A Beginner's Guide to Painted Worlds: The Haunted Mansion, Dark Souls III, and the Playground of Interpretation

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a set of spatialized narrative designs that elicit certain practices of intersubjective interpretation; I term these spaces *playgrounds of interpretation* in reference to the playful and ongoing negotiation of a shared reality that takes place within them. Drawing on Ricouerian hermeneutic theory, performance theory, fan studies, and the history of visual media, I develop a framework of analysis that examines how these intentionally designed spaces attempt to resist the closure of meaning associated with hermeneutic action by distributing signifiers across space such that they are unable to be thought in sequence. I then examine the communal interpretive play that emerges within and around the playground of interpretation and the ability of these communities to engage meaningfully beyond the fictional boundaries of the playground. I conclude by arguing for the importance of critical engagement with these understudied spaces and the potential within.

Keywords

hermeneutics, fan studies, performance, visual media, genealogy

INTRODUCTION

In thinking through the question of the playground, I was immediately drawn to the kinds of play either allowed or elicited by the design of a space and the cultural habits that can predetermine what forms play takes within that space; these questions become increasingly pressing the more specific and historically defined a playground becomes. The aim of this paper, ultimately, is the video game medium and the kinds of play being designed for within it, but with a careful consideration of the historical and cultural situation out of which the video game has emerged.

Let us begin therefore with a stage – we can consider the stage as a playground in the sense of an area demarcated for the play of performance, even though its standard form is simply a raised, flat area that can be decorated with props. There is very little in the design of the space to elicit play, and yet there are few places that are more determined in the forms of play that take place there; the history of theater performance back to the Elizabethean stage tells the audience that the stage is another world, "the peep-show world of the bourgeois theater." (Piscator 1929) This other world is created in the moment of play; to the audience of a performance, the

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difference between improvisation and scripted performance is essentially negligible – whatever is said or done constitutes the reality into which the audience is gazing.

The *players* in a scripted performance, however, do have a sense of their shared reality on the stage prior to the performance, originating with the script and then rehearsed into being over time. Within the scope of that rehearsal, certain aspects of the rehearsed reality may and often do change over time, as the players and director negotiate the best form of that reality – a process of interpretation and reinterpretation. This mode of negotiation, drawing on aspects of both improvised and scripted performance, is nevertheless distinct from either; both Bertolt Brecht and Erwin Piscator identified its importance to producing a revolutionary theater, specifically what came to be called epic theater. For Brecht, the actors needed a greater number of rehearsals during which they should remain "a reader" of their part for as long as possible; this would enable them to "act in such a way that the alternative emerges as clearly as possible." He called this process "fixing the 'not…but,'" i.e. highlighting the actor's "account, view, version" as one interpretation "out of the possible variants," rather than a fated reality that brooks no alternative. (Brecht 1964) Piscator sought to "make the constructive aspect of thought our point of departure" and thereby produce "a performance so scientific and so clearly analyzed by the intellect… with a technique just as intentional and calculated as the architecture of the stage," that "everything on the stage is calculable, everything fits together organically." (Piscator 1929) The desired effect on the audience is two-fold: on the one hand, any given moment is revealed as contingent rather than fated and therefore open to reinterpretation and re-imagination. On the other, the performance is able to strike the audience with the logic of its project by, in a sense, showing its work; rather than opening the question of revolution as a matter of emotion, Brecht and Piscator both sought to demonstrate revolution as the irrefutable conclusion to rigorous analysis of the present moment.

For now, however, I am not primarily interested in the audience but rather in the rehearsal itself; setting aside the historically contingent question of the success of epic theater with regards to the political and economic structure of the Weimar Republic, the project brought together a collective of actors, directors, writers, designers, musicians, mechanics, architects, carpenters, etc. For Piscator, this was an end in and of itself:

> Gradually the kind of cooperation which my productions required transformed them into a human and artistic, and in a certain sense a political, community, and the majority of them took part in the 1928 secession and have remained involved in political theater since that time.

Crucially, this radical community rehearsed itself into existence; performance was simultaneously a political endeavor to generate momentum for the Communist movement in Germany and a basic necessity for the collective to maintain itself financially (two aims often at odds with one another). Rehearsal rather than performance was how the collective brought itself into being and definition, a process of communal negotiation "during which a clear and firm will… crystallized out of the theoretical discussions and on the basis of experimentation with the material, the actors and the technical equipment." In order to more powerfully exercise the energy and potential of this process, Piscator established the Studio, a group within the larger theater whose entire purpose was to freely rehearse plays with no emphasis placed on the performance itself:

> [The] uncommitted nature of the Studio is a necessary prerequisite if it is to work freely. It does not function under the direct control of the management, but they share a community of spirit. It must quite consciously be a *playground*, an arena for preparatory work. (Piscator, 1929, emphasis mine)

It is this connection between the space of the playground and the rehearsal of radical communities that informs the project of this article and the turn to video games; I propose the *playground of interpretation* as a model and framework for understanding how these spaces, physical or virtual, elicit the free and ongoing negotiation of reality that allows community to play itself into being. Play is deliberately multivalent in this context; play as activity, such as in the performance of a role on stage or in the ludic action of gameplay, is simultaneous with the play of meaning that allows for interpretation and discussion. As such, playground refers not simply to a set of equipment in a designated area, nor to the physical structure of a theater, nor to the virtual world instantiated within a video game; certainly it *does* refer to that structure, but only insofar as the structure is used for play by a community. Thus, any analysis or definition of these playgrounds should take into account the communal use of the structure that might well extend beyond the structure itself, such as in online discussions or artistic appropriations of the structure.

