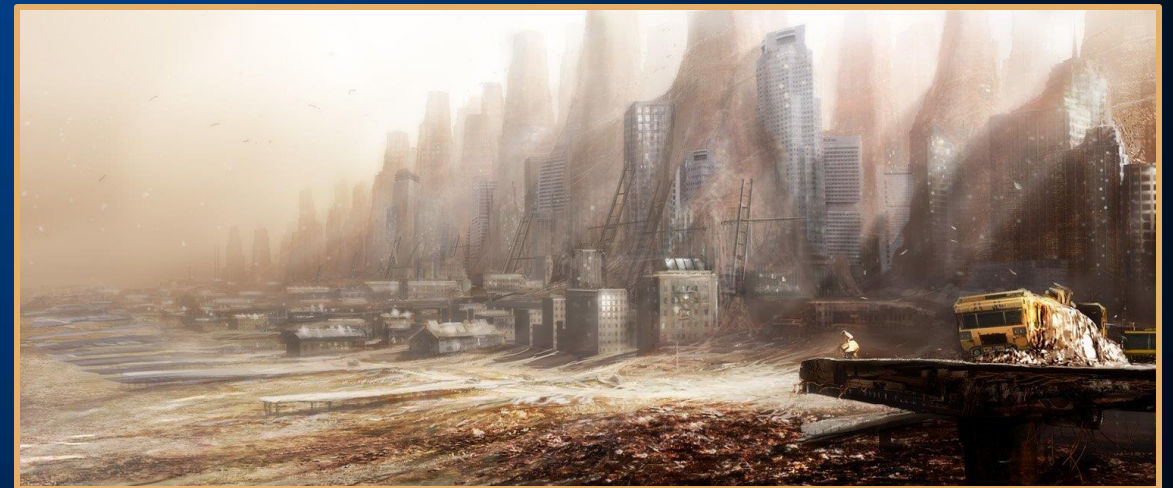


Narrative Design Elements

Building Worlds That Tell Stories



Horizon Zero Dawn · Guerrilla / Sony



WALL-E (2008) · Disney/Pixar

Lecture contents

Environments Evidence, atmosphere and audience interpretation

Designed spaces Architecture, infrastructure and cultural influences

Technology and industry Function, resources, limitations and world identity

Natural worlds Geography, climate, ecosystems and environmental change

Relevance to Assignment (Task Desc. Section 3)

Physical spaces Natural, manufactured and imagined environments or situations

Buildings and infrastructure Places, transport, architectural styles, mythology and influences

Technology and industry Types of technology, period detail and deployment

Natural environment Climate, seasons, wildlife, natural history, terrain and landscape

A method for analysing world design

Visible evidence Identify a specific feature and its position or condition

Interpretation Explain what the feature suggests about the world

Narrative purpose Connect that meaning to audience experience or possible action

Critical judgement Consider another reading and the limits of your evidence

A strong claim connects a visible choice to a reasoned narrative consequence.

Environments as narrative devices



[Stray \(2022\)](#) · [BlueTwelve](#) / [Annapurna](#)

Place as evidence

Wear, arrangement and absence suggest earlier events

Place as experience

Scale, enclosure and light influence how a location feels

Place as possibility

Routes and boundaries shape what can happen there

Narrative meaning often comes from the relationship between details.

Spatial storytelling in games



BioShock · 2K, Remastered

Evocative spaces

A location draws on familiar stories or genres

Enacted stories

Actions and movement produce narrative moments

Embedded evidence

Details allow the player to reconstruct prior events

Space can organise an encounter within a story.

Objects, traces and implied events



[The Last of Us Part I](#) · Naughty Dog / Sony

Everyday systems

Furniture, signs and storage imply ordinary use

Interrupted use

Damage or unusual placement suggests a disruption

Evidence together

Several related clues strengthen a reading

A trace becomes useful when it suggests an action or a change.

