Mindspaces

The Mind as a Visual and Ludic Artifact

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Introduction

It is no secret that media like film and video games can tell stories and express feelings and thoughts through methods other than text and dialogue. It is hard to overstate the importance of space in non-verbal storytelling. Film and video games construct complex sets and create (digital) landscapes and architecture that often only offer glimpses into their narrative universes. This analysis focuses on spaces that express the cognitive process of a character. These spaces tap into feelings, dreams, fears, and memories, and, as such, they are typically surreal, confusing, and even fantastical. I will call these spaces *mindspaces* or *mindscapes*. Different rules apply in such spaces, with both film and video games using their own techniques and strategies to create them. However, as I argue here, mindspaces and mindscapes are used to express a character's mental health, often linked to trauma. This essay will therefore take a closer look at these spaces in recent popular culture to provide an overview of their use and portrayal of mental health. To examine these spaces' particularities in the video game medium, the latter half of this essay will focus on the case of the 2016 Japanese role-playing game PERSONA 5.[1]

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1   PERSONA 5 (P-Studio, 2016: Atlus).

INVESTIGATING MINDSCAPES

Mindspaces and mindscapes, as their name suggests, give internal states–feelings and memories–a shape in landscape form. They investigate places within the human mind that are otherwise not visible. In media, mindscapes are an attempt to visualize the complexity of the human condition, often drawing on the unimaginable, the unthinkable, or the surreal to express the vastness of the human mind. As I argue here, they manifest in spaces—mindspaces—through media-specific strategies and are narrative tools to relate to trauma.

When considering existing literature of mindscapes or mindspaces, it is difficult to make out a distinction between either term because the terminology has gone through various definitions and applications. In the humanities, literature studies use the term mindscapes, albeit in a different context than the one introduced here. In their anthology MINDSCAPES. THE GEOGRAPHIES OF IMAGINED WORLDS, George E. Slusser and Eric S. Rabkin analyze science fiction literature.[2] The authors mention imaginary landscapes created by mapping cognitive processes, as if there was an innate "need to link inner and outer reality, mind and matter, by means of a mindscape [...]."[3] Slusser and Rabkin regard fantasy and science fiction as artistic forms that engage in thought experiments, with "the mind using its speculative power in hopes of reaching beyond itself [...]."[4] In another example of mindscapes in literary studies, Bernhard Lindemann also uses the concept to refer to a reader's cognitive processes when engaging with complex literary works such as Robert Coover's THE BABYSITTER.[5] Told in more than 100 short paragraphs, the story employs numerous narrators and focal points, delivering various narrative frames in which readers themselves might not clearly understand whether the told events are merely fictitious or not. To navigate the complex storytelling, Lindemann describes the reader having to enter

"[…] particular mental landscapes, particular cognitive tableaux, i.e. particular mindscapes. A mindscape is a cognitive landscape which readers enter from a particular angle, which

2   Slusser, George/Rabkin, Eric: "Introduction: The Concept of Mindscape", In: Slusser, George/Rabkin, Eric (eds.), *Mindscapes. The Geographies of Imagined Worlds*, Southern Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press 1989, p. ix-xiii.

3   Ibid., here p. x.

4   Ibid.

5   Coover, Robert.: "The Babysitter", In: Robert Coover (ed.), *Pricksongs and Descants,* New York: Grove Paperback 1969/2000.

they live in for some time by rambling through its conceptual make-up, a cognitive scene which they eventually become accustomed to by repeated and prolonged returns."[6]

Whilst Slusser and Rabkin refer to mindscapes as an artistic expression of the mind, Lindemann understands them as referential frameworks for readers to comprehend information. Research on mindspaces and mindscapes is scarce in the humanities and the few texts that do exist on this subject vary greatly in their use of the terms. Before moving onto popular culture to see how mindspaces and mindscapes are used, it is first necessary to further clarify the terminology.

