The Living Dungeon:
Space, Convention, and Reinvention in Dungeon Games

by

Zachary Selman Palmer

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Department of Digital Humanities
University of Alberta

Abstract

Across digital and tabletop gaming, the 'dungeon' has been a generic setting with enduring popularity for decades. A staple of games of medieval fantasy-themed adventure, the traditional dungeon is a subterranean labyrinth full of monsters, traps, and treasures into which brave or foolish adventurers face danger for glory or gold. This thesis recognizes 'the dungeon' as it relates to game production and game culture as a peculiarly rich spatial concept. Through this work, I answer answering not just "what is a dungeon?" – but, more provocatively, "what *could be* a dungeon?" or "what does a dungeon *do*?" Ultimately, I argue the dungeon operates much like a genre, establishing a commonly-understood range of expectations for game creators and a comfortable range of expectations for game audiences and providing opportunities for subversion.

I turn to game studies' implementation of genre as more than a taxonomic label, but a communication tool that provides a range of predictable expressions and experiences for creators and audiences that also creates the possibility for subversion. I argue that the dungeon convention provides much the same advantages of a genre to game creators and game audiences. As a dungeon is a convention of space and not a cultural work in itself, my understanding of genre is supplemented by an understanding of space as actively and culturally constructed through human action.

To support this argument, I engage in close readings of several dungeon games from distinct but related backgrounds. *Might and Magic VI: The Mandate of Heaven* (1998) is emblematic of the conventional dungeon game and illustrates its conventions when embedded within games that value simulation and coherence. *Rogue* (1980) and the many 'roguelikes' it has inspired demonstrate the utility of the dungeon space as one that can be constructed through automatic rules rather than intentional design and also one that can simultaneously accommodate a variety of interactive and

thematic styles. I use several more recent roguelikes that use dungeon settings to demonstrate the dungeon's affinity with hybrid game designs, providing a useful point of reference for players and a point of departure for designers. My final case study, *Darkest Dungeon*, shows the dungeon's potential for not just hybridization but transformation through subversion of the convention. Through thematic appeals to the cultural language of horror fiction and through the establishment of game states that generate negative affect like tension, fear, and guilt, *Darkest Dungeon* reframes the dungeon from a source of fun adventure to a source of horror.

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not exist without the tangible and intangible contributions of so many. I am grateful to you all.

I offer my deepest and sincerest thanks to my supervisor Maureen Engel. Your astounding and unflagging patience and support is the number one reason this thesis exists, but what you have taught me transcends this document. My writing, my scholarly reading, and my thinking have all reached a higher level thanks to you.

I would also like to thank everyone at Humanities Computing/Digital Humanities: Geoffrey Rockwell and Sean Gouglas, who stand on my thesis committee, as well as Astrid Ensslin and Harvey Quamen, excellent instructors whose lessons have all contributed to this thesis in some form. Thanks to Nicola DiNicola for helping keep things organized. I'm also grateful to HUCO/DH for the chance to meet and learn alongside Jane Kuznetsova, Rob Budac, Andrea Budac, Jocelyn Beyer, Maren Wilson, Kaitlyn Ensley, Sheng Zhang, Grady Zielke, John Montague, and more, all of whom helped shape my scholarship.

Thanks to Fiona Nicoll, David Bryenton, and everyone at W1 for being so accommodating as I brought this thesis to a close. You made this far easier than you had to. Thanks also to my excellent friends Dennis Goulden, Shaun Kerr, Paige Hamilton, Lucas Smart, Will Mitchell, Murray Cullen, Asia Smart, Charlie Pearson, Stéphane Drouin-Moreland, and everyone else who offered me so much encouragement even as I cancelled yet another week's game night during my final push.

My parents Jan Selman and Curtis Palmer have provided me with so much over my whole life, but I would like to single out the extraordinary amount of help and comfort you gave me during my final few weeks of writing. It really would have been impossible without you.

Finally, to my lifelong friends Ian Lauder and Jordan Thompson, if you hadn't – independently – invited me to play *D&D* with you all those years ago, this thesis would not exist. Also, I would be a completely different person. Thanks for everything.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Introduction

> "Other special dungeons, known as 'living dungeons,' rise spontaneously from beneath the underworld, moving upward steadily toward the surface as they spiral across the map. Living dungeons don't follow any logic; they're bizarre expressions of malignant magic. If a living dungeon survives to break onto the surface of the world, it can become a permanent feature of the landscape."
>
> *--13ᵗʰ Age*

The above quotation is taken from Pelgrane Press's *13ᵗʰ Age* (2013), a tabletop roleplaying game designed by Rob Heinsoo and Jonathan Tweet. Each had been a lead designer of different prior editions of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Within their description of the "Dragon Empire," a loose setting designed for players to use to ground their own imaginary adventures and battles, they introduce this concept of the "living dungeon" (265). This type of *dungeon* – they decline to explain what they mean by the term – does not need to make sense within the established world. Living dungeons can arrive anywhere, presenting an immediate opportunity for the players' adventurers to face bizarre dangers and make off with some "loot" (191). The game setting presents players with an infinitely flexible pretext to engage in a particular type of *play* as defined by a particular type of *space*. *13ᵗʰ Age* presumes than anyone likely to play it already knows what a 'dungeon' is and wants to play through adventures in one.

Tabletop roleplaying is not the only medium of games where dungeon spaces thrive. Digital games have endlessly reproduced the fantasy dungeon setting as well. This thesis recognizes 'the dungeon' as it relates to game production and game culture as a peculiarly rich spatial concept. Through this work, I answer answering not just "what is a dungeon?" – but, more provocatively, "what *could be* a dungeon?" or "what does a dungeon *do*?" Ultimately, I argue the dungeon operates much like a genre, establishing a commonly-understood range of expectations for game creators and a comfortable range of expectations for game audiences and providing opportunities for subversion.

Before engaging with its functions, though, a historical account and basic definition of the dungeon concept is necessary.

What Is a Dungeon?

'Dungeons' in games today bear little more than superficial resemblance to historical dungeons. They are not sites of imprisonment, as their name might suggest. While they often draw on the kinds of visual imagery found in medieval prisons, they rarely actually serve this purpose within the context of their game worlds. Rather, the term refers to a much more essential element regarding fictional and functional role – a challenging labyrinth full of threats and treasures waiting for players to confront it. To explain gaming's odd redefining of the term, it is necessary to turn to gaming history.

The most obvious instance of 'dungeon' in the history of games is in the title of seminal tabletop roleplaying game, *Dungeons & Dragons* (henceforth *D&D*), first commercially published in 1974. Reputedly, *D&D* co-creator Gary Gygax arrived at this name "by drawing up two columns filled with evocative words, then polling his players about what names they liked… everyone (or perhaps just Gygax's daughter or perhaps his wife, depending on which interview you prefer) liked 'Dungeons & Dragons' best" (Appelcline 13). By the time Gygax was searching for such an evocative name, though, dungeons had already been established as settings for the experimental rulesets and game settings that would influence *D&D. D&D*'s other co-creator, Dave Arneson, had shifted his tabletop medieval fantasy *Blackmoor* to a new setting: "the dungeons beneath and around Castle Blackmoor – a castle that originated in a plastic kit of a Sicilian castle that Arneson owned" (Appelcline 10). As early as 1972, one of Arneson's regular players streamlined the dungeon exploration element of *Blackmoor* into a boardgame called *The Dungeons of Pasha Cada,* later published simply as "*Dungeon!*" in 1975 (Appelcline 20). The dungeons in these games provided sites of challenge and reward to players of the nascent roleplaying game genre. Of particular significance is dungeons' rewarding nature; one of the defining innovations of the emerging roleplaying game was the ability to advance a single character's wealth and skill by acquiring treasure and experience points (Hall 16).

The dungeon is the designated place of challenge in early *D&D*. The original *D&D* set prompts the referee (the player whose role would later be called the 'Game Master' or 'Dungeon Master') to "draw out a minimum of half a dozen maps of the levels of his 'underworld,' people them with monsters of various horrid aspect, [and] distribute treasures accordingly" (Gygax and Arneson, *Men & Magic* 5). Once this preparation is complete, players can "make their first descent into the dungeons beneath the 'huge ruined pile, a vast castle built by generations of mad wizards and insane geniuses'" (Gygax and Arneson, *Men & Magic* 5-6). What this description is meant to be quoting is unclear, but this text forms the foundation of a new type of game that would have massive influence on later analog and digital games.

Later, more widely circulated editions of *Dungeons & Dragons* continued to emphasize the dungeon as a space for exciting and adventuresome imaginary play. 1983's 'Red Box' *Basic Set* introduced the dungeon[1] as "a group of rooms and corridors in which monsters and treasures can be found" (Gygax and Arneson, *Players Manual* 2). The third edition of *D&D,* published in 2000 and revised in 2003, provides a more detailed description not just of what dungeons could be, but why they were suitable for the roleplaying game genre. By then, the roleplaying game was well-established in both digital and tabletop forms, and both strands of the genre had incorporated a greater diversity of settings, but dungeon exploration remained significant. The *Dungeon Master's Guide 3.5* provides an intentionally "loose" definition of the dungeon space across functional, fictional, and aesthetic dimensions. The game privileges the fictional dimension, emphasizing their role in providing "adventure" to players (Cook 57). The book classifies the most common fictional pretexts for the existence of such spaces in a coherent fantasy game world – "ruined structure," "occupied structure," "safe storage," and "natural cavern complex" (Cook 57-58). Within each category, the game describes what might be found there, in terms of challenges to be confronted and more aesthetic sensory description of dungeon appearance. A sidebar in this section of the book discards the fictional justifications for dungeons and appeals to utility. "A dungeon," it claims, "is really nothing but an adventure flowchart" (Cook 58) that breaks up the simulated world into manageable parts for a game world imagined and tracked solely by human participants. Dungeons "set apart the 'adventure' from the rest of the world in a clean way" (Cook 57).

---

1   The *Basic Set* was a repackaging of an effort to introduce *D&D* to "younger players" (Appelcline 30).

D&D is a recognized influence on some of the earliest digital games. In *Twisty Little Passages*, Nick Montfort's history of the adventure game genre, he notes the influence of *D&D* on Will Crowther's *Adventure* (1975)[2], the first digital interactive fiction game (231). While it lacks the dice-based tactical play of *D&D*, *Adventure* retains the thematic focus on navigating a dangerous underground labyrinth in search of treasures. Espen Aarseth explains *Adventure*'s emphasis on puzzle solving and total lack of the mathematically simulated avatar as the result of Crowther's collaborator Don Woods being "not familiar with the *D&D* system" ("Wumpus" 502).

These early fantasy games have literary antecedents, and their emphasis on dungeons is mirrored in myth and fiction. The myth of Theseus sees him descending into an enclosed labyrinth to defeat the Minotaur. The Minotaur and many other creatures from Greek and other mythologies were transformed from a singular threat to a species of monster to fill out *D&D*'s many *Monster Manuals* with threatening beasts a Dungeon Master might draw from to populate their own mazes. Closer to our own era, the works of J.R.R. Tolkien are frequently associated with the development of fantasy gaming, an association which, while present, is frequently overstated. Montfort declares as much regarding the creation of *Adventure* (234), citing Crowther's real-life caving experience as a primary source for *Adventure*'s creation and topographical organization. Don Woods adapted Crowther's original design, adding fully fictional territory not present in the real-life cave system Crowther drew from (Peterson 189). Tolkien is similarly popularly understood as the primary source for *D&D*'s loose fantasy setting. While he does list Tolkien's Middle-Earth works among *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*' "inspirational and educational reading," Gygax states, "The most immediate influences upon *AD&D* were probably de Camp & Pratt, REH [Robert E. Howard], Fritz Leiber, Jack Vance, HPL [H.P. Lovecraft], and A. Merrit" (*Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, 224). In a 1974 letter to a wargaming magazine, Gygax presents a similar list (adding Poul Anderson) as exemplars of the kind of "Swords and Sorcery" fantasy that most directly influenced early *D&D* ("Swords and Sorcery" 6). Nevertheless, Tolkien-inspired content appears frequently in early fantasy gaming. Early versions of *D&D* included Tolkienian creatures like "hobbits" and "ents"; they were renamed to "halflings" and "treants" in later editions following legal challenges (Appelcline 29). An early major roguelike (see Chapter Two) was 1983's *Moria*, named after the underground ruins traversed in Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

---

2   There is some dispute as to this date, summarized in Montfort (1175); this is the best guess from available evidence.

Moria would be adapted into the "more 'Tolkienized'" *Angband* in 1990 (RogueBasin, "*Angband*"), named for a subterranean fortress in Tolkien's setting of Middle-Earth.

In scholarly literature, the dungeon as a meaningful convention is under-theorized. In the 1986 article, "Hellivision: an Analysis of Video Games," Gillian Skirrow notes the adventure game's tendency to take place in "unnatural systems" (123) like mazes or tombs. Working from a psychoanalytic framework, she characterizes both the environments on screen and the physical situation of playing while looking at a screen as a kind of "maternal cave" (123) into which fascinations and anxieties are projected and reflected. Game scholarship has changed greatly since 1986, not in the least by opening the possibility of centring the analysis on the game, rather than the player. My work in this thesis treats games themselves as the object of study. Unlike Skirrow, I do not seek to psychoanalyze – or pathologize – the game player. My goal is to isolate the generic dungeon space and explain its longevity and ubiquity by demonstrating its utility in the production and wide reception of games. Furthermore, Skirrow's blanket statements like "women do not play [video games]" (115) mark this work as an analysis of a gaming culture that no longer exists. While my analysis reaches back to games that existed at the time of Skirrow's writing, it also extends to the games of more recent decades, produced in an era where games are more accessible, more pervasive, and more varied in thematics.

An exception to the lack of current critical consideration of dungeons is the work of Greg Gillespie and Darren Crouse. They analyze the nostalgic tendencies of *Dungeon Crawl Classics* and *Advanced Adventures,* two different gaming manual series that produce "retro" content for tabletop roleplaying games. These publications are deliberate efforts to evoke the style of early *Dungeons & Dragons*. Gillespie and Crouse examine the art and packaging of these works to draw generalizations about nostalgic reflections on classic dungeon crawl gaming. These artistic "retroscapes" literally illustrate some aesthetic trappings characteristic to the dungeon environment and put forward some explanations as to their function and longevity. Some trends in dungeon depictions that return in forthcoming case studies include the following:

- Dungeons as "dark, dank locations that possess an oppressive, claustrophobic feel." Illustrators accomplish this by featuring "bas-relief of skulls and tormented faces," "cracked fieldstone

walls and floors," "ruined columns and statues," or "stalagmites, and especially stalactites" to emphasize age, danger, and the weight of the earth above ("There and Back Again" 456).

- A fixation on "light and shade," with a specific emphasis on "torches and lanterns" as iconic tools of the prepared dungeon explorer ("There and Back Again" 457).
- "Giant fungi," which Gillespie and Crouse connect to a longstanding fantasy literature tradition. They cite Jules Verne's *A Journey to the Center of the Earth* and Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* as sources for giant mushrooms' ability to convey "otherworldliness" ("There and Back Again" 456).

Gillespie and Crouse explain these works of nostalgia as acts of resistance to a perceived dominant cultural trend. Through this analysis, they identify a dichotomy that surfaces in the narrative framing of most of my case studies. They argue that the artwork of *Advanced Adventures*, one of their case studies that hearkens back to early *D&D*, constructs dungeon delvers as "bumbling treasure seekers" ("There and Back Again" 448) in opposition to the more confident and heroic figures that they appear as in more modern, mainstream interpretations. Gillespie and Crouse frame this dichotomy among representations of dungeon adventurers in terms of readiness and competence. I demonstrate a similar dichotomy through every case study in this thesis in terms of dungeon narrative framing; dungeon games position their protagonists somewhere on a scale from "morally ambiguous, low fantasy dungeon explorer" ("There and Back Again" 452) to "hero" ("There and Back Again" 448), sometimes at different points within the same game.

Theoretical Framework

In this section, I present the theoretical context in which I have conducted my research and analysis. I discuss the three major concepts of particular significance to this work: game, space, and genre. I also engage with texts that connect these concepts to one another. Finally, I outline how these large-scale theories influence my methodology for approaching the case studies. Further theoretical concepts with particular relevance to specific chapters are discussed in the chapters themselves. This section is the foundational theoretical framework that informs the entire work.

Game

As games are my object of study, it is useful to understand what I mean when I use the term. For a workable definition, I turn to Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's influential primer on interpreting and designing games, *Rules of Play.* Salen and Zimmerman's book summarizes many definitions of play and games that have been put forward by philosophers, sociologists, and game designers[3] to synthesize a cogent, useful definition. The definition they present is: "A *game* is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome" (80). From this definition, it is possible to identify the boundaries of a game and separate it from the activity of play, a crucial differentiation when treating a game itself as an object of study. This definition can be broken down into different elements, which highlight the different vectors through which a game can be understood. Significantly among these elements is the "system." For Salen and Zimmerman, a system should be understood as "a group of interacting, interrelated, or interdependent elements forming a complex whole" (50). Reading a game as a system both allows and requires analysis of each element of the game in relation to each other part of the game system. This allows for analyses of game affordances – what their systems permit and encourage and what they prevent and deter. Given the interactivity of games, not every game player or game scholar will have the same experiences interpreting a game. Players and researchers can play a game *badly*, or unusually, or with a different set of priorities than the formal quantifiable outcome, but understanding the game as a system that organizes behaviour opens it up to effective legibility despite the breadth of possible subjective exchanges with that system.

Absent from Salen and Zimmerman's definition is the cultural dimension. Game theme – which not all games actively pursue – can enter their definition at the stage of 'artificiality,' 'rules,' or 'quantifiable outcome.' Only one of their sources, game designer Greg Costikyan, defines games as "a form of culture" (qtd. in Salen and Zimmerman 78). Salen and Zimmerman shy away from agreeing with this claim, but it is a claim that informs my analysis. The games I study in this thesis exist within a tradition of cultural production that informs their design. Furthermore, the dungeon concept carries with it a set of narrative and aesthetic commonalities that are inseparable from its history across games

---

3   They dissect eight definitions from Parlett, Abt, Huizinga, Caillois, Suits, Crawford, Costikyan, and Avedon and Sutton-Smith.

and its functional role within games. While Salen and Zimmerman's definition is useful, especially when attempting to encompass all games, not just commercial electronic ones, I must also acknowledge the significance of thematics to the game tradition I study here.

In his book *Half Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds,* game scholar Jesper Juul provides a usable framework for understanding the significant role fiction plays within games. His main argument is that "video games [specifically] are rules *and* fiction" (12, emphasis his), which he positions as a response to an unprofitable debate within game scholarship insisting video games were one or the other. The fictional qualities of video games, he argues, should not be understood as stories, but as techniques games use to "cue players into imagining worlds" (121). Descending from *D&D*'s imagination-driven form of spatial representation, dungeons have a long history of interrelationship with both games and the imagination.

Juul's book also provides the game researcher with the term "game state" (60). The game state is the current position and condition of all significant game components. Isolating game states and the connections between them is important when making generalizations across digital games with significant emergent properties.

Space

My main object of study is the dungeon – a kind of fictional space that games deploy to communicate common conventions. To that end, an understanding of space, representations of space, and game space is essential. Before delving too deeply into spatial theories of games, it is worth outlining the theories of space these game scholars draw from. Space is a complex and contested theoretical notion in the humanities, but game theorists consistently apply the work of a handful of prominent twentieth-century theorists. I briefly summarize these theories, describe how they have been taken up and adapted by game theorists, and then explain how a spatial theoretical framework is best applicable to my goals.

An influential spatial theory to game studies is Henri Lefebvre's notion of 'social space,' as detailed in his book *The Production of Space*. Social space is a complex, dynamic, actor-driven, dialectic system interdependent with history and economics. Lefebvre's social space is a more useful, theoretical alternative to the prosaic, Cartesian conception of space as strictly physical, eternal, calculable, absolute, and value-neutral. Similarly, he rejects the poststructuralist imagination of mental space as dismissive of the real effects of space on society and thought. A particularly significant component of the theory of social space that can be adapted to games is the "conceptual triad" of spatial practice (the active, participatory character of lived-in space), representations of space (that demonstrate and reinforce the spatial practices they are created in), and representational spaces ("space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols") (38-39).

Lefebvre's spatial theory enters the field of game studies through the work of Espen Aarseth. Aarseth is a prominent figure in the establishment of game studies as a distinct discipline. In his influential article, "Allegories of Space: The Question of Spatilaity in Computer Games," he correctly asserts that "it may be dangerous to 'map' Lefebvre's theory of space onto computer games" (163), but he still finds that theory a useful point of departure. Space in digital games is certainly not the abstract, valueless, poststructuralist conception of space Lefebvre argues against, as it contains, shapes, and defines much of the behaviour of players. Nor can game space be understood as a neutral, blank, natural, Cartesian emptiness; games are designed by people and incorporate the biases, assumptions, intentions, and socioeconomic conditions of their creators into their architecture. Game space, argues Aarseth is "a representation of space that is not in itself spatial, but symbolic and rule-based" ("Allegories of Space" 163). To Aarseth, the distinction between Lefebvre's social space and game space occurs at the "reduction" of space, where it becomes governed by "automatic rules" that are absent from real life but necessary for gameplay ("Allegories of Space" 163). This assertion does not mean that game space is somehow inauthentic or immaterial in the larger context of games. On the contrary, Aarseth argues that "the defining element in computer games is spatiality. Computer games are essentially concerned with spatial representation and negotiation" ("Allegories of Space" 153). Axel Stockburger extends a similar argument to apply a greater portion of Lefebvre's theory to games, incorporating the broader concept of social space as a process of production. He approaches this by defining game space as "the sum of its disparate modalities" ("The Rendered Arena" 68), a definition which allows for a plethora of different readings of game space that can be reactive to different player

9

experiences with those spatial representations. These extensions of Lefebvre's spatial theory to describe game space are invaluable in my analysis of dungeons across game genres. Ideas of negotiated, reproduced, and representational space are vital in defining what a dungeon is and how it can be reinterpreted through changes to the game rules by which it is presented. If space is the fundamental unit of study for games, as Aarseth argues, does the proliferation of dungeon spaces across genres of gameplay mean that those games are more alike than their traditional genre categories might suggest? Or does the different classification of games featuring dungeons imply that the dungeon is not a kind of space at all, but simply trappings on multiple kinds of space? Lefebvre's theories and the applications of Aarseth and Stockburger allow me to ask these questions, some of which clearly reveal some assumptions I have had to address in my research.

Yet another useful spatial theory for game studies comes from Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*. De Certeau defines every story as "a travel story – a spatial practice" (115), which he justifies by drawing a distinction between a neutral, lifeless "place" and an inhabited, interpreted, transformed, living "space" (117). 'Place' is ubiquitous, and the presence of narrative subjects transforms it into a 'space' of interaction. Significantly, this translation of de Certeau reverses the definitions of these words as they are used colloquially and academically within social geography. The field of game studies has embraced 'space' as the term for simulated field of play within games, so that is the term I use in this work. De Certeau describes inhabiting place as the interpretive or transformative act that makes something inert sensible. This assertion – that "space is a practiced place" (117) – allows for the fundamental incorporation of player interaction and meaning-making into a spatially-based analysis of digital games.

One example of the application of de Certeau's spatial theory in understanding games is in Henry Jenkins's "Game Design as Narrative Architecture." Designed, representational spaces, Jenkins claims, are an essential aspect of games equal or greater in importance to story or game mechanics. He argues that evocative spaces with an intentionality of design create opportunities to experience "embedded narratives" in game artifacts or fragments of setting (126). Such evocative created spaces can also encourage the generation of emergent narratives. Jenkins's description of how game spaces operate is an application of de Certeau's various related dichotomies: space and place, strategy and tactic, map and tour. These concepts have analytical utility for understanding the interactivity of game

spaces, and it is important to distinguish their theoretical definitions from more colloquial usage. Precise distinction of usage is especially significant when discussing digital games, where 'strategy,' 'tactic,' and 'map' have special meanings. In de Certeau's theoretical sense, a "strategy" is a "calculus of force-relationships" where a powerful "subject" defines the "proper" rules to organize relations with "an exterior distinct from it" (xix). In contrast, "tactics," are the techniques by which the exterior "object" navigates these rule-laden places based on immediate actual circumstances (xix). For de Certeau, the "map" and the "tour" have a similar relationship. "Maps" are a method of communicating spaces that privilege "seeing" spaces in absolute terms, while "tours" emphasize "going" – what someone must do to traverse the space in practice (119). In the framework of a digital game, these three dichotomies of de Certeau's can apply roughly as follows: the designer creates an environment[4], which is a neutral *place* that waits for a player to arrive. The designer likely has in mind a *strategy* – how the game environment is meant to act on the player and control their actions. From the designer's privileged position, they are aware of everything the game contains. The player, then, interprets and navigates as they play. From neutral *place*, they create value-laden *space*, with their experiences. They develop an individualized *tactic* for moving and behaving in that space, one that responds to the space as it changes. Through understanding that tactic as an experience, it becomes a process for navigating the digital space that produces meaning experientially. This model cannot be universalized to all games, but it is significantly useful for analyzing a spatially-defined concept like the dungeon. The concept of the embedded narrative superbly integrates the study of narrative into a spatial context. With the understanding that the narrative of the dungeon is bound up in its features, aesthetic, and contents, narratological questions can still be asked of it – questions of plot, theme, and politics.

In another noteworthy article, "Nintendo and New World Travel Writing," Jenkins and Mary Fuller use a similar theoretical approach to compare the play of popular Nintendo games to travel writing from the age of European colonialism. The politics of the games as read in the types of movement through space, they argue, are highly-similar to a project of colonial 'discovery' (emphasis/irony theirs). Such a claim has clear parallels with how dungeons are usually presented and interacted with in games. De Certeau's spatial narrative theory gives Jenkins and Fuller the theoretical basis to make such a claim, and it gives me the theoretical basis to evaluate that claim and seek to transpose it to a new context.

---

4   Or creates the rules by which a program creates an environment, as is the case with the roguelikes of Chapter Two.

Genre

Much of what this thesis aims to prove is that, within the cultural context of digital game production and reception, dungeons are a type of space that functions somewhat like a genre. 'Genre' is a loaded term, so here I explain how I understand the concept and how I use it in my readings and analysis of games. Genre is a contested topic in both literary studies and game studies. While I am unlikely to arrive at a satisfying universal definition, I can nonetheless derive some precise terminology and useful analytical foundations from the large amount of scholarly work done on the subject.

The most surface-level understanding of game genres is as a taxonomic label. This is typically how game genre is considered by players and marketers. Genres are conversationally used as categories that works can be sorted into. This basic approach runs into trouble when discussing video games. Video games have multidimensional identities when facing categorization. To use examples from games in this thesis, it is possible to categorize *Rogue* as an adventure game and *Crypt of the NecroDancer* as a rhythm game, assigning primacy to the method of interaction. Simultaneously, though, I can call *Rogue* an adventure game and *Darkest Dungeon* a horror game, here appealing to thematics to define game category. This confusion is only deepened with the intrusion of marketing labels, multi-register labels (i.e. 'first person shooter'), or comparative labels (i.e. 'roguelike').

To sort through this confusion, genre scholars have put forward different sets of dimensions to classify game genres. In their introductory text "Genre and Disciplinarity in the Study of Games," Gerald Voorhees, Josh Call and Katie Whitlock organize an understanding of game genre around three overlapping dimensions: "functional genres," defined by the creators' intent to entertain, educate, etc.; "thematic genres" defined by their "representational characteristics" – what the game is 'about'; and "ludic genres" organized around "the systems of rules that structure gameplay" (7-8). These categories provide useful, specific vocabulary for discussing the different kinds of generic elements that can connect games to each other in the minds of designers and players.

Other scholars reject the idea of games participating in multiple genres. In "Genre and Game Studies: Toward a Critical Approach to Video Game Genres," Thomas Apperley insists on interactivity

as the principal dimension of generic classification (21). Drawing on King and Krzywinska, he separates genre from theming, calling the category of common visual themes a "milieu" (11). Apperley theorizes four basic genres organized around method of interactivity: simulation, roleplaying, strategy, and action. While dungeons are most associated with roleplaying games thanks to the history of that genre, they appear in action games (*Diablo*), strategy games (*Dungeon Keeper*), and even simulation games (*Dwarf Fortress*). I argue there are similarities across these categories that are derived from interpretation and remediation of the dungeon theme. These similarities are not just on the level of the milieu; creators implement the tropes of the dungeon setting through mechanics.

Understanding genre simply as a way to categorize works is reductive. What game genres *do* is of greater significance to this work than what game genres *are*. Genres are not just categories; they play an active role in how games are made, sold, and enjoyed. In this perspective, I am influenced by Dominic Arsenault. His article, "Video Game Genre, Evolution, and Innovation" puts forward a more dynamic interpretation of genre. "The main function of genre," he argues, is not classification, but "communication" (171). The trappings of a genre present familiar territory to a new player, suggesting appropriate forms of interaction. Arsenault also declines to disentangle genre from a game's circumstances of production. Genre's role as facilitator of communication permits "the convergence of the production and reception sides of the video game industry" and "aesthetic appreciation from the players literate in these conventions" (171).

My application of Arsenault's ideas is enriched by reading Stuart Hall's essay on the dissemination of information, "Encoding/Decoding." For Hall, "broadcasting structures" (138) – including the systems of creating and disseminating cultural products like games – encode meaning into their output. They rely on the audience having a similar set of tools and experiences necessary to "decode" a meaning that resembles the initial intent. Genres can establish this kind of proximity between systems of meaning making and interpreting. I argue that conventional settings like the dungeon function as a shared vocabulary between game creators and game players. Designers can implement thematic conventions with novel mechanics and appearances, trusting the audience will have sufficient understanding of the purpose of these conventions. This level of understanding can even occur without a real-world referent, as is often the case in works about fantasy dungeons.

Another function of genre is its ability to shape innovation. Genre creates opportunity – and necessity – for innovation. Apperley, writing in the appendix for the *Video Game Theory Reader 2*, notes that "the following of generic conventions has become a standard practice in the video game industry, however, the audience will often criticize games that are perceived as relying on genre conventions *without also introducing an innovation or twist*" (354, emphasis mine). Games can read as 'innovative' by remediating either ludic or representative genre conventions in new ways. Again, I am persuaded by Arsenault when he claims, "variation inside familiarity seems to be the name of the genre game" (162) within sites of digital game production and reception.

Methodology

These theoretical approaches inform my reading of the games I analyze in this thesis. My methodological approach is following:

- **Selection:** I played a breadth of games with both conventional representations on the dungeon and attempts to innovate within it. As such a popular convention, I had a wide field to draw from. I considered 26 digital PC games, four tabletop roleplaying games (some with multiple editions), and six board or card games for deeper analysis. From play experience, I identify a set of games that, taken collectively, best reveal the dungeon's conventional function as well as the flexibility of that convention. As an example of a conventional game that embodies the orthodox use of the dungeon and conspicuously demarcates it within its game world, I chose *Might and Magic VI: The Mandate of Heaven*. As an exemplar of a game that expects and subverts familiarity with dungeon spaces, I present *Darkest Dungeon*. I considered several games for this role that apply some degree of innovation to the dungeon space. Many of these are claimants of the 'roguelike' genre inspired by the original graphical dungeon adventure game *Rogue*, included for its historical significance and dungeon-exclusive setting. A selection of games that innovate within the dungeon tradition without transforming it as comprehensively as *Darkest Dungeon* are included in Chapter Two. These games situate the dungeon within a particular cultural convention; they are all fantasy-themed computer games from English-speaking backgrounds. While operating within a single cultural tradition, they are also

collectively representative of a variety of modes of production from the work of singular hobbyists through commercial indie productions to the combined efforts of large game studios.

