

Gaps:

I'm not sure this is going anywhere.

I'm afraid this is going to end.

There might not be anything else.

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BFA, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University 2019

A THESIS SUPPORT PAPER SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE COMPLETION
FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF FINE ARTS



EMILY CARR UNIVERSITY OF ART + DESIGN

2025

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Abstract

This thesis project uses code-driven media to express states of spatial, cognitive and narrative uncertainty. *Gaps: I'm not sure this is going anywhere/ I'm afraid this is going to end/ There might not be anything else* (shortened to *Gaps* throughout) combines aspects of game design, electronic literature and film to develop a structure of looping progression. *Gaps* features a three-channel interactive video installation that combines photographic and computer-generated footage, text, and digital objects to express a series of thought loops, emotional states and memories occupied with perceived unstable futures. Viewers move through these states, some of which present occasional moments of limited agency through interaction and what Lev Manovich calls spatial cinema, giving viewers the agency to change details but not the outcome. The project situates viewers in liminal and suburban spaces that express internal states and evoke qualities of what Deleuze and Guattari call the “smooth and striated.” Viewers are encouraged to linger in the narrative moments and digital spaces presented through the language of code-driven media. This thesis support document, written to accompany the media installation, elaborates on each of its key themes and concepts.

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Acknowledgements

There were so many wonderful people I met during my time at Emily Carr and I am thankful for every conversation.

I want to thank my Supervisor Alla Gadassik for her support, insight, and help working through the seemingly endless cycles of editing.

I want to thank my professors for guiding me through this journey:
Ingrid Koenig, Lauren Marsden, Mimi Gellman, Prophecy Sun, Mark Igloliorte, Sanem Guvenc, and Randy Lee Cutler.

I also want to thank Lindsay McIntyre and Peter Bussigel for their regular studio visits.

I want to thank my reviewers Sarah Joyce and Ben Unterman for meaningfully engaging with my work.

In no particular order I want to thank Brady Marks, Colinda and Bryn Chambers, Sara Osenton, Alex Haythorne, Sean Arden, Kevin Romaniuk, Yang Hong, Naomi Watkins, Valentine Bedford, Gavin Peterson, David Clark, Robin Lambert and Ian Cook for your time and energy.

Thank you to my cohort for your feedback, support and time spent together in the studio.

To my brave partner, thank you.

Introduction/Framing

Gaps: I'm not sure this is going anywhere/I'm afraid this is going to end/ There might not be anything else is a three-channel media installation that forms the core of my MFA thesis. Developed over a series of iterations, the thesis submission version of this project is installed in the RBC Media Gallery in the Michael O'Brien Exhibition Commons at Emily Carr University.

This thesis project is structured as a series of three acts, which correspond to the three weeks of the exhibition run. The first act, *I'm not sure this is going anywhere*, takes the form of a looping three-channel video installation that combines computer-generated images, photographic images, and text. The 90-second loop changes iteratively over the course of each day and over the course of the entire act, slowly reordering and changing out the imagery, sound and text presented the same but different each cycle.

The second act, *I'm afraid this is going to end*, transitions into a single 10-minute loop, which incorporates moments of viewer choice through direct interaction, and asks viewers to linger in the digital spaces they are surrounded by.

The third act, *There might not be anything else*, reconfigures the three-channel installation into a non-linear interactive environmental exploration.

Throughout the duration of *Gaps: I'm not sure this is going anywhere/I'm afraid this is going to end/ There might not be anything else*, the installation transitions between different configurations of narrative, temporality, and audience engagement.

The work may be experienced in its entire three-week duration, or in a single visit that allows access to only one moment of the entire trilogy. Throughout this text, the entire project will be termed in the shorthand as *Gaps*, while each arc will be referenced using its individual title.

As culmination of my MFA research, *Gaps* is centered around learning how to express ideas by combining elements from three media: electronic literature, cinema and game design. The first year of this degree being focused on experimenting with how to work with these mediums and the second year applying what I learned to explore the main theme of uncertainty.

My background in my undergraduate degree was in conceptual sculpture, and in the years between degrees I moved into working with digital media. As an artist I have learned my own way of working with these mediums from an outsider perspective, having never studied these mediums formally, instead learning how to code, work with game engines like Unity, 3d model and edit audio and video through experimentation and online tutorials. I value this outside perspective, because I am free to work with these mediums in independent ways. This has let me develop my own design ethos and aesthetic, often hacking together different elements to get the desired effect.

Gaps is interested in code-driven media's ability to express change over time. The project explores this medium's ability to mirror the experience of uncertainty and instability in the contemporary mediated social landscape – an experience understood here through Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of "the smooth and the striated." This MFA thesis examines the distinct, yet permeable, boundaries between three media forms that can be expressed in code: electronic literature, cinema, and video game narrative. *Gaps* combines these media forms in a gallery space through concepts of atmosphere and tone. It uses setting, narrative, viewer interaction and imagery to express its ideas about different responses to uncertainty throughout the project.

This document, which supports the *Gaps* media installation thesis project, comprises six thematic sections that can be read in any order. The document mixes several different types of writing, and key authors and works that inform the thesis recur and are re-introduced among different sections.

Gaps uses computer-generated imagery and digitally photographed imagery of physical spaces and objects, often combining both image types. In this document, when I describe computer-generated imagery I use the term 'digital', and when I describe photographed images of physical space and objects, I note 'physical'. In reality, both of these types of imagery are digital, as the project relies on digital (not analog) photography. However, for clarity of understanding, I refer to photographic images in terms of 'physical' spaces and objects, in distinction from computer-generated or simulated images.

Additionally, please note that this project's reference to code-driven media and digital imagery does not refer to AI generation. All of the computer-generated imagery in this thesis project has been created from scratch.

To best understand this document, if you do not have access to the installed media installation, I recommend watching the video documentation of each of the sections. Please note that the video documentation cannot express the interactive or modulating elements and is static in a way that the full project is not.

[Here](#) is a link to *I'm not sure this is going anywhere*.

[Here](#) is a link to *I'm afraid this is going to end*.

[Here](#) is a link to *There might not be anything else*.

Uncertainty

I feel an uncertainty about my place in the world.

I'm not sure if anything is the right thing.

Stuck with this question of "enough". Will this be enough, will I be enough.

I think about what I perceive as unstable futures.

This thesis project responds to uncertainty, how it makes me feel stuck in time, how it evokes a feeling of running out of time, and how it changes my experience of the "now." I see these states of uncertainty as stemming from my relationship to hyperobjects like the digital spaces of the internet, late stage capitalism, and global warming. Timothy Morton, who coined the term hyperobjects, describes them as "things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans"¹ I interpret hyperobjects as objects that – despite their overarching presence – are challenging to grasp. They are often non-local but have local instances or effects. The example that Morton uses is global warming, as something that is so massive both in scale and its presence in time that it's hard to comprehend in a personal way, but that affects people on a local level.

I see the internet as a hyperobject because of the way it is made up of a massive amount of interconnected but individual instances that users can navigate through. In the book *Pattern Discrimination*, media theorist Clemens Apprich draws on the work of sociologist Niklas Luhmann to describe the uncertainty created by the internet and network science:

Due to the diversity of media formats and offerings supported by the internet, the "construction of reality" has been dispersed into a network of simultaneously existing realities.²

For me this dispersal and fragmentation of reality has led to a sense of dissociation and uncertainty about my place in the world.

I am more aware than ever of how small I am. Never really present in one place, less and less connected to where I am.

I think about how I live simultaneously in the physical world and the digital world, and that these two types of experiences feel both real and unreal. I think about the strange

¹ Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 2013, p.1.

² Apprich, *Pattern Discrimination* 2018, p.104 (Luhmann 2000, p.76)

architecture that I move through, the over-populated accelerating, subdividing and looping web page UIs that I have to navigate, the jobs that I rapidly switch between as contract worker in a gig economy orchestrated through emails and online job applications, the youtube channels that I become obsessed with and then forget, the friends that I only see online and the ones I only see in the physical world, the images and videos of other people's life structures that make me long to restructure my own life, my stored memories brought to the front of my mind both by revisiting physical spaces and by seeing fragments of the past in the digital archives I create in my files, email and social media accounts.

I find it challenging to try and reconcile these different modes of existence. I'm finding it harder to construct a linear narrative about my life. I stop believing that this is going in any one direction, or that it should be.

Communication theorist Wendy Chun links the sense of inauthenticity and disconnection produced by digital networks to conditions of postmodernism. Drawing on the work of Frederic Jameson, Chun writes that network science falsely promises to be a "neoliberal cure of postmodern ills":

Postmodernism, according to Jameson, submerged subjects "into a multidimensional set of radically discontinuous realities, whose frames range from the still surviving spaces of bourgeois private life all the way to the unimaginable decentering of global capital itself". Because of this, they were profoundly disoriented, unable to connect their local experience (authenticity) to global systems (truth)."³

I don't see digital spaces as inherently disorienting on their own. I instead think it is the way that capital infiltrated and dominated digital spaces that creates this feeling of dissociation, by striating and commodifying our attention into smaller and smaller fragments through content that is interesting enough to hold most people's attention, but not necessarily showing us what we care about. But I believe there are still smooth spaces on the internet that present the opportunity to share knowledge, support independent content, art and media creators and create healthy social and parasocial relationships.

One of the ways I understand how local effects of twenty-first century capitalism create uncertainty is through Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "the smooth and the striated."⁴ I explain my understanding of *the smooth and striated* in detail in a different section, but this concept allows me to see the subdivision of our time and the spaces around us as occurring in service of capitalism's need to continuously expand. In my life, this subdivision of time and space creates disorientation, by stopping me from flowing from one thing after the next, and instead asks me to separate the different parts of my life into smaller and smaller fragments. The biggest separation in my life that I understand through Deleuze and Guattari's *the smooth and the striated* is the separation between my work and my life.

I see capitalism's need to expand as being in contradiction to addressing global warming. I feel the most uncertainty in my life due to the existential threat that the global warming

³ Chun, *Pattern Discrimination*, 2018 p.69 (Jameson 1991, p.413).

⁴ Gilles Deleuze, Massumi, and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus : Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. 2004, P.474-500.

hyperobject poses, which is becoming more and more apparent each year. It is uncertain how drastic the effects of global warming will be on our future lives. I feel uncertain on how I should progress, how much I should change my life plans based on the likelihood of future instability.

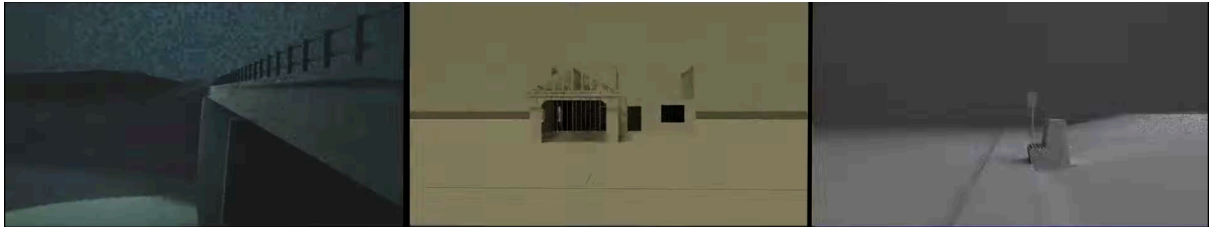


Figure 1. Screenshot from *I'm afraid this is going to end*.

`I'm not sure this is going anywhere.`

My thesis project is not focused on the details of the hyperobjects that I see as creating uncertainty in my life – late-stage capitalism or global warming – but on the experience of uncertainty they create on an individual level. These hyperobjects are the underlying themes of the project, but they are not made directly known to the viewer. In *Gaps*, the primary character's response to uncertainty changes throughout the three acts. The project starts with an ungrounded wandering through stagnant cycles that seem as if they will never end, then moves to a series of moments describing the ending of life cycles, and then finishes with the cycles of the present. Through these three acts I present different ways of responding to uncertainty, which correspond to the titles of each act of the project:

I am not sure if this is going anywhere.

I am afraid this is going to end.

There might not be anything else.

In other sections of this document, I explain how each act of *Gaps* mirrors these responses to uncertainty through their narrative structure, as well as their visual, sonic and interactive elements. At its most fundamental, however, *Gaps* relies on the Unity game engine, a program developed for video game production, to generate uncertainty through a work of media that changes each time it is played.