Drawing on Ricouerian hermeneutics, fan studies, performance theory, and visual media history, I argue that the ability to define and therefore distinguish these playgrounds is crucial to understanding the intricate narrative structures being developed by video games and the communities emerging in and around them. I situate this framework within its longer generic history, both to provide clarity to the description and to illustrate the dangers and weaknesses of this interpretive play. After briefly establishing the theoretical grounds of the playground of interpretation, I will elaborate the form and function of the framework by applying it first to The Haunted Mansion (Disneyland 1953) then to *Dark Souls III* (FromSoftware 2016), with special attention to the community that has formed around each.

FROM EXEGESIS TO FAN THEORY

If we are to remain within the free space and time that precedes the constitution of a reality, then the playground of interpretation must be designed such that players negotiate with one another not what performative statements to *accept* as constitutive of the shared reality, but rather what interpretations are *possible* based on the structure and content of the playground. The goal of this playground then is to infinitely defer the closure or decidedness of the signifiers within it, with the unexpected result that the playground of interpretation must be designed to *prevent* the act of interpretation. To explain: interpretation in the Ricouerian hermeneutic model is the process of appropriating the world perception projected by a text to the world perception of the individual. The text *is* a way of viewing the world; to interpret the text is to dispossess one's own way of looking and take on the perception of the text, and thereby gain "a new capacity for knowing [one]self." (Ricouer 1973) Though there are many steps to this process:

> Interpretation in its last stage wants to equalize, to render contemporaneous, to assimilate in the sense of making similar. This goal is achieved insofar as interpretation actualizes the meaning of the text for the present reader. (ibid)

This assimilation, actualization, appropriation is the overcoming of the distanciation of the reader from the text. Ricouer regards the power of this overcoming as the useful function of distanciation towards understanding and self-understanding; this process of interpretation is thus always individual, "the playful metamorphosis of the ego." (ibid) In other words, interpretation as a fully realized process is no longer a discussion or negotiation, but rather a reflection or inflection of the self.

That being said, Ricouer is also interested in what he terms "narrative identity," an ongoing intersubjective process of interpretation arising "from the endless rectification of a previous narrative by a subsequent one, and from the chain of refigurations that results from this." (Ricouer 1984) Ricouer, ever canonical in his thinking, privileges both the Old and the New Testament as constitutive of narrative identity through "a vast field of words open to comparisons and linkages without any constraint or limit on this process."

This description resonates, however, with Henry Jenkins' analysis of the definitionally non-canonical activities of fans in *Textual Poachers* (1992). Of particular relevance is his description of the process of fanon (fan canon) creation through continuous intersubjective rereadings of, in his case, *Star Trek*:

> The "ideal" version of *Star Trek*, the meta-text against which a film or episode is evaluated, was constructed by the fan community through its progressively more detailed analysis of the previously aired episodes. (1992)

This meta-text then provides the basis for an incredible amount of fan activity, from arguments on forums to fan fiction expansions of the narrative gaps within the text to artistic experimentation such as re-editing or reorganizing the text; all of these simultaneously contribute to and are derived from the meta-text. As Lesley Goodman has pointed out, however, "fan-tagonism," the "demand [for] unity in the collective understanding of the fictional universe" is central to the process of fandom; Paul Thomas, working in this line, has shown the hierarchical and authoritative structures involved in the production of Wikipedia articles and the "One True Canon," often relying on a relatively small number of fan editors engaged with an even smaller number of authorial sources attached to the creation of the text (2015; 2018). Ricouer's narrative identity presents an even more stark example, with midrash and exegesis being primarily performed or mediated through the priest caste that the community then engages with.

The problem once again is closure; the intersubjective interpretive activity of these communities tends towards the closure of negotiated meaning in agreement, often facilitated by the instantiation of some figure of authority who can act as the arbiter of disagreement. Neither narrative identity nor meta-text can fully describe the playground of interpretation; since the primary feature of the playground is the deferral of closure in favor of continuous negotiation, the idea of canonicity is antithetical to ongoing interpretive play. What this play requires then is for the intersubjective process of interpretation which both Ricouer and Jenkins describe to be oriented not towards agreement but rather towards difference and discourse, to be oriented in other words towards itself as its own end.

