Virtually In Ruins:

The Imagery and Spaces of Ruin in Digital Games

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English (Modern and Contemporary Literature)

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Abstract

The image of the ruin is one that has haunted Western culture from the days of antiquity to the contemporary sphere, adapting and finding new tonalities as it is incorporated within new aesthetic, cultural and philosophical arrangements, but, in one form or another, remaining ever-present.

My intention with this dissertation is to home in on one of these adaptations, by examining the ruin-image at work within the relatively new medium of digital games. The possibility of such a reading is announced by the marked frequency and variety of ruins as settings for games - a frequency which, I shall argue, is neither accidental, nor entirely determined by cultural factors, but a product of the formal affordances of the medium itself.

After some initial theoretical groundwork which will serve to fix the notion of 'ruin' as a philosophical as well as a material concept, the first part of the dissertation will focus upon a diachronic investigation of the ruin-theme, aiming to locate the key tendencies and tropes around which the image of the ruin has crystallized. The aim here is not only to present examples of the ruin-image at work, but also to attempt to formulate a semiotic framework for what I shall term the 'ruin-situation' - the network of interlocking connotations and forces set in motion around the ruin.

Once this has been established, the next step is to consider how this semiotic framework at the heart of the ruin might be set to work within the digital games medium. In order to do so, the formal characteristics of the medium will be examined with the purpose of identifying a number of affinities between the experience of the viewer encountering a ruin and the player incorporated within the gameworld.

The objective of the dissertation, therefore, is twofold: firstly, to study the various ways in which the possibilities opened up by the new medium modify, recontextualize, problematize, or perhaps simply reaffirm, the established notions surrounding the representation of ruins; and, secondly, to utilize this exploration as a means of shedding light on the aesthetic affordances offered by the new medium, as well as the formal and semiotic systems by which they operate.

Statement of Authenticity

I declare that this dissertation is original and is entirely my own work. All works I have quoted from, referred to and consulted during the writing of this dissertation have been cited where appropriate in the text, and are included within the list of works cited.

Daniel Vella

27th September 2010

To Lara, and to Matthew,

without both of whose support this dissertation would have been 'in ruins' in an entirely

less favourable sense

Acknowledgements

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The view of an illustrious city deserted, the remembrance of past times, their comparison with the present state of things, all combined to raise my heart to a strain of sublime meditations. I sat down on the base of a column; and there, my elbow on my knee, and my head resting in my hands, sometimes turning my eyes towards the desert, and sometimes fixing them on the ruins, I fell into a profound reverie.

- Constantin-François Volney [1]

[1] *The Ruins, or, A Survey of the Revolutions of Empires* (London: J. Johnson, 1796), p.5

Introduction

T.S. Eliot famously showed us a heap of fragments shored up against our ruin, in the process crystallizing the twentieth-century's sense of itself as a time of dearth, witness to an exhausted civilisation that can express itself only in the mode of epilogation.[2] Half a century later, M. John Harrison's *Viriconium* cycle of novels and short stories drew on *The Waste Land* in order to explore the limits of this sense of belatedness, constructing a vision of a fantastical city at the twilight of history, as culture, humanity and the earth itself decline into senility and entropy - a city thrown together out of the accumulated ruins of histories upon histories, composed of 'scraps of machinery, and broken-up philosophies'.[3]

Both owe their genesis to - and, in turn, feed back into - the sense that, as George Steiner puts it, 'we come *after*, and that is the nerve of our condition'.[4] Intermeshed with this is a feeling of failure - of humanism, of a belief in rational progress, of civilisation itself - that comes to the fore in Walter Benjamin's vision of the angel of history, gaze fixed backwards, seeing only 'one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at its feet'.[5] But, although the sentiment emerges from within a specific cultural dominant that is itself a product of a particular set of socio-historical factors, the imagery of ruin in which these observations are couched is by no means a recent development: in one form or another, ruins have haunted the imagination of the West at least since the Middle Ages.

Partly, of course, this is due to the waves of history that have ebbed, flowed and eddied across the geography of the old world, leaving behind ruins (and ruins heaped

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[2] *The Waste Land,* in *Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), pp.39-64
[3] "The Luck in the Head", in *Viriconium* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2005), pp.379-400, p.382
[4] "Humane Literacy", in *Language and Silence* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), pp.21-29 (p.22)
[5] *Selected Writings, 1938-40*, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambride, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p.392

upon ruins) seemingly at every turn as bearers of cultural memory, enduring as the physical traces of history, but also, at the same time, as monuments to decline and decay. In this, of course, they are also a symbol of our own mortality: a point revealed by Chateaubriand's suggestion that the arresting appeal of ruins lies in 'a secret conformity between these destroyed monuments and the caducity of our own existence'.[6]

The ruin, however, presents a much more complex figure than these manifestations of the theme can convey in isolation. As the title of Rose Macaulay's landmark study of the ruin-cult, *Pleasure of Ruins*, indicates, they can also be a source of fascination - even of a unique beauty. And, in Christopher Woodward's observation that ruins become the site of a 'dialogue between incompleteness and the imagination',[7] we can perhaps begin to identify part of the appeal, as well as glimpsing the play of presence and absence that is so fundamental to the ruin.

The ruin-image is a trope that, in enduring, continues to reveal new aspects and significations as it is recontextualized into new cultural, generic and medial environments. The image Woodward chooses to launch his study of the ruin-theme, the Statue of Liberty in ruins in the final scene of *Planet of the Apes* (Franklin J. Schaffner, 1968), draws heavily on established conventions of the ruin-image, but it is nonetheless a decidedly nuclear-age ruin (Fig.1). Nowhere is this pattern of revision by repositioning more evident, however, than in the medium of digital games, where we encounter a situation that might, at first glance, seem paradoxical. In this most contemporary and self-consciously forward-looking of media, the ruin-image is not only present, but prevalent: Dunstan Lowe notes that the 'quantity and diversity' of ruined settings in digital games is remarkable,[8] and this observation certainly seems to be borne out, whether the ruins in

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[6] *The Beauties of Christianity,* trans. by Frederic Shoberl (London: Henry Colburn, 1813), p.363

[7] *In Ruins,* (London: Vintage, 2002), p.15

[8] "Always Already Ancient: Ruins in the Virtual World", in *Virtual Worlds of Classics: A Guide,* ed. by Marek Kretschmer, Thea Selliaas Thorsen and Staffan Wahlgren (Trondheim: Tapir Press, forthcoming 2010), p.1

question are the ancient remains being explored in *Tomb Raider* (Core Design, 1996), or the post-apocalyptic wasteland of *Fallout* (Black Isle Studios, 1997).

The question mark that appends itself to this apparent paradox represents the problem I intend to tackle in this paper. Some initial preparatory moves, however, are in order: the necessary first step is an attempt at more thoroughly defining the implications contained within the concept of 'ruin'. Gaining this foothold will allow us, in subsequent chapters, to map out some of the key developments and traditions within the diachronic development of the ruin-image in Western culture, attempting a distillation of these traditions into a semiotic framework that might grant us a way into the complexities of the ruin-image.

With this groundwork established, I will then move on to tackling the question of the ruin-image in digital games. It is my hypothesis that the marked preponderance of ruins as settings is not accidental, and nor can it be exclusively attributed to games' reflections of the wider cultural landscape within which they are produced. Instead, I will argue that the formal properties of the medium are such that a number of marked affinities can be drawn between the experience of the player within the gameworld and that of the visitor encountering a ruin-site.

My outlining of these formal properties has a twofold intent: firstly, to study the various ways in which the possibilities opened up by the new medium modify, recontextualize, problematize, or perhaps simply reaffirm, established notions surrounding the representation of ruins; and, secondly, to utilize this exploration as a means of shedding light on the unique aesthetic affordances offered by the new medium, as well as the formal and semiotic systems by which they operate. In other words, I aim to use digital games as a means of rethinking the ruin, and the ruin as a means of rethinking digital games.

Chapter 1

The Notion of Ruin

As with all such endeavours, it is best to start with a clarification of terms. From the outset, I would like to stabilise four terms which I shall be making use of to refer to different aspects of the figure of the ruin. First, *ruin-site* refers to the ruin purely as a physical entity, that is, as an aggregation of architectural forms and fragments arranged in a specific topographical locus. Second, *ruin-situation* - a term that shall be defined more thoroughly at a later stage - describes the ruin in its full connotative extension, going beyond the site itself to include both the original construction and the process of its ruination. A ruin-site, then, represents the visible trace of a ruin-situation: the most concise way to express the distinction might be to say that a ruin-site might move a viewer to a contemplation of the ruin-situation. Third, a *ruin-sentiment* is the impression attendant upon the contemplation of a ruin: as we will note in the next chapter, the ruin-sentiment can take a variety of forms, and is as dependent upon the viewer and the cultural matrix they inhabit as on the ruin itself. Finally, a *ruin-image* is a textual ruin, ruin as represented or imagined through an act of mediation.

Prior to all of these, however, is *ruin* itself. The OED lists eleven definitions of the word 'ruin' as a noun, among which we find 'gin of a poor quality'. Also offered are six possible definitions of the word when used as a verb, as well as fifteen derivatives ranging from the common ('ruined', 'ruination') to the less common ('ruin-tail', an obsolete slang term for a prostitute).[9]

The closer we examine the concept of ruin, the more its multiplying valencies unfold it into new configurations. Ruin can be a property of an object, or an object in itself. It can refer to an idea, a project, a building, a person, an institution or an empire. It

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[9] *The Oxford English Dictionary,* 2nd ed., XIV (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p.225-7

can be a process, an event or an outcome. In all its inflections and extensions, however, what remains constant is the central fact of (the OED again) 'decay and fall', whether we are referring to 'ruin' as that which remains after, the process of, or the agent of this downward movement.

Founding an understanding of ruin upon the notion of a fall, particularly if we collapse together the literal and metaphorical senses of the word, conceiving of a fall that is simultaneously physical and metaphysical, immediately points us towards the symbolic as well as the material nature of ruin. It also forces us to expand our viewpoint beyond the object of ruin and to take in the entirety of the situation encompassed by the concept of ruin. Describing something or someone as *fallen* naturally invites considerations of an original, prelapsarian state of wholeness or unity that is lost to us, and, as such, the ruin inevitably sets in motion anxieties of exile and dispossession.

> Landscapes and buildings in ruination, reduced to abandoned sites, are traces
> that embody a sense of loss. Ruins hold out an image of a once glorious
> present, another time, revealing a place of origin no longer as it was. Their
> presence is a sign of that loss and of the impossibility of overcoming it. They
> remind us of finitude as both disruption and continuity, of the necessity of
> living on among ruins.[10]

Separation, occlusion and absence therefore lie at the heart of the ruin - *ruin* is the absence of an original totality. This absence, however, is one that crystallizes around a remnant; it is only by virtue of these fragments that we can have any awareness of ruin at all:

> *Ruin* articulates itself in its relation to its results: it requires those outcomes
> (ruins) and is implicit in them. Ruin requires *remains,* requires *that which*

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[10] Charles Merewether, "Traces of Loss", in *Irresistible Decay: Ruins Reclaimed,* ed. by Michael S. Roth (Los Angeles, CA: The Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1997), pp.25-40, p.25

remains, *ce qui reste;* it requires that *the rest* exist, as such. Without ruins

showing, no ruin.[11]

Little wonder that in ruin Jacques Derrida finds the basis for an architectonics of *différance,* equating the ruin as visible trace of a lost totality with the sign that marks only the abyss yawning open between it and its absent referent: 'writing is itself written, but also ruined, made into an abyss, in its own representation'.[12] In this sense, ruin - as condition - lies at the core of any system of representation; it stands for a drawing - an act of inscribing - that is also a 'drawing of the blind', a screen that conceals 'an impossible totality'.[13]

Ruins and Time

Derrida's metaphorics therefore sunder the ruin from the certainty of an original plenitude, and just as surely from the assuredness of a final, total dissolution: his is a de-temporalisation of ruin, a rendering of the ruin as a suspended, static image of absence, an image that, in showing, shows us precisely '*nothing at all, nothing of the all*'.[14] Returning, bearing this in mind, to a contemplation of the site of ruin, we perceive it – as, in truth, we generally do, faced with the inexplicability of its presence – not as an object in transformation, but as a monument to incompleteness that seems always to have existed as a fragment. As Dylan Trigg says, 'often, the impending gravity of a ruin, its being-in-place, can negate the belief that it was otherwise, less even a functioning structure'.[15]

Of course, it is certainly possible to take the opposite view of ruin, to step outside the moment of static contemplation and return to a consideration of ruin-as-

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[11] Stephen Barker, " Strata/Sedimenta/Lamina: *In Ruin(s)*", *Derrida Today*, 1 (2008), 42-58 (p.47)

[12] *Writing and Difference,* trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 65

[13] *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins,* trans. by Pascal-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p.68

[14] ibid., p.69

[15] Dylan Trigg, The Aesthetics of Decay: Nothingness, Nostalgia and the Absence of Reason (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), p.144

process, thereby bringing to the fore matters of temporality, decay and mortality. Consider, for instance, the recordings collected by composer William Basinski as *The Disintegration Loops.*[16] The unique quality of these recordings lies in their genesis: while attempting to salvage some compositions recorded decades earlier on magnetic tape loops by converting them into a digital format, Basinski discovered that the aging tapes were flaking apart as they went through the machine's read/write heads; instead of halting the process, however, he chose to record their deterioration.

The result is a fascinating example of process music that not only connotes the notion of ruin as decay, but physically embodies it. Each piece consists of a short, looped melody, decaying progressively with each iteration. What starts off as an ordered, melodic structure of clear notes becomes fractured and indistinct, the melody shifting into new forms as notes break down or are silenced completely: by the end each piece has decayed from a full melody, through soundscapes of barely-audible fragments, and into total silence.

Basinski's musical architecture of decay therefore reveals the temporal aspect of ruination that Derrida's philosophical elaborations leave unexamined. But even this is not sufficient, on its own, to account for the unique nature of the ruin-site, suspended in decay. While being aware of the ruin as a temporal object, it is – in almost every case – *available to us* as a static, unchanging image, a seemingly – perhaps paradoxically – eternal symbol of an absent original. This absence at the heart of the ruin – Derrida's abyss - is only rendered comprehensible if we parse it into a temporal, proto-narrative conception of ruin-as-process, with an original wholeness at one end and presumably, total decay at the other. Temporality and static monumentality, therefore, go hand in hand within the boundaries of the ruin: what is needed is a framing of the ruin that meshes the two.

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[16] 2062, 2062 0201, 2002

Stephen Barker argues that such a framing exists in the work of Monsù Desiderio, a pseudonym for the seventeenth-century painter François de Nomé and – possibly – several collaborators, who – whether as individual or as collective - left behind one of the most singular *oeuvres* of the Renaissance. One reaches for twentieth-century terms - surrealist, post-apocalyptic - to describe the fantastical landscapes of ruined architecture that populate these canvases. This is architecture that enmeshes divergent styles, and that binds itself to no logic of form, function or geometry - though its constituent elements are drawn from recognizable classical and biblical sources, the whole presents itself to the viewer as an enigma; enshrouded by dark, overcast skies and gloomy shadows, these scenes are 'suspended in a world somewhere between historical tradition and the uncanny'.[17] And the form of this suspension is key - these architectural forms, already fragments that bring to mind entire cultures and iconographies, are doubly fragmented: they are caught in the act of falling into ruin.

The cavernous colonnaded aisles of *King Asa of Juda Destroying the Idols*, for instance, is seen in the process of being engulfed by a wave of destruction sweeping across the canvas from right to left, bearing with it fragments of masonry and the pall of darkness, and heralded by the remarkable figure of a shattered column bisecting the picture, captured in the moment of falling, about to fall but never to fall (Fig.2). These images are both static and dynamic: the inherently transient and transformative become monumental, but only to stand - once again - for transience and transformation. Any attempt on the part of the viewer to extrapolate an original scene that makes sense of these fragments is doomed to failure: in Barker's words, 'it is narrative only to the extent that the viewer inevitably attempts to account for these quasi-allegorical visual enigmas'.[18]

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[17] Barker, p.50
[18] ibid., p.52

The Ruin of Building

This paper will take a bottom-up approach; its main concern is not ruin, but ruins - more specifically, the image of ruins, as represented textually. A ruin is, necessarily, a ruin *of* something. In the most common contemporary usage of the term, a ruin denotes an architectural referent: when we talk of ruins, we are most often talking about the ruins of a building. As such, it is here - in an examination of the image of architectural ruins - that I will locate the focus of my analysis.

Before launching into an examination of ruined buildings, however, it might be useful to make a brief digression in order to ask ourselves about the nature of building itself. What - we need to ask - does the act of building represent? Edward S. Casey suggests that 'built places stave off the chaos, 'the void above the abyss' found in a disaggregated natural order'.[19] Architectural structure as symbolic structure: building thereby comes to stand for the imposition of (human) order upon indefinite space, through which that space might be mapped and enter the sphere of the knowable. Martin Heidegger makes this amply clear when he suggests that it is the placing of the temple within the primeval landscape that allows that landscape to come into view as the site upon which the patterns of civilisation might be drawn:

> It is the temple-work that first fits together and then gathers around itself the
>
> unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and
>
> blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of
>
> destiny for human beings.[20]

The primary geometric function by which this ordering functions, then, is the demarcation of a *place,* its claiming into the symbolic order represented by civilisation: its

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[19] *Getting Back Into Place: Towards a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), p.112

[20] "The Origin of the Work of Art", in *Basic Writings,* ed. by David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1993), pp.139-212, p.167

necessary corollary is the stabilising of the boundary between inside and outside. Gaston Bachelard suggests that this fixing of boundaries represents the fundamental impulse at work in the act of construction, noting that 'the sheltered being gives perceptible limits to his shelter' - the shelter, the inside, the place within the limits, thereby taking on the connotations of home.[21]

It is the home, then, that represents the essence of what it means to build, and it is in the mode of dwelling, or inhabiting, that the nature of our relation to building can emerge - dwelling here understood in the Heideggerean sense, as an existential term reflecting humanity's mode of being-in-the -world: 'the way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans *are* on this earth'.[22] Gaston Bachelard's observation that 'all really inhabited space bears the notion of home'[23] recalls Heidegger's assertion that 'dwelling and building are related as ends and means'.[24]

Bachelard, however, goes further, castigating Heidegger for failing to note that dwelling is not only an end state to be striven towards, but, crucially, represents the initial state that every human being - as an individual - is born into: 'before he is "cast into the world", as claimed by certain hasty metaphysics, man is laid in the cradle of the house'.[25]

Upon the site of the ruin, therefore, is marked a displacement from the home that contains within it a sense of being cast out from one's essential being; inseparable from this is the intimation of a breakdown of sense, disorder surmounting the boundaries laid down by order and overwhelming it. In Trigg's words, 'to be displaced means recognizing the other place as native from where we are displaced. [...] What we

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[21] *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994), p.5
[22] Heidegger, Martin, "Building Dwelling Thinking", in *Basic Writings,* ed. by Farrell Krell, pp.342-363, p.349
[23] Bachelard, p.5
[24] "Building Dwelling Thinking", p.348
[25] Bachelard, p.7

are displaced from is the burgeoning idea that rational space is central and native to our dwelling'.[26]

From a phenomenological perspective, then, the ruin of building represents a breakdown of the boundary between inside and outside, leading to order giving way to disorder; overlaid on this is a sense of the loss of essential dwelling. We cannot, however, lose sight of the fact that a building is also a cultural artifact, inscribed with - and standing for - the values of a specific socio-cultural order. In order to account for this within our framing of the ruin, we need to consider another aspect of the notion of the fall that we have identified as being central to the concept of ruin: the fact that a fall does not only constitute a fall *from* an initial state, but also a fall *into* a new state.

