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Edgar Allan Poe Simulators:

On Dream Logic, Game Narratives, and Poesque Atmospheres

Marco Caracciolo

Edgar Allan Poe is one of the few canonical literary authors to have a significant presence in video games. The list of titles inspired by Poe spans three decades of graphic adventure games, from the live-action-based *Phantasmagoria* (Sierra On-Line, 1995) to *Dark Tales: Edgar Allan Poe's Murders in the Rue Morgue* (ERS G-Studio, 2009), a puzzle game for mobile platforms. This success is a sign of Poe's enduring popularity within and without the United States; it reflects the capacity of his work to speak to a broad audience. Mark Neimeyer has explained this popularity by highlighting Poe's "ambiguous position between highbrow and lowbrow culture," which makes "him especially appealing to the general public."¹ Poe himself famously remarked that "The Raven" (1845) was intended to be a poem which would "suit at once the popular and the critical taste."²

This chapter will approach Poe's work from a different, but complementary, angle. Rather than exploring the extent of Poe's contribution to popular culture, as other scholars have done,³ I will consider one of the reasons for his lasting appeal and suggest that Poe's short stories, and particularly his classic horror tales, are so effective because they are—to borrow Emily Troschianko's term—"cognitively realistic."⁴ Troschianko introduces this concept in a book-length study of Kafka's fiction in which she argues that Kafka's major works recreate

the dynamics of perceptual experience on the stylistic level. Like recent contributions to cognitive science, Kafka's works imply that perception is not about constructing an internal, static representation of the world but rather involves an active, embodied exploration of one's surroundings.⁵ Poe can be said to do something similar in the domain of dream consciousness: in their narrative logic, some of his best-known short stories mirror the structural features of dream experience. These texts give rise to feelings of unease and horror that are all the more powerful because they leverage our familiarity with dream experiences not just in thematic but in *structural* terms. Of course, this interest in how Poe's works dramatize psychological phenomena is not completely new. Yet seminal studies of Poe from a psychological perspective have mostly grown out of psychoanalysis,⁶ a paradigm that receives only sparse references in more recent Poe criticism.⁷ Largely, this reflects the way in which psychoanalysis itself has been superseded as a theory of mental functioning.

Nevertheless, my account shares an underlying assumption with these psychoanalytical approaches to Poe; Robert Shulman puts it as follows: "[I]n his best stories Poe has a genuine understanding of unconscious processes and imaginative powers."⁸

In a first step, I will summarize some of the major insights cognitive psychology and the philosophy of mind have offered into dreaming, demonstrating that this body of work departs significantly from the psychoanalytic paradigm. I will then illustrate these ideas through a reading of one of Poe's most canonical short stories, "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842). I would argue that this reading can be easily applied to many of Poe's tales (but, of course, I will not be able to conclusively demonstrate this point in the limited space of this chapter). Finally, I will turn to video games and explore two highly successful Poe remediations, which display the same dream-like logic which is at work in the short story. These video games are separated by almost two decades: I will discuss *The Dark Eye* (Inscape, 1995), an experimental video game that made early use of 3D graphics and stop-motion technology, and the first episode of *The Last Door* (The Game Kitchen, 2013), a serial game that harks back to the visual style and mechanics of point-and-click adventures from the 1990s. While the former game features episodes based on several of Poe's short stories, *The Last Door* has an original storyline whose atmosphere, however, is remarkably Poesque—to the extent that a game critic called it a "point and click Edgar Allan Poe simulator."⁹

I will argue that these games become Poesque through their recreation of the distinctive dream-like atmosphere of Poe's classic tales. A particularly thorny question my contribution to this volume will, accordingly, tackle is how

this effect can be achieved in a medium that, unlike Poe's original stories, allows for player interaction and involves visual as well as auditory cues. By exploring this set of issues, my chapter seeks to highlight that intermediality studies should focus on how narrative practices are able to evoke specific kinds of experiences by borrowing strategies from other media *and* by tapping into shared features of our psychological make-up. A "media-conscious narratology"—which I see as an endeavor closely aligned with intermediality studies—should thus not elude the question of audiences' experience of media artifacts, but use it as a lens to examine how narrative media work.¹⁰ I will build on my own experiences in the following pages, assuming that they are likely to be partly shared by other players; but there are certainly alternative ways of responding to the narratives I will consider.

The goal of these case studies is not to be exhaustive about experiential possibilities, but to demonstrate the need for a more nuanced understanding of atmosphere in video games. In this sense, my chapter ties in with Bernard Perron and Felix Schröter's edited collection *Video Games and the Mind* (2016), but it also extends their approach in an explicitly intermedial direction: atmosphere is an experiential concept that accounts for the "recognizability" of a style (the Poesque) across media.¹¹

Dreaming research: a thumbnail sketch

When it comes to dreaming, Freudian psychoanalysis is the proverbial elephant in the room. Yet the Freudian theory that dreams are symbolic expressions of the unconscious has been largely superseded in modern psychology. From the 1970s onwards, psychologists have favored a neurophysiological explanation of dreaming that sees dream imagery as a by-product of the biochemical processes accompanying sleep—and particularly, but not exclusively, REM sleep. From this perspective, the phenomenology of dreams (i.e., what dreams feel like) can be directly mapped onto the activation of certain brain areas. For instance, the vividness of dreams reflects the heightened activation of the visual cortex during sleep, while their emotional salience depends on activity in the limbic system.¹² One of the upshots of this research program is that, *contra* Freud, there is nothing inherently meaningful in dreams: they do not contain any hidden meanings to be recovered or symbols to be interpreted, but only a sequence of memories and associations triggered while sleep performs its restorative function on the human (and more generally mammalian) brain.