Although Slusser and Rabkin's use of mindscape differs greatly from Lindemann's application of the same term, they refer to a mindscape as a landscape. For geographer Jay Appleton, landscapes are "a kind of backcloth to the whole stage of human activity,"[7] a description as vague as the use of the term 'mindscapes.' Yet, as the title of Appleton's monograph THE EXPERIENCE OF LANDSCAPE suggests, a landscape is not merely the objective arrangement of the environment through hills, mountains, flora, and fauna but also humans' relationship to it. In this vein, Appleton explores styles of landscape in art and literature, landscape design natural and man-made, or symbolic interpretation and aesthetic appropriation of landscape. In this approach, the backcloth of human activity encompasses an entire discourse on and with landscape. In a similar fashion, one might subsume mindscapes to a similar scope: the backcloth of the human mind. The greatest difference between this and a landscape, however, is that a mindscape is not necessarily a feasible place. When Appleton attempts to explore why humans derive pleasure from seeking landscapes, an "aesthetic sensitivity to landscape [...] from inborn behaviour mechanism,"[8] it is questionable whether the same can be said about mindscapes. Slusser and Rabkin use other words to describe a mindscape, such as the relation of mental and nonmental worlds or speculative worlds.[9] Lindemann, on the other hand, speaks of cognitive landscapes, in which information can be stored and understood, it is less about an aesthetic experience as one might have with a landscape. As I argue here, mindspaces necessarily relate to emotions, memories, and trauma—aspects not required for mindscapes in Lindemann or

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6 Lindemann, Bernhard.: "Readers and Mindscapes", In: *Journal of Literary Semantics* 22 (1993), pp. 186-206, here p. 193.

7 Appleton 1975, 2.

8 Appleton 1975, 169.

9 Slusser, George/Rabkin, Eric: "Introduction: The Concept of Mindscape", In: Slusser, George/Rabkin, Eric (eds.), *Mindscapes. The Geographies of Imagined Worlds*, Southern Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press 1989, p. ix-xiii, here p. xi.

Slusser and Rabkin's use of the term. Mindscapes remain a vague concept, a subjective experience occurring either within oneself or created by someone else. The experience of mindscape, then, may be a venue to further explore the mind in science, literature, and art.

UNDERSTANDING THE (MIND)SPACE

Mind*spaces*, then, are the spatial manifestations of a mind*scape*. Here, mindspaces are a visual experience, one that is linked to mental and emotional trauma. I argue that characters use mindspaces to bury and rediscover trauma again to overcome it. These mindspaces are part of mindscapes, in a sense that they are necessary to communicate in media that the viewer is, in fact, experiencing one and not merely looking at a regular landscape. How exactly this happens, and which media-specific strategies exist to make this possible will be the focus of this chapter.

For this approach, Benjamin Beil's media-focused essay on mindscapes, for which he also uses the German term *Erinnerungsräume* (literally *memory spaces*), views them as a place where two narrative layers of memories and reality merge.[10] Beil uses both the English term mindscapes and the German term *Erinnerungsräume* somewhat interchangeably, despite the German translating into memory spaces. However, Beil's choice to translate *Erinnerungräume* as mindspaces helps to understand the strategy behind creating mindspaces in media. The fusion of the layers of narrative and reality is made possible through editing techniques that establish the mindspace through montage conventions, merging the topographies of reality and memories.[11] In an analysis of Charlie Kaufmann's screenplays, such as ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND, Chris Dzialo describes the film's narrative style of memory sequences as "spatializing multiple simultaneous timeframes."[12, 13] A recent example is the television series SHERLOCK.[14] SHERLOCK is not only about memories or dreams but also the detective's genius ability to recall

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10 Cf. Beil, Benjamin: "Mindscapes. Erinnerungsräume im zeitgenössischen Film", in *Rabbit Eye. Zeitschrift für Filmforschung* 2 (2010), pp. 4-18, here p. 2.

11 Cf. ibid.

12 Dzialo, Chris: "'Frustrated Time' Narration: The Screenplays of Charlie Kaufmann" in: Buckland, W. (ed.), *Puzzle Films. Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell 2009, p. 107-129, here p. 109.

13 ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND (US 2004, D: Michel Gondry).

14 SHERLOCK (UK 2010-2017).

information by storing it in a so-called mindpalace. Usually, the series merely refers to the mindpalace in lieu of showing it. However, in the third season of the series an entire sequence is dedicated to this mindpalace to make use of various layers of consciousness, merging layers of memory and reality. As Beil comments, the visual portrayal of a mindscape can be realistic but also spectacular, and Sherlock's mindpalace is an example of this.[15] The mindpalace sequence in SHERLOCK demonstrates how the mise-en-scène and editing process are vital for the audience's understanding of a mindspace.

