

Puzzle About The Island – Multi-Perspective Studies on Knowledge in THE WITNESS

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Introduction

Somewhere between the categories puzzle, adventure and explorative game Jonathan Blow's recent release *THE WITNESS* (Thekla Inc. 2016) embodies a distinct form of hybrid game that fulfils ludic core functions like traversing space and solving puzzles but omits an elaborated story arc or complex avatar controls. At first glance it seems to be a mixture of *PROTEUS* (Ed Key/David Kanaga 2013) – a recent peek in discourse on what a video game can be or cannot be (c.f. Bogost 2013) – and *MYST* (Cyan Worlds/Preston Studios 1993) – a puzzle game classic with iconic mechanics.

In context of visual aesthetics *THE WITNESS*'s game world, though partly ruined, aged, overgrown by flora or weather-beaten (although it is always sunny), looks somewhat pristine (Fig. 1). With an impression almost like a synthetic model world from a child's playroom it resembles the screaming colors of *PROTEUS* adding only enough texture and patterns to distinguish between multiple rock and wood types, flora aesthetics, water surfaces and the like and to convey the feel of an animate island.



Fig. 1.: *Simple panorama* from the fortification of the tutorial area.

Additionally objects within the world of *THE WITNESS* are executed as polygons instead of *PROTEUS*'s pixelated retro bitmaps. Said feel of an animate island seems incomplete: Blow's open world island lacks the audiovisual patterns and characteristics of a vivid fauna, which

the procedurally generated island of PROTEUS, albeit in a very abstract fashion, offers. Speaking of, it also lacks an immersive soundtrack for most of the playthrough. The comparison with MYST is only in parts based on the latter's visuals. Myst stages an abandoned island, whose low-poly objects are iconic for their planar surfaces with one color. Like THE WITNESS MYST also transports a sterile feel of a model world by the absence of a vivid fauna or humans. At its core the resemblance between both puzzle games constitutes of a distinct fey landscape experience and the confrontation with complex puzzles.

All three games stage the experience of an abandoned island once inhabited by humans. While MYST – coming from the dawn of CD-ROM as storage device – is organized in branching paths and traversed by pre-rendered sequences (hard-rail), both PROTEUS and THE WITNESS are open world games with less scale as for example GRAND THEFT AUTO V (Rockstar North 2013) but freely navigable nonetheless. However, this is only true in parts as THE WITNESS has certain spaces, pathways and districts that only can be accessed in later gameplay sessions as the semiotics of more advanced, access blocking puzzles are learned elsewhere on the island. THE WITNESS is a computer game with both classical and progressive patterns, merging the so called ‘walking simulator’ with one of gaming history’s most iconic recipes for puzzle games (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: Simple vista from the symmetrical peninsular onto the pottery.

This paper will argue, that THE WITNESS is all about (generating) knowledge within the game world and of the game as a medium, as well as about knowledge itself: To go a step further one can say that appropriating THE WITNESS's island is a pure *epistemic modality* in the sense of Michel de Certeau (1980: 181, 192). This is enabled by basing the game through and through upon “being perceptive” (Blow 2015). Thus the thesis is, that puzzles, *prospects* and fragmental *embedded spaces* (Totten 2014: 279, 284) replace the need for textual narration or dialogs with NPCs of a typical hero's journey. Nonetheless THE WITNESS is contrary to freely navigable but story driven explorative games like EVERYBODY IS GONE TO THE RAPTURE (The Chinese Room 2015) or FIREWATCH (Campo Santo 2016) but induces a similar play behaviour. As Gehmann and Reiche enunciate the intention of explorative games is to bring players “into the world to explore and to gaze“ (2014: 444). However, in THE WITNESS said

agency of exploration and gaze is more for the sake of solving all the puzzles rather than for an attuned impression of a narrative. Therefore the insular open world and its diversified arrangement plays the indispensable role of anchoring all puzzles and regulating perception as an elaborated *hub space* (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3: *Interrupted panorama onto the swamp and tree house districts, complete with the castle's donjon as artificial secondary vantage-point.*

Accordingly THE WITNESS constitutes of three intertwined aspects that are structured around the insular landscape and especially can be allocated to the first two points of this year's call for papers on knowledge in games, namely "1. *Inquiry, discovery, exploration and experimentation.*" and "2. *The epistemology of play.*" This paper clarifies said aspects by a transdisciplinary phenomenological approach but has no purpose in being a complete study on THE WITNESS.