Because *Gaps* is code driven, it is able to change elements each time it is played, unlike traditional films and single channel video, where the footage is always the same. These changes can come from viewer interaction, but they are also 'decided' by the program itself using random number generators. Random number generators, commonly referred to as *RNG* in video game communities, randomly generate a number within a specified range in a similar way to a dice roll. Here is an example of how I write a random number generator in C# :

```
Variables name = Random.Range(1, 55);
```

In this example, when this line is called, the program will generate a number between 1 and 55.

In *Gaps*, RNG creates uncertainty in the different parts of the project in multiple ways, sometimes deciding what imagery is shown, selecting from an archive of several similar shots. At other points, it decides how long and in what order shots will be played. It decides the combination and orientation of the objects shown in a shot. It decides how long a viewer can linger in the digital space that is being presented. It decides what sounds play, how often they play, and at what volume. Yet this randomness is limited, since I am controlling the parameters for each of those decisions, giving a range with which the program works within.

These changes create the effect of the same-but-different – same outcome with different details. Often these changes go unnoticed by viewers. The outlier to this is a unique event that has a chance of happening anytime throughout the project, where organic footage from an archive of clips will appear on top of whatever is happening. This is my one moment of levity, acknowledging the human-centric nature of this story.

Progressive Loop/Change over time

I see my world through slowly expanding cycles – in time, labour, and relationships. These cycles are reflected in the recurring or looping structure of this thesis project. *Gaps*' narrative structure similarly takes the form of expanding loops that are spread over three weeks, with each week of the exhibition playing a different act of the thesis project and developing a different relationship to time.

By using the Unity game engine, I can begin with a collection of different elements, such as sound, imagery, and text, and then write code that combines or manipulates those elements in different ways each time the project plays. Through this modular method, the program can add and remove different elements as time goes on, slowly introducing new text, imagery and sound, allowing me to embed gradual changes or variations in what appears to be a repeating logic.

There is a musical quality to this kind of structure, as some elements are repeated each cycle, while others are replaced, and like a bridge in a song, cycles of the project expand into the next cycle. In this sense, I take influence from the song "Jesus of Suburbia" from Green Day's album *American Idiot* (2004), drawing from the way its structure matches the expanding cycles described in its narrative.⁵ In "Jesus of Suburbia," a teenage-like voice driven by the song's pathos describes the journey of an individual through suburban spaces, as the character comes to understand an emotional idea and moves through the cycles of their life through a looping but progressing structure.

⁵ Green Day and Armstrong, Jesus of Suburbia, 2004

The 9-minute and 9-second song can be loosely broken into three cycles. Each of the three cycles first introduces details of the character's situation and surroundings. Then it presents the character's internal dialogue as they begin to develop the words to describe an emotional idea. Each cycle repeats three times, expanding by adding more details, returning and working through an emotional idea, and changing slightly each time. Each cycle subsequently breaks and transitions into the next cycle, expanding into the next part of the idea. Each cycle is distinct from the previous in both its lyrics and sonic elements, describing the character's different emotional responses to their situation. The final cycle breaks from the pattern of the first two and does not loop, continuing to expand out into a culminating emotional idea(see figure 2). The character arc within the song starts from a vague feeling, grows into a more emotionally defined idea, and gradually expands until a kind of breakdown. After the breakdown, the song builds toward its conclusion.

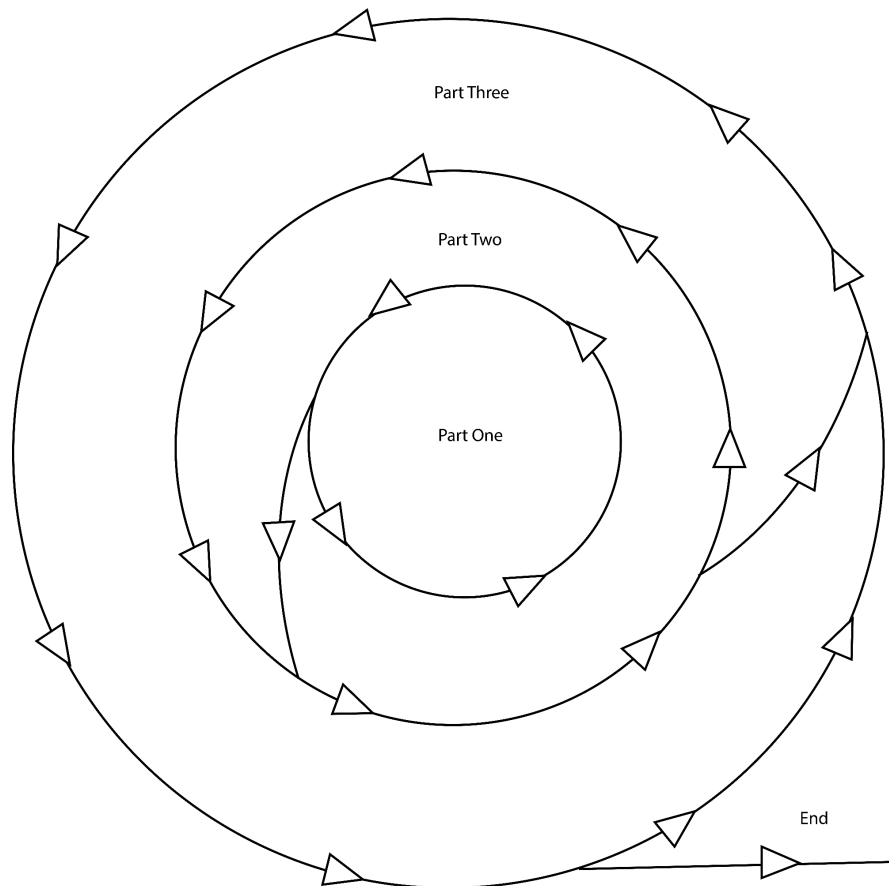


Figure 2. Diagram of *Jesus of Suburbia*'s expanding cycles

Similar to "Jesus of Suburbia," during the first act of *Gaps*, the cycles of the narrative slowly progress. Each day of the first week, the project displays similar-but-different elements in a continuous 90-second loop, presenting slightly different shots, in a different order and with different lengths. The changes occur not only between the different days of the week, but also between each return to the beginning of the 90-second cycle.



Figure 3. Example of how the orientation of the objects in *I'm not sure this is going anywhere*. Changes each 90 second loop.

At first, these changes are subtle enough that most viewers will not notice, such as changing the orientation and location of objects in shots; changing shot backgrounds while the foreground remains the same; switching between several very similar shots; and lines of text with changing sentence structures that say the same thing. As the week progresses, the changes between the days become more drastic. New footage of new spaces is introduced, as well as different text. More objects accumulate, and the amount of static in the background of the footage changes. In some scenes the length of the shots changes, and the range of varied shot lengths extends each day. On the first day, the shots can vary in length by 20% and on later days by up to 60%. Alongside adjusting length, after the third day the shots in some scenes appear in a different order every time.

The same but different.

This structure attempts to mimic the change in the primary character's internal state, as they wander through stagnant spaces in a dissociative state, feeling as if time isn't passing, things remaining the same, having trouble imagining a future. This structure also hopes to create a sense of unease in the viewer, as they may feel that something is different but not notice or know for sure what that is. As the week progresses, a viewer who finds themselves nearby or returning to the same space may realize that what seemed like a looping video is changing.

Don Herzfeldt's short film *It's Such a Beautiful Day* (2012) is another example of a narrative that is structured through progressing loops, most clearly expressed in a scene later in the film where the character seems to have developed short term memory loss. The character stands at his front door and thinks, "It's kind of a really nice day," then decides to take a walk around the block. He repeats this and ends up in a loop, noticing the same details over and over again.

The cycle is momentarily broken, before the film returns its character to his walk around the block. However, this time the film shows the scene in more detail. The narrator notes:

He walks down his side street and sees striking colours in the faces around him, details in these beautiful brick walls and weeds that he must have passed every day but never noticed, the air smells different, he's never realised, brighter somehow, the grass is strange and vivid and the sun is warming his face and the world is clumsy

and beautiful and new. And it's as though he's been sleep walking for god knows how long and something has violently shaken him awake, his bath mats are gorgeous!"⁶

The change in the narration indicates the growing sense of self-awareness and emotional range of the character.

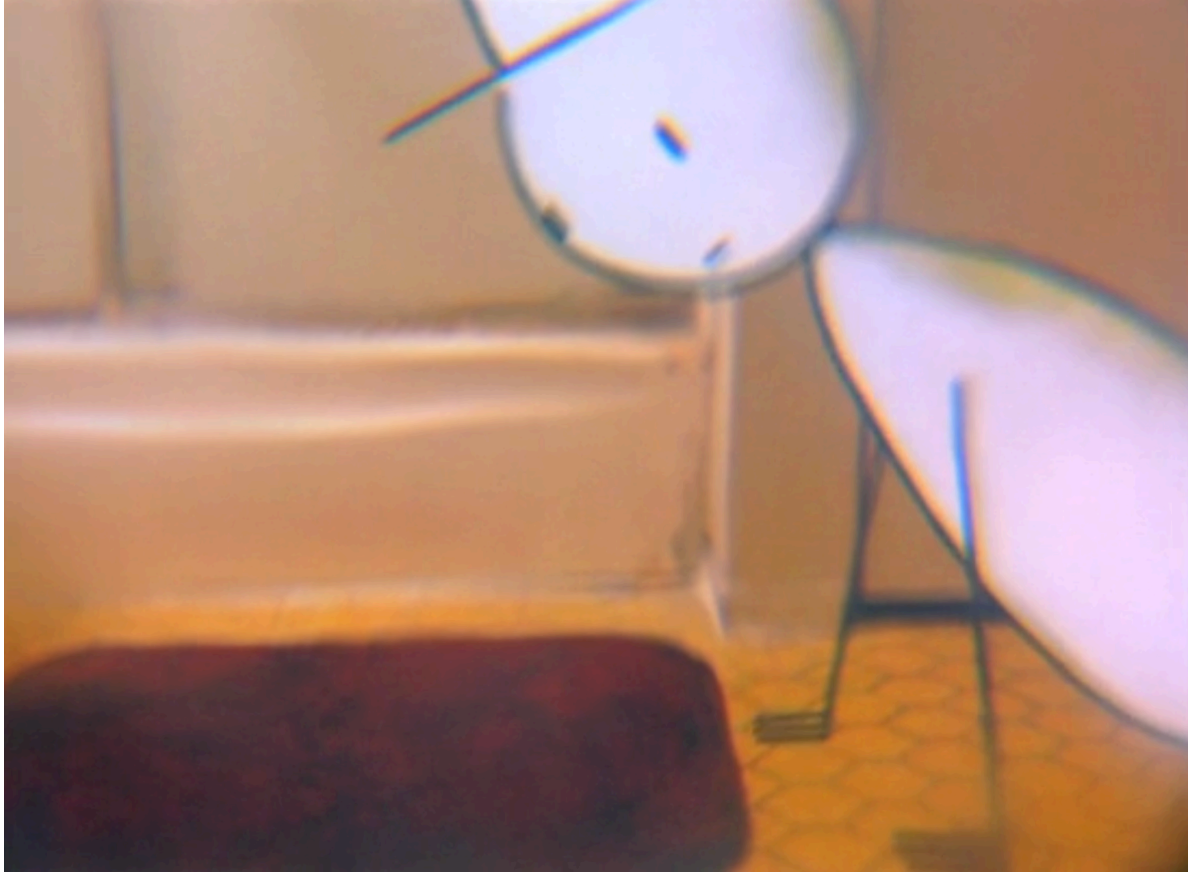


Figure 4. Film still from *It's such a beautiful day* "His bath mats are gorgeous!".

The first act of *Gaps* follows a similar structure, looping while slowly progressing in its emotional range. The narrative first appears difficult to understand and vague in its feeling, but gradually becomes more and more pronounced with each cycle (see figure 5) – for a while seemingly coming close to articulating something, but never reaching that moment of understanding.

