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## **Walking through the Past: The Mechanics and Player Experience of Haunting, Obsession and Trauma in *Layers of Fear***

**Abstract.** *Layers of Fear*, a 2016 psychological horror game by Bloober Team, is a story-oriented walking simulator. While many walking simulators focus on uncovering the past, *Layers of Fear* centres on the experience of being haunted by the past. The gameplay narrates a tragic story and the complex relation of the protagonist with his past from which he cannot escape: his fear, his obsession and the endless cycle of his madness. Most importantly, this experience is not constructed in the game by providing the players with journal entries or letters to read, but by allowing them to literally walk through the past, among material representations of memories and emotions, as the house itself shifts through various layers and moments of time both before and after the tragic events that haunt the protagonist. This paper focuses on the unique delivery of experiencing past events used in *Layers of Fear*, as well as the concept of haunting, trauma and obsession central to both the game and gameplay.

**Keywords:** *Layers of Fear*; trauma; exploring the past; player experience; walking simulator.

*Layers of Fear* is a psychological horror digital game developed and published by a Polish studio, Bloober Team<sup>1</sup>, on 16 February 2016. According to the developers' description, the title is "a first-person psychedelic horror game with a heavy focus on story and exploration," in which the player controls "a painter whose sole purpose is to finish his Magnum Opus"; the player, as the creators explain, "must navigate through both a constantly changing Victorian-era mansion and ghastly visions of the painter's fragile and crumbling psyche" (<http://www.layersoffear.com/main.html>). The gameplay experience involves being confronted with—or haunted by—tragedy and trauma, obsession and insanity suffered by the protagonist of *Layers of Fear*. This paper aims at describing the unique manner in which space and story interact. Instead of shifting the story elements within constant space, *Layers of Fear* manipulates the space surrounding the character to suggest the main storyline; the player must move their avatar not through a physical landscape, but through a string of abstract representations showing the protagonist's past. In this way, the narrative can reach its conclusion in the present of the fictional world of the game.

Thematically, the game is classified as psychological horror; as far as mechanics and gameplay are concerned, *Layers of Fear* is a walking simulator—a type of games which feature "non-violent gameplay" (Valentine and Jensen 2016: 18), use "little mechanics," and are considered to be "exploration-heavy . . . with a particular focus on environments" (Carbo-Mascarell 2016). The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how the themes of obsession, trauma and haunting past in the game *Layers of Fear* are expressed in gameplay through hauntological aesthetics and use of spectral traces, temporal disjunctions and uncanny discontinuities (Riley 2017: 18), as the game allows the player to both symbolically and literally walk through the past. The research methods chosen for this analysis belong to the field of game studies, and include the textual analysis of the game with particular emphasis on its ludic elements and player data. The textual analysis denotes a regular textual analysis—i.e. the in-depth study of a game (Fernández-Vara 2015: 9), which specifically focuses on appreciating how the players make sense of the game (Fernández-Vara 2015: 11). The ludic elements refer mainly to the mechanics of the game, and player data to the player experience. The story, being central to the experience, is also taken into consideration, but with the focus put on the narrative framework and the narrative design.

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<sup>1</sup> According to their official website, Bloober Team SA is an independent producer of video games (<https://www.blooberteam.com/about.html>). *Layers of Fear* is their most successful project to date.

## ***Layers of Fear* and the Question of Genre**

While *Layers of Fear* is a walking simulator, it significantly departs from the conventions of the genre in order to provide a unique experience of the past. In all games of this type “the player assumes control from the first-person perspective and steers in-game movements using directional inputs through a control interface, such as a keyboard and mouse”; the game worlds typically offer few obstructions, and there are hardly any challenges or explicit goals (Muscat et al. 2013):

the [walking simulator] experience involves few player interactions and slow movement within the virtual space. Furthermore, . . . there are few event-based disruptions, obstacles and pressures to impede the player’s movement and navigation. . . . Although the slowing of movement, uninterrupted navigation and extending of time could be seen as a subject of frustration for some players, it does much to configure the played [walking simulator] experience. Without obstructions the player may set the pace of navigation as they please, allowing for extended time spent within the game world. (Muscat et al. 2013)