The relation of the ruin to the original, then, is not only one of absence to presence, but also one of difference: this becomes evident if, for a moment, we shift our attention from the absence that is marked to the presence that is doing the marking, thereby acknowledging the possibility that the ruin might constitute a meaningful semiotic unit *in itself*. Midas Dekkers might be stating the obvious when he notes that 'the sentiment that the ruins of a castle can stir up has nothing to do with the pride a knight must have felt when his castle had just been completed',[27] but it is within this essential difference that the semiotic nature of the ruin is to be located. Florence M. Hetzler's assertion that 'ruins must also be semiotically different from what they were before they became ruins' puts the case succinctly.[28]

Of course, the difference could be as simple as the fact that the ruin bears the marks of the passage of time. Such is the argument of Alois Riegl, who suggests that buildings showing signs of decay possess what he terms *age-value* quite apart from the

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[26] Trigg, p.130
[27] *The Way of All Flesh: A Celebration of Decay*, trans. by Sherry Marx-Macdonald (London: Harvill Press, 2000), p.29
[28] "Causality: Ruin Time and Ruins", *Leonardo* 21 (1988), 51-55 (p.53)

monumental value of new, intact constructions.[29] A possibility also emerges, however, to envision the ruin as a site of political or cultural struggle, in the sense that the tension between what the ruin *was* and what the ruin *is* can constitute the dynamics of a semiotic conflict. We can conceptualise this through a framing of ruins as examples of what Guy Debord termed *détournement,* the modification of a symbol such that it results in 'the negation of the value of the previous organization of expression'.[30] This is not a negation that leaves only a void in its wake, but one that negates through opposition - 'the elements re-used acquire new meaning',[31] thereby inviting us to recall Mikhail Bakunin's polemical affirmation that 'the urge to destroy is also a creative urge'.[32]

Form and Function

One way of conceptualising this difference between the ruin and its original wholeness is to frame it as a loss of functionality: the ruin, in its incompletion, is a building that has been stripped of its purpose. This loss, Robert Ginsberg argues, allows the building to be perceived for its own sake, as an aesthetic object - form overtakes function: 'the ruin liberates form from its subservience to function….the death of function in the ruin spells the life of form. Forms, when freed, spring forth into attention'.[33] This finds an echo in Trigg's suggestion that 'the ruin as an artifact counters its original implementation as an instrument that serves an end'.[34] Freed from the constraints of functionality, then, the ruined construction comes into view, no longer instrumentally, but as an artifact to be interpreted and judged on formal and aesthetic terms.

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[29] "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and its Origins", trans. by Kurt W. Foster and Diane Ghirardo, *Oppositions* 25 (1982), 20-51

[30] "*Détournement* as Negation and Prelude", in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. & trans. by Ken Knabb (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), p.55

[31] *Guy Debord,* trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1999), p.60

[32] *Selected Writings,* ed. by Arthur Lehning & trans. by Steven Cox (New York: Grove, 1974)

[33] *The Aesthetics of Ruins* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2004), p.15

[34] Trigg, p.137

The ruin, in a way - especially if we are talking of the ruin of a familiar structure - becomes the site of a defamiliarisation of the architectural sphere. 'The familiar becomes strange, thanks to the ruin', Ginsberg tells us, and the reason for this is a double movement of concealment and unconcealment: 'in making the original invisible, the ruin makes visible what is not meant to be seen. The hidden becomes evident, while what ordinarily is present is absent'.[35]

What this addresses is the easy-to-overlook fact that, before any cultural, historical or metaphysical frames of interpretation are imposed upon the ruin, it is, first and foremost, a physical entity that can be approached and inhabited as such. This proves central to Ginsberg's framing of the ruin - which we shall look into in more detail in a later chapter - as primarily a spatio-formal entity, a collection of tantalizingly indeterminate suggestions of forms awaiting exploration and interpretation (the two actions, in this case, are inseparable).

The question that needs to be asked, then, is precisely what it is that emerges into view when the concealing veil of function is lifted from the building. It is not a matter simply of the coming-to-the-fore of the now-functionless construction's formal architectural properties, though that is a part of it. In attempting a more complete answer to the question, we shall now proceed to an exploration of the ruin-theme in the various inflections it has adopted. I shall make no claims for this to be an exhaustive overview of an image that so thoroughly permeates Western culture as a whole: the ubiquity of the ruin-image renders my approach necessarily selective. As such, my aim is not to be comprehensive, but to identify the key cultural, philosophical and aesthetic considerations that have been attached to the ruin-image, thereby deconstructing the ruin-theme into a comprehensible set of notions, connotations and framings - with the

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[35] Ginsberg, pp.51-2

understanding that such an undertaking is unavoidably reductive and cannot but fail to

fully capture the elusive nature of the ruin.

Chapter 2

Framing the Ruin-Theme

Perhaps appropriately, there is little fixity or consistency to be found within the enduring resilience of the ruin-image in the Western imagination. Far from coalescing into a single, clearly-defined statement or connotation, the ruin, in its many guises and representations, has served as the focal point of a constantly-shifting web of discourses. If the ruin-image, viewed diachronically in the various forms it has taken on, has stabilised in any consistent form, it is as a locus around which considerations of history, architecture, aesthetics, culture, politics and philosophy have intersected.

Nonetheless, if we are to delve into the mysteries of the ruin-image, an attempt must first be made to bring this multiplicity of significations and framings into some sort of comprehensible order, identifying, as far as possible, the key trends and developments that have shaped our contemporary conception of the ruin-image.

Before proceeding any further, it is essential that I make the disclaimer that the approach to ruins I am adopting is an aesthetic one, informed by approaches to the theme that have developed within the fields of literature, cultural studies, philosophy and critical theory. Thus, while historical and archaeological considerations will inevitably play a part in proceedings - and while they might certainly represent equally fruitful constructions of the ruin - they are not my focus within this study.

In our attempt to make inroads into the ruin-image, a useful starting point might be found in the line drawn by Robert Ginsberg to demarcate the distinction between what he identifies as the two distinct traditions of ruin-framing in Western culture.

Terming these traditions the Classical and the Romantic, Ginsberg argues that it is within

the interplay between the two that much of the Western response to ruins can be located.

The Classical Ruin-Sentiment

The Classical vision, Ginsberg suggests, found its initial flowering in the explosion of

interest in the classical world that marked the beginnings of the Renaissance in Italy.

Appropriately, then, this first form of the ruin-sentiment is intimately tied to a

fascination with the past age of which the ruin is a fragment: the ruin is valuable precisely

as a remnant of that past, which – due to the presence of the ruin – has not been entirely

lost.

> The Classical vision of the ruin…sees the remnants as the valuable parts that
>
> suggest the whole retrievable on site by the activation of disciplined imagination.
>
> The original, fortunately, is not lost, precisely because its remains are still with us.
>
> The ruin wins out over time, nature, neglect, and destruction.[36]

The ruin, by this understanding, is the fragment shored up against the flow of time; it is

that which, miraculously, remains - having survived the ebb and flow of history and the

entropic pull of decay. Its value lies in its status as heritage, as a remnant of a past age

that is invoked and preserved in memory through its continuing existence.

The consequence of such a framing, which interprets the ruin as a symbol, rather

than an object of interest for its own sake, is a certain tendency to efface the ruin itself:

the visions of the past that the ruin opens onto overtake the image of the ruin itself. No

clearer illustration of this impulse can be found than Rose Macaulay's description of the

yearning experienced by travellers to the site of ancient Troy in the centuries since its

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[36] Ginsberg, p.319

downfall. 'They,' she suggests, 'would have preferred, we should prefer now, to see the great city as she was; but, gazing on her ruins, we build her in our minds'.[37]

This is a desire, not so much for an accurate version of history, as for the classical world of myth: the travellers Macaulay describes draw upon Homer first and - most often - also last.

> The ascendancy over man's minds of the ruins of the stupendous past, the past of history, legend and myth, at once factual and fantastic, stretching back and back into ages that can but be surmised, is half-mystical in basis [...] it is the soaring of the imagination into the high empyrean where huge episodes are tangled with myths and dreams; it is the stunning impact of world history on its amazed heirs...it is less ruin-worship than the worship of a tremendous past.[38]

From the outset, then, and despite claims to the contrary, any suggestions of retrieving or reconstructing a vanished era need to be qualified. If such a ruin-sentiment represents a form of cultural nostalgia, it is a desire for an imaginary - and hence irretrievable - past, more myth than history. The image of the past that the ruin calls up is precisely that - being composed of a tissue of textual sources as much as by insights gleaned from the ruin itself, the imagistic, artificial nature of this vision comes to the fore. Nowhere is this more evident than in the seventeenth-century landscape paintings of Poussin or Claude, both French painters who were inspired by the ruin-strewn *campagna* surrounding Rome to paint 'tranquil classical landscapes, where broken arches and columns stand above luminous water under luminous skies'.[39] The latter's *Landscape with Ascanius Shooting the Stag of Sylvia* is typical: the ruin is imagined within the landscape of myth, and framed within a composition that adheres to classical rules regarding clarity and definiteness of form (Fig.3).

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[37] *Pleasures of Ruin* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1953), p.48
[38] ibid., p.152
[39] ibid., p.19

Although the heyday of this Classical ruin-sentiment has long since passed, its trace lingers in the continuing popularity of re-imaginings of the mythical past, whether in films such as *Jason and the Argonauts* (Don Chaffey, 1963) and *Clash of the Titans* (Louis Leterrier, 2010), or games such as *God of War* (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2005) and *Titan Quest* (Iron Lore Entertainment, 2006). In this regard, it is revealing to note, as Dunstan Lowe does, that, though it is the living past that is conveyed in these visions, they nonetheless, somewhat paradoxically, retain the visible trace of their pastness in the figure of ruin: of *Titan Quest,* Lowe observes that 'its Greek locations are so filled with interchangeable tumbledown temples, graveyards and tombs that they define the very landscape'.[40] (Fig.4)

The Classical ruin-sentiment can be - and, indeed, has repeatedly proven to be - distinctly amenable to purposes of ethnic, nationalistic or ideological identity construction. It is no accident that the mythic milieu selected by Claude is that of the *Aeneid,* Virgil's founding myth of empire - and one that drew a direct link between Rome and the Hellenic culture that preceded it. The stress that is laid on the enduring presence of the ruin implies a vision of an unbroken historical continuity between the past represented by the ruin and the present - or, at least, a continuity that had been suspended, but has now been restored. A conception of the ruins as *heritage* - a term both conceptually and etymologically laden with the suggestions of birthright and inheritance - therefore belies a self-identification, whether on the level of the individual or the nation, with the builders of the ruin. Thus we find, in the nineteenth century Rome of Vittorio Emanuele, capital of a newly-unified Italy, long-neglected ruins being restored and incorporated as monuments within the new city, suggesting that the Middle Ages and the long centuries of decay were merely an interlude between 'the twin pillars of heroic

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[40] Lowe, p.13

antiquity and the new republic'.[41] And no more direct and unambiguous an illustration of the ruin-site's potential (mis)appropriation can be found than Saddam Hussein's reconstruction of the ruins of Babylon using bricks inscribed with his own name.

Inevitably, the construction of identity that the ruin-site is incorporated into operates by a double movement: founded not only on a crystallization around the ruin (and the heritage it stands as a symbol of) but also on an opposition to the Other, the 'not-us' who do not partake in this inheritance, who remain outside the ruined walls. This pattern of cultural reappropriation and preservation has its origins, Heidegger argues, in the Roman self-definition as *homo humanus,* denoting a perception as being the embodiment of *humanitas,* or 'essential' humanity. Not only was this predicated on the Romans' adoption of the Hellenic culture that preceded them, it also performed the drawing of a demarcation between *homo humanus*, possessed of *humanitas,* and the *homo barbarus* who lived outside the sphere of Rome's cultural influence: '*homo humanus* was opposed to *homo barbarus. Homo humanus* here means the Romans, who exalted and honored Roman *virtus* through the embodiment of the *paideia* [education] taken over from the Greeks'.[42]

This, in turn, finds an echo in Renaissance humanism, which, as Alois Riegl argues, once again sets up an exclusionary definition of the essence of the 'human' based upon access to the culture of an earlier age – in this case, the rich seam of culture (and ruins) left behind by the not-quite-vanished classical world:

> The idea that the Italians, after surviving the barbarian invasions, recovered
> their true identity, and with it an ancient art which had always been integral to
> them and which they continued, was undoubtedly a historical one. It assumes
> a notion of development which attributes to the Renaissance Italians, thanks
> to their very nationality, a kind of necessary and natural destiny which

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[41] Woodward, p.24

[42] "Letter on Humanism", in *Basic Writings,* ed. by Farrell Krell, pp.213-266 (p.224)

obliged them to assume the heritage of related cultures of antiquity.[43]

The trend repeats itself again and again: the Grand Tourists that descended upon Italy from the late seventeenth century onwards sought to claim their share of this classical inheritance. Nor is the present exonerated from participation in the same cyclical pattern of appropriation. Charles Merewether suggests that contemporary Western culture, to a considerable degree, remains irreversibly caught within the pattern, continuing to define itself in relation to the ruins of the past - more often than not filtered through several layers of historical reappropriation. 'Westerners,' he suggests, 'are the squatters in the several layers of ruins that define the West. Thus, we are Roman and Greek ruins'.[44]

And yet, such a relation to the ruins of antiquity does not reflect exclusively political motivations: a much wider philosophical framework is being employed. In the attention afforded to the formal properties of the ruin - as well as in the conviction that the original order can be retrieved - one can detect a firm belief in the primacy (and permanence) of form. Inherent in this is a form of Platonism: Ginsberg notes that 'the Classicist leaps in fulfillment beyond the world to what escapes change but is manifest in human striving'.[45] The Classicist, in short, deals in the artifice of eternity; the cornerstone of this particular ruin-sentiment is a flight into the immortal, into the forms of human order that stand against the ebb and flow of dying generations.

The Classical view of the ruin, then, is a product of Enlightenment humanism in more ways than one. It is unwaveringly positivist in its assumption that careful analysis of the ruin can penetrate the veil of mystery surrounding it, and reveal its innermost secrets. And, equally, it betrays its humanist roots through the desire it exposes for the establishment of a linear, unbroken path of historical progression linking the ruin to the

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[43] Riegl, p.28
[44] Merewether, p.25
[45] Ginsberg, p.326

present: 'we reclaim [the ruin] and its past as ours. The ruin is made whole by our desire to make a whole out of the passage of humanity'.[46]

Intimations of Mortality

The ruin-sentiment, however, is hardly ever so simple or clear-cut. Even in its most ardently Classical framings, it is rare for the ruin-image to not also be troubled by an underlying unease. Wolfdietrich Rasch suggests that at the core of all representations of the ruins of Rome, 'there runs one strangely unified theme: that nothing that exists, whether natural growth or human creations such as institutions and states, will last for ever; everything is doomed to oblivion'.[47] This is the ruin as *memento mori*, recalling Chateubriand's equation of the ruin with our mortal frame, standing as a monument not only to earthly glory, but also - at the same time - to the inevitability of its demise.

Perhaps the ultimate manifestation of this is the comparatively more recent trend of depicting one's own civilisation as a hypothetical future ruin. From Hubert Robert's 1797 painting *Imaginary View of the Grand Galerie of the Louvre in Ruins,* the first recorded example of this variety of ruin-image (Fig.5), to the plethora of apocalyptic ruinscapes encountered in contemporary science fiction, this cultural self-portrait in ruins has grown into one of the most prominent forms of the ruin-image: to the aforementioned *Planet of the Apes* we can add Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz,* Cormac McCarthy's *The Road,* and, in the digital games medium, the nuclear-war-scarred ruins of Washington DC in *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008). Woodward argues that this projection of ruination into the present constitutes a natural progression from the fascination with the ruins of the past: 'travellers to the ruins of antiquity were not only contemplating past

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[46] Ginsberg, p.315
[47] "Literary Decadence: Artistic Representations of Decay", *Journal of Contemporary History* 17 (1982), 201-18 (p.201)

greatness but also considering the future of their own societies'.[48] In other words, ruins invite us to wonder: if great empires and civilisations have fallen in the past, why should we presume that ours will not? The image of the present-in-ruins thereby becomes a lens held up to the age, within which its concerns and neuroses are magnified for self-reflection.

From here, it is the smallest of steps to the notion of the ruin as *vanitas,* exposing the folly of earthly ambitions and pride in the wake of their inevitable demise. Often, this is tinged with a religious dimension, interpreting the ruin either as a symbol of the ephemerality of the material world, or of divine punishment - as it is in Archbishop Hildebert's dictum, dated 1116, 'that ancient Rome's remains be left unrestored as witness of heavenly chastisement'.[49] The ruin-site, however, can also mark hubris of a decidedly secular variety, as in Percy Bysshe Shelley's famous lyric "Ozymandias", where the vain proclamations of the titular monarch are silenced by 'the lone and level sands' slowly engulfing the 'colossal wreck' of his broken image.[50]

In either case, the end result is an awareness of finitude: this is certainly the case in Edmund Spenser's "The Ruines of Time", where a wanderer, arriving near the site of the ancient Roman city of Verulamium, meets a woman weeping. Asked about the nature of her sorrow, she reveals herself to be the spirit of the defunct city, lamenting the loss of her former glory. Though the light of Classical wonder is to be found in the suggestions of 'buildings fayre / Adornd with purest golde, and precious stone', it is dimmed by the overarching sense of the totality and finality of their loss : now that all her former glories 'are turnd to dust, / And ouergrowen with blacke obliuions rust', she can only think of the 'vnstedfast state / Of all that liues, on face of sinfull earth':

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[48] Woodward, p.177

[49] Cited in David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p.173

[50] In *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley,* ed. by Neville Rogers (London: Penguin, 1977), II, pp. 319-20

Though nought at all but ruines now I bee,

And lye in mine owne ashes, as ye see :

Verlame I was; what bootes it that I was

Sith now I am but weedes and wastfull gras? [51]

Linked to the sentiments of transience and mourning that such a ruin-framing engenders, a second, unsettling undercurrent makes its presence felt beneath the surface of the Classical ruin-vision. This is revealed in Macaulay's statement that 'we have been bred in a classical culture, given from our youth to understand that there was the glory of the world...nothing can compare'.[52] It is the glory that takes precedence in the Classical imagination, but the past tense, and the distancing preposition, are equally crucial: *there was* the glory of the world - here and now, that glory is absent, or present only in hints and fragments that we find ourselves drawn towards, finding nothing else that compares to them. This kernel of melancholy, anchored by a profound sense of loss, cannot but remind us of Jacques Derrida's 'impossible totality', standing, alluring but unreachable, on the other side of an abyss. It was this intimation that, finding fertile soil in the post-Kantian disillusionment with the established aesthetic frameworks of the Enlightenment, proved to be the seed of the Romantic ruin-sentiment.

