

Dreaming in the Witch House

An Esoteric Approach to Computer Game Research

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Abstract The following text is a shortened transcript of my lecture performance *Dreaming in the Witch House*, which centres around the narration *The Dreams in the Witch House* written in 1932 by American author H. P. Lovecraft. The lecture focuses on the theme of research in which the architecture of Lovecraft's witch house serves as a catalyst for different strategies to find the hidden and the unexpected. By combining the efforts of Lovecraft's characters with different unpredictable player behaviour in video games, the lecture argues towards an idea of esoteric computer game research. Within the lecture situation, Lovecraft's text fragments were played back in audio. The pre-recorded female voice served both as a narrator and as a dialogue partner.

Keywords Artistic research, computer game research, game space, play behaviour, glitching, H. P. Lovecraft

The Fear of the Unknown

He was in the changeless, legend-haunted city of Arkham, with its clustering gambrel roofs that sway and sag over attics where witches hid from the King's men in the dark, olden days of the Province. Nor was any spot in that city more steeped in macabre memory than the gable room which harboured him—for it was this house and this room which had likewise harboured old Keziah Mason, whose flight from Salem Gaol at the last no one was ever able to explain (Lovecraft and Joshi 2004, 300).

The following thoughts will circulate around the geometry and architecture conjured by H. P. Lovecraft in his short story *The Dreams in the Witch House* written in 1932



Fig. 1 Representation of the witch house in the CryEngine Sandbox Editor.

(2004, 300–34). The witch house, with its oppressive atmosphere, the oblique angles, its areas of insecurity and safety shall serve as a starting point, as a place of transition for knowledge, as a place of banned knowledge, as a place that stimulates travelling through space and dream time.

The witch house is a laboratory, an alchemical kitchen in which the protagonist explores the unknown. “The new is uncertain, it is by definition not predictable, so it can only be evoked to a limited extent. What is really new has to happen, and conditions have to be created for it to happen” (translated from German by the author, Rheinberger 2007).¹

Nevertheless, the unknown is associated with fear. We do not know it and contrary to the scientific laboratory, with its controllability and reproducibility, these fears influence the premises of the witch house and our individual perception. “Fear makes the future uncertain” (Hull 2006, 12). However, it also drives research: We have to foster our courage and dare to do something in order to overcome our own fear and explore this situation.

1 “[...] was wirklich neu ist, ist definitionsgemäss nicht vorhersehbar, es kann also auch nur begrenzt herbeigeführt werden. Was wirklich neu ist, muss sich einstellen, und man muss Bedingungen dafür schaffen, dass es sich einstellen kann” (Rheinberger 2007).

Gilman could not have told what he expected to find there, but he knew he wanted to be in the building where some circumstance had more or less suddenly given a mediocre old woman of the seventeenth century an insight into mathematical depths perhaps beyond the utmost modern delvings of Planck, Heisenberg, Einstein, and de Sitter (Lovecraft and Joshi 2004, 301).

The witch house exists on the threshold of the twentieth century and during this time, the British scientist Lord Kelvin claims that in physics there is nothing left to be discovered (Paul Davies, *Superstring: A Theory of Everything?* from 1988, quoted in Ingwersen 2014, 46). This sentiment of absolute certainty, of having penetrated a discipline or the world entirely, stems from a time when things were fundamentally changing, especially in the natural sciences. Albert Einstein's theory of relativity expanded Cartesian space by a fourth dimension. The curvature of space through space-time broke radically with Euclidean geometry. At the same time, other mathematicians were introducing counter models to established theories: János Bolyai's *hyperbolic geometry*, or Nicolai Lobachevsky's and Bernhard Riemann's *differential geometry* provided counter evidence for Euclid's long-standing assertions. These scientific discoveries caused the field of mathematics to diverge into two paths: one being the familiar with numerous already existing explications, the other one opening a gateway to the unknown, a field yet to be researched. Within that second path, we are not at the end but at the very beginning of our journey.