Already in this regard *Layers of Fear* differs decidedly from other walking simulators. While the players indeed spend extended time in the game world, they have very little control over the pace of their navigation, or even actually the act of navigation itself, because the environment changes constantly. This results from the way in which the game makes use of another very important aspect of gameplay typical for this genre—the placement of objects and the semiotic arrangement of space (Carbo-Mascarell 2016). In the majority of walking simulators information is supposed to be dispersed in space in a way that encourages the cycle of exploration, discovery, unlocking and more exploration (Carbo-Mascarell 2016), mostly due to the fact that the storyline in such games is structured and expressed primarily through its spatial extensions (the items and materials in the game world constitute a database of sort, which is displayed spatially) (Wolf 2016). In *Layers of Fear* it is not the objects containing information that are dispersed in space, but the past itself: memories, emotions and images. Usually, in walking simulators space tends to be “dominant in contrast to everything else in the game; while the space of the game remains constant, . . . the narrative is constantly shifting in ways that redefine that space” (Valentine and Jensen 2016: 89). Narratives, which are sequences of events, for the

most part preference, as Wolf points out, temporality (2016). In the case of a scripted narrative the player meets either a series of quests that they need to complete or a series of events that must take place in order for the story to progress (Calleja 2009); the story may be “forced upon players through devices such as cut scenes” or it can emerge “from the players’ interaction with the environment” (Calleja 2009). Either way, the story is a sequence of events. Although *Layers of Fear* employs both spatiality as well as scripted events (even cut scenes), it does so in a distinct manner—it is not the narrative as it is perceived by the player that shifts and redefines the stable space, but in fact it is the illusory space recreated in the Artist’s memory that continues to shift around the player’s avatar, sometimes even from one second to another, redefining the Artist’s past and therefore the narrative of the game as it is experienced by the player.

Many walking simulators focus on the past, usually by compelling the players to uncover events that have already taken place by the time the avatar arrives at the location, or to puzzle together a story leading up to that point, the fragments of which are usually presented in the form of journals, logs or diary entries with a distinct narrative form. *Layers of Fear* is significantly different from games taking such an approach. Firstly, the story the player is trying to piece together is already known to the character, so in this sense there is no “uncovering” of any kind. In contrast to many other walking simulators, the protagonist is not trying to determine what has happened, neither are they reminiscing about past events; the Artist is not (re)discovering his past—he is haunted by it, and in more than one way. Secondly, the majority of the most important elements of the story, as well as their emotional impact, is revealed not by reading journal entries or letters, but by literally walking through the past: the house which initially seems cared for and lived-in is only an image of the gone-by days that the Artist has been holding onto, and the objects and locations which the player encounters point to past events; nearly every object picked up by the character belongs to a different point in time, and the house shifts through various layers and moments of time both before and after the tragic accident that changed the Artist’s life.

Through the introductory sequence to *Layers of Fear* the players learn that there is “a way to bring it all back,” even though it takes a substantial amount of time to formulate a guess concerning what “it” might be, and even by the time the game is complete the answer may not be clear (depending on the ending achieved). As the game begins, the players can hear the following opening lines: “I know how you must feel. Lost, alone, hopeless. You probably deserve it. But even for you there is still a way... A way to bring it all back. The one precious thing you ever truly desired. Finish it” (*Layers*

of *Fear*, 2016). The game puts heavy emphasis on the importance and the role of the past. The players begin the game without any kind of foreknowledge of the events in the game; even the official story information available at the game's website is deliberately vague:

