APRIL 26, 2023

ASSESSMENT 3: VIDEO ANALYSIS & ACADEMIC REFERENCE LIST
GD3600 – FILM AND VIDEO GAMES MAJOR PROJECT

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LABYRINTHOS ERGON: ERGODIC CRITICISM PROJECT CRITICAL REFLECTION

<u>Link to Video:</u> https://youtu.be/64Jg86uQMFw

<u>Link to Project File:</u> https://drive.google.com/file/d/1D12POYk_d9qqpPZ_hNAlC1uFOU9Rhii2/view?usp=sharing

Introduction/Abstract

Labyrinthos Ergon. The name of this project implies a maze through which mental and or physical 'work' and effort are required in order to traverse it.

This name hopes to capture the aim of this project, wherein I further explore a new trajectory in the field of video game criticism, one which incorporates additional elements into video game criticism, such as interactivity, non-linearity, agency, and fail-states in an attempt to better align with the medium-specific qualities of video games.

Initially, the project introduces the idea of ergodicity based on the work of Espen Aarseth (Cybertext: Perspective on Ergodic Literature, 1997), as well as outlining the objectives of the project. Specifically, what the participant may expect and guidelines for how they should approach the project. This aims to not only mitigate some confusion but also allows for the participant to position themselves as both critical observer and configurative player with regard to the subject matters explored in the project as well as the project itself.

This work is inspired by and grounded in the works of Balsom (2006), Bellour (1975), Corrigan (2011), and Keathley (2011), in relation to film theory, and Aarseth (1997), Galloway (2006), Juul (2005,2021), and Salen & Zimmerman (2003) in their understanding of video game-specific qualities. This project also builds upon my own previous iteration of ergodic criticism, created using the Twine Engine. This previous iteration allows for the exploration of linear text, similar to a text-based adventure game.

While this project was effective, it lacked both modularity and complexity in its ludic structure as well as hypertextuality, making it difficult to apply as a general mode for video game criticism.

Labyrinthos Ergon aimed to improve upon this previous iteration by incorporating previous concepts into a Virtual Reality (VR) environment, which allowed for increased interactivity for the participant as well as a more nuanced ludo-narrative structure. Additionally, this platform allowed for the introduction of new concepts such as presence, immersion, and proprioception, while also expanding areas such as level of interactivity, agency, and non-linearity.