For the layman, the multiple ideas of space-time may appear difficult to grasp, given that scientific languages favour the initiated. This discourse problem further alienates the scientific realm from everyday life. New findings or methods, which already seem strange to other researchers, are mystified in the perception of the non-scientific population. Mathematics, or at least its field of research, questions the fundamentals of our existence. It is an omnipresent horror that is not bound by any dimensions and rather travels through them until it finally knocks on the door of our witch house.

"According to this logic, the sensation of terror experienced in face of the deformed, the infinite, or the supernatural, stems from an epistemological crisis, an incapacity to make sense" (Ingwersen 2014, 46). Therefore, the witch house is on the threshold to something different, a liminal place where the parallels of different spaces and times meet. The unknown and the new calls for us and wants to be explored—no matter how high the costs. We now enter the witch house, get an impression of its architectural condition, its angles and corners, the creaking of its boards and of the hidden, the secret and the unknown that dwell within.

Gilman's room was of good size but queerly irregular shape; the north wall slanting perceptibly inward from the outer to the inner end, while the low ceiling slanted gently downward in the same direction. Aside from

an obvious rat-hole and the signs of other stopped-up ones, there was no access—nor any appearance of a former avenue of access—to the space which must have existed between the slanting wall and the straight outer wall on the house’s north side, though a view from the exterior shewed where a window had been boarded up at a very remote date (Lovecraft and Joshi 2004, 302).

The Witch House

In Lovecraft’s *Dreams in the Witch House*, it is the title-giving building that acts as a catalyst of knowledge. The witch house puts the main character Gilman in a state of delirium. In feverish visions, he dreams himself into the dreamlands, a place that can only be entered by dreaming, as it is disconnected from our world. As in Lovecraft’s earlier stories, it is this ability that allows his characters to travel through space and time. Gilman’s witch house and study room hold unimagined knowledge, but the dark aura of the architecture also has a threatening effect on his mind. It is in this fragile state that Gilman begins to dream. His fears are only surpassed by the irrepressible drive for knowledge.

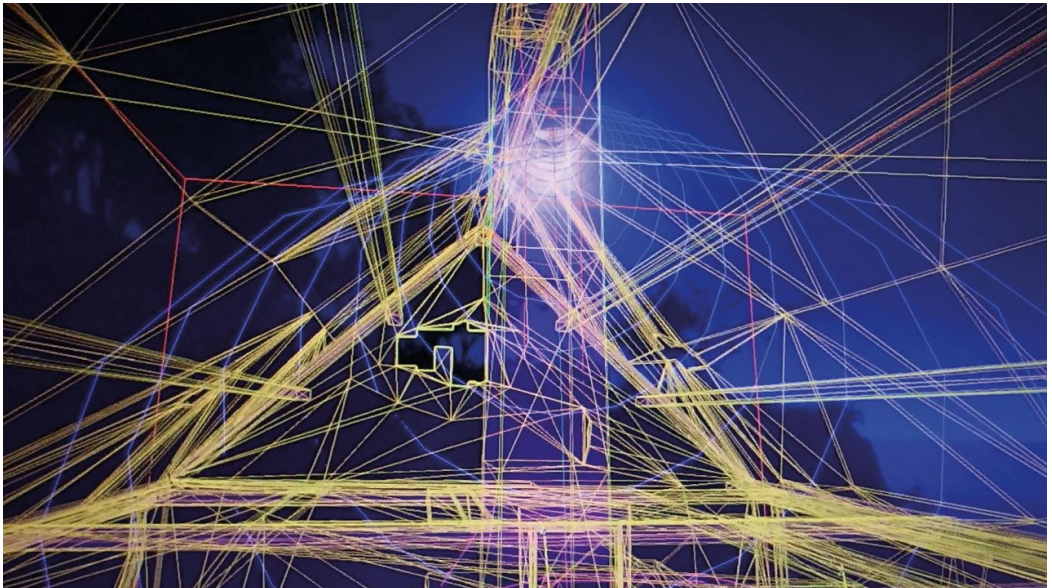


Fig. 2 The gable of the witch house.

