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The book as framing device in exploration games

Myst (1993) and *What Remains of Edith Finch* (2017)

1 Introduction

With the advancement of computer graphics, digital games have gradually become a medium suited for telling complex stories in a visual manner, moving away from textual forms of narration which had characterised the text adventures and roleplay games of the 1980s. At its release in 1993, the exploration/puzzle game *Myst*[1] ushered in a new era in game design with its rudimentary three-dimensional effects which enabled the game to transport the player into the story world in an immersive, non-verbal manner. Nevertheless, the plot pays homage to a much older narrative medium through the presence of books – not merely as aesthetic objects but as an integral part of *Myst*'s game mechanic. In a remarkable introductory cut-scene, the game foreshadows the importance of the book as a framing device and a ubiquitous presence in the story where antique tomes are inhabited by characters and encompass a means of transportation to unknown worlds, the fate of which depends on the player's handling of said volumes.

Decades later, it is apparent that the tradition of including books in games continues: they appear in titles across numerous genres as collectibles, scrolls,

1 *Myst*. PC, Cyan, 1993.

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guides, and intermedial references among other formats. Scattered about the game space, the role of these items tends to be intertwined with the exploration element in games and they often function as Easter eggs[2] to reward the observant player. The present study analyses a storytelling technique which goes beyond presenting books as objects the player can find which are usually secondary to the gameplay itself. Rather, it seeks to cover instances where books feature in a more abstract, often metanarrative/metamedial manner providing narrative frames, making them a significant part of the plot while retaining their connection to exploration and traversal and at once assigning them a crucial role in the game's aesthetic. For this purpose, *Myst* will be revisited with an emphasis on its representation of books, followed by an analysis of a more recent exploration-based game employing a similar gameplay principle, *What Remains of Edith Finch* (2017),[3] an example of the renaissance of story-exploration games which defined game design in the 2010s. A telling resemblance between the two titles is the way in which they make the writing process, the genesis of the books their story revolves around (in the case of *Myst*, the book as a container for and link between worlds; in *What Remains*, a chronicle of the protagonist's family history) a metaphor of player interaction. In such cases, books frame the experience and recontextualise the game's events, contributing to its experiential aesthetic. Thus, the approach of this project unites aesthetic and narratological considerations while drawing on recent theories of book presence.

2 Integrating exploration and storytelling in games: an overview

In his seminal essay on video game aesthetics, *Navigable Space* (1998),[4] media scholar Lev Manovich points out a crucial connection between the unfolding of game narratives and the mechanic of traversing virtual spaces. Based on this observation, he locates the singular nature of games as a storytelling me-

2 Parodic references to elements within the same game or to other works of art (e.g., other games, films, literary works, paintings, etc.).

3 *What Remains of Edith Finch*. PC, Annapurna Interactive, 2017.

4 Lev Manovich: »Navigable Space«. *manovich.net*, there dated 1998, http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/navigable-space, perm. accessed March 12, 2022.

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dium in their unique ability to represent stories in a primarily spatial manner. Simultaneously, the author identifies the adventure/puzzle game *Myst* (alongside shooter game *Doom*) as an archetype of games following the »hyperrealistic turn«[5] which focus on exploration and interaction with the game environment foregrounding audiovisual representation.[6] In this sense, Manovich focuses on games' ability to employ novel modes of storytelling while devoting less attention to the more apparent ways *Myst* comments on its own narrative nature: the presence and symbolic role of books throughout the game. Not only do we encounter books in cinematics in and as objects within the game world, but, as will be demonstrated, the book as a magical object governs the gameplay and even plays a symbolic role in the plot.