First Aspect: The Avatar – The Player

As a recurring entity bound to the island (c.f. the normal ending of the game) the avatar casts shadows of a human body onto the game world accompanied by walking sounds. The avatar seems to be depicted indirectly as neither hands and arms nor legs are seen in the frame (Fig. 4). THE WITNESS stages its landscape experience by non-linear three-dimensional navigation in the current style of above mentioned explorative games but time and again the players have to switch into a fixed point of view that only allows a reduced interaction on two-dimensional grids and mazes by a mouse-like icon in the interface – here MYST's pre-rendered island full of fixated views into puzzle spaces comes to mind. Thus the point of action changes within the "space-image" from a 3D first-person "artificial navigation" (Günzel 2008: 172) within the *hub space* of THE WITNESS's island into a 2D movement pattern which the players know from using browsers, office applications or graphics editors. According to Rune Klevjer a mouse cursor as representation of the players or link into the "space image" keeps them from being bodily engaged within the game world as the cursor doesn't belong to the diegetic semiotics or system of meaning, respectively (2012: 17). While solving the 2D puzzle panels, the point of view then seems to hover somewhere between the

implicit avatar body and the puzzle panel. The avatar seems non-existent or at least reduced to the virtual camera. This is also affirmed in the *THE WITNESS*'s staging of the avatar: much like *PROTEUS* the avatar is disembodied and somehow lags 'physical' connection with the game world.



Fig. 4: The avatar's cast shadow in the quarry *district* while solving a light and shadow puzzle after opening the windows.

Normally, testing out the agency or courses of action of the very own avatar produces a sense of inhabitation with the players and – like Daniel Vella argues – transforms modular game space into a “meaningful place” and thus generates “the human mode of being as *Dasein*, or ‘being-there’“ in the Heideggerian sense (2013: 3). Klevjer bases this mode of experiencing a bodily engagement upon the term of “I can” instead of “I think”: “[M]y new ‘here’ has been re-located into screen space there; I am *tele-present* in that space. When captured by the avatar, I am phenomenally present elsewhere” (2012: 30, 34). The more complex or extensive the embodied engagement with the game world, the more virtually authentic is the embodied perception and the bigger the atmosphere of placeness. Klevjer accentuates: “The sense of bodily immersion that is involved in avatar-based play is rooted in the way in which the body is able to intuitively re-direct into screen-space a perception of itself as object, which is the perception of itself as part of external space” (2012: 29). For example this is the case with Faith’s Parkour abilities in *MIRROR’S EDGE CATALYST* (DICE 2016) or Nathan Drake’s tactile appropriation of basalt cliffs, rooftops and tropical paths in *UNCHARTED 4: A THIEF’S END* (Naughty Dog 2016). That said the avatars and thus the bodily perception in both *PROTEUS* and *THE WITNESS* are reduced and less physically ‘earthed’. There is no jumping, no crouching, no climbing; just walking on designated paths as well as looking up and down. At least *THE WITNESS* enables the basic interaction with buttons, levers and puzzle panels though without depicting the necessary limb and thus the necessary kinetic action. It seems to be a more abstract inhabitation of the virtual environment (Vella 2013: 5) that – while playing – evidently feels like piloting an entity and thus highlights even more the “*vehicular* nature of prosthetic avatars“ as Klevjer points out in context of first-person perception (2012: 35).

As mentioned before, the lack of fauna and its sounds leads to an experience of being alone that really means the experience of solitariness. The players traverse an island long abandoned and slowly reconquered by nature. Vella thematizes the staging of wilderness in context of *PROTEUS* and *MINECRAFT* (Mojang 2009) explicating: “The trope of the lone individual in the untamed wilderness is a recurrent image that, in its various manifestations, remains inevitably inscribed with the mark of divergent assumptions regarding the manner of the individual’s engagement with space, place and nature [...] if *Minecraft* and *Proteus* are anything to go by, now that space exploration, the dream of a technological optimism that no longer seems to hold, appears to have receded into history, the twenty-first century is forced to venture into fantasy or impressionistic generality in order to locate fresh wildernesses to subject to the explorer’s gaze” (2013: 6). Though *THE WITNESS*’s island isn’t a procedurally generated but meticulously executed, ‘hand made’ game world, Vella’s argument can be adapted: as stated before the players’ embodied engagement on the island is reduced and almost abstract. But the phenomenally experience of landscape, nature and wilderness is a heightened aesthetic perception that compensates the lack of bodily agency and thus fuels the *tele-presence* (Fig. 5). In other words: *THE WITNESS*’s game world is a meaningful place anyway. This is accomplished by the focus of a pure aesthetic landscape experience – a thoroughly designed insular game world for networked puzzles and their diverse semiotics.



