Vol. 11, No. 1 (2020)

http://www.eludamos.org

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Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture. 2020; 11 (1), pp. 39–54

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> Through mirroring, being became ambiguous [*doppeldeutig*] for the first time for the human; it stepped out of itself, becoming original and image, so that he could ask what being might be. (Fink 1960, 89; my translation)

Mileage varies in any open-world video game, but it's probably about midway through a complete playthrough of puzzle game *The Witness* (Thekla, Inc. 2016) that the player will discover a film clip embedded within the game-world that will be particularly striking to any cinephile: the entire 12-minute sequence that concludes Andrei Tarkovsky's art-film classic *Nostalghia* (Tarkovsky 1983). It consists largely of a sustained, nearly 10-minute tracking shot that follows the protagonist Andrei (Oleg Yankovsky) as he attempts to carry a lit candle across the length of a drained pool on a gray and breezy day. Andrei's persistence as his candle is extinguished midway through the laborious journey—he pauses, returns to his starting point, relights the candle, and begins his procession anew—is mirrored by that of Tarkovsky's camera, which patiently stops, retreats, and follows Andrei again and again, framing him centrally in an act of faith it has in common with its protagonist. This shared action of the Andrei and the camera, in addition, can be said to mirror the play of *The Witness*, which consists in a similarly wordless, deliberately paced, and sometimes frustratingly repetitive drive toward an obscure goal.

An independent game by the developer Thekla, Inc., overseen by celebrated designer Jonathan Blow, *The Witness* offers notably little discursive guidance or narrative elaboration on its rules or motivating scenario. Play simply begins as the game's first-person avatar fades into existence in an underground tunnel, quickly emerging into a garden on an island of bright, saturated colors, rendered in three-dimensional computer graphics. The starting area serves as a tutorial in the game's basic mechanics: a path that consists of a circle, denoting the starting point, and of a line leading from the circle appears on a touch-screen display on the exit to the tunnel. By pressing a key to enter puzzle-solving mode, the player freezes the avatar in place and can use a circular cursor to click and trace the path presented on the in-game screen. Outside, the player finds more of these screens: they are fastened to walls, propped up among hedges, nestled within cherry orchards, and hidden in corners of buildings, castles, and lumber mills. When one of these increasingly complex mazes are solved, another screen is powered, a mechanism is activated, or a door is opened. The puzzles often come in chains, at the end of which, in the 11 main areas of the island, a laser is activated that projects its beam toward the peak of a mountain on the Southeast side of the island, signifying the player's progress and indicating the end station of the main game.

Eludamos Vol. 11, No. 1 (2020)
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The player is soon cued to search the environment, both for clues to solving the puzzles on the screens, and for hidden paths within environmental details that match the circle-line pattern found on the screen. They may consist of streaks of paint, the continuous edges of a staircase, or a stream viewed from above, and can be interacted with in the same way once the avatar-camera has assumed the correct perspective: click the circular starting point, then trace the line. Often, the player is miscued by a false path, or happens to discover a visual trick that is not a traceable path, like the forced-perspective trick in proximity of the mountain which makes it look as if one statue is lending another statue a hand up the mountain. An additional mechanic which has no effect on the player's progression, but which serves to outline both a set of thematic concerns and, after much gameplay, something like a narrative, sees the player collecting audio logs left in various places around the islands. On each of them, one of four voices reads quotations from figures ranging from Renaissance theologian Nicolas of Cusa and the ancient Chinese thinker Zhuangzi, to 20th-century British physicist Arthur Eddington.

The invited parallel with Tarkovsky's cinema suggests a comparison between *The Witness* and the cinema of the "time image" (Deleuze 1986). Its conjunction with cinema that offers "direct images of time," particularly that of filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami, will aid us, in what follows, in understanding the game's commentary on the temporality of the digital image. This comparison will lead toward a phenomenological understanding of the game as an attempt to make clear—to mirror—the state of human temporality in the twenty-first century. For this reading I draw on a lineage of thought rooted in the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Bernard Stiegler. This outline of *The Witness*'s relation to the time-image and the phenomenology of temporal consciousness will allow us to read *The Witness* as itself a contribution to a thinking-through of time in the digital age, a time of accelerating technical evolution—and of accelerating time. Riffing on Paul Ricoeur's description of narratives as "games with time", I propose that the very loosely narrative-based *The Witness* is a game *on* time (Ricoeur 1985, p. 60).