This does *not* mean that dreams are completely random, however. Typically, a sense of thematic and quasi-narrative coherence can be detected in

dreams—and in their verbal reports. In an influential study, Robert Stickgold, Cynthia D. Rittenhouse, and J. Allan Hobson found that people are usually able to distinguish intact dream reports from reports that have been tampered with by the experimenters.¹³ How can this sense of coherence be accounted for? First, the memories activated during sleep are thematically related at the level of their neural encoding, because human beings tend to remember things in associative clusters rather than individually. As philosopher Owen Flanagan has put it:

Our brains do not store memories in single neurons but in networks . . . When a node of a net receives a hit the entire net is activated. Suppose a picture of a beach cottage is activated. In all likelihood, a set of memories and associations are also activated—beach scenes, memories of relatives or acquaintances one has spent time with at the beach, beach balls, fried clams.¹⁴

This makes it statistically more likely that the images experienced during REM sleep will have a (more or less loose) common thread.

There is a second factor to consider: According to Martin Seligman and Amy Yellen, dreams have three dimensions: perceptual (mostly, but not exclusively, visual), emotional, and cognitive. The perceptual imagery comes in apparently unrelated “bursts” and depends on random patterns of brain activity. The emotional component, by contrast, tends to be more stable: the emotions experienced during sleep are “relatively more enduring states [than perceptual sensations; they] grow and decline in time. At the brief end they can be viewed as ‘emotional storms.’ At the long end they can be thought of as ‘emotional baths.’”¹⁵ Through their relative stability, emotions can thus lend thematic coherence to a dream. What Seligman and Yellen call the “cognitive” dimension does the rest. The brain areas responsible for making sense of experience—for most commentators, the prefrontal cortex—may operate less efficiently when we sleep than when we are awake, but these areas are never really “off.” The brain will thus continue to make sense of the perceptual input it receives by ascribing temporal sequentiality and, to some extent, causality. This activity of “cognitive integration” is responsible for the apparent narrative coherence of dreams: the images, in themselves random or only loosely connected, are threaded together to the best of the brain’s ability.¹⁶ Arguably, this process continues when we wake up and try to translate the dream experience into a verbal report.

The consequence of this neurophysiological account of dreaming is that, while Freud was wrong to think that dreams are inherently meaningful, dreams can still occasionally be “self-expressive,” to use Flanagan’s term: the

brain's cognitive integration reflects aspects of the dreamer's personality and self-concept.¹⁷ Of course, the randomness of the mental imagery experienced during REM sleep prevents the brain from constructing a fully coherent story. This partial integration of dream experience explains the inherent bizarreness of dreams—perhaps their most salient feature.

According to Hobson et al., dream bizarreness has three dimensions: incongruity, uncertainty, and discontinuity.¹⁸ Flanagan exemplifies these concepts as follows:

Incongruity (I) refers to mismatches—the blue Caribbean waters viewed from the restaurant in Montreal; Socrates in a business suit. Uncertainty (U) refers to actual persons, things, and events that are not specified in a dream, one's geographical location, the person herself—maybe Beth or maybe Jane.

Discontinuity (D) refers to an abnormal shift in person, place, or action—Clinton becomes Reagan; I am in New Jersey one second and I am with the same people in Paris the next.¹⁹

Bizarreness is usually not part of the dream experience itself, though. Bert States has raised this point: when we dream, we do not experience the content of the dream as bizarre; rather, we just accept whatever our brain throws our way as the fact of the matter.²⁰ A sense of bizarreness emerges as soon as we wake up and compare the dream with our beliefs and expectations about “awake” reality. This implies that dreams are a full-fledged mode of thinking. In this respect, Freud was on the right track: dreams have their own kind of logic, but it has nothing to do with a presumed “unconscious.” This specific dream logic arises from a unique tension between the incongruous perceptual images conjured up by sleep and our frontal lobe's mostly vain attempts to make sense of those images. In turn, this tension is complicated by the activation of the brain's limbic system—an area associated with emotions and instinctual drives—during REM sleep: as Hobson has argued, “emotions (feelings) and instincts (primitive behaviours) are both enhanced by [this activation].”²¹

In the next section, I will demonstrate that emotions play a significant role in Poe's “The Masque of the Red Death,” a short story that effectively evokes a dream-like logic by deploying a number of incongruities, uncertainties, and discontinuities. My recourse to cognitive accounts of dream experience in my analysis of Poe's tale and the video games is not meant to supplant an attention to formal features of narrative media, such as stylistic choices or generic conventions. On the contrary, I think a productive dialogue can be established between the cognitive-level description of mental functioning, introspective

intuitions about how reading fiction (or playing video games) works, and the affordances of the artifacts themselves.²² Building on the mind sciences attunes researchers to patterns in their own experiences (and aspects of the texts they are engaging with) that may pass unobserved from other theoretical viewpoints.