WALL-E: a city made from waste



[WALL-E \(2008\) · Disney/Pixar](#)



[WALL-E \(2008\) · Disney/Pixar](#)

Repeated accumulation

Waste towers turn everyday disposal into urban scale

Familiar advertising

Commercial imagery connects the future to recognisable habits

Figure and scale

A small robot makes the waste landscape feel overwhelming

The setting links a recognisable system to its accumulated consequences.

Personal interiors and inhabited space



WALL-E (2008) · Disney/Pixar

Selection

Kept objects distinguish personal space from storage

Arrangement

Repeated use gives possessions a spatial pattern

Light and enclosure

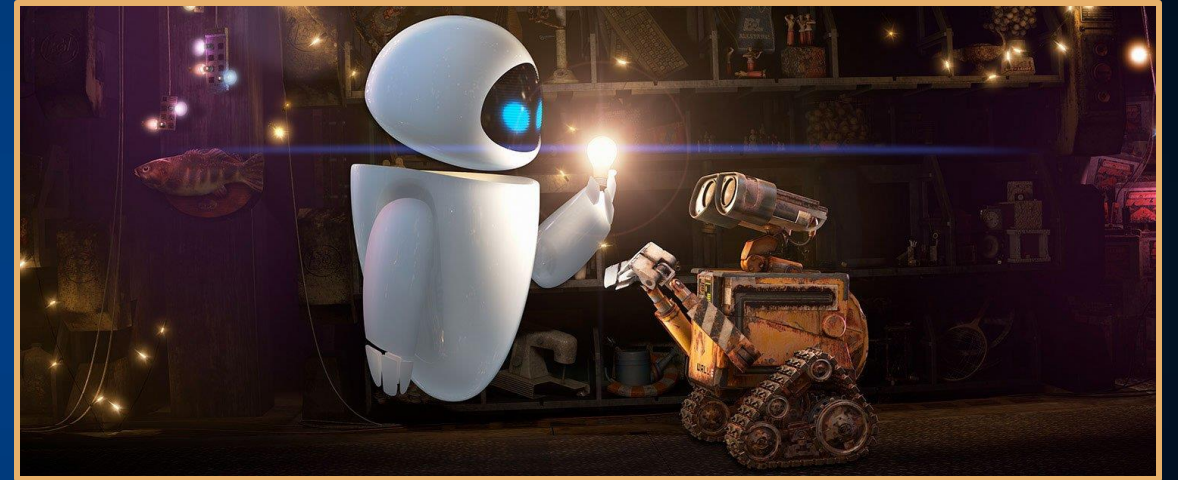
A small interior can change the emotional meaning of a vast world

Inhabitation becomes legible through patterns of use.

Composition, light and atmosphere



Stray (2022) · BlueTwelve / Annapurna



WALL-E (2008) · Disney/Pixar

Visual hierarchy

Contrast and scale determine what we notice first

Spatial expectation

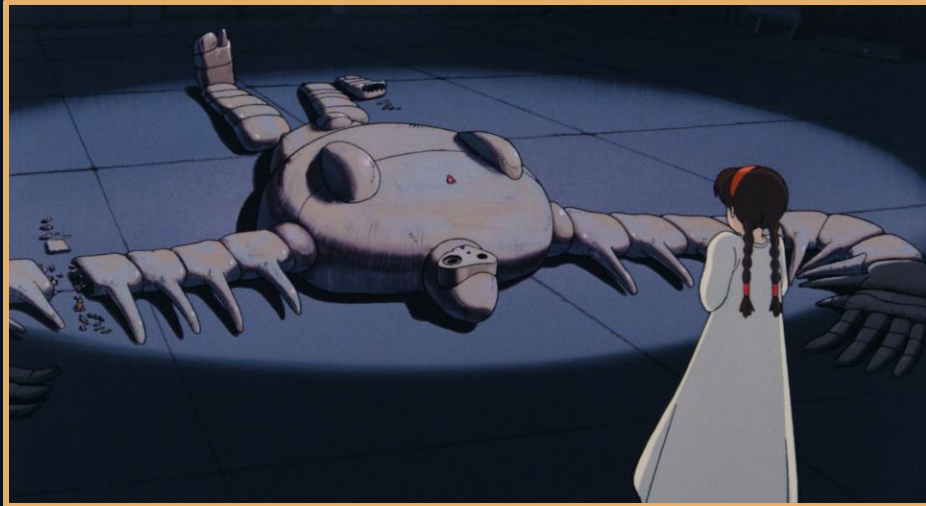
Open vistas and enclosed routes suggest different experiences