To be specific, *The Witness* gives space for thought regarding the interweaving of digital and human temporality and the impact of this relatively new relation on consciousness—an urgent concern within media theory and phenomenology. Mark B. N. Hansen's *Feed Forward* (2014) provides a compelling framing of the problem at hand. Noting that 21st-century media, through biometrics and algorithms of prediction, intervene in the world of humans at levels far below that of perception, Hansen calls for a "repositioned […] human witnessing" of a world in which media are no longer "surrogates for the perceptual flux of experience," but more fundamental constituents of the very basis of sensibility (pp. 268, 249-250). In this sense aptly named, *The Witness* makes possible a thinking on the relation between human and digital time by leading its player toward a consciousness that knows it has been repositioned by digital media. Its play becomes a "mirroring" in Eugen Fink's sense, in that it offers a split, ambiguous vision of life that prompts the question of what it is to be a human within the time of a digitized world.

From Time Image to Computer Time: *The Witness* and *24 Frames*

The *Nostalghia* clip is activated, like most every device, door, and mechanism in the world of *The Witness*, when the player inputs the correct path onto a multi-solution maze displayed on a touch-screen display. It is only one of six videos that can be unlocked and played in an underground theater in the center of the island, as if the game designers were trying to live up to Marshall McLuhan's well-known dictum that the content of any medium is always another medium (1964, p. 8). The digital game depends in part on many of the underlying physical precepts (e.g., the persistence of vision, the *phi* phenomenon) of film, video, and television, and can archive these mobile segments of time within it. I explore in this section how *The Witness* may be understood as both containing the time image and going beyond it.

Andrei's trek across the pool reflects rather directly upon the experience of playing *The Witness*, turning this experience precisely toward a questioning of why the player persists in time through arduous tasks whose significance is unassured. Andrei's obscure endpoint, only metonymically represented, turns out to be death: after he lies the candle down at the opposite end of the pool, he disappears from frame, and the reverse shot shows us onlookers rushing off screen toward him. *Nostalghia* cuts not to his body, but to black-and-white footage of a blonde child (a younger Andrei), a farmhouse, and then to Andrei and his German Shepherd, sitting on the edge of a water-filled ditch within a bombed-out cathedral. Such devices as *Nostalghia*'s abstention from showing the final movements of Andrei's life, as well as the emphatically "irrational" cuts and composites that thread together the elements of past and fantasy that metaphorically indicate his death, place the film firmly within a cinema in which "movements themselves have lost the centers of revolution around which they develop […] movement ceases to demand the true [and] time ceases to be subordinate [to movement]: both at once" (Deleuze 1986, p. 143).

The abandonment of internal claims to unambiguous truth (i.e., that the content of the text is "true" within the diegesis) and the predominance of time over movement may also be said to coincide in *The Witness*. With its unpopulated island distinguished by deliberately languorous mechanisms and silent marble statues, winding paths that often culminate in little more than a new perspective, and the constrained pace it sets for its player's first-person avatar, *The Witness* compels long hours of contemplation. The player contemplates not only solutions to its numerous puzzles, but streams, windmills, trees, rocks, shipwrecks, inlets, temples, castles, gardens, and the sky. Notoriously, one puzzle takes over an hour to solve, simply because the player must wait for the circle starting point to drive across the back of the theater screen toward the line it is meant to conjoin with. As this example illustrates—the player could also simply circle around and watch the video—sometimes the game's time-laden contemplation is purposeful and goal-directed and sometimes it encourages the player to relax this instrumental thinking.

In any case, the meaning behind the player's tasks, or the purpose of the numerous unactionable structures, artworks, and natural formations there are to discover on the island, remains ambiguous. Why the player, by the end of the game, has learned to draw paths that frame background elements, separate squares of different colors, and mimic sounds in the environment—and most of all, why the player has been trained to abstract environmental images into the circle-line form—is unclear. What

little narrative *The Witness* has indicates that the player's avatar may represent one of a group of programmers who have designed the island precisely as a virtual meditative space for the contemplation of self–world relations—a *dispositif* that functions as a means of "disclosing our senses in such a way as to enable thinking or to make ideas possible", as John Rajchman describes Deleuze's view of cinema (2009, p. 301).

A parallel to a filmography other than that of Tarkovsky suggests itself here, and it is one that will take us further into the implications of *The Witness*'s phenomenology of mediated time: the work of Abbas Kiarostami. Not only does the game's symbolic use of zig-zagging paths—both those the player wanders and those they discover on screens and hidden within the environment—recall the zig-zagging paths Kiarostami uses as existential metaphors in *Where Is the Friend's Home* (1987), *Life, and Nothing More* (1992), and *Taste of Cherry* (1997). In addition, the "secret" ending of *The Witness*, accessible only via a hidden puzzle in the game's opening area, recalls the finale of *Taste of Cherry*, in which the protagonist, having laid down to die, is resurrected in a coda that abruptly switches from film to video, and which exposes the film's crew and actors relaxing and chatting: death turns into an awaking from fiction into reality. Here, Rex Butler argues, "Kiarostami is precisely doing away with the afterlife, the possibility of some other world […] the world is all that there is" (2012, pp. 71-72).