The Romantic Ruin-Sentiment

The Classical view, therefore, already contains the Romantic in embryo: what is implied in the earlier framing is brought to the foreground in the later development. Thus understood, the ruin is valuable not in how close it is to its original, complete state, but in how distant it is: the value of the ruin lies precisely in its status *as* a ruin, in the chasm

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[51] In *Spenser: Poetical Works,* ed. by J.C. Smith and E. De Selincourt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp.471-478

[52] Macaulay, p.152

between the building as it was, and as it is now. Clearly, as Ginsberg observes, this inscribes the ruin with a radically opposed conception of history, and, indeed, of being: ephemerality replaces permanence, mutability replaces stability, and organicity replaces formalism.

> The Romantic vision sees the ruin as remnant of an irrecoverable past and thereby weighted with the burden of loss. The ruin teaches us that the past has slipped through our hands. We possess its shadow, a broken image, fragments. The passage of time has trod heavily upon the ruin.[53]

This reframing allows for the ruin to be reinterpreted as a symbol of melancholy, of a fallen state whether in a historical, religious or philosophical sense. The ruin still, inevitably, retains its association with the past, but it is a lost past, one from which we are irrevocably exiled. As such, the eloquence with which the ruin is gifted in the Classical vision is replaced by an eerie silence: 'the features of the ruin are vague. Their meaning irretrievable. No restoration is feasible. What we wander about, in wonder, is indecipherable. No telling what went where or what it all meant. The original unity has forever fled'.[54]

The shift from a Classical to a Romantic ruin-sentiment – which can be taken to be contemporaneous with, and symptomatic of, the epistemological crisis that marked the limit-point of Enlightenment positivism – subjects the ruin to a total transformation. Under the aegis of this new epistemological framing, the ruin is endowed with a radically divergent signification: no longer a window thrown wide open onto a heroic past that can, through a diligent application of our mental faculties, be to some degree retrieved, it becomes the site upon which an absence is inscribed. The undeniable presence of the ruin-fragment, enduring despite everything, marks only a void at the heart of the ruin:

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[53] Ginsberg., p.315
[54] ibid.

what it must have once signified is now lost, and it is 'only' the sense of that loss that the ruin can now signify to its viewers.

With this in mind, we can compare the idyllic, Classical scene painted by Claude with Caspar David Friedrich's unmistakably Romantic 1810 painting *The Abbey in the Oakwood* (Fig.6). In the later painting, the Gothic figure of a ruined abbey window, framed within the crooked branches of a copse of skeletal, leafless trees, looms over a graveyard in which a procession of shadowy, indistinct figures walk towards an open grave: the image takes on the status of a *memento mori* that extends its reach to encompass every aspect of the world - the human body, the natural world and the artifice of civilisation are all similarly in ruin. Upon the whole twilit scene the pall of night is descending: the bottom third of the picture is shrouded in a dense screen of darkness that renders the landscape murky and the figures indistinct. Hazy, occluded, obscured, unknowable: Friedrich's arched, ruined window, through which we can see, but through which we see only the formless, undefined night, becomes the archetypal Romantic ruin, reflecting Ginsberg's identification of darkness as one of the hallmarks of the Romantic ruin-sentiment: 'the ruin is most itself at night. The night of time resides in its shell. [...] At night, the ruin loses its last vestiges of clarity and is totally invested with mystery'.[55]

It is interesting to note that a similar visual contrast - Classical clarity versus Romantic indistinctness - can be traced within digital games. To *Titan Quest* we can oppose *Ico* (Team Ico, 2001), surely one of the most impressive ruin-images in the medium. The entire game takes place within a vast, ancient and deserted castle, from which the player-avatar, a young boy imprisoned within, must escape: this is a ruin with no recognizable historical referent, stunning the viewer who might make sense of it; if we are to find a parallel, it would be to the architectural fantasias of Monsù Desiderio. The game is remarkable not only for its intricate architectural design, but also its unusual

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[55] ibid., p.318

visual style: using techniques such as bloom lighting and a washed-out, low-contrast palette, it wraps its ruined milieu within a brilliant haze, imbuing the ruins with a dreamlike, barely-there liminality despite their colossal solidity, and hinting at half-glimpsed, indeterminate forms (Fig.7). We are reminded of Ginsberg's suggestion that, just as surely as the ruin finds its ideal, Romantic form at night, it also 'welcomes the blinding sun...the burning light burnishes the secret life of the ruin'.[56]

The murky unknowability that both *The Abbey in the Oakwood* and *Ico* identify in the ruin is by no means a purely negative sentiment - or, if it is, it paves the way for what Immanuel Kant terms a 'negative pleasure'.[57] Ginsberg's statement that 'upon the melancholy grounds of the ruin comes the flight of the sublime' begins to make sense here: looked at in aesthetic terms, we can interpret the shift between the Classical and the Romantic ruin-sentiment as being representative of a wider movement in aesthetic sensibility, away from the criteria of beauty determined by Enlightenment Classicism, and towards Romantic notions of the sublime.[58] This much should be evident from a cursory glance at Kant's distinction between the two aesthetic categories:

> The beautiful in nature is a question of the form of the object, and this consists in limitation, whereas the sublime is to be found in an object even devoid of form, so far as it immediately involves, or else by its presence provokes, a representation of *limitlessness*; yet with a superadded thought of its totality.[59]

Thus, whereas the ruin, framed in a Classical perspective, becomes a matter of form, the Romantic ruin-image, being irreducible to any distinct formal criteria, opens onto a mystery that is potentially infinite.

This property of the ruin makes it available to the Romantic imagination as the embodiment of one of its most essential aesthetic components - the notion of the

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[56] ibid.
[57] *The Critique of Judgement,* trans. by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), p.91
[58] Ginsberg, p.317
[59] Kant, p.90

fragment. In *Athenaeum* fragment 22, Friedrich Schlegel suggests that the appeal of fragments lies in the invitation they extend to the viewer 'to complete them and in part carry them out within oneself'. Here we glimpse the central importance of the fragment within Schlegel's aesthetic philosophy, which in turn would prove crucial in the development of German Romanticism. In contemplating the fragment, he argues, we remain grounded within a specific, real object - thereby avoiding the danger of empty speculation without an object - while overleaping the object and catching a glimpse of the otherwise-unattainable ideal. This gives the fragment its 'transcendental' quality, a concrete object that nonetheless surpasses the bounds of its own objectivity.[60] Or, as Thomas McFarland puts it, 'the logic of incompleteness is ultimately the logic of infinity': by means of the fragment, we can perhaps begin to grasp a sense of the impossible totality that must remain out of reach.[61]

It is in this sense that McFarland suggests that the ruin-image can be taken as an overarching metaphor for the Romantic conception of humanity's mode of being-in-the-world. McFarland uses the term *disaparaction* – meaning 'to rend or sunder in pieces' – to refer to the Romantic intimation of being out of joint with the world. It is, in short - and to quote one of William Wordsworth's most famous lines - the sense that 'there hath pass'd away a glory from the earth'.[62] We are back at the very foundations of the concept of ruin, once again dealing with the notion of a fall, but expanding the idea into a world-view: here, it is the world itself that is available to us as a fallen ruin.

It is hardly surprising, then, to note, as Nicola Trott does, that 'an aesthetic of the ruinous, or incomplete, contributes to the Romantic fascination with fragmentation and

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[60]*Philosophical Fragments,* trans. by Peter Firchow (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p.21
[61] *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), p.28
[62] "Ode: Intimations of Immortality", in *William Wordsworth: The Poems,* ed. by John O. Hayden (London: Penguin, 1977), I, pp.523-9, p.524

the fragmentary'.[63] McFarland, however, goes further, suggesting not only the obvious

point that the ruin-image is distinctly attuned to the sentiments underpinning

Romanticism, but that it can be taken as metonymically constitutive of the phenomenon

itself: 'incompleteness, fragmentation and ruin...not only receive a special emphasis in

Romanticism but also in a certain perspective seem actually to define that phenomenon'.

It is this fundamental conception of the world as the fragmentary ruin of a quasi-Edenic,

lost state of innocence, McFarland argues, that generates 'the sense of longing – which is

an inner form of the perception of reality as disaparactive – [that] saturates

Romanticism'.[64] Hence, viewed through a Romantic glass, the world, metaphorically, is a

ruin; the ruin, metonymically, is the world. Fragmentation, loss and separation define our

experience of both.

It is precisely such a sentiment – an epistemological crisis experienced as a sense

of loss or exile – that is at work, for instance, in Lord Byron's meditations on the ruins of

Rome in Canto IV of *Childe Harold,* one of the most enduring ruin-images within English

Romanticism. Having established his intention to 'meditate among decay, and stand / A

ruin amidst ruins',[65] Byron embarks on a tour of Italy, whose faded grandeur he praises

in a lengthy apostrophe: 'Thy wreck a glory, and thy ruin graced / With an immaculate

charm which cannot be defaced' (IV.26). Inevitably, the climax of this whistle-stop tour

of past glories is reached with Childe Harold's arrival in Rome, with the arch-ruin of the

Western world provoking the poet into an extended meditation on transience, loss and

the mystifying veil of time:

> ...far and wide
>
> Temple and tower went down, nor left a site:
>
> Chaos of ruins! who shall trace the void,

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[63] "The Picturesque, the Beautiful and the Sublime", in *A Companion to Romanticism,* ed. by Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 72-90, p.76

[64] McFarland, p.7

[65] In *The Complete Poetical Works,* ed. by Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press), II.

O'er the dim fragments cast a lunar light,

And say, "here was, or is," where all is doubly night? (IV.80)

Veiled both by their temporal remoteness and by our lack of knowledge, the ruins convey no meaning or vision beyond their own existence as tombstones for absent glory. They signify only a 'void', an impenetrable abyss that cannot be encompassed by order or reason. It is a darkness unpierced by the dull, nocturnal light of our benighted age - and the pall of night in which Byron envelops the scene is significant, accentuating the alluring obscurity of the ruin in a way which brings it in line with Friedrich and - as Ginsberg argues - with the paradigm of the Romantic ruin.

Form does not hold chaos at bay, and Time has not been defeated - 'she who was named Eternal' has been proven otherwise by the inexorable march of history (IV.84). *Contra* the Classicists, it is impossible here to rebuild the glory of Rome in our minds. The past is gone, and all that is left to us is an inarticulate pile of broken fragments. Here, then, we find the constitutive elements of the Romantic ruin-sentiment arrayed for inspection - the melancholy, the sense of fallenness, the mystery that opens onto an infinity, the intimations of mortality.

Chapter 3

Alternative Framings

At this stage in our exploration of the complexities of the ruin-theme, some clear patterns have begun to emerge. Thanks to the distinction Robert Ginsberg traces between the Classical and Romantic ruin-framings, we have identified a fundamental tension that has, to a considerable extent, shaped the historical development of the ruin-theme. This distinction itself, of course, is not new to Ginsberg - his contribution lies in making explicit, via a rigorous systematisation, a contrast that has, to some extent, been a recognised feature of ruin-writings for some time.

The Classical and Romantic ruin-sentiments, however, can only take us so far: though valuable as starting points in our investigation of the ruin-theme, these categories are both reductive and insufficient: Ginsberg himself outlines the problems they face. At heart, the two ruin-framings are more alike than different: both are backwards-oriented, seeking to look beyond the ruin itself to a glimpse of its past. If we were to take this point further, we might observe that the basic similarity of the framings is underlined by the porous nature of the barrier between them: melancholy meditations of loss will often creep into the most celebratory of classical views, and even the most despondent of Romantic ruminations on decay is often pierced by uplifting visions of classical grandeur. The two aspects are interlinked: one is the flipside of the other.

Ginsberg acknowledges the close proximity of the two viewpoints, and highlights the tendency for ruin-viewers of either persuasion to find themselves caught in flux, oscillating between the incommensurable poles of the Classical and the Romantic. And yet, he stops short of concluding that it is precisely in this wavering, in this space marked

out by the aporetic suspension of incompatible conceptualisations, that we may locate the possibility of an alternative understanding of the ruin.

The Ruin as Aesthetic Unity

Instead of taking this next logical step, Ginsberg's response to the apparent inadequacies of both Classical and Romantic framings is to suggest a third alternative, one that, rather than attempting a mediation of the opposing positions, takes up a viewpoint that renders the distinction between the two irrelevant. He takes both the Classical and the Romantic ruin-framing to task for not placing due emphasis upon the ruin itself, in the physical form in which it is available to our perception, arguing that, 'in their theoretical and experiential extensions, the Romantic and Classical views miss something in the ruin: its integrity, centrality to our encounter, and aesthetic substantiality'.[66]

The approach he develops in response to this perceived failing is one that appreciates the ruin-site *as* ruin, that identifies the ruin itself as a complete unity that is worthy of aesthetic appreciation as an object in its own right. In effect, Ginsberg's proposal is to dehistoricise and detemporalise the ruin, to view it mainly – perhaps even exclusively – as a physical object in the form(s) in which it exists for our perception.

Once again, the idea is nothing new: Ginsberg is again drawing on a tradition of writing on ruins that has appreciated the accidental beauty of which a ruin can be capable. Such was the impression left upon visitors to the ruins of the city of Antioch, Macaulay observes, at least until the intrusions of twentieth-century development: 'eighteenth and nineteenth-century travellers have found in this half-ruined grandeur a magnificence

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[66] Ginsberg, p.326

nobler than its original form'.[67] Most commonly, this idea is predicated on a notion of the ruin as an aesthetic unity in which the formalism of human artifice achieves a unique balance with the organic forces of nature. Thus, for instance, Chateaubriand, writing on the ruins of Hadrian's villa in Tivoli, believed that, 'Never were heaven and earth, the works of nature and man, better mingled in a picture'.[68]

It is upon this aspect of the ruin that Florence M. Hetzler founds her version of the ruin-sentiment. Foregrounding the idea implicit in such ruin-writings as Chateaubriand's, she defines the ruin as 'the disjunctive product of the intrusion of nature upon the human-made without loss of the unity that our species produced'.[69] The caveat Hetzler inserts into her definition is crucial: her conception of the ruin is founded, as is Ginsberg's, on a framing of the ruin as an aesthetic unity, complete in itself. Crucially, however, it is a unity resulting from the ruin's privileged status at the intersection of the spheres of art and nature: 'ruin beauty comes closer to the sublime and the ineffable than either nature's beauty or artistic beauty considered alone. In a ruin the beauty of nature intersects with man-made beauty in a unique manner'.[70]

The sentiment bears clear echoes of the Renaissance conception of the garden as a seamless, organic intermingling of artifice and the natural, an image through which, Allen S. Weiss observes, 'the garden reveals the dynamic, creative relation between humanity and nature'.[71] In the writings, for instance, of the sixteenth-century philosopher Jacopo Bonfadio, the idea emerges of a 'third nature' that results from the interplay of the artificial and the natural. This is an understanding of the garden as a border-realm, mediating between the formal places of dwelling and the natural landscape: the garden

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[67] Macaulay, p.56
[68] Cited in Macaulay, p.403
[69] Hetzler, p.51
[70] ibid., p.54
[71] *Unnatural Horizons: Paradox and Contradiction in Landscape Architecure* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press) , p.14

here is 'a dynamic, complex synthesis linking the constructed, geometrized spaces of habitations with the non-geometric, organic realms of the natural world'.[72]

Weiss suggests that within the garden, this third nature is only a representation of organicity: it is nature introduced, intentionally and meticulously, into artifice, remaining inextricably intermeshed as an element of the formal and aesthetic design. It could be argued, however, that the ruin represents a different paradigm for the interaction of art and nature, the crucial difference being that of intention: nature makes its mark on the ruin *against* the plans of the original constructors.

In this respect, then, the 'follies', or artificial ruins, that became popular in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century gardens throughout Europe cannot be classified as ruins without difficulty. A qualification, however, is necessary, as the question of intentionality within any aesthetic discourse is inevitably a fraught one. It is certainly possible to conceive of a visitor taking a folly for an actual ruin, and experiencing the entire range of ruin-sentiments as genuinely as any traveller coming across the remains of antiquity. Moreover, the distinction between intentional and contingent decay is not always as easy to make as it may seem: witness the *Theorie vom Ruinwert* developed by Adolf Hitler and the architect Albrecht Speer, according to which the monumental buildings of the Third Reich were to be designed and constructed in such a way as to survive as imposing ruins long after the fall of the thousand-year Reich, and hence to enrich future civilizations with their glory. In this case, would an image of the building in ruins mark the successful intrusion of nature upon the original design, or merely the successful unfolding of the plan?

Even keeping such potential difficulties in mind, it is clear that Ginsberg's proffered alternative to the Classical/Romantic dichotomy is a necessary corrective to the tendency to position the ruin purely in the role of a signifier. Its capacity to bring the

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[72] ibid., p.15

ruin itself, as object, into sharp focus, is crucial, and any theorization of ruins that fails to take this into account would prove fatally lacking. On the other hand, to suggest that this mute, superficial formal unity is the *only* framework by which to judge a ruin is as reductive as the approaches Ginsberg reacts against - and, as I will go on to argue, it still suffers from the flaw of excluding a rich vein of ruin-images that follow a distinctly different path that reveals another fascinating aspect of the ruin.

Ruin-images Outside the Boundaries

It is essential, at this point, to draw a parenthesis, and to examine precisely which categories of ruin-images are marginalized by the theories that have been propounded to date. With barely any exceptions, the ruin-framings examined so far presuppose, on some level, an identification between the implied viewer of the ruin and the creators of the original construction, whether that link between viewer and creator is retrievable (as it is in a Classical view) or lost forever (as it is for the Romantics.) As such, this framework cannot account for representations of ruins in which such an identification is not at least implicitly at work.

Out of bounds, therefore, are ruin-images where the viewer is asked to identify with the agents of ruin, rather than the original builders. We have already alluded to some ruin-images where this might be the case: in the first chapter, we raised the possibility of the ruin as an act of *détournement,* and we have also briefly touched upon the notion of the ruin as a symbol of divine retribution for human transgression. Indeed, the latter represents a particularly resilient strand of ruin-imagery, finding its roots in the writings of the Hebrew poets of the Old Testament. Note, for instance, Isaiah's prophecy of the fall of Babylon:

> And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldees' excellency, shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah. It shall never be inhabited, neither shall it be dwelt in from generation to generation...But wild beasts of the desert shall lie there; and their houses shall be full of doleful creatures; and owls shall dwell there, and satyrs shall dance there. And the wild beasts of the islands shall cry in their desolate houses, and dragons in their pleasant palaces: and her time is near to come, and her days shall not be prolonged.[73]

Here, the ruin-sentiment takes the mode of a desire for - and a promise of - ruination. This is the mode adopted, not only for such religiously-motivated castigations of cultural opponents, but also for the expressions of military enmity to which they are, inevitably, closely related - both framings being predicated upon a hostile relation to the Other and the works of the Other. King Henry's monologue at the walls of Harfleur in Shakespeare's *Henry V,* replete with promises not to quit the town 'till in her ashes she lie burièd' is couched in much the same idiom (III.3.9).[74]

The Monstrous Ruin

Even more fascinating are the cases where the viewer is not invited to share complicity in the ruin, but neither can she feel herself to bear any affinity with the builders of the ruin. In this vein, Woodward recounts that, just as often as the ruins of Rome evoked wonder in their medieval and Renaissance viewers, they also instilled a distinct unease - a sense of gazing upon past technological and aesthetic grandeur that the impoverished present could not hope to equal. Woodward describes it as 'that strange sense of displacement

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[73] Isaiah 20. 19-22
[74] In *Four Histories* (London: Penguin, 1994), pp.667-865 (p.785)

which occurs when we find that, living, we cannot fill the footprints of the dead',[75] and

suggests it was perhaps the primary impression left upon visitors to Rome in those

centuries when the loss of classical grandeur was still most keenly felt.