HAUNTED BY GENRE

In order to define precisely *how* this self-orientation is achieved, we can stick with Jenkins a little longer: the concept of environmental storytelling, as developed in his seminal essay on "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," is useful for thinking through the designed spatiality of the playground of interpretation (2003). Jenkins enumerates four design strategies that video games employ to engage their players in "an immersive narrative experience," specifically: evocative spaces, enacting stories, embedded narratives, and emergent narratives (ibid). Evocative spaces are for Jenkins those games that elaborate or expand upon an existing fictional world, drawing upon the player's prior knowledge of that world to evoke it in the space of the game, e.g. a *Star Wars* game that doesn't recapitulate the story of *Star Wars*; as a result, "they can paint their worlds in fairly broad outlines and count on the visitor/player to do the rest." (ibid) In order for the game to neither be a sequel nor a retelling, its story would need to be temporally detached from the story of *Star Wars* while still evoking it. In other words, the game would need to be constantly prompting the player to interpret their surroundings as being meaningfully related to *Star Wars*, without ever explicitly being placed within the sequential organization of *Star Wars*. The relationship between *Star Wars* the movie and the evocative space of the game would be one of signification without causation – whatever aspect of *Star Wars* was evoked by the space of the game could not be linked causally backwards or forwards to the events of the movie, or it would enter into the chronology of that story, which is to say it would become part of the story.

Though Jenkins is focused on the idea of transmedial storytelling and the expansion of existing storyworlds, he mentions but never elaborates on the possibility of a generically evocative space, i.e. a space that is evocative not of a specific extant storyworld but rather a generic tradition. At first blush, one could simply advance the argument that this is a description of genre itself – every text participates in a particular genre by virtue of the degree to which it evokes that generic tradition, and so on for every genre the text is participating in. But if we take seriously the claim that certain spaces perform the work of evocation as we've defined it with regards to the *Star Wars* game, then what those spaces would need to do is produce a sense of a genre *without* the temporal specificity of story. Jenkins' example is the decidedly real Disneyland and Disney World dark ride The Haunted Mansion, which he cites in his brief mention of a generically evocative space. For those unfamiliar, the attraction has guests enter into the titular mansion estate and walk through several rooms before boarding a set of "Doom Buggies," 3-person vehicles capable of swiveling 360 degrees while moving along a track. These "Doom Buggies" carry guests through a series of rooms with various audio-animatronic and light effects before depositing the guests at the exit of the ride. Since its opening 54 years ago, The Haunted Mansion has consistently ranked as one of the most popular attractions at the Disney parks for both first-time park-goers and repeat customers. As of October 2023, The Haunted Mansion's Wikipedia page bears a notification that the "Ride summary" section "may contain an excessive amount of intricate detail that may interest only a particular audience." (Wikipedia, retrieved October 2023) Looking through, it is easy to see why: despite only being a seven-and-a-half-minute long ride, the section is almost 1500 words long – it would take much longer to read aloud then to actually experience the ride itself. The section is also filled with links to the various references and images deployed over the course of the ride, including one to the page of the "Hatbox Ghost," a feature of the ride whose removal and return garnered enough attention to warrant an entirely new page.

In order to understand how The Haunted Mansion functions as a generically evocative space as opposed to a work of genre fiction, I am going to stick with these Wikipedia pages as artifacts of how guests enter into, interact, and describe the experience of the ride. Here is a short excerpt from the page in question:

> After the Ghost Host apologizes to the guests, a wall opens, exposing the portrait corridor leading to the loading area. The subjects of the portraits on the right flicker briefly into macabre versions of themselves when lighting flashes from the windows on the left. These portraits show:
>
> - The Werecat Lady: a woman on a couch holding a rose turning into an anthropomorphic white tiger (originally a black panther) holding a bone.
> - The Black Prince: a knight and his horse on a cliff turning into skeleton-like ghosts with the sky darkening.
> - The Aging Man: a handsome nobleman turning into a skeleton in a rotting suit.
> - The Flying Dutchman: a ship on calm waters turning into a ghostly version of itself in the middle of a storm.
> - Medusa: a woman in a Greek temple turning into a stone gorgon in the temple's ruins.
>
> At the end of the corridor are two busts who appear to "follow" the guests with their gazes. (Wikipedia, retrieved October 2023)

By way of comparison, here is an excerpt from the description of its close contemporary and similarly popular attraction Pirates of the Caribbean:

> From the deck of the Wicked Wench, the Pirate Captain (modeled on Blackbeard's appearance) leads the assault as colonial defenders can be seen manning the fort's cannons, barking orders to each other in Spanish and shouting threats at the invading pirates. The village of Puerto Dorado on Isla Tesoro is overrun with pirates in search of treasure. The first sight is the town square, where some pirates have kidnapped the mayor, Carlos, and threaten to drown him in a well if he does not divulge the location of the treasure. Carlos' wife peeks out of an upstairs window, telling him to be brave and not talk; she is shot at as Carlos is repeatedly dunked in the water while a line of other captive city officials look on. (ibid)

This second description reads clearly as a narrative summary of the fictional action represented over the course of the ride – characters have names and a clear sequential and causal progression. The conceit of the ride is that guests are bearing witness to the fantastical story of the Wicked Wench's attack on a certain Spanish colonial holding in the Caribbean, and so the description of the ride follows that story. The description of The Haunted Mansion however doesn't take the form of a narrative, but of a list – the writing presents the portraits in detail but without further commentary, and with limited chronology; the objects in the ride are presented literally in sequence to the rider, but bear no sequential relationship to one another. Put simply, there is no story to summarize; instead the ride deploys image after image after image to evoke the genre of horror without ever specifying a story to enter into that genre.