- **Supplementary Reading:** I support my understanding of the expansive field of dungeon games with accounts of gaming history and current gaming practice in my research. Matt Barton's *Dungeons and Desktops* provided an exhaustive overview of the computer roleplaying game's history, while Shannon Appelcline's similarly meticulous history of tabletop roleplaying game companies, *Designers and Dragons,* charts the development of fantasy gaming conventions that would find their way into digital dungeons. Of particular use to Chapter Two's analysis of the roguelike was "RogueBasin," an online repository of information on roguelike design and dissemination actively maintained by roguelike creators and fans.

- **Close Reading:** I played the chosen games exhaustively. Except for *Rogue* and *NetHack*, I had played all of them at length for enjoyment before I closely read them for this work. While researching, I played *Might and Magic VI* once to completion, supplementing with numerous experimental new games examining early-game concepts in greater detail. I played the roguelikes of Chapter Two – designed for repeated play with new conditions each time – dozens of times each, likely hundreds in some cases. I extended my previous informal *Darkest Dungeon* playthrough through my research to 188 in-game "weeks." I later started a new playthrough specifically intended for research that lasted 67 "weeks." I paid specific attention to their methods of representing space as informed by the theoretical framework outlined above. I consider the games' aesthetic, narrative, and mechanical presentations of their dungeons. Where possible, I contrast dungeons with the 'normal' world the game presents. I search for commonalities and shifts within the appearance and function of the dungeon.

- **Analysis:** For each game, I attempted to isolate the distinctive qualities of its narrative, aesthetic, and mechanical presentation. These categories are not wholly separable, but this framework demonstrates the multiplicity of methods that games use to communicate meaning. My analysis of game aesthetics includes visual and auditory design of game environments and game interfaces. My analysis of game narrative includes their scripted plots and their affordances for emergent narrative meaning outside of those structures. The discussion of 'quests' in Chapter One further elaborates on the narrative function of dungeons within games. My mechanical analyses draw meaning from both how the game is played and how the game models recurring motifs from the dungeon convention.

Outline of the Work

Across the following three chapters, I illuminate the dungeon space's qualities as a generic space, demonstrate how the dungeon can accommodate many registers and modes of play, and finally show how the generic dungeon provides opportunities for innovation through subversion and reinterpretation of its generic conventions.

Chapter One, "*Might and Magic VI*: the Orthodox Dungeon" uses a close reading of New World Computing's 1998 computer RPG *Might and Magic VI: The Mandate of Heaven* (*MMVI*) to articulate the principles and tropes of the typical game dungeon. This game is emblematic of large-scope graphical computer RPGs and of the dungeon's uniqueness and utility within such games. Chapter One examines the aesthetics, mechanics, and narrative of *MMVI*, and how those qualities define the generic dungeon. Drawing on Juul's construction of "game worlds" and Foucault's concept of the "heterotopia," I theorize the dungeon as a space that is clearly marked as separate within their worlds and imbued with special significance for the player. Dungeons provide the appearance of threat, but are in practice spaces for players to feel empowered through mastery of space. Additionally, I detail the role dungeons typically take on within the complicated and semi-substantial narrative form unique to interactive media that Tosca, Aarseth, other scholars, and games themselves term the "quest."

Chapter Two, "*Rogue* and Roguelikes: the Elemental Dungeon" provides a more historical look at a particular game design approach that dates from some of the earliest digital games to today. Dungeon spaces are closely associated with this genre – the roguelike. I summarize the debate surrounding the history and applicability of this generic label. Using literature and definitions provided by the communities of practice who design and play roguelikes, I test the conclusions I made about the dungeon in Chapter One against the dungeon's use in the roguelike tradition. Roguelikes conspicuously prioritize interaction above graphical and narrative complexity and continue to favour dungeons as their settings. In a roguelike, dungeons are randomly created by the game rules, meaning creators must make active choices about how to represent those spaces mechanically. I examine three related traditionally-styled roguelikes as well as several successors that apply different themes, forms of

interaction, or interpretations of the roguelike concept. The variety of dungeon interpretations within this chapter demonstrates the dungeon convention's flexibility and continued utility, both in typical usage and as a point of departure for games that subvert or hybridize the convention.

Chapter Three, "*Darkest Dungeon*: the Transformed Dungeon" demonstrates my central argument about the possibility of the dungeon space – that its prominence and continued reproduction within digital games lets designers achieve non-orthodox experiences by subverting the dungeon's established generic traits. My close reading in this chapter is of *Darkest Dungeon,* a recent indie dungeon game that, like some case studies in Chapter Two, claims inspiration from the roguelike tradition. Unlike the less orthodox games in Chapter Two, *Darkest Dungeon* continues the dungeon tradition but also fundamentally changes its representation. It reinterprets commonly simulated concepts to achieve a different tone than other dungeon games, specifically horror. This chapter summarizes scholarship on horror media and games, asserting that horror is drawn both from the pursuit of negative affect as well as appeals to existing cultural traditions beyond those found in games.

Chapter One

Might and Magic VI: The Orthodox Dungeon

This chapter argues that there is such a thing as a "conventional" dungeon space in games, one that carries and deploys a certain set of assumptions and affordances. Specifically, I argue there is a common understanding that dungeons are spaces apart from the ordinary, spaces of perceived threat, but they are threats meant to be overcome. The many dungeons of *Might and Magic VI: The Mandate of Heaven* (henceforth *MMVI*) have aesthetic, mechanical, and narrative features that exemplify the orthodox dungeon and test its generic limitations. Understanding the prevalence and function of these tropes is fundamental to the first stage of my core argument: that the dungeon has a widely-understood function in game production and reception. These tropes include the portrayal of the dungeon in aesthetics and narrative as a space of threat, but through mechanics communicate that it is actually a space of opportunity. This chapter proceeds as follows:

- I situate *MMVI* in context of the history and development of the digital roleplaying game as a conventional dungeon game.
- I explain and connect two theoretical concepts integral to the analysis of this game: Juul's construction of the "game world" and Foucault's theory of the "heterotopia."
- I begin my close reading of the game with its visual and auditory aesthetic presentation. I draw out how the conventional dungeon is represented artistically.
- I then turn to the dungeon's role in game narratives. I describe theories around the 'quest' structure for creating stories through play and the position the dungeon typically takes within those structures.
- I provide an in-depth analysis of the aesthetic, narrative, and mechanical features of the dungeon.
- I synthesize this analysis into a set of conventions that define the orthodox dungeon space.

MMVI is a 1998 computer roleplaying game by New World Computing. Players create a party of four adventurers by defining their initial professions, capabilities, and numerical statistics ("Might," "Intellect," "Endurance," etc) in the tradition of "avatar simulation" originating in tabletop roleplaying

games (Aarseth, "Wumpus" 502). The players explore the 3D medieval kingdom of Enroth in first-person view, supplemented with two different mapping tools – one for dungeons, one for outdoors. The party fights hordes of monsters, undertakes quests, delves into dungeons, and grows in wealth and capability, until they eventually save the realm from the plague of extraterrestrial devils that beset it.

This game is an early attempt to create a large, three-dimensional world for player exploration. Unlike its predecessors in its own series and the dungeon-crawling games based on *Rogue* detailed in Chapter Two, *MMVI* does not feature a grid-based system of navigation, nor is it turn-based[5]. Instead *MMVI* attempts to more closely simulate the functionality of real space and time.

Why choose this game? At the time of its publication, it was a great achievement in technology and scale, but compared to contemporary games of the genre, it is technically unremarkable. There are games with much more current popularity that could illustrate the typical dungeon, and, unlike Chapter Two's *Rogue*, this game does not have the privileged position of being remembered to this day as the progenitor of an entire genre. However, I analyze *MMVI* for several reasons. First, this chapter is not about the prevalence or continued relevance of the dungeon generic space. There are always new dungeon games being made. *MMVI* is emblematic of large, coherent-world games which set dungeons apart semi-informally. This chapter is intended to illuminate the characteristics of the dungeon convention – how the dungeon concept is expressed in mechanical, aesthetic, and narrative terms. It also analyzes the implications of those expressions. *MMVI* is a game where the distinctiveness of its dungeon spaces from its non-dungeon spaces is visible but not as radical as in other games in this thesis, as the whole game attempts to simulate a consistent game world. Studying *MMVI* reveals what makes the dungeon unique.

The scope of the game is another asset; the large number of distinct dungeons within the game – there are 39 – allows me to draw some farther-reaching generalizations about the game's dungeons and the possibilities for other orthodox dungeons in other games. It also provides a strong foundation for discussing diversity within the dungeon tradition's own set of conventions.

---

5   The game does feature the option to activate a turn-based mode, but in this mode, the player cannot move. Turn based mode is only useful for conducting battles in a stationary position.

MMVI's position within its genre and in relation to similar games also makes it a good candidate for study. As the first in its series to abandon turn-based and grid-based gameplay for simulated free roaming in a 3D environment, *MMVI* is a useful counterpart to Chapter Two's *Rogue*. *MMVI* pursues a representation of space that simulates real space, rather than being conspicuously controlled by game rules. While in *Rogue*, the entire game takes place in a dungeon with the outside world only implied, *MMVI* is an attempt to simulate an entire world of which dungeons are a part. Furthermore, the game makes some attempts to transcend the narrative and aesthetic trappings of the typical fantasy roleplaying genre. However, as I will demonstrate, these efforts are largely superficial and do not sufficiently disrupt the game's conventionality, unlike *Darkest Dungeon*'s implementation of the dungeon concept detailed in Chapter Three. Examining why that is the case will be useful in determining what generic elements are essential and what are ephemeral.

The Heterotopia and the Game World

This chapter contrasts the dungeon with the other spaces in its game environment to illuminate the distinctive qualities of the conventional dungeon. A theoretical concept particularly useful – though not fully mappable – to this process of contrasting is Foucault's concept of the heterotopia. Foucault invents this term to describe "a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (24). They are spaces that are set apart from the space of everyday activity through barriers of time or ritual that perform important social functions despite being hidden from society at large. This idea can help interpret dungeons in a few ways. Superficially, it takes a trivial amount of thesaurus use to equate a 'dungeon' with a 'prison' – one of Foucault's prime examples of a heterotopia. While, as mentioned, the gaming dungeon is rarely a site of imprisonment, they are sites that normal people fear to enter, separating them apart. Dungeons are aesthetically, narratively, and mechanically set apart from the 'normal' sites of their game world. In the rule-based environment of a digital game, they can very literally have different 'rules' than towns and cities.

I do not propose to directly map the concept of heterotopia onto the fictional settings that games present. Games, no matter how detailed, are not actual spaces and do not operate socially in the same

way as space. There are many issues with directly declaring a fictional environment a heterotopia. For instance, the concern that the societies represented within games are composed of fictional characters rather than real people is unavoidable. Similarly troublesome is the fact that the playing of the game takes place in actual space, whereas the game merely represents space[6]. Nevertheless, the concept of the heterotopia can be usefully applied to describe dungeons within the "game world" that a game leads the player to imagine. The heterotopia conceals and isolates forms of social organization that cannot be countenanced by mainstream society. The idea of the "game world" informs how the facsimile of society is created and communicated within the unreality of the digital game.

This concept of the game world is drawn from Juul, and informs my analysis of not just *MMVI*, but many of the other games I will investigate in this thesis. Juul summarizes his concept of the "game world" as "a fixed set of signs the game presents and… something the game cues the player into imagining" (2). Even a game of *MMVI*'s ambitious scope does not and cannot aim to simulate an entire world. The player's imagination is a necessary – and subjective – element of the creation of the game world. While the inherent subjectivity and incompleteness of a game world prevents direct applicability of Foucault's concept, the idea of the heterotopia still explains the function of a dungeon within a game world. The game communicates dungeons as abnormal spaces, thereby defining the player characters as extraordinary people, even in games without much dialogue or characterization. The dungeon is a site where any and all activity or even habitation is considered hostile to society. The typical dungeon is one where the player is mechanically and thematically encouraged to kill and steal in the name of some pro-social goal. The heterotopia serves the purpose of hiding such unsightly but necessary functions so that society can continue without directly acknowledging these sites of crisis. The player characters are not subject to the game world's taboos and fears about entering dungeons, fulfilling the *real-world* social function of associating the player with exceptional characters.

Juul categorizes game worlds by their degree of coherence. As I demonstrate, *MMVI* is a game that aims to present a highly coherent world, one where "nothing prevents us from imagining [it] in any detail" (132). For example, incidental details like the descriptions of the various items the heroes can use and equip gesture toward a thoroughly established history and geography of the game world

---

6   The "magic circle" frame for gameplay (Salen and Zimmerman 99) could be described as its own heterotopia. Game worlds themselves better resemble Foucault's idea of the "utopia" as a "placeless place," (24) like the reflection in a mirror.

beyond the places and times that can be experienced in-game[7]. The game even takes pains to provide coherent explanations for gameplay abstractions that do not necessarily require them. It provides thematic framing and explanation for the kinds of incoherencies that can normally be accepted in the context of games delivering an engaging, enjoyable game experience. For example, if all four of the player's adventurers die or are knocked unconscious, the game returns them to the starting area alive, but without any of the gold they had not managed to deposit in a bank. This could be considered a perfectly acceptable departure from the coherence that exists only as a function of the game rules, as the game is built around gradual progression and exploration over dozens of hours. If death ended the game, it would be too frustrating to play and explore. This rationalization with appeal to the rules is similar to Juul's example of Mario's three lives in *Donkey Kong* (130); the game would be too hard without them. Instead of simply appealing to the rules, *MMVI* first presents the defeated player with a short animated cut-scene in which a Grim Reaper-like figure declares "thy work in the land of the living is not done." *MMVI*'s conspicuous bid for coherence presents dungeons as not just as spaces where different game rules apply, but spaces with significant and unique fictional qualities as well.

The Aesthetics of *MMVI*

Now I turn to my close reading of the game. I begin my analysis with *Might and Magic VI*'s aesthetic decisions, including its visuals, its music, its sound effects, and how those relate to familiar cultural imagery not native to games. Dungeons are afforded special aesthetic markers that set them apart from other game spaces, signifying their functional role as heterotopias within their game worlds. The conventional dungeon aesthetic exemplified in *MMVI* is visible through the commonalities across its dungeon spaces. Dungeons' unified aesthetic presents them as spaces of threat while also connecting them to a generic tradition that promises a familiar play experience of dangers to be overcome.

MMVI draws on well-established aesthetic tropes common to games of its genre. Despite a few distinctive flourishes, the game participates strongly in the Western European-esque medieval fantasy genre that most games of this type adhere to. All the hallmarks are present – swords, armoured knights, wizards, dragons, and other stock fantasy tropes. These are not just present within the game; they also

---

7   Earlier and later games in the *Might and Magic* series would bring these places and time periods into play.

appear in its paratextual packaging, marketing, and out-of-game interface. The game uses a painting featuring all of those tropes by veteran fantasy artist Larry Elmore, cover artist of the 1983 *Dungeons and Dragons* starter set, for its opening menu screen, box, and manual. Juul identities all these paratexts as ways games make meaning (135). Identifying this game so actively as operating within the fantasy roleplaying genre invites the assumption that it will employ that genre's tropes, including those that concern dungeon spaces.
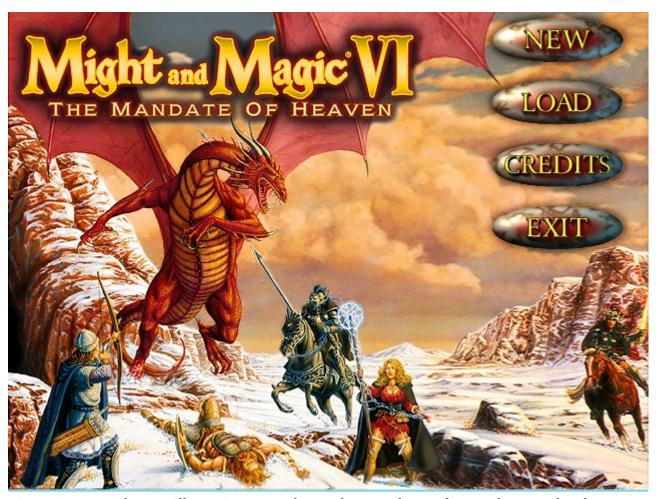

Figure 1: Larry Elmore's illustration, seen also on the game box and manual, greets the player on starting MMVI.
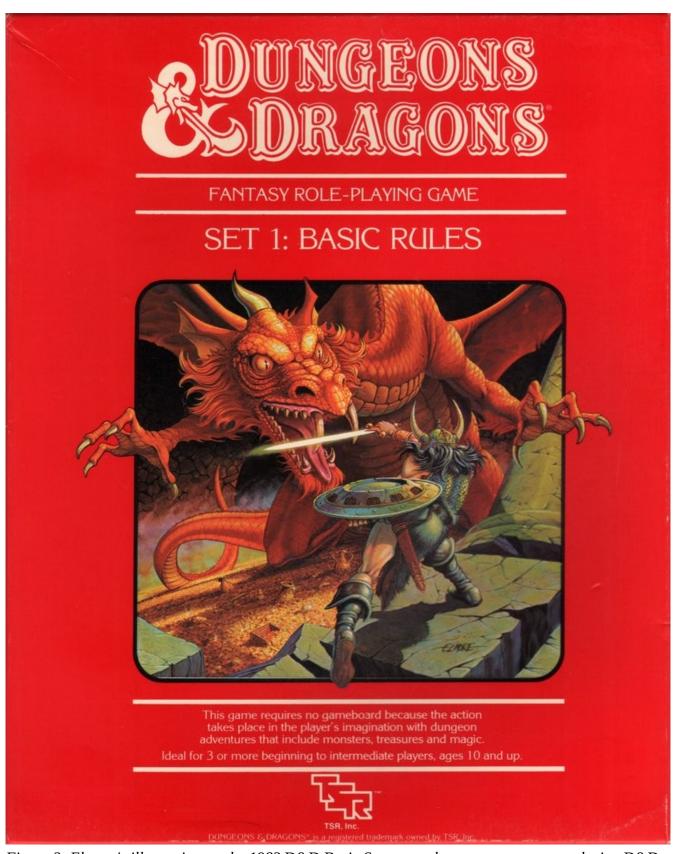
Figure 2: Elmore's illustration on the 1983 D&D Basic Set, *an early success at mass-marketing* D&D.

The game's dungeons are portrayed with conspicuously elevated levels of detail through multiple avenues of representation. Dungeons are plainly represented more times and in more ways than other areas in the game. This particular attention indicates their greater significance to the gameplay experience than non-dungeon areas. Dungeons in *MMVI* have three separate visual and spatial representations from three different game states: observing the dungeon from outside, navigating the dungeon's interior, and confirming intent to cross the threshold into the dungeon. Each is different. The exterior view is the simplest, being a basic solid object composed of textured polygons embedded within a large overworld map. Dungeon interiors are fully interactive areas that can be explored in their own right. The confirmation screens between outside and inside present non-interactive animated renderings of the dungeon entrance. These have conspicuously greater graphical fidelity than the game's interactive areas, and the game's artists take the opportunity to embellish these screens with details that technical limitations do not permit elsewhere. These screens, the implication is, are what the dungeon is 'supposed' to look like from outside. The confirmation screens are accompanied by non-visual representations that provide even more detail to the dungeons. Some accompany the animated confirmation screen with bespoke sound effects. All dungeon entrances present the player with text. For example, approaching "Goblinwatch," the game's introductory dungeon[8], the player is met with the following: "The weathered stones of this old keep shelter empty buildings in an unused courtyard. Faint sounds echo from a worn stairway that leads down below the keep." This courtyard and the other buildings are not ever spatially represented in the game, existing only in this textual description. Dungeons, more than other spaces in the game, provide the player with a large amount of information both to experience directly and to engage the imagination.

---

8 Goblinwatch is represented through one additional means beyond the other dungeons in the game. The game's user manual offers step-by-step instructions to proceed through the first stages of the dungeon – a "tour" to use de Certeau's terminology.

Figure 3: An MMVI *party approaches Goblinwatch from the outside.*

Figure 4: The threshold of Goblinwatch. The pre-rendered graphics are much more representative, but not interactive. Note the text piece engaging other senses. The party has the option to change their mind and not go in.

Figure 5: Goblinwatch interior, immediately inside the front door. Note how the map in the upper right has changed format. Also note the timing gems to the upper right of each portrait are yellow. They sense danger even though no enemies are in sight or on the map.

In contrast, the other interactive structures in the game world are afforded much less detail by the designers. Houses and businesses have only a two-dimensional image as their interiors and can be entered and exited without ceremony. Entering the game's castles – the homes of the most narratively-significant non-player characters – also presents the player with confirmation screens, but these do not place as much emphasis on the sensory nature of the space they represent. Inside, the castles work the same way as homes and businesses, offering only a two-dimensional suggestive image of their contents. The transition screens do not showcase the castles' architecture; they all present the same image of armoured guards demanding the player characters announce themselves in front of a close-up of the castle gate. The text pieces at castle gates also do not provide sensory information; they instead

state the names and responsibilities of the characters who live there, placing greater emphasis on the building's social role. Travelling between outdoor map areas also prompts a confirmation scene that is similarly functional instead of aesthetic. It offers no additional art and simply states the destination and the fictional time[9] needed to travel there. Dungeons, unlike even the most narratively significant non-dungeon spaces, are represented in ways that promise mystery and enticing danger.

The aesthetic commonalities among the game's many dungeons are typical of the dungeon tradition, well-established by *MMVI*'s creation. In *MMVI*, there is a strong visual theme consistent across its various dungeons. Dungeons are always fully enclosed spaces, often underground. They are most often built spaces, even when their current inhabitants are not responsible for their construction. In outdoor spaces, the game's sky texture and lighting simulate the time of day and the weather. Dungeons are always lit the same, which gives them a timeless, self-contained quality. It is possible to enter a dungeon during the daytime and emerge – possibly several days later by the in-game calendar – into surprising darkness. The textures of dungeon environments almost always depict stone or earth construction. This is a contrast to the half-timbered look of most of the game's citizen dwellings. Even other stone buildings like the realm's castles often use brighter and warmer colours in their textures. These visual motifs paint the dungeon as a menacing space.

The game's sound design also amplifies the idea of the dungeon as a threatening space. Dungeons have different music tracks than the overworld, tracks that elicit a sense of menace in serious contrast to the mellow, pastoral MIDI harpsichord and simulated birdsong of the overworld. One dungeon's soundtrack, the "Temple of Baa's," employs a musical riff reminiscent of the horror trope of Bach's 'Toccata and Fugue in D Minor' on the pipe organ (or MIDI equivalent). There are also emergent properties of the soundscapes within dungeons that contribute to a feeling of menace. Enemies make sound effects if the player characters stand close enough to them without alerting them. Outdoors, enemies' passive sound effects are hardly noticeable, as monsters close enough to be heard run to attack the player. Inside a dungeon, where monsters can be concealed behind doors, around corners, or on higher or lower levels, it is not uncommon to hear, for example, the chittering of rats or the guttural growls of goblins without knowing exactly where they are coming from. Dungeons also

---

9   Jesper Juul coins this term to "denominate the time of events in the game world" (*Half-Real* 142). *Might and Magic VI* uses the Gregorian calendar, and the passage of time does affect the game rules in subtle ways.

prompt voice lines from the player characters; entering or attempting to exit dungeons prompts a random player character to express their curiosity, bravado, or unease. If there are not monsters close by – usually because the player has cleared out the dungeon – these lines are not voiced.

There are other, more obvious, aesthetics of *MMVI*'s dungeons that support the traditional idea of the dungeon as a threatening space through gruesome imagery. The game's dungeons are full of macabre iconography and evidence of human deaths. Skulls are frequently deployed to this effect. In the rendered and animated splash screens, skulls – either actual or sculpted ones – are a common feature. Some dungeons, such as the "Tomb of Ethric the Mad" and the "Temple of the Fist" feature interactive "Skull Piles" that can be searched for treasure while risking being afflicted with disease or curses. More skulls find their way into the textures used for walls and decoration within dungeons. This occurs even when there is little to no narrative reason given for the presence of such decor. This is the case with Goblinwatch, which is described as a defensive fortification recently taken over by roving goblins. Goblinwatch's lower levels are full of skull iconography and architecture reminiscent of sites of religious practice.

This association of menacing religious architecture is consistent across the game – a trend I argue is consistent with the dungeon motif beyond *MMVI*. 12 of the game's dungeons have a religious or ceremonial purpose, being described as a "Temple" or "Tomb." More, like the Lair of the Wolf or Goblinwatch feature religious architecture and iconography despite such ideas being absent from their fictional positioning. The frequency of religious-themed dungeons is in part due to the central role of the "new religious cult," the Temple of Baa, as significant antagonists in the game's narrative, but many of these religious-building dungeons are unaffiliated with Baa. These are a heterotopic inverse of the 'good' religion practiced at the temples present in every town. The game represents non-dominant faiths as threats that organize and thrive in hidden places. While the game does not say much directly about the dominant religion of Enroth, the gameplay function of the friendly temples – healing player characters of any malady (including death) and receiving donations to improve the party's "reputation" – points to their favoured status in *MMVI*'s game world. These temples adopt aesthetics from Christianity in their architecture and the dress styles of their acolytes, as might be expected from a game that hews so closely to the tropes of European-styled medieval fantasy. Appropriately enough then, the dungeons use the visual language of non-Christian, pre-Christian, or anti-Christian religions

(or popular imaginings thereof) to mark themselves as exotic, foreign, threatening spaces. They employ iconography and terminology of animistic and nature-associated religions. "Druids," for example, despite being one of the playable character classes and a High Druid being part of Enroth's elite in the fiction, are a significant enemy type near the town of Silver Cove and in the nearby dungeon, "The Monolith." The player may undertake a quest to "deface the altar" belonging to a group of evil druids who have taken over the Monolith. Baa uses goat and sheep iconography, co-opting a real world association between these animals and popular imaginings of Satanism. Another dungeon, the "Tomb of VARN," is a fantastical Egyptian-styled pyramid buried in the sand and filled with enemies resembling the Egyptian god Anubis, despite Egypt not existing within the setting of Enroth. This depiction trades on popular imaginings of Egyptian ruins as the closest the real world comes to the fantasy dungeon – ancient ruins left behind by a forgotten culture, full of treasure to be plundered if an adventurer can avoid the traps and curses.

The game does make an attempt to escape its standard Euro-fantasy swords-and-sorcery aesthetic by gradually introducing science fiction tropes. The Oracle, situated in one of only two non-hostile dungeons in the game[10], is revealed to be an advanced computer who instructs the players in the use of the sci-fi weaponry necessary to defeat the encroaching devils, who are invaders from outer space. I argue the game's deployment of sci-fi is just as fantastical as its fantasy, and does nothing to subvert its genre, especially given how late in the game's progression most of these tropes appear. The invading aliens are perceived as devils, but, visually and textually speaking, they are devils. They use magic in the same manner as the heroes. Their presence brings social and supernatural unrest to the kingdom, so there is some supernatural component to their existence. The deployment of these sci-fi tropes is additive, not subversive, to the fantasy genre conventions the game adheres to everywhere else in its aesthetics. Even though the game's attempts to subvert its adherence to fantasy genre convention do not have much traction, this foreshadows how the dungeon concept can be exported by games that later chapters investigate.

MMVI's dungeon aesthetics match and perpetuate the conventional use of dungeons through many games. Despite the apparent breadth of uses for these spaces in the fiction of the game, they always are presented as places of threat. As the forthcoming section on mechanics demonstrates,

---

10 The other is a hidden 'Easter egg.'

though, the dungeon's existence is entirely tuned around providing a space that the player acts upon. This in turn makes the player aware of their own achievements when they successfully tackle a dungeon. While *MMVI*'s aesthetics present dungeons as hostile spaces, the game's position within the genre of dungeon adventures – as well as the game's narrative and mechanics – make it clear that these spaces are to be engaged with. This engagement is made more appealing by the increased level of detail and greater number of channels of communication the game employs to describe its dungeon spaces.

From this analysis, the following conclusions about the aesthetics of the standard dungeon tradition can be drawn:

- Dungeons are afforded greater significance than non-dungeon spaces within games. They are marked as being set apart from the rest of their worlds by the amount of information they communicate. In a Lefebvrian construction of social space, dungeons are 'more social,' incorporating more cultural and textual information into their spaces.
- Dungeons are closely associated with other generic tropes from European-styled medieval fantasy fiction and gaming. They appear as exotic or menacing counterpoints to the familiar medieval pastiche of villages and castles.
- Dungeons feel isolated and isolating.
- Dungeons have all the markers of threatening spaces, even when the game's mechanics and story encourage the player to explore them.

These aesthetic conventions contribute to the more functional roles the orthodox dungeon plays. With this understanding of the typical dungeon aesthetic in place, I turn to its typical narrative positioning.

The Narrative of *MMVI*

Might and Magic VI deploys narrative elements to enrich the activity of dungeon delving and add structure to its open-ended, exploratory gameplay style. It accomplishes this by assigning "quests" to the player. These quests frequently guide players into dungeons. The game delivers the majority of its narrative content through these quests, and, since *MMVI* is an effort toward a coherent game world,

there are some generalizations that can be made about the function of dungeons in the game's fiction. As this game is emblematic of other dungeon games, these generalizations are also frequently present in the genre at large.

Quests

MMVI presents its narrative content in the form of multiple concurrent quests designed to guide progression through what is otherwise a very open-ended game. In the article "From *Hunt the Wumpus* to *EverQuest*: Introduction to Quest Theory," Espen Aarseth summarizes several theories regarding the structure and role of quests in video games. He uses spatial analogies to describe how quests are organized in games. Some games feature a single quest, some present several in parallel or in sequence. *MMVI* fits within Aarseth's category of "rich and highly complex quest worlds, where the player feels free to decide what to do next, and can solve the quests in many orders" ("Wumpus" 499). The player must explore the world to discover both the quest prompt and the quest objective. The openness of games like *MMVI* benefits from a formal system of quests that guide the player to appropriately difficult challenges and provide varying narrative contexts for repetitive player action. The way the game organizes its quests provides affordances for guided progression through the game, but also prompts exploration and interaction with the dungeon and non-dungeon areas of the game.

