

“Perhaps, this is Hell”: Descent Into *SIGNALIS*

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Hell and, to a larger extent, the underground, figures the modern fascination with what is buried or hidden and the absolute, mythical opposition to what is found at the surface (Pike, 1997; Pike, 2007). Katabasis, i.e. the descent to the underworld, depicts a person travelling down into Hell. It allows him or her to be immersed in and transformed by what is found below in a process that Rachel Falconer calls the “inversion” (Falconer, 2007: 45), the point at which the descent hero’s perspective radically shifts from their experience of Hell and their encounter with the “absolute Other”¹ (Falconer, 2007: 200). Hell has become an important chronotope and the journey through Hell a popular motif in contemporary literature and fiction (Brunel, 1974; Falconer, 2007; Pike, 2007). Video games are no exception. Through a close reading of specific sequences of *SIGNALIS* (rose-engine, 2022) and a comparative analysis of some of the game’s intertexts, this presentation explores how video games translate and engage with the images and motifs of traditional katabases, and how these playable descent narratives present opportunities for complex emotional experiences.

Early text-based adventure games such as *Colossal Cave Adventure* (Crowther, 1976) already mobilized underground imaginaries as their primary space for narrative and play (Aarseth, 2025; Careri, 2021). Entire genres, namely rogue-likes and dungeon crawlers, are almost without exception structured around the motif of the descent (Careri 2021). Be it the original *Rogue* (A.I. Design, 1980), the *Indiana Jones* inspired exploration of caves and ruins in *Spelunky* (Yu, 2008), the desperate escape from Isaac’s murderous mother through the basement down into the Sheol in *The Binding of Isaac* (McMillen, 2011), the whimsically critical depiction of capitalism and startup culture in *Going Under* (Aggro Crab Games, 2020) or the figurative plunge into memory depicted as the eventual dive into the Abyssal Scar in *Returnal* (Housemarque, 2021), the rogue-like genre heavily uses the underground as their setting (Careri 2021; Aarseth 2025) and, in turn, katabatic *topoi* (Falconer 2007: 43) as the structure for storytelling and progression. Other genres such as survival horror often put the playable characters in hellish situations and construct themselves as journeys through the underworld.

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While some games tell the story of an infernal descent, which is the case of most of the games previously cited, others make use of katabatic *topoi* only in parts of their stories. This is the case, for instance, in the journey down into The Desert of the Knaaren in *Rayman 3: Hoodlum Havoc* (Ubisoft Paris, 2003), the entire bottom of the well and shadow temple sections in *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo, 1998) or even the descent into the Abyssal Scar in *Returnal*, which is the latter half of the game. These sections explicitly put the characters into an underworld and allow them to uncover hidden knowledge or powers. These examples demonstrate that video games have found a productive source of inspiration in descent narratives' images and motifs.

For this presentation, we are specifically interested in *SIGNALIS* (rose-engine, 2022), which is both a literal and metaphorical katabasis. The game is structured as a vertical descent into a hellish underworld. The main direction is downwards, first to the bottom of the Sierpinski Base, on planet Leng, then to the end of the mine found underneath and, finally, to an infernal threshold. Spatially, *SIGNALIS* moves towards the depths of the world, to a place completely hostile that hides the answers to the game's mysterious plot. This magnetic pull to the center of the earth is figured in the determination with which Elster, the playable character, takes on the enemies and puzzles. She is called to, almost compelled when she stands at the thresholds separating the layers of *SIGNALIS*' world. In scenes reminiscent of *Silent Hill 2* and *4* (Team Silent, 2001; 2004), Elster stares at large, gaping and, at times, fleshy holes in the ground. "Jump into the hole?" the game asks, as if there were any other option. After a fake ending and upon entering yet another cavity plastered with pulsating viscera, the game states its thesis in all caps: "PERHAPS, THIS IS HELL."

Hell is not a place Elster reaches in *SIGNALIS*. It is the world itself, a distorted hellscape resulting from the collapse of time and space with the hallucinated memories of a dying Replika.² It is a complex cycle of self-doubt, guilt and shame spiraling from the rotting of body and memory, which keeps her in a sort of time loop; a Hell of her own creation. When she reaches the ultimate threshold, an antagonist, Adler, asks, "what waits beyond the threshold?" Elster simply answers that "it doesn't matter." Whatever this Hell is does not matter; it is meant to be traversed and endured, which pushes us to interrogate why Elster, and to an extent we, undertake the journey below. *SIGNALIS* does not ask us to understand what its Hell is precisely. It resists understanding by bombarding our senses with information, texts and imagery, resulting in an overwhelming visual, auditory and cognitive experience. Exploring the ludic (gameplay mechanics), narrative and intertextual layers of *SIGNALIS* demonstrates a compelling use and integration of infernal descent *topoi* and reveals how playable katabases can construct complex affective spaces.

Endnotes

¹ Hadès, Dis, Satan or any other demonic figure would fit this description. The "absolute Other" is the negation of what is above; in the katabatic tradition, it is the ruler of the underworld, but in contemporary descent narratives, it is the final encounter at the bottom. It can be a demonic creature, a person, an object, a vision or anything that marks the end of the descent, the inversion and the start of the ascent.

² In *SIGNALIS*, there are humans, called Gestalts, and biomechanical androids called Replikas. Elster, the playable character, is an LSTR

("Landvermessungs-/Schiff-Techniker Replika" or "Land Survey/Ship Technician Replika") unit.

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