Fig. 5: The avatar casts its shadow onto basaltic column viewing onto the sloping path that starts at the beach and within the tropic forest.

Despite, or perhaps because of the said oscillating 3D-2D perception the players experience a problem solving and game-intrinsic knowledge generation by combining landscape experience and diverse puzzle semiotics that also lead to an extrinsic overvalue on knowledge. According to *THE WITNESS*’s game director Blow “[i]t’s all about figuring out how we learn in games. [...] [T]he fun is in gathering the knowledge you’ll need to solve each one [of the puzzles]” (Mahardy 2015). *THE WITNESS* then is not about an avatar, its embodied engagement or fate in the game world, but about the players and their ability of knowledge adaptation and cognitive progression – “a lecture about knowledge disguised as a puzzle game” (Roberts 2016). Of course this can only be experienced in a playthrough of the game.

Coming to the interim conclusion that above all THE WITNESS is a commentary on the ontology of computer games, as modular database, initiated by the players' "simulation fever" (Bogost 2006: 105, 132).

Second Aspect: The Island – The Puzzles

Realized by architect Deanna van Buren (FOURM design studio), landscape architects (Fletcher Studio) and game artist Luis Antonio the island is a showpiece for game world design. It consists of several *districts* that depict biomes of different climates and flora and blend into each other despite distinct forms and color palettes. According to van Buren this was a focal point during the design process, as in a lot of other games the transitions between level areas or texture maps often are abrupt and impure (2015). While wandering around the THE WITNESS's island the players traverse from a clearing with grass and green broadleaf trees near the tutorial castle area to a grove of pink fruit trees with a field and a barn in between. Said pink grove with its dazzling color leads into the arid desert area via a meadow. The desert *district* is flanked by a peninsular full of trees and a marble quarry. It houses a temple ruin within sand dunes (Antonio 2016). Not only the succession of different flora, heights and concentrations organizes the billowy landscape but also the color palettes of the biomes are all floating into each other by complementary colors or discreet relations (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6: *Horizontal vista towards the quarry district as well as the forest of lumber mill district beyond.*

The Ruins and abandoned architectures are designed to express an evolution of building history by three phases of civilization and thus three eras of technology (van Buren 2015; Warr 2016). The (landscape) architects reflect on questions such as "What is the topography of the land? What materials are available to us? What climate are we in? What are the zoning laws? Where is the sun coming from?" (van Buren 2015). The archetypal *environmental storytelling* in game design was thus deepened by aspects beyond ludo-narrative purposes that – with some exceptions – are seldomly addressed: "a sort of fictional history rooted in real geography and patterns of human activity" (Warr 2016). Van Buren argues: "Sometimes

in an effort to create a holistic identity or world, video games commit to one style/period, or genre yet this is not how environments exist in reality. Our built environments have history, a story across time. They are layered. In *The Witness* we use this passage of time to create the narrative so the environments are a series of adaptively re-used buildings and landscapes beginning with prehistoric times to the present day and beyond. Each building and landscape is designed in response to the needs of at least one civilization and in some buildings all three civilizations are expressed” (van Buren 2015). A place like the quarry was designed as natural era and then underwent transformations through all three civilizations. The building has parts of medieval built volumes as well as structures that seem to refer to industrial era. Accompanying this design approach there also are different combinations of building materials and their aesthetics (Fig. 7). Thus certain materials embody certain civilizations. Different woods and natural stones, steel, iron sheet or concrete evoke a tactile experience.



Fig. 7: Rooftop of the quarry building with built volumes of an industrial age.

