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Screenshots as Photography in Gamescapes: An Annotated Psychogeography of Imaginary Places

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ABSTRACT

Travel is an integral part of our lives, whether for work or leisure. Since the advent of photography, we have documented our journeys, often sharing the images with friends and family to reflect upon the experience, tell stories, or invite commentary. We often lose ourselves in digital media – film, documentary and games – particularly during times when physical travel is unavailable. In this pictorial, we explore the travels of a single player through hundreds of games, presenting annotated game screenshots as photo-documentary through gamescapes, and as a form of the New Games Journalism. We present a New Games Travelogue traversing and formulating the psychogeography of games as imaginary places, and through this process, we unveil transdisciplinary tensions in negotiating and perceiving the importance of visual knowledge in games research, encouraging other researchers to join us in this practice.

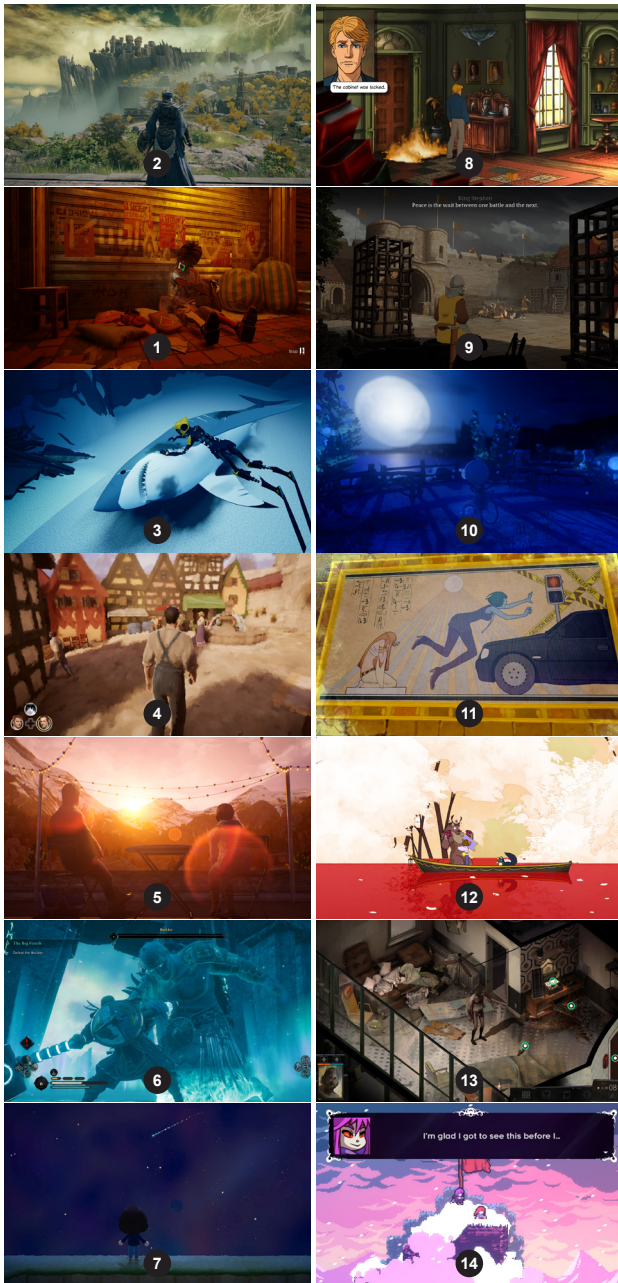
Authors Keywords

games, visual knowledge, screenshots,

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CSS Concepts

- Human-centered computing

INTRODUCTION

We all travel in different ways, and through different places. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many of us took our travelling to digital spaces [18], creating memories in virtual contexts. In this pictorial, we focus on games as travelling, and in screenshots as documentation. Rather than a textual academic paper, we present a pictorial photo album of a long pilgrimage through imaginary landscapes. As an architect would keep memoirs of encounters with material textures, room alignments, or even the beautiful framing of a view, so does a games researcher collect snapshots of significant experiences. In this pictorial, we – a group of four researchers with interdisciplinary backgrounds – compose a collective annotated portfolio [5,7] of screenshots. These images are an amalgamation of our experiences together in discussing games and the value of imagery – as well as the tensions in understanding screenshots as photography within gamescapes.

The Story of This Pictorial

In 2021, Michael, a games researcher, embarked on a long journey through hundreds of games. He was on a mission to conquer the backlog he had collected. As the year drew to a close, his colleague Mafalda was curious to know more about his favourites. She asked: “Did you collect screenshots out of the games?” and he answered “I kept loads of screenshots. 99% of them it would just be ‘Oh, that’s nice’ and for the other 1% it’s ‘that’s funny’. Or I guess occasionally ‘That makes a good screenshot for a lecture’”. This was a strange thing for Mafalda who, as a designer, collected screenshots as inspiration for her work. She asked what would make a good screenshot for a lecture, to which Michael replied: “It definitely is for design insights, which is one of the things I say to begin with. But I don’t really think I spend a lot of time thinking about screenshots, because they’re basically effortless and so I don’t need to think about it. I use a Switch Pro controller, and it has the genius element of a screenshot button right on the controller. So

it’s basically that I take them because it’s no cost to do it. They’re rarely very intentional.”