The Witness stages a strikingly similar, and equally surprising finale, of which we might make the same observation regarding a return to the world as all there is. This secret ending, returning us again to a captured video image, implies that the player has awakened as one of the virtual island's programmers. A hidden environmental puzzle transports the player to a vast lounge that hovers unseen in the sky above the island. Exploring the warm-hued hallways of this spa-like space, the player comes to a corridor, which eventually degenerates into a stone path suspended in a dimly multicolored non-space. The outline of a corridor is reached, and the screen fades to black, transitioning to a live-action, first-person digital video footage from the perspective of a person waking up, detaching themselves from numerous diodes, and exploring the confines of an independent game programming studio. The apparent programmer from whose perspective the player now perceives the world, weakened by their indeterminate time spent in the virtual world of the island, proceeds slowly outside toward an enclosed backyard. They lie down on a lawn chair, the camera pointed at the sky, as the perspective fades again to black.

Inherent to *The Witness* and Kiarostami's cinema is an embrace of the "false" metamorphosis that for Deleuze approaches reality precisely by eschewing the "true". In this kind of time image, "descriptions become pure, […] narrations falsifying and stories, simulations" (1986, p. 155). Such images, what Deleuze calls the "powers of the false" (1986, p. 127), are powerfully developed in Kiarostami's final film *24 Frames* (2017). The title, a reference to cinema's standard frame rate, is inflected to refer to the 24 images out of which Kiarostami composes the film. Kiarostami and his team animate the elements captured in photos he allegedly took himself, or composite in new elements and add sound effects, assembling imagined reconstitutions of the temporal flow out of which these photographs were seized. Instead of lasting one second, then, these two dozen frames take up 113 minutes of

screen time, extended via computer animation into an experience of cinematic duration.

The film undoes the temporality of the photograph—what Roland Barthes called its anterior future tense of "this will have been"—which restores to the images' (false) flux, rescuing them from the premature death of the still photo (Barthes 1980, pp. 94-97). Waves on a beach are made to flow; horses observed in a snowy forest playfully battle to the sounds of tango emanating from the care in which the photographer sits; a duck waddles into the foreground and contemplates the tableau of a desolate pier with us. The overdetermined falsity of the images—Kiarostami's son Ahmed has admitted that several photographs are pure fabrications (Douglas 2018, p. 66)—emphasizes that, rather than an aid to memory, the converged media of the computer have become primarily producers of synthetic virtualities.

Nevertheless, Kiarostami suggests that these virtualities still form a part of our world by ending *24 Frames* with the image of an open window, as if at the end the text were opening back up into the outside world. Cinema for Kiarostami is "the taking-place of a relation to the world" (Nancy 2001, p. 44), and in *24 Frames*, this relation is specifically to the new temporalities of the digital cinematic image. Mediated images have become, like human consciousness for Henri Bergson, "centers of indetermination" with creative power of their own (Bergson 2004, p. 28). Well before the discovery of its surprising ending, *The Witness*'s central setting evokes powers of the false: a verdant, multifarious space revealed through exploration to be everywhere interpenetrated by mechanical infrastructure that can be straightforwardly interpreted as a figuration of the digital code that underlies it, the island is a profligate falsifier. The game's diegetic sense of time, for example, is patently artificial: leaves and grass lightly sway in the breeze; a windmill turns once activated, and doors unlock and swing open, however slowly they move; but despite these markers of temporality, the sun, that original marker of worldly temporality, never moves in the sky. The internal inconsistency of this digitally animated world, the uncanny dislocation of the "magic circle" of play that it foregrounds (Huizinga 1950, p. 10), leads us toward a contemplation of how its odd time seeps actually into and impacts ours.

The Witness does not give us a Deleuzean pure image of time. Rather, it asks us to reflect on the way mediated time becomes *our* time. To fully address this aspect of *The Witness*, we will have to broaden our phenomenological inquiry, delving into a tradition of thought rooted in that of Edmund Husserl. While Husserl and Deleuze's systems of thought are often understood as odd bedfellows—or even antithetical—given Husserl's centering of transcendent consciousness in his discussion of time, Bernard Stiegler's deconstruction of Husserl's phenomenology of time in *Technics and Time 1: The Fault of Epimetheus* has shown how consciousness cannot be conceived of as originarily transcendent. Instead, it must be thought as worldly, as paradoxically comprised by its own technical exteriorization and its existence within a tradition materialized in techne (Stiegler 1998). Thus, while Stiegler's aims still do not align with Deleuze's project, which is to think phenomena such as temporality precisely outside of the constrains of consciousness, Hansen is able to argue that Deleuze and Stiegler's Husserlianism are merely at two ends of the same continuum of thought about the relation of life and media (Hansen 2014, pp. 36-37). Through a

discussion of this phenomenological lineage, we will be able to better understand *The Witness* as a game on time.