Dreaming the masque

In “The Masque of the Red Death,” an epidemic of a disease known as the Red Death is sweeping through an unnamed country. A nobleman, Prince Prospero, decides to seclude himself and a company of young men and women in an abbey. Safeguarded from the plague by the abbey’s apparently impenetrable walls, the company revels and dances without respite. The narrator describes the layout of this space, lingering in particular on seven rooms provided with stained glass windows of different colors.

Since the only light source is on the other side of the window, each room is filled with the window’s color. In all rooms but one the furniture matches the color of the windows. Only in the last room the fittings are black, whereas the window panes are “scarlet—a deep blood color.”²³ During a masked ball, the guests suddenly become aware of a strange character whom they don’t recognize: his costume mocks the appearance of someone who died of the Red Death. Outraged by this provocation, Prince Prospero lunges forward to seize the unknown reveler. He runs through six of the seven rooms, but upon entering the seventh, red-black room he stumbles, falls on his own dagger, and dies instantly. The guests realize that the stranger’s “grave-cerements” and “corpse-like mask” are “untenanted by any tangible form” (676). The Red Death has entered the abbey, and its inhabitants start dying one by one. Eventually, “Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all” (677).

Unlike most of Poe’s horror tales, “The Masque of the Red Death” lacks a full-fledged protagonist: the third-person narrator makes only occasional references to the characters’ emotions, without privileging any of them—not even the Prince. Still, the story manages to be deeply unsettling despite this narrative distance. To a large extent, this emotional impact is due to Poe’s adoption of stylistic and narrative strategies that are evocative of the main structural features of dream experience. Consider the importance of colors in the tale. From the very first paragraph (and the title itself), the plague is associated with “the redness and the horror of blood” (670). While this association is relatively conventional, Poe’s use of the colors in the rooms is not. Note that this detail plays no role whatsoever in the plot: if one left out the

description of the windows and their respective colors, the tale would still make perfect sense. What does it add to the story? My hypothesis is that the colors' function is at the same time affective and imaginative. Thus, the initial comment on the redness of the plague sets the emotional tone for the whole narrative. This effect reflects the way in which dreams are often "bathed"—to use Seligman and Yellen's metaphor²⁴—in a single emotion that pervades them from beginning to end. In the case of Poe's story, the emotion staged by the narrative is the fear of our own mortality, as many commentators have noted.²⁵ Importantly, this emotion is never attributed to the characters—not even to the Prince: it underlies—one could say "colors"—the tale without ever being directly referenced in psychological terms. The rooms' colors, and especially the disturbing red and black of the seventh room, become a symbolic stand-in for this pervasive mood.

The rooms' colors also serve another function: they are a prop for readers' imagination, helping them form vivid imagery. Visualizing this space is easy because we don't have to focus on the details; we can just imagine a progression of colors: blue, purple, green, orange, violet, and red-black. The vividness of this sequence of rooms goes hand in hand with its apparent arbitrariness (apart from the symbolically motivated red-black), in the same way as dreams bombard our consciousness with images that are, at the same time, disorderly and visually striking. The colors become all the more important in readers' imagination of this scene, because the layout and look of the Prince's abbey are only vaguely described. Consider the following passage:

In many palaces . . . such suites form a long and straight vista, while the folding doors slide back nearly to the walls on either hand, so that the view of the whole extent is scarcely impeded. Here the case was very different; as might have been expected from the duke's love of the *bizarre*. The apartments were so irregularly disposed that the vision embraced but little more than one at a time. There was a sharp turn at every twenty or thirty yards, and at each turn a novel effect. To the right and left, in the middle of each wall, a tall and narrow Gothic window looked out upon a closed corridor which pursued the windings of the suite.

671; italics in the original

The narrator starts by contrasting the Prince's abbey with a much more standard layout, where the rooms are arranged in a straight line. This "negative" description calls attention to two aspects of this space: first, the unpredictability of the rooms' arrangement, where each turn is "a novel effect." Again, this aspect ties in with the apparent randomness of dream imagery: implicitly, the reader is invited to imagine moving through the "windings of the suite" and

being surprised at every corner (the simulation of motion is, in itself, a typical feature of dream experience²⁶). Yet the actual appearance of the rooms is surrounded by uncertainty, since we're only told that each of the rooms had a "tall and narrow Gothic window." Even in the lines that follow this excerpt, the spatial references remain vague and generic ("decorations," "ornaments and tapestries," "casements," etc.). The effect is strongly reminiscent of dreams, for an experience clearly defined in kinesthetic and emotional terms—moving through a winding corridor, being repeatedly surprised—is coupled with the strange, and as if inexplicable, vagueness of the perceived space. The only reference point in our imaginings is a series of Gothic windows that cast a distinctive—and eerie—light on the scene.