The mindscape sequence is set at night in a London office with a view of nearby skyscrapers. Here, Sherlock is shot, falls on his back, and is then later found by his companion John Watson. Sherlock is subsequently brought to a hospital to undergo emergency surgery. This is what happens in the narrative framework of reality, and the audience only sees snippets of this happening in between mindpalace sequences. Whilst these events unfold, Sherlock is desperately trying to find a way to survive, such as purposefully falling backwards to increase his chances of survival. Primarily audiovisual indicators throughout the sequence allow for the audience to recognize the mindpalace. One such example is the beginning of the mindpalace sequence: as soon as Sherlock is shot, all present characters in this scene halt their movements, a siren begins to howl off-screen, and the room's lighting changes. Furthermore, the skyscrapers outside are not visible anymore; the view has completely darkened–as if this office apartment was floating freely in a dark void. The lighting is focused on Sherlock only, starkly contrasting to the now darkened room as Sherlock begins venturing into his own mindpalace.

The mindpalace sequence shows at least five different locations, each with their own mise-en-scène and an audiovisual indicator that this is not a real place, but rather a place created by Sherlock. In one moment, Sherlock is seen in an uncharacteristically bright morgue, looking at his own dead body. In the next moment, Sherlock can be seen running through a long corridor with both ends mirroring each other, creating a seemingly infinite space. SHERLOCK never ventures into fantastic territory with these mindspaces. Rather, these mindscapes are used to estrange familiar locations of the show. This is further reinforced with the use of unconventional perspectives otherwise not used in the series, such as extreme close-ups of Sherlock and other characters he meets in his mindpalace or showing the entire scene from an oblique angle.

Although each place within Sherlock's mindpalace is visually different, these scenes take place in the same mindspace, even at the same time. In fact, there are almost no scenes indicating Sherlock leaving one place and going to another, so

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15 Cf. Beil, Benjamin.: *Mindscapes. Erinnerungsräume im zeitgenössischen Film*, p. 5.

the order of events is not told through the character's movements. Time has slowed down, or is at least working differently, demonstrated by the scene where Sherlock falls backwards in slow-motion. Sherlock's worsening condition is shown across different places, indicating that he is in all these places at the same time. As Beil comments, mindspaces are not a loose arrangement of spatial and isolated events, but a complex interplay of consistent and paradoxical sequences.[16] In Sherlock, this is indicated by the increasingly emotional barrage that the protagonist faces as he descends within his mindpalace, from facing the trauma of losing his childhood dog Redbeard, to his complex relationship with his older brother Mycroft. The final sequence begins with Sherlock reaching the bottom of a winding staircase that leads to the last room of his mindpalace, the room that is buried the deepest in his subconscious. Here, he meets his nemesis Moriarty, chained, and dressed in a straitjacket in what seems like a prison or isolation cell. As the show has repeatedly shown Moriarty as a counterpart to Sherlock, meeting Moriarty in his mindpalace implies Sherlock fights against a part of himself that is like Moriarty, a criminal mastermind without regard for human life. The order of sequences and montages implies a specific layout of Sherlock's mindpalace, one that orders the spaces according to their and their significance to the character. The deeper Sherlock descends, the more he dives into emotional and traumatizing memories, gradually losing control over the search for information to help him survive until Sherlock face things concealed or suppressed.

Other than merely being a spectacle for the audience, the mindspace is a narrative tool to introduce or reenforce themes. A concurrent theme throughout the series is Sherlock's human side—or the lack thereof. He appears apathetic regarding human emotion (especially the suffering of the crimes he investigates) and repeatedly claims to be a high-functioning sociopath. The American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) categorizes sociopathy as a type of antisocial personality disorder. Some of the listed traits certainly ring true regarding Sherlock, such as failure to conform to social norms, irritability, aggressiveness, and impulsivity.[17] Despite Sherlock being quite vocal about his (likely self-diagnosed) disorder, the series often questions whether he is truly a manic genius devoid of human empathy and emotions. Independently of whether he really is a sociopath or not, the series emphasizes Sherlock's human side by comparing him to characters such as his partner John, just as the show explores Sherlock's dark side by comparing him to his nemesis Moriarty.

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16 Cf. ibid., p. 5.

17 DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders). DSM-5 (5th edition), Washington, DC: *American Psychiatric Publishing* (2013), here p. 695.