Ruins are crucial sights in *THE WITNESS* that not only add to the experience of reclusion and wilderness but also to the coherence of the game world’s history and its regulation of game intrinsic mechanics like exploration and gaze. This is already stated by Jay Appleton’s *prospect-refuge theory* and the experience of landscape: “Supreme among the devices for linking the artificial with the natural is the ruin, in which the harsh functionalism suggested by its form is tempered by its manifest incorporation within natural order. A castle, manned and patrolled by hostile occupants, must be a forbidding sight. The powerful symbolism of both prospect and refuge which such a structure embodies cannot be aesthetically apprehended as long as it represents a real and possibly lethal hazard. But empty it of its garrison and it takes a very different role. Reduce it to impotence still further by physical disintegration and there comes a time when a balance is struck between the functional but unacceptable symbolism of a wholly artificial contrivance and the inoperative but ‘naturally’ plausible stone surface rising out of a bed of ‘natural’ vegetation” (1975: 173). Appleton’s description of such a spatial arrangement can be found in *THE WITNESS* with the example of a majestic castle ruin, its central donjon and multiple surrounding in-environment puzzles, that resemble typical labyrinth gardens and are only solvable by the prospect from the donjon.

As mentioned earlier the landscape reminds of a model world. With the implementation of biomes and artefacts of bygone civilizations it is a most diversified wilderness: Staging cultivated *districts* like the quarry, the fruit tree grove or the lumber mill complete with a cutover section of a forest as well as an abandoned village, ruined castles, impassable nature like a swamp or a bamboo labyrinth and utopian images of nature like a tropic beach. The surrounding ocean adds to the atmosphere of a model world as it is tame like an unused swimming pool (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8: Simple vista onto the mangrove forest and its tree houses.

Of such a thoroughly top-down design, the *districts* or biomes constitute the island as a composition of several *evocative spaces* (Jenkins 2004) and embody a quality of *environmental storytelling* that resemble theme park attractions (Rogers 2009). Scott Rogers traces *Disneyland's* several strategies of involvement as crucial game design aspects. Here only two examples will be carried out. For example the *Sleeping Beauty Castle* is the central *landmark*, or “weenie” of the theme park (ibid.). A vertical structure as reference point relates the visitors within *Disneyland's* fictional world. The equivalent in THE WITNESS is the basalt mountain. Its summit also marks the entry to the last puzzle areas towards the normal game ending. Another strategy are branching “paths”. They give the illusion of having a choice which route to take while exploring and strolling in districts like *Jungle Cruise* or *Tomorrowland* (ibid.). In context of an open world structure the illusion of *free-roaming* is staged. Vistas onto low *landmarks* of the village (Fig. 9) or the mangrove forest are forced. This is due to designated lines of sight and altitude differences, which trigger the urge of exploration with every new gaze. Players look for more puzzle panels yet to solve and unknown semiotics inscribed in the mysterious *districts* or biomes yet to decipher.



Fig. 9: *Closed vista* towards the village.

Rogers' example of *Disneyland's* Main Street axis can be contextualized with all of THE WITNESS's choreographed gazes and prospects. Its insular landscape can be defined as *possibility space* (Totten 2014: 316). The latter category means an area or stretch of way that not only enables *vistas* and *prospects* of multiple types (Appleton 1975: 85-95) at *landmarks*, *districts* and hints for solving "puzzle clusters" (Machkovech 2016) but also stages multiple affordances for spatial appropriation. The *possibility space* then can be understood as a kind of *hub space*.

In order to facilitate the landscape's complex function, it generates and governs a media specific distillate of historically habituated man-made behavior patterns, which can be analyzed by above mentioned *prospect-refuge theory* (Appleton 1975). As Vella states a purely aesthetic landscape experience in PROTEUS, THE WITNESS's game intrinsic function of *prospect* and *refuge* also is a purely aesthetic one: the players are not confronted with *animate hazard* or *impediment hazard* (ibid.: 96) and thus don't need to circumvent or attack enemies but they need to decode semiotics of puzzle panels, in-environment puzzles or general hints as well as possible or hidden stretches of way. Here *refuge spaces* are only staged in order to build a sound atmosphere of intimacy or mystery and the overall hide-and-seek aesthetics work for puzzle spaces instead of hazard spaces. Today the urge for exploring, hunting and survival continues to have an effect as aesthetic experiences like climbing, camping, trekking and so forth. Appleton clarifies: "... aesthetic satisfaction, experienced in the contemplation of landscape, stems from the spontaneous perception of landscape features which, in their shapes, colours, spatial arrangements and other attributes, act as sign-stimuli indicative of environmental conditions favourable to survival, whether they really *are* favourable or not. [...] Yet the symbolic impact of these environmental phenomena can induce in us a sense either of ease and satisfaction or of unease and disturbance, and it is on these emotional responses rather than on the real potency of the danger, the refuge or the prospect that our aesthetic reactions will depend. [...] Though few of us would give up the emancipation we have already won, all of us long to get back, when the opportunity arises, to