⁶ Hertzfeldt, Don. *It's Such a Beautiful Day*

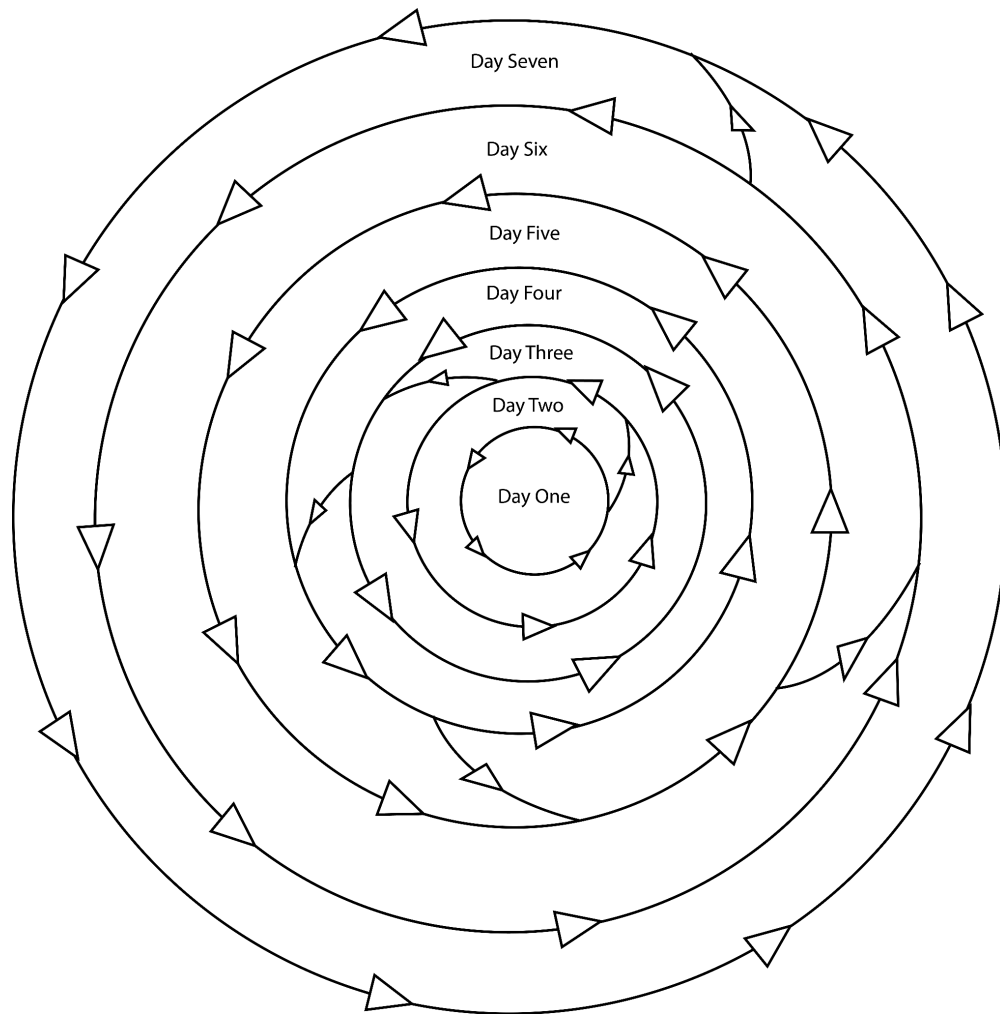


Figure 5. Diagram of act one's expanding cycles

I am afraid that things are going to end before I understand.

I am afraid that I understood but I forgot.

The first act follows the primary character's internal dialogue which is presented as the text that appears on screen and changes each day of the first week. This text describes how the primary character slowly forms an emotional idea through wandering thoughts and then works through that emotional idea. The act shows how the primary character in progressive cycles moves from "I'm not sure this is going anywhere." to "I'm not sure where this is going." and ending the first act.

The progressive looping structure of *Gaps* takes doesn't just match the gradual slow change of the primary character's internal states that I am interested in expressing, but also matches my choice of a code-driven medium. Media theorist Lev Manovich famously argued that the looping structure of digital code is central to computer programming and interactive media narrative. As Manovich writes, the language of programming depends on the interaction between looping structures:

Programming involves altering the linear flow of data through control structures, such as “if/then” and “repeat/while”; the loop is the most elementary of these control structures. Most computer programs are based on repetitions of a set number of steps; this repetition is controlled by the program's main loop.⁷

However, as Manovich emphasizes, these loops are not closed or mechanically repetitive, but rather give rise to expansiveness and change over time: “As the practice of computer programming illustrates, the loop and the sequential progression do not have to be considered mutually exclusive.”⁸

Drawing on looping progression allows me to change how the same events or compositions are reframed in the work. Throughout its three acts, *Gaps* changes what medium it mimics or evokes, from looping single-channel video, to electronic literature, to game design. This change in how *Gaps* frames itself is inspired by the way *Kentucky Route Zero* (2013), an interactive fiction game by Cardboard Computer, changes the roles of its player and the way they interact over the course of the game.⁹ One section of the game is framed as an art gallery, with the narrative expressed through characters’ discussion of the artwork. Another puts the viewer in the front row seat of a play, with the only interaction being the ability to look around the room in first person. Another section is expressed through an in-game automated phone service that plays different audio depending on what numbers the viewer/player enters(see figure 6).



Figure 6. Screenshot of phone interaction from *Kentucky Route Zero*

As *Kentucky Route Zero* shows, one of the luxuries of code-driven media is that its storytelling method does not have to be static. The logic, rules of interaction, and structure of its story can change to suit whatever is being expressed.

⁷ Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*, 2001, p.317

⁸ Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*, 2001, p.317

⁹ Elliott Jake, Kemenczy Tamas, Babbit Ben, *Kentucky Route Zero*, 2013

As well *Gaps* draws from the concept of hypermediation that Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin describe in *Remediation Understanding New Media* :

In digital media today, the practice of hypermediacy is most evident in the heterogeneous "windowed style" of World Wide Web pages, the desktop interface, multimedia programs, and video games. It is a visual style that, in the words of William J. Mitchell(1994), "privileges fragmentation, indeterminacy, and heterogeneity and . . . emphasizes process or performance rather than the finished art object" . Interactive applications are often grouped under the rubric of "hypermedia,"and hypermedia's "combination of random access with multiple media" has been described with typical hyperbole by Bob Cotten and Richard Oliver (1993) as "an entirely new kind of media experience born from the marriage of TV and computer technologies. Its raw ingredients are images, sound, text, animation and video, which can be brought together in any combination. It is a medium that offers 'random access'; it has no physical beginning, middle, or end".¹⁰

Gaps attempts to use hypermediation's focus on fragmentation, indeterminacy and heterogeneity as a method to adapt to the limited amount of time that average gallery visitors spend in the gallery, and does not give a sense of conclusion to the viewer on their first visit, instead just a moment from a larger series of moments. As well, *Gaps* takes hypermediation's strategy of combining many different fragments made up of images, sound, text, spaces and digital objects into a whole that can be moved through differently by each viewer.

In *Gaps*, each act has its own relationship to a looping structure, and all three acts also combine into one developing structure. For example, the second act's structure has moments where the dialogue branches, while the third act's structure is non-linear with no clear beginning or ending instead letting the participant wander through its sections in any order. Instead of exploring changes between cycles, the later two acts of *Gaps* explore changes in the role of the visitor, and changes caused by participant interactions.

As I elaborate more in the Spaces section, such a progressive structure is possible because this thesis project is situated in a space that people regularly move through during their daily cycles, making it likely that some viewers may engage with *Gaps*' multiple times during the three weeks of the exhibition, especially if the changes between acts are distinct.

Agency

In *Gaps*, I look closely at agency in relation to the story (characters), the audience, and the author/maker. Interactive narrative often blurs these different forms of agency by including the reader as a participant or extension of the narrative world.

¹⁰ Bolter, J. David, and Richard Grusin. *Remediation : Understanding New Media*. Cambridge. 1999. P31

In *Hamlet on the Holodeck* Janet Murray defines agency as “the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices.”¹¹ The agency in *Gaps* is disrupted by uncertainty, in moments it is unclear what the player is doing, and it is unclear why it matters. Similar to the primary character the player is uncertain of what affect their actions will have if any, because of this the player's agency may not necessarily be satisfying, or meaningful. *Gaps* is interested in coming to terms with a lack of control, over the state of the world, over moments ending and time running out.

Gaps draws a distinction between power and agency, with the primary character lacking the power to change the things that create the states of uncertainty in their life, but retaining agency in how they respond to the state of uncertainty. In this way more often than not the primary character's agency is internal. The choices that face the gallery visitor are about how to move through challenging moments with grace, even though the outcome is fixed.

Within my practice, I interpret agency as the viewer's ability to make choices about or manipulate elements of the artwork that will affect their viewing. In my work prior to the MFA program, I enabled viewer agency by making sculptures that viewers were encouraged to manipulate, and that responded with some sort of feedback. Often these interactions would trick the viewer into expressing something about themselves.

Gaps borrows strategies of fostering spectator agency from three mediums: film, electronic literature, and game design. The project looks at the role of the viewer and their level of agency in each of these mediums. I don't think of interaction and agency as being expressed solely by physical manipulation. Within film, I think of agency in terms of where a viewer is encouraged to pay attention, what they pay attention to, and how they choose to interpret what is being presented to them. The viewer may interpret what caused the character's actions, they may imagine what happened in between or after the moments shown on screen, but they cannot change what happens in any of the scenes of the film. The viewer's agency is limited to how they control their own experience of the film.

The pacing and order of scenes in a traditional film is always the same, while in contrast, works within the electronic literature genre, experienced through the computer interface, give users the agency to control the pace and order that the narrative is presented. For a foundational example, I look at the 1996 digital artwork *My Boyfriend Came Home From The War*,¹² created by Olia Lialina, where each of the viewer's clicks causes different elements of the web page that present text and images to change. The user is given the choice of when to click and where, but the user is unsure of what each click will do (see figure 7). In this way, the user is an active part of revealing the fragmented parts of the narrative, but they have no agency in deciding the details of the narrative or the outcome.

¹¹ Murray, Janet Horowitz. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. 1998. P 126.

¹² Lialina, Olia. *My Boyfriend Came Back from the War*, 1996.



Figure 7. Screenshot of the interface from *My Boyfriend Came Back from the War*

In a video game, the player typically has a more active role in expressing narrative than in electronic literature. During my MFA research, I paid attention to how video games from narrative driven genres, such as walking simulators, adventure games, and visual novels create a sense of limited agency. I looked at how different types of limited agency can be used to express narrative ideas in video games, including video games that lean toward interactive storytelling.

For example, the game *Kentucky Route Zero* (2013) gives players the agency to choose which details of the story are being told, affect specific details in the narrative, and even control which thoughts and memories each of the characters express to each other. In his video essay *CO-VIDs: kentucky route zero's terminus*, Ian Danskin describes how *Kentucky Route Zero* enables the player to decide details in its story:.

What I'll never forget is how in the beginning I, the player, not the protagonist Conway, but I, got to pick the name and gender of the dog traveling with me. I wasn't just naming the dog, I was deciding what the dog's name had always been. I was writing the past in the present.¹³

Yet, despite players' agency to change details in *Kentucky Route Zero's* narrative, players cannot change the overall outcome of the events in the game.

A similar example happens in the beginning of the video game *Firewatch* (2016) developed by Campo Santo.¹⁴ An opening text and audio sequence sets up the story for the rest of the game by presenting the rise and decline of a romantic relationship. In this section, player agency is activated by inviting a choice among limited dialogue options that determine how the character responds to their situation. In an option in the beginning of the section, you choose what dog the couple will get, between a "scruffy undersized beagle" that the character's partner is excited about and "an intimidating gentle eyed german shepherd" that is implied to protect the character's partner. In a later scene, someone tries to mug the main

¹³ Danskin, Ian , *CO-VIDs: Kentucky Route Zero's Terminus*, 2020.

¹⁴ Moss, Olly, and Sean Vanaman, *Firewatch*, 2016.

characters and his partner while they are walking the dog. It doesn't matter what dog you choose, the dog runs off either way. But if you chose the undersized beagle, you may assume that having chosen the larger dog would have helped in the situation.

As the sequence progresses, the character's partner begins to develop an illness, and the options players have available to respond are limited(see figure 8), mirroring the lack of agency the character has in the situation as their partner's illness develops. Like choosing which dog to get, the outcome remains the same, the choices are just about maintaining a small amount of grace in the situation. The main character is unable or unsure how to handle the reality of his romantic partner's declining health, unable to do anything but be present or absent. Ultimately this leads to having to decide whether to move the character's partner into a 24 hour care home or to take care of her himself when her illness overwhelms her. As in the case of the choice of the dog, the overall outcome for the partner will be the same regardless of choice – either way, the character will end up separated from his partner and decide to take a summer job as a fire watchman.