Narrative emphasis

Composition can make a feature feel inviting, fragile or threatening

Atmosphere depends on relationships and context, as well as colour.

Animation and games: directing attention



Castle in the Sky (1986) · Studio Ghibli



BioShock · 2K, Remastered screenshot

Animation

Framing, editing and duration control the order of information

Games

Routes, landmarks and interaction guide an encounter with evidence

Shared problem

The audience must notice enough to make a supported inference

Important information should be presented in a way that naturally draws the audience's attention.

Interpretation and believability



[Stray \(2022\)](#) · [BlueTwelve](#) / [Annapurna](#)

Consistency

Evidence follows the rules the world has established

Selective detail

Specific traces imply history without explaining every event

Alternative reading

A convincing analysis acknowledges uncertainty

Discussion: what can this location establish, and what remains uncertain?

Architecture as narrative information



BioShock · 2K, Remastered screenshot

Form

Scale, silhouette and ornament imply priorities

Material

Construction reveals resources, skill and maintenance

Access

Entrances, thresholds and routes shape who can move where

Architectural identity includes how a place works.

BioShock: aspiration and deterioration



BioShock · 2K, Remastered screenshot

Designed grandeur

Ornament and controlled interiors suggest civic ambition

Water outside

The setting makes separation and containment tangible

Present danger

Threats complicate the promise of the designed environment

A building's intended identity can conflict with its present condition.

Dishonored: the city as a working system



Dishonored (2012) · Arkane / Bethesda

Dense construction

Layered streets suggest development over time

Service connections

Pipes, waterways and working routes support urban life

Uneven upkeep

Different conditions imply different experiences of the city

Connected systems make a city feel larger than the visible route.