that proper environment to which our inborn behaviour mechanisms are still tuned, and in it to live and move and have our being” (ibid.: 69, 81, 177).

According to Appleton even in natural landscapes „we find recurring the same basic situations in which the details are peculiar to the particular occasion while conforming to a regular general pattern“ (ibid.: 136). Said layout patterns are diversified by intensity, variation, spatial arrangement and balance of places or objects that symbolize *prospect* and *refuge* (ibid.: 74). THE WITNESS’s landscape plays with repetitions of *simple vistas*, *closed vistas*, *interrupted panoramas* and *closed prospects*, among others, which were established by Appleton and only partly reveal the environment. Additionally the players gaze at *secondary vantage-points* like ledges, hill tops or towers that promise epistemic views by foreshadowing a *direct prospect* from the next horizon onto the biomes beyond (ibid: 85-95). In order to generate knowledge it is all about the perception of the island by designated paths and prospects. The modular picturesque of the island’s diverse *districts* or biomes and its regulation of different *prospects* also fits to the ideals of landscape gardens which Christian Hirschfeld defined as artificial multi-course worlds staging diverse spaces of prospect, intimacy and atmospheres (1780: 130). Accordingly this picturesque place sets the overall atmosphere of a beautiful but abandoned island and charges the non-linear navigation to each puzzle panel with the topics of isolation in a lifeless wilderness regained.

The (mostly) contained spaces of the puzzle panels are the actual game space as the players follow and adapt rules and mechanics of semiotic systems within the grid structures by drawing paths from point A to B (Machkovech 2016). Puzzles in one location may bear the solution for puzzle panels in another and increase the players’ knowledge and perspective on THE WITNESS (Roberts 2012). Also some puzzle panels are only solvable by hints within the landscape. Every *district* has its own semiotics for puzzle panels that can built upon or alternate each other. The panels can be found as sole objects or are (spatially) arranged in groups. Also there are four types of puzzles. First the normal puzzle panels with grid structures and implemented semiotics like geometric forms in different colors connoting certain rules of drawing a path. Here the alignment of the point of view is automated by sequence right into a fixed frame. Secondly, there exist puzzle panels that are only solvable by incorporating their close environment. Here the players have to adjust themselves in the right angle towards the panels. For example tree branches in the lumber mill *district* that block out paths on the panel’s grid by casting shadows or sun reflection on the panels that indicate fingerprints in the desert *district*. The third type of in-environment puzzles are scattered throughout the island. They are solved by adjusting the right point of view into the landscape or onto a treetop by foreshorten spatial arrangements. These actions are heavily based on the aforementioned patterns of lines of sight and train the players not only to decode the landscape aesthetically in the sense of the *prospect-refuge theory* but also to think of the landscape under ludic aspects as a spatial puzzle. Recently this is experienced in a lot of games. For example the Riddler’s spatial puzzles in BATMAN ARKHAM CITY (Rocksteady Studios 2011) or the isometric Escheresque puzzles in MONUMENT VALLEY (Ustwo 2014) which foster the interaction of built volumes in 3D but decode the paths for avatar princess Ida in 2D, knowingly ignoring geometric rules. Furthermore the oscillation between two different points of action reminds of the indie game PERSPECTIVE (Digipen 2012) that merges 3D first-person exploration with 2D classic side-scrolling platform appropriation: In first-

person perspective players adjust the frame of the virtual camera so they can cross the space with the 2D avatar in two-dimensional fashion and within a fixed frame. This is also the case in THE WITNESS as players can't move their avatar while tracing a path and solving it via the cursor. Fourth of all are puzzles that combine the first three types like in the Monastery *district*. The progression of every greater *district* is documented on black octagonal obelisks on whose surfaces solved puzzles begin to glow mysteriously.

