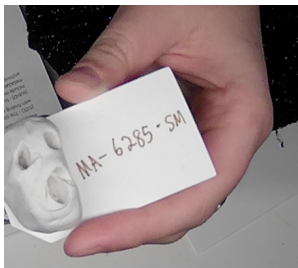
YOU-A-913 title: Smelt Hand desc: Melt metal, shaped like a humane hand.



M-ARY-479 title: a face desc: I forgot how much I liked doing this.
What better place to leave a thing for remembering, than an archive.



YOU-A-543 title: New Entry desc: could be a teeth from unknow
nurtures



YOU-A-443 title: New Entry desc: A little clay head I sculpted