Nor is this sense exclusive to that arch-ruin of European civilization: on the

contrary, it seems to be as distinct a trend within ruin-appreciation as the Classical and

Romantic strains marked out by Ginsberg. It emerges most clearly in the conspicuously

repeated - and seemingly cross-cultural - tendency to attribute ruins to a mythical, pre-

historic and even pre-human race of prodigious size. Hilda Ellis Davidson notes that

'much local tradition throughout Europe associates giants with impressive ruins',[76] and

examples can be traced across Europe: upon viewing the ruins of Mycenae, for instance,

the second-century poet Alpheus wrote, 'Here stood the city rich in gold, the city that the

Cyclops built'.[77]

The apogee of this tendency can be observed at work among the early Anglo-

Saxon population, where, as R.M. Liuzza suggests, the sense of standing in the shadows

of giants achieved the status of a ubiquitous cultural trope. Coming across the decaying,

abandoned cities of Roman Britain, these Germanic settlers found themselves

overwhelmed by the visible traces of a built environment that was not only totally

divorced from their own architectural and cultural tradition, but was also far beyond the

horizon of their technological ability. Tellingly, P.J. Frankis argues that the divergence

between the Anglo-Saxon treatment of Roman ruins and that of contemporaneous

continental cultures – notably the Franks – could be traced to a fundamental difference

in their perceived relation to the builders of the ruins: whereas the Franks consciously

identified themselves as the rightful inheritors of Rome, the Anglo-Saxons could not

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[75] Woodward, p.5

[76] In *Medieval Folklore: A Guide to Myths, Legends, Tales, Beliefs and Customs,* ed. by Carl Lindahl, John McNamara and John Lindow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002)*,* p.179

[77] Cited in Macaulay, p.109

overcome the barrier of cultural remoteness separating them from their precursors.[78]

This was *homo barbarus* stumbling across the abandoned fragments of the Roman world, playing the role not of inheitor, but of bewildered outsider.

Their response, as can be seen in, for instance, the poetic fragment *The Ruin* – a work that lies at the very root of the ruin-sentiment in Anglo-Saxon culture, and that, in the form in which it is available to us, is something of a ruin itself – was to refer to such works as *enta geweorc,* 'the work of giants'.

Wondrous is this stone wall, smashed by fate.

The buildings have crumbled, the work of giants decays.[79]

In short, to use Liuzza's words, 'these Roman building were taken as the mysterious work of giants, *enta geweorc,* and their builders de-historicized from the Romanized Britons whom the Anglo-Saxons had dispossessed into the inhabitants of a generic heroic age'.[80]

The image is more complex than it may at first appear. Certainly, as with all manifestations of the prevalent motif relating to a mythical, antediluvian heroic age, it speaks of a fall from a fuller mode of existence into a diminished present – inscribed very literally in the decline of the physical forms we inhabit. In this much, at least, a relation can be drawn to the Romantic view of the ruin, and the *enta geweorc* motif can perhaps be identified as a distant precursor of the notion of the ruin as representative of a fundamental exile from plenitude.

It is an image which survives in the contemporary cultural landscape: take, for instance, the moment in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* where the fellowship is sailing down the river Anduin and sight the Pillars of the Kings, colossal monuments representing the rulers of an earlier age hewn into the rocky sides of the gorge on either

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[78] "The Thematic Significance of *enta geweorc* and Related Imagery in *The Wanderer*", *Anglo-Saxon England* 2 (1973), 253-269

[79] In *Old and Middle English c.890-c.1459: An Anthology*, ed. by Elaine Treharne (Chichester: Blackwell, 2010), p.97

[80] "The Tower of Babel: *The Wanderer* and the Ruins of History", *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 36 (2003), 1-35, p.5

side of the river. Frodo is impressed by them, and by the glimpse they offer of a lost golden age: 'Giants they seemed to him, vast grey figures silent but threatening...the craft and power of old had wrought upon them, and still they preserved through the suns and rains of forgotten years the mighty likenesses in which they had been hewn'.[81] Here is crystallized Rosemary Jackson's observation that the contemporary high fantasy or romance genre, at least in its more conservative reaches, extols the virtues of 'a lost moral and social hierarchy', repeating the long-standing trope of a vanished, dimly-remembered heroic age.[82]

And yet the *enta geweorc* motif does not only bear the sense of a diminution, of an impoverished, less vital existence in the world. There is another force at work within the motif, one that, more often than not, overshadows this melancholy sentiment of loss. This is the sense, attendant upon the encounter with a ruin-site that cannot be accounted for by the viewer's historical schemas, of being confronted with the trace of something entirely alien and indecipherable - an experience often marked with at least a tinge of existential horror.

While the ruins of the Greco-Roman classical world – perhaps the archetypal ruin-images - greet the western viewer with the familiarity of a distantly-recalled cultural memory, ruins of other, more distant civilizations appear before the viewer with no pre-existing frame of reference through which they might be interpreted. Such is the case, to take perhaps the most distinct example, with the remains of the ancient Mesopotamian cities – Nineveh, Babylon, Akkad, Susa, Ur. Macaulay, drawing a contrast between the impression upon western viewers made by these enigmatic remains when compared to the more readily comprehensible traces of Greece and Rome, says that 'vanished Assyria

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[81] *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), p.383
[82] *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1998), p.2

is no part of our western heritage; its ruins, uncovered, speak of an alien world in alien tongues; they stun us with aloof astonishment'.[83]

Appropriately, this alien quality - the *frisson* generated by an encounter with remains which find no point of reference in our cultural memory - finds its natural generic home not in traditional fantasy, but in horror. It is drawn upon, and taken to its hyperbolic extreme, in H.P. Lovecraft's short story "The Nameless City". The unnamed narrator of this tale travels into the Arabian desert, in search of the ruins of an ancient city that exists, chimera-like, outside the bounds of any comprehensible order: not only does it lack the fixity imparted by a name, it also stands entirely outside the limits of recorded history. We are told, with telling vagueness, that it predates Memphis and Babylon, and that 'there is no legend so old as to give it a name'[84] – hence locating it firmly outside the interpretative systems, not only of history and archeology, but also of mythology; by its very existence, the city puts all of these systems into question.

This is the ruin as the site of the monstrous, here used in the Derridean sense as that which appears before us 'without tradition or a normative precedent', which we cannot interpret and which threatens the stability of our frames of interpretation.[85] Of course, once the narrator finds himself within the boundaries of the ruined city, its silence is not broken – on the contrary, it is amplified, nearly overwhelming the narrator with the horror of its blank unknowability. It is an 'unvocal place...crumbling and inarticulate' - at any rate, it speaks in no comprehensible language, and presents only a 'viewless aura' to the eye: this ruin is not only unknown but unknowable, inhuman, totally Other.[86]

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[83] Macaulay, p.104

[84] In *The Whisperer in Darkness: Tales of Mystery and the Supernatural,* ed. by M.J. Elliott (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2007), p.8

[85] Derrida, *Points...: Interviews 1974-1994,* trans. by Peggy Kamuf et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p.385

[86] Lovecraft, p.9

There is another mode of - if we can coin the term - the monstrous ruin. This is the ruin that is not monstrous *in itself,* but that has been rendered so by the intrusion of the Other upon it. In Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's 1972 novel *Roadside Picnic,* a landmark of Soviet science-fiction, mysterious extraterrestrial beings briefly visit Earth, leaving the sites of their landing marked by an inexplicable and otherworldly force. In the areas that come to be known as the Visitation Zones, artifacts left behind by the visitors exert their influence upon their surroundings, denaturing decidedly mundane landscapes - garages, disused quarries, industrial estates - into, as Fredric Jameson remarks, 'an enigmatic and dangerous space of otherness'.[87]

Here, we go beyond the uncanniness of the silent, dilapidated factory or the derelict home - a strangeness we are used to, and can account for - and into the realm of the monstrous, the other which ruptures the boundaries of our signifying systems. The line between normal ruination and the mark of the other is clearly drawn:

> It had been ages since the last time anyone had walked or driven down this street. The asphalt was all cracked, and grass had grown in the cracks. But that was still our human grass. On the sidewalk on our left there was black bramble growing; and you could tell the boundaries of the Zone.[88]

The monstrous presence at the heart of the Zone explodes into consciousness with the force of the alien, not only unknown but unknowable, shattering preconceived notions of order. As the physicist Dr. Valentine Pillman exclaims, 'We don't understand a thing about them. We can only weave fantastic theories about properties of space that we never suspected before'.[89] In other words, the Zone is marked by a *novum* - what Darko Suvin, who borrows the term from Ernst Bloch, defines as the 'strange newness' at the

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[87] *Archaeologies of the Future* (London and New York: Verso, 2007),p. 73
[88] *Roadside Picnic* (London: Gollancz, 2007), p.18
[89] ibid., p.106

core of a science fiction narrative[90] - whose irruption into the ordered world rends apart the epistemological systems by which it is structured.

Andrei Tarkovsky's loose filmic adaptation of the novel, *Stalker* (1979), strips away the Strugatskys' science fiction trappings, whittling away extraneous detail to reveal the pure idea of the Zone as the site of an unaccountable mystery, forcing those who venture into it to reconsider their very mode of being in the world. Like the novel's milieu, Tarkovsky's Zone is defined by ruin: Jeremy Mark Robinson notes that '*Stalker*'s *mise-en-scene* is roughly-hewn, broken-down, burnt-out and long-forgotten: buildings and machines lie derelict, areas are grassed-over, distinctly post-apocalyptic (or at least – at best – post-industrial)'.[91]

In an inspired move, the third iteration of this narrative, the 2007 game *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*: *Shadow of Chernobyl* (GSC Game World) links Tarkovsky's and the Strugatskys' Zone to the Zone of Alienation, the irradiated, evacuated thirty-kilometre-radius circle surrounding the site of the Chernobyl disaster. Giving the Zone a specific reference and linking it to a definite cause dilutes the sheer, monstrous inexplicability it is endowed with in its earlier incarnations, but the connection to an event that looms so large within the cultural imaginary grants it an unsettling power all of its own (Fig.8).

With some allowances for artistic license, the gameworld represents a large-scale, meticulously-researched model of vast tracts of the Zone of Alienation, including the derelict town of Pripyat and the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant itself. Alan Weisman describes the Zone of Alienation as a perversely peaceful scene, a place which, in the absence of humans, is in the process of being reclaimed by nature: 'in Pripyat, an unlovely cluster of 1970s high-rises, returning poplars, purple asters, and lilacs have split

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[90] *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979)

[91] *The Sacred Cinema of Andrei Tarkvosky* (Maidstone: Crescent Moon, 2006), p.437

the pavement and invaded buildings. Unused asphalt streets sport a coat of moss'.[92]

Already, the scene invokes a complex ruin-sentiment that laminates a number of distinct

tonalities into a single, powerful ruin-image: the strangeness of the mundane, everyday

scene in ruins, the *memento mori* impulse surrounding depictions of the present in ruins,

the uneasy, accidental beauty that emerges from the combination of nature and artifice.

Underlying all of this, however, is a sense of the uncanny, hovering over the

realization that, on some fundamental subatomic level beneath the apparent proliferation

of new life, the disaster's radioactive legacy lingers, and will linger for millennia to come.

Weisman expresses the point clearly when, noting the prevalence of subtle but marked

mutations in the area's animal populations, he notes that 'life goes on, but the baseline

has changed'. [93] This is a site haunted by the ghosts of a technoscientific mythology,

elevated practically to the threshold of the fantastic by their enclosure within a scene of

such determined mundanity.

It should be clear that any formulation of the ruin-theme aiming to account in full for the

remarkable variety of connotation exhibited by the ruin-image needs to maintain a degree

of flexibility. Each theory we have considered so far has been instrumental in bringing a

particular facet of the ruin-image into view; by the same token, however, each has proven

unsatisfying as a totalizing ruin-theory, framing the ruin in such a way as to foreground

certain aspects and arrangements of the image while concealing others.

Defining the Ruin-Situation

Perhaps an indication of the way forward can be found in a crucial formulation by

Salvatore Settis, one that deserves quoting at length:

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[92] *The World Without Us* (London: Virgin Books, 2008), p.216
[93] ibid., p.214

>Ruins speak to us in ways that things made by Nature cannot. In their persistent presence, ruins speak to us of the structures they once were, of the people who made them, of those who commanded them to be made, and of those who for a time made use of them. In their evocation of absence, they speak of those who destroyed them or abandoned them or failed to protect them from the irresistible ravages of Time. In their present state, ruins speak of those who have tried to make sense of them, or have been drawn to represent them, or have used them as objects of memorialization.[94]

Here there is a recognition that the ruin, in standing, does not, and cannot, stand for one thing: its very status of ruin determines the ruin as the suspended crystallization of a temporal conflict. Encoded within its dialectic of presence and absence is a second dialectic, that between its ruined state and its original wholeness, an oppositional relation that also brings into view the agent that transformed one into the other.

With the crucial disclaimer that I do not intend this as a rigid formalisation of ruin, but merely as an attempt at offering an interpretative framework that might begin to shed light on the conflicts and relations that shape the ruin's semiotic being - and hence with the observation that, as is always the case when confronted with a ruin, this attempt at order represents the inscribing of patterns on the surface of an abyss of absence - I would like to propose the following diagram as a representation of the conflicting semiotic forces whose interrelations shape what we have been calling the *ruin-situation*.

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[94] In *Irreversible Decay: Ruins Reclaimed,* ed. by Michael S. Roth and others (Los Angeles, CA: The Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1997), p.vii

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                    ORIGINAL TOTALITY
                         Order
                        Eternity
                        Artifice
                        'Inside'


    Presence                                    Exploration
                        'CITY WALLS'
    RUIN-SITE                                   RUIN-VIEWER

                       Breached / Intact
    Absence                                     Extrapolation


                      AGENT OF RUIN
                          Chaos
                          Decay
                          Nature
                         'Outside'
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The ruin-situation emerges through the interaction of the viewer with the ruin-site: faced with the physical presence of the ruin, the viewer can only account for it, as we have noted, by conceiving it as a fragment, and linking it to the notion of a totality. We can perhaps say that the ruin-situation is the interpretative framework that the viewer interposes between herself and the ruin, in order to decipher the ruin into a comprehensible entity.

We have already explored in some detail the notion of the ruin-site as being defined through a play of presence and absence: the fragments which remain, and the greater whole whose absence they mark. Accordingly, the viewer's response to the site is determined both by her exploration of the extant remains, and by her extrapolations based upon these remains.

The viewer's extrapolations - which, it must be pointed out, remain bounded by the forms and limits of the ruin-site itself - therefore extend in two directions

simultaneously. Firstly, as Settis notes, ruins continue to retain a trace of 'the structures they once were', and hence of the *original totality* that stood before the process of ruination. As such - as we have already noted - the ruin continues, on one level, to stand for the original structure and the cultural ideals it represented. Secondly, the ruin-site also bears witness to the agent of ruin, not only through the absence of the original totality, but also through the visible marks of destruction and decay. 'Agent of ruin' is a necessarily broad term: it can refer to a physical enemy, such as the Goths sacking Rome; more abstractly, it can refer simply to natural processes of decay, or even to time itself - in short, anything that arrays itself in opposition to the ordered sphere set up by the original construction, and that contributed to its ruination.

Upon this dual signification is founded the notion of the ruin as a contested semiotic space, organised - as we noted in the first chapter - around the contrast between what *was* and what *is*. This, Trigg suggests, defines the tension at the heart of the ruin: 'the ruin is not the same as its previous (active) incarnation. Now, an altered place emerges, which retains the shadow of its old self, but simultaneously radically destabilizes that presence'. The crucial insight Trigg edges towards is the realisation that, with regard to the original building, the ruin marks 'both its erasure and its continuity'.[95]

Thus a ruin can, as Ginsberg suggests, '[bring] to mind, or to soul, a value saved, and hence vital', standing as a 'cultural treasure' symbolically uniting the present with the past.[96] But, at the same time, the ruin never lets us forget that 'it has come into being by a passing away'.[97] Hence the conflict: the ruin stands for the original *and* its erasure, for power and its overthrow, ambition and its downfall, eternal forms and temporal decay, order and chaos.

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[95] Trigg, p.131
[96] Ginsberg, p.107
[97] ibid., p.57

At the centre of this opposition, however we define the terms on either side, lies what I have termed - and the quotation marks are crucial here - the 'city walls'. By this I am referring to what we have defined, following Bachelard and Zucker, as the fundamental architectural act: the barrier set up between inside and outside, between the ordered interiority of artifice and civilisation, and the undifferentiated disorder of the other. Here, as with Bachelard, the notion of the wall gains a metaphorical extension; I do not use it to refer simply to a physical structure, but also to a cognitive one: it represents the setting-in-stone of limits and distinctions. What is *inside* the metaphorical walls, then, is civilisation, an ordering system set in stone, and what is *outside* is nature and disordered space. The viewer's response to the ruin-site, then, will depend to a great extent on whether she feels herself to be included within the reach of the walls, or excluded.

Inevitably, ruin-as-process represents a breaching of this barrier : the outside has not been kept out, but has somehow broken through and engulfed the inside. Disorder has overwhelmed order; that which aimed for eternity has been subsumed into the cycle of decay. This is clearly the case with Isaiah's vision of the ruin of Babylon, which is constructed as an image of the city's despoiling by the natural forces of the desert that its walls were put up to keep at bay: the beasts of the wilderness penetrate not only the walls of the city, but also the private interiorities of its houses and palaces. Clearly, disorder and the wilderness bide their time at the edges of the established order: 'it is obvious that round the walls of every desert city, however mighty and extensive, the animals prowled, waiting their chance; and they had only to wait'.[98]

Although, in this sense, every ruin bears the mark of a breach in the city walls, this breach is not necessarily absolute - it is a matter of degree. In the Classical mode, the walls have stood fast: enough of the original order still holds for it to be reinstated in the

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[98] Macaulay, p.3

role of a rallying-point for a nationalistic or cultural identity. The Romantic viewer reaches the opposite conclusion: the walls have fallen, the totality is lost and irretrievable.

The impression imparted by the ruin, therefore, depends to a considerable extent upon the viewer's formulation of the ruin-situation - not only in terms of how this basic conflict is defined, but also how the viewer situates herself in relation to it. Does she locate a shared cultural - or perhaps simply human - identity with the builders of the original structure, as with the Renaissance laying claim to the sites of antiquity? Does she stand with Isaiah, outside the walls, taking satisfaction in the annihilation of the other? Or is she in the position of Lovecraft's narrator, confronted by a monstrous ruin to which she can apply no frame of reference?