The dichotomy between insular landscape and puzzle panels is most evident in the discrepancy of navigable space versus spatial representation (Günzel 2008: 180), meaning that THE WITNESS's island has more passive than active level structures. Much like the scenery of theme park *districts*, only buttons, levers, entries and the mysterious laser projectors are alterable. Buildings as a whole and the flora for the most part are static and feel distant. According to Blow this ever changing 3D-2D interaction is the crucial point of THE WITNESS's production of meaning: "the process of moving from place to place, and solving new panels that seemed impossible before, I think that's meaningful" (Mahardy 2015; c.f. Roberts 2016). Here the embodied engagement involves players by an elaborate aesthetic experience made by (landscape) architects and feels aloof by staging the actual ludic interaction in 2D game space at the same time. Nonetheless both mark a highly perceptive, distinct synaesthetic gameplay. Said gameplay is thus an *epistemic modality*. De Certeau describes the latter as stretches of way that have a value of perception or awareness inscribed. In context of THE WITNESS it is the artificial navigation of the certain, the plausible and the excluded. With further wandering, exploring and puzzle solving the *epistemic modality* can be actualized in order to broaden knowledge or render it more precisely.

Third Aspect: The 'Story' – The Endings

The 'story' of THE WITNESS constitutes of audio logs, statues in expressive and vivid poses, *embedded spaces* and academic videos.¹ They all circulate around topics like thought and knowledge from religious and secular perspectives and thus epistemological approaches towards our world (extrinsic) or the island of THE WITNESS, respectively (intrinsic). Quotes of philosophers, religious leaders and researchers fulfil this purpose (Roberts 2016). A lot of these things seem fragmented and in no relation to the game or each other. They are more about a kaleidoscopic view that leaves it to the players if and how to contextualize these multiple approaches between believe, thought and research with THE WITNESS or their physical real everyday life: "The Witness [...] is about fully exploring a concept: the nature of epiphany, and how a new set of information can affect our understanding of the world around us" (Roberts 2016). The intention is crucial that there is not the one truth or the one approach. There rather are multiple hints and perspectives, which are too manifold to be examined here objectively. It is up to the players to generate an image of their very own liking. In this context it is clear that all audiovisual fragments of the game world's 'story' are only implemented to accompany the players' generation of knowledge, some also seem

¹ Totten defines *embedded spaces* as spatial arrangements that communicate aspects of the game world's story in order to deepen the experience on levels of architecture, interior design and scenery i.e. a relief inside a gothic cathedral depicting the crucifixion (2014: 179, 284). One example in THE WITNESS is an airy shed full technical drawings near the pink fruit tree grove.

pretentious. The latter can be understood as the plot of THE WITNESS. Thus audio logs, statues and *embedded spaces* enable a discourse to reflect on knowledge if desired. Therefore I rather will focus on the endings of THE WITNESS.

There are two possible endings in THE WITNESS. The conventional ending seems to affirm the thesis on *epistemic modality*: solving the ‘last’ puzzles in the rocky pillar hall beneath the basalt mountain, the players enter an elevator made of glass and fly over the whole island only to recognize that every single solved puzzle has been reset. Like a respawn, players land in the tutorial area of the island, with all the work and invested effort undone. As THE WITNESS is not meant to be “completed” (Machkovech 2016) it communicates, that the journey – the progress of gathering and adapting knowledge – is the reward. In context of this looped momentum Matt Peckham argues that this is also thematized in one of the audio logs at the very beginning of the game: “There’s an audio clip in an out-of-the-way part of the birth-like starter area, where — this much I’m also presuming — the female figure you play says ‘Through many births I have wandered on and on, searching for but never finding the builder of this house.’ You appear to be caught in some sort of temporal loop” (Peckham 2016). In context of Henry Lefebvre this said loop can be described as *cyclical repetition* (2014: 18) that constitutes of several *linear repetitions* (the four puzzle types). Lefebvre compares the *cyclical repetition* with the ‘cosmic’ like seasons or day-and-night-circle and the *linear repetition* with “human activities” (ibid.: 18). He furthermore illustrates both kinds of repetition with the example of a conventional watch: the clock hands perform a cyclical movement across the dial while the necessary mechanism of gears embodies the *linear repetition* (ibid: 18). This is of course an analogy of the media condition of computer games in general – setting the game stat to zero. Like Phil Connors (Bill Murray) in GROUND HOG DAY (Harold Ramis, USA 1993), the gamers start anew into the game world with an increased knowledge for the iteration.