The narrator's comment on the bizarreness of the Prince's taste only confirms this impression, making it explicit for the benefit of distracted readers: we are here in the domain of the bizarre, in the domain of dreams. The same word reoccurs a few pages later, again italicized, in a passage in which the narrator describes the guests' attire at the masquerade: "There were arabesque figures with unsuited limbs and appointments. There were delirious fancies such as the madman fashions. There was much of the beautiful, much of the wanton, much of the *bizarre*, something of the terrible, and not a little of that which might have excited disgust" (673). The dream-like uncertainty that surrounds the space of the abbey is thus extended to the revelers' physical appearance, which is here dematerialized by being compared with psychological phenomena such as "delirious fancies" and even (in the sentence after the end of the quotation) "a multitude of dreams."

In addition to tapping into dream bizarreness through uncertainty, Poe's short story features incongruities and discontinuities. These elements are perhaps less evident than the spatial descriptions' blurriness, but they are still quite significant. Several aspects of Poe's narrative appear incongruous: for instance, the narrator lingers on the contrast between the devastation brought about by the Red Death outside the abbey and the lavish cheerfulness reigning inside. This tension creates an atmosphere of foreboding that tinges emotionally our reading of the tale from the very beginning: with dream-like certainty, we develop a nagging sense that something is bound to go wrong. A second incongruity is the figure of the mysterious stranger. His mockery of the Red Death is perceived as scandalous: "The whole company . . . seemed now deeply to feel that in the costume and bearing of the stranger neither wit nor propriety existed" (675). The guests' reaction is, in itself, incongruous, because given their carefree attitude one might expect that even making fun of the Red Death wouldn't be going too far. This incongruity is doubled when they eventually approach the character and find him "untenanted by any tangible form" (676). An even more spectacular inconsistency is the narrator's

final statement that “now was acknowledged the presence of the Red Death. He had come like a thief in the night” (676). How could the plague have entered the hermetically sealed abbey? This final twist seems to imply a sudden leap to the symbolic level, as if the stranger—an intangible phantom—stood for the moral corruption that no physical barrier could keep outside the abbey. But this outcome is likely to come across as incongruous—not because the guests’ death was unexpected, but because the way in which it comes to pass short-circuits the inside/outside dichotomy that underlies the whole tale.

Finally, the story features a number of discontinuities. A pendulum clock in the red-black room produces a sound “of so peculiar a note and emphasis that, at each lapse of an hour, the musicians of the orchestra were constrained to pause, momentarily, in their performance, to hearken to the sound; and thus the waltzers perforce ceased their evolutions; and there was a brief disconcert of the whole gay company” (672). Clearly, this sound is a symbolic reminder of time’s passage and therefore points to the tale’s central theme of human mortality; it is no coincidence that “the more aged and sedate [in the company] passed their hands over their brows” (672). At another level, the sound—whose exact qualities are left indeterminate—introduces an element of suspenseful discontinuity into the tale’s temporal fabric. The narrative set-up is thus complete: as readers, we have developed a sense of this place’s indeterminate yet vivid spatiality (thanks to the colored room) and of its rhythmic temporality. What is more, the turning point of the tale is also temporally discontinuous. As the reader may remember, the Prince’s death is not caused directly by the corpse-like figure, but by an accidental fall as he chases this figure through the rooms:

[Prince Prospero] rushed hurriedly through the six chambers . . . He bore aloft a drawn dagger, and had approached, in rapid impetuosity, to within three or four feet of the retreating figure, when the latter, having attained the extremity of the velvet apartment, turned suddenly and confronted his pursuer. There was a sharp cry—and the dagger dropped gleaming upon the sable carpet, upon which, instantly afterwards, fell prostrate in death the Prince Prospero.

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The text limits itself to registering a cry in front of the mysterious character, but what is strongly suggested is a discontinuity in the Prince’s consciousness, as if the sight of the stranger (or the revelation of his true nature) had dazed the Prince and caused him to stumble on his own knife. As noted by Halliburton, the fact that “the principal action of the Prince’s should be a kind of non-action (a loss of consciousness and a fall) indicates the temporal quality of the

narrative, which is a rhythm of motion and stasis.”²⁷ Through the Prince’s death, the text thus inscribes a principle of discontinuity into the logic of its plot.

Even this brief analysis of one of Poe’s horror tales should show to what extent Poe’s narratives build on structural aspects of dream experience—namely, the persistence of an emotional tone, the vividness and arbitrariness of the imagery, and the strategic use of uncertainties, incongruities, and discontinuities. The imaginative power of Poe’s best short stories depends on a combination of these factors, which map directly onto underlying features of dream consciousness—hence the “cognitive realism” of his works.