So what are quests? The 'quest' is a concept much discussed at the intersection of game studies and narratology, as well as seeing frequent textual use in games, including *MMVI*. Understanding the quest concept before proceeding with an analysis of the narrative traits of dungeons in *MMVI* is worthwhile. "Quest" is the term used by *MMVI* and similar games to describe the tasks asked of the player characters by others. These requests, when encountered, are recorded in a log by the game's interface until they are fulfilled, whereupon they enter the litany of awards bestowed on the party. Susana Tosca, in her 2003 conference paper "The Quest Problem in Computer Games," recognizes the quest as "the primary way for game designers to implement storytelling elements in games" (5). Aarseth adapts this idea to create a generalized description of the quest game as "a game with a concrete and attainable goal, which supersedes performance or the accumulation of points. Such goals can be nested (hierarchic), concurrent, or serial, or a combination of the above" ("Wumpus" 497).

These theorists, building on Ragnhild Tronstad's "Semiotic and Nonsemiotic MUD Performance," distinguish between quests and narrative. While there are some meaningful distinctions between these theorists' definitions of the quest and *MMVI*'s more colloquial application, these analyses are useful for understanding the distinctive ways in which open-ended quest-driven games like *Might and Magic VI* deliver narrative.

Tronstad, writing specifically about quests in MUDs, conflates the quest and the puzzle, claiming, "To do a quest is to search for the meaning of it. Having reached this meaning, the quest is solved. The paradox of questing is that as soon as meaning is reached, the quest stops functioning as quest. When meaning is found, the quest is history" (3). She cites the loss of the pleasure of discovering the solution as something that definitively alters and lessens the replay experience. This is not a generalizable claim across all quest games. It cannot apply as strongly to "games of emergence" (Juul 67), where the principal joys of play arise from the unpredictable interactions of rules instead of the scripted intentions of a game designer. Tosca acknowledges this limitation and highlights other reasons why players may pursue quests – such as for a mechanical reward. She defines quests not as something "to be *known*, but something to be *done*" (3.1). Tosca does, though, agree with Tronstad's contention that quests themselves are not stories, but performative acts that can become stories once they are completed and transformed into "constatives" (Tronstad 3) that can only be analyzed as stories retrospectively. Quests, for Tosca, are the connection of "storytelling elements (characters, plot, causality, world)" with "soft rules" (4.2). Soft rules are the particular interactions with the game world that are required to progress through the quest. Aarseth disputes the necessity of storytelling elements to create his broad definition of the quest game above, but Tosca's more specific definition better describes the relationship between quest and narrative in *MMVI*.

The structure of the quest in *MMVI* is far more stable and fixed than implied in Aarseth's far-reaching definition. The game's 'official' quests[11] all have the same framing elements:

1. A non-player character who provides the quest. They are almost always found in houses, inns, and castles. These characters are given a name, a profession, a picture of their face, and sometimes a few lines of dialogue unrelated to the quest they provide.

---

11 The game also features several less formalized objectives that fit Aarseth's and Tosca's definitions of quests, even though they aren't called 'quests' by the game. One example is the collection of "Cobra Eggs" – items which can be sold only to a particular collector rather than the shops found in every town.

2. Quest dialogue. There is a textual dialogue piece for the initial request. Usually these are denoted with the topic "Quest." When the player accesses this dialogue, they accept the quest. This event is marked with a sound and visual effect. Speaking to the same character again before the quest objectives are completed provides a second dialogue piece from the quest-giver, usually asking the player characters to hurry and sometimes providing hints as to how to proceed. Once the player has fulfilled the requirements of the quest, speaking to the quest-giver provides a new dialogue piece, usually one of gratitude. Triggering this dialogue concludes the quest.

3. Descriptive text. After the quest has been begun but before the player returns to the quest-giver to complete it, the game provides a reminder text in a specific "Quest Log." After completing a quest, the quest log text disappears, but a short past-tense summary of the accomplishment is entered on the "Rewards" screen[12]. In many quests, where the objective is to retrieve a particular item, the quest item in question has its own image and textual description.

4. Mechanical rewards. Most quests provide the player characters with currency and experience points, helping them grow in power to overcome greater obstacles. Some provide items, and some alter the characters' reputation score (positively or negatively). Rewards are received immediately upon speaking with the quest-giver after having completed the quest's objectives. Here is where the "soft rules" of the game (such as 'gaining levels and gold is desirable') and the storytelling elements (many quest-givers say they offer a reward in their quest dialogue) overlap to create incentive to engage with the quest structure.

The content of these text pieces provide the "storytelling elements" of the game's quests. The "soft rules" of *MMVI*'s quests are the trials necessary to complete them. These trials almost always take place in the game's dungeons. In *MMVI*, quests and dungeons are thoroughly interlinked. Of the game's fifty-one official quests, thirty-six of them demand the player enter a dungeon. Of the remaining fifteen, four require a previous dungeon quest to be completed. Some dungeons, like the "Abandoned Temple" and "Castle Darkmoor," are integral to multiple quests. On top of the number of quests that send players to dungeons, the exploration of dungeons is the most time-consuming and challenge-rich part of the quest cycle. Read as a step in the narrative of the completed quest, the dungeon is the part of the story with the least narrative content. Seen as a discrete phase of gameplay, however, a dungeon

---

12 This structural element parallels Tronstad's model of quests being stories only in the past tense]

exploration is the moment given the most narrative background and rationalization. It is easy to gloss over the dungeon phase when retelling a completed quest. In the inverse, though, it is far easier to explain in narrative terms why a particular gameplay moment is in a dungeon than anywhere else.

Since the game's dungeons and quests are so intertwined, the commonalities that can be seen across quests' storytelling elements are essential for understanding the conventional dungeon.

As Aarseth notes about *Morrowind,* another "open landscape" (499) quest game, in *MMVI* the player "may eventually discover story-elements in the form of a 'central quest' that one is free to pursue, but given the open landscape, one can play for a very long time doing anything one pleases" (505). *MMVI* fully expects and encourages the player to undertake a healthy amount of exploration and unrelated questing before tackling the central challenge[13]. Even though the game encourages open-ended exploration, its quests eventually channel the player toward engaging with its more scripted central plot.

The game's central narrative as established by its background and mandatory quests is one of typical medieval fantasy heroic adventure, despite the appearance of some science fiction genre hallmarks later in the plot. The land of Enroth is invaded by extraterrestrial "devils" bent on planetary conquest. The four protagonists escape the devils' first attack on their hometown thanks to the intervention of a wizardly mentor who trains them to become adventurers. Three years later, they "stumble across" letters that prove the missing king of Enroth was betrayed by an advisor as he went to fight the devils. They also reveal that the devils are behind the rise of the "new religious cult" called the "Temple of Baa." The player begins the game with a quest to deliver these letters to Enroth's regent, but then they are expected to neglect the central quest and eventually find their way back to it. After performing a handful of non-sequential quests to gain the favour the lords of the land and exposing a traitor on the ruling council, the protagonists gain access to the "Oracle," who proves to be an advanced computer on an ancient crashed spaceship. The Oracle assigns multiple quests that send the player characters to some far-flung dungeons to retrieve the components necessary to restore its memory and reveal how to defeat the devils. The answer requires the protagonists to enter the technological workings of the Oracle itself (a dungeon) to recover "ancient weapons" (sci-fi blaster guns) capable of

---

13 The Seer, a fourth-wall-breaking, hint-giving character, recommends completing the "Promotion Quests" to become stronger before pursuing the critical path of the game.

destroying the devils' spaceship hive. The following quests return to the medieval fantasy mode, requiring the player characters to ask the young prince to cure the king's treacherous brother Archibald, turned to stone as a punishment for his rebellion in a previous game. Archibald teaches the protagonists a ritual that will prevent the destruction of the devils' hive from also destroying the planet[14]. The final quest requires the protagonists to enter the dungeon that is the devils' spaceship-hive, destroy its reactor, and escape. When the player accomplishes this, there is another cut-scene that shows the player characters being knighted by the young prince while the denizens of the kingdom celebrate. While the open nature of the game allows for many methods of interaction, engaging with the game's quest structure puts the elements of this more progressive, linear type of narrative into play to be engaged with at the player's discretion. These quests typically guide players into dungeons.

The traits of the player characters are defined and developed by engaging with the central sequence of quests. They come across as helpful and brave, approaching selflessness in their tendency toward solving other people's problems. Pursuing the mandatory quests further develops the player characters as enthusiastic servants to the powerful people of the land. Through loot and quest rewards, the characters are made wealthy, but they receive no access to power outside the demands of their duties as saviours of the kingdom. They are always without homes, always adventuring, as it is possible to continue playing after destroying the devils' hive to clear up any unfinished quests, though dungeons and quests are an exhaustible resource.

The game's minor quests further develop the cipher-like protagonists. These independent objectives need not be performed in any particular order. It is up to the player to seek these out and undertake them. Almost all of them follow the same broad template: the protagonists are asked for help, they travel to a dungeon, they overcome the monsters and possibly other challenges therein, then they return to the quest-giver for a reward. While the mandatory quests demand more varied tasks from the player, the optional quests almost all require entering and progressing through a dungeon. The narrative framing for these quests relies occasionally on the altruism of the player characters, such as when Violet Dawson the Potter in New Sorpigal asks the players for help rescuing her daughter from the Abandoned Temple. Frequently though, the narrative motivations for questing are economic. In many

---

14 The quests to revive Archibald are technically optional, but completing the final quest without them results in the destruction of the world.

quest introductions, the promise of a reward is stated up front. An early-game example is when Andrew Besper the Factor declares he is willing to "pay someone capable" to retrieve a harp stolen from one of his caravans. Even when the narrative framing is wholly altruistic, the player can be assured that their efforts will be rewarded. While not every quest rewards the player characters materially, every quest does provide the less tangible reward of experience points. The player is motivated through the game's mechanics to undertake as many quests as they can. This system frames the player characters as helpful and brave, but also somewhat desperate. They are willing to take on dangerous odd jobs for anyone who asks, but also dependent on doing so to gain the skills and equipment necessary to save the kingdom. These characterizations and repeated formulaic plots establish a common purpose for the dungeon in the game's quests; dungeons serve as obstacles, or testing places for adventurers motivated by heroism or greed to struggle against and triumph over.

The typical quest structure establishes some fictional qualities of both the dungeon and non-dungeon spaces. Un-delved dungeons cause problems for regular people living in towns and castles. These problems can be caused by monsters, like the giant spiders that "periodically plague" New Sorpigal, or outlaws, like the Shadow Guild who also threaten New Sorpigal with "extortion" and "kidnapping." Government officials and private citizens turn to rootless adventurers to deal with the threats posed by the proximity of these loci of trouble. The quest structure – as well as the layout of the game's towns and monsters – supports a reading of the game world where few travel beyond the borders of the peaceful towns. The roads and wilds are dangerous places where monsters and brigands prey, using abandoned dungeons as their bases. For the travelling adventurer, towns are places of respite and commerce, with businesses and temples catering to their adventuring needs and anxious townsfolk seeking their services. Outside towns, and especially in dungeons, there is no law. Hiring adventurers to remove threats to life or commerce by killing every last monster or criminal in a nearby dungeon is an accepted practice[15]. The absence of normal social rules in dungeons is another way in which they can be conceived as heterotopias. The game's fiction constructs dungeons as sites where the social order is threatened. Adventurers like the player character are required to undertake the necessary social function of murdering the monsters, criminals, and heretics that make dungeons their home. In

---

15 An exception is the quest to capture the Prince of Thieves and bring him back to Enroth's spymaster "in chains." Notably, this quest sends players to the "Free Haven Sewers," the only dungeon located within a town.

towns, this grisly business is recognized as nothing more than a financial transaction, as the villagers are unwilling or incapable of venturing into dungeons themselves.

MMVI delivers narrative through means other than its quests. The game's introduction and background establish much of the game's tone and themes. The game's cut-scenes and paratext work toward establishing a narrative that supports the idea of protagonists who are both heroic and rewarded for their heroism. At the basic background level, the narrative context of *MMVI* has two central trajectories: the restoration of a righteous social order and the player characters' own rise to wealth and prominence. Both of these themes are established before any quest is underway. The idea that the protagonists are restoring order is introduced by the game's subtitle, "*The Mandate of Heaven.*" The game's initial cut-scene – one of very few – states that, "Since the arrival of the devils, foul creatures and evil spirits have appeared throughout the land." The heroes' task is to restore a lost cosmic order reflected in the loss of the monarchy and the rise of various evils now blighting the land. The less altruistic motivation of adventure for reward and renown is also reflected in the game's introduction. It tells the player, "The time came at last when [the player characters' mentor] could teach you no more, and you have ventured into the world to seek your fame and fortune." The prologue also reinforces the lack of urgency in pursuing the central quest. The mentor tells the heroes, "You have much to learn before you can deal with the likes of those monsters," and three years pass between the devils' invasion and the beginning of the game. The introduction foregrounds the openness of the ensuing game rather than the importance of the central plot. It says, "The roads ahead are infinite," and, "Your destiny is tied to the Mandate of Heaven," suggesting that, while the player has a great deal of freedom to navigate the game, they will eventually engage with the central quests – an accurate representation of the quest structure of the game.

While dungeons mainly contribute the "soft rules" of *MMVI*'s quests, to use Tosca's schema, they are not without their own "storytelling elements." As mentioned in the previous section, dungeons are given additional description absent from towns and castles. While some of these provide only sensory information, others provide brief historical notes on the dungeon. Townsfolk can occasionally be prompted for an opinion or a lecture on a local dungeon's origin as well. Some dungeons contain fragmentary notes, letters, and journals that provide snippets of story that encourage the player to imagine a dynamic world in which actions by non-player characters have narrative consequence. These

notes are examples of Jenkins' "embedded narratives" (126) – not sophisticated examples, but ones that still show the dungeon's heightened significance to the thematic elements of the game[16]. They are notably always contained within dungeons at fixed points. These embedded narratives attempt to build continuity between independent quests and occasionally provide characterization to a unique enemy without having to change the game framework to give them dialogue.

From these descriptions, their appearances, their names, and their methods of progression it is possible to infer some conclusions about the role of dungeons in the game world. Common purposes of dungeons include military fortifications (e.g. Goblinwatch, Icewind Keep, Silver Helm Stronghold, various castles), religious buildings (e.g. various Temples of Baa, Temple of the Snake/Sun/Moon/Fist, the Monolith), natural caves (e.g. Dragoon's Caverns, Dragon's Lair, Lair of the Wolf), and sites of magical research and experimentation (e.g. Gharik's Forge, Agar's Laboratory, Castle Darkmoor). Some dungeon areas are hybrids of these types, such as the extensive natural tunnels underneath the Abandoned Temple. Perhaps the only underrepresented generic dungeon setting among *MMVI*'s dungeons is the tomb, a common fictional pretext for dungeons in other games, including games examined in later chapters. *MMVI* has only two textual tombs, the "Tomb of Ethric the Mad" and the "Tomb of VARN," which has the appearance of an Egyptian pyramid. Other dungeons do have tomb-like elements, such as the sarcophagi in Castle Darkmoor. Notably, also, the Tomb of VARN is not a tomb at all, but an ancient spaceship, suggesting the inhabitants of the world are ignorant to its true nature and have merely guessed at its purpose from afar. The Tomb of VARN's identity exemplifies the other significant theme among *MMVI*'s dungeons – science fiction dungeons. Other examples of sci-fi dungeons include the Oracle's Control Center and the devils' Hive. Science fiction theming is not as generalizable to dungeons in other games as those mentioned above, as most dungeon games are content to work with the established trappings of the medieval fantasy genre[17]. Nevertheless, these science fiction spaces are examples of the broader trend of dungeons being places where capable adventurers can make fantastic discoveries that help them grow in wealth and power.

---

16 *MMVI*'s sequel embeds fragments from an expedition's journal all around its game world, inviting the player to discover them all and piece together its eventual fate.

17 The blending of sci-fi and fantasy in dungeon gaming has precedent. *Expedition to the Barrier Peaks* is a 1980 *Dungeons & Dragons* adventure that featured medieval adventurers discovering a crashed spaceship.

Another noteworthy commonality among *MMVI*'s dungeon descriptions is their age. Even its science fiction dungeons are ancient. Dungeons are ruined places that ordinary citizens do not visit. Dungeon descriptions establish that they are abandoned spaces built long ago and taken over by monsters, rebels, or criminals. Goblinwatch, the introductory dungeon, is a perfect example; its quest text draws attention to the irony that the very goblins the keep was built to defend against are now living there.

The game's openness and interactivity can confuse its basic quest structure. By reason of their prominence in the game and the well-grounded presumption that they are entertaining and rewarding spaces to visit, players can enter dungeons before their characters receive the narrative pretext for doing so. Only a few dungeons[18] have hard barriers preventing access until the player character receives narrative impetus to visit from a quest-giver. More have soft barriers, such as the dungeons being surrounded by or populated with challenging opponents that make out-of-sequence exploration difficult. Nevertheless, especially during the early-to-middle stages of the game, it is very possible to enter and fully explore dungeons before being asked to do so, discovering the narrative pretext for entering the dungeon only after it has been conquered. It is then possible to visit the relevant quest-giver and receive a reward for recovering something the protagonists didn't know was missing. However, proactive dungeon exploration is encouraged by some dungeons. Two dungeons are not associated with any quest, but yield much in the way of treasure[19]. Another dungeon, the Hall of the Fire Lord, is an exception to the rule that quest-givers live in safety in towns and castles and send the player characters forth into unsafe dungeons. The quest-giver for the associated quest is the Fire Lord himself, encountered in the first room of the dungeon. Players can only accomplish this quest if they actively seek out and enter dungeons without a quest's pretext.

This kind of narrative discontinuity is only possible because of the understanding, communicated through the game's mechanics, that dungeons are rewarding places to visit. The mechanics are sure to reward dungeon visits (as long as the player characters are powerful enough to contend with the enemies therein), so players do not actually require narrative justification for raiding

---

18 The Oracle, the Control Center, the Supreme Temple of Baa, and Goblinwatch. Gaining access to Gharik's Forge and Goblinwatch is as simple as asking a quest-giver for the key.

19 There is a third quest-less dungeon that offers no rewards, but it is a hidden 'Easter egg' dungeon that essentially serves as the game's list of credits.

them. Dungeons have a greater concentration of treasure and enemies (who yield treasure and experience points when defeated) than outdoor areas, and almost every one is linked to one or more quests. That dungeons have rewards beyond the quest is a textually recognized part of the game's fiction. The introductory quest to recover the code to a combination lock in Goblinwatch can be completed long before the dungeon is fully explored. In her dialogue thanking the protagonists for achieving this, the quest-giver Janice encourages the player characters to return to explore the now-open depths of the dungeon, kill whatever lives there, and keep whatever they find. This character makes explicit a core tenet of the game's dungeons enshrined in its mechanics – that dungeon spaces are exempt from the rules of society. The absolute freedom of the characters to take anything found in a dungeon extends even to dungeons whose narrative pretexts establish the dungeon is full of plunder stolen by the very thieves the player characters have been asked to defeat. Only 'valueless' quest items are not assumed to be owned by the player characters once picked up; they can be returned to their owners for rewards.

It is also possible to achieve narrative discontinuity by resisting the implicit idea that the protagonists are benevolent agents dedicated to restoring order to Enroth. The game accounts somewhat for this option through its mechanics. The game features a "reputation" system that increases or decreases as the protagonists commit certain acts. While reputation does not have much actual bearing on progression through the game, it is still a gauge that lets the player imagine their characters' social position in the game world outside of limited conversation options the game includes. Some quests increase or decrease reputation. Killing villagers decreases it, and donating to temples raises it; both these activities can only be performed in towns. Activities contained within dungeons do not affect reputation; it is possible to kill hundreds of people and maintain a "Saintly" reputation, as long as those people are designated enemies. This further reinforces the heterotopic idea of dungeons as spaces that are invisible to the citizens of the game world where different social rules apply. Furthermore, no matter how despicable the player characters' reputation, nothing bars them from accepting and accomplishing quests. It is difficult to engage with the game without accepting the designed destiny of the protagonists as helpful.

MMVT's mechanics back up the frequent narrative role of dungeons as lawless places by populating dungeons entirely with hostile creatures and almost no 'characters.' The player characters,

of course, enter dungeons. They can hire one or two townsfolk to accompany them into danger, but once hired, these characters' presence is wholly abstracted. A few dungeons contain captives that must be rescued to complete a quest, but these individuals essentially serve as quest items with a few lines of dialogue. There are nearly no allied actants (entities that move and take up space in the 3D environment) in any of the game's dungeons[20] Outside dungeons, enemies and allies coexist[21]. In some regions of the game, such as Bootleg Bay, Silver Cove, and the starting area of New Sorpigal, the initial positions of enemies and villagers are quite close to one another. The mystical figure of the Fire Lord in the "Hall of the Fire Lord" is a notable exception, as he is a quest-giver who provides material aid and advice on how to navigate his dungeon. This character has no significance or connection to anything outside his own quest and dungeon and holds a largely functional role within it. The game's most dramatic moments of narrative happen outside dungeons, but often as a result of completing quests, which, as established, usually involve retrieving things from dungeons.

Through this analysis, I have isolated some narrative traits of dungeons. These principles are:
- Dungeons don't tell stories themselves, but are often integral to the "quest" structure that makes up so much of game designers' efforts to include narrative elements within games. They are however also often sites of embedded narrative.
- Dungeons are the 'middle' part of quests, the trials, the least invested with storytelling elements such as characters and plot.
- Within game worlds are old, abandoned, ruined places. Their inhabitants are often opportunistic squatters or supernatural evils trapped there; rarely are they 'civilized' enough to build their own spaces.
- Dungeons are threatening. Regular people don't go there, but exceptional people like the player characters gladly do. Successfully navigating dungeons makes other people's lives better. They will often reward player characters for doing so.
- Dungeons are distinct, separate spaces from the spaces regular people dwell in. They are lawless places where criminals make their lairs, and even the deeds of supposed 'heroes' are

---

20 There are two exceptions. The "Temple of the Snake" contains a few villagers. They do not speak to the player characters, and it is unclear why they are there. "New World Computing" is the other; it is a model of the game company's office that contains villagers named after the real-world people who worked on the game.
21 In this game's sequel, they attack one another.

done invisibly. Glory can be found through raiding dungeons, but only with trophies brought back for the benefit of townsfolk unwilling or unable to enter dungeons themselves.

- Dungeons define player characters as some combination of altruistic and acquisitive.
- Dungeons are counterpoints to towns within game worlds. Towns are places of respite and commerce for dungeon delvers and a seldom-left home to others. Dungeons yield up treasure that is valued by town-dwellers, who sell goods and services to dungeon-delvers.

These principles form the basis of the narrative pillar of the 'orthodox' dungeon. In later chapters, I examine games that alter and experiment with these principles as their designers attempt innovation within the dungeon genre. To finalize my analysis of the conventional dungeon as a functional space, I turn to its mechanical distinctiveness.

The Mechanics of *MMVI*

MMVI's mechanics have both emergent and designed qualities that exemplify the orthodox dungeon genre. The game's mechanical traits separate its dungeon and non-dungeon spaces and mark the dungeon as a site of particular significance to gameplay and to the fiction established by the game world. *MMVI*'s dungeon mechanics represent dungeons as spaces with new and more limited modes of exploration, unfamiliar spaces within the game's fictional world, and spaces where players (and player characters) engage in risk for reward, though in ways that tend more toward 'reward.'

Spatial Interaction

Entering a dungeon in *MMVI* changes the game's mode of exploration and progression. *MMVI*'s outdoor maps are wide open and possess few solid barriers. As long as the monsters of the overworld can be evaded or defeated, it is possible to explore the world of *MMVI* in any direction. Quests and the relative strength of wandering enemies provide some guidance as to where the designers suggest the player should go, but there are very few formal constraints. In terms of the spatial metaphors used by game theorists to describe game structures, this resembles Murray's "rhizome" (132). It also fits

Aarseth's "open landscape" ("Wumpus" 499) quest game template. In contrast, The dungeon is a "labyrinth" ("Wumpus" 502), to use Aarseth's term for a game space designed to be navigated and solved. Some dungeons are complex, multicursal labyrinths with multiple viable paths for exploration and sometimes even multiple quest objectives. Others are more linear, unicursal spaces with a codified set of challenges between the dungeon entrance and the goal. In either type, the contained environment of *MMVI*'s dungeons permits wholly unique forms of interaction that would be impossible in the overworld. Challenges based around solving puzzles or discovering keys that permit further progression are only feasible in the constrained environment of the dungeon. Many of the game's dungeons feature these kinds of challenges, including the Temple of Baa and Gharik's Forge. The game commonly deploys this type of challenge to protect a quest goal or a hidden treasure.

Dungeon designs constrain player mobility and freedom through their basic construction. Doors and walls in dungeons are impassible barriers. Outdoors, there are attempts to three-dimensionally model natural barriers, but they are rarely impassible. Almost any slope can be climbed by both the avatar and wandering enemies. Doors as a modelled feature of the game environment are unique to dungeons. Doors exist symbolically in the overworld as points the player can interact with to start conversations at a home or castle, begin buying or selling at a shop, or enter a dungeon. However, doors exist as barriers that separate one part of simulated space from another only in dungeons. Dungeons demand exploration, but their internal barriers channel that exploration along predefined routes that force the player to confront the dungeon's gameplay challenges, like enemies, puzzles, and traps. The gradual exploratory nature of dungeon gameplay is also reflected by the game's automatic mapping tool. The outdoor map is a top-down colour picture of the terrain. The real-time mini-map that is always shown on the interface automatically shows the terrain in all directions within a set radius around the party. In dungeons, the map only updates to show areas the party has actually seen. The dungeon mapping style is also capable of representing multiple overlapping height levels present in dungeons but absent outdoors, aside from the occasional bridge. Closed doors and walls block the game's automatic mapping function, so navigating a dungeon is by its nature an act of exploration and revelation. In the de Certeauian sense, the dungeon imposes more of a 'strategy' upon the player than outdoor areas. Progression begins in a defined place and is constrained by an absent external subject – the designer. In games such as this, the designer's tools for imposing this strategy are the automatic rules of the game, rather than social rules or physical laws.

Dungeons' unique spatial representation has emergent effects on other arenas of gameplay. For example, enemy behaviour, while following the same rules in both indoor and outdoor spaces, presents different challenges to the player in the different arenas. The player must employ different strategies in different environments. Roughly half the enemies in the game have a standard behaviour pattern when they detect the player characters; they move toward them and attack from close range. Player characters can all be outfitted with bows, wands, or magic spells that launch attacks at range. As a result, when this category of enemy is encountered outdoors, they do not present much of a threat. Outdoors, where there is ample space to retreat in between launching ranged attacks, the player can wipe out large bands of attackers at minimal risk and cost. It is further possible to activate "turn-based mode," where the player and enemies take turns moving and attacking, meaning that players' ranged attacks cannot miss a moving target. In dungeons, the more frequent close quarters and blocked sightlines complicate this dominant playstyle. It is not possible to back away from attackers as much as desired in a dungeon corridor. Because of enemies resetting to initial conditions when leaving, it is also not possible to partially damage a particularly tough enemy from range, flee the dungeon, and return later to whittle them down further. Close combat – much riskier for the player – in the dungeons is made much more necessary by dungeon spatial design. The same monsters following the same rules can present a much greater threat in dungeons by nature of their shape. Turn-based combat in the dungeon is much more likely to be used for its intended purpose – approaching battles tactically at a manageable pace. The common spatial organization of *MMVI*'s dungeons imposes different gameplay conditions that compel the player to expand their repertoire of tactics – both in the colloquial sense and in opposition to the dungeon's more restrictive "strategy" as defined by de Certeau. The player must search for and seize opportunities based on the emergent conditions of the continuously evolving game state.

Purpose: Challenge and Reward, but Mostly Reward

I have already detailed the function of the dungeon within the quest structure, which unites gameplay and storytelling elements. *MMVI*'s dungeons also have traits that operate fully on the gameplay level that are representative of the dungeon tradition. The game's dungeons feature hard rules

and emergent properties that contribute to the fiction of the dungeon as a space of threat but still make dungeon exploration desirable and enjoyable to the player.

While dungeons may be fictionally and aesthetically positioned as dangerous places, they functionally exist to entertain the player at the player's chosen pace. For players, dungeons are spaces of opportunity. They are sites in the game where the players can take risks for the promise of reward, but the player controls the degree of risk involved. Players do not have to enter dungeons, and, once inside, it is usually possible to safely retrace the party's steps back to the entrance. They can enact a tactic based not solely on their ability to overcome the dungeon's challenges, but also depending on their enjoyment. Some players may break up a dungeon visit with many returns to town to recover, allowing them to take on greater obstacles with less risk, while others might prefer the challenge of completing the dungeon without recuperating in the middle. These preferences might change from moment to moment.

Aside from their possible quest rewards, dungeons are dense pockets of monsters and treasures. Killing monsters always rewards the player characters with experience points, usually with gold as well, and occasionally with other items. All of these resources help the player gain power to more easily traverse the game. Even without the guidance of quests, it is possible to find direction in *MMVI*'s open world by choosing to take on the dungeons that offer challenges of a comfortable difficulty. Dungeons also provide concentrations of treasure, but there is challenge involved in acquiring them. While some treasures are found lying on dungeon floors, most are kept in treasure chests. Some outdoor areas feature chests, but they are more common in dungeons. Most chests in *MMVI* are protected with traps, another conventional dungeon trope. Special character abilities are necessary to prevent traps from detonating and harming the entire adventuring party. If the trap is disarmed, or if even one character survives the trap, the player may empty the chest at their leisure. Since all harm in *MMVI* is reversible by player abilities, resting, paying for healing at temples, or – at worst – allowing the party to die and be returned to life, the risk of looting treasure chests is quite minimal. Traps unconnected to treasures are rarer in *MMVI*'s dungeons than in other dungeon games, but they do exist. They typically serve more as barriers to be removed through solving a puzzle or as simple hazards to be avoided while maneuvering through the 3D environment. Fighting enemies, looting treasures, and

navigating dangerous places are all part of the central pleasure of playing *MMVI* and other dungeon games.

In order to facilitate gameplay, player actions in *MMVI* have a privileged status, to the point of undermining fictional coherence. Dungeons in *MMVI* are the only spaces in which the three-dimensional game space can change, usually through the opening of doors. Enemies, even sentient ones, have no means of altering their environments. Groups of allied monsters cannot come to each other's aid through doors as one might expect them to. Treasures and dead bodies left on dungeon floors remain there until the player comes to pick them up. Players can enter and leave dungeons at will, and the dungeon remains largely the same when they return[22]. Quests do not have time limits; they can be pursued, delayed, or abandoned at the player's discretion, and the dungeons they rely on will always remain as they are left. These mechanics contribute to the player's control of the dungeon challenge. They can always decide to progress at a controlled pace or to flee and come back stronger. The dungeon waits for the player.

Dungeons are designed for players to challenge at their discretion, but presented in the fiction as spaces of danger. One mechanic that supports this is the "timing gem" interface element. It detects the presence of enemies within a set radius, ignoring lines of sight and the enemies' awareness of the party. This gem provides this information to the player, but also limits player action when enemies are near. While the gem senses enemies, the game's "Rest" function is disabled. Attempts to use it will prompt a character to utter a voiced line about how unsafe the area is. This happens even if the nearby enemies have no means of actually reaching the player characters. This rule helps maintain the fiction that dungeons are threatening spaces without requiring the game to greatly increase the complexity of its enemy behaviours.