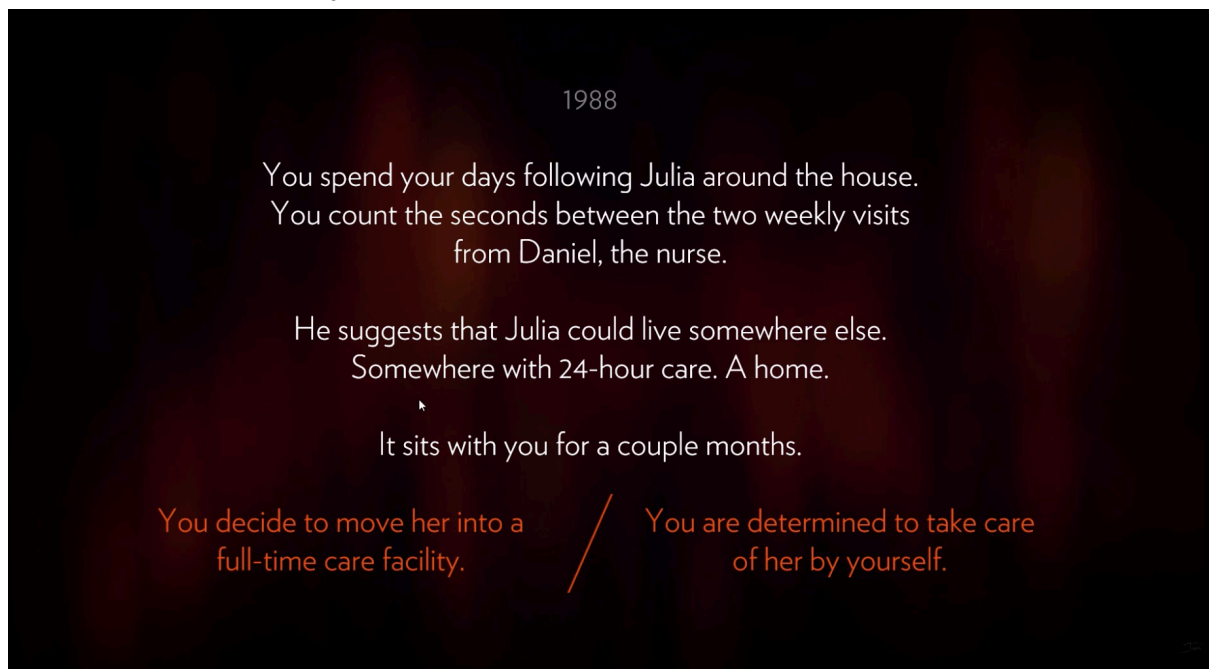


Figure 8. Screenshot from *Firewatch* intro. One of the choice points.

The beginning of *Firewatch* creates agency through letting the viewer experience the characters' challenging moments and letting them choose how to respond. But the player's options are limited to responses that match the nature of the character and their situation. Ultimately these choices do not change the outcome of the events, just how much grace the character maintains in the situation in the eyes of the player and their value systems. I find this lack of agency valuable because it creates moments where players may feel empathy for the characters and through that empathy may gain some insight into their own or someone else's emotional experiences.

Gone home, an influential game developed by Fullbright and released in 2013, also underlines the player's agency by encouraging them to wander through an empty house, where elements of the story are hidden.¹⁵ From the beginning, players are able to go to most

¹⁵ Gaynor, Steve, *Gone Home*. 2016.

of the rooms in any order and pay attention to whichever audio, notes and objects convey the story. The game lets players be as thorough as they want, letting them pick up every object and search every part of each area(see figure 9), or letting them rush through the game. There is even an achievement called *Homerunner* for “completing” the game in under a minute. Once again, the agency in *Gone Home* does not come from changing the details or outcome of the story. No matter how the player goes through the game, the story remains the same.



Figure 9. Screenshot from *Gone Home*.

Each of these games establishes limited agency in different ways. I understand the value of media that embraces limited agency through the video essay *Protagony One: Joi* (2020) by online essayist Ian Danskin, where he describes the role of the character Joi in *Bladerunner 2047* and highlights her importance despite her lack of agency in the film.

Conventional wisdom is that objects [*here used to describe characters that have no plot agency*] can be likeable, admirable but not relatable, they are viewed from without, real empathy is reserved for characters with agency,(...)but as an elder millennial with no money in a broken democracy with a pitiless economy on a dying rock in space, I feel agency is in short supply and I know there are lots of people in this world with far less than I have and I hate to think that makes us all unfit to be protagonists. I am so rarely the thing that acts, rather than the thing that is acted on. Joi speaks to me more than anyone else in the movie. (...) Maybe it's worth questioning why agency should be the gold standard for relatability, because if we can't relate to characters with little control over their lives, how could we ever tell stories about capitalism?¹⁶

¹⁶ Danskin, Ian. *Protagony One: Joi*. 2020.

I'm not sure I can understand the things that create uncertainty in my world. Even if I could understand, I don't believe I would have any real agency over them. But I am here anyway.

In *Gaps*, the role of the viewer and their ability to interact changes throughout the three weeks of the exhibition. These changes experiment with giving the gallery visitor different levels and types of limited agency, with visitors gaining more agency as the project progresses. Yet, throughout all three weeks of *Gaps*, the gallery visitors' agency is limited, in that they do not have the ability to change the outcomes of the narrative, just some of the details of those narrative. Their most enduring level of agency is how long they choose to linger with the work, and how they make meaning of what is presented.

In the first act, *I'm not sure this is going anywhere*, the viewer has no direct agency to change any elements in the project. Instead, the project acts as its own player; the code is the driving force deciding what is being shown and when. The code in the project chooses what details are being presented and what order those details are being presented in, but the outcome remains the same. The visitor takes on the role of viewer and acts as they would when watching a looping video piece in a gallery. Their agency comes from what they pay attention to and how they interpret what is being presented. This highly limited agency to affect what is being presented matches the lack of agency the primary character feels in relation to their sense of uncertainty.

After the first week of the exhibition, the first act ends, and a touchscreen is installed in the middle of the gallery space. This touchscreen is how gallery visitors can directly interact with *Gaps* in the second and third acts. I have chosen a touchscreen, because this more familiar interface typically has a lower skill level requirement in comparison to a gaming controller, mouse, keyboard or motion control. Through the touchscreen, viewers can directly touch digital objects, text, and spaces to navigate and manipulate them.

In the second act, *I'm afraid this is going to end*, visitors switch roles from viewer to participant several times. In one instance, a ringing phone appears on the touchscreen in the middle space. The visitor has three options in how they can respond. They have the option to answer the phone call, to decline the phone call, or to ignore the phone call:

If they ignore the phone call, after a minute the phone disappears, and the visitor can only linger in the space for several more minutes until the loop resets.

If they press the decline button, the phone call ends, the phone disappears, and they can linger in the space for several more minutes, until the loop resets.

If they answer the phone call, text appears on the center screen before expanding to other screens, and a conversation plays out. The visitor now functions both as the person having the conversation (since they answered the phone), but they are also outside the conversation, as they do not choose what is being said.

As the conversation continues, it splits into three possible paths, each of which runs in parallel on a different wall(see figure 10). The text in this section moves at a quick enough speed that most readers will have trouble comprehending all three conversation paths and

will have to either choose to pay attention to one conversation or only get fragments of several conversations.

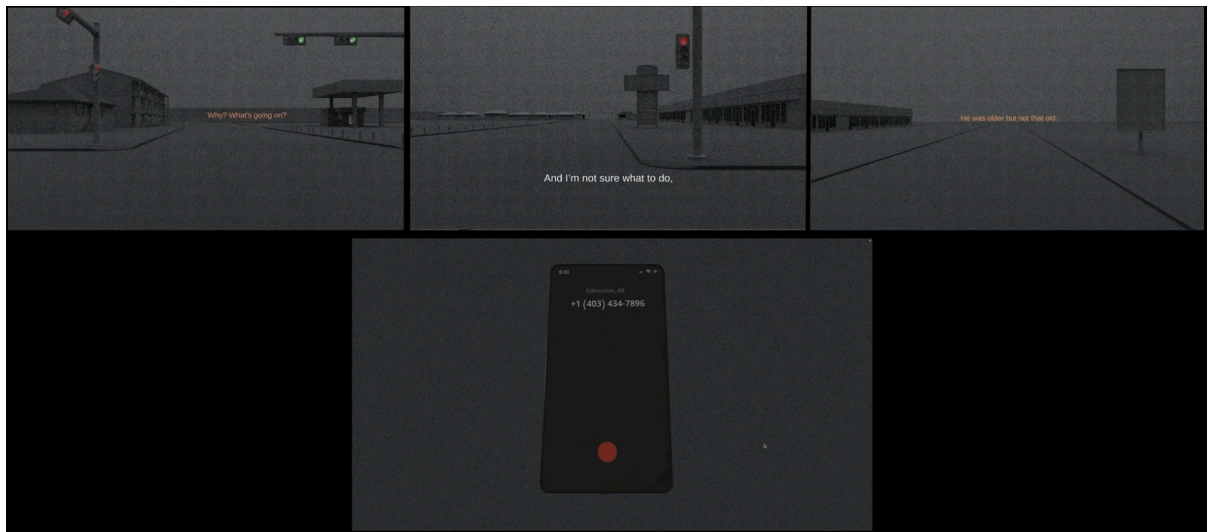


Figure 10. Screenshot from the beginning of the second act of *Gaps, I'm Afraid this is Going to End*.

The act ends by again presenting the viewer with options of how they want to respond to the incoming phone call. But this time if the viewer answers the call as the conversation progresses instead of three dialogue paths appearing on the three walls of the space, the project presents three dialogue options the participant can choose from on the touchscreen in the middle of the space(see figure 11). Then the project lingers until the participant either chooses one of the options or ends the call. When touched each option presents a different dialogue sequence on the back wall of the space and then returns to a shared dialogue sequence. In this way depending on what options the participant chooses, the details of the conversation change, but the outcome remains the same.

Throughout the act, visitors first have the agency to decide if the phone call happens or not, but not the details of the call. Gradually, they also gain more agency in determining the direction of the call itself. However, throughout the act, visitors ultimately have no control over the ultimate outcome of events, only the details. This ability to respond to a recurring situation mirrors the primary character's changes in internal state, as the primary character's response to uncertainty is informed by their previous experiences.

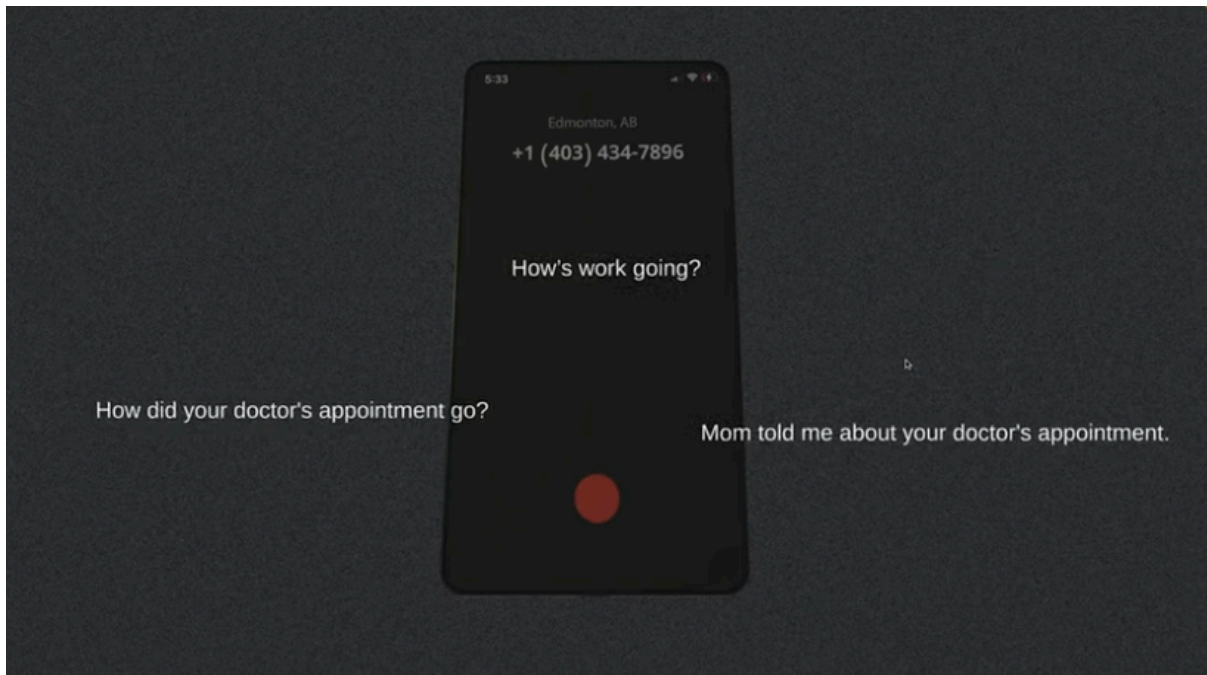


Figure 11. Screenshot from end of second act of *Gap, I'm Afraid this is Going to End*.