STRUCTURE OVERVIEW

This project takes the form of a maze within a 3D virtual reality environment constructed of six layers. Each layer consists of three nodes. The nodes themselves contain text, film sequences, and interactable assets, each relating to the topic of the node. The films included in each node begin playing as the player approaches a plinth in front of them. This ensures that the player is facing the projection while also maintaining a distance from the projection that allows for it to be seen in its entirety. The participant is only able to access one of these nodes in each layer during a single playthrough. The design of this maze is inspired by Aarseth's description of the multi-cursal maze, which sees the participant placed at the centre of the maze and allows for multiple paths to be taken towards one or multiple exits. This structure allows for a high level of modularity and combinations of meanings. Specifically, this structure allows for 54 unique combinations to be explored.
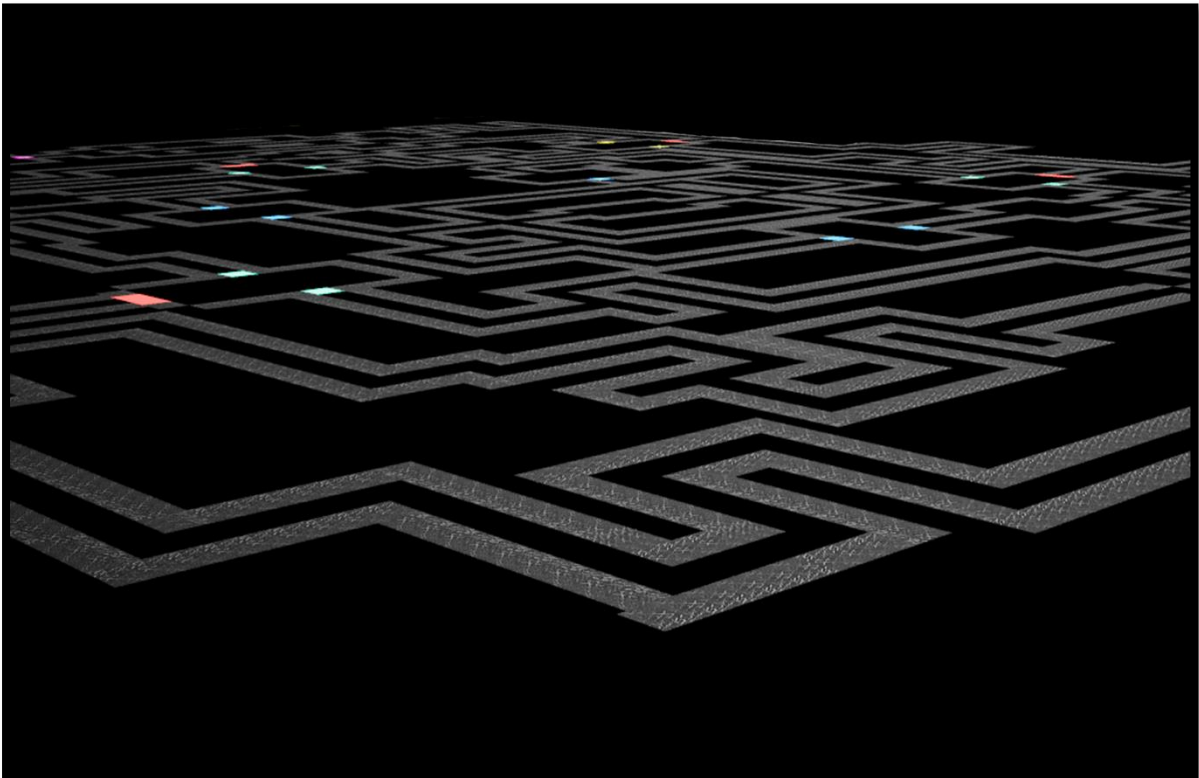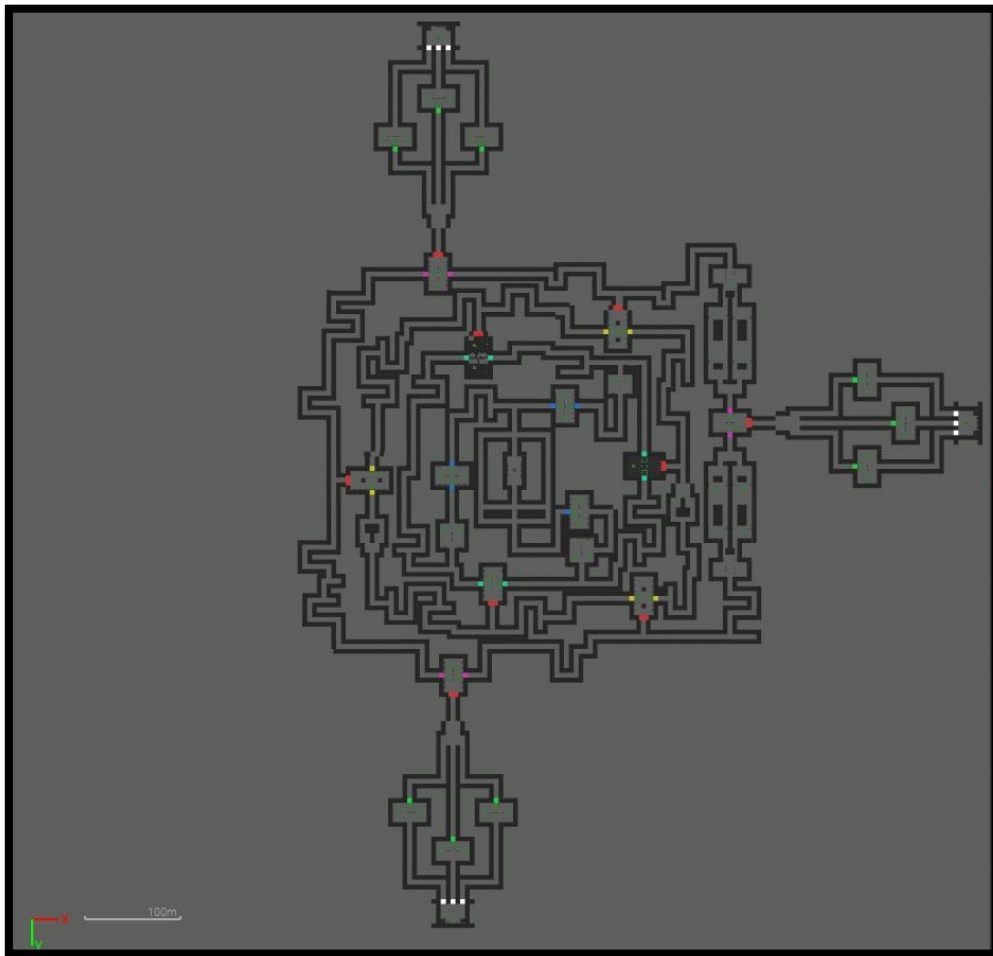