The game's resting mechanics also have emergent properties that complicate using dungeons as a place of safety, building the image that dungeons are spaces where player characters should be on guard, even when, practically speaking, they are entirely safe. When the party rests, the type of terrain texture immediately beneath the party's feet determines how much 'food' must be spent to rest and restore the characters. In exterior spaces, except for intentionally inhospitable spaces, players can

---

22 Enemies damaged but not killed will return to full health and reset to their starting position.

usually find grass (the least expensive type of terrain to rest on) to use food economically. In dungeons, when resting is possible, it will never cost that little. The timing gem and food systems encourage the player to treat dungeons as the threatening spaces they are presented as and retreat from them to find respite in more hospitable seeming places like pleasant meadows or towns with inns.

MMVT's dungeon mechanics communicate dungeons as spaces to ultimately be defeated by player action. After a certain length of time passes, outdoor areas in the game reset. Any dead monsters or villagers reappear and treasures can be picked up again. This contributes to the game's efforts at the simulation of a large, dynamic, organic game world. Dungeons do not do this[23]. Once the player conquers a dungeon, it is conquered forever. This is true despite many dungeons being fictionally positioned as abandoned spaces taken over by monsters or outlaws. Goblinwatch and the Dragoons' Caverns are two such examples. That being said, the fiction also recognizes the player's accomplishments as helpful and significant[24]. This principle of the dungeon as a space to be mastered by the player is even represented on a more granular level. Dungeon doors cannot be closed once opened, so player action permanently alters dungeon environments as they progress through them. Also as the player progresses, more of the dungeon is permanently added to their map. The player's initial progressive "tour" (to use de Certeau's construction of the term) through a dungeon is a process of active spatial participation. As the player explores the dungeon, overcoming its native obstacles, spatial knowledge of the space becomes more map-like. Once the player fully masters the dungeon space, it becomes empty of meaning. When the dungeon map is complete, there is little value in returning and living in its space again, except by playing the game again from the beginning. The completion of a dungeon is communicated through the map and through the timing gem; it is rare for the gem to not detect any nearby enemies before a dungeon has been completely cleared out. Completing a dungeon is an accomplishment in itself that usually requires efforts beyond just completing a quest objective. The static nature of dungeons preserves the player's progress toward their eventual total mastery of those spaces – another example of the dungeon existing functionally as a space of opportunity.

---

23 The final dungeon, the Hive, is an exception. It replenishes much more frequently than outside areas.
24 The early-game dungeon Goblinwatch is a perfect example of this; the anachronistic walkthrough from the game
    manual calls the process of clearing out Goblinwatch "urban renewal" (Chichester 58)

Separation: The Rules of Heterotopia

I have already discussed how the aesthetics and narrative function of dungeons position them as heterotopic within their game worlds. The game's mechanics further isolate dungeons from the rest of the game world through formal rules and informal rules interactions. Dungeons are not just fictionally separate; they are functionally separate as well. This separation through mechanics changes forcibly changes the player's behaviour between dungeon and non-dungeon play.

MMVI formally divides dungeon and non-dungeon spaces through hard rules. Certain character abilities can only be used indoors or outdoors. Typically, these interact with the sky in some way. Powerful attack spells that call down damage from the sky cannot be used in dungeons, including the "Armageddon" spell that damages everything on the current map. It is not just combat abilities that work differently in dungeons. The "Fly" spell is a vital convenience for navigating the game's larger outdoor areas. Fly (or its lesser counterpart "Water Walking") is necessary to reach some key areas (themselves dungeons) in the game. Fly allows the player to move quickly overland, ignoring the soft obstacles of slopes, deep water, and wandering monsters that have no ranged attack abilities. Even enemies that do attack at range become less of a threat when flying, as the increased movement speed the spell affords makes avoiding projectiles easier. The speed of travel when flying also makes it very easy to completely bypass hostile enemies. The spell lets the player rapidly cross the outdoor world without seriously engaging with the space, moving from point to point almost at will. Once the player develops this ability, overland movement loses most qualities of the de Certeauian "tour." Traversing outdoor space becomes a process of identifying salient locations on the overworld map and moving directly between them. In dungeons, this is not possible. Fly cannot be cast in dungeons. If it is already in effect when the player enters a dungeon, it is not removed, but the flight inputs do nothing while indoors. Dungeon challenges cannot be evaded so easily, and the player is encouraged to engage with them more directly.

MMVI formally separates its dungeons from its expansive overworld through deliberate rules. When a player enters a dungeon, the outside world disappears. The exterior map is unloaded and a new dungeon map takes its place. While this is likely a practical design consideration rather than a choice made with specific play experiences in mind, it has important emergent gameplay implications. When a

player crosses this threshold, the world on the other side can no longer be interacted with. Upon return – no matter how little time has passed – all mobile enemies and allies reset to their original positions and conditions unless they were killed. Injured allies and opponents have their health restored to their starting values. This resetting can be exploited by a player to minor advantage. Heavily injured enemies in *MMVI* will flee from the player. Enemies with ranged attacks also move in ways that keep their distance from the player. In outdoor areas, these fleeing opponents can cross the invisible boundaries of the map and escape to safety or at least to a place where the player cannot loot their bodies. This is not an optimal outcome for a player who is incentivized to kill and rob every hostile creature. Any departure from an outdoor area in *MMVI* will prompt the type of resetting that allows this optimal play, but leaving over land consumes player resources, so using a local dungeon is the most effective means for ensuring total clearance of outdoor areas.

This is something of an edge case. A more significant implication of dungeons being separate gameplay environments is that hostile opponents cannot chase the player into or out of a dungeon. Dungeon denizens and outdoor enemies remain separate instances of threat that must be confronted in their initial environments, even if fictionally they are members of the same group. Examples include the goblins that occupy Goblinwatch and the werewolves surrounding the Lair of the Wolf. These dungeons are surrounded by the same types of creatures or enemies that inhabit them, but these separate groups cannot assist each other as the player attacks one or the other. Fictionally speaking, this is a moment that makes the game world less coherent, but in terms of gameplay, it is another example of dungeons presenting more precisely crafted and staged challenges instead of the broad freedom of overworld exploration. Within the dungeon, the player need only confront the challenges of the dungeon itself. Players can also flee difficult dungeons and not worry about the creatures within following them.

Mechanical Conclusions

The mechanical construction of *MMVI*'s dungeons illustrate intentional and emergent traits that are common across the dungeon genre. The main generic traits of dungeon gameplay that I will watch out for in future chapters as other, less conventional games experiment with them are as follows:

- The exploration and navigation of dungeons is an integral part of their interactive pleasures. Dungeons have hard edges that shape gameplay into a more sequential set of challenges. Their labyrinth structures alter the ways players interact with them.
- Dungeon sites are created for the player's benefit. They present a concentration of enemies and traps, but also rewards for the player. Despite their frequent narrative positioning as threatening spaces, dungeon exploration is tied to growth in avatar capability. Dungeons ultimately exist to be conquered by player action.
- Much like dungeon aesthetic and narrative elements, dungeon mechanics mark them as important within their game worlds, endowed with enhanced significance thanks to formal and informal rules that shape dungeon gameplay.

MMVI Conclusions

From these observations of the distinctive aesthetic, narrative, and mechanical qualities of *MMVI*, I can synthesize the following general principles of the orthodox dungeon:

- Dungeons are heterotopic within their game worlds. Narrative, mechanics, and aesthetics mark the dungeon as a separate, special locale that is removed from spaces where everyday life is conducted, as represented by towns. Towns and dungeons are inversions of each other. Towns are spaces of safety, commerce, and rest, populated by characters, while dungeons are spaces of danger, acquisition, and excitement, populated by hostile people and creatures. Dungeons isolate the player from other characters; almost everything encountered there is a threat, an obstacle, or something of value to be taken.
- Dungeons are not necessarily sites of narrative. There may be a narrative pretext for visiting them and for their existence in the game world, but interaction with them is dominated by rules, rather than fiction. Dungeons typically serve as the obstacle to a straightforward quest narrative that characterizes the played protagonist as someone willing to enter danger for altruistic or acquisitive reasons. As controlled environments, dungeons provide creators opportunities to create embedded narratives, but dungeons still 'work' with weak or absent narrative grounding.
- For players, dungeons are sites of opportunity. Exploring them – and exploration is key to their interactive pleasures – can yield dangers, but also contributes to the fictional and mechanical

advancement of the player character. Narrative positioning and aesthetic depictions make dungeons appear threatening, but not to the point of actually discouraging players from exploring them. Combined with the heterotopic function of the dungeon, this charade positions player characters as exceptional in terms of willingness to take on risk and desire for reward. Contrary to Gillespie and Crouse's dichotomy, dungeon explorers can be both "tomb robbers" *and* "high-fantasy heroes" ("There and Back Again" 448) at different points in the same game or at the same time.

The repetition of these traits across holistic, large-scale dungeon games creates and perpetuates a convention. In the following chapter, I explore if and how that convention changes when the dungeon is removed from the context of a simulated world, when dungeon creation is governed by rules instead of by a designer's attention, and when creators try to fit foreign concepts into the convention.

Chapter Two

Rogue and Roguelikes: The Elemental Dungeon

Long before and long after *Might and Magic VI*'s release and popularity, designers were situating games in dungeon environments. Some of the earliest graphical games chose dungeons as their settings. One of those was *Rogue* (1980), notable for its ability to randomly generate new dungeons with each playthrough. *Rogue* inspired many imitators, with the ensuing 'roguelike' tradition of variation, adaptation, and addition to the *Rogue* formula being a continuous process to this day.

Last chapter, I isolated the conventional traits of the dungeon convention from my representative case study of *Might and Magic VI*. Synthesizing these traits, I construct the following significant conventional functions of dungeon spaces within games:

- Dungeons are hetertopic spaces within their game worlds. Rest, travel, and commerce belong to outer spaces, while risk, alert interaction, and acquisition belong to dungeons. To a game world, the dungeon provides the necessary social function of invisibly containing monsters, criminals, and heretics until adventurers come along to kill them.
- Dungeons are sites with greater meaning afforded them than other game spaces, but not necessarily narrative meaning. Quest games can bookend a dungeon with storytelling elements and spatial narrative can be embedded within them, but dungeons are understood to be playable, navigable spaces.
- Dungeons are sites meant for players. They are meant for players to successfully navigate and gain mastery over. Narrative and aesthetic depictions of the dungeon as dangerous exist to heighten the sense of accomplishment and mark the player as extraordinary.

This chapter analyzes the dungeons of *Rogue* and several roguelikes in context of these qualities. Some games reproduce these traits precisely, while others attempt to amplify, test, reduce, or play with these generic boundaries and those of the roguelike tradition to greater or lesser degrees.

Games in this chapter also layer new fictions, aesthetics, and mechanical conceits on top of established genre elements.

Rogue and Roguelikes Background

Rogue was developed in 1980 by Michael Toy and Glenn Wichman. According to Wichman, the pair enjoyed the seminal computer game *Adventure*, and sought to adapt it into "a game [they] could enjoy playing [them]selves" ("Brief History"). *Adventure* and its imitators, as discussed, are "progression games" (Juul 5) where the designers must devise game's challenges and solutions themselves. Wichman and Toy "decided that with *Rogue*, the program itself should 'build the dungeon,' giving [players] a new adventure every time [...] making it possible for even the creators to be surprised by the game" ("Brief History"). *Rogue* was among the first graphical adventure games, one with wide popularity thanks to distribution across university computer networks (Barton 35). Influenced by both *Adventure* and *Dungeons and Dragons* (RogueBasin, "*Rogue*"), *Rogue* invites the player to descend through a series of randomly-created dungeon levels, fighting monsters, evading traps, and gathering treasure. The ultimate objective is retrieving the "Amulet of Yendor," found in the dungeon depths. Success is difficult, and the death of the player character resets the game, re-randomizing the dungeon and its contents.

Apart from its pioneering status, *Rogue* is also notable for being the namesake of a genre of game design tradition known as the roguelike. The definition of 'roguelike' is one that is highly contested within the communities of practice that make and play related games. *Rogue* directly inspired a great number of imitations and adaptations, some of which remain in continuous development today. RogueBasin, an attempt by roguelike developers and fans to centralize all knowledge regarding roguelikes, lists over 1000 separate roguelike projects in various stages of completion or development ("Category:Roguelike games").

In her paper, "Neo-rogue and the Essence of Roguelikeness," Maria B. Garda summarizes the history of the roguelike genre. She cites the "playability and code simplicity" (3) as a leading reason why *Rogue* has inspired so many imitators. She identifies two major "waves" of mainstream,

commercially successful games that drew from roguelike design principles while the classic roguelike genre became relegated to "an entertainment niche" ("Neo-rogue" 3). The first wave followed and imitated *Diablo* (1996) and brought contemporary graphics and real-time action to the roguelike procedural dungeons of the 1990s. According to Garda, the second wave of roguelike-inspired mainstream games begins with *Spelunky*, first released online in 2008, then commercially in 2012. She coins the term "neo-rogue" to categorize the ensuing indie game trend that adopt design principles from the traditional roguelike into new settings and gameplay modes. She identifies neo-rogues as typically independently-produced games with 2D "retro" art and a more casual playstyle than traditional roguelikes. She calls them products of "hybridization," bridging roguelike design with other, less nich ludic and thematic genres. Notably, neo-rogues are "set not only in fantasy dungeons" ("Neo-rogue" 8), which is not true of the *Diablo*-inspired first wave to break away from the roguelike tradition. Yet, as is evident in the neo-rogues analyzed in this chapter, the neo-rogues that retain dungeon settings often do so self-reflectively.

Contemporaneously to the early stages of Garda's "second wave," the International Roguelike Development Conference of 2008 attempted to define some precise criteria for the roguelike "not to place constraints on developers or gamers" (RogueBasin, "Berlin Interpretation"), but to provide linguistic clarity for the term. They derive their definition from a canon of games they selected as exemplars of the roguelike genre, namely *Rogue, Ancient Domains of Mystery* (*ADOM*), *Angband*, *NetHack*, and *Crawl*. From these case studies, they isolated some "high value factors" and "low value factors" as markers of the roguelike genre. These factors mostly prioritize modes of interaction, and I will examine them in action in further detail when I address the mechanical distinctiveness of the dungeon space in *Rogue*. Briefly, the Berlin Interpretation names as "high value factors" random environment generation, "permadeath" (the necessity to start a new game – with a new random environment – and abandon all progress should the player be defeated), turn-based play, grid-based navigation, "non-modal" play (where every in-game action is available to the player at all times), complexity, resource management, exploration and discovery, and "hack'n'slash" gameplay (where the main character must kill their way through many monsters to achieve their goal). The framework's weak criteria include the existence of only a single player character, the modelling of monsters similarly to player characters, ASCII display, open numerical game statistics, "tactical challenge," and – most significantly to this thesis – dungeon settings. The Berlin Interpretation does not offer a

particularly detailed definition of dungeons, citing only "rooms and corridors" as defining features. Given that the Berlin Interpretation is created by and for a group of existing classic roguelike creators and enthusiasts, explaining the dungeon setting further would be redundant in that community. While the dungeon setting is listed as "low value," it is present in the five 'canonical' roguelikes and the majority of classical roguelikes inspired by that canon. I suggest the Berlin conference recognized the dungeon setting as important and endemic among the roguelike genre, but listed it as "low value" thanks to their explicit philosophical goal to "concentrate on gameplay" (RogueBasin, "Roguelike Alphabet").

The Berlin Interpretation is not without its detractors from game development and criticism circles. Roguelike developer Darren Grey rejects the Berlin approach as exclusionary, pedantic, and reductive in his blog post, "Screw the Berlin Interpretation!" He considers the suggestion that the dungeon setting even weakly identifies a game as "more roguelike" to be "downright nonsense." As Garda's "second wave" of "neo-rogues" rose to prominence, the roguelike term became used to describe games with little resemblance to the Berlin criteria, prompting further debate on its applicability. Writing on video game development website Gamasutra, designer Tanya X. Short favours discarding the term 'roguelike' for games beyond those that are very strictly *Rogue* imitators. She considers the term "imprecise" and "misleading" when used in game marketing and description. She considers it exclusionary "jargon" that only becomes more so as game creators and marketers search for more apt terms. This search has resulted in neologisms like "Rogue-lite" and "Rogue-like-like" that aim to encapsulate games that use roguelike principles without seeking to emulate *Rogue* directly. Short considers these terms "even more vague, just as clubby, and even less explanatory" than 'roguelike.' Responding to Short, game designer Lars Doucet proposes "Procedural Death Labyrinth" as a term to encompass both classical roguelikes and the new wave of neo-rogues[25]. I do not aim to solve this persistent question of terminology, but evaluate the necessity and utility of the dungeon setting to its development across this game design tradition's history.

The character of this ongoing debate frames my approach for this chapter. The first sections will interrogate Chapter One's claims about the dungeon when it is stripped of much of its graphical and

---

25 He does not use the term, as Garda's term has not caught on in communities of practice, but I continue to use it for clarity.

narrative context by examining *Rogue* and its most doctrinaire descendants. The second half of this chapter is devoted to games inspired by *Rogue* that bring new implementations of the dungeon and of the roguelike. Most are commercial "indie" games that are part of Garda's "second wave" of more current games whose status as a roguelike has been debated. This debate is in part due to their efforts to innovate within the form.

Regarding terminology, I will continue to use the term 'roguelike' expansively to encompass all these various strands of games inspired by *Rogue*'s design. A game claiming roguelike status for itself is sufficient for me to include it in this chapter's analysis. As established, my understanding of genre is not only as a taxonomy. Following from Arsenault, I understand genre to be principally a tool for communication and identifying a range of experiences (171). Where additional clarity is needed, I draw from Garda's scholarly approach as well as communities of practice to find appropriate terminology.

Classical Roguelikes

In order to make generalizing claims about roguelikes, I draw analysis not just from *Rogue*, but from its direct descendants. In addition to *Rogue*, I study the more complex *NetHack,* which was first released in 1987 and has undergone intermittent development up to the current day. I also consider the more modern "coffeebreak" roguelike[26], *Brogue*, first released in 2009 and updated since. These are classical roguelikes that only feature a single dungeon environment each. There are major influential roguelikes, like *Angband,* that feature towns and wildernesses (RogueBasin, "*Angband*"), however the progenitor of the genre, *Rogue*, and many of its successors feature dungeons as the sole area of play. These roguelikes isolate the dungeon and devote all their design efforts to work within that generic space. Through this work, I call these "classical" roguelikes and consider them representative of the genre as it relates to dungeons.

As mentioned, *Rogue* creators Wichman and Toy acknowledge *Adventure* (1975) as a direct inspiration. *Adventure*, the popular text adventure in the nascent digital gaming community of the day, presented the player with the challenge to navigate a dungeon-like underground labyrinth. RogueBasin

---

26 This term is drawn from its categorization on the online roguelike community and knowledge base RogueBasin. It refers to roguelikes where the goal can be reached in less time than in most games.

also cites *Dungeons & Dragons* as an influence on *Rogue* ("*Rogue*"). That influence is evident in the importance of numerical character statistics and random number generation in *Rogue*'s mechanics as well as the model of character progression by earning experience points from killing monsters. Early *D&D* placed great emphasis on the mapping and measuring of its imaginary spaces on a square grid (Gygax and Arneson, *Men and Magic* 5). The UNIX terminals of university computers of the day and specifically the "curses" software library that allowed direct positioning of characters on the computer screen could simulate the rectangular rooms and corridors of a classic *D&D* dungeon map. The dungeon space and the coordinate grid were understood in gaming subcultures as compatible before *Rogue*'s creation.

Classical roguelikes are true games of emergence. Not only are the interactions between agents in the dungeon unpredictable but rule-based, the creation of space is unpredictable and rule-based. To create a roguelike dungeon crawl, it is necessary to define the rules by which a dungeon can exist, rather than the dungeon itself. In a roguelike, the de Certeauian "strategy" of dungeon design is one step removed from the player's experience. Instead of simulating a space governed by rules as seen in games with fixed spatial layouts like *MMVI*, the roguelike designer must construct a process that uses hidden rules to construct a random space that is then governed by public rules. As a result of the mutability of the roguelike dungeon, player "tactics" for navigating space are even more determined by the particulars of the game state at a particular moment. There is no definitive, "proper" interaction with space in a roguelike, only the puzzle of determining the best possible path through a situation-dependent ephemeral space using imperfect information.

Classical Roguelike Mechanics

The mechanics of the roguelike genre have been exhaustively examined. In a genre that intentionally places so much significance on 'pure' interaction, it is easy to find gameplay significance in every minute rule, especially as those rules change between classical roguelikes. Focusing as it does on formal elements, the Berlin Interpretation provides a useful structure to analyze the classical roguelike genre's mechanical distinctiveness from the perspective of roguelike creators themselves. I compare each of the Berlin Interpretation's factors against the significant dungeon traits identified in

Chapter One. When the dungeon is made the entire elemental space of play, as in roguelikes, how does the understanding of the dungeon change for designers and players?

The Berlin Interpretation's "random environment," "permadeath," and "exploration and discovery" are strongly linked. Starting every new playthrough of a classical roguelike creates a new random dungeon[27]. Should the player character be defeated, the player cannot retrieve a saved game and must start over. A new dungeon is created, any progress the player had achieved is removed, and the player must begin exploring again. As the player tours about the dungeon, its contents, edges, and borders become known. Even as the map is revealed, the dungeon's contents are only visible within the player's line of sight[28]. Monsters can spontaneously generate in unobserved places, meaning that space must be continually moved through and experienced as a system of relations to be understood – toured, to use de Certeau's term. Thanks to the uncertainty and changeability of the roguelike, its dungeon spaces are resistant to map-like "totalizing" (de Certeau 121) of the dungeon space seen in more static games like *MMVI*.

Discovery in roguelikes is not merely spatial. A common classical roguelike feature is unidentified equipment. Magical scrolls and potions, when discovered, are identified only by colour (for potions) or randomized nonsense word (for scrolls). These items can have beneficial or harmful effects when used. Should the player survive using an unidentified item, the game preserves player knowledge of what item corresponds to what appearance. As the player experiments with or identifies scrolls and potions, their knowledge and security grows. When the player dies and restarts, however, the appearances and effects of scrolls and potions are, like the dungeon, re-randomized. The player must begin the efforts of discovery again. Scrolls and potions are a non-spatial arena in which classical roguelikes feature expanding discovery as a key element of gameplay. They are also highly associated with the sort of *D&D*-inspired fantasy theme that corresponds so frequently with dungeon environments. While other themes of classical roguelike certainly exist, they cannot lean on the widely-understood fantasy gaming staples of magical potions and one-use scrolls to recreate uncertainty after every new character death.

---

27 In another influential classical roguelike, *Angband*, dungeon levels are re-randomized each time the player enters a new floor (RogueBasin "*Angband*").
28 Different roguelikes represent lighting and vision in different ways, but they all include rules for doing so.

Classical roguelikes' representations of space and time are closely tied together. The Berlin Interpretation considers both "turn-based" gameplay and "grid-based" environments to be strong contributors to the roguelike identity. The basic forms of interaction classical roguelikes use rely on the strict relationship between these two concepts. The player navigates the dungeon in *Rogue* in a sequence of brief turns. The player takes one action, then each of the monsters on the level takes one action. The most common action is moving a single space on the grid. Other actions include searching for hidden doors and traps, activating an item (such as a scroll or potion) from the player's inventory, descending stairs to reach another level, changing the rogue's ready equipment, or throwing an inventory item. These are all actions the player can perform in *Rogue*; more complicated classical roguelikes like *NetHack* add many more verbs the player can employ. Attacking a monster with a weapon is another common action in *Rogue*, one that is done spatially. Attacking does not require a specific input; it occurs automatically when the player attempts to move into the space occupied by an enemy. After each player turn, every enemy on the level acts at once. Often, monsters that are aware of the player move toward them or attack if already adjacent. Due to this connected, rule-based representation of space and time, the game state of the classical roguelike is easy to read once a player is familiar with the game's iconography, letting the player thoughtfully develop tactics for navigating the dungeon in response to changing situations.

This connection between the turn and the grid is a fundamental mechanic that can inform tactical play of classical roguelikes as well as the ability to design within its strictures. For example, when confronted with multiple enemies, it is advantageous for the player to lure them into a corridor that is only one space wide. There, the player can fight the enemies one at a time and improve their chances at success. Original *Rogue*'s room-and-corridor structure means this tactic is frequently available; roguelikes with more complex dungeon design algorithms like *Brogue* make it less reliable. On the design side, roguelikes can offer resources that disrupt the basic equivalence of one turn to one space on the grid. *Brogue* does so with its modelling of the medieval weapons common to dungeon fantasy settings. Spears can strike enemies up to two spaces away instead of one. Axes damage all adjacent enemies, even around corners. Maces change the turn economy, inflicting increased damage on a hit, but skipping the player's next turn. The player can make strategic choices and adjust their styles of play based on these fundamental changes to the operation of space and time in the game

becoming available. The fictional referent used to model and inspire these interesting interactions is the medieval weaponry endemic to dungeon settings.

The turn-based quality is certainly not deterministic of dungeon settings. Plenty of games are turn-based without dungeon environments, and there are many dungeon games that are played in real time. There is an affinity between grid-based play and the dungeon. The underground setting of the default dungeon supports the design and technical considerations behind the appearance of *Rogue*'s dungeons. Most of the screen in a *Rogue* level is inaccessible, presumably representing solid rock or earth. The random assortment of rooms and corridors *Rogue* generates for its play space makes more architectural sense if it is embedded in a solid surface. The game can only fit a set size of level on the screen at a time. To extend the lifespan of the game, the game needs multiple levels, which, again, make more sense if they descend further and further underground. Levels also provide difficulty benchmarks; the deeper a player proceeds, the more difficult things become, and they must apply new strategies (RogueBasin, "Berlin Interpretation").

Classical roguelikes achieve the next of the Berlin Interpretation's high-value factors, "non-modal" gameplay, by having either a very high or very low number of possible interactions. Non-modal play means that every player action is available to the player at all times. Shopping and speaking to other characters are common points where games create new play modes; in classical roguelikes, these activities, if available, are done using the game's existing mechanics.

"Resource management" is the next Berlin Interpretation criteria. This principle, somewhat nebulous in practice, changes significantly in games where there is no non-dungeon environments. The "resources" in question include the player's health (which slowly replenishes over time); limited-use items like potions, scrolls, and wands; and ammunition for ranged weapons. Time is also a limited resource, as many classic roguelikes track the player character's hunger. Players must find and eat food periodically or suffer statistical penalties or death. Resource management was key to success in dungeon exploration in *MMVI*, but the ability to flee the dungeon to recover makes the resource management challenge more of a self-imposed one than the core difficulty of the game. There, successful dungeon exploration was a question of not over-extending oneself and retreating when necessary. In *Rogue* there is no total safety to retreat to. Monsters periodically appear on dungeon

levels in places out of sight of the player, so even 'completed' levels still offer some hazards. In such an unpredictable dungeon, distinct from the fully conquerable spaces of *MMVI*, successfully managing gameplay resources requires much more active attention.

With no external source of resources, dungeons in classical roguelikes must provide the tools necessary to complete them. While the distribution of loot in roguelikes is random, these games do assume that the challenges of the lowest depths cannot be overcome without acquiring resources from the intervening levels. However, the acquisition of resources in classical roguelikes is limited by limits on inventory items. Players either have a limited number of slots to store items grouped by type as in *Rogue*, or a set carrying capacity determined by the avatar's numerical strength characteristic, as in *NetHack*. The three classical roguelikes I use for my case study handle excess items very differently. Uncarried items in *Brogue* remain on the floor for the player to return to at their discretion, so recovering them is a matter of time and overcoming monsters that may have reappeared in the meantime. Original *Rogue* is similar, except players cannot return to dungeon levels they have left, so leaving items behind is giving them up for the rest of the playthrough. In *NetHack*, monsters can pick up items on the floor and wield them against the player, so abandoning less crucial items is not just a tactical choice over what resources to prioritize, but what resources can be risked possibly being used by enemies. These mechanics affect the degree to which the dungeon can be read as a space that centres and privileges the player's action like it was in *MMVI*. The greater range of capable actions monsters can perform, especially in highly-complex roguelikes like *NetHack,* lessens the uniqueness of the player. While player actions retain their special significance for the player, there are fewer rules to the dungeon space that privilege their place in the dungeon over others. The dungeon becomes more of a simulation than a specific set of challenges. The similarity between player and monster capability is a "low-value factor" for the Berlin Interpretation's definition of roguelike, seen among these three classical roguelikes to differing degrees.

A significant difference between the dungeons of *NetHack* and those of the other classical roguelikes examined here is that *NetHack* folds the type of commercial and social activity that *MMVI* relegates to towns and *Rogue* does not feature at all into the dungeon. *NetHack* features shops where the player can buy new equipment and sell their discoveries within the dungeon itself. This

63

incongruous intrusion of a safe[29] place to conduct business is one example of how *NetHack* and similar highly-complex roguelikes alter the dungeon space for the purpose of facilitating gameplay and building complexity. Unlike *Rogue*, treasure found in *NetHack* does more than just denote score. It becomes another resource to manage in the bid to progress further. This space of incongruity weakens the coherence of the game world, but pursues the stated goal of the classical roguelike, which is focus on interaction. Many of the neo-rogues examined in the latter half of this chapter carry forward this design element, but are more likely to present their shops as different play modes.

A Berlin Interpretation "high value factor" that is represented in mechanics but has narrative implications is the focus on "hack 'n' slash" gameplay. To define this criteria, RogueBasin elaborates: "Even though there can be much more to the game, killing lots of monsters is a very important part of a roguelike. The game is player-vs-world: there are no monster/monster relations" ("Berlin Interpretation"). The dungeon setting simplifies the narrative implications created by such a focus. As seen in *MMVI* and drawing from *Dungeons & Dragons*, any creature found in a dungeon may be assumed to be evil and worthy of slaying. Dungeon settings in classical roguelikes are not just appeal to tradition; they provide the – admittedly minimal – thematic justification necessary for hack 'n' slash gameplay. They can provide this without lengthy explanation thanks to their canonical position.

The final Berlin Interpretation criteria is "complexity," explained by stating, "The game has enough complexity to allow several solutions to common goals. This is obtained by providing enough item/monster and item/item interactions and is strongly connected to having just one mode" (RogueBasin, "Berlin Interpretation"). As this criteria is based on the interaction between multiple mechanics, it is difficult to isolate a single exemplar of "complexity." To achieve complexity, though, the dungeon environment must present sufficient objects and creatures to interact with at a given time. As mentioned, the orthodox dungeon must be a space that challenges the player but also intrigues them. For classical roguelikes that deliberately avoid complex narratives and aesthetics, complexity of interactions is central to creating an enjoyable dungeon game – especially one designed to be played over and over again.