Some ruin-images will invite consideration through a particular arrangement; but the more powerful ones will suspend the viewer in a moment of indecision, thwarting any attempt at stabilising the ruin into a single signification. As Ginsberg suggests, 'we continually make sense of the ruin' [99]- and it is in its capacity to serve as a liminal space between artifice and nature, form and formlessness, presence and absence, and between competing ideologies and symbolic orders that the true nature of the ruin comes to the fore.

Our investigation of the image of ruin within the Western cultural tradition has led us - through a multiplicity of examples revealing a variety of radically divergent ruin-sentiments - to map out a tradition marked by the development of distinct patterns and established tropes. Tracing these tropes through their historical unfolding and into the contemporary sphere, we have already begun to catch a glimpse of the same ruin-sentiments at work in digital games: the obvious, and perhaps predictable, insight to

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[99] Ginsberg, p.36

glean here is that games, like any other expressive medium, partake of the cultural inheritance from which they emerge.

At the same time, however, our interrogation of what we have termed the *ruin-situation* has identified, at the core of the ruin, a semiotic framework of competing significations arranged in a system of tensions and uneasy relations around the enigmatic absence at the heart of the ruin. It remains possible, then, to conceive of the ruin as a space of possibility, an open image which can continue to reveal new facets as it is shaped into new configurations and made to bear new associations.

Few new associations, of course, are as radical as that of an established trope at work within a new medium, and, as such, digital games harbour at least the possibility of locating fresh tonalities and modes of the ruin-image, just as surely as they will inevitably repeat those that have solidified into convention. In order to identify what these new, digital game-specific developments of the ruin-image might be, then, it is time to turn our attention to the formal properties of the medium itself.

Chapter 4

Ruins in Digital Space

The player is presented with a screen populated with a complex arrangement of
architectural features in which a representation of her or his avatar stands ... For
experienced players of such games the landscape is best understood as a series of
potential pathways and routes, with heights and distances suggesting the way
forward, and the very textures and lighting of the landscape drawing the player
onwards and upwards with subtlety. [100]

The broad, generic outline provided above could be applied, with barely any modification,
to practically any game that locates itself within the tradition stretching from *Donkey Kong*
(Nintendo, 1981) to *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves* (Naughty Dog, 2009). Barry Atkins is
actually describing *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (Ubisoft, 2003), a game he argues is
paradigmatic of this tradition, at least insofar as it structures, through the process of
gameplay, a specific mode of relation between the player-avatar and the architecture of
the gameworld. The borders of this genre are somewhat hazily drawn - as can be
surmised from the fact that it has variously been termed, in its numerous guises, the
platform game, the action-adventure game, or simply the adventure game. The common
denominator of this loose genre, across its various appellations and extensions, is the
spatial challenge posed by the necessity of traversing the gameworld. As Atkins puts it:

It is one of the most basic challenges of such games that the player be able to
read the space before her or him and imagine progress...one of the most basic

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[100] Barry Atkins, "Killing Time: Time Past, Time Present and Time Future in *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*", in *Videogame, Player, Text,* ed. by Barry Atkins and Tanya Krzywinska (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp.237-253 (p.237)

pleasures of such games rests in the player's ability to decode the landscape according to the key provided by the available movements of the avatar.[101]

It is no accident that the particular scene facing the Prince is 'a distressed environment of fractured and broken masonry inside a ruined palace'.[102] The disproportionate ubiquity of ruins, in some form or another, as the setting for adventure games is indeed remarkable: the archaeological escapades of the *Tomb Raider* franchise might be the most iconic in this regard, but, as *Prince of Persia* demonstrates, they represent the rule rather than the exception. Of course, in the light of the enduring richness of the ruin-image within the wider sphere of Western culture, it is hardly surprising that ruins will feature in digital games as they do in other media, and games' associations with generic contexts - such as fantasy, science fiction and Gothic horror - that feature ruins as a recurring trope makes their prevalence almost a foregone conclusion. Nonetheless, the 'quantity and diversity'[103] of ruins as game settings noted by Dunstan Lowe is so marked that it cannot be explained away solely by these circumstantial factors, and, as such, special attention is warranted.

It is certainly true, that, as Lowe argues, 'players and designers borrow influences from other popular media, and videogame antiquity can therefore involve receptions of receptions'.[104] All too often the presence of ruins does not mark an active engagement with - or even an interest in - ruins, or ruination, in themselves, but merely the wholesale adoption of all the accoutrements of a generic milieu such as Tolkienesque high fantasy or post-apocalyptic science fiction. Consequently, it might be more correct, in many cases, to describe ruins in games as (sometimes unthinking) quotations of ruin-images from other cultural texts, and, as such, they rarely stray far from established - even, uncharitably, clichéd - developments of the theme.

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[101] ibid., p.238
[102] ibid., p.237
[103] Lowe, p.1
[104] ibid., p.2

The role-playing game *Dragon Age: Origins* (Bioware, 2009), for instance, locates itself firmly within the tradition of medieval high fantasy. An introductory sequence establishes the player-character's origins and their being drafted into the Grey Wardens, a Templar-like organisation dedicated to protecting the world from the threat of the darkspawn, an army of demonic creatures. With this scene-setting complete, play moves to the ruined city of Ostagar, site of a Grey Warden encampment where preparations are being made for a forthcoming battle. Once here, the player is free to wander within the confines of the city, and - should she choose to - inquire about its past.

The appearance of the ruins - built on both sides of a mountain gorge spanned by an arched bridge, surrounded by forests and sheer precipices - owes much to the neo-Gothicism of Romantic art; at least, inasmuch as such art was incorporated and modified via the medievalism of Pre-Raphaelite painting, which in turn formed the basis for the work of fantasy artists such as Alan Lee, whose illustrations of Tolkien have been instrumental in defining the aesthetic of the high fantasy genre - Lowe's point about 'receptions of receptions' could not be better illustrated (Fig.9).

The player learns that the city was built by an ancient fallen empire called the Tevinter Imperium, whose experiments with magic had culminated in an attempt to reach the celestial Golden City and overthrow the Maker. This attempt, though unsuccessful, led to corruption and evil seeping into the world in the form of the darkspawn, who, as the game informs us, are 'man's sin made flesh'.

One could hardly write a more formulaic restatement of the theme of human hubris, one of the archetypal ruin-narratives. All the elements - pride and intellectual overreaching leading to a fall from grace - are present and accounted for, and the impression is only reinforced by the ruins of the city's chief architectural feature, the

Tower of Ishal, whose echoing of the archetypal image of the Tower of Babel, 'the first of all ruins', is impossible to ignore.[105]

The symbolic role played by the ruin within the game's fiction, then, is richer than it might at first appear, but at no point does it overstep the boundaries of genre conventions: the ruin-themes that are being brought into play - primarily, *vanitas* and divine retribution - operate according to formula. This observation holds true, not just for *Dragon Age,* but also for most other instances of ruin-images in games. In most cases, it has to be admitted, these received conventions are not even elaborated as coherently and effectively as they are in *Dragon Age.* More typical is the approach demonstrated by the *Tomb Raider* franchise, which, as Lowe notes, 'places the emphasis on the touristic pleasure of varied scenery and not on the history of any given site' - which is, of course, ironic given the games' subject matter.[106]

While this is undeniable, it does not get us very far: besides constituting an unfoundedly broad generalisation that does not account for the possibility of exceptions to this rule, nothing has been revealed about the specificities of the digital game medium. In order to reach an understanding of the particularities of the ruin-image as it has developed in games - and, if we are to explain their disproportionate presence within the medium, it is imperative that we do so - our analysis needs to be grounded as thoroughly in an awareness of the formal properties inherent in the medium as in an understanding of the cultural and generic ecology within which games are produced. As Eric Zimmermann argues, 'it's clear that games can signify in ways that other narrative forms have already established [...] but perhaps there are ways that only games can signify, drawing on their unique status as explicitly interactive narrative systems of formal play'.[107]

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[105] Liuzza, p.6

[106] Lowe, p.4

[107] "Narrative, Interactivity, Play, and Games: Four Naughty Concepts in Need of Discpline", in *First-Person: New Media as Story, Performance and Game,* ed. by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), pp.154-164 (p.162)

More specifically, I will suggest that the epistemological relation of a player to the gameworld - the processes by which the player acquires knowledge of the gameworld, and interprets that information into a functional and semiotic understanding of the gameworld - bears a number of marked and clearly identifiable affinities to that of a visitor's relation to a ruin-site. It is important to make the clarification that I am not arguing that games (or gameworlds) are, in any ontological sense, ruins: stretching the definition of 'ruin' that far would do irreparable damage to a concept I have strived to maintain clearly-defined. Neither should the argument be taken to imply that the situation of the player and that of the ruin-viewer are alike *in every way*: there are at least as many points of divergence as similarities, and these shall be noted during the course of the paper. My suggestion, more modestly, is that the similarity between the two situations is pronounced enough as to make the fit between medium and theme a natural and, at its best, a productive one.

Moreover, I will also argue that this affinity allows digital games to approach the ruin-situation, in its many guises, from angles that can reveal fresh perspectives on the ruin-image, thereby hinting at the possibility of reshaping the densely interwoven network of semiotic conflicts and relations surrounding the ruin into new arrangements.

The Adventure Game

First, however, a boundary needs to be drawn. While ruin-imagery can be identified at work practically across the spectrum of digital games, from strategy games to shoot-'em-ups, my analysis is going to focus upon the range of games that can be grouped under the umbrella of the adventure game - a genre I will proceed to define in more detail. This closing-in of focus is intended to avoid a common pitfall facing work in the field of games studies: the temptation to discuss, and to theorize, digital games as a

homogeneous entity. As Espen Aarseth notes, discussing games 'as a consistent genre or medium is highly problematic' [108] - it is virtually impossible to conceive of a critical framework that addresses digital games as a whole without effacing the radical differences implicit in the varying conventions and design philosophies at work in the medium. Hence, the need for specificity: my choice of the adventure game is made on the basis that, as I intend to demonstrate, it is within the specific properties of this genre that the affinities with ruin-sites that I have alluded to can be identified most clearly.

A definition, then, is in order, and the generic outline proposed by Atkins in relation to *Prince of Persia* - that such games are built upon 'the player's ability to decode the landscape according to the key provided by the available movements of the avatar' - can serve as our point of departure. Although Atkins stops short of defining or labelling the genre, his observations seem to owe a clear debt to Aarseth's theorization of the adventure game as a genre whose lineage - both in an aesthetic and etymological sense - can be traced back to William Crowther and Don Woods' seminal *Adventure* (1976). It is important to note that Aarseth uses the generic term with a much broader reference than it generally bears within the games industry. His definition extends its reach to all digital games - whether textual, such as *Adventure,* or graphical, such as *Prince of Persia* – featuring, as a fundamental constitutive element, the negotiation and traversal of the gameworld by an avatar representing the player's embodiment within that world. The distinguishing feature of the genre rests in this traversal being structured as a linear progression that emerges through the player's exploration of the gameworld. The Prince's engagement with the ruins of the palace in which *Prince of Persia* takes place - to keep to the same example - operates according to a predefined logic: the ruins' disordered confusion conceals a path that the player must uncover through a process of exploration. The common element of this diverse range of styles and games, then, lies in a topographical -

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[108] "Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation", in *First-Person*, ed. by Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan, pp.45-55 (p.46)

one can almost say architectural - organisation that conceals 'a storylike, episodic

structure, where the player/hero progresses in a linear fashion through the maze'.[109]

Gameworld as Explorable Space

The foundation for this definition is therefore laid by Aarseth's description of the

gameworld as a *maze* or labyrinth. The maze is, of course, a central concept in Aarseth's

theoretical framework, being the primary metaphor employed in his elucidation of the

conceptuality of the *cybertext* – literally, the maze as text (or the text as maze). The

cybertext, as Aarseth defines it, is 'a machine for the production of variety of expression'

- it is a text governed by a configurative algorithm that responds to the reader's active

input. [110] It is the existence of this algorithm that creates both difficulties and possibilities

for the design, experience and analysis of the ruin-image within the medium. The

cybertext sets up a feedback loop - the reader (if such a term is appropriate in relation to

the cybertext) makes active choices which result in the text offering up new

configurations, which result in a new set of choices, and so on. The defining feature of

the cybertext is what Aarseth terms its *ergodicity* - the freedom it grants the reader (but

also, at the same time, the demand it makes of her) to work out her own path through

the system of the text. In the cybertext, 'nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader

to traverse the text' - its reading is an active one, and the reader's choices along the way

meaningfully modify the course of that particular reading. [111]

It is in this constant necessity to choose between forking paths that the

labyrinthine quality of the cybertext emerges. At every intersection, a path is chosen, but,

equally importantly, another path is *not* chosen: unfulfilled possibilities multiply at every

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[109] ibid., p.51

[110] *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p.3

[111] ibid., p.1

turn, giving the impression of a text which extends in all directions far beyond the boundaries of any given 'reading'.

> ...when you read from a cybertext, you are constantly reminded of inaccessible strategies and paths not taken, voices not heard. Each decision will make some parts of the text more, and others less, accessible, and you may never know the exact results of your choices; that is, exactly what you missed.[112]

In other words, the reader emerges from the cybertext with the sense that the path they experienced was only one out of a multiplicity of possible paths, and that they have not glimpsed the boundaries of the text. Aarseth's definition was built upon the textual adventure game, but it is, if anything, even more relevant when applied to graphical adventure games. In fact, what was only a metaphor becomes literal - the gameworld is no longer an implication built on verbal description, but a digitally-modelled two- or three-dimensional spatial construct within which the player-avatar is placed.

As Aarseth notes, a labyrinth can belong to a number of different types, their classification depending both upon their spatio-dynamic configuration, and on their interpretability: is there only one correct way through the labyrinth that can be uncovered, or are there multiple paths, possibly leading only to confusion and undecidability? Or, even further, is each point connected to every other point, resulting in a near-endlessly-propagating series of possible avenues through the labyrinth? The type which concerns us in relation to the adventure game is the first one, that which Aarseth, following Penelope Reed Doob, terms the *unicursal* maze – that is, a maze 'where there is only one path, winding and turning, usually towards a centre'.[113]

Applying this framework to the adventure game model, as Aarseth does, allows us to glean two related, but distinct, insights into the genre. The first, most obvious one is a point we have already touched upon: the inherent linearity, or unicursality, of the

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[112] ibid.
[113] ibid, p.6

adventure game genre. This is evidently, and unequivocally, true of the classically-structured adventure game: although the player-avatar is granted full freedom of movement within the space of the gameworld, that space is structured in such a way as to allow the player very little agency in terms of deciding where to go. As such, the adventure game's ergodicity is limited to the player's efforts to uncover the path that has already been laid for her by the game designer.

It is possible to argue that the essentially unicursal nature of the adventure game is overstated in light of the increasing popularity of 'open-world' adventure games, of which *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar Games, 2008) and *Just Cause 2* (Avalanche Studios, 2010) are recent examples. Open gameworld topographies - which grant the player-avatar freedom of movement within much less restricted confines - mark out games that revel in their ergodicity, inviting the player to actively work out their own path out of a seemingly near-infinite range of options, rather than proffering the single correct one.

Even here, however, the restrictions of the unicursal maze have not been dispelled entirely; merely pushed beneath the surface. Many open gameworlds are built around a dichotomy between the *overworld* – the relatively unrestricted expanse of topography that the player is allowed to wander - and a number of distinct *dungeons* - sections of gameplay following a linear path through a hostile, generally indoor environment, which can be accessed via portals at specific locations within the overworld. This basic structure has remained virtually unchanged since *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo, 1986), where the overworld of Hyrule Field conceals the entrances to nine dungeons that have to be conquered in order to complete the game.

More radically, however, unicursality survives in the open gameworld in the form of *quests*. Marie-Laure Ryan defines the archetypal schema of the quest narrative as one in which 'a hero is given a mission, passes many tests in order to fulfil this mission, and

defeats a villain'.[114] In digital games, the quest structure therefore superimposes a roughly linear path onto the open world: the player is effectively told, go to point A, do this, now go to point B, and so on -as Ryan says, 'the player has to fulfill a quest by solving problems in a rigidly prescribed order'.[115] Aarseth links the notion of the quest even more forcefully with the adventure game:

> If we examine a number of adventure games, they all seem quite similar in terms of form: the player-avatar must move through a landscape in order to fulfill a goal while mastering a series of challenges. This phenomenon is called a quest.[116]

It seems reasonable to conclude, then, that a varying degree of unicursality appears to be ensconced as a defining feature of the adventure game. However, a second, equally crucial, point is implied by Aarseth's framing of the adventure game as a unicursal maze. If it is to be referred to as a maze at all, then traversing the topography of the game must present the user with some level of navigational challenge. To this end, the gameworld must appear to the player, at least initially, as a non-linear construction; in other words, as a world extending in multiple directions, rather than a single path; the result being that progress is contingent upon the player successfully performing an act of interpretation of the gameworld, a reduction of its apparent complexities into a set of easily-processed game-functional possibilities ("I can climb up to that ledge"; "I can jump across that chasm") out of which a viable path of traversal might be constructed.

The purpose of this somewhat lengthy digression has been to gain a clear picture of the spatial properties of the adventure game world, one that we can proceed to apply to our examination of how the ruin-site might function within the gameworld. Having begun to formulate a concept of the adventure game world as a space that draws the

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[114] *Avatars of Story* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p.117-8
[115] ibid., p.186
[116] "Quest Games as Post-Narrative Discourse", in *Narrative across Media: The Languages of Storytelling,* ed. by Marie-Laure Ryan (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), pp.361-376 (p.368)

player into forward movement in a process of exploration, we might already have been reminded of Robert Ginsberg, who, in noting that the ruin-site involves the viewer in a continual process of sense-making, suggests that 'the ruin's aesthetics requires discovery and stimulates exploration...the ruin draws us forward in disclosure'.[117] Before this link can be cemented, though, another brief detour needs to be made in order to examine more closely the mechanisms by which the player makes sense of the gameworld - a mechanism, I will argue, which links the player to the ruin-viewer attempting to decipher a ruin.

The insight we are edging towards bears more than an echo of Edward S. Casey's philosophy of space, particularly his formulation of the phenomenological process by which undifferentiated space becomes available to us, as embodied beings, as a defined place - that is, how we come to feel emplaced, inhabiting a specific 'somewhere'. The process, he argues, is one of mapping-out, or familiarisation, of drawing boundaries and vectors: once we can orient ourselves to the features of a previously disorienting space, and plot out paths of traversal and courses of action onto its surface - once, in other words, we have interpreted the space into a comprehensible order - then we have finished 'transmuting an initially aimless and endless scene into a place of concerted action, thereby constituting a dense placescape'.[118]

Within the gameworld, this process of interpretation is predicated upon the player's virtual embodiment through an identification with the form of the avatar - a path through the gameworld is worked out through an application of the tool-set the avatar possesses. This inseparability of avatar and gameworld is expressed in Gordon Calleja's concept of *incorporation*. As he explains, the term intermeshes two distinct but inseparable processes - 'incorporating (in the sense of assimilation or internalization) the environment while reincorporating (in the sense of corporeal embodiment) the player

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[117] p.156
[118] Casey, p.29

through the avatar in the environment', with the result of this dual mechanism being that 'incorporation makes the game world present to the player while simultaneously placing a representation of the player within it through the avatar'.[119] The player, in other words, assimilates knowledge of the gameworld through the same mechanism by which she is assimilated into the gameworld in the shape of the avatar.