From the Window to the Sky: The Problem of Mediated Time for Human Consciousness

Philosophical debate around the consciousness of time has historically centered around whether our perception of the present is "extended" or "retentive" (Weardon 2016, pp. 5-11). Recently, science has greatly complicated any such debate: in fact, the human body actually must simulate the present in certain respects, using specialized neurons to detect the time difference between the reception of a stimulus and its arrival at the brain, and using that information to adjust our sense of succession, the order of events. "The brain can read its own states as evidence of external events to which it has no direct access," writes John Durham Peters in his magisterial exploration of the omnipresence of mediation in the human world, *The Marvelous Clouds* (2015). "It too is a recursive medium" (p. 180).

Of course, the brain can only be understood as a recursive medium in a milieu in which another recursive medium that operates at much higher speeds—the computer—exists within the human's world. That is, higher speeds of transmission and calculation within a digital sensing medium are what make it possible to relativize human consciousness in this way. Hansen observes that 21st-century media "impact the general sensibility of the world prior to and as a condition for impacting human experience" (2014, p. 6). Even as digital media expand our potential world, the processes of this intensification remain largely invisible. Like many technical objects, the computer is what Peters calls a *Zeitgeber*—time-giver—but the time it gives, as Hansen repeatedly points out, is no longer fully commensurable with human experience. To elaborate on the phenomenological relation between digital media and time, I root this problem below in the transition of technical media from forms of what, drawing from Husserl, Stiegler calls "tertiary retention" (Hui 2016, p. x) to what Yuk Hui calls "tertiary protention" (2016, pp. 240-44).

Thinking the technicity of time with Stiegler and Hui necessarily routes us not only through Husserl, but his student Martin Heidegger, as well. In his definition of Dasein, or human Being, as being-in-the-world, Heidegger is attentive to the constitution of time out of what is encountered in the world. "Time first shows itself in the sky," he writes in *Being and Time*, and it is this sky-time, or "world-time," that constitutes the time of the other entities that Dasein encounters within the world (2008, pp. 471-472). On the basis of the sky, humans construct calendars and build clocks. For Heidegger, world-time is not, however, "temporal" in the sense that Dasein is, namely, in the sense of what he calls care (*Sorge*), the ontological structure of Dasein whose "authentic" modality consists in a "*Being-towards-the-end which understands*" (p. 353). The authentic form of this kind of anticipation of "one's ownmost" future always also involves a "having been" (i.e., a past), and results in a "making present," a total structure Heidegger refers to as "resoluteness" (pp. 373-374). In looking back, resoluteness reveals what Heidegger calls the "thrownness" and "falling" of Being that is a constitutive element of care—the way in which Dasein

is "thrown" into a world which pre-exists it, and "falls" away from its origins in care, into the everyday world of the "they" (pp. 219-225).

Paul Ricoeur's investigation of the relation of time and narrative, which routes itself through several phenomenological excurses, finds in Heidegger's ontology of care both a compelling account of both Dasein's temporality (as coming-toward, having-been, and making-present) and its modes of "temporalization," but finds faults in Heidegger's insistent privileging of the Dasein's resoluteness as the sole "authentic" temporality, and in his discussion of world-time as the forgetting of originary temporality. In the first place, Heidegger's discussion of temporality is unable to fully account for the "historicality" of entities within the world into which Dasein is thrown—broadly writ, tradition, culture, language the persistence of these pieces of previous life-worlds into the present, and the fundamental "Being-with" of which they speak, whose role in comprising Dasein's temporality Heidegger appears, to use his own terminology, to forget (Ricoeur 1988, pp. 90-91).

In the second place, Heidegger sees the sciences as perpetuating the "falling" nature of ordinary everydayness that derives its sense of time from this world-time, but Ricoeur points out that, in fact, there is no singular scientific time. Scientific inquiry has in fact opened up numerous time scales—in the last four hundred years, the presumed timescale of human existence has expanded from a matter of thousands to billions of years—and our exteriorizations of time can serve to reinscribe the Being-toward-death Heidegger sees primarily in resoluteness:

> [F]orgetting death, we contemplate the sky and we construct calendars and clocks. And suddenly, on the face of one of them, the words *memento mori* stand out in mournful letters. One forgetfulness erases another. (Ricoeur 1988, p. 93)

In his neglect of the functionally eternal times revealed by geology and astronomy, Ricoeur argues, Heidegger has merely avoided, rather than solving, the Augustinian paradox of the *intentio* and *distentio*, that is, "our intentional hope for last things" and the "threefold present" of past, present, and future, a time which endlessly slips away (Rosengarten 2013, p. 174). The time of science can call our attention back to the *intentio*, which Augustine identified with the eternal time of God. This is precisely the import of *The Witness*'s constant calling of our attention to its fabricated digital sky—it proclaims as much in its all-important audio logs by juxtaposing the musings of Nicolas of Cusa on clocks and the infinite time of God with physicist James Jean's 1928 description of humans as infants on the time scale of the universe.