Mafalda was taken aback: how could he not understand how important his collection of screenshots was? This question triggered a cascade of other questions, and this pictorial is the results of the discussions that followed. Joined by two other researchers, one specialised in visual thinking (Miriam) and other in games (Pauline), we collectively annotated and discussed the screenshots taken by Michael during his travels.

Screenshots as Photography

A photograph creates a unique record of a particular conjunction of photographer, time, and place. It represents a visual fingerprint of a set of circumstances which are difficult or impossible to replicate. Everything from the lighting, to the angle, to the time of day, to the swirl of activity in the background – all of this serves to create a uniqueness that is personal. This distinguishes, for example, a photograph of Notre Dame from a postcard of the same. The latter is commodified, the former artisanal. Photographs couple an emotional resonance to an explicit intentionality. Their value is in many ways linked to their distinctiveness, and yet, we implicitly acknowledge some of the complexities in this. They are not valuable in that they reflect art, but rather that they themselves are art. A perfect photograph of a perfect portrait does not in itself reflect the value of the subject. It is not in the perfect capture of imagery that we value photography, but rather in its composition, its framing, and the extent to which it offers a transformative view of a physical thing. It is this that showcases the (perhaps) unintuitive relationship between screenshots and photographs. Curiously, even Canon, a company that produces photography cameras, recently hosted a competition in game photography¹.

Every screenshot in this pictorial is accompanied with **ALT text including a description of the image, as well as a motivation from the “photographer”**.

¹ <https://www.canon.se/get-involved/for-creators-in-all-worlds/>

BACKGROUND

That games are worthy of the same academic attention as other forms of media seems uncontroversial. In our work, we propose the mindful use of annotated screenshots as a way of documenting travels in games. This notion is framed by *New Games Journalism* and the *Psychogeography of Imaginary Places*.

The New Games Journalism

The New Games Journalism was a brief, but influential, phase of activity associated with discourse about games, pioneered as a philosophy by Kieron Gillen [8], which was influenced by the earlier 'New Journalism' [11]. It is often decried as a movement that produced much noise and very little signal. There is little question that it served as fuel for some of the worst excesses of self-indulgent game journalism, but it is equally hard to deny that the ideas espoused are seductive, and seem to gesture towards something deep and personal in our relationship to the games we play. To quote Gillen directly [8]:

"This makes us Travel Journalists to Imaginary places. Our job is to describe what it's like to visit a place that doesn't exist outside of the gamer's head [...] Go to a place, report on its cultures, foibles, distractions and bring it back to entertain"

The concept was held to be something most appropriate for a certain form of game journalism that has fallen out of favour in the attention-economy [17] – long form, thoughtful and introspective discussions that blend personal experience with game critique. Its focus is on meaning-making – to find ways to transplant the insight of the personal into the context of shared experience. In an age where an endless battle for retention and clicks results in a push for viral, memetic and easily digested content, it may seem like the past era of the New Games Journalism is one that has little to tell us about the present.

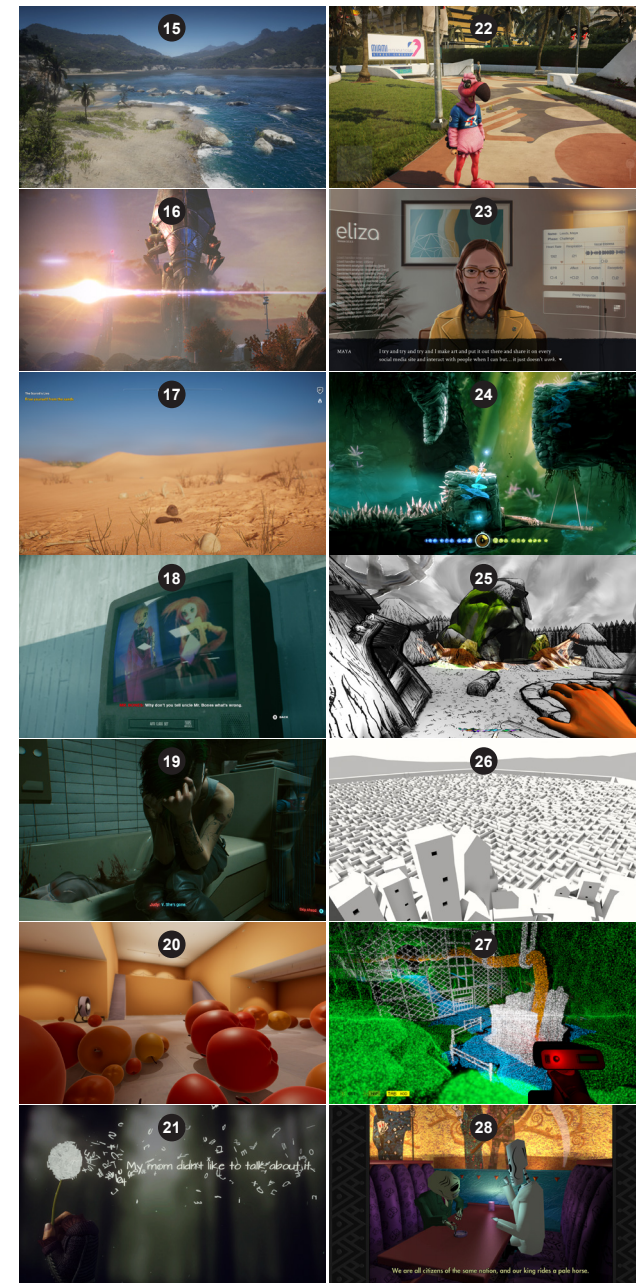
However, we see the core of the idea as being a way for a mindful reflection on the relationship of the individual and the imaginary. Drawing on the work of