In the third and final act, *There might not be anything else*, the visitor's role is most similar to that of a person engaging with a videogame where nothing happens without their direct interaction. This creates the most direct agency, but this agency is still limited, in that it only affects the immediate spaces and moments they are experiencing. There is no unfolding narrative outcome to this act, only a series of self-evident moments.

In this act, the participant moves through the cycles of daily life, cooking, bathing, cleaning. Through playful interactions, focusing on what is around them, sharing small moments with someone else. Wandering through thoughts as they drive through the night, drawing on the condensation that formed on their windows. This mimics the primary character's eventual response to uncertainty, which is focused on the immediate moments and spaces around them. Their agency becomes occupied and limited by its nowness.

As an artist I seek to maintain agency in my making process. Stemming from my own uncertainty about the future, I give myself the agency to draw from whichever mediums I think best suit the ideas I want to express. I chose to continue my studies in an art school because it is a space I understand how to navigate through and one that gives me the most agency while still supporting me, but I feel no direct obligation to art spaces or art making traditions. I am looking for a place where I can maintain my agency as a maker and where the projects I make can be experienced by others. Because I do not feel obligated to art spaces, I give myself the agency to explore mediums in whatever ways I see fit, often working as an outsider to those mediums learning how to work with those mediums in my own flawed way. In this way embracing my own uncertainty about what kind of mediums I will explore and what kind of spaces I will occupy in my future.

I limit my own agency by making all parts of projects myself, not using free 3d models or sound effects, and generally not using plugins for the unity game engine, instead hacking

together code on my own for interactions and animating text. In this way I try to create a handmade feeling to my work. But because I am making all parts of the project I am forced to figure out how to be effective with my time. One of the ways I do this is by working with pre-rendered videos and images instead of full 3d as well as choosing to stylize my imagery by not using textures on 3d models and instead use lighting to create color in the spaces, and keeping my render times short by embracing the artifacts left by the unfinished renderings. Through this method I can do more with less.

Interiority

The media that I've personally responded to in my life explores complex emotional experiences through internal narratives. Such media works describe how characters think and move through their worlds, and how their changing emotional states affect their framing of the world. In strongly relating to the internal states of the characters in the media works I value, I have been able to better understand my own internal states. In my work, I draw upon the vocabulary of film, music, and narrative-driven video games instead of contemporary art, because those mediums have resonated for my internal states and emotional journeys in a more immediate and direct way than much of the contemporary gallery-based art around me.

Gaps is interested in the slow change of primary character's internal states in the course of progressive cycles and how these internal states are formed by and are forming the primary character's responses to uncertainty. *Gaps* describes this emotional journey as a vague feeling that, through expanding thought loops, slowly grows into an emotional idea, which is then brought to words and understood.

I'm not sure this is going anywhere.

What is the point in progressing if we don't know what it is leading to? Expanding to expand, progressing just to progress, nothing seemingly enough. Just meaningless labour. An obsession with more. If this is ending, what was it all for?

I'm afraid this is going to end.

How do I respond to knowing that everything is limited. We are running out of time, every moment is ending, we are wasting time. What do we do with the limited amount of time we have left?

There might not be anything else.

I might only have what is around me at this moment. It's hard remembering all the horrible things that are happening in the world. It's hard knowing how small I am and how little agency I have to change the things I see that are wrong in the world around me.

For now I will just pay attention to this moment, explore the spaces I occupy and listen to the people around me.

Throughout this thesis project I use multiple methods to express the primary character's changing internal states, from narrative dialogue and objects, to audiovisual cues and interactive events.

Drawing from electronic literature, *Gaps* relies heavily on text as the most direct way to express its primary character's interiority, the text taking the form of the primary character's thoughts and conversations as they move through emotional ideas. These thoughts and dialogue are informed by and bleed into the spaces they occupy, with the text presented in a spatial way throughout the digital spaces – on horizon lines, on top of furniture, and through windows and doorways.

At times *Gaps* controls the pace with which the text is presented, using pacing to highlight important words and sentences, sometimes having viewers linger in them, other times having the text flash past them, animating language to match the pace and emotion of the characters in a similar way to an actor's delivery. At other times the work lets participants control at what pace they wish to move through text, lingering when they wish and rushing through when they wish.

The language style changes in each act, but, in general, attempts to give the viewer enough context to have a small understanding of what is going on, while leaving the narrative ambiguous enough that viewers fill in the missing details from their own memories. In this way, *Gaps* invites the viewer into the role of the primary character, while also remaining separate from them.

The narrative structure partly draws on the style of Don Hertzfeldt's experimental animated short *It's such a Beautiful day* (2012). At the beginning of the film, an unreliable narrator describes a character suffering from a brain tumour. The character is losing his comprehension of time and the spaces he occupies. The film expresses the character's internal instability through sections of non-sequiturs, the narrator seemingly unsure of where he is going:

"Later that night bill sat down and put on a big sweater but it only made him sleepy"

"In the supermarket bill was always very careful to select fruit from only the back of the produce piles, as the fruit in the front was at crotch level to the other customers"

"An old man who smelled of gasoline held up an onion and said "big onion" to no one in particular."¹⁷ (see figure 12).

¹⁷ Hertzfeldt, Don. *It's Such a Beautiful Day*. 2012.

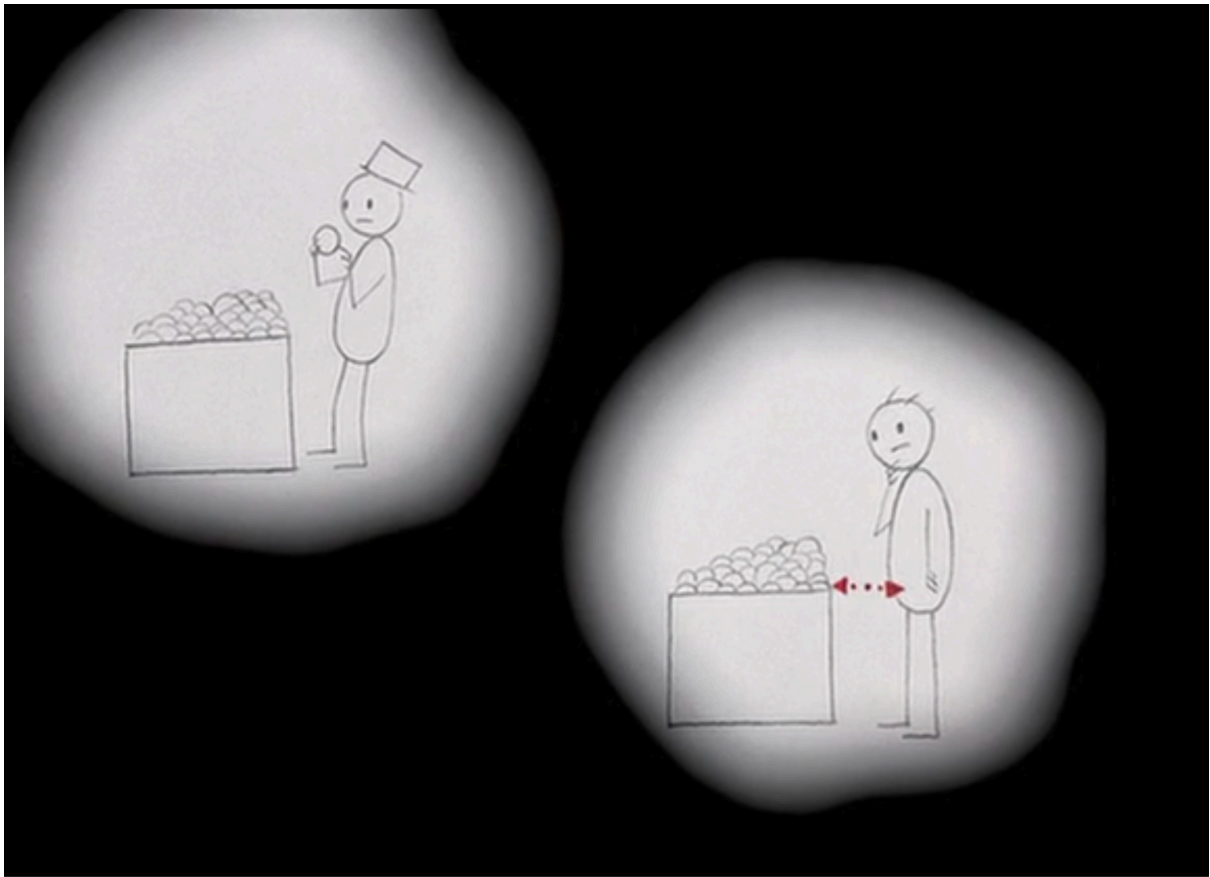


Figure 12. Film still from *It's Such a Beautiful Day*

By putting importance on the marginal details of its story, the narration conveys the character's uncertain state, and as the film continues, the tone become increasingly neurotic, mixing humour with confusion to describe a character stuck out of time:

"Everyone in the supermarket looked like some sort of demon and they all had gigantic bacteria ridden crotches buried in all the goddamn produce!"

"Outside horrible deformed birds checked their voicemail".

"After lunch bill put on the lion king slippers and flew to the bus stop".(see figure 13).

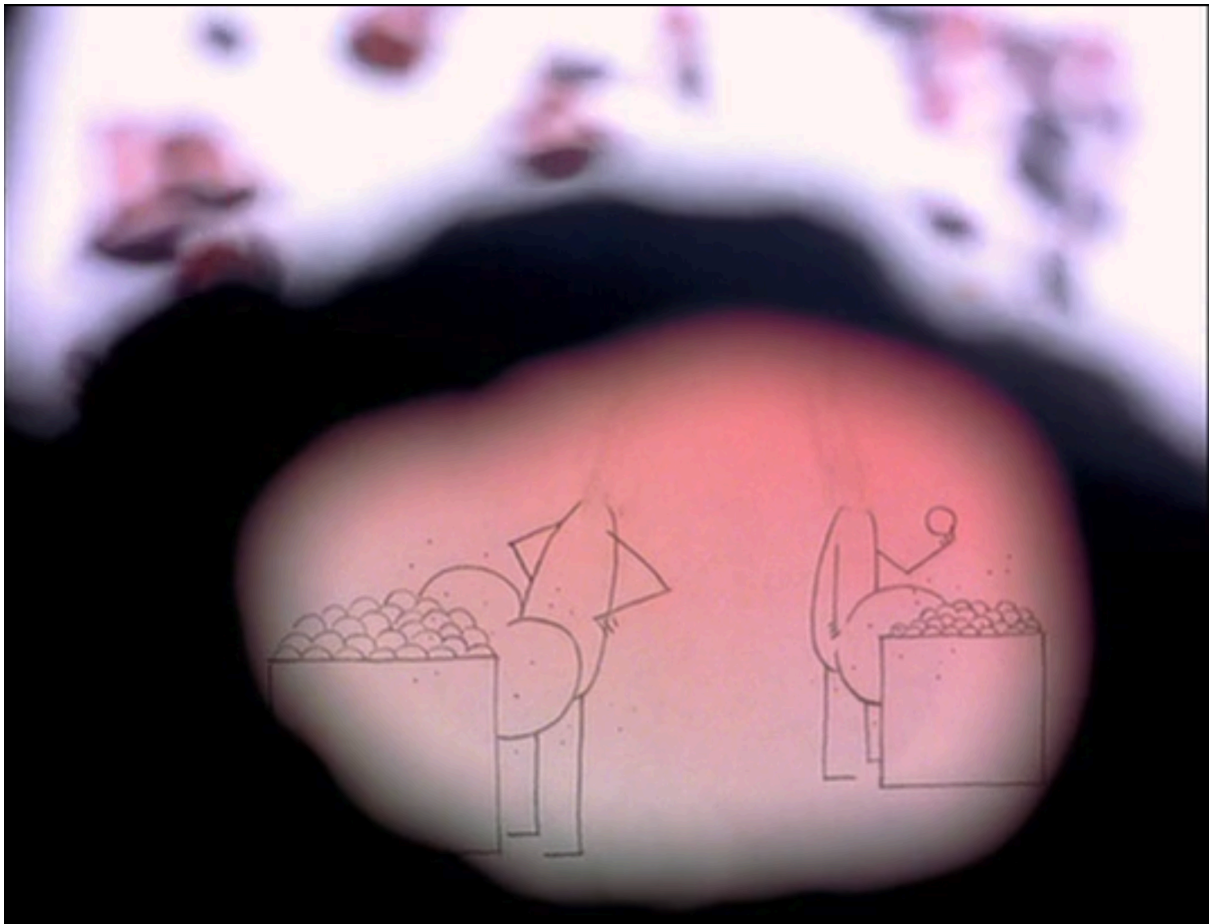


Figure 13. Film still from *It's Such a Beautiful Day*

Influenced by the narrative logic employed by Hertzfeldt in this film, *Gaps* describes instability by creating a state of uncertainty in its viewers, through its frequently cryptic or shifting text. The text in the first act draws heavily on the fragmented style of electronic literature, using short and concise sentences that reflect contextual details and insights spread out over time.