Narrative, for Ricoeur, is enfolded with the *distentio*: the first volume of *Time and Narrative* concludes having laid out a model in which the aporias of time compel narrative, which in turn elucidate time: "time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience" (1984, p. 3). Missing from Heidegger's model of temporality is the direct role of storytelling in interpolating human time and, as tradition, formulating a basis for historicality. Calling narratives "games with time," Ricoeur proposes that they offer us "varied figures of discordant concordance" derived from the tensions of the *distentio,* which "are offered to reading in order to refigure ordinary temporality" (1985, p. 101).

If narrative functions in this way to perpetually refigure time and form the sense of time we receive, as thrown Dasein, from historicality as Being-with others (i.e., tradition), we can easily extrapolate to consider the way in which technical objects of all sorts, the entities which comprise the world into which we are thrown, are true *Zeitgeber*. The proliferation and impact of time-media such as the clock, the timetable, and recording technologies are recurring questions in modern thought, particularly in critiques of capitalist modernity (Mumford 1934, pp. 196-197; Thompson 1967). Stiegler sees the problem of modern technics as consisting essentially in their increasing evolution apart from the human, whereas before the modern era the two had been entangled in an "epiphylogenesis" (1998, p. 177). He argues that it is the tool as prosthesis that gives the human Heidegger's "ahead-of-oneself," and therefore its temporality and its very interiority:

> [T]he interior is constituted in exteriorization … The interior and the exterior are the same thing, the inside is the outside, since man (the interior) is essentially defined by the tool (the exterior)" (p. 50).

Stiegler's work is equally a commentary on Husserl, from whom he takes the crucial notions of retention and protention. Husserl sees time consciousness as rooted in intentionality, the direction of thought toward objects. Intentionality directs our thought toward an object in the now, but it also retains modulations of that object—Husserl's example is a musical tone, which he calls a *Zeitobjekt*, or time-object—that color our perception of the current "now" and give us a sense of succession (Husserl 1991, p. 29-33). This rententional aspect of consciousness Husserl calls primary retention, while recollection is "secondary memory" or secondary retention (pp. 47-50). There is a third form of retention, what Husserl calls "consciousness of image," but which Stiegler re-terms "tertiary retention": "the prosthesis of consciousness without which there could be no mind, no recall, no memory of a past that one has not personally lived, no culture" (2011, p. 37).

Given this primordial link between technics and time, industrialized tertiary retentions threaten to break the "time barrier" by short-circuiting the feedback loop between humans and technics (Husserl 2011, p. 14; Stiegler 2010, pp. 71-73). Almost recalling Deleuze's description of the cinema as a "flickering brain" (1986, p. 215), Stiegler sees the problem that has emerged in the 20th century represented by the fact that consciousness appears to be "*already cinematographic*" (Stiegler 2011, p. 17; see also Sobchak 1992, p. 60). Thus industrialized "cinematic" technologies, which for these purposes would include televisual media, facilitate the "prostheticization of consciousness"—a reversal of this relation, whereby consciousness becomes a prosthesis of technical devices (Stiegler 2011, p. 4). Here, we have almost caught up again with Hansen's problematic of 21st-century media—their subperceptual agency in human life—but while Hansen approaches this problem from the point of view of environmental agency, we have approached it from the phenomenology of Being and consciousness, because this is the conversation which I see *The Witness* as contributing to.

For the final step in this outline of the relation between techne, temporality, and being, we can look to Yuk Hui's *On The Existence of Digital Objects*, which continues Stiegler's project by adducing the model of "tertiary protentions" (Hui 2016, pp. 43, 240-244). Hui's example is a smart coffee machine that has already prepared a

coffee for you when you arrive home, tired from work, because it has synthesized the relations embedded within the digital objects with which one commonly engages in the 21st century. Here, Hui provides a quick gloss on tertiary protention as “the imaginative force exerted from the outer world” (p. 240). Similar to Stiegler, and, for that matter, to Hansen, he sees this displacement of memory and imagination (Husserl’s secondary retention) as the particular problematic of time in the digital age: digital objects “short circuit” consciousness’s syntheses of past, present, and future, with the result that “the future is always the present” (pp. 244-245).