Thus, Manovich' essay paves the way for the definition and analysis of the cluster of genres the present study refers to as ›exploration games‹. For the purposes of this analysis, the term is used in a broad sense and can be applied to computer games which may fall into a different primary generic category provided that exploration plays an integral part in their gameplay as a secondary categorising principle. In this manner, these games include the aforementioned text adventures, side-scrollers, roleplay games such as the franchises *Elder Scrolls*[7] or even *Grand Theft Auto*,[8] and the more recent genre ›walking simulators‹[9]. In all of these cases, an immersive world is not presented as a mere backdrop against which the primary objectives take place (unlike in, for example, games revolving around sports, martial arts, armed combat, or car-racing) – its traversal is also inevitable for completing said objectives, especially for challenges where the focus is on navigation or investigative work. Correspondingly, Wolf summarises these criteria in the following manner, using *Myst* as a prime example: »Games which are set in a ›world‹ are usually made up of multiple connected rooms, locations, or screens, involving an objective which is more complex than simply catching, shooting, cap-

5 Gundolf S. Freyemuth: *Games, Game Design, Game Studies. An Introduction*. Bielefeld: transcript, 2015, p. 81.

6 Ibid.

7 The *Elder Scrolls* series. PC, Bethesda Softworks, 1994–2020.

8 The *Grand Theft Auto* series. PC, Rockstar, 1997–2021.

9 The term is commonly used to refer to games where the player's traversal of the game space, often combined with a narrative or investigative component, constitutes the main objective of the game. *Dear Esther* (PC, Chinese Room, 2012) is often dubbed the prototype of the walking simulator genre.

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turing, or escaping, although completion of the objective may involve several or all of these«.[10]

The second game discussed in this paper, *What Remains* was born out of the recent revival of exploration games that focus on story reconstruction, which was started by independent developers in the 2010s in search of a less action-based game experience which focuses on the players' interpretive freedom. A notable predecessor to the 2017 game is *Gone Home* (2013),[11] an archetype for games set in a family home where we are invited to explore the notes, personal belongings, and voice messages to learn more about the story of the house's inhabitants. While spoof books are staple elements of such digital adventures, just like *Myst*, *What Remains* goes one step further in its representation of the book as an artefact by making it the underlying principle of the gameplay and a cornerstone of its narrative structure. Aside from the evolution of graphics and game engines, *What Remains*' innovation as compared to *Myst* lies in the way it showcases creative methods of using textuality and referencing analogue media.

3 The role of books in computer games: from collectibles to organising principle

As has been noted, books have fulfilled a range of purposes in computer game history, from serving as props through alluding to other works to adding to the mystery of the plot with their »tantalizing unreadability«.[12] Collectible books might serve as Easter eggs based on existing literary sources, such as the book titles we find in *The Sims 4*,[13] parodying real novels, or the readings we come across in *Overwatch*[14] which, as the observant player will notice, are often works that contain parallels to the game's story.[15] Boyd postulates that

10 Mark J. P. Wolf: *Myst and Riven. The World of the D'ni*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: U of Michigan P, 2011, p. 7.
11 *Gone Home*. PC, Fullbright, 2013.
12 Jason Boyd: »Tantalizingly Unreadable. Books in Gone Home, Tacoma, and Firewatch«. Conference paper, *›Books on Screen‹ Symposium*, online, 3.11.2021.
13 *The Sims 4*. PC, Electronic Arts, 2014.
14 Boyd: »Tantalizingly Unreadable«.
15 Ibid.

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there is a spectrum these objects in computer games can be located on based on the degree to which they resemble a print book in their functionality by featuring written information and/or being browsable,[16] spanning from decorative items which are entirely unreadable to scrolls characteristic of the role-play genre (i.e., documents at our perusal which relay relevant information about the game's rules, mechanics or backstory[17]). The present paper proposes, building on this classification, that there is an additional, less frequent, yet, within the games in question, much more omnipresent way in which books might be represented, where they constitute the framework a game is built upon. This category encompasses fictional books pertaining to the developers' vision which structure and guide the gameplay but are only represented schematically, as seen in the selected examples.

The computer games analysed here fulfil this last condition in the sense that books do not remain on the level of spoof objects, decorations to behold, or even scrolls containing background information, but instead take on the abstract yet prominent role of the driving force behind the game's plot, often besides appearing in other, more conventionally imitative settings simultaneously. Moreover, book presence can also have a metamedial function as a reference to the creators' task of designing new worlds (i.e., the creative process itself) and at once become a metaphor for the game narrative which is directly affected by player interaction, assigning to players the role of co-writers. Nevertheless, ›bookish‹ artefacts in both games contribute to the aesthetic of the game, which itself has a strong experiential component and is inseparable from the gameplay.