---

29 Shops are only safe if the player does nothing to anger the shopkeeper.

Beyond the formal criteria of the Berlin Interpretation, classical roguelikes are concerned with creating mechanics for things that only matter when trying to simulate a fantasy dungeon environment. Traps certainly complicate the basic exploratory nature of the game, rewarding cautious advancement and occasionally providing advantage against enemies that can be lured into them. Some traps do not harm the player directly, instead altering the game space by creating unsafe areas or teleporting the avatar to a random location. Finding secret doors is a staple of early *Dungeons & Dragons* exploration[30], and the dungeons of classical roguelikes require careful checking to fully navigate. Roguelikes also create interesting gameplay situations with their modelling of darkness and light. In *Rogue*, rooms are lit or unlit, revealing more or less of the map around the player as appropriate. *Brogue* has a set vision radius for the player that is drawn tighter as they descend levels. As the dungeon's inhabitants get more dangerous, they also become harder to detect in advance. All of these features fulfill the roguelike creed of 'focusing on gameplay,' but are inspired by previous games' implementation of dungeon environments. Combined with the random nature of the classical roguelike's play space, traps and secret doors do not make much logical sense, but the dungeon is a space where illogical construction is a permissible incoherence. It is understood that these are spaces for the player to take on challenges for their own entertainment.

Classical Roguelike Aesthetics

The most defining aesthetic characteristic of the classical roguelike is its use of ASCII art. ASCII, the American Standard Code for Information Interchange, is the technical standard for representing letters and symbols on screen. As *Rogue* was designed to be played on "nongraphical terminals that could only display typographic characters" (Johnson 117), *Rogue* communicates its dungeon imagery through ASCII art and text descriptions.

Rogue presents its player with a top-down map of a dungeon to navigate. A *Rogue* dungeon is constructed entirely out of textual characters. The player's avatar is an '@' sign, now an emblem of the genre (Johnson 127). Dungeon monsters are represented by letters, though the connection between the letter and the monster is not always readily apparent (Johnson 121). Treasure appears as various

---

30 For example, in First Edition *D&D* (1973), elf characters have "special skill at finding secret and hidden doors" (15) as their main distinguishing ability.

punctuation marks that interrupt the grid of floating dots that represents an empty floor. Walls are solid lines, interrupted with punctuation representing doors.

Figure 6: A new arrival has explored most of the first level of NetHack's *Dungeons of Doom.*

There are practical reasons for the dungeon setting of *Rogue*. The architecture of the game space is, due to its original implementation on the computer hardware of the time, fixed to the same grid as the text-based terminals the game was programmed for. Plotting a dungeon on a grid was already a feature of the fantasy gaming landscape upon *Rogue*'s 1980 development, based on *Dungeons & Dragons*, itself drawing from simulated wargaming (Fine 8). This connection to *D&D* is significant, as it also informs many of the game mechanics of Rogue and later roguelikes. The rectangular grid facilitates the random nature of each level of each playthrough of *Rogue*. The dungeon levels of *Rogue* do not have a fixed layout, instead being randomly generated each time a player discovers a new one (and being reset each time a player is defeated and restarts the game). *Rogue* generates dungeon levels as a random distribution of rectangular rooms with corridors connecting

them, possibly concealed behind secret doors. Later roguelikes including *Brogue* would create more elaborate and cavernous dungeon structures.

Classical roguelikes supplement their minimal graphics with descriptive text. The text box describes game objects and spaces, giving meaning to the abstracted labels on the game screen. Roguelikes have a function that lets the player examine entities in their environment to decode what the symbols mean. Some roguelikes provide a great deal of textual information via this interface. *Rogue* mainly uses text to describe the results of combat with monsters. *NetHack*'s complexity means that very much information integral to informed gameplay must be communicated through text. A single dungeon tile in *NetHack* might contain several objects that can be picked up as well as a creature, itself equipped with several more items, and possibly also a trap. *NetHack* only reveals this information if the player decides to actively inspect the space. *Brogue* uses multiple text boxes to simultaneously inform the player of the creatures and objects they can see and the status of the terrain they find themselves in. *Brogue* provides more descriptive prompts that aid in visualizing the dungeon than the other classical roguelikes.

This text describes not just the identity of game labels, but their actions as well. Graphically, the player sees, for example, a capital letter 'E' adjacent to their avatar flicker momentarily. The text box describes the action, like "The emu scored an excellent hit on you," as the characters' statistics are updated accordingly. The text box works for things other than monsters and combat with them; moving over a punctuation mark on the floor of the dungeon will have the player character pick up the item that mark represents. The text box alerts the player to the completion of that action and identifies the nature of that mark. Playing an ASCII roguelike for the first time is not just an exercise in discovering what the game's repertoire of interactions is; it is also a process of learning to read the game's symbols (Johnson 120). *NetHack* and *Rogue* are accompanied with reference materials, either as an in-game screen or a companion text, that help the player decode the symbols scattered around the games' dungeons.

In "The Use of ASCII Graphics in roguelikes: Aesthetic Nostalgia and Semiotic Difference," Mark Johnson explains the persistence of the typographic ASCII interface common to major classical roguelikes. While ease of programming was the reason in the 1980s, traditional roguelike development

continues into the present, where such graphical considerations are nowhere near as limiting. He cites nostalgia as a key component for ASCII art's continued use in the roguelike genre. Among roguelike fans and creators, he claims, there is "profound disaffection" with the development of commercial, graphical computer roleplaying games, and roguelikes offer the ability to retain the highly complex gameplay absent from those titles. He argues that roguelike creators' adherence to ASCII's "*aesthetic* style denotes a coherency of *gameplay*" (118), that identifies a classical roguelike as providing a particular kind of gameplay experience. The dungeon setting, another "low value" Berlin Interpretation factor, is somewhat distinct from the features of ASCII aesthetics. While both were in part determined by the technical requirements at the time, the dungeon environment also derives from the available cultural context of challenging game spaces provided by *Adventure* and *Dungeons & Dragons*. Most classical roguelikes still emphasize dungeon exploration, though not as an attempt to signify resistance to a perceived cheapening of commercial gameplay. As established, the dungeon setting remains popular in mainstream gaming. Instead, the dungeon provides a familiar environment within the classical roguelike community, easing legibility of its non-graphical play. Dungeon and fantasy tropes also provide a baseline thematic set of understood concepts that have been mechanically reinterpreted across many roguelikes. Familiar aesthetics of medieval weaponry, magical potions and scrolls, and dungeon-dwelling monsters can all be expressed innovatively through a new expression of mechanics.

The most modern classical roguelike I analyze, *Brogue*, bears special mention for its aesthetic approach. It uses the traditional ASCII interface for means beyond the functional. It deliberately and conspicuously creates an eye-catching display using only ASCII. *Brogue* alters the background colours of each cell of its title page, painting a blocky animated fire behind the game's opening menu. The game uses the same effect to depict the more ephemeral features of the dungeon environment encountered during gameplay, such as rippling water and colourful gases. These animations continue playing between turns while waiting for the player's next input. Also by altering the colour and brightness of the interface, the game clearly communicates areas the avatar can and cannot see, as well as light sources and the effects of fires. These all have major significance for gameplay, but the While the ASCII interface is typically a sign of nostalgic *Brogue* uses it as a medium for both graphical impressiveness and clear visual communication of important gameplay elements.

Figure 7: An adventurer confronts the denizens of the deepest depths of Brogue's *Dungeons of Doom.*

Aesthetically, the classical roguelike dungeon started as a technical convenience. In more modern roguelikes, the dungeon still provides generic identification similar to the continued use of ASCII as a "cultural choice" (Johnson 120). It also provides an aid to the legibility of the new forms of interaction that the roguelike aims to showcase.

Classical Roguelike Narrative

Classical roguelikes' focus on gameplay intentionally backgrounds their narratives. They provide minimal narrative framing that focuses strictly on the goal found in the dungeon depths.

In the significant strand of classical roguelikes studied here, all gameplay occurs in a dungeon, so conclusions about the wider game world are strictly inferences. The dungeons are full of the typical fantasy dungeon trappings, like inhuman monsters, magic potions, gold coins and medieval weapons

and armour. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the dungeon fulfills much the same purpose in the game world of a classical roguelike as it does in games like *MMVI* where the non-dungeon world is represented. That said, without the quest prompts of such a game, there is not even narrative justification for dungeons' existence or ability to cause problems for the world outside. It is also difficult to read heterotopic functions into the random dungeons

The two character poles of heroism and acquisitiveness that were implied by dungeon interactions remain intact across the classical roguelike tradition. With the genre's narrative simplicity and foregrounding of interaction, there is little information on the protagonist's character. They are the quintessential avatar, existing only as an extension of the player. What little information is given is defined by the quest objective. *Rogue* asks the player to descend through the "Dungeons of Doom" and recover the "Amulet of Yendor." Subsequent classical roguelikes, including *NetHack* and *Brogue* do not alter this objective at all, keeping even the names "Amulet of Yendor" and "Dungeons of Doom" as deliberate self-identification with a longstanding gaming tradition[31]. Whether the quest for the Amulet of Yendor is driven by greed or by altruism is left to the player's imagination. As with *MMVI*'s tradition, successful dungeon exploration results in the acquisition of large amounts of wealth. The uncertain positioning of dungeon adventurers between hero and looter survives in the roguelike dungeon. The lack of narrative specificity lets the player choose their own interpretation of the avatar's actions. Unlike games with more narrative aspirations like *MMVI*, there is limited information to conflict with a preferred narrative interpretation. If players prefer, they can even ignore the unobtrusive story elements. As Juul states, "It is a common characteristic that with sustained playing of the same game, the player may become less interested in the representational/fictional level of the game and more focused on the rules of the game" (139). This is especially true of the classical roguelike as it is designed to be replayed many times.

Rogue is barely a quest game, to use Aarseth's definition. While it is a game that can be won with "mere movement from position A to position B" ("Wumpus" 497), the game's difficulty makes such an achievement incredibly rare. Most plays result only in the acquisition of points, represented by treasure, which Aarseth positions in opposition to quest structures. The roguelike genre is enjoyable not

---

31 *NetHack* frames each playthrough as a divinely-inspired quest and the protagonist as a chosen of a deity. Nevertheless, the goal of the quest remains the same – claim the Amulet of Yendor, escape with it, and offer it to the appropriate divine patron.

only when the central quest is completed, but through navigating the myriad emergent challenges along the way. The storytelling elements of classical roguelikes are intentionally thin, appealing to nostalgic values and to further foreground gameplay. While the dungeon space and the challenges therein are redrawn each playthrough, the quest framing stays the same every time.

NetHack specifically takes advantage of its undefined game world outside the dungeon to expand the range of thematically acceptable content within the dungeon. Its dungeons contain references to specific mythologies and literary works. It does not identify itself as taking place within the settings of those works, as multiple references from different sources can enter play during the same game. Sometimes, this lack of setting specificity simply provides flavour. Sometimes, it opens new possibilities for thematic interpretation, such as when the player selects the "Samurai" starting class. In such games, many dungeon items are identified by Japanese names instead of English ones. Setting vagueness even allows for anachronistic character concepts, like the Archaeologist (outfitted with the signature bullwhip and fedora of Indiana Jones) or the Tourist (equipped with a camera and Hawaiian shirt). These more modern archetypes contribute to the less serious tone *NetHack* in particular strikes in regards to its dungeons. Without an external world to remain consistent with, the designers are free to implement ideas that drive interesting interaction without regard for thematic consistency. The core dungeon trappings remain intact, but can expand to include a wider set of thematic generic elements. The foregrounding of interaction in roguelikes can drive development based on what would be fun, rather than what would be consistent. The dungeon in *NetHack* is a playground for both player and designer, where both can try out many different forms of interaction and representation while remaining grounded in the fundamental characteristics of the dungeon space. In this regard, roguelike depictions of dungeons strengthen the association between the dungeon as a space where the player's action is privileged, where the dungeon exists as a space of freedom for the player to explore and act however they wish.

Classical roguelikes use the dungeon environment to foreground interaction. Through the expansion of classical roguelikes, especially within highly complex roguelikes like *NetHack* that permit many forms of possible interaction, the dungeon environment loses its strict association with structured quests and even with coherent presence in a game world. In the roguelike tradition, the dungeon is both a convenient setting for the kind of interaction-first gameplay the genre values and a signal of

identification for a specific niche genre tradition. Like ASCII art, the dungeon setting works as "an explicit declaration of intent" (Johnson 119) that a particular game actively participates in a genre.

"Second Wave" Dungeon Roguelikes: Hybridization

By today, classical roguelikes are something of an "entertainment niche" (Garda, "Neo-rogue" 3). While they do retain an active fanbase of creators and players – some classical roguelikes including *NetHack* have undergone periodic updates for decades (RogueBasin, "*NetHack*") – they lack the popularity they once held. However, design principles of the roguelike have found their way into contemporary indie game design. As Garda describes, beginning with the initial release of *Spelunky* (2008), indie game developers began using features from the roguelike in decidedly non-classical ways ("Neo-rogue" 6). These games featured the random level generation and the "permadeath" of the classical roguelike, but integrated them with new thematics, aesthetics, and mechanics. For these games, the 'roguelike' term is used as a marketing and descriptive term that promises replayability, challenge, and high-stakes play[32].

Garda correctly acknowledges that these neo-rogues feature a diversity of settings. While true, there are several neo-rogues that retain dungeon settings. Those that do typically foreground some kind of thematic, tonal, or mechanical innovation to set themselves apart from the typical fantasy dungeon game. Garda identifies this process of "hybridization" as a defining and deliberate characteristic of neo-rogues, setting it in contrast to the classical roguelike's concentration on "purity" ("Neo-rogue" 8). This hybridization results in new thematic genres matched to roguelike gameplay beyond the conventional dungeon crawl.

What follows are brief analyses of four neo-rogues with dungeon settings whose design emphasizes this process of hybridization to some degree. Each uses the familiar dungeon as a foundation for hybridization. *Dungeons of Dredmor* layers a gently satirical tone over a very traditional roguelike system of gameplay; *Crypt of the NecroDancer* hybridizes a roguelike dungeon crawler with a rhythm game; and *Rogue Legacy*, while subverting almost every roguelike characteristic, blatantly

---

32 In her argument against the continued use of the term, Short also extracts "mastery," "improvisation," and "mystery" as other game experiences the term can be used to promise.

appeals to the roguelike tradition in several ways, including the use of a conventional dungeon. Finally, *Slay the Spire* combines several characteristics of the above games; it imports a mode of interaction from an external existing game genre and grounds this potentially unfamiliar idea in a dungeon setting.

Dungeons of Dredmor: The Dungeon Is Funny

Dungeons of Dredmor (2011) is an example of a game from Garda's "second wave" of commercial interest in roguelikes. Mechanically speaking, it is the second wave roguelike most similar to classical roguelikes. It starts the player inside a multi-level randomized dungeon. The dungeon is a square grid that the player navigates in a sequence of turns, alternating between the player and all monsters on the level. The player's objective is to descend to the lowest level and defeat a powerful enemy, rather than claim a fantastic treasure, but the objective is roughly the same. What *Dungeons of Dredmor* adds to the classical roguelike formula is graphics, animation, and a satiric take on the roguelike and the fantasy dungeon.

Dungeons of Dredmor is a game that is intentionally working within the classical roguelike tradition. It advertises itself as a more accessible roguelike thanks to its mouse interface. It essentially fulfills all of the Berlin Interpretation's high-value criteria, being a game where the player maneuvers across a grid-based dungeon in a sequence of turns, killing many monsters. Character death is permanent and unrecoverable[33], and the dungeon is randomly created each playthrough. It explicitly acknowledges its connection to *Rogue* in-game; the hardest of *Dredmor*'s difficulty settings is called "Going Rogue." The currency used in the game, the "zorkmid," is the same as the one used in *NetHack*. The game clearly identifies itself as a descendent of the roguelike tradition.

 Dredmor is a work of homage and gentle parody of dungeon crawling games, specifically roguelikes. *Dungeons of Dredmor* reframes the dungeon, specifically the roguelike dungeon, as a space of ridiculous comedy. It highlights the lethal absurdity of the roguelike genre in its small amount of narrative framing. "It is the time for a **Hero**," reads the opening narrative text, "Unfortunately, that Hero is **You**." This gallows humour undercuts the epic narrative common to mainstream fantasy RPGs

---

33 This is an optional setting that may be turned off at the start of a new game. By default, dying deletes the associated saved games.

like *MMVI*, and even present in the playground-like dungeons of *NetHack*. It positions the protagonist more toward the 'heroic' end of the heroic/acquisitive dichotomy, but subverts the heroic narrative by pointing out how dangerous a hero's role is, especially in roguelikes. Depicted in cartoonish art style, the adventurer in *Dredmor* resembles the "thin-armed, poorly-prepared adventurers barely clinging to life, or surrounded by ravenous monsters deep underground" of retro tabletop dungeon crawling games (Gillespie and Crouse, "There and Back Again" 464) celebrated for their high rates of mortality and functional interchangeability – a quality that defines the roguelike adventurer even more than the classic *D&D* player character.

While some of *Dredmor*'s jokes are simply absurd, others rely on the dungeon setting. *Dredmor*'s comedic constructions operate mostly on the aesthetic level. The game's art style clearly communicates its general whimsical and irreverent tone. Its comedy mainly relies on outlandish nonsequiturs, such as the presence of aggressive mobile vegetables and moustaches, or the inherent humour of the word "lutefisk," but other humour comes from parody of dungeon games. The game includes subversions of the expectations imposed by the dungeon setting, usually through the insertion of anachronistic objects. Not only do the *Dredmor* dungeons contain shops reminiscent of *NetHack*'s, they also contain vending machines selling both food and weaponry. Characters skilled in blacksmithing can smelt naturally occurring "plastic ore" into ingots and make weapons and armour from them. These jokes rely on an understanding of what does and does not 'belong' in the dungeon.

The game attempts to complicate the linear – and often unobtainable – quest structure of the typical roguelike. It introduces procedurally generated quests, requiring the player to defeat a certain group of enemies or recover a particular quest object for a reward. It is through these "sidequests" that *Dredmor* deploys its most pointed instance of satire of dungeon fantasy games. To receive a sidequest, a player must find and pray to a statue of "Inconsequentia, Goddess of Sidequests." The game acknowledges that embedding extraneous, randomly generated quests is not likely to result in satisfying narrative, and that players pursue such quests in dungeon games mainly for the mechanical rewards. These prosaic tasks often take on overblown narrative importance, especially when they are optional. This satire is directed not just at the roguelike, but the fantasy roleplaying game tradition, where optional quests are given great significance and urgency in their narrative framing but are left up to the player to decide if and when they want to pursue them.

Crypt of the NecroDancer: The Dungeon Is Accommodating

     Crypt of the NecroDancer (2014) by Brace Yourself Games also layers a foreign concept over a more-or-less classic roguelike formula. In this case, though, the game's claim to innovation is its unique style of input – one based on rhythm. *Crypt of the NecroDancer* is the kind of genre fusion that takes advantage with a presumed familiarity with the dungeon setting. It has many of the mechanical, aesthetic, and narrative qualities of a classical roguelike, which it fuses with basic idea of a rhythm game. This game clearly illustrates the cultural utility of the dungeon genre to game creators in search of novelty.

     Crypt of the NecroDancer maps rhythm game mechanics onto those that very closely resemble a classical roguelike. The player controls a single character moving around a square grid dungeon – full of rooms, corridors, traps, and enemies – is randomly generated each playthrough. Death results in a complete reset of the game back to the beginning. The game has a steady soundtrack[34], the beat of which is represented visually at the bottom of the screen. Commands given by the player are only accepted if they coincide with the beat of the game. Enemies in the dungeon act on the offbeat regardless of whether or not the player managed to successfully time their action. Defeating enemies grants greater rewards if the player has maintained a streak of successful inputs – a mechanic common to rhythm games. The nature of interaction and challenge is similar to *Rogue*, but it is possible to miss a turn, which can prove fatal in a game where absolute command over position in space is essential to success. Compounding this importance are some tweaks to the normal roguelike formula: combats take fewer hits to resolve conclusively one way or another, damage suffered by the player character does not dissipate naturally, and upgrades to player attacks are more likely to alter how the player's attacks interact with the dungeon grid rather than damage or other more abstract mechanics. The game mitigates this difficulty by precisely determining monster behaviour. While some act like the monsters in *Rogue*, running directly toward the player character to attack, enemies more commonly have fixed patterns of movement dependent on their type. Different weapons the player can find change how their attacks affect space, similarly to *Brogue*. This makes the game more solvable than a classical roguelike;

---

34   Some challenges vary the regularity of the soundtrack to add difficulty.

there are optimal paths through each random dungeon that avoid all danger, but the challenge is in identifying and pursuing those paths within the constraints set by the rhythm mechanic.

Aesthetically, *Crypt of the NecroDancer* follows the retro style of the "neo-rogue" as defined by Garda. It uses pixel art not out of necessity but in a deliberate display of appreciation for gaming forms of the past. The game's unique mechanics inform its aesthetics and storytelling elements. All animations in the game are timed to the beat, creating a dance-like moving image. The game capitalizes on this by animating some of its monsters as performing dance moves. Some enemies are musicians or hostile musical instruments. There are more references to music throughout, such as the names of some playable characters "Cadence," "Melody," and "Aria." The musical theme coincides with the appearance of a typical dungeon setting; its characters are featured bearing weapons and tools of dungeon exploration, like shovels and torches popular in artistic representations of dungeon explorers (Gillespie and Crouse, "There and Back Again" 457), and the dungeons are full of classic dungeon monsters like animated skeletons, bats, dragons, minotaurs, and hostile mushrooms[35].

Crypt of the NecroDancer layers a different genre's form of interaction over top of a familiar dungeon formula. The mechanical genres of rhythm game and turn-based roguelike fuse elegantly, providing a new dimension of challenge to both parent genres. Roguelike decision-making must be done quickly and precisely, and rhythm gameplay must be partnered with successful navigation of simulated space. The dungeon provides a familiar template for this mash-up of genres. The player knows that everything might be trying to kill them, and they should explore to find treasure, equipment, and the exit to a deeper, harder level.

For *Crypt of the NecroDancer,* the dungeon is a familiarizing tool. The game draws attention to itself with its novel combination of interactive forms. Players are likely already familiar with the general aims and styles of movement in the dungeon, so can focus on mastering the more expertise-based rhythm mechanics. The dungeon is a flexible enough space to accommodate the drastic layering of another form of interaction.

---

35 The second dungeon area appears as a wilderness space, but it operates like a dungeon. The player still descends through multiple levels of wilderness. Notably, the wilderness dungeon is full of dangerous or outright hostile fungi, recalling Gillespie and Crouse's identification of mushrooms as staples of otherworldly fantasy ("There and Back Again" 456).

Rogue Legacy: The Dungeon Is Tradition

Rogue Legacy (2013) actively signals its intent of operating in conversation with the roguelike tradition. While changing or weakening almost every other aspect of the roguelike definition, it maintains a dungeon setting to preserve its connection to the heritage it claims through thematic links.

From the game's title, it is evident that *Rogue Legacy* aims to position itself as a descendent of the roguelike tradition. Despite this overt self-identification, *Rogue Legacy* is one of the games discussed in this chapter with the fewest similarities to *Rogue. Rogue Legacy* is a real-time action platforming game. The player must run through the game's dungeon[36] while viewing it side-on, instead of overseeing play on a traditional grid-based map. They must battle the dungeon's denizens with carefully timed reflexes and rapid button inputs, in stark contrast to the typically turn-based roguelike.

The "Legacy" in *Rogue Legacy* refers to a significant subversion of the roguelike formula. *Rogue Legacy* considers "random environment" and "permadeath" flexible principles that can be played with. There is explicit continuity between each playthrough. After concluding a run, the player can elect to "lock" the dungeon to challenge the same dungeon again with reduced rewards. Defeated dungeon bosses do not reappear in future runs. After a playthrough, the player can spend treasure they found to permanently upgrade all future characters. Many other neo-rogues, including *Crypt of the NecroDancer* and *Slay the Spire,* unlock different optional starting conditions as the player achieves certain goals while playing, but they do not indelibly alter future plays to the extent of *Rogue Legacy*. The upgrades the player can purchase range from minor improvements to one of many numerical character statistics to significant new capabilities, like being able to jump multiple times without touching the ground or the ability to survive lethal damage by random chance. At the beginning of *Rogue Legacy*, unspent treasure is lost at the start of a new game, but even this nod toward the separation of playthroughs is diminished through dungeon discoveries and permanent upgrades that let the player save currency between expeditions. In classical roguelikes and even most neo-rogues, the only continuity between games is a memorial of previous attempts and the potential to learn the game

---

36   The game calls its dungeon a "Castle," but it functions as a dungeon. The lowest, darkest, hardest part of the castle is called the "Dungeon." It is decorated with appropriate imprisonment and torture devices.

better. While the game does have affordances for improving skill through player experience – enemies have animations that signal their intentions that the player can learn to read – success in *Rogue Legacy* can be achieved through the accumulation of power through long-term play. Dungeon rewards do not increase the likelihood of success for the current expedition; instead they add to the gradual progression across one of many metrics that make future player characters incrementally more capable of taking on the dungeon's predetermined challenges.

Rogue Legacy represents its 'legacy' mechanics through its thematics. The narrative framing for the succession of dungeon expeditions is one of a medieval noble family's generation-spanning quest to atone for a supernatural crime committed by an ancestor. In place of a classic roguelike's high-score-list memorial for dead player characters, *Rogue Legacy* has a series of family portraits listing the class, accomplishments, and randomly-selected quirks of each previous playthrough. Each new character's starting specialty and quirks must be selected from a short list of three randomly generated "heirs" of the previous generation. Players do not undertake successive futile dungeon quests to sharpen their skills or hope conditions are more favourable this time; they do so to improve the effectiveness of their 'descendants' in future runs.

Rogue Legacy presents the cyclical playing and replaying through randomized environments as the most significant aspect of the roguelike tradition that it claims, but not so significant that they cannot be interfered with. It seizes on the opportunity to design mechanics and thematics that soften – or make mandatory – the permanence of death emblematic of the roguelike genre. The game takes on a dynamic of gradual accumulation absent from the typical roguelike experience. The dungeon setting remains useful to *Rogue Legacy* to connect it to the generic tradition it clearly evokes through its naming and design.

Slay the Spire: The Dungeon is Weird

The most recent game examined in this chapter is *Slay the Spire,* in public development from 2017 to its official release in 2019. It combines several of the approaches to roguelikes and to dungeons

seen in the other neo-rogues above. Like many neo-rogues, it claims the roguelike label mainly on the basis of its randomly-generated environments and its "permadeath" characteristics.

Like *Crypt of the NecroDancer*, *Slay the Spire* imports the mechanical basis from another established genre to the dungeon setting. *Slay the Spire* borrows mechanical principles from deck-building tabletop card games, such as the pioneering deck-builder, *Dominion*[37] (Vaccarino 2008). As the player ascends the dungeon, they add, remove, and upgrade cards in a virtual deck that represents their character's available options in combat. The game only occasionally makes an effort to provide a coherent representational rationale for the understanding of 'cards.'

Slay the Spire uses an abstracted map of intersecting nodes to depict its dungeon space. The style and traversal function of the map is reminiscent of major non-dungeon neo-rogue, *FTL: Faster Than Light* (2012). Rather than the representational maps of grid-based roguelikes, it presents the dungeon as an abstract set of rules. Each node on the map could correspond to different modes of play. They can be battles, where the player fights for rewards but risks losing non-replenishing health. Some battles are "Elites" – more difficult, but offering greater rewards. Campsites let the player heal or improve their cards. Shops provide new cards and permanent upgrades as well as the ability to remove one card per visit for a price. Treasure chests reward the player, but usually are limited to fixed milestones in the dungeon. Some nodes are mysterious, leading to any of the above or random events where the player must make a decision. The map informs the player of the type of encounter on each level at the outset of each Act and shows the connections between them. The player must move upward after every encounter. Navigating the dungeon space in *Slay the Spire* is a question of gauging acceptable amounts of risk and plotting a course along the network of routes that maximizes returns. It is a question of strategy and risk-assessment based on partial information similar to the tactical decisions one makes in a classical roguelike, but in an entirely different format. *Slay the Spire* reincorporates navigation ideas from more abstracted games like *FTL* back into the dungeon setting, representing the dungeon on a largely functional level reminiscent of *Dungeons & Dragons*' assertion that "a dungeon is really nothing but an adventure flowchart" (Cook 58).

---

37 The dungeon-crawl genre has also caught on in this sub-genre of tabletop card game. *Thunderstone* (Elliott 2009) was the first game to adapt deck-building mechanics to a dungeon setting, and *Clank!* (Dennen 2016) is another.

Slay the Spire is light on narrative context for its adventures. It works to make its titular dungeon strange and unfamiliar, despite starting from the generic dungeon idea. The Spire is, presumably, alive and malevolent[38], and the player character is trying to kill it. Even that much narrative context must be inferred, largely from the title. No additional quest details are provided; but the mechanics only permit the player to move closer to the final confrontation with the Spire's enormous heart. Noncombat encounters include chance encounters with sadistic game show hosts, powerful capricious spirits, and pushers of strange alchemical steroids. These odd encounters fit strangely coherently with the game's overall presentation of the dungeon as massive, malevolent, and unknowable. Some of these encounters as well as the place's frequent shops strain the coherence of the game world, such as the shopkeeper's deliberate acknowledgement of the mechanics through their "Card Removal Service."

Unlike the other contemporary roguelikes discussed above, *Slay the Spire* does not pursue a 'retro' aesthetic. It is content to let the dungeon serve a functional purpose without conspicuously claiming participation in a fondly-remembered tradition. In avoiding established representational tropes, *Slay the Spire* creates a dungeon space that, while functionally familiar and palatable, reclaims a measure of mystery – a key source of dungeon exploration's appeal (Cook 58) – absent from generic deployments of the dungeon setting as in *Rogue Legacy*.

Rogue and Roguelikes Conclusions

Dungeons defined the space of play for the original roguelike through both their cultural availability and their technical suitability to early computers. The classical roguelike tradition continued forward thanks to the inherent replayability of the format. Even after computer RPGs with advanced graphics like *MMVI* achieved highest prominence in the computer RPG genre, roguelike development and enjoyment continued in a nostalgic bid to stave off the perceived loss of complexity by the most modern graphical games (Johnson 119). The dungeon setting remained useful to classical roguelike development both for the practical reasons it was used for *Rogue* in the first place and for nostalgic reasons, signalling a connection to a preferred form of play.

---

38   Similar to *13th Age*'s "living dungeons"

The ways in which dungeons construct meaning as detailed in Chapter One remain intact within the roguelike genre, but with different degrees of intensity. Reading a dungeon as a heterotopia in a game with no non-dungeon spaces is possible, but not as distinct nor as meaningful. They still fulfill the vital real-world social function of indicating to the player what forms of interaction and representation they should expect. The solitary one-against-all gameplay of the classical roguelike also suggests the player character is trespassing in a forbidden space. Nevertheless, the distinct fictional role of the roguelike dungeon is less of a factor in appreciating the dungeon space, as the fictional framing of the genre – typically light to begin with – diminishes through the kind of repeated play roguelikes assume and demand.

Representations of dungeons in classical roguelikes are laden with large amounts of information, but little of it is narrative. Roguelike gameplay complexity is high, but narrative complexity is low, allowing for the gameplay-first procedural nature of the genre. The stable quest frame of 'get to the end' provides the minimum of progression-based logic for these games of near-total emergence to have a quantifiable outcome.