The witch house is an unsafe territory. If home is supposed to provide security, the witch house seems like a permanent threat to the protagonist. Lovecraft's characters do not find access to the unknown in comfort and security, but in the permanent uncertainty of whether one is awake or dreaming, of being and non-being, of sense and madness. This uncertainty is transported to the reader by the language used. The mathematician Thomas Hull describes it as follows: "Lovecraft's cosmic horror was thus achieved through devices that would, he hoped, feel completely foreign and unknown to the reader. This mood was meant to be crafted in unfamiliar and uncomfortable territory [...]" (Hull 2006, 10).

The protagonist's search for knowledge—in the story described as an urge to the stars, as a feverish advance or as overcoming one's own fears—is placed alongside the reader's advance within the storyline. The search for the new, for a new topography, for a new mathematics, for a final truth or the end of history and sometimes also for the clarity of one's own mind is the driving force behind Lovecraft's stories.

The scientific historian Hans-Jörg Rheinberger describes an exoteric and an esoteric way of how artists work within the concealed space of the scientific laboratory. Esoteric in this context refers to artists appropriating the materials within the lab, such as images, sounds, objects and so forth. In this situation, scientists become mere spectators—there is no epistemic or aesthetic exchange between art and science. The esoteric way, on the other hand, tries to extract effects from the existing material. Therefore, artists and scientists design and construct setups together to overcome the resistance of the material. They build situations from which something new can emerge, whereby the new is not foreseeable—and therefore addresses the unknown in a dream-like process (Rheinberger 2015, 311–14).

In Gilman's esoteric research approach, he tries to overcome the resistance of the architecture and its dark aura. Gilman is looking for something without knowing what it is. He exposes himself to the influence of the witch house. Gilman's unyielding and insistent gaze at all the nooks and crannies of the interior finally reveals the transition to a deep-seated insight.

As time wore along, his absorption in the irregular wall and ceiling of his room increased; for he began to read into the odd angles a mathematical significance which seemed to offer vague clues regarding their purpose. Old Keziah, he reflected, might have had excellent reasons for living in a room with peculiar angles; for was it not through certain angles that she claimed to have gone outside the boundaries of the world of space we know? His interest gradually veered away from the unplumbed voids beyond the slanting surfaces [...]
(Lovecraft and Joshi 2004, 303).

In *The Poetics of Space*, the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard dedicates one complete chapter to the corner. He writes:

[E]very corner in a house, every angle in a room, every inch of secluded space in which we like to hide, or withdraw into ourselves, is a symbol of solitude for the imagination; that is to say, it is the germ of a room, or of a house. [...] a corner that is 'lived in' tends to reject and restrain, even to hide, life. The corner becomes a negation of the Universe. In one's corner one does not talk to oneself. When we recall the hours we have spent in our corners, remember above all silence, the silence of our thoughts. This being the case, why describe the geometry of such indigent solitude? (Bachelard 1994, 136–37).

Contrary to Bachelard's description, the corner in the study room of the witch house becomes the centre of Gilman's meditation on inverse geometries and thus the theory of relativity, the science, and the occult that are nested within. In Lovecraft's earlier stories, these geometric forms already come to life and serve as vehicles of indeterminacy and unimaginability. Lovecraft's corners hypnotise and swallow the viewer. Following Bachelard, the corners become something tangible.



Fig. 3 Zoom-in onto the corner of the gable.

The touch of brain-fever and the dreams began early in February. For some time, apparently, the curious angles of Gilman's room had been having a strange, almost hypnotic effect on him; and as the bleak winter advanced he had found himself staring more and more intently at the corner where the down-slanting ceiling met the inward-slanting wall (Lovecraft and Joshi 2004, 303).

The corners of the witch house connect fragile borderlines between the world we know and the unknown. In order to overcome its materiality on this side, dream techniques are needed. Gilman's urge to move into the angle—in other words, to create a transcendent transition by concentrating on geometric forms—is told in fragments. In fact, Gilman himself cannot say with certainty whether he has not already entered the angle and just does not remember the experience. If Lovecraft's characters cross this threshold, the new dimensions reveal themselves. However, it is often unclear how they can leave these angles again, as Bachelard writes: "But there are angles from which one cannot escape" (1994, 144).