Arcane: contrasting urban conditions



Arcane (2021) · Riot Games / Fortiche

Piltover

Light, open views and maintained surfaces suggest comfort and visibility



Arcane (2021) · Riot Games / Fortiche

Zaun

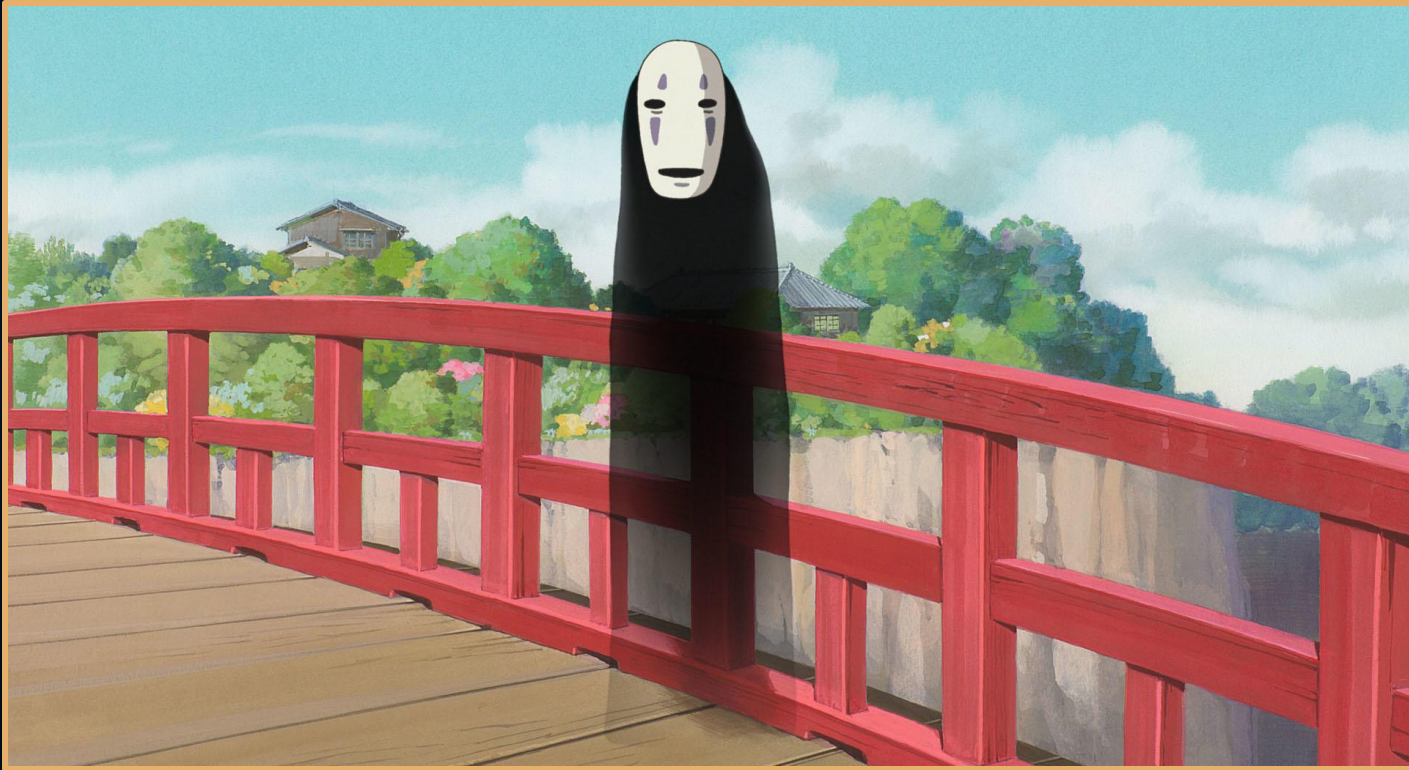
Density and industrial layers suggest constrained, adapted space

The relationship

The contrast makes unequal conditions spatially legible

A contrast becomes stronger when both places still belong to one world.

Transport, thresholds and connection



Spirited Away (2001) · Studio Ghibli

Connection

A bridge or station links places that otherwise remain separate

Restriction

Checkpoints and narrow crossings can control movement

Encounter

Routes create opportunities for meetings, delays and observation

Transport design establishes the conditions under which people can meet.

Historical research and invented architecture

Reference feature	Identify a useful construction or spatial principle
Original context	Investigate why that feature worked in its real setting
Adaptation	Explain how your universe changes its function or meaning

Research becomes useful when it explains a design decision.

Mythology, landmarks and imagined spaces



Spirited Away (2001) · Studio Ghibli

Thresholds

Entrances can establish a transition into unfamiliar rules

Landmarks

A memorable form gives a world a point of orientation

Meaning in use

Repeated encounters can change what a place represents

An imagined place needs a researched meaning and a coherent spatial role.

Interiors, labour and service space



Spirited Away (2001) · Studio Ghibli



Spirited Away (2001) · Studio Ghibli

Front and back

Display spaces often rely on less visible working areas

Routes of use

Storage, delivery and maintenance imply repeated labour

Narrative contrast

Moving between zones can expose how the place operates

Service spaces reveal the work behind a location's public identity.

Visual cohesion and variation



[Stray \(2022\)](#) · [BlueTwelve](#) / [Annapurna](#)

Shared rules

Shared materials and proportions link separate locations

Purposeful difference

Age, function and resources justify variation

Narrative change

Repairs and additions show how the world adapts

Cohesion allows difference when the world explains it.