This allows us to formulate a second notion of the adventure game world parallel (and related) to our original framing of it as a unicursal maze: the idea of the world as unordered topography that the player is required to map out and bring into some form of coherence through the interpretative work of plotting lines of movement and action across it. These two framings are really two sides of the same coin, the distinction arguably being one of perspective: viewed externally the unicursal design of the gameworld becomes apparent, but subjectively, virtually embodied within the avatar during gameplay, the second framing more accurately describes the player's experience.

Ginsberg anchors his account of the experience of physically inhabiting, and traversing, the space of a ruin-site within a very similar understanding of place and spatiality. In both cases (the ruin-viewer as surely as the adventure game player) the subject is cast adrift in a disordered space of looming suggestions of forms, and the act of ordering this space is as dependent on physical exploration and movement as it is on intellectual contemplation:

> The form obliges our movement. We and it move about one another, backing off, moving in too close, occasionally losing sight of one another. We must watch our step while gazing upward, or we may fall in the moat. The ruin does not have clearly prepared paths to follow for enjoyment of its forms...we are disoriented visitors greeted by forms who invite us to follow them.[120]

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[119] "Revising Immersion: A Conceptual Model for the Analysis of Digital Game Involvement", *DiGRA.org,* <http://www.digra.org/dl/db/07312.10496.pdf>

[120] Ginsberg, p.17

Viewing a ruin, then, involves a process of active, and constant, configuration and revision on the part of the viewer. Movement through the ruin-site implies a necessary act of interpretation - both practically, in the sense of working out one's path through broken masonry and fallen stonework, and aesthetically, as each new perspective opens up a fresh arrangement of elements and the possibility of their cohering into a new form: 'by moving about in the ruin, we generate further visions of its formal self'.[121]

The first affinity between the ruin-site and the adventure game world, then, lies in their shared status as disordered spaces, embedded with fragments or suggestions of forms to be pieced together. Of course, we cannot ignore the basic divergence between the two cases: the gameworld's status as a designed environment sets it apart from the organicity of the ruin, and means that it is certainly the case, as we have noted, that there are 'clearly prepared paths' through the gameworld. This makes the terms 'labyrinth' or 'maze' - notions which imply design, wilful concealment and defined paths - something of an ill fit for the ruin-site. A better term with which to compare ruin-site and gameworld, then, might be *explorable spaces,* bearing in mind a double signification of the concept of exploration: connoting both an investigation in the geographical sense, and an intellectual inquiry.

Using this term sidesteps the distinction between the ruin-site and the gameworld by locating our conception of both firmly within a phenomenology grounded in the subject (player or ruin-viewer) embodied (and emplaced) within the space in question. It also allows us to reach a central point of contact between gameworld and ruin-site. Uniquely among media, games have the capacity to involve the player, through her incorporation into the figure of the avatar, within a representation of the ruin-site, allowing her to come to the ruin-image by the same dynamics of wandering, exploration and discovery by which a visitor approaches a ruin-site.

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[121] ibid., p.19

Gameworld as Fiction

We have arrived at a strengthened notion of the essential constituent elements that underpin the adventure game genre in whatever topography it adopts. In summary, these constituent elements might be expressed as follows:

- a structure that, to some degree, constitutes a basically linear progression, concealed within an (illusory or actual) labyrinth

- the incorporation of the player within the gameworld in the form of the avatar

- the player's exploration of the gameworld through the form of the avatar constituting an act of interpretation, cognitively transforming the world from unordered space to coherent place

On this basis, one might be tempted to describe the topography of the typical adventure game as an obstacle course, its *raison d' être* being to serve as a series of challenges for the player to tackle and, hopefully, overcome. While true, this limits our understanding of the gameworld to its functional role within play: viewed from this angle, nothing of consequence would be lost if we were to strip all the representative or semiotic window-dressing from the gameworld and reduce it to a grouping of abstract geometric entities - in other words, seeing the world exclusively as it is parsed by the computational algorithms that implement the game's rule-set. Clearly, this can only result in a distorted and drastically impoverished understanding of the gameworld: any theory adequate to the task of elucidating its full complexity must take both its functional and its representational aspects into account. The Ostagar sequence in *Dragon Age*, for instance, would pale into meaninglessness if it were divested of its referentiality, leaving the player with a purely abstract topography to wander. Player involvement in this sequence exists almost entirely on the level of the fiction that the game constructs: the interest of the

scene lies in exploring the ruins of the stronghold and learning about its history, much as the visitor to an actual ruin might undertake an inquiry into the site.

If we are to adhere to recent developments in game studies, this indivisibly dual-sided aspect of the gameworld - its status as both a self-contained, functional entity and a representational text - is indicative of an essentially hybrid quality at the heart of the medium. As digital games have developed to date, they represent a medium composed in roughly equal parts of elements inherited from earlier media (visual, musical, literary) and affordances specific to their character as games. Ryan points us in this direction when, referring to Roger Caillois' distinction between two types of play, *ludus* (rule-based play with quantifiable outcomes) and *paidia* (free play founded on fantasy and make-believe), she suggests that 'it is perhaps the major contribution of the computer to human entertainment to have allowed a combination of *ludus* and *paidia* within the same environment'.[122] Similarly, Jesper Juul proposes an understanding of digital games as being 'half-real', being made up of both a coded rule-set and a semiotic, fictional level: 'to play a video game is therefore to interact with real rules while imagining a fictional world, and a video game is a set of rules as well as a fictional world'.[123] This understanding makes it possible to conceive of functional, meaningful links between the two aspects of the gameworld: achieving a congruence of formal rules and fictional semiosis means not only, as Juul suggests, that the fiction can aid in making the rule-set more intuitive to grasp, but also that a game's formal aspects can enrich its fiction. To take an example: *Shadow of the Colossus* (Team Ico, 2005) - a prequel to *Ico* - maintains the same aesthetics of ruins that defines its precursor, but adopts an open-world topography in contrast to the earlier game's unicursality, giving the player free rein to wander the Forbidden Land, a barren wasteland strewn with the monumental ruins of an ancient civilisation (Fig.10). The player's attempts at exploration, if they are informed by expectations developed by

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[122] *Avatars of Story*, p.198
[123] *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), p.1

playing similar titles, are frustrated by the sheer lack of anything to stumble upon. There are no hidden items to find, no bonuses, no secrets, and little variety to the landscape. The more the player explores the wasteland, the more feelings of dearth, barrenness and absence are reinforced: this is a ruin-sentiment couched not only in a visual image, but in the formal language of the player's mode of inhabiting the gameworld.

The 'spatially oriented themes of travel and discovery' [124] that Aarseth identifies at the heart of the adventure game can therefore become an end in themselves: players can, and do, enjoy exploring the gameworld simply for the sake of experiencing what it has to offer as a place. For evidence of this, we need look no further than the document which has come be known, somewhat hyperbolically, as the New Games Journalism Manifesto, written in 2004 by games journalist Kieron Gillen to address perceived deficiencies in the discourse of popular writing on games. It is revealing that the phrase Gillen uses to describe the ideal kind of games journalist - one genuinely capable of reflecting the experience of playing digital games, as opposed to the perceived tendency for the gaming press to discuss games as consumer products, enumerating positive and negative features - is 'Travel Journalists to Imaginary Places'. The phrase's suggestions of immersion into the experiences of an alien, but very definite, place speak volumes about the capacity for games to present themselves cognitively, to the player, precisely *as* places, as meaningful spaces to be discovered and inhabited. [125]

Gameworld as Fragment

Any consideration of gameworlds as fictional spaces will, at some point, have to negotiate their way around a particular stumbling-block: the fact that, due either to

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[124] *Cybertext*, p.101-2

[125]"The New Games Journalism", *Kieron Gillen's Workblog*
<http://gillen.cream.org/wordpress_html/?page_id=3>

technical or design-based limitations, the spaces that make up a gameworld are contained within very rigid limitations. As such, gameworlds that do not deal in abstraction must necessarily operate through a logic of incompleteness, justifying their limitations in such a way as to maintain the illusion of fictional coherence. They are by no means alone in this: Umberto Eco notes that, inevitably, 'a fictional world is not a maximal and complete state of affairs'.[126] Fictional worlds, then, are limited, both in the sense of occupying restricted bounds, and in the sense of not being mapped, even within these narrow confines, in maximal detail. This makes them, in Eco's words, ' "small worlds" which bracket most of our competence of the actual world and allow us to concentrate on a finite, enclosed world, very similar to ours but ontologically poorer'.[127] The participant in the fictional world - whether in the form of reader, audience or player - is always an active interpreter, filling in the gaps and fleshing out the world with information brought in either from the actual world or from other, associated fictional worlds.

Thomas G. Pavel suggests that, faced with 'the unavoidable incompleteness of fictional worlds',[128] literary fiction responds in one of two ways. First, there are works that, while acknowledging the impossibility of achieving maximality, will nonetheless attempt to come as close as possible; second, there are works that self-consciously foreground their limits and 'let incompleteness erode the very texture of fictional worlds'.[129]

Though examples do exist of adventure games subverting their own fictions through metafictional asides (see, for instance, *The Secret of Monkey Island* (Lucasfilm Games, 1990) or *Metal Gear Solid* (Konami, 1998)), the genre has by and large gravitated towards the former approach, deploying increasingly elaborate technical and design techniques - from the elaborate backgrounds providing the illusion of depth to two-

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[126] *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), p.74
[127] *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p.85
[128] *Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), p.108
[129] ibid., p.109

dimensional games, to the advanced illusory extensions of contemporary titles - to provide at least the illusion that a complete, coherent world is being presented.

Despite the lack of any ontological identity between the two situations, it should be evident that the notion of the fictional world as fragment mobilises a number of the same mechanisms as the ruin-situation, operating through a dialogue of presence and absence, the part suggesting a greater whole. In the case of the gameworld specifically, this shared quality has often resulted - perhaps unfortunately - in a somewhat facile usage of the incompleteness of the ruin as a 'cover' for the incompleteness of the gameworld. What must be confronted first, then, is the very real sense that the enduring relationship of the adventure game with the ruined setting is partly (albeit by no means entirely) a marriage of convenience. If, even with the latest technical advances, it remains impossible – or, at least, extremely difficult – to convincingly represent functional, complete environments, then perhaps setting your game in a ruined milieu is the easy way out. Representing a thriving metropolis with any degree of believability requires a simulation of the processes at work in the living city: people going about their daily routine, organised systems such as public transport and a police force, and so on. A ruined city requires nothing of the sort: it can, to put it bluntly, be just a conveniently-shaped pile of stones.

This makes ruins a prime candidate to serve as a vehicle for what Terry Harpold terms *recapture*, by which he means 'a structure in the gameworld or a pattern of play [that] corresponds in a direct way to an underlying attribute of the program, representing it to the player in a form that is appropriate to the world and masks the technical requirement that it fulfils'.[130] Recapture, then, represents a basic process by which a game's rule-set interacts with its fiction: when technical or ludic considerations threaten to impinge on

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[130] "Screw the Grue: Mediality, Metalepsis, Recapture", *Game Studies,*
<http://gamestudies.org/0701/articles/harpold>

the plausibility of a game's fiction, a diegetic justification may be employed to recapture that errant element and incorporate it within the fictionality of the gameworld.

Throughout the history of videogames, ruins have proven to be a uniquely versatile tool of recapture. Not only do they provide a convenient diegetic cover for the lack of fully-functional environments, they also allow level designers to construct topographies with a view towards their gameplay functionality first and foremost, without worrying too much about adhering to the expectations of architecture, planning or landscape. A dead end where one would logically expect an exit from a building, for instance, could be plausibly justified as a cave-in; while a staircase where one would expect a sheer wall can be disguised as the debris resulting from the collapse of part of the wall. Nor does any decayed form of order inherent in ruins prove to be a limiting factor: Lowe notes that, within gameworlds steeped in ruin-imagery, 'fragments of masonry, shells of buildings, and arbitrarily scattered columns can cover vast areas without amounting to a city, neither modelled on actual ancient sites, nor even governed by the logic of urban planning'.[131]

While this is undeniably true, limiting our understanding of ruin-images in digital games to their usefulness in hastily hiding the seams between a gameworld's ludic and fictional aspects would constitute an over-simplification. We have, after all, already identified a number of fundamental characteristics of the gameworld, and the player's cognitive relation to its structure and spatiality, that seem to open entirely new paths towards representations of the ruin-site. As I shall attempt to demonstrate in the following sections, both through formal arguments and through critical readings of a number of games, it is decidedly possible for the medium to go beyond convenient or facile examples of the ruin-image, and to put these idiosyncratic properties in the service of aesthetically satisfying treatments of the ruin-situation.

[131] Lowe, p.9

Chapter 5

Representing the Ruin-Situation

By this point, we have reached an understanding of the gameworld as possessing an essentially dual character, both an actual, rule-based entity - the geometric encoding of a series of ludic challenges – and a topographical fiction, in the sense of it constituting either an imaginary place or the fictional representation of an actual one. So far, however, we have stopped at considering the relation of the gameworld to the ruin-site purely as a spatial entity. We have not yet examined how, if at all, the medium can tackle the complexities of the ruin-situation in its entirety - that is, responding not only to the physical nature of the ruin as site, but also engaging in full with the network of semiotic elements and forces we have uncovered at work around the image of the ruin. In order to do so, a method must be identified by which a structural semiosis, such as the one we identified at the heart of the ruin-situation, can be incorporated within the space of the gameworld, organised around the form of the ruin-image.

This chapter, therefore, is devoted to outlining two separate, but related, approaches by which this may be accomplished. These approaches - both intrinsically tied to, and resulting from, the affordances of the medium we have already begun to glimpse - are not mutually exclusive, nor do I make any claims for their being exhaustive. What I do suggest, however, is that they represent the primary formal devices by which the adventure game has the ability to structure its gameworld into a signifying system capable of representing the semiotic complexities of built spaces in general, and ruins in particular.

Gameworld as Narrative

The first approach has its roots in a capacity of the gameworld we have alluded to, but not examined in full. Out of the conjunction of spatial structure and semiotic fiction emerges a third possible framing of the gameworld - its potential as a vehicle for narrative. Henry Jenkins notes that 'the structuring of game space facilitates different kinds of narrative experiences', and suggests that digital games might productively be understood as spaces within which what he terms *environmental storytelling* may flourish. [132]

The question of narrative and its role within the digital game medium is a thorny one that has, to a considerable degree, shaped the field of game studies in its nascent years, in the form of the (now admittedly somewhat overplayed) opposition between the schools of 'ludology' and 'narratology'. The first camp represents a loose grouping around a term coined by Gonzalo Frasca in 1999 to describe 'the yet non-existent "discipline that studies game and play activities"',[133] and as such represents an attempt at setting up an essentialist discourse concerned with the intrinsic specificities of the game medium, self-consciously defined in opposition to narrative theories of games. Generally speaking, this argument is founded on the total incommensurability between narrative as defined in traditional narratology – for instance, Gérard Genette's delineation of a *narrative statement* as that which mediates a story through the verbal (or textual) act of narrating[134] - and classical definitions of games founded on the works of theorists such as Caillois and Johan Huizinga, which, as Juul notes, proposed a framing of the game as '*a rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome*'.[135]

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[132] "Game Design as Narrative Architecture", in *First-Person,* ed. by Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan, pp.118-30 (p.122)
[133] "Ludology Meets Narratology: Similitude and Differences Between (Video)games and Narrative", *Ludology.org,* <http://www.ludology.org/articles/ludology.htm>
[134] *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method,* trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), p.25-9
[135] Juul, p.36

By contrast, the oppositional, narratological position mobilizes definitions of narrative that are not predicated on the achievement of a narrative situation or the production of a linguistic narrative statement. The idea, as Ryan, one of the leading proponents of game narratology, points out, is to move away from a verbal towards a cognitive definition of narrative,[136] with the necessary caveat that the concept of narrative must remain governed by a strict system of rules unless it is to be stretched out into insignificance. As Roland Barthes notes, 'it is impossible to combine (to produce) a narrative without reference to an implicit system of units and rules'.[137]

In setting up a definition of narrative, Ryan proposes precisely such a system, positing a number of rules - such as that a narrative must take place in 'a world populated by individuated existents', that changes over time and features intelligent agents, is marked by 'a unified causal chain' of events, and that therefore possesses spatial, temporal, mental and formal dimensions.[138] This definition is both limited enough to retain a clear, definite concept of a narrative as something possessing a set of particular, fixed qualities, and broad enough to allow Ryan to propose a list of modes that a narrative can inhabit, in addition to the diegetic mode of traditional literary narratology - the most relevant to games being the participatory and simulative modes.[139]

Of course, drawing such a clear-cut distinction between ludological and narratological approaches merely serves to reinforce entrenched battle-lines in a field that calls for a more flexible formulation, one that takes into account the fundamental hybridity we have already observed at work in the digital games medium as it has developed. This, after all, was Frasca's original intention, his aim being to expand the critical vocabulary rather than limit it - in his words, 'to show how basic concepts of

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[136] "Beyond *Ludus*: Narrative, Videogames and the Split Condition of Digital Textuality", in *Videogame, Player, Text,* ed. by Atkins and Krzywinska, pp.8-28 (p.11)
[137] *Image, Music, Text,* trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), p.81
[138] "Beyond *Ludus*", p.8
[139] ibid.

ludology could be used along with narratology to better understand videogames'.[140] As Ryan puts it, the relation between digital games and narrative is an 'elective affinity' as opposed to a 'necessary union' - nonetheless, it is an affinity which cannot be ignored.[141]

The Embedded Narrative Structure

Narrative, of course, is a temporal construct, whereas the ruin-site - it need hardly be pointed out - is, first and foremost, a spatial entity. Before we can understand how an in-game narrative might be used to tackle the ruin-theme, then, we need to interrogate the functional relation between narrative and the space of the gameworld. This nudges us back towards Jenkins' notion of environmental storytelling, and towards what he defines as the *narrative architecture* of games. The gameworld, Jenkins argues, can be - and often is - designed with the objective of enabling the construction of a narrative. The result of this is that games, in contrast to media such as literature or film, can offer narratives that are encoded spatially rather than temporally: story is actually inscribed into the gameworld. In practice, this means that the game's topographical arrangement - and the shape into which it moulds the player's path - can become the narrative's chief organising principle: 'the organization of the plot becomes a matter of designing the geography of imaginary worlds, so that obstacles thwart and affordances facilitate the protagonist's forward movement towards resolution'.[142]

With this in mind, Jenkins suggests a number of paths by which the gameworld can become a narrative space: through the deployment of semiotic codes connoting possibly very wide-ranging generic and cultural milieus, for instance, gameworlds can become 'evocative spaces': such is the case, for instance, in *Dragon Age,* where the usage

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[140] "Ludology Meets Narratology"
[141] *Avatars of Story*, p.183
[142] Jenkins, p.124-5

of ruins represents a bringing-to-bear of the received iconography of the medieval fantasy genre.