Figure 1: Overview of project structure and layout

As mentioned, the first area within the project introduces the participant to the concept of ergodicity, the maze, and its aims. From this, the participant is able to explore the maze freely. However, once they have discovered one of the nodes in each layer, that node is blocked off, preventing them from doubling back and exploring any other node within that layer. As the participant continues to explore the maze, they are introduced to concepts surrounding essay films and video essays and their application within the field of video game criticism. Within this, the potential benefits of this application of video essays are explored as well as their potential limitations and how ergodic criticism aims to circumvent these limitations. This forms the basis for the project's primary argument, that of creating a medium-specific form of criticism for video games in the same vein as the essay film for film criticism (Keathley. C, 2011, p. 179).

PROJECT STRUCTURE

From a technical standpoint, I made use of a variety of source materials from films, performances, and games as well as included assets included in Unreal Engine 5. These source materials aimed to keep the participant engaged through multiple potential 'playthroughs' as well as allowing for multiple points of interest. The complex, modular layout of the maze creates the possibility for the participant to become disorientated, while also ensuring that progression through the maze is almost guaranteed. This is enhanced through the use of low light levels and seamless, repeating textures.

In contrast to this, each node is laid out to ensure that the participant is able to easily navigate around its contents regardless of their point of entry into to node (each node has two possible entrances). This layout and the presentation of the materials emulate that of exhibits within a museum. This also allows for a degree of modularity making each node easily editable and therefore accessible for its use in additional projects that explore varying concepts.