A notable way in which these two games achieve this inclusion of books in the action is by positioning them as instruments of narrative framing.[18] They establish the game world as directly determined by and, in a sense, taking

16 Ibid.

17 For instance, scrolls play an immense role in the *Elder Scrolls* games. This is illustrated effectively by *The Imperial Library*, a fan-made online collection containing all text documents within the games which has amassed over 5000 A4 pages since its founding in 1998. Cf. *The Imperial Library*, online at https://www.imperial-library.info, perm. retrieved on 4.2.2021.

18 In their 2019 study on *What Remains*, Bozdog and Galloway also discuss narrative framing techniques in the game, however, the text focuses mainly on the story-within-a-story aspect and does not deal with the role of books in detail. Cf. Mona Bozdog and Dayna Galloway: »Worlds at Our Fingertips. Reading (in) *What Remains of Edith Finch*«. *Games and Culture* 15.7 (2020), pp. 789–808, here pp. 796–797.

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place within a book: in the case of *Myst*, our goal is to finish ›writing‹ ›the book of *Myst*‹ which contains an alternative world, while in *What Remains* we complete the main character's notebook[19] detailing her family history. Opening each of these volumes transports the player into the game space at the beginning and they also return in the games' »terminal framing«[20] sequence, contributing to the resolution and reiterating their significance as a plot device.

This crucial link between virtual objects resembling books to varying degrees and the player's experience can only be fully understood in the light of recent theories of book materiality in the digital age. The two key notions used in this study are Brillenburg Wurth, Pressman and Driscoll's account of digital book presence,[21] complemented by Pressman's observation of a heightened interest in »bookishness«[22] in current popular culture – a notion she introduces in her eponymous book from 2020. The author uses »bookishness« as an umbrella term for practices »that engage the physicality of the book within digital culture« in modes which are not necessarily connected to the act of reading, but rather our experience of the »nearness« of books.[23] In her view, said practices are manifested in digital media as »a form of indexical reference and spectral haunting« and often involve the reappropriation of books as artefacts for purposes other than their designated use.[24] Therefore, this notion is not only applicable to our case studies but incorporates the ever-present references to books in a range of software we use, such as the sound of flipping through pages in some e-book readers or the helpful, ›talking‹ paperclip we might remember from older versions of a widely used office application.[25] Pressman claims that much of new media are constituted by instances of »remediation« of analogue artefacts[26] including books and stationery. In her vein, it will be argued that some computer games can be viewed as »decidedly

19 Autobiographical writing is a staple element of exploration games, see also: *Gone Home*. PC, Fullbright, 2013; and *All the Delicate Duplicates*. PC, Mez Breeze, 2017 inter alia.
20 Monica Fludernik: *An Introduction to Narratology*. London and New York: Routledge, 2019, p. 28.
21 Cf. Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, Jessica Pressman, and Kári Driscoll: *Book Presence in a Digital Age*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2018.
22 Cf. Jessica Pressman: *Bookishness. Loving Books in a Digital Age*. New York: Columbia UP, 2020.
23 Pressman: *Bookishness*, pp. 1; 10.
24 Ibid., p. 13.
25 Ibid., pp. 85; 88.
26 Ibid., p. 88.

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bookish object[s]« which use books as »formal devices and a central trope«[27] alike, extending the reach of the book as a medium from the screen to the page and even VR goggles. In *Book Presence in a Digital Age*, the three authors reiterate Pressman's thesis by emphasising that our definition of materiality needs to be reconsidered by referring to book presence in electronic forms of expression as an act of »actualisation«,[28] reinforcing the idea that said presence »is not limited to any idea of a physical ›in itself‹ of the book«.[29]As will be demonstrated, in the aesthetics of »archival adventures«,[30] the presence of books is often juxtaposed with the absence of characters other than the player's avatar, looming over their solitude as an ethereal entity and subtly exercising its influence on their choices.