Debord Debord et al. and other situationists [12,13], we believe that we can use the intersection of screenshot and personal reflection to 'study the specific effect of the geographical environment on the emotions and behaviours of individuals'. Or, to put it another way – we believe the New Games Journalism – as evidenced in the capturing of screenshots – allows for a kind of 'psychogeography of imaginary places'. We propose in this pictorial then evidence of a different form of the New Games Journalism... a kind of New Games Travelogue. We explore the intentional or unintentional traversal of space and time, as evidenced through 'photographs of imaginary places' as a mechanism for gaining greater insight into our own personal play.

The Psychogeography of Imaginary Places

Psychogeography is driven by the exploration of the personal intersection of presence and place [3]. As a discipline, it focuses on our own psychic and psychological connection to the spaces we inhabit. Many of its advocates argue strongly for the concept of 'dérive', or 'drift' [15] to encourage its practitioners to become 'lost in the city'. Directionless, purposeless, meandering is a core part of this principle, its advocates noting that it is difficult to find yourself in unusual and unpredictable places if one is burdened by a purpose or a direction.

The concept of psychogeography fell out of popularity in the early 20th century, when the previous romanticism associated with the Baudelairean flâneur – someone noted for their agenda-free sauntering [2] – had faded under the pressure of emerging models of productivity-based capitalism. In modern years, commentators and enthusiasts such as Iain Sinclair and Will Self have spearheaded something of a revival of the idea [9]. Sinclair's exploration of London's orbital roads [14] is rich with symbolism and insight - he talks of how roadways have replaced waterways and how the 'acoustic footprints' of the city are intrinsically tied to the landscape and the mechanisms we use to traverse it. These insights are generated through engagement with the physical act of simply being in a place, at a time,





and allowing it to inhabit your thoughts even as you immerse within its aesthetics [3].

Such explorations are personal reflections, tied to place and time, codified in a way to attempt to turn the personal into something with which the wider community can identify. We can see in this many of the practises of modern gamers, particularly within those games that stress environmental storytelling and an emerging engagement with the environment. While goal-oriented players may simply navigate from point A to point B without ever reflecting on the journey, we can see much evidence regarding what seems to be a growing body of work that mirrors much of what the field of psychogeography has hoped to accomplish. The world of *Death Stranding*, for example, is full of things to do and places to go. It is also filled from corner to corner with places to be, and reflection upon a player's relationship to the landscape, and how their passage alters it, is often cited as one of the defining experiences of play associated with the title. The epic desolation of *Dark Souls*, or the decaying majesty of *Elden Ring*, are landscapes where players are encouraged to – with care – drift around among the relics of great societies brought

into decay. As Hidetake Miyazaki, who is heavily associated with design philosophy at From Software, is quoted in relation to the art design of *Dark Souls* [16]:

“Don't rely on the gross factor to portray an undead dragon. Can't you instead try to convey the deep sorrow of a magnificent beast doomed to a slow and possibly endless descent into ruin?”

That philosophy of ‘a slow and possibly endless descent into ruin’ is reflected in almost every element of the design of the *Dark Souls* games, from the bosses to the buildings. Exploring the ‘deep sorrow’ of these magnificent environments is much of the appeal for a certain category of player. That is something perhaps best experienced authentically, in the moment, in the style of a drift through a world that shows the scars of faded majesty through an almost transgressive act of observance. From earlier games like *Shadow of the Colossus*, through to *Morrowind* and on to the *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*: we see here worlds in which engaging with drift is one of the primary mechanisms by which one might explore the world. Many games present their mysteries obliquely,



opening up only when one gives oneself over to aimless exploration. Interrogating our environments, and how we feel about them, is the core of psychogeography. It is a form of building what Julio Alves [1] has described as ‘unintentional knowledge’ - that which we find when we are not looking. There may be a broader agenda associated with finding that which is not presented, but the path to accomplishing it involves wandering without direction. When allied to games, what we have is a psychogeography of imaginary places. As we contemplate how we feel about the imaginary worlds through which we wander, we can find ways to meditate upon configurations of reality where our own worlds offer few direct parallels. In doing so, we can explore emotional and psychological connections to the mundane through relating it to the fantastical. Meditating upon the ‘endless descent into ruin’ of an ancient dragon can help us articulate our feelings regarding the ‘endless descent into ruin’ of a cultural landscape, or the industrial heavy machinery that may lie fallow in the skylines of our own lives.