The assumption of the dungeon as a space for players to master is diminished by the procedural nature of the roguelike. The player cannot safely assume a dungeon has been designed to be overcome when it has no designer. The random nature of roguelike dungeons can result in 'unfair' situations. Exploring random dungeons is less an act of guaranteed eventual progression than a process of continually adapting tactics to the available information. Roguelikes' signature 'permadeath' mechanic further weakens this assumption, as does the tendency of some classical roguelikes to make monsters' capabilities similar to those of the player (RogueBasin, "Berlin Interpretation"); players are neither as safe nor as privileged when monsters can open doors. The focal point of classical roguelikes remains the player, as all objects in the dungeon exist as exploitable resources or threats to the player.

The roguelike genre's continuous reinterpretation of dungeons have expanded the dungeon convention. When dungeons are the only sites of play and the genre celebrates new forms of interaction, new forms of interaction must necessarily emerge in the dungeon. An example that has found purchase within dungeon games is the in-dungeon shop seen in *NetHack*. Relegated to towns in

games with more expansive, coherent game worlds, shops appear in dungeons in both classical and contemporary roguelikes, including *Dungeons of Dredmor*, *Crypt of the NecroDancer,* and *Slay the Spire*. Intrusions of incoherent elements like these facilitate new forms of play. They return to centring the player as the main 'subject' of dungeon space, as these shops exist only for the player's use and benefit. These kinds of intrusion demonstrate the dungeon concept's flexibility. They are acceptable incoherencies because the player can "resort to explaining the events of the game by appealing to the rules" (Juul 130). Nevertheless, designers are often compelled to fit the aesthetics of such intrusions to the particular appearance of the dungeon setting, such as *Crypt of the NecroDancer*'s singing Shopkeeper or *Slay the Spire*'s masked Merchant.

Neo-rogues that feature dungeons often do so as a means of conspicuous hybridization. Thanks to the prevalence of the generic dungeon, designers can distinguish their works by presenting the dungeon with a non-standard tone, such as in *Dungeons of Dredmor,* or a foreign mode of interaction, as seen in the other three neo-rogue case studies. The dungeon works as a generic foundation to "express a range of intended play-experiences" (Arsenault 171) while the extraneous elements attract players with their conspicuous displays of innovation.

One final noteworthy thread among the neo-rogue dungeon games is the increased prominence of dramatic fictional frames applied to dungeon delving. All four neo-rogues in this chapter attempt to give their main characters a personal stake in the dungeon quest. This quality is present and forms the crux on which my final chapter's case study, *Darkest Dungeon*, narratively transforms the dungeon space.

Chapter Three

Darkest Dungeon: The Transformed Dungeon

Darkest Dungeon (2016) subverts the normative generic vocabulary of dungeon spaces to become a horror game. It employs the spatial tropes of the dungeon, relying on a presumed familiarity with dungeon games. However those tropes are recontextualized through deliberate design decisions to elicit a different emotional and intertextual response than the typical dungeon game. Like *Dungeons of Dredmor*'s whimsical comedy, it is an effort to shift the tone of the dungeon game genre. Unlike *Dredmor*, this shift permeates every dimension of the game's presentation. Through this generic shift, *Darkest Dungeon* provides an excellent example of the latitude for creativity afforded by the dungeon genre.

Darkest Dungeon is an independently-produced video game bearing many of the traits of Garda's "neo-rogue" classification, notably hybridization ("Neo-rogue" 8). *Darkest Dungeon* borrows some precepts from the roguelike, like random environments and permadeath, but implements them in different ways. *Darkest Dungeon* uses a wide spread of horror genre conventions, from the personal and Gothic to the existential and cosmic. Where *Dredmor* took an established style of game and layered comedic aesthetics and prose over top, *Darkest Dungeon* is a work of greater deliberateness in its design.

In *Darkest Dungeon*, the player assumes the role of an inheritor of a noble house fallen to ruin. They must recruit, equip, train, and dispatch "heroes" into the randomly-generated dungeons that lie beneath or around the ancestral home. The story begins with a letter from the player character's "Ancestor", confessing his descent into moral depravity and the use of evil magic that has brought ruin to his name, his family line, his lands, and his castle. He begs the player character to set things right, then kills himself. From there, gameplay begins. Each fictional week, the player must guide a party of adventurers from their roster through one of many available dungeon quests. As the player confronts various benchmark challenges at their discretion, the player discovers snippets of the stories of the corresponding forces, people, and creatures that contributed to the Ancestor's downfall. Eventually, the

player can challenge the "Darkest Dungeon" where they must tackle a series of unique and difficult challenges over several expeditions in order to win the game.

Aesthetically, the game draws much from the conventional dungeon setting exemplified by *MMVI*. *Darkest Dungeon*'s landscapes, architecture, and names all invoke a pastiche of medieval Europe common to many dungeon games. It conveys its intended tone through stylized visuals and sound design. *Darkest Dungeon*'s 2D animation art is gloomy, featuring heavy black lines, muted colours, and Gothic flourishes around the edges of the interface, and its soundscape is dominated by a gravelly-voiced narrator providing grave commentary to the player's actions in overwrought verbiage.

Darkest Dungeon features two main modes of gameplay: dungeon expeditions and town management. These modes are formally separate, unlike the more consistent simulation of space seen in *MMVI*. The player guides adventurers through the dungeons to acquire various items of value that the game uses as currencies. The player can spend those currencies in the Hamlet to improve the town's infrastructure and tend to the mental and physical health of the adventurers. Developing the town lets the player strengthen and customize their adventurers, letting them challenge greater and greater threats. The division between the dungeon as a space of reward and the town as a space for commerce seen in prior case studies like *MMVI* is once again reified by strictly dividing the style and aim of play in each.

Many dungeon games or dungeon settings within games, as I have already demonstrated in *Might and Magic VI,* use visual and auditory trappings of horror to present their dungeons as spaces of threat. However, *Darkest Dungeon* allows these trappings and more aesthetic choices of horror to persist beyond the dungeon's boundaries to convey an overriding sense that it is a 'horror game.'

The dungeon space in *Darkest Dungeon* has great acknowledged textual significance. That much is evident from the title. The opening cinematic that establishes the narrative premise for the game punctuates the titular phrase with textual and auditory emphasis. This sequence also centres the dungeon in the narrative, where it remains through the game's plot. In gameplay too, player activity is all about exploring dungeons or preparing to explore dungeons. It is more than a game featuring dungeons. It is a game that very deliberately foregrounds the dungeon concept with the aim of

recontextualizing it. It presents itself as a game about a dungeon in ways that not even games that take place entirely in dungeons do.

What distinguishes *Darkest Dungeon* from other dungeon games is not only what dungeon tropes it does or does not use, but how it presents them. With only a few tweaks to emphasize the menace inherent in dungeon spaces, the dungeon spaces become sites of horror – or at least the possibility of horror. It is a horror that can be struggled against and potentially overcome, like in the heroic fantasy that so often accompanies dungeon games, but the mechanics, aesthetics, and narrative all provide affordances for a tragic or horror-based interpretation.

Darkest Dungeon is not the only game to take advantage of the dungeon concept and adjust it to fit a new context, nor is horror the only genre the dungeon is suited to shifting to. For example, the tabletop roleplaying game *Torchbearer,* frames the dungeon as a space of desperation. In *Torchbearer*, exploring dungeons is the only opportunity for survival in a depressed economic region; "there are no jobs, no inheritance, no other opportunities for deadbeat adventurers like [the player characters]" (Olavsrud 4). *Darkest Dungeon* stands out as a game to examine closely thanks to its generic similarity to the other games investigated in this thesis. It deploys many of the same dungeon traditions as *MMVI* or any number of roguelikes, but situates them differently. These differences are accentuated by the games' conceptual proximity to one another.

Horror: Affect and Culture

To prove that *Darkest Dungeon* successfully translates the dungeon setting into a horror mode, it is necessary to consider what 'horror' is and how it functions in the context of digital games. The most obvious qualification for an artistic work to be labelled horror is for it to create a fearful response in its audience. This is a troublesome enough definition when applied to non-interactive media, as it depends on the subjectivity of the audience. Carl Therrien, in his historical overview of horror video games, highlights this issue of subjectivity as a refutation of simplistic categorizations of horror fiction as those that necessarily require "the fearful experience of the reader" (29). He suggests that horror arises in a text when the reader's stand-in is confronted with the unknown, provoking a "hesitation" about

85

accepting what is real (29). As subjective as it is, the importance of emotional impact on the receiver of horror media is central to its definition; a discussion of this genre requires a close look at the concept of affect.

Affect is the psychological term for "any experience of feeling or emotion." The idea can be further articulated "in terms of positive affect or negative affect[;] both mood and emotion are considered affective states" (APA, "Affect"). Positive affect "occurs when a goal has been attained, a source of threat has been avoided, or the individual is satisfied with the present state of affairs" (APA, "Positive Affect"), while negative affect is the reverse. While affective media in general does not rely solely on generating one or the other, horror media can be defined by its particular attention to the pursuit of certain kinds of negative affect. Scholar of horror video games Tanya Krzywinska finds it useful to consider affect as a form of "*potential,* the force that produces sensation and which grows in intensity to prepare the body for action" ("Gaming Horror's Horror" 294).

There are hallmark indicators for the techniques creators use to achieve horror. Horror game scholar Diane Carr draws from ideas of film narrative to essentialize the means for producing horror affect. She draws on film critic Robin Wood who forwards a "simple and obvious basic formula" for horror's ability to create the intended affect: "normality… threatened by the Monster" (Carr 65). Applying this formula to works with such a fantastical basis as *Darkest Dungeon*, and, to the fantasy games that most often feature dungeon settings, requires successfully identifying what 'normality' is. Carr even positions the *Dungeons & Dragons*-derived *Planescape Torment* as a counterpoint to horror, claiming its fantastical setting is one with "no normality to begin with" (65)[39]. Wood, however, promotes the adaptability of this formula to different generic contexts (190). As previous chapters have demonstrated, the dungeon setting can be understood by game players and creators as a very familiar kind of space; within games, dungeons *are* 'normality.' While, as we will see, the narrative of *Darkest Dungeon* does include a textual normality that is threatened, it also deliberately makes the 'normal' dungeon environment a source of stress – both for its characters and its players.

---

39 While *Planescape: Torment* is based on *Dungeons & Dragons*, it features a setting that is deliberately far removed from the typical fantasy roleplaying setting.

The particular qualities of the medium of games – most notably its interactivity and potential for nonlinearity – have significant implications for the techniques through which games evoke not just horror but any emotional response. Aki Järvinen outlines the ludic techniques for creating emotional play, which results in pleasure – techniques that include both mechanics and aesthetics. He provides a useful vocabulary for analyzing the types of emotions particular game states and game design decisions can provide for. Of particular utility to this thesis are his categorization of game-induced emotions[40] and the "pleasures" ("Emotional" 102) to which these emotions contribute. For Järvinen, "pleasure" is not necessarily a positive experience, and can include tragedy and horror, which he groups under the term "suffering" ("Emotional" 103). His methodology, which relies on analyzing particular "game states" for their emotional potential, is key to my reading of this game.

'Pure' affect is not the only criteria for identifying a text as a work of horror. Krzywinska warns against reductive readings of horror fiction that disregard the "cultural locatedness" ("Gaming Horror's Horror" 294) of the work in favour of only identifying sources of affect. "Horror [the genre]'s horror," she argues, "cannot be countenanced without placing focus on affect, yet affect must also be regarded in relation to text and context, representation and the symbolic" ("Gaming Horror's Horror" 297). Horror fiction has a generic tradition and accompanying set of signifiers that mark it as horror. As seen in previous case studies, dungeon games use the generic trappings of horror, such as torture paraphernalia and the presence of hostile living dead creatures, to present their dungeon spaces as sites of enticing danger, though they are rarely as spaces of actual menace. For *Darkest Dungeon* to successfully bring horror to the dungeon setting, it must establish a different context for these generic trappings, not only by using them to evoke a horrific affect, but by textually reframing them. Another digital media scholar, Laurie N. Taylor, argues for a solid division between these two approaches. She distinguishes horror as being "defined by affect" and frames media that is "best defined by its processes… in particular, by subversion or transgression of boundaries" as "the Gothic" (49). She concedes that the two concepts often contribute to one another, as they do in the case of *Darkest Dungeon*. My analysis of the game relies both on how it generates particular negative affective states and how it deploys and subverts the genre trappings of both dungeon fantasy games and existing traditions of horror fiction to recontextualize the dungeon space.

---

40 "Prospect-based," "fortunes-of-others," "attribution," "attraction," and "well-being" (90-92)

Krzywinska adapts another useful concept for interpreting horror games that is highly applicable to *Darkest Dungeon* – the "moral occult" ("Hands-On" 13). Her interpretation of this concept provides significant insight into the effectiveness of *Darkest Dungeon*'s attempts at horror, but the points at which the theory and game do not align are also instructive. She defines the moral occult[41] as "the project of making an invisible moral order apparent at a surface level" ("Hands-On" 13). Video games – especially horror games, but also common in the dungeon games previously discussed in this thesis – frequently involve this kind of thematic, as the player's avatar stands for a simplistic 'good' battling against the similarly basic understanding of 'evil' represented by the challenges of the game. Krzywinska applies this concept to the creation and design of game systems and environments, each featuring blatant constructs that either help or hinder the player. She argues that the tension between these forces creates a "dynamic between states of being in control and out of control" ("Hands-On" 14) that is central to the pleasure of playing horror games. This horror technique relies on interactivity and is unique to games. Though it uses different techniques to achieve this tension than the more action-oriented survival-horror games that Krzywinska holds up as emblematic examples of the horror game genre, *Darkest Dungeon* also uses this modulation of player control as a key component in its approach to eliciting horror. I will also demonstrate that through its narrative if not its mechanics, it tries to subvert the simplistic Manichean duality at the core of the moral occult in an effort to frame the game's narrative in a way that neither flatters nor empowers the player avatar.

Another recognized feature of horror games of particular use to this case study is the horror game's construction of threatening spaces. Diane Carr adapts Janet Murray's concept of a continuum between "maze" and "rhizome" to describe game structures meant to be navigated in a direct, forward-progressing manner and an open-ended, exploratory fashion, respectively (Carr 62). She argues that the horror game, typified by *Silent Hill*, can exploit the "maze" side of the spectrum to "fuel its ability to frighten its users" (64) by tightly controlling the played and viewed experience. Similarly, Krzywinska contends that spatial design in horror games relies on the tension between the necessity of exploration in order to continue playing the game and the increased risk that exploration brings ("Hands-On" 21). This sort of tension is present in the dungeon games previously discussed, but of particular significance to *Darkest Dungeon*. These two theories of the horror game space rely purely on its interactivity. Thematic components can create horror in a game space as well. As mentioned, horror is not merely a

---

41   She adapts the concept from Peter Brooks's analysis of Victorian melodrama.

product of affect, but exists in relation to cultural context as well. Ewan Kirkland identifies "a symbolic return to the family home" ("Engulfment" 77), now haunted or transformed, as a common horror fiction trope that extends frequently to horror games. *Darkest Dungeon* is no exception, situating its threatening spaces beneath the player character's family home.

To sum up, horror media attempts to create fearful affect in its audience, but that subjective measure is not the only criteria by which a work may be identified as horror. Horror must also be communicated through channels that reproduce or subvert existing cultural representations. These two fundamental pillars of the horror genre can be achieved through a variety of techniques, some of which are unique to games. The disruption of player control and the tension between the desire to explore game space and the hesitation are two significant examples I return to in my discussion of the game's mechanics. Firstly I analyze *Darkest Dungeon*'s deliberate engagement with the cultural identifiers of horror through its aesthetics.

Darkest Dungeon's Aesthetics

Darkest Dungeon very conspicuously distinguishes itself as a horror game through its aesthetics. The game uses the aesthetic trappings of horror media – including some specific horror traditions – to connect itself to horror conventions. Its visual and auditory aesthetics are also an immediately recognizable source of tension. As I have described, though, the typical dungeon space in games, as illustrated by *MMVI* and others, is often presented visually with signifiers of threat. Signs associated with death, torture, and unwholesome religious practices are common features of dungeon environments, so how does *Darkest Dungeon* reclaim these aesthetics from the domain of things to be conquered? How does it challenge the standard empowerment narrative that dungeon spaces communicate through their visual and auditory design while still making the game fun? The answers to those questions mainly rely on the game's mechanics and narrative. However, *Darkest Dungeon*'s aesthetics independently achieve a degree of horror-game cachet through their conspicuous stylization and appeal to existing horror genre fiction.

Visually, the game distinguishes itself from other dungeon games through its unique art style. The game is rendered in two dimensions, with limited animation. Heroes are only animated during *less* significant moments, such as traversing dungeon corridors without incident or waiting for one's next turn in battle. The game's significant moments, such as strikes in combat, triggering traps, and heroes succumbing to or overcoming stress, are usually depicted with dramatically framed still images. The game borrows visual storytelling techniques from comics to accentuate its most tense moments. Artistically, the game's look is very stylized, seemingly drawing inspiration from horror comics artist Mike Mignola. This visual similarity has also been noted by Tor Watten Melvær (34). Mignola and collaborators are responsible for the horror comics series *Hellboy* and various spinoffs, all unified by his distinctive visual style and composition.

Figure 8: A party of adventurers battles skeletons in the corridors of the Ruins.

Figure 9: Mike Mignola's cover to Hellboy in Hell #8. *Note the heavy black inks, the rectangular fingers, and the skeletons.*

Darkest Dungeon uses elements of both this style and composition to distinguish itself from the typical dungeon game as an effort towards horror. The interface is decorated with macabre baroque flourishes. The slab-like figures and digits of the characters are also reminiscent of Mignola's work. The art's linework also borrows from Mignola's style. Heavy black lines dominate the game's entire

artistic landscape. Characters, objects, and backgrounds are all drawn with thick black lines that emphasize their cragginess and darken the overall colour palette. The linework tarnishes the appearances of characters, objects, and places that would look majestic, comforting, or empowering in a more traditional fantasy game.

Darkest Dungeon's sound design contributes significantly to both its pursuit of negative affect and its connection to established horror media culture. In moments of action, the music is bombastic, with crashing orchestral sounds and squealing strings. Even in non-dungeon spaces, the game uses haunting melodies that are far from the reassuring pastoral soundtracks of the typical fantasy game exemplified by *MMVI*.

The most noteworthy feature of *Darkest Dungeon*'s horror soundscape is its narrator, known only as the Ancestor. The Ancestor, the man responsible for calling forth the evil that besets the Estate, who summons the player character to undo the darkness he has brought forth, and who takes his own life out of regret all before gameplay begins, provides frequent contextual commentary on the actions of the player and the nature of the game world, literally haunting the game world with his presence. He is the only voiced character in the game, as the heroes communicate only through text, and the player character does not speak at all. The Ancestor's voice[42] is deep and gravelly, and his commentary is grim in both tone and content. The Ancestor uses conspicuously overwrought vocabulary in his narration[43]. The narrator speaks a great many lines throughout the game, but several trends in his tone are worth noting. He usually emphasizes the bleakness and hopelessness of the setting, but can be celebratory when the situation calls for it – notably when he revels in a visceral description of a critical hit in combat (i.e. "A decisive pummelling!"). Sometimes his commentary is at odds with the gameplay situation, such as when he clinically warns, "Be wary. Triumphant pride precipitates a dizzying fall," after a player successfully defeats a group of enemies.

The narrator is a key component of the game creators' aesthetic efforts to achieve horror in the dungeon setting. His voice is both an immediately recognizable and constant example of stylization, and it is that stylization that sets much of the rest of the game into a horror context. This is achieved in

---

42 The Ancestor is voiced by Wayne June.
43 An example from an early point in the game: "The old road… winds with a troubling, serpent-like suggestion through the corrupted countryside, leading only, I fear, to evermore tenebrous places"]

part by appeal to established standards of the horror genre. The narration deliberately echoes the style of the horror writer H.P. Lovecraft, who popularized the subgenre of cosmic horror. The game counts "Lovecraftian" among its classification tags on the online game storefront Steam, and its studio's title, "Red Hook Studios" is a reference the title of a Lovecraft story, "The Horror at Red Hook." The narrator alludes to Lovecraft's style of cosmic horror with verbose pronouncements of all-consuming doom like, "The gateless gate: a maddening aperture to realms beyond human understanding." In a Master's thesis about Lovecraftian remediations in popular culture, Tor Watten Melvær notes the visual similarities between some of *Darkest Dungeon*'s curios and the imagery from Lovecraft's stories, specifically citing the "fish idol" found in the aquatic dungeon of the Cove (34). While the affective result of these stylistic allusions is dependent on the subjective experience of the player, they mark the game as an active participant in the cosmic horror genre tradition.

The narrator contextualizes common dungeon game trappings to be sources of horror. While visual signifiers of horror – skulls, torture paraphernalia, darkness, crumbling stone, the living dead, grotesque monsters – are common across dungeon games, they rarely are intended to provoke negative affect beyond motivating the player to view the dungeon as a challenging obstacle. While I argue that *Darkest Dungeon*'s mechanics are fundamentally appropriate for horror, without the context provided by the Ancestor's overwrought narration, the game would not read as a 'horror game' as clearly as it does. He frames battles as not just obstacles to overcome for a reward, which is how they function in the game mechanics, but as desperate scrambles for survival in the dark. The narrator interprets every action, including those that are strictly beneficial for the player's success, in the grimmest possible light. For example, on picking up treasure, an act which can only help the player, the Ancestor can muse, "If only treasure could staunch the flow of otherworldly corruption." The game's voiceless text does this too; acquired treasure is described in the inventory through grim analogies, such as "Blue like strangled dreams" for a stack of sapphires.

In the game's finale, *Darkest Dungeon* deploys a peculiarly ludic technique of sound design in pursuit of negative affect. Daniel Kromand identifies the potential for horror and confusion a game's soundscape can present by calling into question the validity of a sound cue. Sound in games, he states, frequently and unproblematically crosses the diegetic barrier; players recognize that sounds can communicate game information without necessarily 'happening' within the game world (17). "Diegetic

collapse" occurs when players can no longer identify the origin of a sound. He argues this is a technique used to elicit confusion and heightened tension in survival-horror games (18). *Darkest Dungeon*'s finale employs a variation on this technique with consequences beyond the immediate sense of disorientation Kromand describes in survival-horror. The game's final battle is against the Ancestor, his attempt at suicide from the opening to the game having not ended his life, but completed his transformation into "a herald, an avatar of the crawling chaos." As the player's chosen adventurers approach him, he relates the story of his transformation in a similar fashion to the way he recounts his many sins in the lead-up to the game's significant encounters against the various "bosses" of the Estate's dungeons. As the final battle begins, though, the Ancestor appears on-screen for the first time since his apparent suicide in the opening cut-scene, calling into question the diegetic level on which the Ancestor's narration has operated throughout the game. As his speech recontextualizes the player character's hard-won accomplishments to gestures of futility (q.v.), the player must also reconsider the constant presence of the Ancestor's narration in the game up to this point as a literal example of supernatural threat to the non-embodied player character instead of an enjoyable aesthetic flourish by the game designers.

Darkest Dungeon's aesthetic decisions mainly contribute to the 'cultural and genre context' pillar of horror, but they do operate on an emotional level as well. The game's conspicuous stylization evident in the interface design and presence of its narrator invite an appreciation of those elements themselves as aesthetic objects, invoking what Järvinen calls "attraction emotions" ("Emotional" 92) and what Perron refers to as "artefact emotions" ("Cognitive" 2). The game's narrative and mechanics use the context established by the aesthetics to attempt moments that truly engage negative affect, creating a horror experience.

Darkest Dungeon's Mechanics

Darkest Dungeon's mechanics are less beholden to existing mechanical traditions and direct simulation than the roguelikes discussed last chapter. Its design suggests greater deliberateness and imagination when applying dungeon tropes. It uses ideas and mechanics to represent many common dungeon tropes, but it reinvents many, recontextualizes others, and invents mechanics for concepts that

are not common to the genre. Its level of reinvention, plus the fact that this is a game that deliberately and conspicuously engages with the dungeon concept, means every mechanical decision deliberately contributes to the idea of the dungeon the creators want to convey. This is true with more conventional dungeon games as well, but *Darkest Dungeon* is less obviously derived from an existing ludic genre than last chapter's roguelikes. Instead, *Darkest Dungeon*'s mechanics reflect and recontextualize common dungeon traits to support its intended horror-game style. The mechanics constantly force the player into making difficult choices based on partial information. Its mechanics present multiple difficult dilemmas with significant stakes riding on the player's performance – stakes made more significant by the narrative and aesthetic weight placed on them. *Darkest Dungeon* takes concepts commonly presented in simulationist, representational terms in other dungeon games and abstracts them, making them sites to engage directly with the game rules in a strategic way.

The main source of negative affect in *Darkest Dungeon* derives from the design principles it reinterprets from the roguelike. *Darkest Dungeon* claims to be a "challenging gothic roguelike" in its marketing material. The most affecting roguelike trait it borrows is permanence. Because the player manages multiple adventurers instead of embodying a single one or cohesive group, "permadeath" does not mean the same thing it does for a classical – or nontraditional – roguelike. The game continuously saves the player's status. Should one adventurer die in a dungeon, the game does not force the player to restart under new conditions. The player must continue to play without the dead hero. This makes the current quest much more difficult – potentially resulting in more deaths – and sets back the player's progress toward the ability to challenge the endgame dungeon. The game constantly asks players to weigh the success of a quest against the dangers to their heroes. Complicity in the death of a hero and contemplating the risks of that complicity are the principal sources of *Darkest Dungeon*'s negative affect.

Key to understanding the effectiveness of *Darkest Dungeon*'s horror-building mechanics is Bogost's concept of "procedural rhetoric" (125). Bogost contends that game mechanics can be persuasive tools due to the player's active engagement with the set of rules that designers have employed – that they are "a new and promising way to make claims about *how things work"* (125). This argumentative form is expressed both by how game mechanics are designed but also by what they are designed to represent. *Darkest Dungeon* elects to represent concepts not typically modelled in the

dungeon game genre, most notably the stress that adventuring in dangerous dungeons inflicts on the adventurers. Bogost distinguishes between games that intentionally deploy procedural rhetoric to make commentary on the real world and games that focus on "themes of fantasy and power" (122), which would include most of my prior case studies and most dungeon games overall. *Darkest Dungeon,* I argue, makes procedurally-rhetorical claims targeted at those familiar with dungeon tropes. Essentially, the mechanics argue that dungeon exploration is a miserable experience for the characters involved. *Darkest Dungeon*'s most significant procedural claims do not have real-world referents. Instead, it makes claims about the dungeon genre itself. It achieves this both by modelling staple dungeon concepts in ways that promote negative affect and modelling phenomena foreign to the orthodox dungeon concept.

    Darkest Dungeon creates and presents its rules to players in ways that provide for particular affective responses. Carr generalizes that horror games conceal much of their mechanical basis. She positions the mysterious horror game in opposition to the "information-laced... RPG" (69), a term which could aptly describe *Darkest Dungeon.* However, *Darkest Dungeon*'s openly-stated mechanics are grounded in uncertainty, making every move a risk, though one that can be calculated using the game's generous informational interface. It often presents game states that put different facets of Järvinen's emotional framework into conflict with each other. Often, decisions that will provide for the most advantageous outcomes ("prospect-based emotions") are dependent on risking or harming the game's characters, prompting negative "fortunes-of-others emotions" (90-91). The game features a certain degree of chance in its combats and its randomized dungeon creation, which can lead to uncomfortable "attribution emotions" when the game's design or its depictions of agents within it are read as blameworthy. Here I draw out some of the more significant mechanical game states and analyze them based on their affordances in creating negative affect and as disruptive commentary on the dungeon adventure genre.

    Darkest Dungeon has one game mode for exploring dungeons and another for managing the adventurers who do the exploring and the town that provides for them. Both types of space are controlled and created by meaningful rules that develop the game's various tensions rather than appealing to simulation. Dungeons in *Darkest Dungeon* are flowchart-like combinations of rooms and corridors. The game makes plain the "symbolic and rule-based" nature of game space that Aarseth

describes as inherent to all game spaces. *Darkest Dungeon*'s game spaces are not designed to be simulations, like *MMVI,* or the simulation-like grid maps of *Rogue.* Spaces in *Darkest Dungeon* are clearly recognizable as game elements, similar to *Slay the Spire* but with less open information and more ability to maneuver at the player's direction. Each dungeon expedition begins in a benign room. Entering a dungeon randomly generates a floorplan unique to that expedition. Outside the entrance room, there are few certainties. The map begins as a blank representation of the halls and rooms, with details of their contents only filled in as players guide their adventurers through those spaces or by one of the adventurers "scouting" the area. Each time the adventuring party enters a room, there is a chance that one of the group will scout, marking surrounding rooms and corridor cells with indicators of their contents. These contents can be hostile creatures, treasures, "curios" (objects with varied effects based on some chance and some player interaction), obstacles, or traps. Some of these can only appear in rooms, some only in corridors. Rooms are most often, but not always, where the objectives of each quest are placed. Rooms are immediately explored by visiting them; while the player can move their heroes left and right along a room a small degree, this has no mechanical effect. Mechanically, all rooms are identical. The bounds of the space are not important. Only what the space contains matters to gameplay. This model of dungeon that can only be interacted with through the mediation of game rules is somewhere between Murray's "maze" (130) and "rhizome" (132) but leaning closer to the 'maze' end of the spectrum – the end that Carr argues is more supportive of a horror mode, thanks to its limited options.

Once a player has overcome any challenges in a room, they can choose a connecting room from the map and their heroes embark into the connecting corridor. The adventurers then can be directed along a two-dimensional route to the next room. This movement is always represented as proceeding from left to right on the screen. Adventurers can reverse course and move backwards along these routes before reaching the next room, but they move slower when they do so. From the middle of a corridor, it can be faster to finish moving forward, then embark again for the previous room than to start backtracking from part way along a corridor. This is not representative of real space. It is another abstract "reduction," to use Aarseth's term ("Allegories" 163), of space that incentivizes pressing the player's adventurers further, taking on further risk, rather than playing conservatively. The objective of a dungeon expedition can often be completed without fully exploring the space. When the objective is met, the player has the choice to return their heroes to the Hamlet – instantly, and without needing to

re-navigate the space – or to continue exploring, risking danger to those heroes in exchange for the possibility of greater reward. The player can accept more than the minimum amount of risk inherent in the exploration necessary to progress in order to advance more quickly, but must accept the consequences of that risk, which can manifest in delays in achieving the ultimate goal – negative prospect-based emotion – and guilt over the loss of a valued hero – a negative fortunes-of-others emotion.

This all goes to show the amount of rules-based abstraction that goes into creating dungeon spaces in *Darkest Dungeon*. It is not merely an abstraction of space. It also abstracts much of the non-embodied characters' engagement with that space. By expressing so much of its space through rules, the game encourages mastery of those rules in order to best navigate the space. Since many of those rules are dependent on chance, and every decision is permanently saved, the game's modelling of space places great responsibility on the player. As the game's direct address introductory text – one of the few instances of verbiage free of the game's stylized gothic horror trappings – states: "This game expects a lot from you."