The mindspace sequence here is a tool to further emphasize this theme: the final room at the bottom of Sherlock's mind is an isolation cell, where he nearly dies. However, Sherlock manages to pull himself out as Moriarty whispers John's name, giving him the strength to survive. His mindpalace reenforces these narrative themes to contest Sherlock's self-proclaimed sociopathy. This becomes even clearer with the reveal that his childhood dog was not merely a dog but a forgotten traumatic experience about losing his friend Victor Trevor, apparently the starting point for many of his personality issues.

MINDSPACES IN GAMES

Set in modern-day Tokyo, PERSONA 5 follows the lives of high school students who lead a double life as a group called the Phantom Thieves of Hearts. Facing injustice and corruption in their everyday lives, these teenagers are given the power to change the hearts of their targets. The game's general structure reflects this double life: one half is playing a relatively normal teenager with daily obligations such as performing well at school or maintaining social relationships, the other half is infiltrating palaces, manifestations of particularly negative and corrupt thoughts of an individual; the game's choice of "palace" is no coincidence. Thus, the gameplay is two-fold: the player is either a student, doing seemingly mundane things such as studying, doing laundry, participating in food challenges, or spending time with friends. On the other hand, the player battles foes inside these palaces, becomes stronger, and finds treasure. This treasure is not monetary but the embodiment of the targeted person's corruption—their corrupted hearts, as the game describes them. These palaces and their existence are not consciously created by their hosts; rather, the corruption of their own mind has become so severe that it manifests physically in what the game calls the *metaverse*. The metaverse can only be accessed by the members of the Phantom Thieves group, and even then, they must use a smartphone and enter three keywords to locate the palace: the host's name, the type of distortion, and the location. Usually, the targets of the Phantom Thieves are corrupt adults in positions of power, such as a teacher, a CEO, a mafia boss, or a politician. Stealing each target's treasure forces them to feel remorse for their wrongdoings, often leading them to confess their crimes to the police and the public.

To what extent can PERSONA 5 serve as a case study for mindspaces? First, as television shows such as SHERLOCK follow specific rules to tell a story, games follow rule sets to make them playable:

"The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain."[18]

Scholars such as Beat Suter use the idea of Johan Huizinga's magic circle and extend it to the framework of video games, noting that within a video game, new parameters can be set, and new worlds built: "This world can be perceived as object-oriented. To this we add more mechanics with the actions the players can perform."[19] For PERSONA 5, the framework is two-fold: life as a student in a metropolis on one side, Phantom Thief on the other. Each allows for different parameters and different objectives for the player. Naturally, as a specific set of rules comes into play, it is not freely accessible by anyone. On gamespaces, Mark Wigley notes:

"Paradoxically, electronic games offer a form of sanctuary from electronic space, a refuge. Gamespace is the only space that mobiles and email don't reach. There are no messages from another world because there is no other world. The only messages come from other players. The only news from the inside. The inside *is* the only news."[20]

In PERSONA 5, this isolation is even doubled: as per the game's premise, the metaverse is not freely accessible by anyone but the player's party. This access is part of the superpower given to the protagonist and his friends, and part of making the gameplay more than a daily life simulator. It allows for two very contrasting modes of gameplay, which is particularly evident when looking at how space and time are structured in PERSONA 5.

This set of rules has an imminent effect on space and time in the game. Due to the premise of the game, different slices of time as well as different kinds of spaces are united that are otherwise incompatible. PERSONA 5 makes use of a calendar and indicates the daily time, with school usually occupying most of the day, leaving the player with some free time after. The player can improve the player-

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18 Huizinga, Johan: Homo Ludens: *A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. London: Routledge (1949 [1938]), here p. 10.

19 Suter, Beat: "Rules of Play as a Framework for the 'Magic Circle'", in Suter, Beat. et al. (eds.) *Games and Rules. Game Mechanics for the 'Magic Circle'*, Bielefeld: transcript (2019), pp. 19-34, here p. 24.

20 Wigley, Mark: "Gamespace", in von Borries, Friedrich. et al. (eds.) *Space Time Play. Computer Games, Architecture and Urbanism: The Next Level*, Basel: Birkhäuser Verlag (2007), pp. 484-487, here p. 485.

character's attributes such as knowledge by, for instance, spending time studying at the library. Doing such an activity takes time, leaving the player with only a few activities a day to choose from. This flow of time, however, only applies to the daily activities as a student, not when the player-character is in a palace. Although a visit to the palace will cause time to pass as well, the amount of play time available to the player to explore the palace is almost infinite. They can be visited multiple times across several days, or all exploration can be done within one calendar day until reaching the final room. Although palaces must be cleared within specific deadlines given by the calendar and take a minimum of two visits, activities inside the palace do not cause time to pass and stand in clear contrast to the player having to carefully manage each of their activities in their allotted free time. In PERSONA 5, different slices of time are inevitably tied to different slices of space.