Within psychogeography, many of its practitioners advocate the use of photography as a mechanism for



capturing the aesthetics [2] and contextual complexity [12] of places to which the drift has brought them. The New Games Journalism primarily focused on verbal content, but it seems within this frame that it might be profitably explored in the context not of journalism but in the frame of a travelogue. Or perhaps more clumsily – an annotated photographic essay of the imaginary places we have explored. Most game systems already offer a facility to do this – the screenshot – and in many ways, the screenshot is the ideal parallel to a photograph. In most games, we might consider the taking of a photograph to be a form of candid photography where we capture moments of the authentic through the circumspect exploration of our spatiality within imaginary worlds. In others, we might even think of these as secret photographs, where the subject is captured in a natural expression of their physical presence while explicitly

unaware of the existence of a camera at all (Figure E). However, some games also play about with this expectation, explicitly breaking the fourth wall with regards to the presence of an unacknowledged external viewer. *Death Stranding*, notably, has a main character who is aware of interest expressed towards his groin. He will first push the camera away and then punch it if the player persists on assuming a voyeuristic relationship with the protagonist (Figure D). In this, we can see the character as being explicitly aware of the player in a way that textures all screenshots taken thereafter. Immortality similarly often subverts expectation by explicitly de-shackling certain characters within certain scenes from the limits of their diegetic reality.

If the screenshot of a cutscene may be considered a postcard, and an in-engine screenshot may be thought



of as candid photography, we might also consider games which offer photo modes. This can be seen as a tool for capturing intentionally posed photographs where there is no link between character expression and their ‘authentic’ lived experience. In this, photo-mode allows the player to make their equivalent of their significant other holding up the side of the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

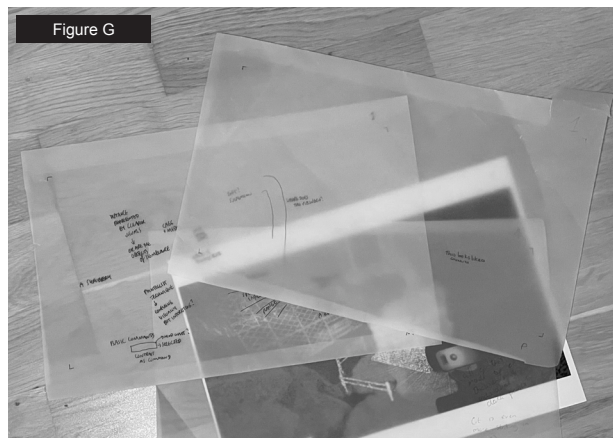
Screenshots cover a wide gamut of roles and responsibilities. Some reflect the capturing of emotional resonance, or are reflective of an external, explicit intentionality. These have value in their distinctiveness. Others may be emblematic, capturing something generic in their framing. A screenshot may be shorn of troublesome context or confusing nuance, but in that simplicity may communicate something significant about the wider context.

ANNOTATING THE TRAVELOGUE

Since Michael was at first reticent to admitting there was more to the screenshots than just mindlessly pressing a button, Mafalda felt invested in making it evident how there must be more to it than that. When Michael commented: *“Okay, I’m enthused about this now I’ve actually gone through my various screenshots. Because it also reminded me of a mindset I have that might be worth documenting – that screenshots of games are only really authentic when they are ‘in engine’ versus cutscenes. Cutscene screenshots are postcards, in-engine screenshots are photographs. One is staged and commodified, the other spontaneous and individual. So if you were a photographer in an imaginary world, you’d only really see something personal in the game, not in its designed ‘movie’ narrative.”* Mafalda knew then it was time to put together an album.

Inspired by the fact that Michael thought that Mafalda’s questions about the screenshots were interesting as they were not questions he asked himself, we decided to annotate some of them in a collective environment, further discussing the relevance of these visuals to games research. We scrolled through the already curated gallery that Michael provided us, and picked some of the more intriguing images. We decided to print them and annotate them, taking turns using tracing paper (see Figures F and G), without looking at each other’s layers. We took turns asking questions to Michael, while also discussing the relevance of our own practice and what we saw in the images. In the following pages, we present those screenshots with the annotations we produced. The use of the screenshots in this pictorial is done under the policy of fair use [10].

The joined annotations are shown in Figures H, I, and J. The experiential qualities represented in the images were annotated by more than one of us. Note how ‘looks relaxing’ and ‘time to relax’ were annotated so close to one another. Mafalda and Miriam, the researchers with a design background, were more concerned with elements caught in the image. Miriam tried to identify game-like affordances in the screen. One of the annotated