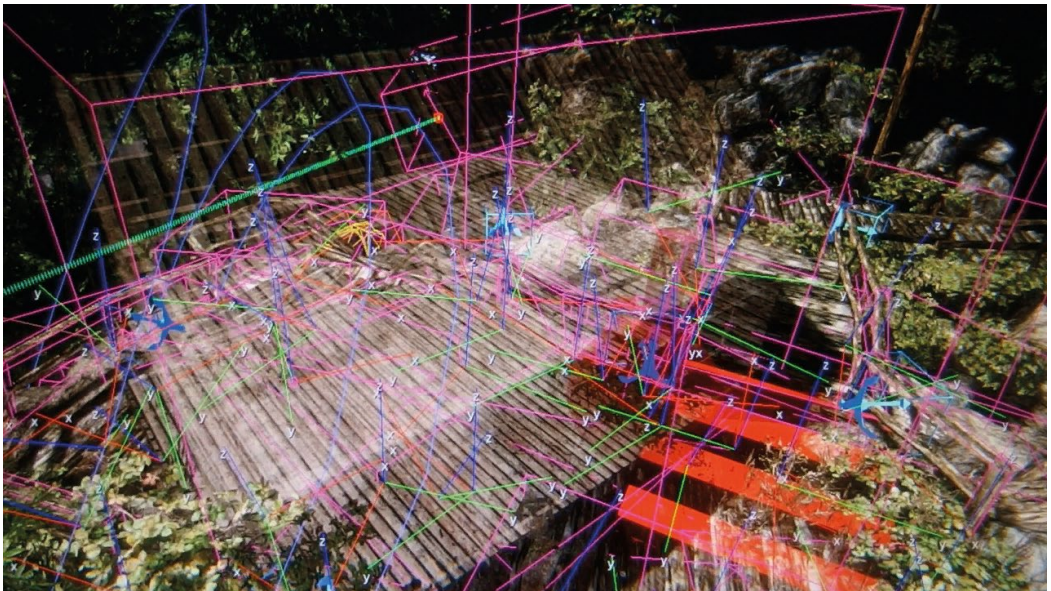


Fig. 4 Exterior view of the witch house.

The Dreamland

“From the depths of his corner, the dreamer sees an older house, a house in another land, thus making a synthesis of the childhood home and the dream home” (Bachelard 1994, 142). The geometry of the witch house becomes a powerful actor within the story as it induces a feverish feel in Gilman’s body and stimulates his dreams. In Lovecraft’s stories, the characters transfer their minds into alien bodies of non-human beings. The dissolution of one’s own body in feverish dreams makes it possible to overcome the boundaries between dimensions and bodies, enabling an alienating experience.

Gilman’s dreams consisted largely in plunges through limitless abysses of inexplicably coloured twilight and bafflingly disordered sound; abysses whose material and gravitational properties, and whose relation to his own entity, he could not even begin to explain. He did not walk or climb, fly or swim, crawl or wriggle; yet always experienced a mode of motion partly voluntary and partly involuntary. Of his own condition he could not well judge, for sight of his arms, legs, and torso seemed always cut off by some odd disarrangement of perspective; but he felt that his physical organisation and faculties were somehow marvellously transmuted and obliquely projected—though not without a certain grotesque relationship to his normal proportions and properties (Lovecraft and Joshi 2004, 304).

In Lovecraft’s narratives, only dreaming can lead to an understanding of non-Euclidean geometry. Dreaming itself becomes a science, the change between waking and sleeping phases merges into a methodical symbiosis that makes actual travel through space and time possible. The characters travel to distant places to gain knowledge and thus a better understanding of the world they originate from. They go on research trips from the corners of the witch house, to the snowcapped peaks of the mountains of madness, and to the depths of the seabed in the nightmare corpse city of R’lyeh. In one of his dream expeditions, Gilman sees a vast jungle landscape after entering. He himself is standing on top of a building. Everything he sees and hears is unfamiliar, with three suns shining above his head.