You take another drink as the canvas looms in front of you. A light flickers dimly in the corner. You've created countless pieces of art, but never anything like . . . this. Why haven't you done this before? It seems so obvious in retrospect. . . . You look up, startled. That melody. . . Was that a piano? It sounded just like her . . . But, no—that would be impossible. She's gone. They're all gone. . . . How long has it taken to get to this point? Too long, but it doesn't matter. There will be no more distractions. It's almost finished. You can feel it. Your creation. Your Magnum Opus. (<http://www.layersoffear.com/main.html>)

Thus the players begin their experience with some awareness that the past is tremendously important in *Layers of Fear*, but with little understanding of the Artist's character or the events that have taken place in the house they explore. In fact, the ambiguous story is one of the game's characteristic features. While some elements of the backstory can be inferred from the narrative constructed by the player's experience during their unique realization of the game, the player experience itself is more focused on feeling and enduring the haunting of the Artist by his tragic past than forming any proper story (understood, as previously defined, as a sequence of events). Consequently, the actual gameplay resembles a patchwork of relived memories and past associations, difficult to map on any time axis. The player controls the Artist—the protagonist of the game—as the first-person avatar, but there are no quests to be done or events to witness: the Artist must wander through his house, haunted by the past, until he stumbles upon the items necessary to complete the *Magnum Opus*.

### The Story and the Narrative Design

Stories in games are realized within the specifications of narrative design—i.e. the way in which the space of the game is designed and, more importantly, how it should be navigated so that a story can be constructed (Fernández-Vara 2015: 159). “As the player traverses the space,” Fernández-Vara explains, “the game invites the player to interpret the objects and characters in the environment” (2015: 159), thus assigning meaning to them

and investing them with coherence. In *Layers of Fear*, the past of the Artist, which can be inferred from the gameplay, forms the following narrative framework (the story): the Artist, unnamed in all materials available in the game, was a very promising painter on the verge of becoming famous; the Wife was also gaining fame, being a skilled violin and piano player. The couple, expecting a child, moved into the house in which the game takes place. The Daughter was born, and for some period of time they all lived happily. At some point, the Wife was horribly injured in an accident—a department store fire—which left her disfigured and in pain. The tension in the house grew, as the couple drifted apart and the Artist started suffering from a creative block and sought escape in alcohol. The Wife, unable to find support in her husband and haunted by the reminders of her former beauty, eventually killed herself. The Daughter was taken away from the Artist by the authorities, and the Artist apparently slowly descended into madness. Eventually he set out to create his *Magnum Opus*: a monstrous painting created on the canvas of flayed skin, with an undercoat made from powdered bone, over which paint mixed with blood was applied with a brush made out of human hair and a human finger, only to be beheld by a gouged human eye<sup>2</sup>.

At this point it is worth noting that one of the most important aspects of *Layers of Fear* is the fact that the game does not rely either on an outsider to discover all this information or on a protagonist with amnesia who would have to remember it all anew. Instead, this tragic story is narrated through gameplay, emphasizing the complex relation of the protagonist with his past from which he cannot escape, his fear, his obsession and the endless cycle of madness. The players immerse themselves in the Artist's past, walking among material representations of memories and emotions, as the house itself shifts through various layers and moments of time both before and after the tragic events that haunt the protagonist. While walking through the past of the Artist, the player makes choices in the present that will allow them to shape the Artist's future<sup>3</sup>. Since all three endings—which will be discussed

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<sup>2</sup> Although many sources (including the English- and German-language Wikipedia pages for the title) state that the body parts used by the Artist belonged to the Wife, the *Endless Loop* ending clearly shows that the Artist is about to attempt to create the *Magnum Opus* again, and he has most certainly created it many times before, as evidenced by all the virtually identical portraits thrown into one room (both in their monstrous form as well as the non-hallucinated form witnessed later at the beginning of the new loop) and the overlapping scribbles in the cabinet for the body parts. The number and identity of the people presumably killed and harvested by the Artist is therefore unknown.