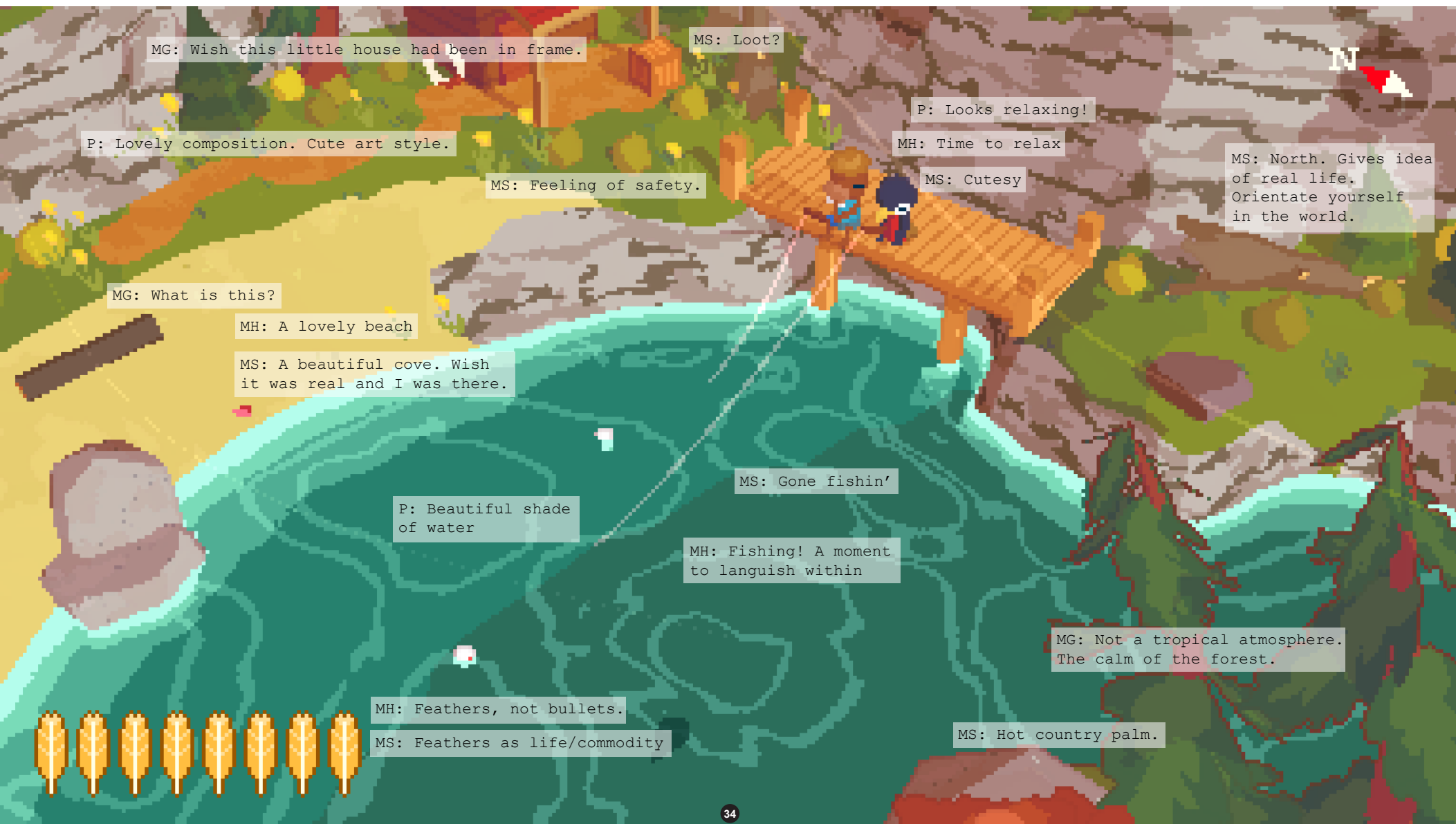


screenshots is not represented in the images below. As shown in Figure G, there was a dramatic difference in the number of annotations created by Pauline (one) and by Miriam (more than 10) on the same screenshot. The annotations on the screenshots (Figures H,I,J) do not have a specific reading order..