That being said, even if the formal qualities of the ride dictate a particular form of descriptive writing, that doesn't necessitate the writing itself – the meticulous care

with which each detail of the ride has been cataloged implies a level of interest that seems to be at odds with thinking of The Haunted Mansion as simply many generic images deployed one after the other. I argue that the phenomenon of that writing indicates the interpretive play I have been pursuing over the course of this paper; the boundaried space of the ride is filled with highly signifying images but lacks the causal linkages that would produce a narrative that unifies them. The very boundary of that space establishes the ride as a fictional situation and therefore not just open to interpretation but requiring it. The images within function as montage, wherein each image brings its own significations that clash and intermingle with each other image – the observer finds meaning in the contact between images. Eisenstein's concept of stacked meaning wherein "each sequential element is perceived not *next* to the other, but on *top* of the other," is certainly at play here; that being said, even his later work on "intellectual montage" carries with it the sense of moving from the concrete to the abstract, from element to theme, and ultimately from the conflict of thesis and antithesis into the resolution of synthesis (1929, emphasis his). For Eisenstein, montage is a disruption of the supposed clarity of each individual element through juxtaposition that eventually re-clarifies into a new understanding of reality.

WORLDS WITHIN WORLDS

The use and the limit of montage as a framework for understanding the playground of interpretation is revealed in the hall of portraits; consider the portrait of the figure colloquially known as the Werecat Lady:

Figure 1: The portrait of the Werecat Lady as it first appears (above), and as it appears when lit (below), circa 2005.

The upper image shows the portrait as it appears at first, while the lower image shows what a guest sees when facsimile lightning flashes outside of the mansion, highlighting the "true" form of the Werecat Lady in a glowing blue image overlaid on the original. I argue that the portrait neither enters into stable narrative sequence nor conflicts with the other images encountered on the ride; as a result, the dialectic of the montage is short-circuited and unable to resolve into synthesis. Considered alone as a micro-montage of the two images, certainly the portrait is a clear example of the dialectic of montage: the initial image of the lady in black is one of mourning, of love lost, while the image of the white tiger is predatory, a classic conflict that "reveals" the danger of female sexuality lurking behind displays of modesty. Taking it further, an observer could well assume that the depicted woman has murdered the lover for whom she appears to be mourning, taking together this general theme and the specific transformation of the symbol of her love (the rose) into the symbol of a successful hunt (the bone). That being said, neither the theme as expressed nor the narrative potential of the portrait is developed outside of its frame – the portrait is *itself* a boundaried space within which the process of montage and interpretation happens, i.e. the portrait of the Werecat Lady (Figure 1) produces its own world within the world of The Haunted Mansion. The space of The Haunted Mansion then becomes a container for the many miniaturized worlds within, i.e. the spatial fabric by which all of these worlds become connected without imposing its own temporal or narrative dimensions onto those worlds. I argue that this phenomenon, though only briefly mentioned by Jenkins, is the radical core of the generically evocative space – the space of The Haunted Mansion becomes a spatial metaphor for genre by literally spatializing the connections between stories that are resonant but not sequential with respect to one another. The Werecat Lady and The Flying Dutchman are related to one another not by virtue of a narrative that could unite the two, but rather by the genre of horror itself in the form of The Haunted Mansion. This does not mean, however, that the audience interacts with this space as senseless or irrational.

In fact, as evidenced by the fan communities that have arisen around this space, the response to the generically evocative space is to actively interpret and reinterpret both the connections between and connections beyond those worlds. Taking a look at DoomBuggies.com, an expansive fan-made Haunted Mansion "tribute website," one can find a trove of information surrounding the ride, including comprehensive histories and interviews associated with the construction and continued operation of the ride over the past half century (Baham 2018). The space itself calls for this kind of external, material investigation and accumulation via the specific references it makes. Returning to the Werecat Lady (Figure 1), the dialectic logic of her representation sits on top of the generic tradition of portraiture within which the specific portrait exists; specifically, her pose recalls Titian's *Venus of Urbino*:

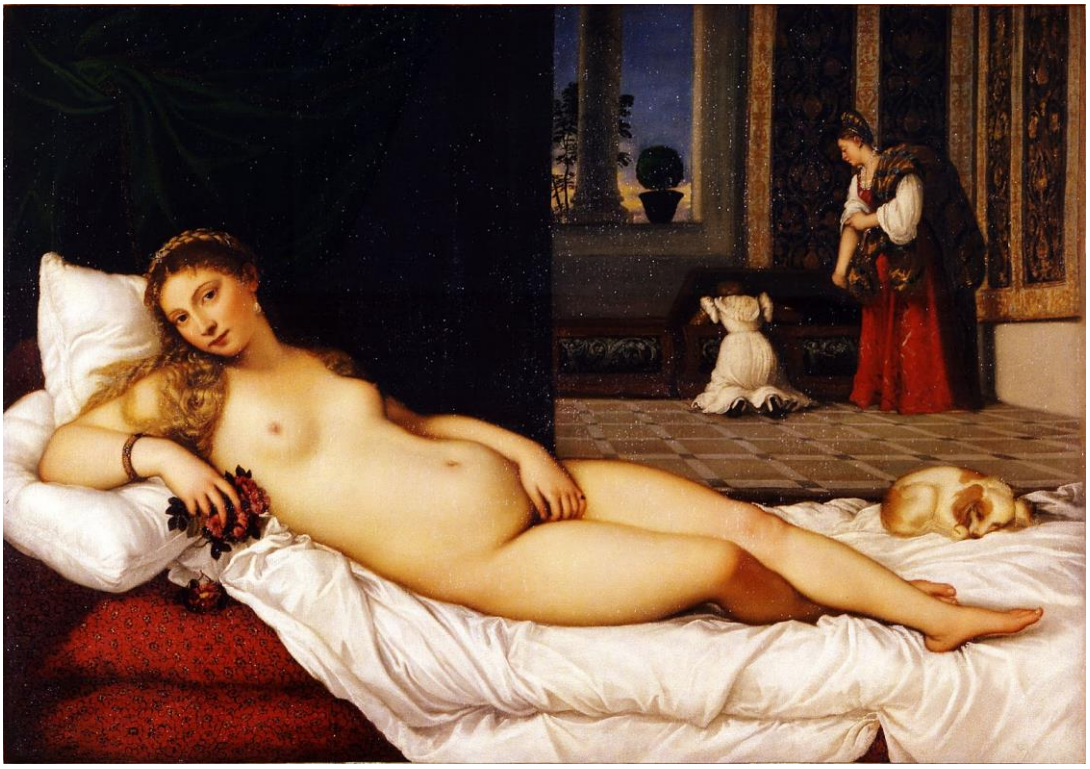

Figure 2: Titian's *Venus D'Urbino*, circa 1534.

The position of repose, the clasped red flowers, the powerful eroticism, even the image of animalism is replicated in the Werecat portrait. The directness of the lady's gaze itself is perhaps the most striking aspect of both portraits; indeed, Titian's painting (Figure 2) is a reformulation of the slightly earlier *Sleeping Venus*, generally attributed to Giorgione:

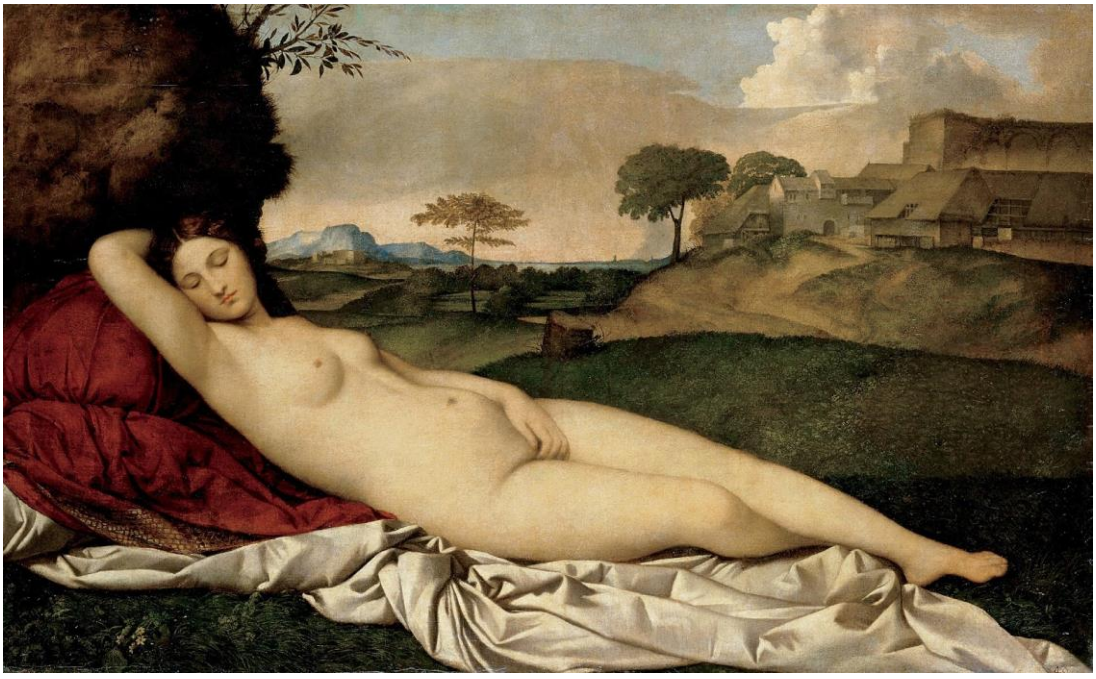

Figure 3: Giorgione's (contested) *Venus di Dresda*, circa 1510.

One of the primary interventions Titian's later portrait (Figure 2) is making on this earlier example (Figure 3) is that gaze that implicates the viewer in the erotic scene of the painting. 300 years later, Manet's *Olympia* (Figure 4) translates the power of that gaze:

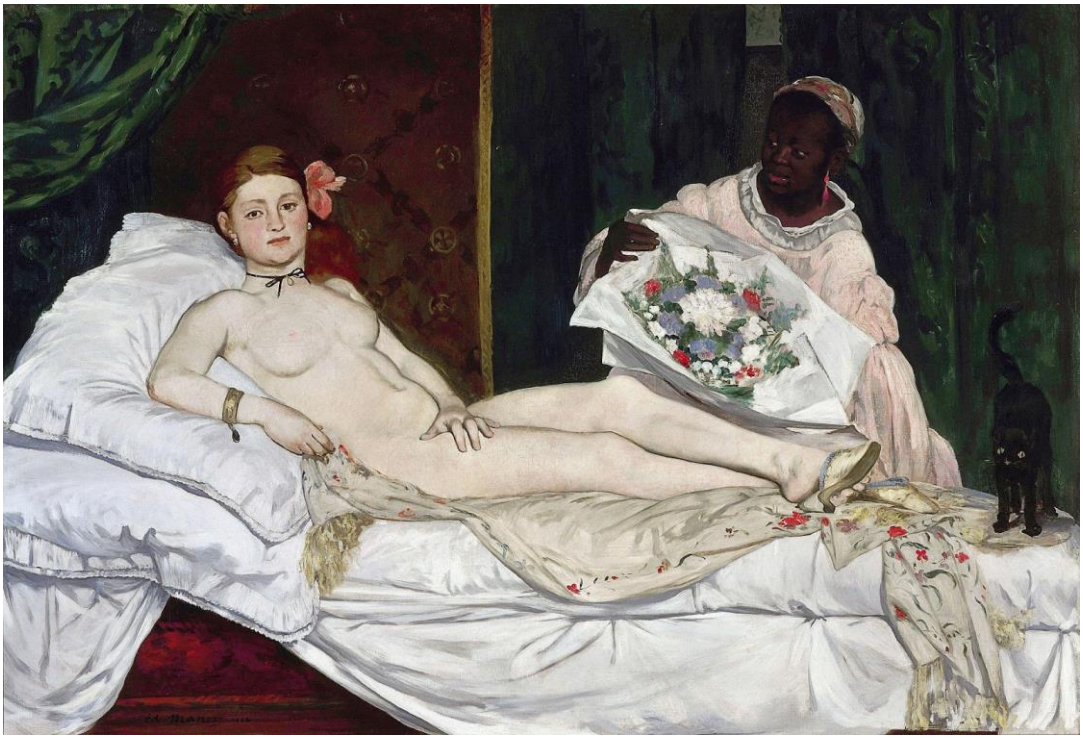

Figure 4: Édouard Manet's *Olympia*, circa 1863.

Here, the titular figure is marked out as a prostitute by various symbols within the painting, including the aroused black cat that has replaced the dog in Titian's work. The viewer is implicated in the action of the painting as Olympia's gaze confronts the visitor to her chambers; her hand covers rather than curls towards her genitalia, not in shame but as a matter of course – payment has not yet been received. Worth noting here is the original appearance of the Werecat Lady:

Figure 5: The original appearance of the Werecat Lady as the Panther Lady, circa 1969. The lady as she first appeared (above) and as she appeared when lit (below).

Previously called the Panther Lady, her original transformation into a panther was changed to a white tiger as a result of lighting necessities; the original lighting situation called for a lighter color scheme to transform into a darker one, where the refurbished system called for the opposite. In this original version (Figure 5), the specific reference of the portrait to the tradition I have just sketched out is even clearer. Though symbolically less dense than the other portraits in the tradition, the Werecat/Panther Lady portrait remediates the generic situation via montage, as well as through its participation in and production of the generically evocative space of The Haunted Mansion. As the portrait evokes the particular generic tradition of the reclining nude, it simultaneously implicates the viewer into the world-within-world of the portrait through her gaze and ejects the viewer into the world *outside* The Haunted Mansion, outside of the dubiously themed New Orleans Square, outside of Disneyland's carefully contrived hyperreality, folding each fictional boundary into the portrait along with the viewer herself. The temporal situation suggested by the painting is even more confused; in terms of the fictional space and time of the Haunted Mansion, *when* is the painting? Out of what time does it arise? To even begin to approach the question, one would need to chart out the intricate web of past-ness evoked within each of those boundaried spaces and the various movements across those boundaries required by the painting.

Instead, I point to that question as precisely the kind of unclosable question posed by the playground of interpretation – not unanswerable, indeed filled with potential

answers, but unclosable: no answer given is capable of becoming canonical, that is to say, of bearing the weight of the authority of truth. Every additional image in the space, evocative and therefore non-sequential, further destabilizes any potential resolution. And yet, the question itself calls out for an answer, its very indeterminacy productive of the unfulfillable desire to have the matter settled – elsewhere I discuss this as the erotic draw of the striptease, but what is most important for the present argument is the energy generated by this tension. (Hall forthcoming) To be clear: every object and image in culture is freely interpretable; what the present argument is concerned with is the kind of image that *resists* both fully realized personal interpretation and canonical ossification of meaning at any given moment.

Made up of these images, the playground of interpretation spatializes a fractured but entangled web of signification and thereby facilitates ongoing negotiation between those who enter into and share that space. As Jeff Baham, author of DoomBuggies.com and *The Unauthorized Story of Walt Disney's Haunted Mansion*, puts it: "The Haunted Mansion offers its guests a sense of community, both during the riding of the attraction and, in a larger sense, as a family of like-minded fans." (2018) The community Baham refers to exists both at the level of shared aesthetic appreciation of an object and in the negotiation of the possible interpretations of that object; that negotiation is neither agreement nor disagreement, but the pleasure of potential itself, the shared excitement of experimenting with the various possibilities inherent in the space.