By definition, this is a difficult problem to see, to theorize. But this is precisely why time is made so present—through its very uncanniness, through its distinguishing slowness—in the play of *The Witness*. Showing us the aporia of time in which we exist, and then showing us how we have become inscribed by the effects of a digital protention, the game discloses the current phenomenal relations between digital time and the human. It contains time images and displays the “powers of the false,” but as a game it is able to return the player back to themselves in a manner unavailable to the cinema, however close in concept Kiarostami’s false-real cinematic worlds are. It is not, in Ricoeur’s sense, a “game with time,” as by Ricoeur’s definition, video games are not narrative: their real-time rendering places them not in the preterite of storytelling (Ricoeur 1985, p. 80), but in the futural mode of digital protention. As Alexander Galloway puts it, the computer “does not facilitate or make reference to an arrangement of being, it remediates the very conditions of being itself”; it “is not *of* an ontological condition, it is *on* that condition” (2012, pp. 21-22). *The Witness* does not play with the lived experience of time relayed through a narrative; it is a game *on* time.

From the Bunker to the Mountain: The Temporalizations of *The Witness*

The Witness is almost preoccupied with mirroring: a group of puzzles likely encountered early on, in which the player’s path is symmetrically mirrored by a path on the opposite side of the screen, requires the player to trace paths around trees in the background, as well as their reflections in the water of a small inlet. The game’s water reflects with striking clarity, as if it were itself a liquid mirror—which one of the six unlockable videos, a 2011 lecture by spiritualist Rupert Spira, invites us to see as a metaphor for pure consciousness: “Are they in fact two things? One, the objects that appear in the mirror, and two, the mirror? Or is it all just mirror?” Spira means to indicate that consciousness persists in the absence of objects, a claim any reader of Husserl will consider dubious at best, but the videos often serve as counterpoints to other things the game has shown us.

After all, a puzzle game that compels us to internalize dozens of rules can hardly be said to be striving toward a pure, untouched consciousness. Instead of signifying the pure consciousness of the player, Spira’s mirror may actually be read as a metaphor for the digital substrate that gives us objects irrespective of any real-world references. And of course, the mirror and the objects it reflects are ultimately all entities within our world—just as *The Witness* points us toward its own outside. Below, I analyze how the game remediates the conditions of human temporality

discussed above, while also reflecting how they are put into question by the protention of the digital image. This analysis follows the outline I sketched above: first, the player's discovery of the historicality of techne and the sense of time derived from the sky; second, the player's temporal synthesis in exteriorizations; and finally, the game's foregrounding of the pre-conscious intervention of the digital image, or tertiary protention.

Historicality and Sky-Time

The Witness announces itself as a game on time from its opening moments, inasmuch as it simulates Heidegger's thrownness by almost totally eschewing the convention of a start menu and plunging the user directly into the game-world. At an opening screen displaying the title, a single click rapidly brings the player into the game's first-person perspective, looking down a long, darkened tunnel toward an illuminated door. Attached to the door is a simple interactive screen presenting the introduction of the game's central mechanic: a circle-line path to be traced. Tracing the path throws the door open to an underground cavern, where a second door sports a minimally more complicated path, merely in that it includes a right angle. Outside this chamber, this will quickly escalate into gridded mazes with increasingly complex rules.

The second door leads upward to the ground level, where the player finds themselves standing in what appears to be a dilapidated garden pavilion, its brick walls crumbled or incomplete, with unnaturally colored, pastel-purple, almost glowing willow leaves encroaching in from the garden. Highly notable here, keeping in mind the errant audio diaries to be found late in the game that reveal that the island has been virtually constructed as a space of meditative retreat, is the degraded form of the pavilion and the ruined columns that lead from it into the garden. Their aged state is notable, keeping in mind that, whether one reads the island of *The Witness* diegetically as a meditative simulation, or extra-diegetically as a meditative game, there's no inherent reason any structure within it would be marked by time. But here, at the opening of the game, the player is confronted with the inheritance of a world that, somehow, existed before.

By throwing its player into an ambivalent historicality in this way, *The Witness* estranges the phenomenon, and thereby makes it more perceptible—present-to-hand (*vorhanden*), Heidegger might say. Repeatedly, the user will encounter structures similarly marked by time, but throughout, this technicality is shot through with ambivalence. The town in the south-central portion of the island is full of incomplete and damaged, overgrown and slapped-together constructions. Serving as a kind of exchange point between the areas and their distinct styles of puzzles, the puzzles in the town bring together the rules the user will learn in the other 10 main areas. Similarly, it presents an arbitrary architectural style: an almost Dutch-style windmill, a vaguely medieval tower, an unfinished Spanish-colonial house, a cottage covered in flowers. So while the game simulates a turning-back toward thrownness, this historicality is undermined by the persistent evidence that the digital image has no coherent sense of past-ness. The second-order thrownness of an interactive digital world is shown to be false by this world's inability to hold itself together. Indeed, yawning gaps in the center of the city square peek into underground caverns,

as if the island is barely held together, as if its infrastructure were erupting from the ground.