4 Meta-narrative worldbuilding in *Myst*: »these are not just books«[31]

The release of *Myst* heralded the advent of a rudimentary form of three-dimensional graphics for computer games. Developers used the new possibilities lying in this technology to design a novel storytelling method which no longer relies on extensive textual description and, instead, directs the player's focus to the spatial/exploratory aspects of the game. *Myst*'s introductory cinematic immediately underlines the importance of books for the game's lore and plot alike in an in-medias-res manner: we first see a mysterious figure falling into a dark fissure along with a leatherbound book, with eerie mu-

27 Ibid., p. 105.

28 Brillenburg Wurth et al.: *Book Presence in a Digital Age*, p. 11.

29 Ibid.

30 Coined by Kagen, the term overlaps with the previously introduced notion of exploration games – this intersection provides a useful label for the two games examined here. Her definition of the genre is as follows: »games composed of ludic repositories of material, carefully arranged, which the player turns into a narrative adventure by the way in which they choose to navigate the given space«. Cf. Melissa Kagen: »Archival Adventuring«. *Convergence. The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*. 26.4 (2020), pp. 1007–1020, here pp. 1008; 1011.

31 Rand Miller, Robin Miller and David Wingrove: *The Myst Reader*. E-Book. Hyperion, 2004, p. 64, online at: *King Author*. https://kingauthor.net/books/Rand%20and%20Robyn%20Miller/The%20Myst%20Reader/The%20Myst%20Reader%20-%20Rand%20and%20Robyn%20Miller.pdf, perm. accessed 1.3.2022.

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sic playing in the background. As the man fades into nothingness, the tome lands in front of the player and the voiceover, telling the story from the perspective of the character we had just encountered, explains the book's significance by expressing concern as to whether it lands in the wrong hands, which he claims might have grave consequences. The sequence ends with the ominous remark that »(…) perhaps, the ending has not yet been written«,[32] which has two-fold significance for the purposes of this analysis: firstly, it highlights the central role of the book and its plot to the game narrative, and, secondly, it foreshadows the player's active participation in completing what is soon revealed to be ›the book of *Myst*‹ itself. In an instant, it becomes clear that the volume *encompasses*, in a literal sense, the island which serves as the starting point of the adventure. The player who assumes a third-person perspective throughout the game is then not automatically transported to the island, but is required to interact with the book for its contents to be uncovered. The book frames the action both directly, its recovery by the player being the onset of the events that unfold, and in an aesthetic sense, as it is on the book's pages that the dynamic world of the island comes to life before our eyes. This experience is described in detail in one of the novels inspired by the game, *The Book of Atrus*:

> Atrus stepped closer, looking down at the open pages. The left-hand page was blank, but on the right… He gasped, amazed by the clarity of the picture in that small, rectangular box. Why, it was like staring through a window! […] Then, with a sudden, sickening lurch, he felt himself sucked into the page. Or rather, it was as if the page grew suddenly huge, enveloping him in the weave of its fibers. […] And as he finally surrendered to that blackness, so he found himself back in his body, standing on the grass just in front of the mound, a fresh breeze blowing into his face […].[33]

Paradoxically, we quickly find that in the game world *only* books encompass moving pictures:[34] the scenery itself is represented with the help of still,

32 *Myst*, »Opening credits«.

33 Miller et al.: *The Myst Reader*, pp. 49–50.

34 This feature is referenced by one of the most unique artefacts the *Myst*-universe has inspired: a »real-life *Myst* book«, i.e., an electronic multimedia installation made by repurposing an antique book and adorning it with a screen. This reflexive reappropriation of books as presented in the game created by Mike Ando strips its object of all practical functionality, thereby commenting on the nature of book materiality. Cf. »How One Myst

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3D-rendered images and is presented to us on a frame-by-frame basis, which lends yet another layer of »bookishness«[35] to *Myst*'s visuals, making the impression of a picture book where each click turns a page, allowing the player to take a step in the desired direction. Using the notes and hidden video messages and solving the puzzles scattered about the island, it is our turn to set out to reconstruct the events that had led up to the moment when the mysterious book landed in front of us. In the process, we also discover the lore of the game's universe and the relevance of books to the developments resulting in its now-abandoned state.