That being said, the images deployed within the space – unstable in their relation to one another though they may be – matter deeply. Hence why it is worth analyzing the particular history and form of an object like the Werecat Lady; the portrait-montage deploys an ancient and misogynistic image while doing little to subvert or problematize that history, in many ways presenting a conservative reaction against the genre of paintings it summons up. The community that emerges from interpretive play with the images in the space is not oriented by instability alone; certainly there is energy and potential generated by that play, but that energy is oriented by the objects being played with. The playground, in other words, is not its own end; Piscator's Studio, for instance, was established with the intention to orient its participants towards the spirit of the revolution. These spaces are *designed* to foster an ongoing and communal negotiation of interpretation and as such artistry and intention go into their production; they must therefore be analyzed and critiqued as ideological objects, especially when a design was personally approved by Walt Disney.

THE PAINTED WORLD

I have labored to carefully establish this framework around The Haunted Mansion because it is useful to understand the playground of interpretation as neither inherently tied to the videogame medium nor an unalloyed good in and of itself. The Soulsborne games, the notoriously difficult, dark fantasy worlds produced by FromSoftware and game director Hidetaki Miyazaki, emerge out of this much longer history as a new and radical expression of the framework. As has been pointed out by commenters such as Tim Welsh and Kevin Ball, the fan community that has formed in and around these games is immense and devoted, producing a bewildering array of lore archives, gameplay strategies, and miscellaneous marginalia on various wiki and fan sites (Welsh 2020, Ball 2017). Beginning in 2011 with the release of *Dark Souls* and

continuing through to the release of *Shadow of the Erdtree* in late June of this year, the game series has developed an intricate tapestry of images and references that defy easy summation. Following the theme so far, therefore, I want to focus on a painting:

Figure 6: The character known as The Painter seated in front of her large canvas in the upper reaches of The Painted World of Ariandel in *Dark Souls III*, 2016.

Paintings are an important motif across the Souls games, adorning many of the interior spaces with a wide variety of subjects, though some stand out more than others; for instance, in *Dark Souls* (2011), the Painted World of Ariamis is a massive painting depicting a castle within a snowy landscape that the player can in fact enter into and explore; in *Dark Souls II* (2014), a portrait of Queen Nashandra can curse a player-character who approaches too closely, revealing her duplicitous nature; and in *Dark Souls III*, there is the painting depicted above (Figure 6) and its attendant Painter. The painting exists *within* the Painted World of Ariandel, another constructed world-within-world like Ariamis that the player-character can cross through the canvas into. Where Ariamis has a massive portrait that directly portrays the reality within, Ariandel is accessed through a bare, rotten scrap of painting. Within, the player-character finds herself in a dark cave littered with bones and blood; behind her, a humanoid creature both sits bestial and corpse-like amidst bulbous pale-red clumps of unknown material, mouth agape. He tells the player-character to "rejoice" as "[t]he cold and gentle painted world of Ariandel… will make a fine home," and that she should find her own "sweetly rotting bed to lie upon." Exiting the cave, the player-character finds that far from being "safe" or a "true haven," Ariandel is filled with dangers – the enemies who

hunt the player-character within are stronger than most of the other enemies in the game.

After passing through many of the challenges posed by the Painted World and being told to leave by Sister Friede, the de facto leader of the area, the player-character meets a Corvian who seems to explain that the dangers faced by the player-character are a result of "the rot that afflicts this world," calling to mind both the rotted scrap of painting that served as entrance and the strange figure in the cave. He implores the player-character to "[m]ake the tales true, and burn this world away," by showing flame to his lady. The player-character meets this mysterious woman locked away in an attic where she has perched on top of a table, ceaselessly scratching at it in a facsimile of the painting she desires to return to. After making it through the remainder of the Painted World, the player-character meets the Painter again, this time stationed in front of her massive easel (pictured above), explaining:

> I wish to paint a picture.
> Of a cold, dark, and very gentle place.
> One day, it will make someone a goodly home.
> That's why I must see flame.

Her stated desire is to create on her canvas that which the Painted World she inhabits only purports to be; she employs the same language as the withered being at the beginning of the area, not as a false description of an extant world but as an intention towards a potential one. Looking at the canvas, the only color immediately visible appears the uppermost corners, dull red patches roughly corresponding to the areas outside the reach of the Painter seated in front; the surface is craggy, seemingly marked by repeated applications of white paint that recall Robert Rauschenberg's "White Paintings," designed and redesigned to foreground the three-dimensionality that all paintings possess and to constantly be reconstituted by variance in perspective and lighting (Rauschenberg 1951). The painting depicts nothing and therefore suggests the void out of which meaning springs; in other words, the painting not only highlights the unclosable interpretability that elicits interpretive play but also renders visible the intention and artifice that produces such a process. The world of the painting is, finally, a miniaturized version of the playground of interpretation itself within the ever larger playgrounds that contain it. As a result, the playground and the interpretive play of its community reflexively become the object of that interpretive play.

Unsurprisingly, conversations surrounding the painting and the Painter are wide-ranging, from discussions of her heritage and connection to other characters in the world based on physical attributes she possesses to commenters claiming they can see certain shapes or patterns within the painting. Since the release of *Elden Ring* (2022), six years after the Painter made her debut, players have described the painting as a representation of that game's Lands Between, *Bloodborne*'s Nightmare (2015), and *Sekiro*'s Ashina (2019), pointing to the various aspects of both the painting and the respective game world that might correspond to their interpretation.