<sup>3</sup> In contrast, in *Layers of Fear: Inheritance* (Bloober Team, 2016), the continuation of the original game featuring the Artist's Daughter as avatar, the time shifts allow the player

later—have tragic overtones, the gameplay thus creates a hauntological effect by not only “conceptualizing the repressed past” of the Artist in the form of objects and phenomena surrounding the avatar in the game world, but also by constructing “a way of understanding [the] obsession with failed futures” he manifests (Riley 2017: 18).

The concept of haunting, in a variety of senses, is very distinct in *Layers of Fear*, as expressed through the themes of memories and insanity and the impression of disjointed, fragmented past—most easily observable in “fear, obsession and the constant repetition of specific actions” (Madikizela and Merwe 2009: 240). The Artist’s obsession with his Wife’s lost beauty and the way she inspired his art leads in turn to his compulsive, disturbed attempts at recreating a perfect reflection of that beauty. This obsession (manifested in the mechanics of the gameplay and expressed in the narrative constructed by it) can lead to three different outcomes, all haunted by the previous tragedy and all depending on the extent of the Artist introspection (staged through the player’s control). There are three different endings to the game, but the canon<sup>4</sup>—and most commonly achieved—ending is the *Endless Loop*; the Artist manages to complete the *Magnum Opus*, which initially depicts the Wife in all her pre-injury beauty. The Artist is delighted, but the portrait suddenly changes—the painted woman scoffs at him and begins to laugh as her skin decays and peels off her face, exposing raw flesh and bones. The Artist laments that he has almost captured the wife’s image this time, and throws the horrifying painting into the adjacent room, where the players can see a huge pile of other pieces of canvas, all featuring the same portrait—clearly having been painted over and over. The Artist shuts the door, the mocking laughter still coming from the room, and then walks through the house again, this time seeing it as a dilapidated ruin. He returns to his study and there he begins work on a new canvas, indicating that this cycle repeats endlessly<sup>5</sup>. Just like the phantom of the Wife that haunts the Artist through his memories, her terrifying scarred and deformed appearance coming forth from under his work represents “that which no longer really exists but which one refuses to acknowledge or remember” (Madikizela and Merwe 2009:

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to change the actions of the Daughter in her own past, which in turn affects the present and therefore determines her future—i.e. the ending achieved by the player.

<sup>4</sup> A “canon ending” is the ending designated by the creators as the desirable outcome of the gameplay, as well as the one which allows for the continuation of the storyline in the next parts of the game franchise (Marak and Markocki 2016: 30).

<sup>5</sup> The players mainly achieve this ending by picking up only those items that are required to move the narrative forward and interact with the phantom of the Wife only once during the course of the game.

240); the injured, disfigured form of the Wife is long gone, but even as the Artist tries to forget it, it still invades his paintings. The horrible visage the Artist cannot escape is just the other side of his obsession.

Two other endings can also be achieved; the *Selfless Ending: Mother And Child* and *Self-Portrait*. In the first one the Artist is able to break through the madness and obsession, but is unable to let go of the past all the same. This time the *Magnum Opus* features both the Wife and the Daughter. The Artist realizes that no depiction, no matter how perfect, will ever bring his loved ones back, and he takes the portrait to the room with all the other paintings of the Wife (this time they are not all the same), and, overcome by grief, he sets them all on fire and burns alongside them<sup>6</sup>. In the *Self-Portrait* ending the Artist's obsession with the past is shifted from the Wife as his muse to art itself—this time his *Magnum Opus* is a self-portrait, later shown as displayed in a gallery, indicating that the Artist was able to start painting again, clinging to his insanity<sup>7</sup>.