Following said clues, we come across a library and find that three of the world's inhabitants are trapped within three separate volumes on the shelves, begging to be set free. We find ourselves in the middle of a family feud between two brothers, Sirrus and Achenar, and their father, Atrus (who also features in the opening scene), each claiming to be the only one deserving of freedom. At this point, the game mechanic is explained: the player is required to find lost pages of either of these three books and choose a character to be set free. As we search the island looking for the pages, we learn just how powerful books are within the game space. The three men are revealed to be the last descendants of a supernatural race called the D'ni, who possess the ability to write magic books which may contain – and serve as portals to – countless alternative worlds, *Myst* being only one of their many creations. This not only alludes to the creative potential of language by thematising the D'ni's mastery of the secret art of constructing worlds using words, but also poses a metamedial comment on the nature of worldbuilding – the process of creating computer games (and narratives at large) with their own immersive universes by means of coding. As mentioned, *Myst*, along with its sequels, has inspired a series of fantasy novels,[36] in the first volume of which the *modi operandi* of such worlds (referred to as »ages« within the universe) and their auxiliary »linking books« are described as follows by Atrus:

> Writing – D'ni Writing – is not merely an Art, it is a science. The science of precise description. […] Once the Age is complete, one must always

Fan Made Himself a Real-Life Myst Book«. On: Wired, there dated 24.11.2012, https://www.wired.com/2012/11/a-real-myst-linking-book/, perm. accessed 13.3.2022.

35 Cf. Pressman: *Bookishness*.

36 Along with a number of printed guidebooks, expanding the game's influence to analogue media.

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> – always – make a Linking Book. […] Each Linking Book refers to one of the larger descriptive books – to one specific book. *You might say that it contains the essence of the larger book – certain phrases and words that fuses it to that book and no other*. But that is not all. For a Linking Book to work, it must also include an accurate description of the place one wishes to link to on that particular Age, which is recorded by writing a special D'ni symbol, a Garo hertee. Yes, and *a Linking Book must be written in the Age and location it is meant to link to*. And so a Linking Book is, in a sense, a working substitute for a descriptive book.[37]

From this description it becomes clear that the characters must have been trapped in their respective ages due to the lack of a linking book at their disposal (this piece of information is communicated using cut-scenes in the game). Moreover, this passage sheds light on the importance of the uniqueness and descriptive nature of each of these texts, even if their exact contents are never disclosed to the player. Therefore, ages and linking books possess an aura of indispensability in *Myst*'s story, where the game space is defined by an ominous sense of book presence.

Fig. 1: A ›living book‹ in Myst.[38]

37 Miller et al.: *The Myst Reader,* p. 67 [my emphasis].
38 Screenshot from *Myst*. Perm. retrieved on 2.2.2022.

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Depending on which book we choose to complete and which character we deem worthy of helping, the game has three possible outcomes. It transpires that it had been the brothers who first turned against their father in envy of his ability to create worlds and the ages in his possession. The two siblings try to manipulate the stranger (i.e., the played character) into freeing them while simultaneously setting a trap for the player. If we choose to help either Sirrus or Achenar, we end up exchanging places with them and remaining trapped in one of the books indefinitely. In contrast, by paying close attention to the clues at hand, the player is directed to the ending designated as preferred by the authors. This conclusion is triggered if the player chooses to help Atrus, the father who fell victim to the scheming of his children who destroyed his library and trapped him in one of the ages with no linking book to leave before getting trapped themselves. In each of these cases, however, it is ultimately the completion of the book we first found, ›the book of *Myst*‹, that concludes the plot and ends the game, supplying the closing frame of the story. Thus, it can be said that our objective is to complete a book embedded in another book which is the organic part of a larger whole: encapsulated in the island's story are the three ages represented by the three tomes, along with the lives of the characters we encounter, and we are invited to pick up the thread where the writing process had come to a halt.

5 *What Remains of Edith Finch*: »the stories are the problem«[39]

Over two decades later, independent game designers at *Annapurna Interactive* revisited *Myst*'s formula and developed a game which revolves around a diary, which, as the player will learn, answers the game's titular question. The similarity to *Myst*'s plot (where completing and passing down books is also of key importance), or at least the intersection between the audience of the two games is also recognised by *Steam*'s algorithm: players interested in one of them receive a recommendation for the other by the game distribution service, which highlights the overlap between the two titles which both fall into the previously outlined category of exploration games.