Playing through *The Witness* will disclose much of this in-world infrastructure—eventually, the interconnection of almost all the underground spaces to be discovered is facilitated by the "final" area, the interior of the mountain. At the same time, *The Witness* gestures toward the disclosure of temporality, the infrastructure of Being. A remarkable area in the island is known in fan circles as The Temple of the Sun, a bleached-white structure in the midst of the desert that takes up much of the northwestern portion of the small island. Given its placement on the map—one or two areas removed from the starting point, and in roughly the direction the path from the starting area leads—the Temple of the Sun is likely one of the earliest sections a player will visit, and it is here that the game most pointedly turns the player's attention toward the sky.

Temples, and the closely associated structure of the tower, "are observatories for auguring celestial and terrestrial signs, places for *contemplation* and *consideration* in the original senses," writes John Peters, pointing out the etymology of con-template (at the temple) and con-sider (with the stars) (2015, p. 235). In the permanent daylight of *The Witness*, there are no stars to consider—with the exception of the sun. The entrance to the temple is adorned with a golden disc representing the sun, which glares in the sunlight as the player's avatar approaches it. This is an environmental clue: the puzzles within the ruined temple will require the player to adjust their relative angle with the sunlight, so that its reflection on the screen reveals oil streaks, presumably left by previous players' fingers, that trace the correct paths. But the glinting disc also cues the possible discovery of the first environmental puzzles, because when it is lined up with the path formed by a line in relief on the temple's façade, it can be clicked on and traced.

At this moment, the world of the island greatly expands in the consciousness of the player, as its central mechanic, learned on an interactive digital screen, can now be extended outward and applied to the world. Like the stone figures placed throughout the island who sometimes appear to be turned in supplication toward the sky, at the temple the plater looks up for meaning and coordination, attempting to reconcile sky-time with the ground. "You go to the *templum* to discern the *tempus* (both time and weather.) Towers set the time and date" (2015, p. 235). Learning this coordination gives us the spatialized time, the clock-time of the island, in that it lends a sense of scale: screen puzzles, and environmental puzzles that you must often reorient yourself to see. It mediates our protentive sense of the island, making what is to come a little more concrete, a bit more tied to concepts. Rather than removing our sense of time, the still sun, fixed in its place in the sky, here short-circuits it, like the digital object it is: looking from the sky to the ground, we skip clocks and calendars and go straight into treating the world as a screen. *The Witness* offers not the sky, but a window onto a world already saturated by the computer's temporality.

Exteriorizations

Soon after the player leaves the enclosed garden that constitutes the starting area, they will come across a bunker with a maze on it that is unlike those few they have

seen thus. Unable to deduce the rules for solving it from pre-existing concepts, the player will likely give up and continue following the path, until they come to a clearing at the south end of a cherry orchard, with two rows of screens. These screens teach the principles needed to solve the puzzle they have just passed, adding complications to basic, unarticulated precepts like ‘your path toward the exit must separate squares of different colors’ until the player has deduced the governing rules.

The game thus teaches the player that sometimes, a puzzle must be passed over, because the rules governing its solution can be determined elsewhere on the island. Once the player has returned to the bunker, the game has something else to teach: that play of this game may depend on the ‘outside.’ Inside the bunker is a chest, openable by a simple horizontal swipe, that contains the key to the first unlockable video in the underground theater, an excerpt of an interview with science historian James Burke from the 1978 documentary television series *Connections*. The keys to these videos, images of paths traceable on a multi-solution screen, are written on slips of paper revealed as the box containing them unfolds. With this (mostly likely) first uncovered key-path, the player is confronted with an object (the paper) that looks like a collectable from any other video game, but which is completely unactionable—it cannot be picked up, its pattern cannot be saved; it is, in this sense, hardly a digital object at all.

The player must therefore forge their own relation to the pattern that has been given to them for which, they might well call upon a simpler mode of hypomnesis: pen and paper. If the player has not discovered the theater underneath the windmill, they will have no reference point for what the shape sketched on the paper is referring to; even if they have seen the bee-hive-shaped puzzle, making the connection, or remembering the pattern, will be difficult without some kind of exterior prosthetic support. Even if this turns out to be a screenshot, this action pulls the player from the game to its exterior.

The searching for a means of storing the shapes that unlock the videos constitutes a searching for a temporal exteriorization outside of the (lack of) those offered by the game. Later, particularly when the puzzles in the swamp and in the cottage in the town require the player to derive the true color of squares within the maze by shifting through blue, green, and red color filters, the player may again step outside of their game-selves to work over solutions and divine rules. By making this act of exteriorization also a stepping out of the game, instead of providing some kind of in-game storage system, *The Witness* discloses the process of temporalization by which tertiary retentions maintain protention—the anticipation of the future.