When Gilman stood up the tiles felt hot to his bare feet. He was wholly alone, and his first act was to walk to the balustrade and look dizzily down at the endless, Cyclopean city almost two thousand feet below. As he listened he thought a rhythmic confusion of faint musical pipings covering a wide tonal range welled up from the narrow streets beneath, and he wished he might discern the denizens of the place. The sight turned him giddy after a while,



Fig. 5 Shot from under the map in *Grand Theft Auto V* (OoB 2018, Thomas Hawranke).

so that he would have fallen to the pavement had he not clutched instinctively at the lustrous balustrade. His right hand fell on one of the projecting figures, the touch seeming to steady him slightly. It was too much, however, for the exotic delicacy of the metal-work, and the spiky figure snapped off under his grasp. Still half-dazed, he continued to clutch it as his other hand seized a vacant space on the smooth railing (Lovecraft and Joshi 2004, 314).

The dream ends abruptly, and Gilman finds himself soaked in sweat in his bed back in the witch house. Sometime later, he finds the said figure under his bed. It has also survived the journey through space and time. Gilman demonstrates the artefact to the scientific community but they fail to find answers to his queries. Only the dreamer knows about its origin, the conventional science with its established procedures and static methods cannot provide any answers. Travels through the dreamlands are expeditions into the unknown. They are field trips to distant planets, into different dimensions or into alternative temporalities of our planet. On these expeditions, we encounter strange fragments of unfamiliarity. We must discard the familiar. Only by following our impressions and our intuition can we discover the new, step by step.

Witch House Exits as Transgressive Play Behaviour

We must build our own witch houses as precautions to summon unforeseeable events, as generators of surprises and as future-producing machines: “Each artist works in the dark and is guided only by the tunnels and shafts of earlier works, following a vein in the hope of discovering a gold mine. At the same time, however, he must fear that the vein may already be exhausted tomorrow” (translated from German by the author, Rheinberger 2007).² Thus, esoteric research could perhaps reach into the future by neglecting the existing tunnels and shafts of earlier works and instead forge new paths within our own mine. It is less a matter of following the beaten tracks of the past than of entering the past through the corners of our witch houses and exploring new exits into the present and the future.

At this point, I would proclaim the idea of esoteric research for the field of video games. We should create our own witch houses within game spaces, meditate in the corners of their architecture and stroll through their landscapes without purpose. Now, in order to further illustrate my ideas, I would like to sketch three possible witch house exits as examples.

Amnesia

One of these exits takes us on expeditions in which we do not follow the narrative of the game, nor do we surrender to atmospheres and immersive effects of the game world. Computer games try to lure us into their designed events, to get us to care about objects, people, architectures and landscapes. But we should not care. Rather, the *holy earnest* of play (see Huizinga 1980, 20) is replaced by the irrepressible urge to find something new, to evoke things no player has ever seen before. The desire for the unknown, the urge for exploration, creates a momentum that pulls us onto unpaved paths, leads us to the periphery and allows us to look at distant and unfinished landscapes of every game world.³

A landscape without content. We fly through handles, coordinate crosses, placeholders, trigger boxes, collision checks, and over the grid of the level architecture. In this world, all connections to its content have been cut. Where once plants and trees stood, only white spheres can be seen now. The materiality of the world has been

2 “Jeder Künstler arbeitet im Dunkeln und wird nur von den Tunnels und Schächten früherer Werke geleitet, während er einer Ader folgt in der Hoffnung, auf eine Goldgrube zu stoßen. Gleichzeitig aber muss er fürchten, dass die Ader schon morgen ausgeschöpft sein kann” (Rheinberger 2007).

3 Regarding the structural constitution of the game world and the idea of prospect pacing, see also Bonner’s chapter in this book.