DISCUSSION

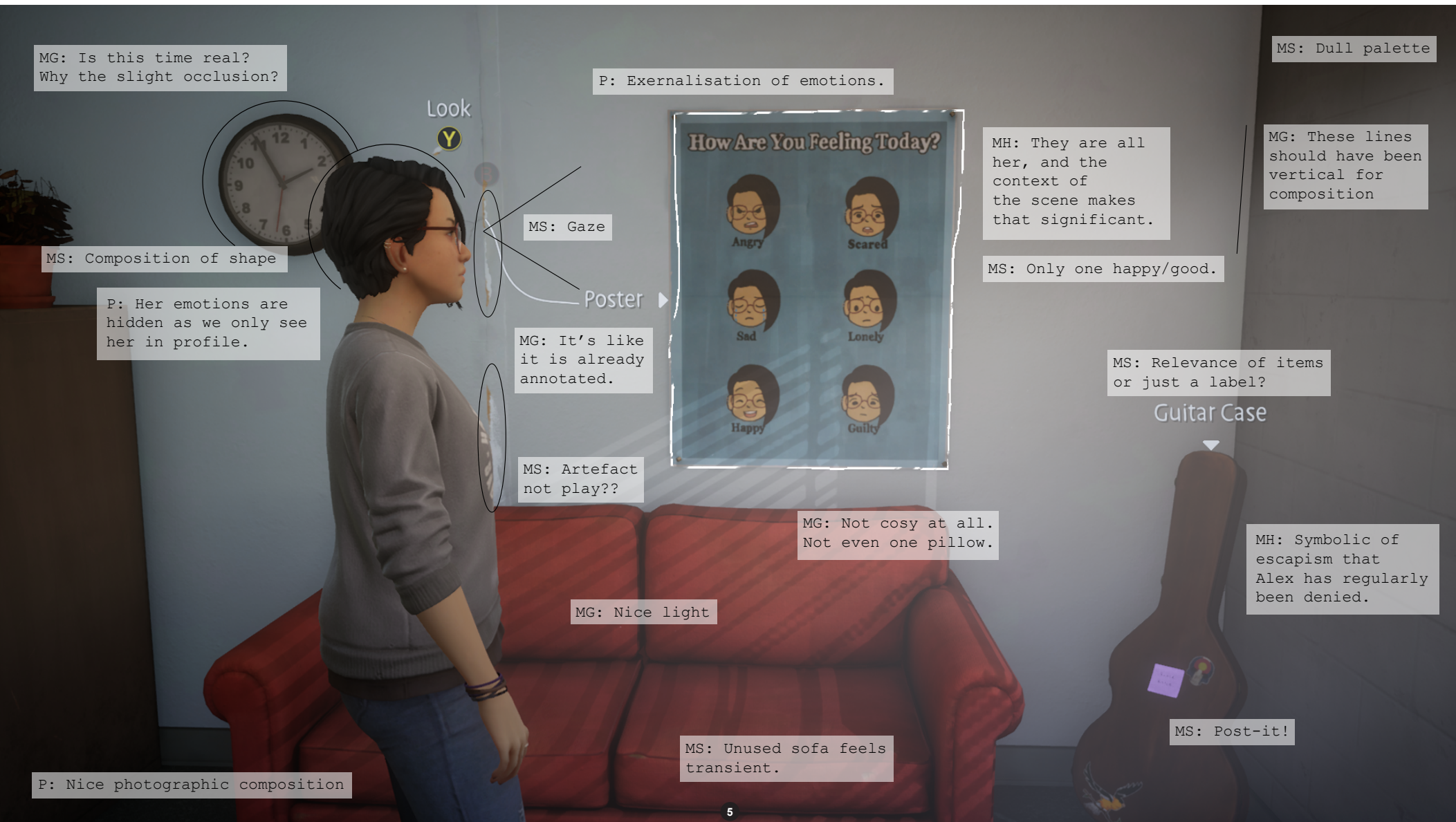
When building this pictorial, Miriam was uncertain if we could legally use the screenshots (but was swift to research the area), and even perhaps if the presented imagery was original enough to be seen as contributing work. While the hesitancy is reasonable, we found it interesting that such a question would not be posed in real-world photography. If a photographer, through their proficiency, can beautifully and significantly frame a facade; the photograph is still seen as an original piece regardless of the building it portrays. In the discussions between Michael and Mafalda, a screenshot (see Figure E) was shared exemplifying what Michael thought was *“the video game equivalent of leaving your thumb in the shot”*. As shown in the image, certain games have inbuilt photography tools, further motivating the argument that screenshots are not just mindlessly captured imagery, but rather intentional portrayals. Unlike real-world photography, because there are graphical elements from the interfaces on the screenshots, it is difficult to layer annotations ON the image without creating confusing labelling (which are annotations, and which are part of the initial screenshot).

The collection of screenshots became a place for transdisciplinary discussion. As shown in Figure G, the density of annotations varied greatly between us. Miriam, who is a researcher more experienced in annotations and visual knowledge, had the aptitude of picking out specific elements in the images, while Pauline and Michael’s comments were less contextual and more abstract. Annotating together is a fruitful activity to surface transdisciplinary knowledge, pointing to different components of the image. Part of the value of this process has been experienced directly within the



MH: A very cosy moment for a very cosy game.
It is so emblematic of the game and how it works.

Figure H: A Short Hike
(<https://ashorthike.com/>)



MH: An excellent in game 'shown not tell' of the emotional resonance of the character.

Figure I: Life is Strange: True Colors
(<https://lifeisstrange.square-enix-games.com>)



MH: Sayonara Wild Hearts is my favourite game ever, and this is the most cathartic moment. Pure self acceptance. I love it so much.

Figure J: Sayonara Wild Hearts
(<https://simogo.com/work/sayonara-wild-hearts/>)

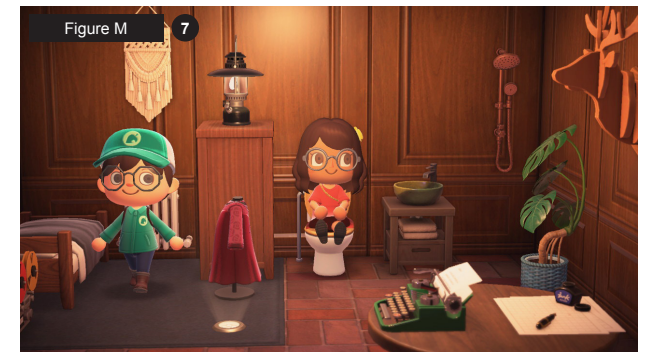


team. Michael began as a sceptic as to their value for meaning making. We outline above the transformative nature of having a screenshot capture button directly on the controller, and its presence led to an almost autonomic compulsion to hit that button whenever anything vaguely important was happening onscreen. This simple relationship between stimulus and screenshot was often so absent of intentionality that it seemed unlikely that the process captured anything of worth. Much of the initial exploratory work around this paper began as a kind of deconstruction of that resistance through active questioning. Upon being asked to provide some samples of screenshots, inquiry was directed towards the implicit and often unconscious intention encoded in their capture. Gradually this process of psychological excavation began to yield an articulation of hidden assumptions; expectations; aesthetic consideration; and instructional