Remediating the *poesque*

Poe’s dream-like atmosphere has been successfully recreated in the medium of the video game, a point I will illustrate by discussing two video games separated by nearly two decades, *The Dark Eye* and *The Last Door*. *The Dark Eye* (1995) presents an early example of an experimental video game that does not shy away from the artistic aspirations of Poe’s writings. Here, Poe’s short stories are not just a source of thematic and narrative inspiration, but are interwoven into the game itself through frequent quotations—in some cases, of entire tales (“The Masque of the Red Death” being one of them). The developers enrolled American writer William Burroughs as a voice actor—a move clearly meant to attract players who would recognize Burroughs’s name and value the cross-fertilization of gameplay and literary art. For all its artistic ambitions, *The Dark Eye* is a quirky and uneven game whose parts do not always blend seamlessly, but the game is also extremely effective at capturing the atmosphere of Poe’s tales. The baseline game is a *Myst*-style adventure where the player navigates the gameworld by moving from one static frame to another. The characters are based on clay figures recorded using stop-motion animation. This technique is rarely employed in video games and greatly adds to the game’s uncanny atmosphere. *The Dark Eye* fully exploits the potential of the so-called “uncanny valley”—the inherent eeriness of anthropomorphic representations that display one or more features deviating from human likeness:²⁸ in the case of *The Dark Eye*, grotesquely enlarged head and nose, gray complexion, and (for some characters) darkened eye sockets (see Figure 8.1).

The story begins with the avatar arriving at his uncle Edwin’s house. This part of the game features a marriage plot, but it primarily functions as a frame narrative for different “performances” of Poe’s tales, which are triggered by interacting with objects and characters in Edwin’s house. These performances

FIGURE 8.1 *Arrival at Edwin's house in The Dark Eye. Screenshot from The Dark Eye (Inscape, 1995).*

come in two varieties: some are animated cutscenes involving word-by-word recitals of Poe's short stories, with little or no player interaction ("The Masque of the Red Death" belongs to this category); others are interactive sequences that take players to another location and ask them to solve a number of puzzles in order to advance the plot. The latter are, of course, much more interesting in the context of this chapter due to their combination of storytelling and gameplay. They are full-fledged video game adaptations, in which the player is projected into the world of three of Poe's tales ("The Cask of Amontillado," "Berenice," and "The Tell-Tale Heart") and follows the story through snippets of voiceover narration and visual overlays activated by interacting with the gameworld. The player can thus experience each of these narratives from two viewpoints, corresponding roughly to the victim and the wrongdoer. For example, "The Tell-Tale Heart" has two sections: in the first, the avatar is a young man (the narrator of Poe's story); in the second, the player takes the role of the old man who is eventually murdered by the narrator. This setup allows the player to experience the tale from a novel perspective—one that is ignored by Poe's original story, since the text never departs from the consciousness of the young man.

What binds the game's individual parts is their intriguing—if unsettling—atmosphere. At one level, this effect is achieved through a visual style inspired by surrealist paintings: the bright blue sky visible from the windows of Edwin's house, for instance, is reminiscent of Magritte, while many of the objects scattered through the gameworld have the enigmatic vividness of Dalí (see Figure 8.2). But the game's atmosphere is conveyed mainly through a combination of narrative and gameplay mechanics. Here, the distinction between dimensions of dream bizarreness comes in handy. To begin with, we need to ask how exactly Poe's tales are grafted onto the frame narrative. This is a two-step process. First, the player performs a specific action in Edwin's house that causes the gameworld to change abruptly: the screen takes a bluish hue, the characters in the house disappear, and we can hear constant whispers. I will call this the "nightmarish mode" following an online walkthrough of the game.²⁹ The beginning invites us to interpret this mode psychologically: the first nightmare sequence is triggered by the avatar's drinking a glass of Edwin's paint thinner, which he explicitly describes as hallucinogenic. The switch from normal to nightmarish mode introduces a dream-like discontinuity in both the storyworld and the avatar's consciousness.

FIGURE 8.2 A surrealistic fish depicted in *The Dark Eye*. Screenshot from *The Dark Eye* (Inscape, 1995).

At the same time, the audiovisual features of the nightmarish mode are emotional cues that function much like the monochromatic rooms in “The Masque of the Red Death” and contribute to the game’s bizarreness.

In the nightmares, the player can access Poe’s tales by interacting with certain in-game objects that are inert in normal mode. The cleaver depicted in Figure 8.2 provides an illustrative example: clicking on the blade has no effect in normal mode, whereas doing so in one of the nightmares transports the player to the world of “The Tell-Tale Heart.” This is an important source of incongruity (and, potentially, player frustration): all of the props that function as portals to Poe’s tales are rather opaque—that is, there is no way of anticipating what object will do what (if anything). This incongruous mechanics is even more evident within the tales’ world, where we can advance the plot only through repetitive chains of actions that follow a symbolic rather than cause-effect logic: the player is often forced to click on every visible object in order to unlock the next sequence. At the same time, the device evokes the incongruity of dream experience—where unrelated images are juxtaposed in surprising ways and frustration is an extremely common emotion.

To recap, the game constructs what narrative theorist Lubomír Doležel would call a “dyadic world”³⁰—that is, a world built on the opposition between the baseline reality of Edwin’s house and a nightmarish reality. Poe’s three tales are nested like self-contained worlds in the latter reality, each of them containing two complementary—but narratively distinct—perspectives. The player moves between these three levels of reality: interacting with the characters in normal mode will trigger the nightmarish mode, where in turn certain actions will transport the player to the world of one of Poe’s tales; after solving the puzzles and “completing” each tale, the player is transported back to normal mode—only to begin the sequence anew, for six times in total.