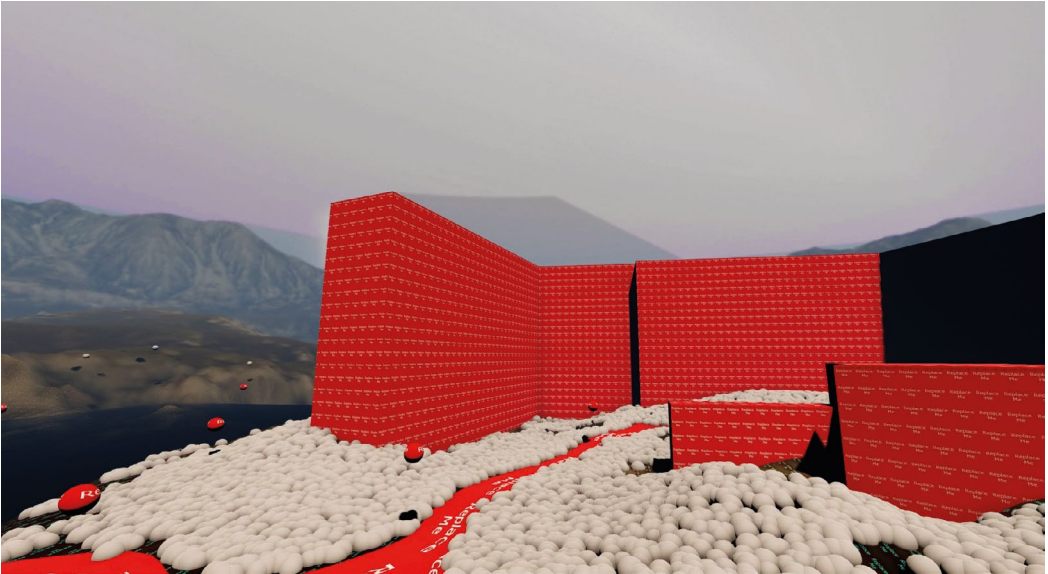


Fig. 6 Level architecture, where the link to the content layer is erased (*The grid, the lib and the best of all possible worlds 2019*, Thomas Hawranke).

replaced by the demand to replace it. This landscape is cut loose of its database linkages, from objects, scripts, and textures. In this absence, things emerge that have been obscured but are nevertheless essential components of it. In such a way, the structure of the game world is liberated from its ludic boundaries, from its gameplay-driven sign system. Through this alternative perspective onto the familiar, we find new things, new starting points and new angles to lose ourselves in.

Meditations

Applying the second exit, we concentrate on geometries, angles, and on our speed. The beat of the machine rhythmises. If we hit the angles of the polygons with an arrhythmic tempo, we succeed in making the transition. We see the world from the outside, the perspective of the designer. With just one step we break through walls, mountains, and floors, float in the air or stand on textureless topography. We walk along the underside of the world or look into the void. Entering these angles makes them experienceable. We use it to our advantage, we shorten, we skip, we cause mistakes.

The abysses were by no means vacant, being crowded with indescribably angled masses of alien-hued substance, some of which appeared to be organic while others seemed inorganic. A few of the organic objects tended to awake vague memories in the back of his mind, though he could form no conscious idea of what they mockingly resembled or suggested. In the later dreams he began to distinguish separate categories into which the organic objects appeared to be divided, and which seemed to involve in each case a radically different species of conduct-pattern and basic motivation. Of these categories one seemed to him to include objects slightly less illogical and irrelevant in their motions than the members of the other categories (Lovecraft and Joshi 2004, 304).