The player’s temporal synthesis, though, still contains the ambivalence of an anticipation whose ends are concealed by the digital image. Based on iconography alone, the mountain announces itself as the end-goal of the play, but the secrets it holds only reveal the digital game as digital game. Stored within the mountain, besides more puzzles and doors to unlock, are discarded puzzles and environmental elements piled in heaps in plexiglass chambers. When the player reaches the bottom of the mountain and solves a series of puzzles that wrap around columnal stalagmites leading out to the sea, an elevator appears, which whisks the player back to the starting area of the game, as all the island’s puzzles reset. A metaphor for the meaninglessness of all human endeavor, perhaps, but also a revelation that these

syntheses have been prompted by a recursive medium, an "imaginative force from the outside world," as Hui has it (2016, p. 240).

The Being-ahead of Digital Technology

If and when the player exits the starting tunnel into which they have been thrown for a second time, they take with them the rules and procedures implanted from dozens of hours of gameplay. Walking out again into the garden, the player perceives things anew: having spent hours abstracting the environment into the form of circle-path, they may now notice that the sun can be lined up with the glowing hinge that forms part of the mystical lock on the garden gate. Tracing this path like they have so many before, the player will find the gate transformed into a doorway, leading to the lounge above the island and passageway into the programmer's waking consciousness—the secret or 'true' ending mentioned above.

The secondary retention of the circle-line pattern results in the protentional anticipation of seeing it as potentially appearing within the environment. This, however, stems from the techniques learned at the hypermediated interface with the island's video screens. The player's synthesis of elements into this pattern—the way they must adjust their avatar's perspective so that circle and path line up—is of course anticipated by the game, which has made these syntheses possible by design. Rather than the player bringing together a coming-towards and having-been in a genuine making-present, this process is encoded in the environment. Even before the player enters the lounge, the game has already made visible the way in which tertiary protention—figured in the form of the interconnected screens of the island—has made the future present. Rather than technics being the prosthesis through which the human goes ahead of and comes back to itself, the algorithm has this anticipation written into it: the digital image is inextricably ahead-of the player in Stiegler's sense.

The revelation of the secret ending that the entirety of the gameplay has taken place in a pre-conscious zone brings us to the culmination of the game's commentary on time in the digital image. As the programmer staggers from the couch where they have awakened toward the outside, they apparently see circles and lines everywhere: from the perspective of a first-person, wide-angle camera, we see them attempt to press on the circles representing the heads on the male/female restroom icons; they seem to be distracted by circular cookies they find on the kitchen counter near the back door. They are also drawn to spoons, coins, a coil of wires: everywhere, the player/spectator's new live-action avatar seeks out the circle and line pattern they learned within the preconscious, digital realm of *The Witness*. The tertiary protention of digital time has mediated the world before the player's waking consciousness was on the site.

By expanding this preconscious realm into an extended experience that allows its player to experience the "powers of the false" and digital time *as time*, *The Witness* gives us space to perceive the intervention of digital time within the time of the human. The crucial second ending not only discloses the persistence of the game's impact on consciousness, but also emphasizes the aspects of the human's world lacking within digital time. Besides noticing the abstract circles, the programmer falls

over, unused to the weight of a body; their apparently dazed gaze is drawn to an office Christmas tree, having been estranged from the true historical time of tradition; they knock over a stack of pennies with a pen, not having been able to grasp tools; they bang spoons on the counter, not having been able to create novel syntheses within time. The game thus ends by recomposing the relations of the human world, even as it shows how it has been shifted by the temporality of the digital image.

Conclusion: Play as a Mirror of the World

Here, I have read *The Witness* as a reflection on the temporality of the digital image. It seems worth reiterating that it performs this reflection *as a game*, that is, a form of play. The philosopher Eugen Fink understood play as the "the symbol of the world," a phenomenon that "as a strange intermixture of 'Being' and 'Seeming' [*'Sein' und 'Schein'*]—is, so to speak, a seeming Being and a being Seeming" (Fink 1960, p. 32). Reading play guides us toward "a grasping of the human's position in the world [*Weltstellung*]" (1960, p. 32). Like a mirror, play splits the world, but more effectively than the mirror, it gives us an intuition of the human as a "relation" within the world (1960, pp. 82, 41). Fink was writing more than a decade before video games became a consumer technology, but his description of the way the realm of play foregrounds the human as a relation to the world rings true for rule-bound digital realms, into which the player fits only on the basis of the relationships they assume to digital processes and 'objects.' In play, the world as a network of relations can be reflected back to us. The relations in play, like the world reflected in the mirror, have their own inner reality, the "seeming Being." As a game on time, *The Witness* hold a mirror up to the current coordinates of human temporality. However, particularly in the 21st century, and as illustrated saliently by the finale of *The Witness*, the inner reality of play cannot be viewed as wholly outside of the 'reality' it constitutes an exception to. In the end, we carry the relations established in the play-world with us into our waking lives, along with play's allegedly paradoxical mixture of *Sein* and *Schein*.

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