How *Darkest Dungeon* represents light levels is a prime example of its abstract, rules-driven approach to repurposing common dungeon game concepts to create tense, risk-driven emotional game states. Mechanics simulating light levels and vision are common through many orthodox dungeon games, including *Might and Magic VI* and some of the roguelikes discussed in previous chapters. *Darkest Dungeon*'s abstracted light and darkness mechanics, like many concepts in the game, are implemented in a way that presents the player with a troublesome dilemma. Each expedition begins at 100% light. Each corridor space traversed reduces light by six percentage points, unless it has been previously explored. If previously explored, a corridor costs no less real time to travel through, but the characters' torches burn down more slowly, plausibly because they're moving more confidently through familiar space rather than exploring new places, but this incoherent gap must be filled in by the player's imagination. Each quartile of the light meter applies different advantages and disadvantages to the player. Light level directly and openly affects the game rules, rather than just making the screen brighter or more of the dungeon visible as it does in other case studies. High light levels make progress safer and more predictable. Low light levels make scouting less likely, improve chances of scoring critical hits on both sides in combat, and increase treasure found. Maintaining high light levels requires

frequent use of torches[44], which cost money and take up inventory space. Forcing adventurers to explore the dungeons in darkness is highly profitable in the immediate term; the player can avoid the cost of torches, find more treasure, and can carry more treasure back, making instances of leaving treasure behind less frequent. However, doing so assumes more risk, threatening to turn a straightforward expedition intended to make money quickly and efficiently into a costly debacle. This enhances the particular type of stressful tension the game tries to create through its dungeon spaces. The game teases the player who decides to pursue such strategies, with the (usually) non-diegetic tips on the dungeon loading screen occasionally reading "If you live for risk and darkness, by all means bring few torches…" These light mechanics build on the choice to "continue adventuring" or not when a dungeon expedition's objective is met before the entire dungeon is explored. Late in the adventure, when the objective is complete is when the temptation to discard any remaining torches in favour of treasure is at its highest.

Representations of light and dark in the dungeon are a key component of how the dungeon is defined artistically. Greg Gillespie and Darren Crouse highlight the preoccupation with "light and shade" as key to the construction of the "retroscape" of the popularly-imagined dungeon crawl with a particular fixation on "torches and lanterns" ("There and Back Again" 457). *Darkest Dungeon* engages actively with this tradition by situating an iconic burning torch in its logo. This same torch image has pride of place in the top middle of the dungeon exploration interface. Interacting with this torch icon shows the effects of the current light level and lets the player quickly light more torches without searching the inventory interface for them.

Darkest Dungeon's light mechanics are at odds with the more representational depictions of light found in previous case studies. *Might and Magic VI*'s very simulationist approach darkens distant objects and creatures when light is low, such as at night or in poorly-lit dungeons, but ultimately does nothing to affect the player's interactions with those creatures and objects. The mechanical options players have for brightening the light level is largely irrelevant. The classical roguelike *Brogue* sets a visibility radius around the player that shrinks as they descend levels in the dungeon. It provides items that improve visibility, but these are rarely anything other than a direct benefit to the player. *Crypt of*

---

44 Some character types can raise the light level through combat actions, though these are rarely the most useful skills to use in a tense conflict.

the NecroDancer features "torch" items that operate on a more gamic, mechanical level; they provide vision through dungeon walls. That game's torches typically can be upgraded linearly. Their discovery is random and almost always beneficial, not a point of decision-making and risk like it is in *Darkest Dungeon*.

Food and hunger is theme dungeon games often represent with mechanics grounded in realism. Once again, *Darkest Dungeon* represents this convention with mechanics that drive tense decision-making. Hunger is the rare mechanic that *Darkest Dungeon* hides from its players. Unlike *MMVI* and the roguelikes that incorporate the concept, *Darkest Dungeon* completely occludes its hunger mechanics. Behind the scenes, adventurers becoming hungry is not a matter of time; it is a matter of space. Certain randomly determined spaces along dungeon corridors prompt hunger events when traversed, during which all heroes must eat (and potentially recover some health) or starve and suffer damage and stress. There are hidden mechanics that prevent hunger event spaces from appearing too close together, but the player cannot effectively predict when and where hunger events will occur. This unpredictability complicates the decision-making around provisioning and rationing food. Outside of combat, food can be consumed (in limited quantities) to restore small amounts of health to adventurers. This is especially valuable for recovering after a battle goes awry and brings a hero to the brink of death. However, using food for emergency healing can lead to later calamity if the player presses their luck, explores further, and encounters a hunger event they do not have enough food to cover. If the party is left without enough food to feed the whole group, they all starve, suffering damage and stress.

The dungeons of *Darkest Dungeon* are, like the dungeons in most dungeon crawler games, full of treasure. Like most other mechanics, how the game handles treasure reinforces the tension between safety and reward. Treasure competes for inventory space with the "supply items" brought into the dungeons that help the adventurers progress and survive. If the player declines to pick up any inventory item, or if they discard one in favour of another, those items are lost forever. Since a new dungeon is generated each game week, the player cannot leave treasures untouched and return for them later. This non-representational depiction of space – why can the adventurers not return to where they left treasure and pick it up later after they've eaten through some of their supplies? – both simulates a more dynamic and threatening dungeon environment and presents a dilemma to the player. Like with many of the mechanical decisions *Darkest Dungeon* asks of the player, the inventory system demands the player

choose between protecting their adventurers and pursuing greater profit. Typically, the main mechanical motivation of each dungeon run is to acquire the game's various currencies to better train and equip adventurers for future runs. Through this mechanic, *Darkest Dungeon* removes the assumption seen in those previous games that the dungeon is on some level only meant to be interacted with by the player characters. The dungeons of *Darkest Dungeon* thereby come across as more dynamic and hostile – suitable given their narrative justification as endless, semi-intelligent places of active malice.

As is the case in many dungeon games, these dungeons are filled with traps. *Darkest Dungeon'*s traps can protect treasures, as in *MMVI*. They can also appear randomly in corridors similarly to their role in a classical roguelike, but more difficult to circumvent thanks to the abstract, flowchart-like nature of the game's dungeon space. Corridor traps trigger when the player guides their adventurers over them, potentially causing both injury and stress to a hero. Tiles containing traps can be spotted during scouting, which allows the player to attempt to disarm them before tripping them, assuming the player is paying sufficient attention. This is not entirely up to the game's hard rules, as the traps intentionally blend into the background of the various dungeon environment aesthetics. Different classes of hero determine the chances of success at trap disarming, and the hero who is selected when the command is given to operate on the trap is the one whose skills are tested. All these factors contribute to the necessity for actual attentiveness from the player in order to most safely navigate the dungeon corridors. Like classical roguelikes, real-world patience is a useful skill in a game that otherwise gives the player complete control over the pace of play.

The game's traps also demonstrate the flexibility of the dungeon setting. The same or similar mechanics represent traps with a variety of artistic representations depending on the particular dungeon being explored. The Crypt features deadly mechanical traps – spikes and sawblades. The Weald hosts dangerous fungi that erupt in caustic spores[45]. The Cove's traps are a slumbering tentacled monster that lashes out when disturbed. These differ wildly in terms of presumed narrative function, but can all be categorized and mechanically modelled under the label of "trap," since that is an established feature and term of dungeon games. That all these different obstacles function identically reinforces *Darkest*

---

45   The Weald is an example of an outdoor space that is still modelled as a dungeon. Gillespie notes that fungal life is a motif in formative depictions of dungeons that have active ecosystems, signifying "otherworldliness" ("There and Back Again" 456). That tradition is carried forward here.

Dungeon's interpretation of the dungeon as an abstracted and fundamentally hostile space – an interpretation strengthened by the game's occasional creation of new traps in previously explored areas.

Traps in *Darkest Dungeon* serve much the same purpose they do in other dungeon games, but the game's aesthetics make them a greater source of horror in context. The game's narrator, the Ancestor, the character who presumably commissioned the creation of the traps, frames the activation of traps with wry dispassion. "Curious is the trapmaker's art, his efficacy unwitnessed by his own eyes," he sometimes remarks when an adventurer walks into a trap, suffering injury, lasting harm, and stress. This line speaks to the absurdity and cruelty of dungeon construction. The random placement of traps in *Darkest Dungeon* mean they do not always have a treasure or other objective to protect. The malignity of the place has no direct logic like the trapped chests in *MMVI*. *Darkest Dungeon* recontextualizes the random appearance of traps found in many traditional roguelikes, highlighting their ultimate pointlessness and viciousness.

As in most dungeon games, the dungeons in this game are full of opportunities for combat against the dungeon's inhabitants. The game's combat mechanics contribute to its sense of tension. As discussed, combats initiate during exploration – without warning if the explored area has not been scouted. Battles are turn-based; each turn the player must select a single action to pursue based on known and unknown variables. Often, fighting battles will be mandatory for success, so even after dozens of expeditions, it is difficult to carelessly explore a dungeon merely to accumulate resources with little risk. Combat is the primary source of danger of permanent hero death – the primary source of the game's negative affect.

One combat mechanic that especially stands out as a source of tension is the "Death's Door" mechanic. Unlike many dungeon crawlers, running out of "Health Points" (HP) in *Darkest Dungeon* does not result in an adventurer's immediate defeat or death. Instead, they lose combat capability and, as long as they remain at 0 HP, should they take any more damage from an enemy's attack, a bleeding or blight condition, a trap, or hunger, they have a chance of perishing permanently. This sounds like it should be more forgiving than the typical death and dying mechanics in dungeon games. My two other major case studies show opposite extremes in handling death in dungeons. In *Might and Magic VI*, death has little to no consequence. An individual character's death can be reversed by spending

sufficient gold at a temple. Death of the entire party is met with a direct address from the Grim Reaper who states, "thy work in the land of the living is not yet done," and returns the party to life without any of their gold, a forfeit that can be avoided by depositing gold in a bank. *MMVI*'s complete freedom in saving and loading and frequent automatic saves[46] is really what makes death free of tension and consequence. In *Rogue* and its successors, death means resetting the entire game – a feature that has come to define the roguelike genre, as seen across the multiple variations demonstrated in Chapter Two.

Darkest Dungeon*'s middle path regarding death – it is somewhat random, occasionally avoidable, possible to play in ways that make it less likely, and entirely unrecoverable – generates more tension and guilt than either of these more extreme approaches. The player can elect to retreat from combat (though that has a chance of failure and its own dire consequences) and from the dungeon altogether. This mechanic makes the player complicit in their adventurers' deaths. While there is an overall decision to gamble a character's well-being that must be taken when entering the dungeon, this is part of the conceit of the game. With the Death's Door mechanic, this gamble becomes immediate and perceivable. The uncertainty of the expedition's exact amount of remaining resources can tempt the player into accepting further risk. Furthermore, unlike in a traditional roguelike, death of characters does not reset the game, meaning that the player must live with the consequences of their decisions if they want to continue playing.

Combat in *Darkest Dungeon* is turn-based, which is a style of play not typically associated with horror gaming. It does not merge the avatar's and player's perspectives like the more cinema-influenced survival horror genre. As with many of *Darkest Dungeon*'s other mechanical choices, though, it achieves its horror through forcing difficult choices on the player and building mounting dread through moments of uncertainty. The game provides all the time and information necessary to make a calculated risk, meaning the player feels responsible should misfortune occur. Like the overall dungeon space, the tighter quarters of space in combat are represented through rules toward achieving tense affect through difficult decision making, rather than being strictly representational. Each side in a battle has four "ranks" where combatants can stand. Both heroes and adversaries have a selection of

---

46 *MMVI* automatically updates one save file at the threshold of every new area. This includes entering and leaving dungeons.

actions they can take on their turn that are limited by what rank the actor is in and limited in what ranks in the enemy group can be targeted. A fundamentally important facet of the preparatory gameplay between dungeon expeditions is assembling a party of adventurers effective in and against the spread of battle positions. Unlike similar systems in other games, this position can be adjusted during battle by either the player themselves or by hostile actions from the monsters in the dungeon, which can throw the player's plans into disarray, leading to the uncertainty-fuelled tension that *Darkest Dungeon* relies on. The more carefully fine-tuned and optimized a battle plan is, the less flexible it can be against enemies that disrupt the party's initial formation.

Physical harm is not the only danger that the adventurers in *Darkest Dungeon* face. Another hazard of dungeon delving is "stress." As mentioned, the creators of this game consider "the psychological stresses of adventuring" to be central to the game's thematics. Unlike the other mechanics discussed this chapter, this is not a reimplementation of a common dungeon game feature. The game's stress mechanics simulate the in-world horror the characters experience while providing tension to the player through posing complex dilemmas. Mechanics to simulate mental shock alongside physical injury are a common feature of horror games – a use of procedural rhetoric to model a protagonist's fragility in the face of horrific danger. The "sanity meter" is a staple mechanical trope of horror games (Therrien 38), modelling the effects of mental distress through game rules. This kind of mechanical representation of player characters' internal state is not typically found in dungeon games. Thanks to the omniscient, unembodied nature of the player's avatar, stress is modelled as something that afflicts dungeon delvers, not the player character responsible for sending them into taxing situations.

Certain occurrences – monster attacks, encountering traps, exploration encounters, monster critical hits in combat, and random happenstance – will cause the player's dungeon explorers to suffer stress. Stress is measured numerically; newly hired adventurers have zero stress. When a hero's stress reaches 100, their "resolve is tested," which can result in the affected hero either acquiring an "affliction" or a "virtue." Afflictions (Fearful, Hopeless, Abusive, Paranoid, Selfish, Masochistic, or Irrational) cause the player to lose their complete control over the affected hero during combat and adventuring, with the hero randomly activating certain (generally undesirable) behaviours. Many of the afflictions in turn cause that hero to spread stress among the other heroes. Virtues, which occur less

frequently than afflictions, provide benefits to the adventurers, and reduce the affected hero's stress when activated. Stress can continue to accumulate beyond 100; at 200, the stressed hero suffers a "heart attack," immediately dropping their hit points to zero and triggering the "Death's Door" effect. This heart attack feature rejects the strict mind/body dualism typically implied by games that feature similar stress or 'sanity' mechanics. Connecting mental and physical health does more than just make the game harder, it makes a claim about the nature of fear – at least in this overwrought horror-genre setting, it is as much a tangible threat to health as any aggressive dungeon monster.

The main danger presented by some adversaries is not to injure or kill adventurers, but to cause them stress. Several inflict stress directly with their attacks, either in addition to physical harm or not. Some, like the "Gargoyle," also cause other effects with their stress attacks, including lowering the light level, which compounds the effectiveness of their stress-causing actions unless the player uses up resources. Even so, an expedition under-equipped with torches that encounters this type of enemy can easily become a source of risk and expense.

How does the stress mechanic add horror to the dungeon environment beyond the menace found in a typical dungeon game? First, it is representational. Stress increases when the mechanical representations of stressful situations (as presented narratively or aesthetically) occur. Adventuring in darkness, receiving critical hits, having frightening encounters with inanimate dungeon features, and witnessing the deaths of their allies all cause or increase stress gain among the adventurers. More than just modelling stressful situations, though, the stress mechanic increases tension on the player. It is another metric to consider when deciding how much to invest in the safety of the heroes at the outset of the expedition, weighed against treasure carrying capacity and the expense of subsequent stress healing.

Adventurers only become stressed in dungeons. Stress can be removed in dungeons, but only through limited ways: the adventurers' "camping skills" (the use of which is heavily restricted), by chance encounters with certain "curios" in the dungeon (though reliably healing stress from these requires luck or proper preparation, which can be costly), or certain rare combat skills (which are often restricted in frequency and always a trade-off against actions that help win the battle). By contrast, much of the gameplay activity in the Hamlet – the only real non-dungeon setting in which gameplay

takes place – is stress reduction. Adventurers' physical well-being as represented by their health points is fully restored at the end of a dungeon expedition, and are easily restored during one by eating food or benefiting from healing combat skills. By contrast, stress remains until removed through town actions[47], often lingering for several in-game weeks. Much of the commerce and management that takes place between dungeon expeditions is stress management, as the player commits adventurers to stress-relieving activities, blocking them from participating in the following week's adventure. These activities are, naturally, framed in the game's typical grim, Gothic narration and aesthetic. Options for stress relief are limited to debauched revelry at the tavern or maniacal religious devotions at the church. These activities cost the gold brought back from the dungeons, so even successful dungeon expeditions may prove to cost more than they earn.

Another town activity that similarly occupies a hero for a whole round of adventuring is a stay in the "Sanitarium." The player can pay to erase physical or psychological quirks that affect (positively or negatively) damage dealt, stress received, food consumed, and other application of the mechanics. Negative quirks can also compel interactions with dungeon objects, introducing further uncertainty into the dungeon-delving experience. Heroes have some quirks at the start and develop others randomly by surviving dungeon explorations. Again, the treatment for these quirks is framed as a horrific experience, with heroes involuntarily having their personalities altered through what are suggested to be horrific medical procedures. The player, in their role as overseer and manager of their roster of heroes, is made complicit in this cruelty, contributing to the sense of moral greyness the game uses to promote feelings of unease.

Resting in dungeons is a separate mode of play, carefully governed by the game's rules. It can only be performed in rooms, not corridors and is heavily restricted. It can only be activated by using and consuming the "firewood" item. This item cannot be purchased from the supplier as other useful items like shovels and torches can be; it is automatically assigned to parties embarking on quests of sufficient length, though it does still take up inventory space. This phase consumes rations, can restore some health, and resets the light level to 100. The camping phase provides some of the more significant moments of characterization for the game's heroes, as the characters chat with one another, saying

---

47 Stress can be reduced through uncommon combat skills. Removing stress in battle with these skills results in more
    stress gained as the combat drags on with more chances for things to go awry.

scripted lines dependent on their character class, potentially building up the player's affinity with them. In the camping phase, the player has an opportunity to use a limited number of "camping skills" when resting, which can restore health, provide items, remove stress, and enhance the characters' abilities temporarily. Unless particular camping skills are used, there is always a chance of being sneak attacked while resting. This prompts a battle, scrambles the party order, and sets the light level to zero, resulting in a hectic and unpredictable combat. This representation of finding a moment of peace in a dungeon is a contrast with similar mechanics in previous case studies. In *Might and Magic VI*, resting in a dungeon was frequently blocked until the dungeon was largely conquered, forcing exhausted adventurers to return to town to rest. In *Darkest Dungeon*, dungeons cannot be fully conquered, and heroes cannot escape the dungeon without abandoning their quest. The endgame Darkest Dungeon cannot be escaped at all without leaving a hero behind to die.

The game features a recurring moment where its aesthetics and mechanics perfectly mesh to create tension. This is the moment where a hero's "RESOLVE IS TESTED," which occurs when their stress reaches 100 for the first time in a dungeon. The game frames the stressed character in close-up. It plays a custom sound effect of rising tension. The rest of the battle fades for a moment as the game creates the illusion that it is calculating the fate of the stressed hero. The game does not need to do this. It could easily apply virtues or afflictions with as little ceremony as it applies other combat effects. The moment of apprehension conveyed through framing, music, and time is purely theatrical. Even character death is not met with such fanfare. This added ceremony emphasizes the importance of the stress mechanic and lends credence to the game's self-described identity as being "about the psychological stresses of adventuring." The game places additional emphasis on these moments of prospect-based uncertainty. A negative outcome during these moments can be the beginning of the expedition's rapid decline, while a positive one is a source of relief. Either outcome elicits significant emotion, and the game's extra focus on these moments heightens that emotion even further.

At the largest scale, *Darkest Dungeon*'s mechanics most closely resemble a game of economic management, which is at odds with the game's emotional affordances. Each in-game week, the player is afforded an opportunity to risk assets they've already invested in for returns. Those returns are reinvested in those assets, making them more secure and able to be risked for greater rewards, including, eventually, victory. The stress and quirk mechanics add to the upkeep costs of those assets on

an unpredictable, but somewhat controllable basis. This, along with many of the game's other mechanics, add up to a game that is a succession of difficult choices regarding mechanics over which the player has partial control. Mastery or optimal play of the game can be aided by dismissing or sacrificing under-performing heroes and replacing them with ones with more desirable quirks, fewer undesirable quirks, or stronger equipment[48]. It is advantageous to treat the game's simulated people as disposable, but, if a player engages with game's narrative and stylization, it is also easy to become emotionally attached to individual heroes. The tension between the raw mechanics and its aesthetic and narrative trappings in this case serve the game's ambiguous morality and attempts to pose difficult dilemmas to the player. The tendency to become attached to the game's characters was one of the reasons participants reported discomfort in Gowler and Iacovedes' study of negative affect in video game players (7). Losing heroes is not the only moment where recognition of their simulated humanity implicates the player in these kinds of morally-suspect dilemmas. The player is encouraged to commit heroes to physical and mental health treatments that are implied to be forceful and unwanted. The player character's total control over their heroes' lives and well-being is also a source of unease when the characters are viewed as more than just playing pieces.

Darkest Dungeon's Narrative

The core and peripheral narratives of *Darkest Dungeon* reinforce its generic shift from adventure to horror. Specifically, they complicate the traditional dungeon narratives of either heroic endeavour or acquisitive desire.

Unlike in previous dungeon game case studies, the player in *Darkest Dungeon* does not assume the role of a dungeon adventurer themself. The player takes on the role of the descendant of a noble family brought to "ruin" by the occult misdeeds of the Ancestor. The player manages a large roster of heroes, rather than embodying one hero or a group. The player directs heroes in combat and adventuring, but afflictions or quirks can cause heroes to act of their own accord. The player can be responsible for the deaths and miseries of their heroes without the game coming to an end, as it would in a classical roguelike, or in finding a coherence-weakening pretext to continue, as was the case in

48 As the player upgrades the "Wagon" Hamlet structure, the recruits it provides can appear already benefiting from expensive upgrades.

MMVI. While the game's dungeon expeditions do provide much in the way of treasure, the player character's stated motivation is one of familial obligation, aimed at atoning for the Ancestor's misdeeds. In his own words, he encourages the player character to "reclaim [their] birthright and deliver our family from the ravenous, clutching shadows of the Darkest Dungeon." The Ancestor requests this, it seems, due to his own guilt, though late-game developments complicate this understanding. In any case, the stories of *Darkest Dungeon* are not the straightforward quests for noble causes or personal reward found in other case studies. The game's narrative framing suggests the player character knowingly exploits the selfless ideals of others to attract adventurers to the deadly task of exploring the Estate's dungeons. For example, the descriptive text for the random event that attracts more recruits to the town reads, "Word of our predicament has spread, and a new crop of aspiring corpses step from the stagecoach..."

This plot is redolent of the markers of the horror genre, independently of its ability to manipulate affect. It draws on both Lovecraftian and gothic themes in its invocations of cosmic horrors beyond comprehension and a dark family secret that has led to personal ruin, respectively. These gestures toward the trappings of horror fiction, as expressed in video games, can have a spatial component, and they certainly do in *Darkest Dungeon*. Krzywinska, in her analysis of games that draw from "familiar pre-sold horror subgenres" ("Hands-On" 14), notes that Lovecraftian and gothic themes often appear together in games with "a strong connection to the 'old dark house' format" ("Hands-On" 14), a format that *Darkest Dungeon* conspicuously draws from and applies to the familiar dungeon-crawling mode of play. Kirkland identifies returning to the family home as a motif in horror fiction that can elicit fearful affect as that familiar space is rendered uncanny ("Uncanny" 2). He applies a psychoanalytic framework to this trope, further noting how horror games often pair "dangerous womb-like spaces alongside narratives where protagonists travel through bloody chambers to discover the secret of their origin" ("Engulfment" 78). While this psychoanalytic observation could be easily applied to a reading of *Darkest Dungeon*[49], of more significance to my approach is his observation regarding the reflexivity he has witnessed between creators and commentators on this trend in horror games ("Engulfment" 78). He notes that horror creators are aware of the symbolic readings of these bodily and continue to use them avidly, making them part of the generic language of horror irrespective of their effectiveness in

---

49 Perhaps too easily. Much like Kirkland's own analysis of *Silent Hill 4: The Room*, "identifying psychoanalytic meaning" in the bloody cave in the heart of the family home in *Darkest Dungeon* "is somewhat like shooting Freudian fish in a barrel" ("Engulfment" 76).

creating a horror affect. Even if these tropes do not frighten an individual player, they still signal the creators' familiarity with the range of experiences used in horror games.

The ending of the main story in *Darkest Dungeon* disrupts the orthodox dungeon narrative, subverting the typical dungeon fantasy narrative convention and reframing the player's actions in a bid to elicit a negative affect through guilt. *Darkest Dungeon* initially presents a narrative that, while full of horror genre trappings, is structurally very similar to the typical dungeon narrative illustrated in Chapter One. The game instructs the player to proceed through increasingly difficult challenges to accumulate treasure and skill to overcome a final great challenge, much like the typical dungeon game. The player character is asked to do this by a person of some temporal authority, even though that person – the Ancestor – kills himself at the beginning of the narrative, but lingers on to verbally encourage the player character's pursuit of familial redemption. While the Ancestor will not directly reward the player character, completing his objective will bring prosperity back to the accursed family estate, so there is a worldly reward in doing as the Ancestor asks. Furthermore, the player is told that the supernatural evil that lies within the Darkest Dungeon is responsible for all the misfortune that plagues the surrounding estate. Delving its depths, it is implied, will be a heroic act that will lift the curse that afflicts the estate and solve many of its problems, from assault by monsters to disease and highway robbery.

The story of the final confrontation, though, exposes this heroic narrative as a lie. After three successful expeditions to the Darkest Dungeon – an area with unique mechanics and aesthetics that emphasize the greater horrors that lie closest to the heart of the otherworldly evil that afflicts the Hamlet – the player can dispatch a party to slay the "Heart of Darkness." Instead of the long, nonlinear hostile dungeon environment the game typically presents, the fourth visit to the Darkest Dungeon is a single hallway leading to a single room. At intervals along this hall, the player's chosen party will be confronted by a ghostly apparition of the Ancestor. This is the only sound during this expedition; the usual threatening background soundscape is conspicuously absent. The Ancestor speaks to the player, as he has been doing all game, but instead of offering wry commentary on game actions, he begins a pontificating speech. He reveals his continuing complicity in the agenda of the dark god that the Darkest Dungeon houses. His letter to the player character and subsequent suicide, he now claims, were not motivated by guilt, but by duplicity. Delving the Darkest Dungeon is not an act of heroism that will

set the world aright. The adventurers the player sends to their deaths through the course of the game have all been blood sacrifices to the Ancestor's patron that he serves willingly and feels no remorse over aiding. After outlining his new nihilistic worldview, adopted after confronting the magnitude of the uncaring beings that he regards as gods, he attacks the player. This battle features the sole instance of the mechanic that perhaps best exemplifies the game's efforts to elicit negative affect through tough decisions. Twice during the battle, the game forces the player to choose a hero to immediately die. This effect is absolute; the health of the chosen character is immaterial and they do not cling to life through the Death's Door mechanic as usual. Forcing the player's inescapable complicity in these deaths – likely deaths of heroes the player has spent a great deal of time using and improving, given their presence in the final confrontation – is a major source of negative affect.

Should the player be victorious, the Ancestor delivers one final verbose monologue in a cut-scene before the game ends, doing all he can to emphasize the futility of the player's efforts:

> Victory... A hollow and ridiculous notion. We are born of this thing, made from it, and we will be returned to it, in time. The great family of man... a profusion of errant flesh! Multiplying, swarming, living, dying... Until the stars align in their inexorable formation and what sleeps is roused once more, to hatch from this fragile shell of earth and rock and bring our inescapable end. So seek solace in a manner befitting your lineage and take up your nugatory vigil, haunted forever by that sickening prose echoing through the infinite blackness of space and time... Ruin has come to our family.

This is an effort to recontextualize the entire narrative of the game after its completion. "Ruin has come to our family" is also the first spoken line of the game, the opener of the Ancestor's deceitful letter to the protagonist. Here, the narration reframes the idea of the "family" to include all humanity, and the "ruin" that threatens it to be utterly existential[50]. The affective result of this narrative framing is, as always, largely subjective. In this instance, it can be partially at odds with the other emotions evoked by the game state. Completing *Darkest Dungeon* is a difficult task accomplished over dozens of hours. It very much builds toward Järvinen's concept of the pleasure of "virtuosity" ("Emotional" 104), as the player can feel pride in their accomplishment, despite the guilt or shame of losing heroes in the

---

50 This reframing only takes hold if the player believes the Ancestor is telling the truth.

preceding battle. This dissonance lends some credence to Krzywinska's dismissal of *Darkest Dungeon* as a "populist action-based Horror game" ("Gaming Horror's Horror" 296), a position I have tacitly argued against for the bulk of this chapter. The effectiveness this narrative frame has in ultimately undermining "the ostensible goal of besting evil and working toward the reinstatement of the status quo" ("Gaming Horror's Horror" 296) is perhaps subjective; it is very possible to play the game for dozens of hours and not complete it, leaving the illusion of the protagonist's noble goal intact.

The narrative of the player character and the Ancestor is not the only narrative at work in *Darkest Dungeon* and not the only one to trouble the typical themes of dungeon stories. Each hero the player recruits has a backstory that implies a setting with a very different set of parameters than the typical dungeon fantasy story. First, just by turning the "heroes[51]" into resources for the player's unseen protagonist avatar rather than being the protagonists themselves, the typical heroic narrative does not apply. No single hero or committed group of heroes will overcome the dungeons of the Estate together. Heroes are hired, dismissed, formed into groups, and commanded by the player character, not by the demands of any greater quest. This shifted perspective reduces the importance of any individual hero within the overall narrative, undercutting the typical heroic themes in a standard dungeon story. The mechanical demands of playing through *Darkest Dungeon* – either playing attentively and micromanaging the skills and preferences of each hero to better tailor them to the expedition they are to undertake or playing inattentively and sending a greater proportion of heroes to their dooms – position "heroes" in the narrative as interchangeable pawns.

Each class of hero has their own backstory that implies the wider world of *Darkest Dungeon* is not the typical source of fantasy-genre adventurers. Even beyond the accursed Estate in which the game takes place, the world is a miserable place. Many heroes only adventure because they are somehow outcast from normal society. When recruiting heroes, the Ancestor says of them, "Women and men, soldiers and outlaws, fools and corpses. All will find their way to us now that the road is clear." The game's website hosts short comic pages that show or imply the unfortunate pasts that have led these people to become desperate enough to turn to adventure to support themselves. For example, the Arbalest, Man-at-Arms, and Crusader have returned from war and lack skills or opportunities to pursue nonviolent professions. The Highwayman and Grave Robber are identified by their criminal pasts. The

---

51 The game uses this term.

Leper and the Abomination are desperate outcasts, and the Vestal, Jester, and Houndmaster were forced out of the institutions they previously belonged to. Only the Occultist and Antiquarian seemingly have a reason to be adventurers, other than needing to support themselves. The result is an implied game world of misery consistent with the misery that plagues the cursed Estate. This both colours the game world as a relentlessly grim place but also implicates the player character as someone keen to exploit the desperate, the deluded, or the foolhardy.