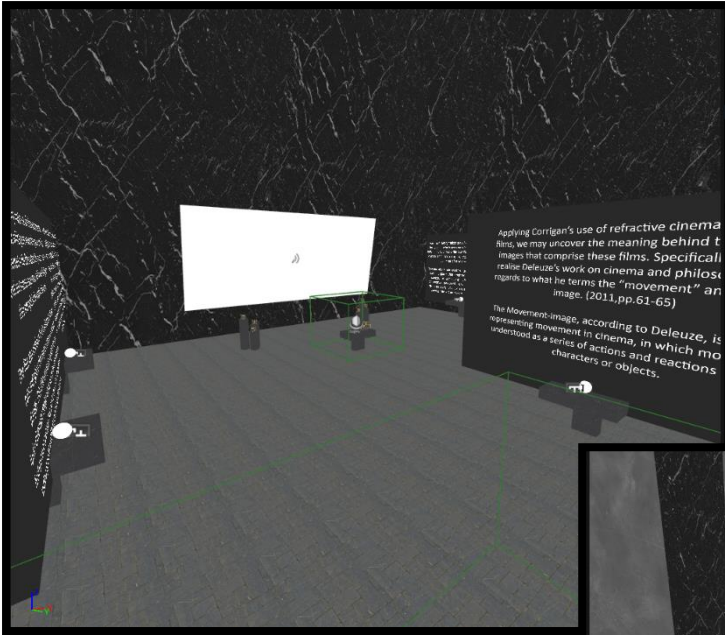

Figure 2: Detailed view of project structure and layout

Additionally, each node is adjusted to better represent the concepts being explored within. Examples of this include the Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (Wiene. R, 1920) node, the Vertigo (Hitchcock. A, 1958) node, and the Undertale (Toby Fox, 2015) node. The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari
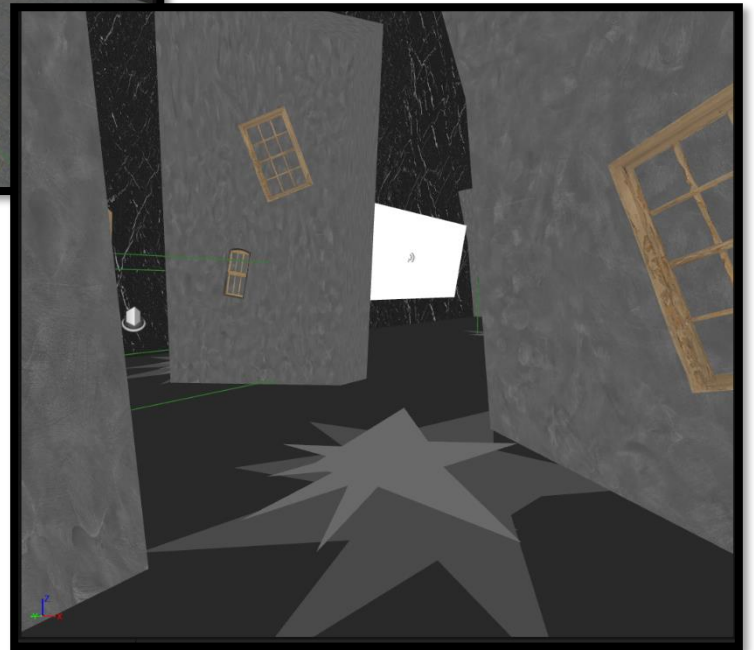

Figure 4: The 'Cabinet of Dr. Caligari Node'

node features assets such as distorted walls, objects at odd angles, and triangular, sharp-appearing textures that attempt to emulate the set design from the film The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari. Creating a half-real experience between the fictional setting and their aesthetic invocations. Similarly, the Vertigo node features a transparent floor with a tunnel-like structure that extends the walls of the node downward. This is used to contrast the experience of 'feeling' vertigo with the experience of seeing vertigo being depicted in the film of the same name by Alfred Hitchcock. The Undertale node makes use of the layout of the maze in order to better highlight its subject matter of agency.

The layout for this node is separated into branching paths which allow the participant to choose which path they would like to take based on the video and information provided to them. The layout of these paths aims to generate a sense of agency as well as a minor critique of agency as all paths lead to the same ending.

While the overall layout of the project is effective, it may benefit from signposting and features that make the act of exploring the maze (in terms of traversing from one node to the next) more engaging for the participant. This would be especially beneficial in the case of layers 5 and 6, where owing to the structure of the maze, the distance between nodes is naturally increased.

VIDEO STRUCTURE

As mentioned, the project includes a variety of source materials. In order to better align with the concepts included in this project, all videos were personally edited by myself to ensure that the overall video length of the project remained within scope while also maintaining the fundamental meaning of the source material. Each film is projected onto a plane within each node, the size of which and intended viewing distance from the projection is roughly the same ratio that is used within a cinema.