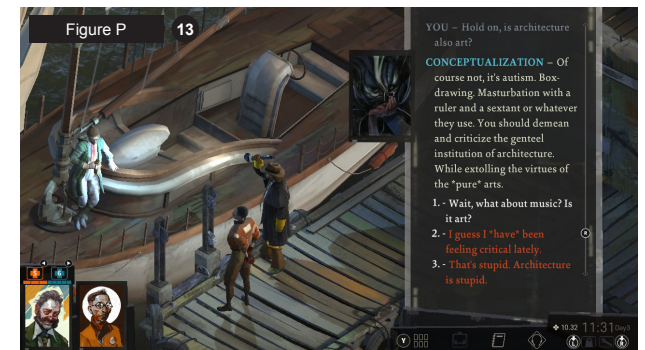
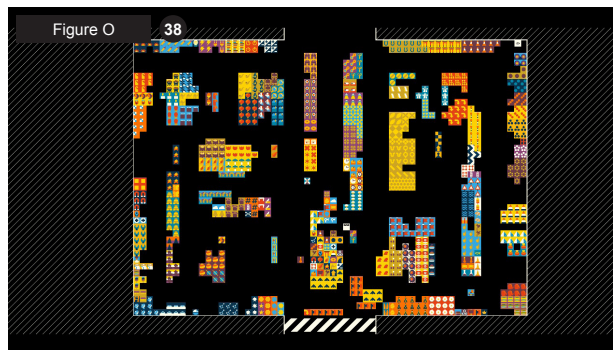
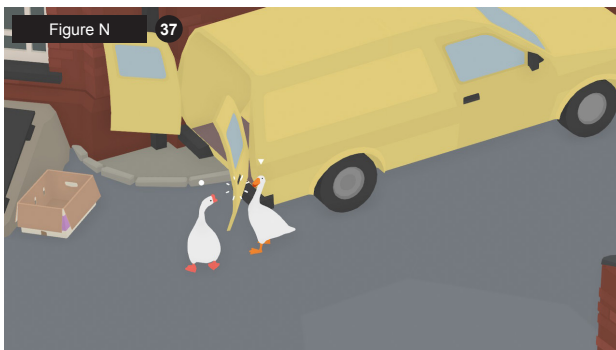


evaluation. The initial description of the screenshot capturing, as outlined by our team's sceptic, was that this was mostly a 'write only process', intended only to create a body of screenshots that could be consulted largely at random and only to provide thoughtless decoration in blog posts and lecture slides. Upon engaging with this large body of approximately 30GBs of screenshots across several hundred games, it became clear that mindful consideration of the intersection of screenshot, its creator, and its context had a value that had not been fully appreciated.

Mafalda, on the other hand (a visual thinker, architect, and designer) who was at once so certain of the intentionality of screenshots, went through a journey of realising how, even though she often played games she was terrible at documenting gamescapes. After this exercise, she went in search for screenshots in her own



Nintendo Switch, and indeed, some could be found with memories and compositional elements attached (see Figures L and M). While she had terabytes of pictures of her children, her vacations, her prototypes and artworks, she had barely collected screenshots. Now, in retrospect, when analysing the few she had, they became precious. She could immediately recognise some of the aesthetics (such as the togetherness shown in Figures L and N when playing together with friends and family) she most liked in games, as well as some of her favourite gameplay design patterns [4] (such as unpredictable behaviour as seen on Figures N and P). Her need for organisation and her preference for job-like games that include organisation or pottering (Figures K and O), mischief (Figures N and M) and introspection (Figure P) was suddenly obvious. In other words, the library of screenshots from which our



few examples are drawn represent a vast, emotionally complex, and communicable data-set of submerged or hidden meaning. These screenshots – at least in terms of a subset – represent a way of expressing emotion, meaning, theme, aesthetics and a sense of presence within imaginary landscapes. This may require active interrogation of subconscious decision making, but the process can create new meaning from these datasets. Like a photo album, the presence of these screenshots creates an opportunity for curation, which in turn permits the retroactive construction of meaning.

We see an opportunity here to encourage game designers, researchers, students, and travellers to engage further with their photographs. Through the combination of visual and textual articulations and motivations for each screenshot, we surfaced new understandings of what constitutes the lived experience of playing games. The collective practice of annotation reveals tensions and intensions, aiding in a more divergent and generative analysis of game experiences. In addition to the initiative we present in this pictorial (which became a mirror of a large collection of travels), we see the potential for the New Games Travelogue to engage more extensively with one single journey throughout one game. The temporal and spacial aspects connecting each screenshot could be weaved together into cohesive stories by the use of annotations.