Uncertainties abound in this complex narrative structure. The predominantly audiovisual narrative of *The Dark Eye* cannot evoke imagery in the same way as Poe’s verbal narratives, because the on-screen world has no significant visual indeterminacies. As a result, the uncertainties are a matter of plot rather than mental imagery. However, this plot is elusive on two levels: On the one hand, the relationship between the events unfolding in Edwin’s house and the world of Poe’s stories remains unclear. On the other hand, the tales’ narrative is fragmentary and difficult to translate into a chronological sequence, so that players are encouraged to re-read Poe in order to find out what really happened. Within the interactive tales the narrative organization tends to break down in favor of a sense of loose, associative progression marked by the player’s trial-and-error interactions with the gameworld. This creates a paradoxical situation: narrative coherence is problematized precisely where we would expect the plot

to fall into place, given the stringent narrative logic of Poe's original tales. The bizarre atmosphere of *The Dark Eye* thus depends on the orchestration of psychological discontinuities, logical incongruities, and narrative uncertainties—structural features of dream consciousness that are used to shape the player's experience at the intersection of storytelling and gameplay.

Some of these dream-like elements can also be found in my second case study, *The Last Door*, although the presentation and game mechanics are quite different. Whereas *The Dark Eye* draws inspiration from the first-person adventure game *Myst* (Cyan, 1993), *The Last Door* belongs to a different subgenre, that of point-and-click adventures (where the avatar is always seen from a third-person perspective). Yet *The Last Door* was released almost twenty years after the heyday of adventure gaming in the 1990s, as part of a wave of independent "retro" games.³¹ Where *The Last Door* differs from classic adventure games is in its serial format, in that it was released in seven episodes over two seasons (the second of which was still ongoing at the time of writing). Here, I will focus on the first episode, which illustrates well the Poesque atmosphere of the series.

This episode, titled "The Letter," asks the player to take the role of a nineteenth-century man, Jeremiah Devitt, who receives a letter from Anthony Beechworth, a childhood acquaintance. Anthony hints that he is in a predicament, asking Jeremiah to visit him in his mansion as soon as possible. The game proper starts with Jeremiah arriving at the mansion and finding it abandoned. After taking control of Jeremiah, the player has to solve a series of puzzles in order to open the house's many locked doors. Eventually, the player will discover Anthony's dead body in the attic, where he has committed suicide. This is a striking revelation for the protagonist, but it isn't for the player, who has already witnessed Anthony's suicide in the game's very first scene. In fact, we've more than witnessed it, because the game's prologue puts the player in Anthony's shoes: the only thing we can do is "help" him commit suicide by tying the rope to a rafter in the attic, climbing on a chair, placing the noose around his head, and hanging himself by kicking the chair (see Figure 8.3). This scene is striking in two ways: first, it asks the player to control a character at a time, the game's beginning, when we would expect a non-interactive introductory sequence; second, the scene directly involves the player in a series of emotionally and ethically charged actions without the possibility of "opting out." The game offers little interactivity here, since we're only supposed to click on the rafter, the rope, the chair, and the noose (in this order). And yet, given the kind of action we're instructing the character to perform, even this small amount of interactivity is likely to prove uncomfortable for the player. Indeed, this uneasy tension between apparent interactivity and lack of options shapes the experience of playing the whole game.

FIGURE 8.3 *The prologue of “The Letter.” Screenshot from The Last Door, Episode 1 (The Game Kitchen, 2013).*

The influence of Poe’s works is less explicit in *The Last Door* than in *The Dark Eye*, but we do find a moment in “The Letter” that clearly draws inspiration from a Poe short story, “The Black Cat.” About halfway through the game, we retrieve the key to the cellar and discover a bricked-up wall from where a cat’s meowing can be heard. As soon as we’ve pulled down the wall with the aid of a hammer, a black cat jumps out.

Just as in Poe’s tale, the cat has been walled in, and Anthony notices that it has been blinded. While this is the only reference to the American writer, and it remains implicit, the atmosphere evoked by the game is distinctly Poesque. This effect draws on the game’s combination of interactivity and storytelling—and here we find a wide gamut of uncertainties, incongruities, and discontinuities.

The game’s pixelated aesthetics is more than a nostalgic tribute to classic adventure games from the 1990s. In those games the visual style depended largely on technical limitations in computer graphics, while in *The Last Door* (and in similar contemporary games) it is a clear aesthetic choice, since it is key to the creation of a sense of dread and mystery in the audience. Consider Figure 8.4; there are three significant “gaps” in this screenshot, which function analogously to Poe’s vague spatial references in “The Masque of the Red

Death.” First, we have the darkness that surrounds the avatar: the only light source is the lamp that Jeremiah holds in his hand. Second, we can see a striped patch of red, black, and light blue on the floor, but we can’t quite make out what this object is (it will turn out to be a music record). This short-lived indeterminacy is part of a larger strategy to make the gameworld unrecognizable, thus fueling the player’s curiosity (and, in some cases, suspense).