39 *What Remains*, chapter »Finch Cemetery«.

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What Remains of Edith Finch chronicles the story of a family presumed to be affected by a mysterious curse which had caused the tragic and premature deaths of several young family members. The player assumes the perspective of Edith, a young woman who returns to her childhood home on Washington's Orcas Island to solve the mystery behind the family tragedy. Throughout her tour, she records the stories of her relatives in her diary which becomes the framing device of the narrative as the written pages come to life. The notebook opens and players are immediately cast into the setting, relying on Edith's focalisation as she passes through the rooms. Instead of disappearing and giving way to a filmic perspective, however, the text of the diary is transformed into a spatial presence – text fragments are projected into the player's field of vision, superimposed on surfaces around the house, only to disappear shortly afterwards. Bozdog and Galloway comment on the immense influence this technique has on the player by describing their experience of encountering text »around [them], in the woods, around the house, in keyholes and fireplaces, in the letters, books, and diaries that [they] find, always guiding [them] forward, always letting [them] in«.[40] In doing so, the game makes an explicit demand for our attention as readers and players alike. We learn that Edith's great-grandmother Edie (who had outlived most of her descendants) had turned each bedroom into a shrine as a tribute to its late resident. Remembrance in the game is thematised through the use of objects (including various types of books) representing characters and providing information about them.[41] *What Remains*' developers have included a range of media such as letters, poems, a flipbook, a computer game, and a comic book among these items which are referred to as sources of »richly interpretable information«[42] in game studies. Each of these formats corresponds to the respective character's personality and alludes to their interests, for example, hand-drawn sketches retell a gifted painter's story while the suicide of an avid programmer is commemorated by a short computer game illustrating his hallucinations leading up to the event. Although such interactive items are not

40 Bozdog and Galloway: »Worlds at our Fingertips«, p. 796.

41 Kagen refers to these as »objects [charged] with potential narrative«, also quoting Jenkins' definition describing the sum of such items as a »narratively-impregnated mise-en-scene«. In: Kagen: »Archival Adventuring«, pp. 1008–1009.

42 Biederman and Vessel qtd. in: Rosa Carbo-Mascarell: »Walking Simulators. The Digitalisation of an Aesthetic Practice«. *Proceedings of the 1st International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG*. Dundee, 2016, pp. 1–15, here p. 5.

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uncommon in walking simulators such as *Gone Home*,[43] in *What Remains* they are used in a unique way: upon finding a key clue, a minigame begins, allowing the player to temporarily assume the perspective of a different character.

In one of these minigames, *Dreadful Stories*, a horror/pulp comic book introduces a semi-fictional retelling of great-aunt Barbara's demise. The outlandish choice of style is a nod to Barbara's achievements as a teenage horror film actress who rose to fame in the 1960s. The plot of the comic contains information crucial to the explorer's progress: without reading it, it is impossible to proceed to the next room. The anecdote reveals that the key required is part of the music box Barbara's ear is said to have been found in during the aftermath of her disappearance. Therefore, the importance of reading and books as the ›key‹ to the gameplay is reasserted once again. Books in the game do not merely provide contextual information but are repeatedly depicted as symbolic parts of the opening mechanism of doors, furthermore, as Kagen notes, when the player hovers over objects with the cursor, important clues are indicated using a book-shaped icon.[44]

Fig. 2: A door handle hidden in a locked book in What Remains of Edith Finch.[45]

43 See also Fullbright; *All the Delicate Duplicates*; or the *Nephise*-series. *Nephise*-series. PC, Tonguç Bodur; 2018–2020.