Most interestingly for the purpose of understanding the game-bound ruin-image, however, Jenkins notes that the gameworld can also function narratively through the introduction of an *embedded narrative*. By his definition, the term - often used, across media, to refer to any story-within-a-story structure - is reserved for a specific formulation of that structure: one in which the architecture of the gameworld bears the scars of events that happened there prior to the player's arrival. As such, the notion suggests a narrative that is 'prestructured but embedded within the mise-en-scene awaiting discovery. The game world becomes a kind of information space, a memory palace'.[143]

Essentially, this frames the gameworld as a repository of traces of the past, a tissue of its own history. This is an insight which goes beyond the figure of the game-bound ruin-image, to reveal a fundamental semiotic structure by which the gameworld can become a signifying space. Having said that, this past-orientedness - bearing the implication that the gameworld can only be deciphered by reference to past events - immediately suggests the ruin as the natural home of the embedded narrative. Minimally, if the site of an embedded narrative has not fallen into ruination in the physical sense, it needs to be, at any rate, a building or site that bears the indelible mark of an event.

The same, it could be argued, is true of an actual ruin-site: one possible definition of a 'ruin' would be a construction marked by an event (understood very broadly) that has changed it from its original state. Once we have framed the ruin thus, it becomes possible to invert our conclusion: not only to say that the place upon which an embedded narrative is written can be understood as a ruin, but also to say that a ruin can be understood as the site of an (overt or implied) embedded narrative. This opens up the

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[143] ibid.,p.126

possibility of making use of the notion of the embedded narrative as an organizing

principle for the ruin-situation; in other words, understanding the ruin-situation (not, it is

vital to note, the ruin as physical entity) narratively.

How would such an understanding work? It might help to consider Gerald

Prince's attempt at setting criteria for what he terms "minimal story" - that is, the

minimum requirements a set of events must possess in order to qualify as a story:

> A minimal story consists of three conjoined events. The first and the third
>
> events are stative, the second is active. Furthermore, the third event is the
>
> inverse of the first. Finally, the three events are conjoined by conjunctive
>
> features in such a way that (a) the first event precedes the second in time and
>
> the second precedes the third, and (b) the second causes the third.[144]

The first and the third events are states - in the case of the ruin, the first is the building's

original, complete state, and the third is the building as it is now, in ruination. The

second, active event (or sequence of events) is the bridge between the initial and the final

state, the catalyst of the change in the building's state - in other words, the agent of

ruination.

This is, of course, a restatement of the conclusion reached at the end of Chapter

Two: again we find, contained within the boundaries of the ruin, signs that bear witness

both to the original builders and to the agent of ruin. An alternative arrangement,

however, comes into view: the embedded narrative allows the conflicting forces at work

in the ruin to be organized temporally, rendering it possible for their relations to cohere

into a narrative structure.

Making the *fabula/sjuzet* (or story/plot) distinction with regard to such a narrative

emerging from a ruin-site - whether an actual ruin-site, or the representation of one

within a gameworld - leads to another insight. If the ruin-site is to be regarded as a text,

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[144] *A Grammar of Stories* (The Hague: Mouton, 1973), p.31

constituting a spatial distribution of plot elements literally *plotted* according to an architectural organization, then the translation of these elements into a story is dependent upon an act of interpretation on the part of the viewer, who constructs it out of the information gleaned from an exploration of the ruin-site. As Jenkins puts it, with the model of the embedded narrative, 'narrative comprehension is an active process by which viewers assemble and make hypotheses about likely narrative developments on the basis of information drawn from textual cues and clues'.[145]

This cannot help but bring to mind, once again, Robert Ginsberg's observation that 'we continually make sense of the ruin'.[146] Perhaps, it could be argued, this process could be extended beyond the spatio-formal or architectural sense-making we have already discussed, to include also a process of narrative interpretation of the ruin. Such a process shapes many literary responses to ruin - it can be clearly identified, already, in *The Ruin*, at the root of the ruin-sentiment in English literature. The elegy-fragment begins, as all contemplations of ruin must, in the present, with a description of the ruin as it is, as it appears to the viewer - that is, in the final state of the narrative. 'Roofs have collapsed, the towers in ruin, / the frosted gate is unbarred', the poet remarks, painting a grim picture of decay that binds together the pall of winter and the inevitability of death under an entropic intimation of 'the hard grasp of the earth'. Out of this reverie, however, emerges a vision of the ruin in its original state of wholeness, bright, lively and upright where it is now faded, silent and collapsed.

> Bright were the stronghold's buildings, the many bath-houses,
>
> the abundance of high arched structures, the great sound of warriors,
>
> many a meadhall full of the celebrations of men - [147]

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[145] p.126

[146] p.36

[147] In *Old and Middle English c.890-c.1459: An Anthology*, ed. by Elaine Treharne (Chichester: Blackwell, 2010), p.97

The contrastive intention of juxtaposing this vision of the ruin's past and present state is evident: R.M. Liuzza observes that 'a contrast is made throughout the poem between the pride, intelligence, and resolve of the ruined city's builders and the inexorable grinding-down of time'.[148] Nor does the poet waste any time in linking the two states by means of a causal event: the stronghold's glory days, we are told, continued 'until fate, the mighty one, changed that'. The ruination of the city, its transformation from whole to ruin, is also vividly invoked. Although the spectre of war raises its head, no specific enemy is identified: if we are to look for an agent of ruin here, it is to be found in the unrelenting forces of decay and mortality themselves.

> ...the days of pestilence came.
>
> Death carried off all the sword-brave men,
>
> their battle places became deserted sites,
>
> the site of the city crumbled.[149]

All three events are thereby collected (and connected) within the ruin: a description of the city in ruins opens onto glimpses both of its original state, and of the series of events leading to its fall into ruin.

The same narrative structure can be observed at work around ruin-images inhabiting not only widely divergent generic contexts, but also different media. In the Danny Boyle science-fiction film *Sunshine* (2007), the crew of the Icarus II, a space mission tasked with restarting a dying sun, intercepts a distress signal from Icarus I, an earlier mission with the same task that had lost contact with Earth seven years earlier. Boarding the seemingly deserted spacecraft - essentially, a ruin in space, and a replaying of the *Mary Celeste* trope - the crew carefully explore its interior, hoping to gain an insight into what went wrong. As they venture through the craft, clues are obtained, which

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[148] Liuzza, p.9

[149] In *Old and Middle English,* ed. by Treharne, p.97

accumulate into a narrative - which the film never spells out, but which gradually dawns on the audience simultaneously with the protagonists - of existential and spiritual despair in the face of 'the great implacable god that pre-exists and pre-empts all our puny religious folktales'.[150]

With *The Ruin*, we noted the enduring presence of the first and second events - the original wholeness and the fall into ruin - within the ruined city of the third state. *Sunshine* literalizes this presence: the Icarus I boarded by the second ship's crew is, in both physical and metaphorical senses, saturated with its own past. The dust that coats every surface and clouds the atmosphere of the abandoned ship is immediately associated with its former crew - we hear the assertion that eighty per cent of dust is dead human skin, and the link is cemented when the crew members are discovered, their bodies burned to ashes after apparently having chosen to expose themselves to unfiltered sunlight at such close proximity to the sun: the dust's nature as an actualization of the 'ashes to ashes, dust to dust' refrain becomes impossible to miss. And the first state - the Icarus I mission before it went awry - remains equally present. Its physical trace - a predictably jovial group photo - is uncovered, in a mundane act of archaeology, beneath the dust; but its presence extends beyond the physical and to the borders of spectrality. Boyle edits constant, near-subliminal flashes of details from the group photo - the smiling faces of the dead crew - into the scene, shattering the continuity of the filmic diegesis and punctuating the action in the present with imprints of the past that suggest its continuing presence within the very fabric of the site.

This is the ruin as what Rosemary Jackson calls a 'gothic enclosure', a site that stands on the threshold of the fantastic. This is, in other words, a haunted house, and as such it embodies one of the most frequently-employed tropes associated with the ruin-

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[150] Peter Bradshaw, "*Sunshine* Film Review", *The Guardian,* Friday 6 April 2007. Available online at http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2007/apr/06/actionandadventure.sciencefictionandfantasy

image. Here 'chronological time is...exploded, with time past, present and future losing

their historical sequence and tending towards a suspension, an eternal present'.[151]

In games, the embedded narrative structure casts the player in the role of a *de facto*

detective, uncovering clues that go towards answering the basic question: 'What

happened here?' The result is a bifurcation of the narrative into two distinct levels, one

playing out in the moment-to-moment actions of the player, the other emerging out of

her exploration of the gameworld. In Ryan's words, 'this structure covers any attempt by

the player to reconstitute events that took place in the past. It connects two narrative

levels: the story to be discovered, and the story of their discovery'.[152]

The structure therefore depends on a distinction - within the boundaries of the

text - between the site as it appears to the visitor in the unfolding process of discovery,

and the site as it exists objectively, independent of this narrative of exploration. It need

hardly be noted that such a distinction cannot exist in the literary work except

problematically: as in *The Ruin*, the site is constituted by the linguistic discourse of its

interpretation, and as such the narrative of its exploration represents not an unpacking,

but a construction. Film might seem to have a better initial claim, thanks to the

photographic technological basis that has led some theorists, notably André Bazin and

Siegfried Kracauer, to argue that the medium is 'uniquely equipped to record and reveal

physical reality'[153] – implying, as Noël Carroll notes, that 'film images have existential

import – the film image re-presents some x from the past'.[154] This understanding of film

as a technologically-mediated process of engagement with a pre-existing physical realm

thereby assigns implicit ontological value to that realm independently of the result of this

filmic engagement. However, Carroll observes, this position is built on ground that is

both formally and ontologically shaky, relying on a dubious equation between

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[151] Jackson, p.47
[152] "Beyond *Ludus*", p.16
[153] *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), p.28
[154] *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), p.148

'representation' and 're-presentation' and glossing over the inextricability of the image from its own filmic construction.

In the digital games medium, however, the distinction Calleja draws between the *scripted narrative* embedded within the gameworld independent of the player's action, and the *alterbiography* representing the player's experience with the game, corresponds to such a split.[155] The "story to be discovered", and the explorable space within which it is encoded, exists independently of any particular play-through of the game, whereas the "story of their discovery" is contingent and can vary from play-through to play-through. Exploring the same site within the same game, two players can take up different routes of traversal that reveal different insights, generating two divergent stories of discovery founded on the same embedded narrative - recall Aarseth's point that in the cybertext, unlike the traditional literary text, what is read is not the same as what is read *from*.[156]

Having already put forward a framing of the gameworld as an explorable space awaiting interpretation by the player into a comprehensible 'place', we can further suggest that worlds featuring a prominent embedded narrative extend this interpretative structure, introducing another layer of information for the player to decipher: the player is thereby called upon not only to make sense of the gameworld as a spatial conundrum, but also to put together the jigsaw-puzzle pieces making up a narrative of these past events.

Small Worlds (David Shute, 2009) demonstrates this process at work in miniature, compressing a simple but effective embedded narrative - and one that makes use of almost obtusely basic graphics - into the space of a few minutes' gameplay. Mechanically, the game is a resolutely traditional two-dimensional platform game, predicated upon the exploration of its intricate levels and on overcoming the challenge of performing precise jumps in order to progress.

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[155] "Experiential Narrative in Game Environments", *DiGRA.org*
<http://www.digra.org/dl/db/09287.07241.pdf>, p.4
[156] *Cybertext*, p.3

Play commences in what appears to be a ruined space station containing four portals, each of which transports the player to a separate level. Each of these levels - the titular 'small worlds', a phrase that cannot help but recall Eco's term for the limited horizons of the worlds of fiction - constitutes a scene whose spherical shape and self-containment suggests the image of a snow-globe scene.

The first world constitutes a textbook example of an embedded narrative, starting the player off in what initially appears to be an idyllic winter scene that pushes the snow-globe allusions to the foreground. As the player explores further, however, they begin to uncover a series of underground tunnels, and it is here that the first doubts are cast on the scene. First to emerge are what look like a series of empty, crumbling concrete bunkers or silos. Even further underground, the player discovers a room with a world map on the wall, covered in blinking LEDs. The suspicion that these hints engender in the player is cemented when, returning to the row of silos by another route, she discovers that the furthest two still possess their contents, imbuing the emptiness of the other silos with a horrible significance.

At the end of the level, the player returns to the wintry surface, to a scene whose connotations have shifted completely, from the initial greeting-card winter wonderland to a chillingly apocalyptic glimpse of nuclear winter, thereby providing the first intimation - which will be reinforced as subsequent levels accumulate further tableaux of ruination - of the avatar as the protagonist of a 'last man' narrative in a universe decimated by some vast, unspecified conflict (Fig.11).

While, in any other medium, this highly specific narrative structure is limited to a relatively small number of isolated works or individual scenes, the affinities we have identified have made it remarkably common in the adventure game. Ryan refers to *Myst* (Cyan Worlds, 1993), but we could just as easily name alternative examples covering the full spectrum of the adventure game: a representative, but by no means exhaustive,

sample could include *Super Metroid* (Nintendo, 1994), *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 1996) *Half-Life* (Valve Software, 1998), *System Shock 2* (Irrational, 1999) and *Bioshock* (2K Games, 2007). And in the *Half-Life 2* modification *Dear Esther* (Dan Pinchbeck, 2009), we find the embedded narrative taken to its logical conclusion: liberated from the need to support action- or adventure-related gameplay operations, the uncovering, piecing-together and experiencing of the embedded narrative becomes the sole focus of the player's traversal of the gameworld.

Here, following the unnamed and unseen avatar's arrival on what appears to be a deserted Hebridean island, the player is provided with no goal or objective, save for the desire to explore the island and explore the cryptic and multi-layered narrative that begins to emerge. The lack of enemies to battle, items to collect, puzzles to solve or objectives to orient oneself towards - elements around which a more traditional adventure game would inevitably be structured - is aimed, as Pinchbeck notes, at 'making the player's engagement with the piece rest entirely with the narrative, visual environment and audio'.[157] As a result, the player is engrossed purely through 'two time-tested sources of narrative pleasure: spatial immersion in a fictional world, and curiosity for its past history'.[158]

Through the notion of the embedded narrative, then, we have identified one method by which this structural tension of forces at the heart of the ruin-situation can find expression within the architecture of the gameworld. The embedded narrative, we have noted, works through a reduction of these forces into a temporal - and hence, narrative - order, which is available to the player through the information structured into the game environment itself. The end result, as Ryan notes, is that this structure adds

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[157] "Dear Esther: an interactive ghost story built using the Source engine', available online at <http://www.thechineseroom.co.uk/PinchbeckStorytelling08.pdf>

[158] "Beyond *Ludus*", p.17

narrative exploration to the range of interactions open to the player within the gameworld.

Gameworld as Contested Space

As vital as the notion of the embedded narrative is to our study, however, it does not represent the only approach by which games can respond to the challenge posed by the ruin-situation. An alternative possible approach might be indicated by Janet Murray when she suggests that 'the most important element the new medium adds to our repertoire of representational powers is its procedural nature, its ability to capture experience as systems of interrelated actions'.[159] Where Ryan identifies the unique affordance of the medium with its capacity to seamlessly blend fiction and rule-set, Murray seems to be pointing us further, to a consideration of the mechanisms by which the system underlying both aspects of the game functions.

In order to gain an insight into these mechanisms - and into what Murray describes as the procedural nature of the medium - we can turn to Ian Bogost's development of what he terms a *unit operations* theory for the textual analysis of games. Taking his cue from theoretical notions of systemicity first articulated in Ludwig von Bertalanffy's general systems theory, which defines systems as 'complexes of elements standing in interaction',[160] Bogost advances an interpretative framework based upon the reverse-engineering of the text into a set of discrete, but interrelated, expressive elements or *units*. Units are '*discrete, material things* in the world' - by which he means not only physical entities, but also the material representation of abstract or conceptual notions -

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[159] *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), p.274

[160] von Bertalanffy, Ludwig, "General Systems Theory", *Main Currents in Modern Thought,* 11 (1955), 75-83

that are also defined by 'reference or relation to other things'.[161] Operations are the meaningful actions, performed to a predefined logic, that establish relations between units, such that the individual units, their operative logic and the web of relations that emerges through their interactions make up the constituents of a functional system.

Bogost's suggestion, essentially, is for a bottom-up theory of systemicity, and the conclusion he draws is that *all* texts, in any medium, can be conceived as 'configurative systems, an arrangement of discrete, interlocking units of expressive meaning' in this way.[162] The specificity of games, however, is that, as Murray notes, the units and relations making up the system can be computationally modelled, via the computer's capacity for procedurality, 'the computer's special efficiency for formalizing the configuration and behaviour of various representative elements'.[163] Functionally as well as aesthetically, therefore, games can be interpreted as a set of units and a rule-set that defines both the properties of these units, and the range and nature of possible interactions between two or more units.

Before a given referent - whether it is a fictional world, a historical situation, a philosophical concept, or a field of human experience - can be represented procedurally, however, it must first be reduced to a conceptual model following the prescribed systemic structure. In the case of the ruin, of course, this is exactly what we arrived at in the previous chapter, with the establishment of a semiotic framework systematizing the meaningful elements and connotations of the ruin-situation into a reproducible structure.

Therefore, we have the model: the question that remains to be answered is how this framework can be made to operate within the gameworld. What is required is a spatial distribution of expressive elements - both functional and semiotic - organised around the ruin-image in such a way that the relations and operations they generate

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[161] Bogost, Ian, Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), p.5
[162] ibid., p.x
[163] ibid, p.13

procedurally represent the interplay of competing significations surrounding the figure of the ruin.

The answer, I would argue, can be found in Katie Salen's understanding of gameworlds as 'contested spaces, or spaces in which the negotiation of conflict drives strategic choice, movement, narrative, and reward'.[164] The notion of contested space, Salen notes, is one that occupies the forefront of the intersection of architecture and politics. Clive Dilnot suggests that possibilities of resistance or opposition to the rigidly hegemonic architectural spaces of the contemporary urban landscape can be located in 'the discovery of configurative possibilities' - in the transformative potential of learning to identify alternative arrangements.[165] This can be understood experientially, as an exercise in 'seeing differently' - as is the case with Guy Debord's notion of the *dérive*, an invitation to wander through the urban landscape that necessitates a 'letting-go' of the frames of habit and convention through which city-dwellers generally shape their sense of place[166]. It can also be understood as a call to physical action, demanding the active reshaping of architectural forms in such a way as to embody an alternative, even oppositional, ideology - which brings us into the territory of the *détournement*, a notion whose relation to the image of ruin we have already discussed in an earlier chapter.

We can therefore define a 'contested space' as a space caught in the flux of multiple ideologically-constructed organizations: in Casey's terms, it is a space over which multiple *places* are mapped in direct competition with one another. At the simplest level, this conflict can be, as we have observed, a purely interpretative one, fought on the level of what Fredric Jameson terms the 'cognitive map' of architectural space.[167] It can also,

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[164] "They Must First Be Imagined", in *Game Set and Match II: On Computer Games, Advanced Geometries, and Digital Technologies,* ed. by Kas Oosterhuis and Lukas Feireiss (Rotterdam: Episode Publishers, 2006), 30-37 (p.30)

[165] "What Are Architects For?", *Scapes,* 4 (2005), 1-6 (p.7)

[166] "Theory of the Dérive," in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. & trans. by Knabb, p.50

[167] *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991),p.51

however, be expressed as a conflict of symbols; finally, it can result in the imposition of territorial and power-relational mappings through violent physical conflict.