What makes the palaces in PERSONA 5 inherently a mindspace however, is the idea of the metaverse itself—a place where a human's distortion and corruption manifests itself. Space and time are regulated differently in the metaverse, with direct effects on gameplay. The game explains that the root of these palaces stems from deep corruption. Generally, this kind of corruption is an incredibly negative trait, such as narcissism, greed, or gaining power for selfish ends. However, there is one exception: the palace of Futaba Sakura, a young teenager whose corruption does not stem from greed or narcissism but self-loathing. Indeed, Futaba's palace specifically addresses themes such as trauma and depression as a manifestation of her mental state.

Futaba's palace manifests in the shape of a pyramid called the Pyramid of Wrath, which works as a metaphor of the character's shut-in personality. As the party ventures further inside her palace, murals that function as puzzles need to be rearranged to find out more about her trauma. Quickly, the party learns that Futaba blames herself for her mother's death and once completing the murals, the player learns of Futaba's memories at the time of her passing. These memories suggest that her mother did not love Futaba and prioritized her work instead, with Futaba portrayed as a nuisance. The names of different sections of the palace like Chamber of Rejection or Chamber of Guilt are revealing. Yet, as the party continues to venture through the palace, it is also revealed that Futaba's anxiety and depression have heavily altered her own memories-to an extent that she pictures her mother as a beast in the shape of a Sphinx, the final enemy of her palace.

Story elements such as these are weaved into the exploration and conquest of the palace. Despite palaces of the metaverse being somewhat unreal places, they have dire consequences for the affected person. The Phantom Thieves are responsible in evoking these consequences for their goal often against the subject's wills; however, in Futaba's case she eventually learns of the metaverse, enters her own

palace, and consciously faces her memories and trauma. She recognizes that her altered memories stem from her battle with self-hatred as well as other people who orchestrated her mother's suicide. Supported by the Phantom Thieves, she joins the fight against her Sphinx mother, finally realizing that she had a loving relationship with her mother and is not guilty for her death. The Phantom Thieves group support Futaba not only inside her palace but also in the real world of Tokyo, looking after her and helping her during her rehabilitation. Despite palaces usually being born out of corrupt, negative desires hurtful to other people, Futaba's palace is framed as an exception.

As demonstrated, mindspaces in Persona 5 allow for diverse types of gameplay and serve as places for social commentary. To a certain extent, the game's palaces also refer to the inability of modern society to address these issues lying beneath the façade of a lively metropolis, such as bullying, sexual harassment, greed, and abuse of power at the cost of powerless people in Persona 5. These mindscapes attempt to tap into the minds of its characters, the minds of people, and the underlying issues of society that often cannot be put into words but are felt through other means. Mindspaces open a possibility to create such a space that can diverge from the norm and tell stories that are otherwise difficult to tell or add a certain depth to the issue at hand.

Conclusion

Despite existing literature on mindscapes and mindspaces, the concept's definition and use have varied in the past decades. Slusser and authors Rabkin and Lindemann offer early interpretations of what a mindscape might entail and Beil specifically makes use of mindspaces in visual media, addressing both the editing techniques that enable the visual representation of such a mindscape and what it attempts to represent: memories. Drawing on these observations, the discussion here focuses on the television series Sherlock and the video game Persona 5 to emphasize the subjective experience of the mindspace, driven by feelings, memories, and, often, trauma. The comparison of a video game and a television show illustrates the respective techniques and strategies that facilitate mindspaces in different media. These analyses further our overall understanding of how the respective media work and, in this case, also shows how themes of mental health can influence these strategies. For Persona 5, the analysis offers contrasting modes of play, changing the rules of game space and time.

Recent trends in popular culture reveal an interest in visualizing dreams and memories into media. By using the term mindspace for this phenomenon—the

visual portrayal of a space expressing memories and dreams—it is possible to further investigate the meaning and significance of mindscapes in media culture.

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Ludography

Persona 5 (P-Studio, 2016: Atlus)

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