44 Cf. Kagen: »Archival adventuring«, p. 1013.

45 Screenshot from *What Remains*, chapter »Molly«. Perm. retrieved on 10.04.2021.

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Another sequence presented in the form of a flipbook titled *The Magic Paintbrush* commemorates Edith's artistic older brother, Milton, who disappeared at the age of eleven after wandering off to the nearby forest. Flipping through the pages results in the illusion of viewing another embedded flipbook which appears as part of the drawings but is then expanded to fit the size of the book at the player's perusal. The sketches depict the young Milton as he paints a door on the wall, breaks the fourth wall and bows to the player, then disappears using the imaginary door. Upon completing each of these objectives, the player is presented with an animation of the character in question which is added to the sketch of the family tree contained in the notebook. This denotes the manner in which the playable character (i.e., Edith) actively records the family's story chapter by chapter as she discovers the memorials one by one.

Edith's tour of the residence leads her to conclude that »the stories themselves might be the problem«[46] – the curse is regarded first and foremost as a narrative called to life by the family's belief in its power, one of the central themes of the game being the impact stories have on our lives. In the recollections of the family members, there appears to be a blurred line between reality and fiction, shedding light on a miscommunication of real events. A final flashback to Edith's childhood reveals that while her great-grandmother Edie was intent to share her knowledge of the family's history, her mother chose to prevent this in fear of the curse. In a symbolic scene, a fight over Edie's diary erupts and the memoirs containing her recollections are torn in two. The words are shown to fade from the pages, leaving the text as a fragment, and information is withheld from the player to leave room for their own conclusions. In what follows, we witness as Edith's ties to the house and Edie, the only person familiar with the events in their complexity, break abruptly when her mother flees the house with the young girl in tow.

Nevertheless, the notes the player completes during the traversal record this event and the stories of all the individual family members,[47] and it is implied that the young protagonist dedicates her own recollections to her unborn child before the family curse claims her life, causing her to succumb to her early demise while giving birth to the sole descendant of the Finch lineage. It re-

46 Ibid., chapter »Finch Cemetery«.

47 Arguably, the fact that the (full) first name of the protagonist and that of the great-grandmother are identical is itself an allusion to the the former preserving the recollections of the latter and ›archiving‹ them as part of her own memories, which implies a degree of fluidity between their consciousness.

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mains up to our interpretation, therefore, whether the stories are passed down to the next generation successfully or fade into obscurity. In light of this, the structure of the game may be described as diary-within-a-diary, whereby the game accomplishes what Fludernik calls »multiple framing«.[48] By eternalising the stories in the notebook, the player also reconstructs the contents of Edie's lost writings by rummaging through a series of embedded books and other mementos in the process. In *What Remains*, characters are represented by objects including various book formats – their absence is mitigated by the (omni)presence of books, providing the ontological basis for the gameplay.

6 Conclusions

The two games discussed here, released at very different moments in the history of computer games following the appearance of photorealistic graphics, are connected in the way they guide the player's experience of book presence: they appropriate the book as a medium and present it as more than an artefact by including multiple layers of books-within-books. This feature is apparent not only in terms of visual/spatial representation but also affects the plot structure of the games. Throughout their traversal of the game space, players are invited to actively contribute to books being (un)written while most of the contents remain shrouded in mystery. In this sense, books provide the narrative frame and mark the beginning and the end of the player's ambulations within the virtual world while simultaneously contributing to the gameplay as elements of mini-games and puzzles, driving the action forward. Books are presented as the only means of entering a lost world which entails, in the case of *Myst,* bridging distances in space, whereas in *What Remains* it requires a leap back in time using narratives of the past. On an aesthetic level, the player's perception of books is shaped by the transmedial commentary defining the subtext of their encounters with various instances of books within the game – a deeply meaningful allusion to the creative process behind the inception of narratives, be they written or retold in an audiovisual manner. From a perceptual perspective, it can be concluded that books encompass a peculiar type of presence across the two examples. At once ephemeral and mate-

48 Cf. Fludernik: *An Introduction*, p. 29.

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rial, they fulfil formal, symbolic, and structural purposes alike. The world in narrative exploration games often being uninhabited, books might also substitute for characters, reinforcing the air of elusiveness surrounding them. It is therefore in a multitude of ways that the book as a medium continually shines through the multimodal storytelling of these games, designating them as profoundly »bookish«[49] objects.

49 Pressman: *Bookishness*.

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