Third, and this is perhaps the most important uncertainty, the avatar’s face has no eyes or mouth that we can make out. Since a person’s facial expressions are a direct reflection of his or her emotional states, players are thus denied access to the subjectivity of the character they are controlling—even as the character clearly finds himself in a distressing situation. Paradoxically, the uncertainty that surrounds the character’s emotions *intensifies* the player’s own affective involvement: we are asked to make up for the absence of explicit references to Jeremiah’s emotional states by leveraging our own imagination. In other words: because we don’t know how the character is feeling, we have to make the mental effort of imagining how we would feel in his situation, and this extra work amplifies our empathetic connection with him, intensifying our overall emotional engagement.³²

FIGURE 8.4 Visual uncertainties in “The Letter.” Screenshot from *The Last Door*, Episode 1 (*The Game Kitchen*, 2013).

Uncertainties and incongruities are also pervasive in the game's interactive narrative. *The Dark Eye*, as we've seen, is a challenging (and potentially frustrating) game because the logic behind the plot-advancing actions is very opaque—that is, it is difficult to predict the next step we are supposed to take. By contrast, “The Letter” pulls off the considerable feat of being very easy and yet quite illogical in its narrative progression. To a large extent, this is due to the limited number of objects we can interact with in the gameworld, which encourages us to try combining things even if we don't know why exactly we're doing it, or where it will take us. For example, consider the record shown in Figure 8.5. We can pick it up and place it on the record player in the living room. The music begins, and since nothing happens and there's nothing else we can do, we leave the room. As soon as we go out, however, the music stops, and this encourages us to go back to check on the record player. We enter the living room to find a disturbing scene: the music has mysteriously attracted a flock of crows, which has taken over the room and also somehow managed to pull the curtains, so that the room is now bathed in red light. The discontinuity between the two versions of the room is striking, and is likely to take the player by surprise. It is not just a visual but a psychological discontinuity, since the red light is a clear emotional cue (like the color of Poe's rooms in “The Masque of the Red Death” or the bluish hue of the nightmarish mode of *The Dark Eye*).

The crows have now vacated the courtyard, which they were previously occupying, and we can collect an indistinct bloody object they've left behind: a dying crow that begins squeaking as soon as we've added it to our inventory. (The game's sound design is particularly effective in creating a sense of unease and foreboding.) The only thing we can do with this bird is place it in a bowl next to an open window, even though we can't quite predict the consequence

FIGURE 8.5 *The living room before and after the crows' invasion in “The Letter.” Screenshot from The Last Door, Episode 1 (The Game Kitchen, 2013).*

of this action: the cat detects the dying crow's smell, starting to meow insistently and thus revealing its presence behind the cellar's bricked-up wall. The logic behind all this is, needless to say, quite sketchy. Why should classical music attract crows, and how can the cat pick up the bird's scent through two floors and one thick wall? These are, to a large extent, questions that we are likely to gloss over as we play the game, driven as we are by the plot's surprisingly smooth (but incongruous) progression. The game manages to convince us—mainly through lack of alternatives—that playing the record and placing a crow in a basin are the right thing to do, and we just go with the flow: we comply even if we don't know where these actions will take us. The plot of "The Letter" is distinctly dream-like because of this sense of effortlessness that feels sinister and ominous—an expanded version of Anthony's suicide at the beginning of the game, which paradoxically elicits the player's guilt (because of the interactive dimension) despite being the only available option. Once again, discontinuities, incongruities, and uncertainties contribute to this sense of deep discomfort, turning the game—in the words of the critic quoted in the introduction—into a compelling "Poe simulator."

Conclusion

The link between dreaming and artistic (and narrative) representation has a long pedigree in cultural history, but it has become particularly prominent starting with the end of the eighteenth century: from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* (1797) to David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001), dream experience has provided both a source of inspiration for a large number of creators and an interpretive framework for coming to terms with strange, illogical, and/or incongruous narratives. This chapter has discussed concrete strategies through which storytelling may tap into features of dream consciousness as they are currently theorized in the mind sciences. Exploring a short story by Poe and two Poe-inspired video games has allowed me to exemplify this approach, which combines an attention to narrative form with the study of patterns in readers' (or players') experience.

My argument has thus been twofold: on the one hand, Poe's work leverages the core features of dream experience—namely, the randomness and vividness of the imagery, the marked emotional tone, and the high frequency of discontinuities, incongruities, and uncertainties. In this respect, Poe's tales can be construed as cognitively realistic, and owe part of their long-lasting appeal to this capacity to mirror aspects of the phenomenology of dreams. On the other hand, I have suggested that *The Dark Eye* and *The Last Door* evoke a Poesque atmosphere by translating Poe's narrative strategies into the

gameplay mechanics of an interactive, multimodal medium like the video games. In the case of *The Dark Eye*, this process is more literal, since Poe's tales provide most of the game's narrative material: yet even here the remediation does not aim at the straightforward adaptation of Poe's plots, but rather at the evocation of a dream-like experience through a series of structural contrasts (for instance, between the frame narrative and the world of the tales, or between the normal and the nightmarish mode, or between the victim's and victimizer's perspectives on the events of the tales). Likewise, in the first episode of *The Last Door* the plot is largely stereotypical; where the genuinely Poesque dimension emerges is in the bizarre actions we're required to take in order to advance the story, and in the visual features of its presentation (e.g., the sense of uncertainty created by the pixel art).