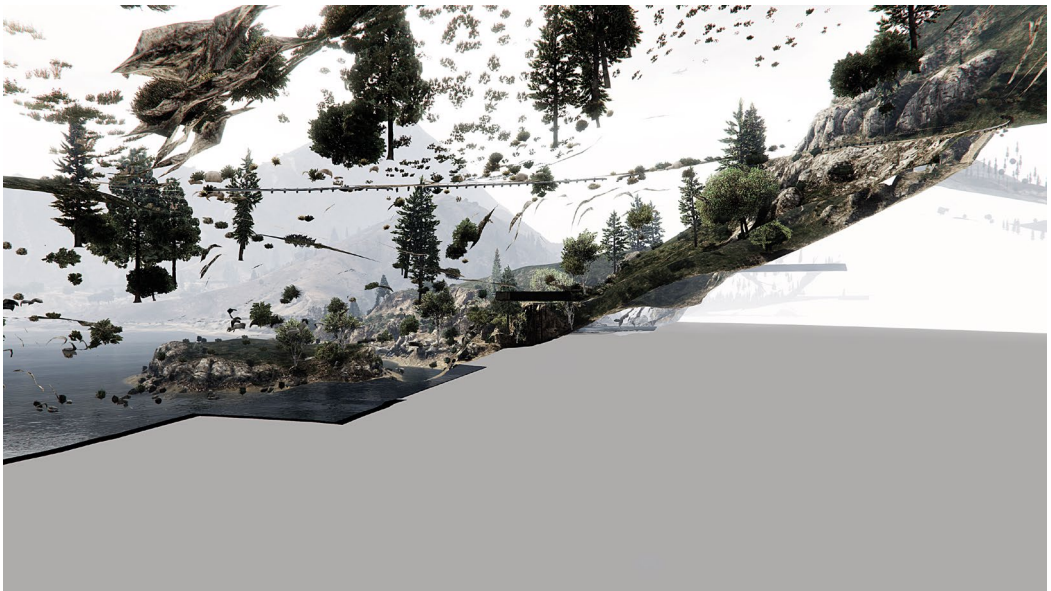


Fig. 7 Out of bound space in *Grand theft Auto V* (OoB 2018, Thomas Hawranke).

Gable Jumping

In order to enter the corners of our witch house, we have to develop alternative forms of spatial practices in computer games. This could be a third exit. Sometimes it is the direct way, sometimes a backward movement. Actions like *Strafe-jumping* or *Accelerated Backhopping* annihilate the game physics and let us explore the boundaries of game mechanics and game worlds:⁴

Accelerated Back Hopping (ABH for short) is a Glitch, and it's the main method of movement on OrangeBox Engine-based games. [...] When your speed is over the limit, by default the game assumes you are always moving forward so the game accelerate you backwards to reduce your speed down to the threshold. However if you are moving backwards when the game bounds your speed, the game will try to slow you down by adding backward speed,

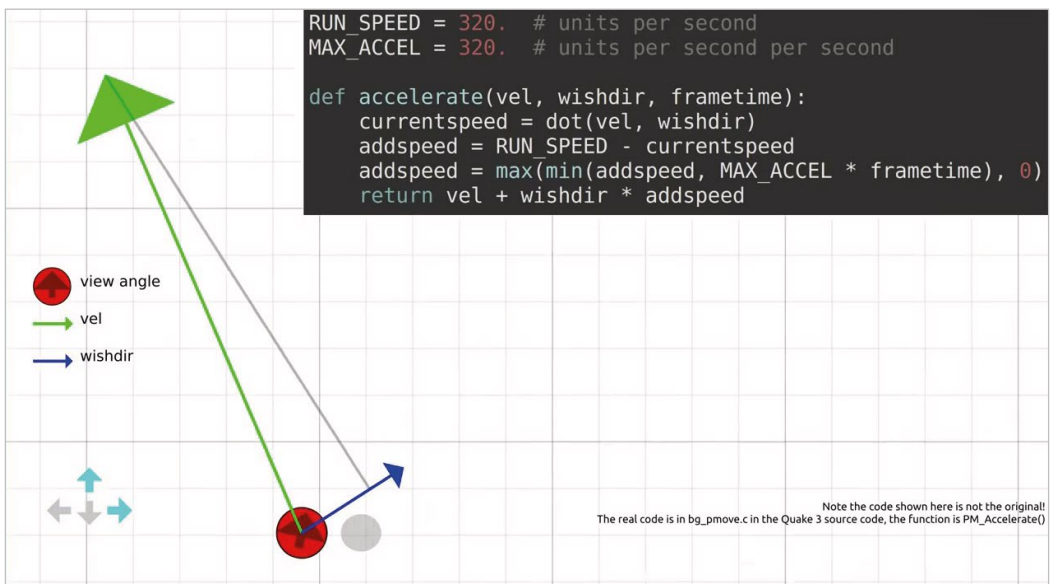


Fig. 8 Explanation of *Strafe-jumping* as part of the *Accelerated Backhopping* movement (screenshot taken by the author, Matt's Ramblings 2018).