Defined, as I have suggested, as a semiotic framework of forces in uneasy suspension, the ruin-situation presents itself as a paradigmatic example of a contested space – we have, in fact, encountered numerous examples of ruin-sites as both objects and markers of very literal conflicts. Salen's suggestion is that the spaces of gameworlds follow the same structures and adhere to the same rules: 'the contested spaces of games have a true affinity to the forms of agency afforded by architecture. Negotiating the play of these spaces requires a delicate balance between design and technology, form and function, the practical and the poetic'.[168]

We are brought, once again, to a restatement of what we have referred to as the dual character of the gameworld, both a functional rule-set and a referential fiction. It should hardly be controversial to suggest that most adventure game worlds can be described as contested spaces - in the sense of being defined according to the parameters of an embedded conflict - at either of these two levels. Adventure game worlds, then, represent systems of units engaged in relations of conflict, embedded within spaces loaded with semiotic signification. That play within these spaces is predicated on a configurative spatial interpretation dependent on the affordances of the avatar, and that this can also contain within it a process of narrative interpretation, we have already noted earlier in this chapter; this new insight into the nature of the gameworld leads us to an awareness that the process of negotiation and cognitive reworking can also reflect an engagement with the forces whose conflict defines the semiotic constitution of the game fiction.

The nature of such conflicts can therefore be brought into clearer focus by observing that, though on the game-fictional level the entities in conflict might be

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[168] p.37

political, ideological or philosophical in their connotations, the demands of procedural representation necessitate their anchoring in distinct units acting upon the gameworld according to the prescriptions of a predefined rule-set. Moreover, the player, as embodied in the figure of the player-avatar, is not excepted from participation in the system of interaction defined by this rule-set, nor from being involved in the semiotic conflict it represents.

Different gameworlds manifest their nature as contested spaces in very different ways, reflecting a possibility-space of relational permutations linking the primary expressive-functional units that define the adventure game. The basic conflict at the heart of the genre is that of the player-avatar against the gameworld itself. This is the conflict that shapes a game such as *Ico* : the player-avatar and the imprisoned girl he rescues must contend with the labyrinthine architecture of the ruined castle itself in order to escape their captivity within its walls. Their (and, hence, the player's) quest thereby takes on the semiotic character of youth and regeneration struggling to break through the constraints of memory and history, which in the castle's broken sweep - and in the shadowy figure of the wicked queen at its heart - become associated with death and decay. And in *Shadow of the Colossus*, the ruin is very literally (and dramatically) the enemy : the Forbidden Land that the player explores is a wasteland shaped by ancient, unnameable and inconceivable forces embedded in the monstrous architecture that lies in ruin across the land. It is against these forces that the player-avatar must battle in order to bring his dead lover back to life: his quest is to find and slay sixteen colossi - massive, living ruin-figures that blur the line between the organic and the architectural. It is difficult to think of a more literal representation of the monstrous ruin than the colossi looming, terrifyingly, over the tiny frame of the player-avatar (Fig.12).

In other cases, the gameworld is not an active agent within the system of conflict, but serves as the terrain over which multiple agents (say, the player-avatar and an enemy

force) engage in battle: again, multiple configurations are possible here. The player-avatar might be semiotically and formally aligned with the physical environment in opposition to enemy forces representing an invasion or a corruption of the order governing the space of the gameworld. The archetypal model for this formulation can be identified as early in the history of the medium as *Space Invaders* (Taito, 1978), which gives the player control of a tank at the bottom of the screen, with freedom of movement limited to moving left and right, and pits them against waves of alien opponents moving slowly downwards from the top of the screen. Apart from the tank and the encroaching invaders, the only other features of this primitive gameworld are three or four (the number varies depending on the version) defensive bunkers on the player's side of the screen, which the player can use for shelter, but which rapidly crumble away under the force of enemy fire. The relation between the player-avatar and the bunkers is one of protection: as they fall into ruin and finally disintegrate completely, the player's chances of survival are adversely affected.

The relation might be inverted, in which case it is the player-avatar who encroaches upon a gameworld to which they stand functionally and semiotically opposed, inevitably bearing hostile intentions. *Just Cause 2* gives the player a mission that, questionable political implications aside, is simple: your avatar is a US military agent airdropped into a small Asian nation under a military dictatorship; your mission - and you have no choice but to accept it - is to cause enough chaos to bring down the regime. The player's task is, very crudely, to be the agent of ruination, and the game provides ample tools with which to wreak havoc. Here there is joy taken in ruination, with the game flashing a celebratory screen awarding the player points and bonuses for every successful act of destruction.

A note of self-parody does little to dilute the distinct imprint of Reagan-era militarism (as filtered through the high-concept action film) that colours the game: this is

resolutely not a game whose primary interests are aesthetic or expressive. Nonetheless, the imagery it invokes occasionally resonates with echoes of real-world, politically-motivated acts of destruction and vandalism: most notable is the case of the ninety-five statues of fictional dictator "Baby" Panay scattered around the nation that the player can find and destroy. The act cannot help but recall news-bulletin images depicting the destruction of icons of deposed dictatorial figures - whether it be Stalin or Saddam Hussein - and constitutes as radical a *détournement* of the original monument and the unshakeable authority it asserted as can be imagined.

 Even when used lightly (as it undoubtedly is in *Just Cause 2*) the ruin-image cannot escape the dense web of memories, allusions and conflicts that define the ruin-situation. In a game which very consciously draws upon such imagery for aesthetic effect, such as *Half-Life 2,* the effect can only be more pronounced. The latter game's City 17, a deliberately nonspecific (in cultural and geographical terms) eastern European metropolis, is a literal site of (and *in*) conflict. As soon as the player-avatar, the scientist Gordon Freeman, arrives in the city, it is evident that the human population is under the dominion of a mysterious alien force known as the Combine, which echoes the technologized totalitarianism of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* but imbues it with an entirely dehumanised alienness.

City 17 - the name itself implies a reversal of Casey's notions of emplacement, a dehumanisation of space based upon the erasure of place-names - is in the process of being reshaped in the image of this inhuman presence. Oppressively alien architecture, defined by dark, reflective surfaces and jagged angles, replaces familiar constructions, and the skyline is dominated by the impossibly tall, monolithic structure called the Citadel.

This clash of architectural styles is crucial. Of course, a partially planned, but largely haphazard patchwork is the inevitable result of the processes of growth, change and development at work in the urban space, but there is a crucial difference between the

organic intermingling of cultural influences, or the sensitive incorporation of new constructions with old, and the aggressive imposition of one architectural paradigm over another. Fredric Jameson has argued that the latter model defines Utopian architectural projects whose setting-up serves to negate an urban space they frame as decadent. Such was the case, he suggests, with the large-scale projects of the International Style of modernist architecture, where :

> the act of disjunction was violent, visible and had a very real symbolic
>
> significance - as in Le Corbusier's great *pilotis,* whose gesture radically separates
>
> the new Utopian space of the modern from the degraded and fallen city fabric
>
> which it thereby explicitly repudiates.[169]

City 17 bears the mark of several such architectural assaults, of which the Combine's is only the most recent. It was the designers' intention to depict the city in these terms, as a patchwork of successive projects of rebuilding: 'City 17 was grown much like a real eastern European city - building up from 19th century architecture, through the architectural intrusions of the 20th century, and finally stamping it on top with the harsh Combine identity'.[170]

The visible marks of the Combine's attempts to remake the city, therefore, seem to reiterate similar authoritarian, top-down attempts at embedding re-engineered social structures within a reworked urban space, commenting upon Stalinism in particular, and twentieth-century fascist or totalitarian systems in general (Fig.13). At the same time, however, the architecture of the Combine transcends such comparisons, and establishes itself within a different order entirely :

> The stately plazas of the eastern European city are beset by technology which
>
> seeks to order the world as it consumes it [...] The towering, angular Combine
>
> structures themselves have a fascistic flavour to them - but their alarming

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[169]*Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p.41

[170] 'Popular Science', *Edge,* April 2010, pp.68-75

asymmetry, impossible distribution of mass and unknowable materials, dark and iridescent, mark them out as something entirely Other.[171]

The otherness of the Combine architecture imposes itself upon the fabric of the city with a very concrete violence. In their constant, mechanized expansion, the outer walls of the Citadel literally consume the city's human architecture, gradually eating away at the buildings that surround them: the old (in this case, associated with an essentially human organicity) is grist for the mill of the technological new (Fig.14).

This invites a reading of *Half-Life 2*'s milieu as an aesthetic reflection along the lines of Cecilia Enjuto-Rangel's interrogation of the ruin-image within the modern city. In her suggestion that 'machines construct and destroy buildings, constantly re-shaping the urban landscape', [172] we glimpse a vision of the contemporary urban space as one in which fixedness of place and stability of order have collapsed: the modern city is a space in flux, constantly tearing itself down and rebuilding itself into new configurations in a 'self-devouring process of constant reinvention and self-destruction'.[173]

Crucially, this is a ruin-image which could only have had its genesis within the digital game medium. It depends entirely upon the player's incorporation within the scene in the figure of Gordon Freeman, not only because it emerges from the player's exploration and involvement in the fictional space it constructs, but also because it allows the player to become an active agent within the conflict embedded in that space, a conflict which - in this case - bears the semiotic tenor of a discourse on power, structure and agency within the contemporary urban landscape.

We opened this chapter with a question: in what way(s) can the dual character of the gameworld - both functional organisation of spatial forms *and* a fictional place which can

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[171] ibid.

[172] "Broken Presents: The Modern City in Ruins in Baudelaire, Cernuda and Paz", *Comparative Literature,* 59 (2007), 40-157 (p.148)

[173] ibid., p.155

gain meaning *as* place - be put in the service of expressing the ruin-situation in the full range of its connotations? During the course of the chapter, we have identified two answers to the question. The first is to arrange the elements of the ruin-situation into a temporal frame and embed them as a narrative within the gameworld for the player to decipher. The second is to order those elements as units within a system of conflict structured, once again within the gameworld itself, thereby constituting a contested space.

Both approaches are predicated, not only on the spatiality of the gameworld, but also on the player's incorporation within it:: in the embedded narrative situation, as explorer, and in the contested space formulation, as an active agent within the system of conflict. Perhaps we have begun to identify an essential expressive quality of the adventure game world that goes beyond the limits of the ruin-theme; here, organised around the poles of player and gameworld and operating by mechanisms of interpretation, constraint and agency, our consideration of the ruin-theme might have led us to glimpse the preliminary sketch of a spatial poetics of the adventure game.

Conclusions

This dissertation has necessarily fallen short of providing a comprehensive overview of an image which has proven resilient and versatile enough to continually re-emerge in new tonalities when framed within new cultural, philosophical, aesthetic and medial paradigms. As has become amply clear, the notion of ruin - whether we are referring to the figure of the ruin-site, the textual ruin-image, or the aesthetic and philosophical idea of ruination itself - collects within its sphere a complex network of political, semiotic, epistemological and ontological considerations.

To contemplate the ruin, then, is to engage in the play of presence and absence surrounding a fragment that connotes both an original totality and an agent, and process, of ruination. This is what we have termed the *ruin-situation,* and, depending upon the configuration taken by its formative elements, it can give rise to a great number of distinct ruin-sentiments. We have noted that ruins can connote enduring cultural values, serve as a *memento mori* or a reminder of the folly of human vanity, or mark a sense of loss and exile from the whole. They can stand as manifestations of a monstrous Other, or, fallen, commemorate victory over an enemy.

Prior to all of these sentiments and connotations, however, the ruin-site is, first and foremost, a *site* - a topographical arrangement of architectural forms, or suggestions of forms, that invites the viewer to an act of exploratory interpretation. The viewer encounters the ruin as a disordered, incomprehensible aggregation of incomplete forms, and immediately sets upon the task of translating it into a comprehensible order, whether that means attempting to piece together a vision of its original plenitude, extrapolating the narrative of its ruin-situation, or - as Robert Ginsberg suggests - identifying the ruin as an aesthetic unity in itself.

It is upon this essential character of the ruin-site that its affinity with the spaces of digital games is founded. We have demonstrated that the player interacts with a gameworld - and the invisible computational algorithm underpinning it - in much the same way as the visitor to the unmapped ruin-site, testing out approaches and attempting various configurations in an effort to make functional sense of the world. This allows us to reach an understanding of adventure games as explorable spaces, constituting both a functional, rule-bound spatial structure and an overlaid fiction. This insight has led us to uncover expressive possibilities based upon the organisation of semiotic elements within the gameworld, whether that is in the form of a narrative embedded within its spatial architecture, or an arrangement of the semiotic elements into the dynamics of a contested space.

It was my aim, with this dissertation, to juxtapose the image of the ruin and the formal notion of the digital gameworld in such a way as to use each as a lens in which to view the other, thereby gaining fresh perspectives on both. As has been amply demonstrated, this framing of the medium has led us through a theorization of the gameworld that might serve as the foundation for a more extensive study of the semiotic and aesthetic potential of gaming space: what has been identified is not merely how meaningful representations of ruin might be constructed in the gameworld, but, more broadly, how the gameworld can become a space of aesthetic signification through the mechanisms by which the player is incorporated into, inhabits, interprets and interacts with the gameworld on both a functional and a semiotic level.

In this direction, then, our investigation has borne fruit; but what, if anything, have we learnt about the ruin itself? What possibilities, in other words, does the medium offer to re-imagine the ruin? I would suggest that, viewing the ruin through the lens of its textual manifestation within the gameworld, what is brought to the fore more forcefully than in its other mediations - in the dialogues of exploration, spatial formulation,

negotiated traversal and narrative interpretation that open up between the in-game ruin-image and the player incorporated within its spatiality- is the sense, not only of its *sitedness*, as a physical form within a topographical locus, but also of the viewer's inhabiting of the site, and hence of her inevitable participation within the ruin-situation.

The ludic ruin-image, then, nudges us towards a fresh - or, at least, a reframed - understanding of the ruin that could only have emerged within the crucible of the digital gameworld: an understanding which privileges the ruin as, in Edward S. Casey's term, a cognitive *place*, and which reminds us that the notions of order and disorder, dwelling and homelessness which animate the ruin are encoded in a primarily spatial language, one that is dependent upon our emplacement, as embodied beings, within its shattered sphere.

At the time of writing, Blizzard Entertainment are on the cusp of releasing *World of Warcraft : Cataclysm,* the latest update to the phenomenally popular massively multiplayer online role-playing game. The distinguishing feature that sets this genre apart from the traditional adventure game is that play takes place in a persistent, shared online gameworld that players log into for every session, but that The idea behind *Cataclysm* is that it subjects that world - the fantasy realm of Azeroth - to disaster on an unimaginable scale. Once the update is launched, players who have been inhabiting this virtual world since the game's release in 2004 will find it in ruins - cities destroyed, deserts flooded, landscapes split by vast chasms - and, crucially, *they can never go back*: the world as they knew it will exist only in memory. In a preview, Quintin Smith notes:

When *Cataclysm* is released, whole chunks of Azeroth will be destroyed,
forever - the Shimmering Flats and its mad racetrack will be lost below a

> hundred meters of water, and the foundering city of Auberdine will finally
> undergo total destruction.[174]

Here we encounter an expression of the ruin-theme that, while certainly drawing upon many of the tropes and ruin-sentiments we have examined, is entirely fresh in its development and presentation. It restates many of the familiar sentiments surrounding the ruin - nostalgia for familiar places, ruin as a sign of the loss of an old order, ruin as a marker of exile or homelessness - but *Cataclysm* breathes new life into these established notions by predicating them upon the player's experience of inhabiting the place of the gameworld. By doing so, *Cataclysm* continues to reveal both the richness of a theme that reveals new resonances with every iteration, and the still largely unexplored potential of digital games to put their unique expressive affordances to the task of re-imagining the cultural landscape upon which they are set to work.

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[174] "Azeroth is Burning", *The Escapist,* 17 August 2010
<http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/issues/issue_267/7994-Azeroth-Is-Burning>

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APPENDIX

Illustrations

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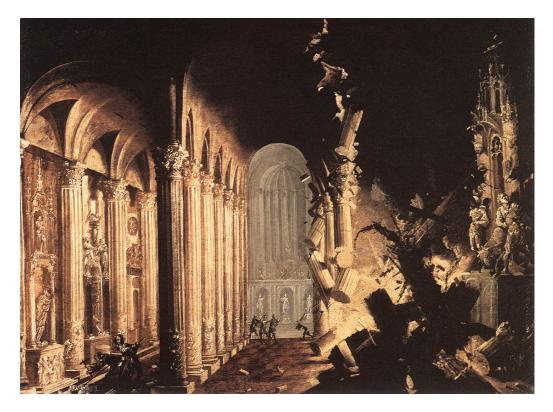
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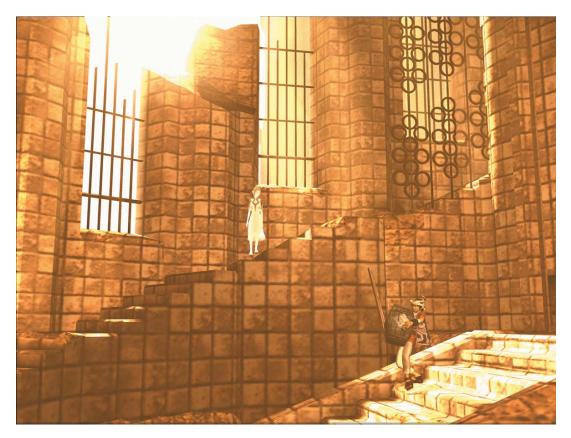(Ashmolean Museum, Oxford)

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([Musée du Louvre](), Paris)

Figure 6
Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840), *The Abbey in the Oakwood,* 1810 (Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin)

Figure 7
Ico (Team Ico: Sony Computer Entertainment, 2001)

Figure 8
S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl (GSC Game World: THQ, 2007)

Figure 9
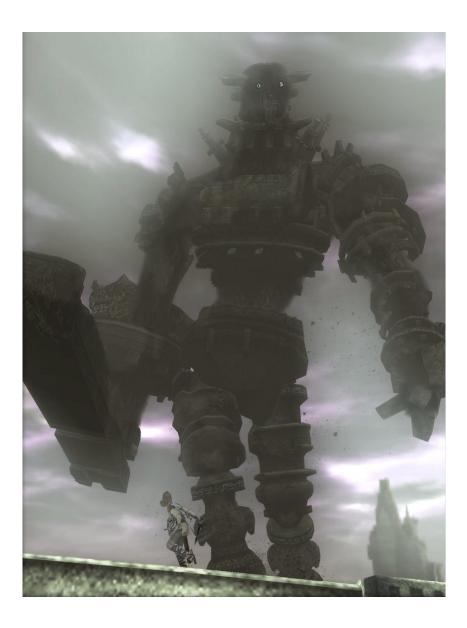*Dragon Age: Origins* (Bioware: Electronic Arts, 2009)

Figure 10
Shadow of the Colossus (Team Ico: Sony Computer Entertainment, 2005)

Figure 11
Small Worlds (David Shute, 2009). The embedded narrative gradually revealing itself
through the process of exploration.

Figure 12
Shadow of the Colossus: the ruin as enemy

Figure 13
Half-Life 2 (Valve Software, 2004). The conflict of architectural styles.

Figure 14
Half-Life 2. Combine architecture consuming human architecture.