These conversations are predicated upon and ultimately always turn back towards the inherent potential of the painting, not as an unfinished object or a blank canvas but instead as the site of an ongoing process of meaning-making; that process is the community itself as it engages in an unending and collaborative negotiation of meaning within and around the worlds of the game series. *Dark Souls III* centers that

process, highlights it, foregrounds it by carefully curating each element of its playground; thus when the Corvian commends the player for uncovering the flame with the Painted World, the evocative undecidability of his words is specifically that which renders them politically radical.

> When the world rots, we set it afire.
> For the sake of the next world.
> It's the one thing we do right, unlike those fools on the outside.

The phrase "fools on the outside" certainly refers to the world of *Dark Souls III*, wherein self-deified beings cling to their crumbling empire even as all descends into suffering and madness, but just as clearly it refers to us, the fools not just on the other side of the painting but the other side of the screen. We are not simply implicated in holding on to empire at the expense of the world – that much is clear, even assumed; the game is more interested in articulating the role of art and the aesthetic experience within such a world:

> Those who aren't ken to fire cannot paint a world.
> Those absorbed by fire, must not paint a world.

These words are spoken by the Painter to the player-character; the open question of the statement is the image of "fire" – each of the preceding quotations mentions it, and with good reason, as fire is the most developed theme throughout the entire series. The iconic bonfire of the series serves as a touchstone both mechanically and conceptually such that the image of fire becomes overloaded with meaning; even across the brief quotations mentioned, it appears as a font of inspiration, a force of destruction, and a kind of consumptive knowledge. Returning to the theme of revolutionary rehearsal developed early in this essay, these lines reflect Piscator's description of the new method of acting required for his productions:

> [The] actor must have a completely new attitude to the theme of the play in question. He can no longer set himself above each role, or be indifferent to it, any more than he can be totally absorbed in it, abandoning his own conscious will.

What is required for both the painter and the actor is the self-awareness that the artistic act is itself an interpretation, a specification, an answer to a question that should not be closed; therefore the interpretation must present itself as one of many without either ceding the power of its argument or allowing for the interpretation to present itself as unquestionable truth, i.e. an end to the question itself. The potential for a new world to be born is in the liminality of negotiation, the durée of non-decision between not knowing "fire" exists at all and the total closure of meaning of "fire" into something beyond belief – an ordering of being. Following this line through, the role of art would be to awaken a player to "fire" without burning them, i.e. without allowing the player to "[actualize] the meaning of the text." (Ricouer 1973) The potential of the playground of interpretation is that it allows its players to freely rehearse, to as it were, play with fire. Or put another way, the radical hope of the playground is to rehearse a new world into being, not as a performance or an end, but as the rehearsal itself.

The trick here is in the useful conceptual slippage of the word play flagged at the beginning of the essay – player as used in the preceding lines refers to *both* Piscator's

revolutionary players in Weimar Berlin and the millions of *Dark Souls* players across the world. As discussed, whether or not the radical project attempted by Piscator's company was successful, the emergent political awareness of its players is unquestionable. This then is the specific potential of the video game playground of interpretation; where the stage or company as playground can only admit a limited number of players, the video game playground is almost unlimited in capacity, especially when considered as including the online forums and wikis wherein much fan activity takes place. Nor is it a simple thing to claim that the two activities are of a different type – the language of play and performance, of rehearsal and practice, of script and improvisation is inextricable from discussions of either theater or games. I argue that the video game eliminates the distinction between audience and player in game play and is thus able to leverage the activity of rehearsal to orient interpretive play towards radical self-awareness.

CONCLUSION

I have attempted to demonstrate the flexibility and use of a framework that recognizes a particular spatialization of narrative and the communal interpretive practices that emerge from that structure. I do not intend to claim either that this is a new structure, nor a utopian one –The Haunted Mansion serves as a useful example for proving precisely the opposite. As much as the non-closure of signs in negotiation allows for potentially alternative modes of thought and being, that continuity of community can also function as exploitation whereby labor and wealth are extracted from participants in the community. Tickets to Disneyland alone currently cost about $100 a day, not to mention the rest of Disney's massive multimedia empire; a community oriented in and around the spatially located Haunted Mansion ride are not only paying to visit the park, but are also creating further revenue for Disney via the unpaid labor of generating additional meaning and content for fans to engage with. As charged with potential as the playground of interpretation can be, the concomitant danger of participation in that aesthetic space is that it can defuse that potential rather than promote activity in the world. That being said, the video game as a form is well poised to foreground the intentional participatory action of its players and thereby reveal rather than obfuscate its own aesthetic boundaries. It is crucial therefore that we develop a critical language for identifying and describing these spaces in order to participate in the piercing of that aesthetic veil; after all, one might well think of academia itself as a playground of interpretation, well poised both to comment upon and fall prey to the same logics of isolation, exploitation, and the dispersal of political potential. Whether it be the shifting walls of The Haunted Mansion, the coagulated temporality of *Dark Souls*, or the ivory towers of the academy, we must take care not to become trapped inside our Painted Worlds.

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