The text in the second act is more similar to the dialogue of a film or video game, expressing the primary character's internal states through what they choose to express, and how they express it. Here, the participant is also presented options for how the primary character might respond. In the third act, participants also have agency to shape what thoughts the characters will pay attention to. The possible thoughts change depending on the spaces and objects around them, or based on the dialogue of another character.

By shifting the form of the text and how it is expressed in *Gaps* I am able to explore themes of uncertainty through different focuses. In act one through wandering internal thoughts of an isolated person uncertain of their role and the state of the world. In act two exploring through challenging conversations about uncertainty in the primary character's life. In act three a response to uncertainty by being occupied with the now, occupied with wandering through spaces and thoughts. These three examples express different types of uncertainty and different ways of responding to uncertainty in one's life cycle.

Expanding beyond narrative form, I also consider a cinematic approach to character perspective and interiority. A key influence here is how the film *Aftersun* (2022) presents its characters' emotions, hints at their varying perspectives, and finds moments of love in spaces, sounds, subtle dialogue and minor actions.¹⁸

One scene in the film shows the character of the dad struggling to cut off his cast, while the daughter talks to him in the next room(see figure 14). The sound of the water washing away the plaster and the different qualities of light in their rooms express their different internal states. The father is not fully listening to his daughter, who hesitantly continues to speak.



Figure 14. Film still from *Aftersun*

Near the end of the film, you see the daughter as an adult waking and tending to her own young child. This reframes the narrative as the perspective of an adult working through their childhood memories of their now-absent father, seeing hints that her father was struggling, which, as a child, she couldn't fully understand.

In *Gaps*, I similarly seek to express the primary character's interiority with visual and sonic elements. The soundscape attempts to subtly describe how the primary characters experience spaces, the moments of tension they feel, and their emotional journeys. Similar to the hybrid sources of imagery in the work, the sound uses a mix of audio recorded from physical spaces and computer generated audio, including a frequently added layer of static or distortion.

In act one, *I'm not sure this is going anywhere*, the sound serves as a subtle background to each video channel and its presentation of shots. As the week progresses and the shots shorten and start appearing in a more apparently random order, so does the sound, further highlighting striation and fragmentation. In act two, *I'm afraid this is going to end*, the sound serves to describe the barren spaces around the primary character, as well as the rising

¹⁸ Wells, Charlotte, dir. *Aftersun*. 2022.

tension when they are confronted with various endings. Depending on whether participants are exploring the digital spaces or are answering the phone call on the interactive touchscreen, the soundscape amplifies ambient sounds or sounds reflecting the primary character's internal states. In act three, *There might not be anything else*, the sound is used to describe the atmosphere of the spaces around the primary character and gives sonic feedback to participant input during interactions. This describes the qualities of the spaces around the primary characters and their actions. For example during the car section the humming of the car describes the feeling of driving through the night, meandering through thoughts and memories, or during the shower section the sound of the running water describes the privacy and intimacy of a shower. In the kitchen, various noises are generated by preparing the meal: the chopping of garlic, the boiling of water, the humming of the open fridge.

Placed objects also play important roles in conveying the primary character's emotional states and express a sense of how they move through the world by what objects they are surrounded by. Such as a McDonalds meal late at night, a growing collection of junk food garbage, empty cupboards, a collection of small trinkets and artifacts from experiences hung on a wall, a rotting pumpkin in the freezer.

This method of expressing story through objects is common in narrative driven video games, giving hints of character arcs and detail of their world through the quality of objects found in their digital spaces.



Figure 15. Screenshot from the first act of *Gaps*, *I'm not sure where this is going*.

Through its multiple elements, *Gaps* attempts to express emotional experiences and internal states. I think that expressing these internal states is valuable because I hope that at least some gallery visitors will empathise or relate to the character's responses to uncertainty in some small way and through that they may learn something about their own relationship to uncertainty.

I understand the value of attempting to create opportunities for viewers to relate to emotional experiences and internal states through the ways that screenwriter and director Charlie Kaufman describes in his lecture for the BAFTA Screenwriters' Lecture Series:

Say who you are, really say it in your life and in your work, tell someone out there who is lost, someone not yet born, someone who won't be born for 500 years. Your writing will be a record of your time, it can't help but be. But more importantly if you are honest about who you are, you'll help that person be less lonely in their world, because that person will recognize him or herself in you, and that will give them hope.¹⁹

I draw from this lecture, when confronted with the question of why my voice matters, if I am uncertain of my place in the world. If necessary, *Gaps* is willing to give up the formal qualities of "good" art in exchange for expressing its emotional ideas in an authentic way.

Spaces

I store my memories in the spaces around me. When I return to the spaces from earlier parts of my life, the qualities of these spaces remind me of who I was, of my struggles and what I cared about. Some spaces are worn out for me after years of memories have layered over each other and the space has become stagnant. Other spaces continue to resonate and represent truths in my life, with how I perceive these spaces and memories and how I move through the world changing overtime.

Gaps' interest in uncertainty is closely linked to its approach to space. The installation relies on three projectors to cover three walls in the small gallery with moving images, creating a space that its characters inhabit. The spaces change in form and perspective throughout the three acts of the thesis, gradually developing into what Lev Manovich would describe a "spatial cinema."

In his influential book *Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich describes spatial cinema as representing "an alternative to traditional cinematic temporal montage, replacing its traditional sequential mode with a spatial one." Manovich notes how "[i]n contrast to cinemas' sequential narrative, all of the "shots" in spatial narrative are accessible to the viewer at once."²⁰

By installing *Gaps* on the left, center and right walls of the space, it can engage with spatial cinema techniques with sections where it presents three parallel images that express ideas or memories. The different images are sometimes contrasting and are sometimes visually parallel to each other. At other points the three projection sites present a continuous image through all three walls. Surrounding the viewer with these images and presenting a series of disconnected spaces attempts to invoke the quality of memory, similar to remembering a series of disjointed moments that describe a journey through time.

¹⁹ Kaufman, Charlie. Charlie Kaufman | BAFTA Screenwriters' Lecture Series. 2017.

²⁰ Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. 2001. P 322.

The memories of my life overlapping, confused order, blending, no longer a linear story.

Manovich describes this quality:

The logic of replacement, characteristic of cinema, gives way to the logic of addition and coexistence, time becomes spatialized, distributed over the surface of the screen.

In spatial montage nothing need be forgotten, nothing need be erased.

Just as we use computers to accumulate endless texts, messages, notes and data, and just a person going through life accumulates more and more memories, the past slowly acquiring more weight than the future, spatial montage can accumulate events and images as it progresses through its narrative.

In contrast to the cinema screen which primarily functions as a record of perception, here the computer screen functions as a record of memory.²¹

Besides being an opportunity to express parallel narratives and moments of the same but different, this structure helps to remind the viewer that they are in a physical space. As opposed to normal screen viewing, where you generally keep the same body position, in some sections *Gaps* asks the viewer to change their focus from one projection surface to another when only one screen is active. Other sections make the viewer choose which image they prefer to pay attention to when all three spaces are active, briefly returning their attention to their body. This attempts to mirror the way that memories and emotions are felt in the body as we move through familiar spaces, sometimes not directly brought to our forefront but felt on a subconscious level.

The first act, *I'm not sure this is going anywhere*, expresses its spaces through a cinematic approach, with images not extending the space around the viewer. Instead the viewer is separate from the spaces being presented, viewing them from the outside. The viewer is only able to see the presented space from one angle at a time, the predetermined camera movements controlling what is available to the viewer at any given moment. This frames the presented spaces, and decides how the viewers move through them and what they look at, enabling me to have control over what is available to the viewer on the screen at any time and how they move through the presented spaces.

When I am developing the spaces for these scenes, I first draw them, getting a sense of what the space might feel like, what camera angle I want to use, and how it might be lit. Often the initial ideas in the spaces come from memories. Using the 3D animation software Blender, these spaces are then modeled and lit, often with elements such as moving lights or animated objects. These models serve as sets for the scenes I then develop. I move through the sets to figure out the camera angles of the shots and decide how to mix them with footage of physical spaces and objects.

²¹ Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. 2001. P 325.

The compositional strategies I use almost always take a character's first-person perspective, the camera height and angles describing how that body moves through space. In *I'm afraid this is going to end*, the middle section shows three different versions of a primary character laying in bed watching the light come through the window onto the ceiling(see figure 16).

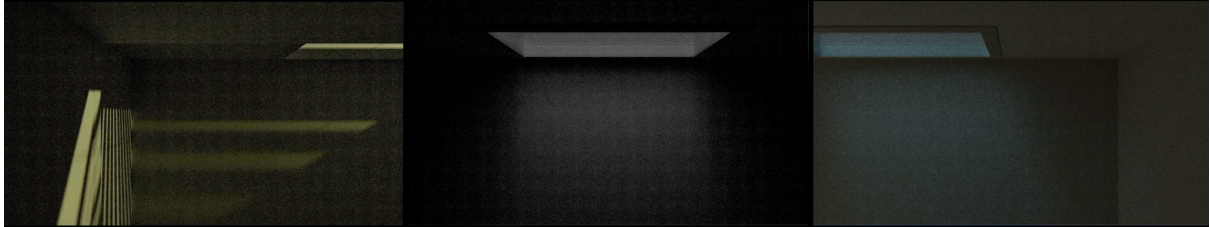


Figure 16. Screenshot from the second act of *Gaps, I'm afraid this is going to end*.

Another shot from that section shows the primary character driving over a bridge at night, then making their way below the bridge, where they pause to look up at the bottom of the bridge(see figure 17).

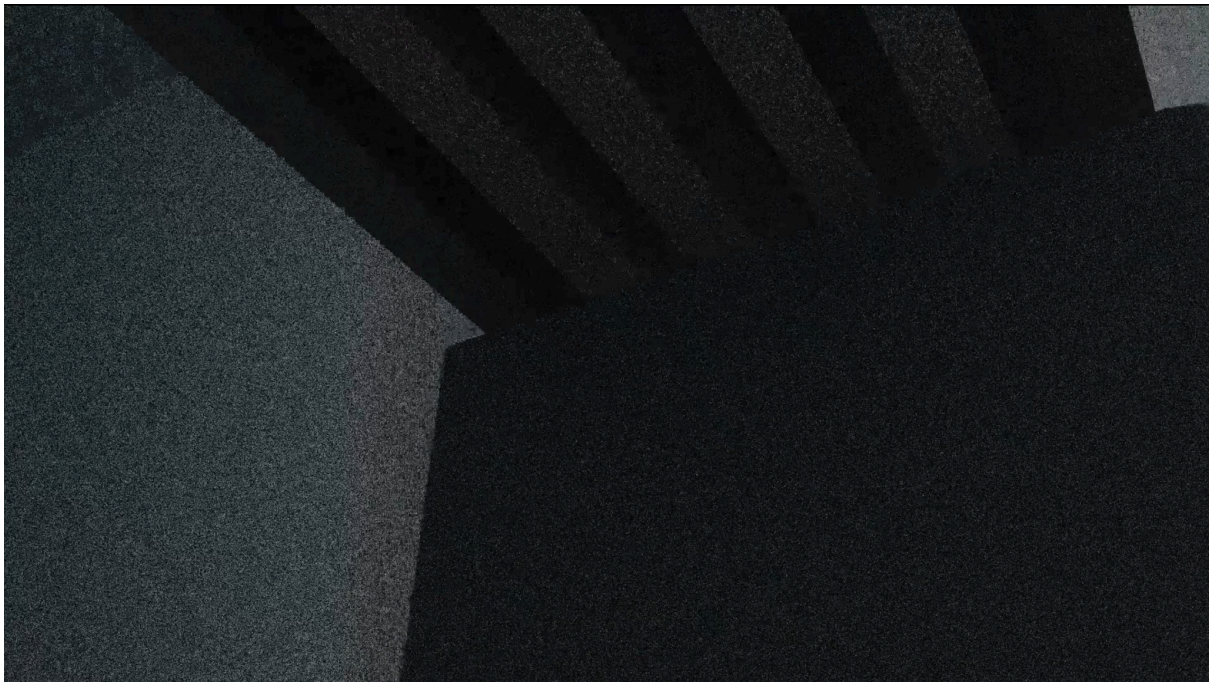


Figure 17. Screenshot from the second act of *Gaps, I'm afraid this is going to end*.