### The Mechanics of the Haunting Past

Since the text of digital games is non-fixed, there is no single telling of the story (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2016: 203), but instead a myriad of potential actualizations (Crogan 2003: 289). Each playthrough is unique, and therefore reducing the game to explaining the mechanics and the story events is not enough. In the case of games, it is the experience of the audience (the players) that is crucial—which requires elaborating on the types of interactions the game encourages or discourages, as well as commenting on the game's challenges and the player's response to those challenges (Fernández-Vara 2015: 110). The experience of the player is capital to understanding some games as texts (Fernández-Vara 2015: 110), and such is the case with *Layers of Fear*. The game places heavy emphasis on themes of decay, loss of control and sanity, and the obsession with that which is lost, and those themes are, as will be demonstrated, embodied both in the mechanics and in the fictional

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<sup>6</sup> For the narrative to reach this conclusion, the player needs to always move towards the Wife whenever the Artist sees her, touch and examine all of the items related to her (notes, photos, vanity items), and push the wheelchair found at the end of the game.

<sup>7</sup> In order for the narrative to conclude in this way, the player needs to avoid the Wife whenever the Artist can see or hear her—never walk towards her, and try to avoid any interaction with her phantom. The Artist must also not touch any items related to either the Wife or the Daughter (especially the wheelchair); instead the player should focus on the delusions of rat infestation and the Artist's obsession concerning getting rid of them.



world of the game. While the fictional world is represented mainly through visual design, audio design and music, the game mechanics include all the elements that Richard Colby refers to as “atoms of gameplay”—among others options, rules, constraints, progression, turn-taking, aesthetics and controls (2013: 224). Rules and constraints are especially important here since in the fictional world created within the game they determine what the game world allows the players to do and what it prevents them from doing (Fernández-Vara 2015: 123), thus establishing how the players participate in the game (Fernández-Vara 2015: 98). In terms of experiential aspects of *Layers of Fear* this means that the protagonist’s obsession with the past, returning time and again to the same places, objects and thoughts, results in the player being unable to exit certain locations or encountering the same objects numerous times, although sometimes in different forms.

The mechanics employed in *Layers of Fear*, including the limited interaction and control over the environment, and the emergent gameplay epitomize the characteristic style that the game employed to create the experience of being haunted by the past. Instead of manageable journals or logically scheduled flashbacks, the storytelling makes use of memories of emotions and situations—picking up items triggers a voice-over that delivers the context, but nothing else; furthermore, depending on the direction which the avatar faces, the objects examined and the layout and the appearance of hallways and rooms change as well. This hauntological “movement to and fro between different temporal dimensions which provokes anxiety and imbalance” (Madikizela and Merwe 2009: 240) begins with uncovering the canvas—once the player enters and then exits the studio, they enter the Artist’s past: the house is now arranged not according to its physical layout, but according to the Artist’s memories and associations. The interior not only becomes more and more dilapidated with the progress of the game, but the appearance of the rooms and hallways changes to reflect specific memories or events, as can be seen in the sequence in the bedroom with the phonograph. The bedroom reflects the time from both before and after the Wife’s injury, in the same way the nursery changes to reflect the presence and absence of the Daughter in it in front of the player’s eyes. In this way the house becomes the proof of the trauma experienced by all the members of the family: the Artist, the Wife and the Daughter. The trauma is preserved within the walls and objects in the house: drawings, burn marks and damage visible on the environment elements, as well as objects and voices.

## The Hauntological Character of the Game's Indexical Storytelling

*Layers of Fear* employs indexical storytelling, which is related to the concept of environmental storytelling as defined by Richard Rouse. In contrast to environmental storytelling, where the story is “told by the game-world” as if the player were not there (Rouse 2010), indexical storytelling refers to “a story told mainly through indices,” where each and every index either has a relation to an event or—oftentimes—is a consequence of an event (Fernández-Vara 2011). In the fictional world of a game, indices can work as indications of what took place in the world before the game started, and it is usually up to the player to interpret them (Fernández-Vara 2011). Since each game realization is unique, different players will also “probably have different interpretations, allowing for a multiplicity of ways to understand the history of the space” (Fernández-Vara 2011). This multiplicity is drastically reduced in *Layers of Fear*, as the repeated “revisiting of spaces” or exposure to “resources with narrative connotation” (Rouse 2010 in Fernández-Vara 2011) not only are rarely open to interpretation, but also force the player to adopt the Artist's interpretation of events.