- 4 *Strafe-jumping* and *Accelerated Backhopping* are specific spatial practices developed by players that use errors in the physical calculation of the video game to gain a benefit.

consequently accelerating you. [...] (T)he amount of backward speed the game applies on you is based on your speed when you jump, so the faster you go, the more speed you'll get. [...] Jump forward, turn around in the air and jump right as you land. It's recommended not to hold S or W (or your respective keys for moving forwards and back) while ABHing. Binding +jump to mouse wheel or using a jumping script is recommended as it makes timing jumps a lot easier (Source Runs Team 2018).

Esoteric Computer Game Research

One could understand esoteric computer game research as an approach similar to the research of Lovecraft's characters: In order to find something new, we have to create an unfamiliar and uncertain surrounding, exchange the comfort of our home for the menacing angles of the witch house gable. In this agitated state of anxiety, our thoughts will not rest but resonate feverishly with the elements of the game world. Within this state of permanent motion, unthinkable and unspeakable things will hopefully surface from the depth. Esoteric computer game research cannot be restricted by norms and regulations, it should be wild and free and use all the resources that one can find. In

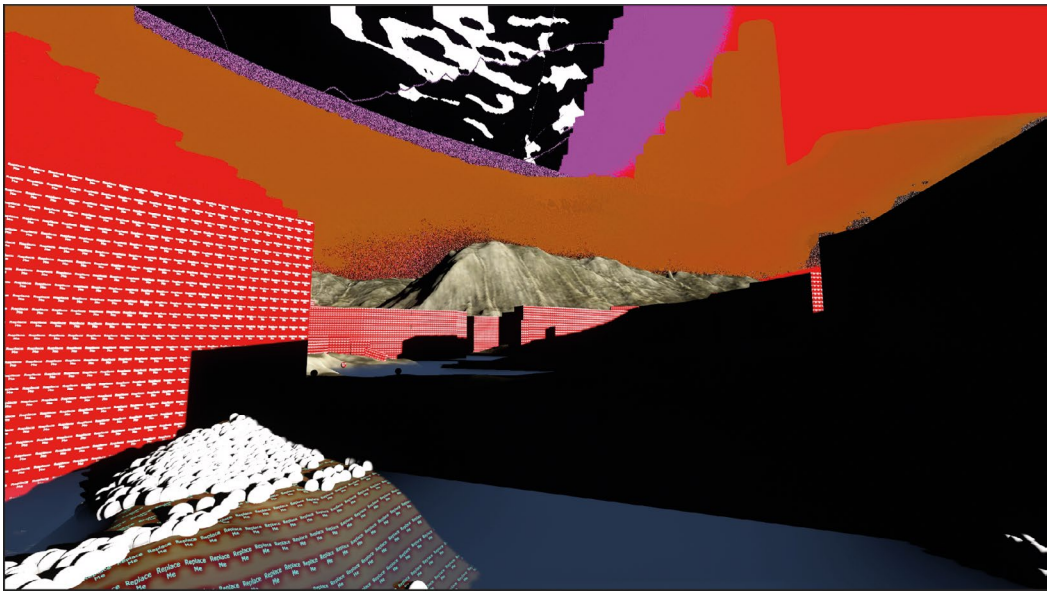


Fig. 9 Landscape glitch, after messing with the data of the CryEngine.

2003 already, Espen Aarseth proclaimed the idea to use everything we can find within video game research (2003, 7). According to him, it could generate knowledge where no one else dares to look. The potential lies not in disciplined research, like the adoption of methods and rules, but to quote Hito Steyerl, in epistemic disobedience and undisciplined research (2010). Hence, I propose that we should all go on research trips into the unknown, into the corners and architectures of the game worlds—into the inverse geometries of our own witch houses—and enter, linger, meditate, experience, accumulate and reflect.

Figures

Fig. 1–4: Screenshot and content by the author, 2019.

Fig. 5: *OoB* (Thomas Hawranke 2018).

Fig. 6: *The grid, the lib and the best of all possible worlds* (Thomas Hawranke 2019).

Fig. 7: *OoB* (Thomas Hawranke 2018).

Fig. 8: Matt's Ramblings. 2018. "Strafe-Jumping Physics Explained." In youtube.com, February 28. Accessed October 10, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rTsXO6Zicls>.

Fig. 9: Screenshot by the author, 2019.

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