This first-person perspective matches the way I remember spaces, and aims to suggest how the atmosphere of these spaces affects and mirrors the primary character's internal states. When presenting several shots at the same time using the three channel projection, I think about how the three shots will interact with each other; at times the three shots share the same qualities but reflect different perspectives; at other times, such as in *I'm afraid this is going to end*, the three shots contrast each other – one features shaky physical footage, one smoothly moves through digital terrain, and one features static shots that combine digital and physical imagery.

The second act *I'm afraid this is going to end* draws on the format of a video installation, surrounding the viewer with spaces and asking them to linger as at the same time the primary character lingers in moments. When *Gaps* presents one of its spaces through the

format of a video installation, it surrounds its viewer with multiple angles of that space by retexturing the left, center, and right walls of the gallery space with the corresponding left, center and right angle of the space it is presenting(see figure 18). In doing this it visually extends the space around the viewer with the digital space. In some sense the viewer is inside the digital space being presented to them. Through this method I can express primary characters' experiences through the qualities of space present, asking viewers to occupy the same space as the character and empathise with the character. An additional effect of this is that unlike conventional cinema, because viewers are surrounded by the projection they cannot see all of the images one time which forces the viewers to decide what to look at.



Figure 18. Screenshot from the second act of *Gaps, I'm afraid this is going to end*.

The third act, *There might not be anything else*, uses the lens of video games by allowing viewers to choose in what order they navigate through the spaces, how they stay in those spaces, and what they choose to focus on in those spaces.

When *Gaps* presents its spaces through the lens of video games, the viewer has the agency to affect the camera angle, choosing what they wish to look at during any given moment. They can look around the digital space and decide how they want to move through it.

During the sequences where *Gaps* presents its spaces through the lens of video games, it can mimic its primary characters internal state and describe their response to uncertainty by asking the participant to linger in spaces and moments, enticing them with a series of seemingly unrelated interactions, allowing them to decide what to focus on and for how long. This lingering in a moment or a space is something unique to interactive media, where the game/program is able to uphold the rest of the narrative until the viewer continues.

Ian Danskin describes this lingering in his video essay *Story Beats: Dear Esther*

The only way to experience a movie is to have each frame be followed by the next frame, the way to experience a book is to keep turning pages, you consume the narrative by being pulled forward through it(...)it is the difference between being shown a haunting image and being in a haunted house. (...). If a book is dense your primary option for unpacking it is to upon finishing it reread it and see if you notice more this time. You can't spend more time in the book because the only way to be in its world is to be progressing towards the end of the book. (...) What the game can do that books, movies and dreams can't is allow you to linger.²²

²² Danskin, Ian. *Story Beats: Dear Esther*. 2016.

When *Gaps* takes the lens of video games, it explores the unique ability of interactive media to linger by giving participants limited agency to control the pace that they move through the presented spaces and to control what they pay attention to in any given moment.

This thesis project expresses its spaces in multiple ways, informed by the growing prominence of hybrid media formats and lowered barriers between disciplines in art spaces. In her 2019 lecture “Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media,” Giuliana Bruno describes the changing relationships between visual arts, media, and architecture:

When we approach the visual architecture of today, we in fact confront a hybrid landscape, modes of reception in the visual arts and media are becoming more fluid and increasingly more mobile, the exhibition of film images has exited the space of the movie house and entered the space of the museum. Screens have multiplied, they have changed scale, different forms of viewership and also sites emerged as places for screening, movie images have migrated in the museum and established themselves as a solid presence as light spaces in the contemporary art scene. (...) This migration of screens has made it so that the relationship between art, architecture and moving images has become stronger.²³

For me, the most interesting artworks occupy the spaces between disciplines and media formats. *Gaps* attempts to similarly occupy these spaces by using the formal properties of different screen-based media to develop and present a virtual space.

Using these multiple approaches, this thesis project presents or creates two main types of spaces: liminal spaces and suburban spaces.

Liminal spaces

I define the liminal space as the junk space, the space between, that is meant to be moved through and not lingered in, often threshold ridden, eerie and vaguely nostalgic. In my daily commute, I walk through a fenced off pathway between seemingly empty industrial buildings, past the railroad tracks beside the McDonald’s and several half built condos that have shut down the sidewalks around them. I used to seek out liminal spaces because of the comfort that they afforded me, a public-private space of contemplation. Now more and more of my life is occupied with the liminal, as the spaces around me are constantly changing, striated by capital’s need to expand. This striation has left me more and more disconnected to the environment around me, contributing to the sense of uncertainty and instability in my life.

In *Gaps* I create or present images of liminal spaces because of the way they express uncertainty in the world around the primary character and the way they match the character’s liminal internal state, generated by their slow process of forming emotional ideas over progressive loops.

Additionally, I explore the liminal by mixing digital and physical imagery in a way that highlights the seams between each type of imagery(see figure 19). I also attempt to establish a sense of liminality in the viewer’s experience of the work, by alternately placing

²³ Bruno, Giuliana. *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media*. 2019

the viewer inside and outside the presented spaces – sometimes acting as the primary character, and other times acting as the viewer.



Figure 19. Screenshot from the first act of *Gaps, I'm not sure this is going anywhere*.

My interpretation of liminal spaces is informed by political commentator and cultural critic Natalie Wynn and her video essay *Tangent: Liminal Spaces*, in which she describes the rise in popularity of liminal space photography in internet culture. In her video essay, Wynn speaks about why she thinks people find comfort in liminal spaces:

In liminal spaces, you have no identity, because there is not a social context for identity to be expressed. So your house says something about you, the kind of bars you go to say something about you and you're interacting with other people in them where you're identity is relevant, but if you are alone on a road in monument valley, or if you're stranded in an empty airport hallway, your identity becomes kind of irrelevant: class, race, gender, how much money you make, how you're dressed, whether you are old or young, or beautiful or ugly, these things don't matter, because you're in this inbetween place where you are sort of ritually dead almost, and I think that that can be freeing"²⁴

By engaging liminal spaces, I attempt to occupy my viewer both with the discomfort of uncertainty, but also the agency to momentarily escape themselves and linger in a transitional state.

Suburban spaces

²⁴ Wynn, Natalie. *Tangent: Liminal Spaces*. 2023.

Suburban and liminal spaces are often interconnected for me. One of the factors that connects them is their shared sense of eeriness. In *The Weird and The Eerie*, Mark Fisher describes the eeriness of late stage capitalism and defines the eerie as:

constituted by a failure of absence or by a failure of presence. The sensation of the eerie appears either when there is something present where there should be nothing, or if there is nothing present when there should be something.²⁵

I feel this eeriness most in vast homogeneous suburban expanses, such as the ones that can be seen when driving through the ring road around the city of Calgary. The presence of something where there should be nothing; vast cloned houses stretching over the prairie landscape; the edges of areas that are still in development, a sandy threshold of half-built houses, the space between the striated and the smooth. And, more often than not, a failure of presence of the people that live there, who are seemingly never outside of their houses.



Figure 20. Screenshot from the second act of *Gaps, I'm afraid this is going to end*.

In *Gaps*, I present suburban spaces to convey isolation and dissociation, while at the same time implying a feeling of nostalgia, and providing access into the primary characters' private life. The sense of isolation and dissociation is expressed through the barrenness of the suburban spaces. The architecture surrounds the primary characters with intimations of other people, but at the same time it separates them from others. In contrast the sense of nostalgia comes from the familiar suburban architecture and objects, such as the venetian blinds at the end of *I'm afraid this is going to end* (see figure 20). Through this method I attempt to invoke memory in these domestic spaces through subtle lighting and sound.

²⁵ Fisher, Mark. *The Weird and the Eerie*, 2016. P 61.



Figure 21. Screenshot from the first act of *Gaps, I'm not sure where this is going*.

The spaces in *Gaps* are the most direct method of creating an atmosphere, which conveys the primary characters' internal states through the environment around them and invites the viewer to also inhabit that environment. By situating this thesis project in a physical gallery space, *Gaps* attempts to influence the audience's role and position in the space – at times keeping them outside of the presented spaces as a spectator, and at times bringing them into those spaces as a participant. These changes invite the viewer to reflect on how their relationship to uncertainty affects how they interact with the physical and digital spaces in their lives.

Smooth and Striated

I use Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of the smooth and the striated, elaborated in their influential book *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, as a framework for understanding the world around me. I used this concept as a guiding theme when deciding how to structure spaces and temporalities in this thesis project, with the striated and the smooth elements in *Gaps* describing the different internal states of the primary characters, as well as the local effects of the hyperobjects that underlie this project.

I interpret the concept of the smooth and the striated as a theory that looks at the qualities of any given thing as on a spectrum from smooth to striated. I best understand what makes something more striated or more smooth through Deleuze and Guattari's examples of weaved textile as striated and felt textile as smooth. They describe weaved textile as a striated space, because of the following characteristics: weaved textiles are made of two or more kinds of parallel elements, vertical and horizontal, that are intertwined and that intersect perpendicularly. Those two elements have different functions: one is fixed (warp),

the other mobile (weft). A striated space is also partly limited and closed; in the case of weaved fabric, it is limited by the width of the loom.²⁶

In the world around me, I best understand striated space through suburbia. The suburb takes a flat piece of land, which is originally easy to traverse in any direction, and develops it into maze-like roads that wind back and forth across the land (see figure 22). Many similar houses are built between these roads, fencing off passage over the space between the roads. Passage through the suburban space becomes limited to prescribed paths that are often not the most direct route.

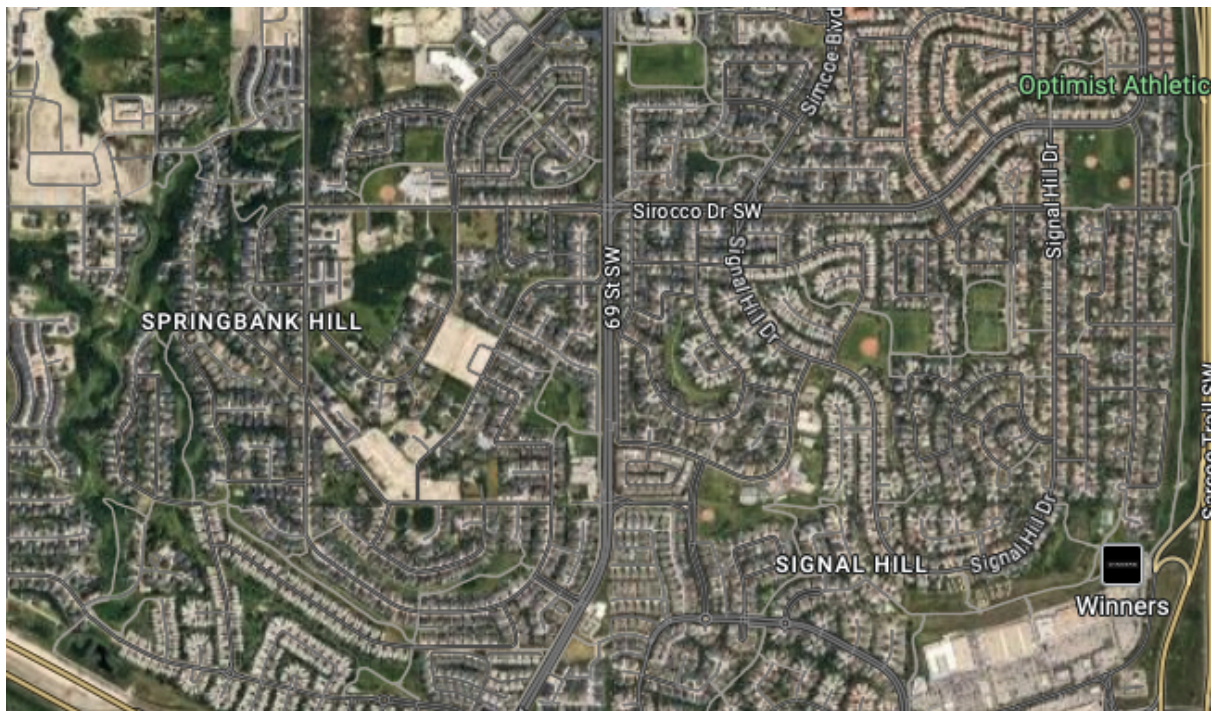


Figure 22. Google Maps imagery of Calgary suburbs.