The game guides the player through the Artist's memories and associations by using traces (Riley 2017: 18), which mark the absence of a presence (McCrea 2009: 223). In *Layers of Fear*, these traces are mostly objects that represent persons or actions (as opposed to the echoes of the past), usually positioned in places associated with them, like the violin in the cabinet in the corner of the large phonograph bedroom, the ring in the jewel casket and the bandages on the night table beside the burning bed in the underground area, which represent the Wife. Similarly, pictures and toys, such as regular drawings or the chalk lines drawn on the floor and walls of the hallway, and the teddy bear with a party hat stand for the Daughter. However, the absence of presence can be also more immaterial, as signified by the moving rocking chair (the Wife), the running doll (the Daughter), or sounds such as piano music by the piano, or a child's laughter in the looping room.

The burned notes, bloodied bandages, and broken toy soldiers signify the past in various ways, but are not proper records of it. Walking simulators and games in general tend to rely on actual records of the past, such as newspaper articles and clippings, letters and handwritten notes. Such records also exist in the game, but serve to paint the background details rather than the core of the Artist's trauma. The player encounters disjointed objects

and items which denote the overlapping of various points in time (Riley 2017: 18)—the experience of the present being not simply revisited (Riley 2017: 18), but actually haunted by the past. In the study to which the Artist repeatedly returns in order to work on the *Magnum Opus*, various changes take place as the game progresses: new items appear (notes and drawings), the wallpaper and curtains deteriorate, and more and more floorboards are torn up in search of imaginary rats. In place of a journal entry that would inform the players how the Artist forgot about his child's birthday, the avatar finds an abandoned teddy bear in the middle of one of the hallways. The birthday hat on the toy points to the forgotten birthday of the Daughter, and upon examination the Artist recalls himself having been too engrossed in his work and blaming the Wife for not reminding him. Similarly, there is no actual record of the couple's growing apart after the Wife's injury (such as diaries or letters), but at some point the player can guide the Artist to the haunted, twisted version of the present, and after picking up the receiver the Wife's voice can be heard, asking the Artist why he does not talk to her; this call is not a flashback, but a disjointed conversation that should have taken place but never did.

Another aspect of the haunting past in *Layers of Fear* concerns not only those memories that the Artist relives, but those that he wants to trap and at the same time is trapped by. Apart from the hideous spectre of the Wife's disfigurement that he does not want to remember but which haunts him, the other memory which the Artist cannot free himself from is that of the Wife's lost beauty. By striving to create the *Magnum Opus* (the one which can be seen in *Endless Loop*), he is in fact trying to preserve—trap—the beauty of his Wife as he remembers her, and (re)capture her spirit in an image. What is more, the Wife before her death was haunted by the same memory of her own beauty with which the Artist is obsessed. This haunting memory she perceived almost like a separate presence in the house. She regards and addresses her painted image as a separate, different person, which is clear in the following monologue:

I am such an idiot. To think that someone like me could ever compete with you. In all your sublime beauty. Everlasting. Immortal. . .  
I finally figured it out. And it's all thanks to you. You've shown me that there is no other way. Even now, your sad smile confirms what should have been obvious. We will not speak again. (*Layers of Fear*, 2016)

This dialogue can only be heard if the player guides the Artist to linger over the traces of the Wife. The portrait depicts the Wife, still unscarred and beautiful. The sorrowful words about the inability of something as ugly as the creature she had become (in her own eyes) to compete with the eternal and inviolate sublime beauty of the woman in the painting are directed to the portrait, indicating that the Wife saw the image not as a reflection of herself from the past, but as an unfamiliar presence that haunted her every waking hour.