CONCLUSION

Through this collective exercise in analysing and discussing screenshots as photography in gamescapes, we have surfaced the importance of this form of visual knowledge in games research. While best practice for the development of annotated gamescapes photography as place- and sense-making in the psychogeography of these imaginary spaces is in need of more research, we hope to inspire other travellers to collect and annotate their own journeys and experiences through games.



LIST OF GAMES IN FIGURES

- [1] Stray (<https://stray.game/>) BlueTwelve Studio / Annapurna Interactive
- [2] Elden Ring (<https://eldenring.bn-ent.net/>) ©BANDAI NAMCO Entertainment Inc. / ©2021 FromSoftware, Inc
- [3] ABZÛ (<https://abzugame.com/>) GIANT SQUID. © 2015 / 505 Games
- [4] 11-11: Memories Retold (<https://en.bandainamcoent.eu/11-11-memories-retold/>) Aardman Animations, Digixart ©2018 BANDAI NAMCO Entertainment Europe
- [5] Life is Strange: True Colors (<https://lifeisstrange.square-enix-games.com/>) Dontnod Entertainment. © 2015-2022 Square Enix Ltd.
- [6] Assassin's Creed Valhalla (<https://www.ubisoft.com/sv-se/game/assassins-creed/valhalla>) © 2021 Ubisoft Entertainment
- [7] Animal Crossing: New Horizons (<https://www.animal-crossing.com/new-horizons/>) © Nintendo
- [8] Broken Sword II: The Smoking Mirror (https://revolution.co.uk/games_catalog/broken-sword-2/) © Revolution 2023
- [9] Ken Follett's Pillars of the Earth (<https://ken-follett.com/adaptations/the-pillars-of-the-earth-video-game/>) © Ken Follett 2023
- [10] Last Day of June (https://store.steampowered.com/app/635320/Last_Day_of_June/) 505 GAMES
- [11] Persona 5 (<https://atlus.com/persona5/>) © ATLUS. © SEGA
- [12] Spiritfarer (<https://thunderlotusgames.com/spiritfarer/>) Thunder Lotus Games
- [13] Disco Elysium (<https://discoelysium.com/>) ZA/UM
- [14] Celeste (<https://www.celestegame.com/>) Extremely OK Games, Ltd. / Maddy Makes Games Inc.
- [15] Red Dead Redemption II (<https://www.rockstargames.com/reddeadredemption2>) Rockstar Games, Inc.
- [16] Mass Effect 3 (<https://www.ea.com/games/mass-effect/mass-effect-3>) BioWare / Electronic Arts (EA)
- [17] Assassin's Creed Origins (<https://www.ubisoft.com/en-ca/game/assassins-creed/origins>) © 2021 Ubisoft Entertainment
- [18] Control (<https://www.remedygames.com/games/control/>) © 2018 Remedy Entertainment Plc.
- [19] Cyberpunk 2077 (<https://www.cyberpunk.net/>) © 2022 CD PROJEKT S.A.
- [20] Superliminal (<http://www.pillowcastlegames.com/>) Pillow Castle
- [21] What Remains of Edith Finch (<https://edithfinch.com/>) Giant Sparrow / Annapurna Interactive
- [22] Hitman (<https://ioi.dk/hitman>) IO Interactive A/S
- [23] Eliza (<https://www.zachtronics.com/eliza/>) Zachtronics
- [24] Ori and the Blind Forest (<https://www.orithegame.com/>) ©2023 Microsoft
- [25] Magic Circle (<https://www.questiongames.com/the-magic-circle>) © Question LLC
- [26] The Unfinished Swan (<https://www.giantsparrow.com/games/swan/>) Giant Sparrow / Annapurna Interactive
- [27] Scanner Sombre (<https://introversion.co.uk/scannersombre/>) © 2017 Introversion Software Ltd.
- [28] Grim Fandango Remastered (<http://www.grimremastered.com/>) © & ™ Lucasfilm Ltd.
- [29] Iris and the Giant (<https://ludocube.fr/game/iris/>) Louis Rigaud / Goblinz Studio, Plug In Digital, Maple Whispering Limited and Mugen Creations
- [30] Timelie (<https://timelie.urniquestudio.com/>) Urnique Studio
- [31] Detroit Become Human (<https://www.quantifiedream.com/en/detroit-become-human>) ©2018 Sony Interactive Entertainment Europe Ltd. Developed by Quantic Dream SAS.
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- [34] Sayonara Wild Hearts (<https://simogo.com/work/sayonara-wild-hearts/>) Simogo / Annapurna Interactive
- [35] A Short Hike (<https://ashorthike.com/>) adam robinson-yu
- [36] Unpacking (<https://www.unpackinggame.com/>) © 2023 Witch Beam
- [37] Untitled Goose Game (<https://goose.game/>) © House House in cooperation with Panic
- [38] Wilmot's Warehouse (<https://www.wilmotswarehouse.com/>) Richard Hogg and Ricky Haggett / Finji
- [39] Heaven's Vault (<https://www.inklestudios.com/heavensvault/>) inkle Ltd.

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