I best understand the striation of time through the way the work week divides working individuals' time, dividing their time between work and leisure, and not basing work off of what needs to be done, but off a predetermined schedule. Deleuze and Guattari describe this striation through the war machine's imposition of a work model that creates a separation between normal life and work life:

Impose the Work-model upon every activity, translate every act into possible or virtual work, discipline free action, or else (which amounts to the same thing) relegate it to "leisure," which exists only by reference to work.²⁷

²⁶ Gilles Deleuze, Massumi, and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus : Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 2004, p.475.

²⁷ Gilles Deleuze, Massumi, and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus : Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. 2004 P.490

Through the striation of the individual's time in this way, interested parties are able to create "progress". Through striation, "progress" is made by structuring and subdividing time and space into knowable and therefore controllable and commodifiable parts.

I find the striated easier to understand, because I feel that it more heavily occupies the spaces and society around me, structuring my life. The smooth is more elusive and harder to understand for me. In *A thousand plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari describe felt as carrying characteristics of the smooth, a "supple solid" and "anti-fabric" to contrast against weaved fabric. Describing felt as having "no separation of threads, no intertwining, only an entanglement of fibers" which they describe as "in no way *homogeneous*" but "nevertheless smooth" and "in principle infinite, open, and unlimited in every direction" not fixed but rather an "a continuous variation".²⁸

Deleuze and Guattari describe the smooth as a patchwork, smooth space, as unstructured, flowing from one thing to the next in an irregular way.

When I think of smooth space, I think of uncultivated plains which change over time, slowly becoming more hilly and then less and varying in a combination of different organic elements. I understand smooth time through unstructured travel, wandering from one place to the next, meeting your needs as they come, finding interest in the immediate spaces and moments around you.

Alongside spaces and times, I see the smooth and striated as describing different states of mind and ways of moving through the world. In the smooth, one's focus is free to shift from one thing to the next. Labour is done when needed, but not in excess. In the striated, one's day is highly structured, and where one's attention goes is predetermined. Every moment is used towards advancing progress in some way.

Within my own life, I see the striated around and within me in many different ways. I see it in the subdividing spaces around me, the architecture that blocks my way, lengthening what could be a short straight walk into a long loop around the street. I see it in myself through the different parts of my personality that I express in the roles I play, if I am working, if I am studying, if I am with one friend, with another friend, with family, with instructors. Always quickly changing to someone else. I see the striated in the subdivision of my time, breaking my day into smaller and smaller sections of time, each serving a different purpose, and on a longer time scale the subdivision of my projects into controllable sections, the subdivision of my studies into semesters with intermittent periods of work and holiday periods. Moving from place to place, only ever staying for less than a few years, switching jobs every six months to a year. Things always ending. All of this striation occurs in the hope of making progress, living my life in accordance with capitalism's need to expand, to continue to develop the spaces around us, to produce more information, to continue to commodify, consume, accumulate, expand. Always trying to expand with no clear idea where it is going or why. Making progress for its own sake.

²⁸ Gilles Deleuze, Massumi, and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus : Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. 2004, P. 475.

I'm not sure this is going anywhere.

I see the smooth in the moments where someone distracts me, and I end up wandering and lingering in a new space. The structure that I attempt to maintain in my life slips away, as I get caught in authentic conversation, noticing and listening to the subtle qualities of a person and the spaces around me. I am not defining what I should do or what I want something to be, not setting expectations for what is around me.

I have the desire, and see a desire in other people around me, of just wanting to exist and move from one seemingly unrelated thing to the next. To not separate my work from my life or cut my time into smaller and smaller sections. I long for my days to be smoother, to flow from one activity and moment to the next, to have the agency and lack of urgency to linger in moments, to notice what is around me, to experience spaces and listen deeply to the sound of people's voices. To work through ideas slowly...

I interpret the smooth in part as a *nowness* – things existing in a neutral undefined state connected to the spaces of this moment. Smooth time as moving from one moment to the next with no clear demarcation, like a patchwork of self-evident and contained moments.

But I see both the smooth and the striated as necessary organizations of time and space in my daily life. This is most clear in my making, where I oscillate between smooth and striated labour, slowly generating ideas in the beginning, floating from one seemingly unrelated idea to the next. Then collecting those ideas and organizing, storyboarding and structuring my ideas. Then beginning to create the images, sounds, writing and systems in an open and exploratory way, often working on all parts of a project at the same time. Then connecting and structuring all the parts of the project, creating harmony in some sections while leaving other sections more irregular.

As a maker the concept of the smooth and the striated informs how I understand time and space in this thesis project. Although not explicitly each of the acts in *Gaps* draws from the smooth and striated.

The first act, *I'm not sure this is going anywhere*, is occupied with the striated, the scenes and spaces fragmented, the same but different each time. The work is expanding, but uncertain if it is going anywhere.

The second act, *I'm afraid this is going to end*, is a mixture of the smooth and striated – striated, in that it is limited and relatively linear, as the outcome remains the same, the spaces it presents are often physically striated, and it advances towards something. But the act is also smooth, in that it lets the viewer linger in its spaces, in that the language it uses is often open to interpretation, the scenes and imagery moving from one to the next in an irregular way, and in that it asks the viewer to be occupied with the *nowness* of the primary character's situation.

The third act, *there might not be anything else*, attempts to create the feeling of the smooth. It lets the viewers move from one thing to the next at their own pace, there is no beginning or end to the act, the narrative is not building towards something. It is entirely about moments of *nowness*.



Figure 23. Install documentation of act one *I'm not sure if this is going anywhere.*

Reflection

Overall I think this thesis project was a success, in that it met its goal of exploring and learning several different approaches to storytelling through interactive media. Seeing the acts installed in the RBC Media Gallery, I was particularly excited about the scale and presence of the images and how well they conveyed spaces, alongside the spatial qualities of the sound. Some of the interactions managed to be simple and satisfying while others were less effective. I particularly liked how the sound effects supported the interactions in act three and added humour. For me, the second act is the strongest, its ringing phone as a call to action, the way it presents its spaces, the spatial montage in the middle, and the way it did more with less to express its themes.

There were a few things that I would like to improve with future projects. One is to better situate media projects in the spaces they are shown. I would like to work with projectors earlier in the production of the work and test the project in a space that is the same size as the gallery. I would like to have better control over the amount of light in the space and do more to connect the work to the space, through projection mapping and by altering the gallery space. I would like to expand on the spatial cinema techniques I am using, further exploring presenting parallel and opposing images and having the imagery move and linger around the viewer.



Figure 24. Install documentation of act two *I'm afraid this is going to end.*

Through this process I realized that narrative is core to the projects I make, and in the future I would like to take the time to further flesh out the narrative ideas and themes before beginning the production of the work, and then iterate on those ideas throughout the project.

Game design is generally done in iterative cycles, over often several years. Because this thesis project was working within the constraints of this MFA program, and because I was focusing more on learning new methods rather than refining what I already knew, I didn't have time to iterate on the ideas and mechanics in each act to improve them. Because of this smaller time window, when making decisions about how to make the elements in each scene, I often had to choose what I knew would likely work and be stable, instead of exploring different ideas. In future projects I am looking forward to working in iterative cycles over longer periods, making a basic working version of the project and then working to improve and expand all of the elements of the project. In this way, I can refine interactions, imagery, sound and dialogue, as well as working to make the project more cohesive.

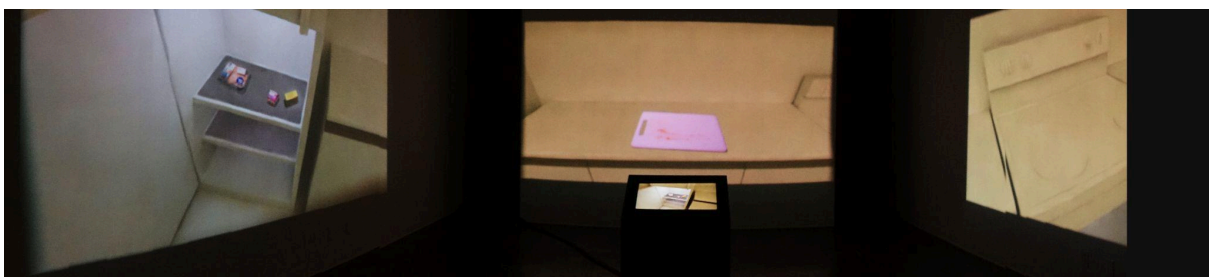


Figure 25. Install documentation of act three *There might not be anything else.*

From seeing *Gaps* installed in a gallery space, I have found that there are a few qualities that I find important when showing the work. The main one is that the project images should

surround the viewer so that they cannot see all three images at once and so that viewer has to turn in the space during viewing, the images extend the space around viewers. The projection sites should not be a continuous image and should have spaces between them and the sharpness and brightness of the image is preferred over larger images. The project's sound should come through speakers and reverberate through space and there should be comfortable seating and enough room for multiple viewers.

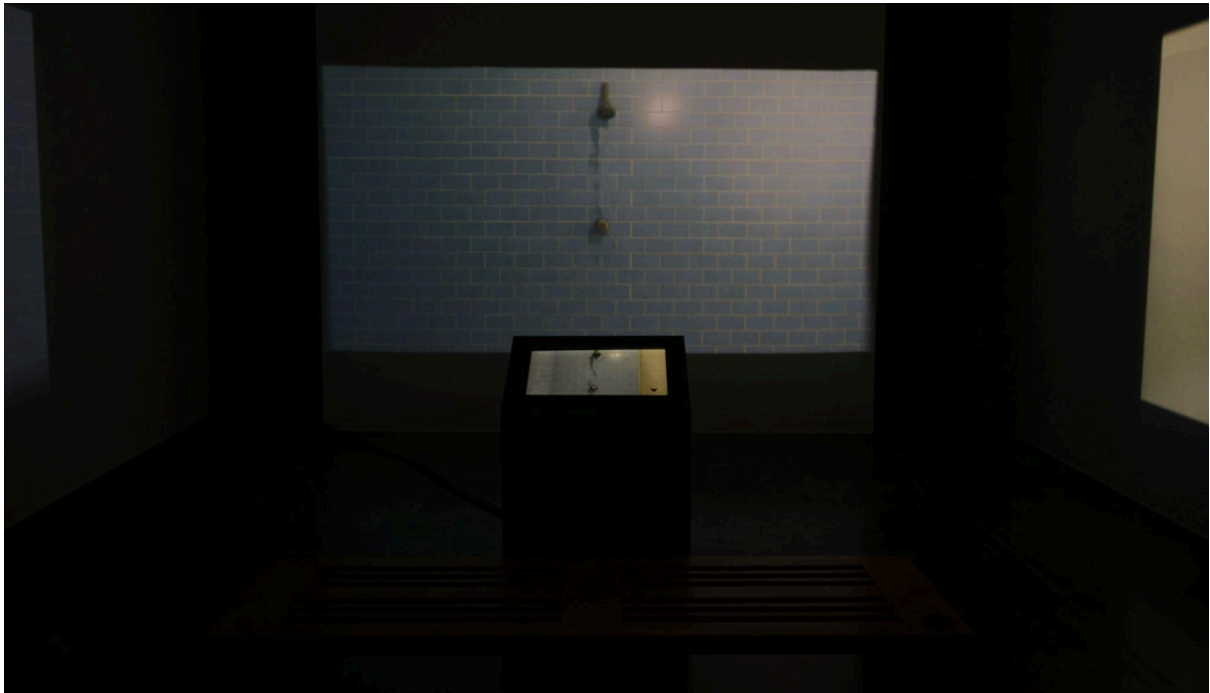


Figure 26. Install documentation of act three *There might not be anything else*.

Overall this project was a learning experience and is unfinished in a lot of ways, but reflects my goals of this MFA program which was to create a base knowledge of theory, methods and technical experience with interactive storytelling that will support the production of future projects.

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