The projections for source materials including Historie(s) du Cinéma (Godard, J.-L. 1988-1998), F for Fake (Welles. O, 1973), Riddles of the Sphinx (Mulvey. L and Wollen. P, 1977), Parallels I-IV (Farocki. H, 2012-2014), Vertigo (Hitchcock. A, 1958), and The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (Wiene. R, 1920) make use of a montage of sequences from each film to create a focused view of the aspects being examined. The way in which these aspects are presented also aims to engage the participant by allowing for a degree of active participation, on a cognitive level, in order for their meaning to be realised.

However, this same use of montage did not effectively convey the meaning of the film Ten Skies (Benning. J, 2004) due to its length and subject, this film appears largely static over a short duration. In order to account for this, the film was separated into ten segments, each one capturing the 10-minute sequence of each sky. These 10-minute sequences were then converted to a thirty-second GIF, which loops infinitely within the project.

The composition of source materials for Hardcore Henry (Naishuller. I, 2015), Resident Evil 4 (Capcom Co, 2021), Beat Saber (Beat Games, 2018), Undertale (Toby Fox, 2015), Ricky Jay (Hyman. S, 2016), Tripp VR (Tripp, 2021), and The Game of Video Game Objects (Juul. J, 2021) required similar adaptations for the presentation of their elements. Specifically, these required that a more continuous sequence be presented in order for their meaning to be better realised. This was also decided as outlined in the project, this would allow for a similar form of 'vicarious play' outlined in the works of Glas and van Vught (2017, p.2). They also allowed for the use of interactable assets such as guns, sabres, and collision cubes to be used as a mimetic interface used in tandem with the video projection.

While I do believe this is effective in conveying the concepts explored for these sequences, there still remains a distinct lack of interactivity between the actions of the participant and the resulting sequences projected.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this project is effective in conveying this idea of ergodic criticism and grounds itself within both film and video game theory. The project aims to highlight both the benefits and shortcomings of video essays for video game criticism and how this may be addressed through the inclusion of ergodicity. The project does not dismiss the use of video essays as standalone devices for video game criticism and instead highlights their practical application in this new form of criticism by incorporating them throughout this project. While it is important to consider varying levels of criticism within any field of study, a form of criticism for video games that more closely resembles the action-based nature of the medium may prove more effective. The use of a virtual reality environment also allows for the exploration of video game-specific qualities which cannot be effectively translated through video or text alone. While not discussed in the project itself, VR games and projects similar to this, such as Noun Town (realiaXR. (2022) show an increase in the comprehension for the participants as they are able to interact directly with the object of study.

While there are many positive qualities to this project, its design also presents possible shortcomings that are difficult to mitigate. Firstly, the project itself may lack accessibility due to the hardware and software required in order to access it. Secondly, the technology used for this project (VR Headset) has the potential to negatively affect participants due to visual lag leading to feelings of motion sickness. Though this has been mitigated in part through the inclusion of a 'teleportation movement system' and 'snapped' angular orientation settings. This project may be further improved by creating a more engaging ludo-narrative structure that incorporates more traditional game elements that encourage more performative engagement. Additionally, I would have liked the conclusion of the project to be more reflective of the participant's unique exploration of the project and the choices made by them.

However, with these aspects brought into consideration, this project effectively demonstrates and reflects on current forms of video game criticism as a whole and hopes that it provides a platform from which additional research may be explored.

VIDEO LENGTH

Name	Length (in seconds)
Ten Skies (Total)	300s
Parallel I-IV	45s
Histoire(s) du Cinéma	24s
Vertigo	64s
Riddles of the Sphinx	62s
Hardcore Henry	91s
Ricky Jay and His 52 Assistants	36s
F for Fake	22s
The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari	82s
Resident Evil 4	49s
Undertale (Total)	130s
Beat Saber	55s
The Game of Video Game Objects	28s
Tripp VR	42s
Total Time	1030s -> 17mins

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