The mechanics modelling the economics of the world of *Darkest Dungeon* support this depiction. As a gameplay simplification, all treasure recovered from the Estate's dungeons belongs to the player character. Heroes cost nothing to hire and have no general upkeep costs. The player can spend their treasure to train and equip heroes and to provide them with health care. 'Health care' in this case includes the adjustment of mental and physical quirks at the Sanitarium and the reduction of stress through religious devotion or pursuit of vices. Heroes themselves do not accumulate wealth like in other dungeon games – unless they have the "Kleptomaniac" quirk, which causes them to occasionally 'steal' treasure found in dungeons, preventing it from being added to the player's reserve. This choice is most likely a useful abstraction for smooth gameplay, but, along with the grim backstories of the player characters, *Darkest Dungeon*'s wealth mechanics create a narrative where adventurers do not adventure for noble ends or even with much expectation of fame and fortune, like successful heroes tend to find in other dungeon games. Adventuring is hardly even a choice for these people; it is done out of economic necessity. Adventurers in the game world of *Darkest Dungeon* resemble those of the tabletop RPG *Torchbearer,* wherein: "Adventurer is a dirty word. [One is] a scoundrel, a villain, a wastrel, a vagabond, a criminal, a sword-for-hire, a cutthroat" (Olavsrud 10). The player is incentivized to treat them as such. There are constantly more adventurers available for hire and adventurers can be released at will. Beyond the mechanics, the implied narrative of the game also problematizes the usual assumptions of heroic endeavour being rewarded with material wealth central to most dungeon games.

The game's depiction of religion is an area in which narrative, mechanics, and aesthetics intersect to take on a horror context, through efforts to evoke negative affect and through appeals to a commonly understood cultural context of horror media. Like many fantasy games where protagonists struggle against supernatural evil (including *MMVI*), *Darkest Dungeon* co-opts religious aesthetics to denote the existence and efficacy of more benign supernatural forces. However, religion is not exempt from the

113

excessively grim world painted by the game. Like in *Might and Magic VI*, there is a religion in the game world that borrows the real-world trappings of Christianity to identify itself. Its specific beliefs and practices are not directly stated and must be inferred. Paratext, religious items found in dungeons, and character dialogue suggest a religion with many of the less-savoury aspects of medieval European Christianity – or at least how it is popularly imagined. The religion seems to venerate a deity called the Sacred Flame, and worship practices include enforced chastity, confession, a holy book divided into "Verses," crusading, and flagellation as a form of penance. "Holy Water" exists, but it is only loosely connected to any of the religious aspects in the game; it is most commonly acquired in a purely commercial fashion from the "Provision" screen. The architecture of the Hamlet's "Cathedral" is dominated by the large spire and stained glass windows of European Gothic religious buildings. The function of the Cathedral is to relieve heroes' stress. The Cathedral and religious characters bear a cross-like symbol. The player can pay gold to the Cathedral to commit a hero to a week of meditation, prayer, or flagellation[52], which will reduce the hero's current level of stress. Functionally, the Cathedral is identical to the Hamlet's "Tavern," which offers stress relief for gold in the same way. Prayer and debauchery are just as likely to cause problems for the affected hero; indulging in either form of stress release risks taking the hero out of commission for one or more weeks, costing the player character additional gold, or instilling new negative quirks. Through these mechanics, *Darkest Dungeon* positions religion not as a divine calling, but as an optional activity that is occasionally useful.

Several of the game's hero classes – the Vestal, the Crusader, and the Leper – are identified as "religious," being subject to a few hidden mechanical effects. Religious characters receive greater benefits from certain camping skills possessed by other religious characters. The Vestal and Crusader have combat skills that are more effective against enemies with the "UNHOLY" type – a classification used for mostly skeletal undead monsters. This additional effectiveness of religious adventurers against the undead has a long pedigree in fantasy games, with the "turn undead" ability being a central feature of the *Dungeons and Dragons* "cleric" character class since its earliest edition (Gygax and Arneson, *Men & Magic* 12). The Vestal is modelled after the classic *D&D* cleric, with her mace reminiscent of the weapons most commonly wielded by clerics in that game. Religious characters also suffer some downsides. Some camping skills such as the Hellion's "Reject the Gods" create more stress for

---

52 This list is organized from least to most costly and effective. The most 'effective' form of religious observance is the grisly one.

religious characters. Should the player attempt to group any religious character and an "Abomination" together, the religious character will refuse and state their objections – a display of character agency otherwise only reserved for heroes suffering from a mental affliction due to high stress. Like in other fantasy games, religious characters, most notably the Vestal, are a source of healing magic, but in *Darkest Dungeon,* there are other options. Mundane-themed medicine from the Arbalest can also restore health, but more effective than that is the Occultist, whose magic comes from understanding and command over the dark magical forces that the player character is nominally fighting against. Aligning the player characters' mission with a 'good' religion is far less mandatory in *Darkest Dungeon* than it is in other fantasy games.

Some of the game's dungeons feature religious objects and characters. The Darkest Dungeon itself inspires worship; its cultists are the type of enemy that can be found throughout the game's dungeons. The swine-people of the "Warrens" have their own religious symbols that are perceived as a threat worthy of destruction. Some religious items, like confessionals and memorial fountains, share the Christian-like trappings of the religion practised in the Hamlet. These curios, like most of the game's curios, can be beneficial with preparation or good luck, but can also be a source of stress or harm to the heroes.

While the religion of the Sacred Flame is helpful to the player character, it is positioned far less centrally in the narrative than the Ancestor's veneration of the Crawling Chaos. He asserts that this entity is a true creator deity, something not said of the Sacred Flame. Again, the 'good' religion is optional, but confronting the 'evil' one is the point of the game. This cosmology is significantly different from the Christian one whose aesthetics it borrows, and from the dualistic 'good versus evil' cosmologies put forward by many fantasy games. This framing is consistent with the tentpoles of Lovecraftian cosmic horror.

Darkest Dungeon Conclusions

Darkest Dungeon recontextualizes the dungeon from a space that feigns danger to one that actually entices player interest into a space of negative affect for both the in-world characters

unfortunate enough to enter its dungeons and the real-world player. It achieves this mechanically through a web of interlocking tense dilemmas. It prioritizes degrees of success and failure rather than the traditional roguelike approach of wiping away all progress each time, making loss something the player must move forward to overcome. Despite having two entirely different modes of play between dungeon and town, the strict separation of those spaces as seen in *MMVI* is absent here, as semi-random events can threaten the Hamlet and interrupt the logic of pure accumulation that dungeon games often feature. Artistic flourishes reinforce this lack of total separation even further after the player's first foray into the Darkest Dungeon. After that, monstrous images will subtly or unsubtly replace the familiar faces of the heroes and helpers in the Hamlet. With these aesthetics and the rest of its presentation, *Darkest Dungeon* draws on established genre conceits which it deploys to an exaggerated degree, marking every sound and image with the trappings of horror media. Narratively, the game upsets the traditional dungeon narrative. "Heroes" are dehumanized, made into tools serving an ultimately self-defeating and futile end. On top of the game's design intended to produce negative affect through constant difficult dilemmas, it also achieves horror by reinterpreting and subverting the 'normality' of the logic of a typical dungeon game.

Conclusion

"Spontaneously From Beneath the Underworld"

In "From Hunt the Wumpus to EverQuest: Introduction to Quest Theory," Espen Aarseth looks to the primordial history of digital games to explain the interrelationship between quest, game space, and fiction. He traces his genealogy back to three "origin games" (502), each responsible for introducing physical simulation, landscape simulation, and avatar simulation to the medium of digital games. Of these three progenitors, two are dungeon games – Crowther and Woods' *Adventure* and Gygax and Arneson's *Dungeons & Dragons*. The history of digital gaming is thoroughly entwined with the dungeon.

The dungeon is a rich, meaning-laden space within the field of gaming that functions like a genre. Drawing from Arsenault, I understand the function of game genre to be the communication of a set of possible experiences (171). In Chapter One, I use the emblematic example of *Might and Magic VI* (1998) to demonstrate how a dungeon operates within a coherent-world game. They are self-contained sites of adventure. Through the rules by which they simulate space and their narrative positioning as part of quests, dungeons add progressive structure to their games. Dungeons are socially constructed as sites of great significance through game aesthetics, mechanics, and narrative.

Foucault's concept of the heterotopia reminds us that just because a space is separated from normal society by space, time, or ritual does not mean that it has no bearing on that society. In fact, such separate spaces fulfill a vital role to their society while hidden from public acknowledgement. Dungeon spaces fulfill this role within their game world. Dungeon spaces have different rules, both socially in their fiction and literally in their mechanics. Ordinary people do not venture into dungeons but are threatened by the monsters, criminals, and corrupt religions practised there. Extraordinary people like player characters can transgress these boundaries and restore order by putting a violent end to these threats somewhere out of the public eye. Dungeon explorers who take on these vital tasks are rewarded either by society through the completion of quests or more organically by plundering

dungeons, setting up a tension between the heroic narratives dungeon games often thrust on their player characters and the less altruistic appearance of dungeon delvers as "tomb robbers" (Gillespie and Crouse, "There and Back Again" 448).

The reception of dungeons is only half of their function as a genre. Game genre tells players what to expect, but it also establishes a "range of expression" for creators (Arsenault 171). Chapter Two's survey of the roguelike game genre demonstrates the flexibility of the dungeon space. For the original *Rogue* (1980), dungeons were technically convenient and culturally available setting. *Rogue*'s random dungeon creation provided for the unprecedented replayability of a single-player computer game. The familiarities of the dungeon space provide *Rogue* with legibility and coherence in spite of its simple graphics and narrative.

"Bizarre Expressions of Malignant Magic"

Classical roguelikes continue to reproduce dungeon spaces both as a nostalgic gesture toward a fondly remembered gaming tradition and due to dungeons' remarkable flexibility. The dungeons of "major" classical roguelikes like *NetHack* (RogueBasin) accommodate an immense amount of interactive options, which in turn expand the thematic radius of the generic dungeon. The dungeon setting provides an accepted range of familiar game elements that roguelike designers can reinterpret mechanically to tangibly signify innovation.

The "neo-rogue" wave of indie games brings the high stakes and randomized environments of the roguelike to a plurality of settings and modes of interaction. While these games are not limited to generic dungeons, the neo-rogues that stay within the dungeon are often the games that demonstrate the most deliberate and dramatic examples of neo-rogue "hybridization" (Garda, "Neo-rogue" 8). Games like *Crypt of the NecroDancer* (2015) and *Slay the Spire* (2019) import entire modes of interaction from external genres and use the dungeon setting to make them familiar.

Other neo-rogues like *Rogue Legacy* (2013) and *Dungeons of Dredmor* (2011) use the generic status of the dungeon to position themselves within a generic tradition. *Rogue Legacy* does this to

present itself as an inheritor and adapter of the roguelike tradition while replacing almost all of its more formal elements. *Dungeons of Dredmor* does this in an attempt to create a comedic tone through gentle satire of its parent genres. *Dredmor*'s attempts to bring a new tone to dungeon gaming operate mostly on the surface level. For an example of a game that more deeply subverts and transforms the dungeon convention, I turn to *Darkest Dungeon* in Chapter Three.

Darkest Dungeon (2016) recontextualizes the conventional dungeon into a space for horror. It achieves this both by creating situations that generate negative affect in the player and by appealing to an existing cultural idea of horror as a genre. The game accomplishes this through intersections of its mechanics, fiction, and aesthetics. It deploys the familiar trappings of dungeon games with mechanics designed to force the player into making uncomfortable choices. It also introduces mechanics to model concepts foreign to the dungeon game genre, most significantly the stress accumulated by dungeon explorers. The game shifts the player's role in the typical dungeon quest structure to the person responsible for enlisting adventurers to explore dungeons, so the negative affect arises from apprehension and guilt rather than embodied fright. Narrative and aesthetics draw from established representations of horror fiction to permeate the game's entire atmosphere with conspicuous horror theming. *Darkest Dungeon* demonstrates the capacity for the dungeon genre to present an opportunity for subversion. Designs with sufficient depth can use the dungeon to make different forms of meaning.

"Become a Permanent Feature of the Landscape"

The distinctiveness of the dungeon setting has implications beyond the formal traits I have detailed and beyond the cultural context I have been working in that present interesting avenues for future research.

For example, in this work, I have examined only the dungeon as it operates in single-player digital games. Dungeons in multiplayer games have a social component that in turn feeds back on the game design. Dungeons in the massively-multiplayer online roleplaying games (MMORPGs) like *Guild Wars 2* (2012) are specifically designed to be spaces of particular challenge that must be confronted as an organized group. The game segregates its dungeons from the 'massively multiplayer'

part of its game world and requires players to cooperate and divide specific responsibilities to succeed at these isolated challenges. This social framework contrasts with much of the rest of the game, which can be played with or without the input of other players. *Guild Wars 2* is hardly the only MMORPG to deliberately create these kinds of challenges; they are endemic to the genre. To investigate the unique *social* qualities of these spaces beyond the basic formal description I have just presented would be an interesting topic for a study with a more ethnographic approach than mine.

Another avenue for potential research is the expression of the dungeon concept beyond the North American computer gaming culture context. In particular, Japanese games and other media have seized on the dungeon as a generic space[53]. The dungeon appears in a very traditional sense in popular Japanese fantasy game series like *Final Fantasy* and *The Legend of Zelda,* but Japanese developers and other creatives have also found novel ways to contextualize and use the dungeon concept with atypical settings, aesthetics, narratives, and gameplay styles. *Persona 3* features a supernatural dungeon intruding into a modern day setting as a symptom of a social and metaphysical ill. *Recettear* (2010) presents a typical fantasy RPG world but casts the player as a shopkeeper who must profit off the local adventurers' expeditions into the nearby dungeons. The principal action of Ryoko Kui's comic book *Delicious in Dungeon* is the efforts of an archetypal group of fantasy adventurers to make delicious meals from the monsters and flora of a generic game-styled dungeon. All of these works take full advantage of the dungeon's current position as a widely-understood generic setting type with a privileged position within certain strands of gaming. They are excellent examples of games that trade on audience familiarity with the dungeon tradition in order to achieve something novel. They illustrate the flexibility of the dungeon setting thanks to its ubiquity as well as the games I selected for that purpose in Chapters Two and Three. That does not mean that the context I have most closely explored is the only one in which the dungeon genre has thrived.

These two avenues are far from the only routes research into the dungeon convention might proceed. In the words of the Ancestor, "The way is lit. The path is clear. We require only the strength to follow it."

---

53 This generalization is drawn only from Japanese media that gets translated to English. Those media typically tap into an English-speaking consumer group familiar with 'geek' and gaming culture where dungeons are mainstream.

Works Cited

Aarseth, Espen J. "Allegories of Space: The Question of Spatiality in Computer Games." *Cybertext*
Yearbook 2000*, 2001. pp. 152-171

---. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature.* JHU Press, 1997.

---. "From Hunt the Wumpus to EverQuest: Introduction to Quest Theory." *Entertainment Computing –
ICEC 2005*, edited by Fumio Kishino et al., Springer, Berlin, Heidelberg, 2005, pp. 496–506.

---. "Playing Research: Methodological Approaches to Game Analysis." *Artnodes*, vol. 0, no. 7, Dec.
2007.

---. "Quest games as post-narrative discourse." *Narrative across media*. University of Nebraska Press,
2004, pp. 361-376.

Anglin, Dustin. "You Should Say Roguelike More Often." *Gamasutra,* 5 December, 2013,
www.gamasutra.com/blogs/DustinAnglin/20131205/206308/You_should_say_ Ro
guelike_more_often.php

APA Dictionary of Psychology. American Psychological Association, 2018. dictionary.apa.org/

Appelcline, Shannon. *Designers & Dragons: The '70s*. Evil Hat Productions, 2014.

Apperley, Thomas H. "Genre and Game Studies: Toward a Critical Approach to Video Game Genres."
Simulation & Gaming, vol. 37, no. 1, Mar. 2006, pp. 6-23.

---. "Genre Studies." *The Video Game Theory Reader 2*, edited by Bernard Perron and Mark J. P. Wolf,
Routledge, 2009, pp. 353-354.

Arsenault, Dominic. "Video game genre, evolution and innovation." *Eludamos. Journal for Computer
Game Culture*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2009, pp. 149-176.

Ashmore, Calvin, and Michael Nitsche. "The Quest in a Generated World." *DiGRA Conference*. 2007.

Barton, Matt. *Dungeons and Desktops*. Taylor & Francis Group, 2008.

Bogost, Ian. "The Rhetoric of Video Games." *The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning*. MIT Press, 2008, pp. 117-140.

Brottman, Mikita. *High Theory/Low Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan US, 2005.

Carr, Diane. "Space, navigation and affect." *Computer Games: Text, Narrative and Play.* Polity Press, 2006, pp. 59-71.

Chang. Alenda Y. "Games as Environmental Texts." *Qui Parle*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2011, pp. 56-84.

Chichester, D.G. *Might and Magic VI: The Mandate of Heaven User Manual.* The 3DO Company, Mars Publishing Company, 1998.

Costikyan, Greg. "I Have No Words & I Must Design: Toward a Critical Vocabulary for Games." *Proceedings of Computer Games and Digital Cultures* Conference, edited by Frans Mäyrä, Tampere University Press, 2002, pp. 25-33.

Darkest Dungeon Presents. Red Hook Studios, https://www.darkestdungeon.com/media/

de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Rendall, University of California Press, 1984.

Dodd, Kerry. "Narrative Archaeology: Excavating Object Identity in Lovecraftian Video Games." *Studies in Gothic Fiction,* 2018.

Doucet, Lars. "On Procedural Death Labyrinths." *Gamasutra*. 3 December, 2013 www.gamasutra.com/ blogs/LarsDoucet/20131203/206159/On_Procedural_Death_Labyrinths.php

Fine, Gary Alan. *Shared Fantasy: Role-playing Games As Social Worlds.* University of Chicago Press, 1983.

Foucault, Michel, and Jay Miskowiec. "Of Other Spaces." *Diacritics*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1986, pp. 22-27. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/464648.

Fuller, Mary, and Henry Jenkins. "Nintendo and new world travel writing: A dialogue." *Cybersociety: Computer-mediated communication and community.* 1995, pp. 57-72.

Garda, Maria B. "Neo-Rogue and the Essence of Roguelikeness." *Homo Ludens.* vol. 1, no. 5, 2013.

---. "Nostalgia in Retro Game Design." *DiGRA Conference*. 2013.

Gillespie, Greg. "Remember the Good Old Days?: Nostalgia, Retroscapes, and the Dungeon Crawl Classics." p. 29.

Gillespie, Greg, and Darren Crouse. "There and Back Again: Nostalgia, Art, and Ideology in Old-School Dungeons and Dragons." *Games and Culture*, vol. 7, no. 6, Nov. 2012, pp. 441–470.

Huizinga, Johan *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture.*Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1949.

Hunicke, Robin, Marc LeBlanc, and Robert Zubek. "MDA: A formal approach to game design and game research." *Proceedings of the AAAI Workshop on Challenges in Game AI*. Vol. 4, no. 1, 2004.

Gowler, Chad Phoenix Rose, and Ioanna Iacovides. "'Horror, Guilt and Shame' -- Uncomfortable Experiences in Digital Games." *Proceedings of the Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play – CHI PLAY '19*, ACM Press, 2019, pp. 325–337.

Grey, Darren. "Screw the Berlin Interpretation!" *Games of Grey*. 14 May, 2013. http://www.gamesofgrey.com/blog/?p=403

Grimshaw, Mark. "The Audio Uncanny Valley: Sound, Fear and the Horror Game." *Audio Mostly,* 2009.

Hall, Stuart. "Encoding/Decoding." *Media and Cultural Studies KeyWorks.* John Wiley & Sons, 2012, pp. 138-144.

Harpold, Terry. "Screw the grue: Mediality, metalepsis, recapture." *Game Studies*, vol.7, no. 1, 2007.

Ho, Xavier, and Marcus Carter. "Roguelike ancestry network visualisation: insights from the roguelike community." *Proceedings of the 14th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games*. ACM, 2019.

Järvinen, Aki. "Quake® Goes the Environment: Game Aesthetics and Archaeologies." *Digital Creativity*, vol. 12, no. 2, June 2001, pp. 67–76.

---. "Understanding Video Games as Emotional Experiences." *The Video Game Theory Reader 2*, edited by Bernard Perron and Mark J. P. Wolf, Routledge, 2009, pp. 85-108

Jenkins, Henry. "Game design as narrative architecture." *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and* Game, 2004.

Johnson, Mark R. "The Use of ASCII Graphics in Roguelikes: Aesthetic Nostalgia and Semiotic Difference." *Games and Culture*, vol. 12, no. 2, Mar. 2017, pp. 115–35.

Juul, Jesper. *Half-real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds.* MIT Press, 2005.

Kirkland, Ewan. "Horror Videogames and the Uncanny." *DiGRA Conference*. 2009.

---. "Maternal Engulfment in Horror Videogames." *Videogame Cultures and the Future of Interactive Entertainment,* edited by Daniel Riha. Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2010.

---. "Storytelling in Survival Horror Video Games." *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, edited by Bernard Perron, McFarland & Company, 2009 pp. 62-78.

Kirkpatrick, Graeme. *Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game*. Manchester University Press, 2011.

Kromand, Daniel. "Sound and the diegesis in survival-horror games." *Proceedings of the Audio Mostly Conference*, 2008, pp. 16-19.

Krzywinska, Tanya. "Hands-on Horror." *ScreenPlay: cinema/videogames/interfaces,* Wallflower Press, 2002, pp. 206-223.

Krzywinska, Tanya. "Gaming Horror's Horror: Representation, Regulation, and Affect in Survival

> Horror Videogames." *Journal of Visual Culture*, edited by Caetlin Benson-Allott and Eugenie

> Brinkema, vol. 14, no. 3, Dec. 2015, pp. 293-297.

Kui, Ryoko *Delicious in Dungeon,* vol. 1, Yen Press, 2017.

Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Blackwell, 1991.

Leirfall, Anita. "Computer Game Space as Directional Space." *7th International Conference on the

> Philosophy of Computer Games*. 2013.

Lynch, Kevin. *The Image of the City*. MIT Press, 2005.

McNabb, Keith. "World of Warcraft: Motivations that Keep Players Playing." 2015.

> wow.richardcolby.net

Melvær, Tor Watten. *Imagining the Unimaginable – Lovecraft in Popular Culture*. MS thesis. NTNU,

> 2018.

Mignola, Mike. *Hellboy in Hell*. Issue 8, Dark Horse Comics, October, 2015.

Montfort, Nick. *Twisty Little Passages: An Approach to Interactive Fiction*. Kindle ed., MIT Press,

> 2005.

Murray, Janet H. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. MIT Press, 1997.

Nooney, Laine. "Let's Begin Again: Sierra On-Line and the Origins of the Graphical Adventure Game."

> *American Journal of Play,* vol. 10, no. 1, 2017. pp. 71-98.

Oliver, Julian Holland. "Polygon destinies: The production of place in the digital role-playing game."

> *COSIGN Conference,* 2001.

Perron, Bernard. *A Cognitive Psychological Approach to Gameplay Emotions*.

---. "Coming to play at frightening yourself: Welcome to the world of horror video games." *Aesthetics

> of Play,* 2005, pp. 14-15.

---. "The Survival Horror: The Extended Body Genre." *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, edited by Bernard Perron, McFarland & Company, 2009 pp. 121-143.

Peterson, Dale. *Genesis II, Creation and Recreation with Computers*. Reston Publishing Company, 1983.

Rockwell, Geoffrey. "Gore galore: Literary theory and computer games." *Computers and the Humanities,* vol. 36, no. 3, 2002, pp. 345-358.

RogueBasin Wiki. RogueBasin, 2019, www.roguebasin.com.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Avatars of Story*. University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

Salen, Katie and Eric Zimmerman. *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2004.

Sanders, Julie. *Adaptation and Appropriation*. Routledge, 2006.

Short, Tanya X. "Never Say Roguelike." *Gamasutra,* 19 November, 2013, www.gamasutra.com/blogs/ TanyaXShort/20131119/204988/Never_Say_Roguelike.php

Sicart, Miguel. "Defining Game Mechanics." *Game Studies* vol. 8 no. 2, 2008.

Skirrow, Gillian. "Hellivision: An Analysis of Video Games." *High Theory/Low Culture: Analysing Popular Television and Film*, edited by Colin McCabe. Manchester University Press, 1986, pp. 115-142.

Stockburger, Axel. "Playing the Third Place: Spatial Modalities in Contemporary Game Environments." *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, vol. 3, no. 2–3, Dec. 2007, pp. 223–36.

---. *The Rendered Arena: Modalities of space in video and computer games*. Diss. University of the Arts London, 2006.

Taylor, Laurie N. "Gothic Bloodlines in Survival Horror Gaming." *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, edited by Bernard Perron, McFarland & Company, 2009, pp. 46-61.

Therrien, Carl. "Games of Fear: A Multi-Faceted Historical Account of the Horror Genre in Video Games." *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, edited by Bernard Perron, McFarland & Company, 2009 pp. 26-45.

Toles-Patkin, Terri. "Rational Coordination in the Dungeon." *The Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 20, no. 1, June 1986, pp. 1–14.

Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Lord of the Rings*. Allen & Unwin, 1954.

Tosca, Susana. "The quest problem in computer games." *Technologies for Interactive Digital Storytelling and Entertainment (TIDSE) conference, in Darmstadt*. 2003.

Tronstad, Ragnhild. "Semiotic and Nonsemiotic MUD Performance." *1st Conference on Computational Semiotics for Games and New Media 10–12 September 2001 CWI-Amsterdam*. 2001.

Turkle, Sherry. "Constructions and Reconstructions of Self in Virtual Reality: Playing in the MUDs." *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, vol. 1, no. 3, June 1994, pp. 158–67.

Voorhees, Gerald, Josh Call, and Katie Whitlock. "Genre and Disciplinarity in the Study of Games." *Dungeons, Dragons, and Digital Denizens: The Digital Role-Playing Game.* Continuum, 2012, pp. 1-10.

Wichman, Glenn R. "A Brief History of 'Rogue.'" 1997, https://web.archive.org/web/20050829223201/wichman.org/roguehistory.html

Williams, Raymond. *The Sociology of Culture*. University of Chicago Press, 1981.

Wood, Robin. "An Introduction to the Modern American Horror Film." *Reading Popular Narrative: A Source Book,* edited by Bob Ashley, Leicester University Press, 1989, pp. 189-192.

Young, M. Joseph. "Theory 101: System and the Shared Imagined Space." *Places to Go, People to Be.*

    2005, www.ptgptb.org/0026/theory101-01.html.

Games Cited

10000000. Windows PC version. EightyEightGames, 2013.

Amos, Ryan, Marc Kelsey, and Aron West. *Catacombs*. Third Edition, Elzra Corp, 2015.

Castle of the Winds. Windows PC version (emulated), SaadaSoft, 1993.

> archive.org/details/CastleoftheWinds_1020

Cavanagh, Terry. *Dicey Dungeons*. Windows PC version, 2019.

Clark, Daniel, Corey Konieczkka, Adam Sadler, and Kevin Wilson. *Descent: Journeys in the Dark.*

> Second Edition, 2012.

Cook, Monte. *Dungeon Master's Guide Core Rulebook II v3.5*. Wizards of the Coast, 2003.

Crowther, Will and Don Woods. *Adventure*. 1975.

Crypt of the NecroDancer. Windows PC version, Brace Yourself Games, 2015.

Darkest Dungeon. Windows PC version, Red Hook Studios, 2016.

Dennen, Paul. *Clank!: A Deck-Building Adventure*. Renegade Game Studios, 2016.

Diablo. Windows PC version, Blizzard North, 1996.

Dungeon Crawl Stone Soup. Version 0.24.0, Windows PC version, DCSS Devteam, 2006

Dungeon Keeper. Windows PC version, Bullfrog Productions, 1997.

Dungeons of Dredmor. Windows PC version, Gaslamp Games, 2012.

Dwarf Fortress. Version 0.44.12, Bay 12 Games, 2018.

Elliott, Mike. *Thunderstone*. Alderac Entertainment Group, 2009.

Final Fantasy series. Various platforms, Square, Square Enix, 1987-2019.

FTL: Faster Than Light. Windows PC version, Subset Games, 2012.

Fox, Toby. *Undertale*. Windows PC version, 2015.

Guild Wars 2. Windows PC version, ArenaNet, 2012.

Gygax, Gary. *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Dungeon Masters Guide.* TSR Games 1979.

---. *Expedition to the Barrier Peaks*. TSR Hobbies Inc, 1980.

---. "Swords and Sorcery in Wargaming." *Wargames Digest.* May, 1974. Reprinted in *Dungeon*, vol. 18, no. 7, Paizo Publishing, 2004.

Gygax, Gary and Dave Arneson. *Dungeons & Dragons Men & Magic*. Tactical Studies Rules, 1974.

---. *Dungeons & Dragons Players Manual*. Revised by Frank Mentzer, TSR Hobbies Inc, 1983.

Heinsoo, Rob and Jonathan Tweet. *13th Age.* Pelgrane Press, Fire Opal Media, 2013.

Kingdom of Loathing. Web, Asymmetric Publications LLC, 2019.

LaTorra, Sage and Adam Koebel. *Dungeon World*. Sage Kobold Productions, 2012.

Leder, Patrick and David Somerville. *Vast: The Crystal Caverns*. Leder Games, 2016.

Legend of Zelda series. Various platforms, Nintendo, 1986-2019.

Mass Effect. Windows PC version, BioWare, 2007.

Might and Magic VI: The Mandate of Heaven. Windows PC version, New World Computing, 1998.

Might and Magic VII: For Blood and Honor. Windows PC version, New World Computing, 1999.

Meunier, Nathan. *This Book Is A Dungeon [This Dungeon Is A Book]*. 2015.

NetHack. v3.6.2, Windows PC version, The NetHack DevTeam, 2019.

Olavsrud, Thor, Luke Crane. *Torchbearer*. The Burning Wheel, 2015.

O'Neal, Johnny, Chris O'Neal. *Boss Monster: The Dungeon Building Card Game*. Brotherwise Games, 2013.

Persona 3 FES. PlayStation 2 version, Atlus, 2006.

Planescape: Torment. Windows PC version, Black Isle Studios, 1999.

Recettear: An Item Shop's Tale. Windows PC version, North American release, EasyGameStation, 2010.

Rogue Legacy. Windows PC version, Cellar Door Games, 2013.

Seek Etyliv. Windows PC version, Rokas, 2018.

Slay the Spire. Windows PC version, MegaCrit, 2019.

Wichman, Glenn, Michael Toy, and Kenneth C.R.C. Arnold. *Rogue*, public domain release, 1986. archive.org/details/ROGUE_PD

Uesugi, Masato. *Welcome to the Dungeon*. IELLO, 2013.

Vaccarino, Donald X. *Dominion*. Rio Grande Games, 2008.

Walker, Brian. *Brogue.* Version 1.7.5, Windows PC version, 2018.

Yu, Derek. *Spelunky*. Version 1.1, Windows PC version, 2008.