We can extrapolate the following idea from these case studies: in the intermedial exchange between Poe's literary oeuvre and two contemporary video games, the distinctive atmosphere of the Poesque is remediated by shifting the burden from the narrative per se to its actual performance in gameplay. The narrative becomes less central to players' experience than in Poe's original tales, while the focus turns to the bizarre logic inherent in our gameplay choices. This creative choice, of course, reflects the different affordances of the game medium, and how the interest of the narrative has to coexist with the attractions of gameplay in video games. As I have argued elsewhere,³³ only the exploration of patterns in players' experience can do justice to this cohabitation of narrative and ludic values: as an inherently experiential notion, atmosphere—the lynchpin of my analysis here—provides an important point of departure for this approach. One of the upshots of this chapter is that the study of intermediality should concern itself more directly with experiential phenomena at this level.

Notes

- 1 Mark Neimeyer, "Poe and Popular Culture," in *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 208.
- 2 Edgar Allan Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition," in *Edgar Allan Poe: Essays and Reviews*, ed. G.R. Thompson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 15.
- 3 Neimeyer, "Poe"; Christine A. Jackson, *The Tell-Tale Art: Poe in Modern Popular Culture* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012).
- 4 Emily Troschiano, *Kafka's Cognitive Realism* (New York: Routledge, 2014).
- 5 See, for example, Alva Noë, *Action in Perception* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

- 6 Marie Bonaparte, *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psycho-Analytic Interpretation*, transl. John Rodker (London: Imago, 1949); David M. Rein, "Poe's Dreams," *American Quarterly* 10, no. 3 (1958).
- 7 See, for example, Kevin J. Hayes, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- 8 Robert Shulman, "Poe and the Powers of Mind," *ELH* 37, no. 2 (1970): 245.
- 9 Adam Smith, "Ready, Steady, Poe: *The Last Door*," *Rock, Paper, Shotgun*, October 21, 2014, <http://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2014/10/21/free-horror-game-the-last-door/#more-243063>.
- 10 Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon, ed., *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014).
- 11 Bernard Perron and Felix Schröter, ed., *Video Games and the Mind: Essays on Cognition, Affect and Emotion* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2016).
- 12 J. Allan Hobson, *Dreaming: An Introduction to the Science of Sleep* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 110.
- 13 Robert Stickgold, Cynthia D. Rittenhouse, and J. Allan Hobson, "Dream Splicing: A New Technique for Assessing Thematic Coherence in Subjective Reports of Mental Activity," *Consciousness and Cognition* 3, no. 1 (1994).
- 14 Owen Flanagan, *Dreaming Souls: Sleep, Dreams, and the Evolution of the Conscious Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 159.
- 15 Martin E.P. Seligman and Amy Yellen, "What Is a Dream?" *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 25, no. 1 (1987): 4.
- 16 Ibid., 3–5.
- 17 Flanagan, *Dreaming Souls*, ch. 5.
- 18 J. Allan Hobson et al., "Dream Bizarreness and the Activation-Synthesis Hypothesis," *Human Neurobiology* 6, no. 3 (1987).
- 19 Flanagan, *Dreaming Souls*, 148.
- 20 Bert O. States, "Dream Bizarreness and Inner Thought," *Dreaming* 10, no. 4 (2000): 189.
- 21 Hobson, *Dreaming*, 144.
- 22 Marco Caracciolo, *The Experientiality of Narrative: An Enactivist Approach* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), 12–16.
- 23 Edgar Allan Poe, "The Masque of the Red Death," in *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, Vol. II, *Tales and Sketches 1831–1842*, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1978), 672. All subsequent references "The Masque of the Red Death" will refer to this edition and will be made parenthetically in the main text.
- 24 Seligman and Yellen, "What Is a Dream," 4.
- 25 See, for example, David Halliburton, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Phenomenological View* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 310.
- 26 See Helene Sophrin Porte and J. Allan Hobson, "Physical Motion in Dreams: One Measure of Three Theories," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 105, no. 3 (1996).

- 27 Halliburton, *Edgar Allan Poe*, 313.
- 28 See, for example, Tyler J. Burleigh, Jordan R. Schoenherr, and Guy L. Lacroix, "Does the Uncanny Valley Exist? An Empirical Test of the Relationship Between Eeriness and the Human Likeness of Digitally Created Faces," *Computers in Human Behavior* 29, no. 3 (2013).
- 29 Marcus Dracon, "The Dark Eye Walkthrough," *The Computer Show*, accessed February 27, 2016. <http://www.thecomputershow.com/computershow/walkthroughs/darkeyewalk.htm>.
- 30 Lubomír Doležel, *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 128.
- 31 See Matt Kamen, "Gaming Trends: The Return of the Adventure Game," *The Guardian*, February 9, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/feb/09/gaming-adventure-games-revival-matt-kamen>.
- 32 For a similar dynamic, see Marco Caracciolo, "Unknowable Protagonists and Narrative Delirium in *American Psycho* and *Hotline Miami*: A Case Study in Character Engagement Across the Media," *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae: Film and Media Studies* 9 (2014).
- 33 Marco Caracciolo, "Playing Home: Video Game Experiences Between Narrative and Ludic Interests," *Narrative* 23, no. 3 (2015).

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