As explained at the beginning of the game, the goal of the Artist (within the narrative) and, therefore, of the player (in the gameplay) is completing the *Magnum Opus*. As the *Magnum Opus* is being developed—literally layer upon layer—the traces of the earlier work remain visible. Similarly, as different memories surface, each door opened and each corridor turn change the surroundings—sometimes just slightly, and sometimes drastically—the layers of the Artist’s past slowly melt away, revealing more and more of his backstory. The players’ lack of control is also manifest in the way in which they can only barely navigate in the environment built out of memories; because the changes are completely beyond the player’s control, and happen at different, irregular intervals, the player must explore and examine every place before moving forward as there is no going back: the door through which the Artist enters the room can be gone when he turns around, and the scriblings on the wall can change or disappear if he looks away even for a moment. In *Layers of Fear*, the past cannot be covered (*Magnum Opus*) or altered (no backtracking). The gameplay itself serves primarily to express the Artist’s relation to his past, allowing for reflection upon the nature of haunting itself. By controlling the avatar, the players follow the Artist’s footsteps through time into the echoes and images of the past, and become themselves a figure out of time, a displaced presence that does not belong but lingers on nonetheless, just like the Artist, who himself is but a ghost of the person he once was, haunting the ruin of the house. In the case of interactive storytelling, the audience will expect to influence the storytelling—in games the users “need to experience agency within a dramatic entity,” and it is that agency which changes their role from “members of the audience” to “participants” (Spierling 2005). In *Layers Of Fear* the players—like in all other games—have agency, but their role is not as pronounced as in other game genres (even other walking simulators), as they are first and foremost witnesses of things past. Furthermore, the creators’ choice to remove the fight-or-flight dilemma and opt for the non-combat style instead (Marak and Markocki 2016: 103) leaves the Artist defenceless and the player powerless. What might seem to some like a dubious choice in terms of game design is

in fact a very appropriate strategy in terms of the subject matter. The ghost of the Wife can assault the Artist, and he can be confused by the visions, but he has no means of fighting back or even running, because escaping one's own past is not possible. The Wife's deformed, horrifying figure haunting the protagonist is merely the manifestation of the Artist's sense of being haunted, registering "the uncanny return of a ghost from the past" (Madikizela and Merwe 2009: 240; Riley 2017: 18).

## Conclusion

Game texts as a medium have the exceptional potential to influence and manipulate the players mainly due to their unique ability of placing the player in a "continuous mode of interaction with the game"; the players are "continuously presented with (and react to) a wide palette of content types that vary from sound effects and textures to narratives, game rules and levels" (Togelius and Yannakakis 2016: 156). In this sense *Layers Of Fear* forces the player to reenact the Artist's obsession and experience his trauma; the players, unable to control their surroundings, will revisit the same locations even if they attempt to leave or will discover that they are trapped in a room because the door through which they entered has disappeared, and—in order to progress—they will repeatedly pick up and examine the same objects, remnants of the Artist's past. Furthermore, the trauma of the Artist literally changes the world around the players—a process which the players cannot counteract and which prevents them from accessing the world as it really is (within the virtual environment); the old, dilapidated building is accessible only briefly, before the new cycle of insanity begins. The specific nature of the mechanics and gameplay in *Layers Of Fear* also makes it the perfect vehicle for the player to experience various aspects of haunting. The game allows the players to bear witness to the Artist's past and emotional experiences; despite the fact that it is actually the Artist who is haunted by his past, by the memory of his loved ones and by his mistakes, it is the player who experiences fear, confusion and anxiety while playing the game. Instead of telling a linear story about a painter unable to escape his past, the gameplay of *Layers Of Fear* creates, therefore, a unique narrative about the Artist and his past, his obsession and his spectres, a narrative which is experienced by the player. Once the canvas is ready, every step moves the player deeper into the protagonist's perturbed memories, pushing them to wander through overlaying temporal dimensions and fragments of tragic events, scattered throughout the house. In this way, the seemingly stable

space becomes a fluctuating, erratic maze of images and sounds as they were remembered by the protagonist, and simultaneously a trap which the player cannot leave until they face the Artist's ghost. Thus the players also become the ones who are haunted—by ghosts that are not their own.

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