The secret ending not only furthers the idea of knowledge and world-view but also expands the said by broaching the issue of computer game ontology. A subtle in-environment puzzle right at the exit of the fortified tutorial area has to be solved by adjusting the point of view towards the castle’s defence wall. Forshorten the glaring sun in the *skybox* with a part of the gate into the game’s typical semiotics of point and line, the players, instead of leaving the castle’s compound, enter a surreal, non-euclidian architecture which suddenly also is situated in the clouds of the game world’s *skybox*. Traversing the coherent but impossible succession of a Mediterranean lounge bar, a cave system and space age modernism corridors the players have multiple *prospects* as *rewarding vistas* (Totten 2014: 246, 248) onto the island (Fig. 10). Each of these *prospects* is from a different place and height scattered around the whole game world and doesn’t fit to the spatiotemporal coherent architecture and its distances the players had to cover (Fig. 11).



Fig. 10: *Interrupted panorama* from the balcony of the Mediterranean lounge bar.

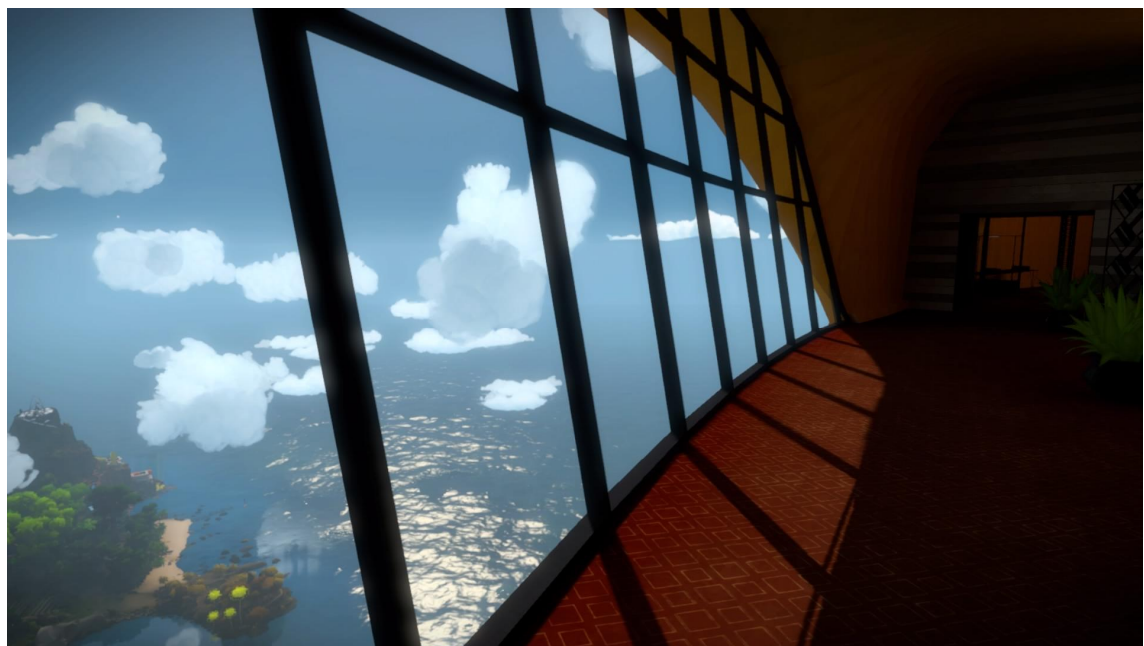


Fig. 11: *Interrupted panorama* from a higher point and opposite to Fig. 10 though the lounge bar is just a few meters around the corner.

