

# Uncanny Homecoming: The Temporality of Dwelling and Return in Digital Games

**Justyna Janik**

Faculty of Management and Social Communication  
Jagiellonian University in Kraków  
Łojasiewicza 4 Street, 30-348 Kraków  
[justyna.m.janik@uj.edu.pl](mailto:justyna.m.janik@uj.edu.pl)

**Daniel Vella**

Institute of Digital Games  
University of Malta  
Msida, MSD 2080, Malta  
[daniel.m.vella@um.edu.mt](mailto:daniel.m.vella@um.edu.mt)

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## INTRODUCTION

The spatial practices of dwelling and being-at-home in digital gameworlds has been the subject of some attention in game studies (Vella 2019; Lima 2022; Nguyen 2024). In games like *Animal Crossing* (Nintendo 2003) and *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe 2016) – as well as in specific locations in games like *Mass Effect* (Bioware 2007) and *The Witcher 3: Blood and Wine* (CD Projekt RED 2015) – the impulse towards progression and movement towards the goal of the quest is replaced with the spatial practices of habituation, repetition, lingering, and an inward-drawing focus on the centre, often with affects of coziness (Waszkiewicz and Bakun 2020; Poirier-Poulin 2024).

In this presentation, we shall expand on this work by focusing on how the different temporalities that intertwine in gameplay shape the player experience of these in-game home places. More specifically, we shall examine moments of homecoming – the return to game places that no longer afford the practices or affective qualities of dwelling.

In order to do so, we shall be drawing not only on the aforementioned literature on space and place in games, as well as approaches to the phenomenology of space (Bachelard 1994; Casey 1993; Massey 2005) but also on existing work on time in games (Zagal and Mateas 2010; Alvarez Igarzábal 2019). We shall also argue that the affective experiences of unhomeliness that such moments of return give the player can be conceptualized through the notion of the uncanny (Royle 2003).

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There is already some existing work that looks at uncanny effects in games, mostly focusing on horror effects or intermedial poetics of glitches (Holmes 2008; Janik 2019; Zawacki 2024). However, what we are referring to by the uncanny in this context is “the sense of something unhomely at the heart of hearth and home” (Royle 2003, 1). We propose to follow a hauntological route (Derrida 1994; Royle 2003) and consider the uncanniness of “time out of joint.” This allows us to explore the tension that appears when different layers of time collide in one moment, trapping the player in a present still bound by the past, not letting them orient themselves towards the future. This moment often generates a space for longing rooted in nostalgia (Boym 2001; Sloan 2016).

We propose a taxonomy of five different kinds of uncanny homecoming in games. The first, *narrative homecoming* - which we encounter in games like *Gone Home* (Fullbright 2013), *Returnal* (Housemarque 2021) and *Bastion* (Supergiant Games 2011), describes situations where a game’s scripted narrative returns the player-character to a former home that is not a part of the player’s past experience. Here, the temporal dimension at work is “fictive time” (Zagal and Mateas 2010, 8), and the past that haunts these unhomely places is the past of the scripted narrative, disconnected from the player’s lived temporal experience.

The second kind of uncanny homecoming, *progression homecoming*, occurs in situations where the player’s progression through the game, whether in the linear form of a scripted narrative or in a more open structure, brings them back to an in-game place they had previously inhabited, and in relation to which they had experienced the affects of dwelling and homeliness - only to find that the place is no longer the same - as in the return to Candlekeep in *Baldur’s Gate* (BioWare 1998) and the return to Kokiri Forest in *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo 1998). Here, the temporality in question is that of the player’s alterbiography (Calleja 2011), and the uncanny affect emerges in the disconnect between the player’s memory of the place, and what they find upon their return.

Third, there is the uncanny feeling of *negated homecoming* which a player might feel when, having put in a great deal of work in the development of the gameworld as a place that can afford the experience of dwelling, they return to the start of the game. All personal efforts and meaningful choices disappear from the digital materiality of the gameworld, surviving only in the player’s memory. Here, the player finds themselves at a disjuncture in the flow of time - to use Zagal and Mateas’ terms, the “real-world time” in which the player lives has moved forward, while “gameworld time” has reverted, undoing all of their work and progress (2010).

Fourth, there is the *return to the abandoned game home*, where the player returns to a game place that used to afford the qualities of dwelling and homeliness, to find that the virtual space is materially different and no longer provides the same affective qualities - either through its abandonment by the player (*Animal Crossing*) or by other players (as in the case of dead MMO worlds, like *Meridian 59* [Archetype Interactive 1996]), or due to a game having changed significantly as a result of patches and version updates (*Baldur’s Gate III* [Larian Studios 2023]).

Finally, there is the experience of returning, after many years have passed, to a fondly remembered gameworld - only to find that, though it has remained uncannily the same, we have changed. In this kind of *nostalgic homecoming*, we are dealing with the uncanny of that which has remained the same, but that marks our divergence as

individuals, returning to find that the same gameplace no longer affords the same affective qualities of dwelling. Rather than an alterbiographical return - where the temporality in question is that of the player's existence in the gameworld - this is an autobiographical one, marked by a nostalgic relation to the game itself as a recollected place of dwelling (Sloan 2016).

By examining these different forms of uncanny homecomings in games, we aim to shed light, not only on the experiences and affects of dwelling and being at home in digital gameworlds, but also on the temporalities of our experiences of game places, and on the way that past and present intersect on multiple temporal levels in our dwelling in, and returning to, these places.

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