Thus the *rewarding vistas* do induce a visual knowledge, *epistemic views* onto the island, that suggest disembodied and transcendent perspectives of an *oculus dei*. Here it literally means the pure fiction of knowledge as described by de Certeau (1980: 180). More precisely these *rewarding vistas* change into *alethic views* exposing the ontology of digital game space and its illusion, its “virtual fictive” placeness (Tavinor 2012: 192-195). De Certeau describes the *alethic modality* as stretches of way that have a truth-value inscribed. He states, that the action of walking – in our case the appropriation of game space – among others affirms, suspects, risks, exceeds and respects its paths taken (1980: 192). Like every other game world THE WITNESS, too, is processed by hardware and based on algorithms using a database full of

textures, sounds and polygons. Only by the players it gets a meaning. The impossibility of traversing the non-euclidian architecture marks the possibility of digital media, especially computer games, and thus uncovers a media specific *alethic value* by *rewarding vistas* from within the *skybox*' clouds. This fits perfectly with Blows intention and meta-reflexive approach on systems of meaning and knowledge because as we know by now, it is all about perception.

Conclusion

Finally the players are guided deep into the surreal architecture, turning their backs on the *rewarding vistas*. They follow a linear and more and more fractured path into darkness. Along the way the players can solve another puzzle panel which allows to peer 'into' the office space of Thekla Inc. This reminds of observing an aquarium, only that it's an empty habitat for THE WITNESS's developers. This last stretch of way recalls Alice's descend into the warren (Fig. 12) in a reciprocal manner which ends with a GoPro video. The live action sequences show the first-person perspective of one of the developers who seems to awake from a man-machine cyberpunk connection.

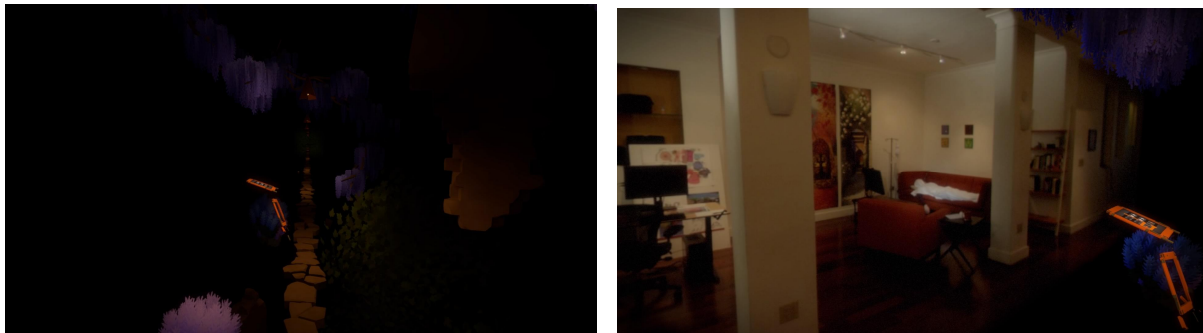


Fig. 12: Transition from the deconstructed path and view into the real world office.

The final point of view of the developer as well as the transition from darkness imply the process of coming back into awareness. Said developer stumbles through the actual office trying to solve puzzles on physical, real every day objects that faintly resemble the several hundred panels in THE WITNESS. The semiotics that were internalized and mastered on the island in several hours and iterations now are of no use. In case of the developer the gathered knowledge fails in adapting to the real world. An actualisation is needed in order to perform an effectual engagement with the physical reality. This can be read as a commentary on the fact that specific or distinct knowledge possibly isn't adaptable into other systems of meaning or only can be transferred in parts forcing one into a change in perspective or adjusting the frame of reference. At least to us as academics this is a well known struggle in transdisciplinary approaches.

THE WITNESS not only stages the ludic and aesthetic puzzling about a picturesque landscape and its actual puzzles but also about cognition, gathering and adapting knowledge as well as about reality and ourselves. THE WITNESS more stages the players' confrontation towards obstacles and how to approach them rather than a traditional ludic satisfaction or a hero's journey. These findings may seem fragmental or kaleidoscopic but reflect the ontology of THE WITNESS.

Games

BATMAN ARKHAM CITY. Rocksteady Studios, Xbox 360, 2011.
EVERYBODY IS GONE TO THE RAPTURE. The Chinese Room, PS4, 2015.
FIREWATCH. Campo Santo, PS4, 2016.
GRAND THEFT AUTO V. Rockstar North, Xbox 360, 2013.
MINECRAFT. Mojang, PC, 2009.
MIRROR'S EDGE CATALYST. DICE, PS4, 2016.
MONUMENT VALLEY. Ustwo, Android, 2014.
MYST. Cyan Worlds/Preston Studios, PC, 1993.
PERSPECTIVE. Digipen, PC, 2012.
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