Technology as a world rule



WALL-E (2008) · Disney/Pixar

Capability

Technology establishes what people can do

Limit

Energy, materials and expertise restrict that capability

Consequence

These conditions shape buildings, routes and everyday life

A technological rule should have consequences beyond the object itself.

Period detail and uneven development

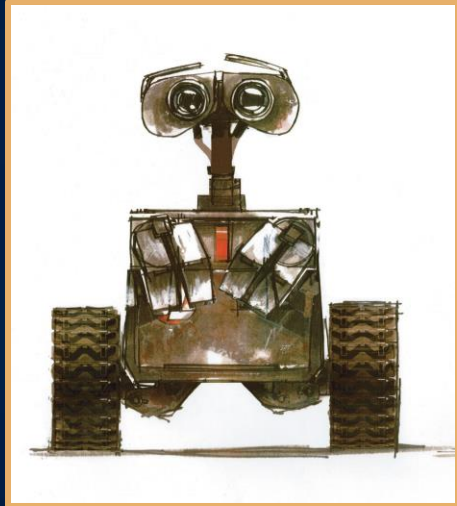
Established baseline Tools and infrastructure establish ordinary capability

Local difference Access and repair can vary between places

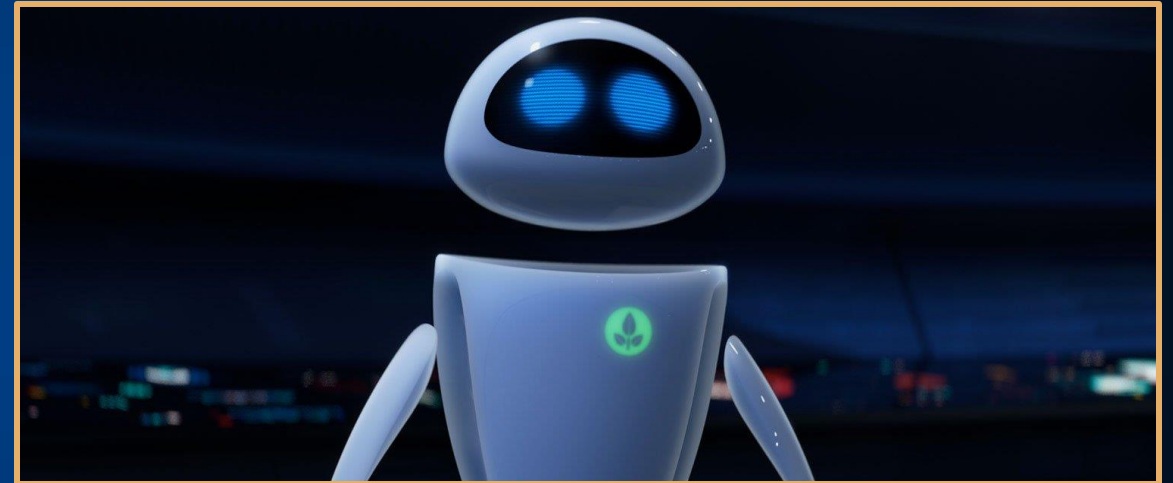
Exceptional invention A departure from the baseline needs a consequence

Simply identifying a historical period does not
explain the capabilities, limitations, or
accessibility of its technology.

Industrial design: function made visible



WALL-E (2008) · Disney/Pixar, production artwork



WALL-E (2008) · Disney/Pixar

Form suggests use

Size, articulation and tools
imply a task

Material and wear

Wear and exposed parts
imply contact and
maintenance

Design priorities

Different devices can express
different design assumptions

A device's form can imply its task and its relationship to the world.

Dishonored: industry and visible dependence



Dishonored (2012) · Arkane / Bethesda

Industrial forms

Machinery and services establish a technological identity

Energy dependence

Powered systems require fuel, supply and maintenance

Uneven consequences

The same capability can create opportunity and exposure

Industry becomes narratively active when places depend on it.

Resources, manufacture and deployment

Supply Energy and materials must reach the site of use

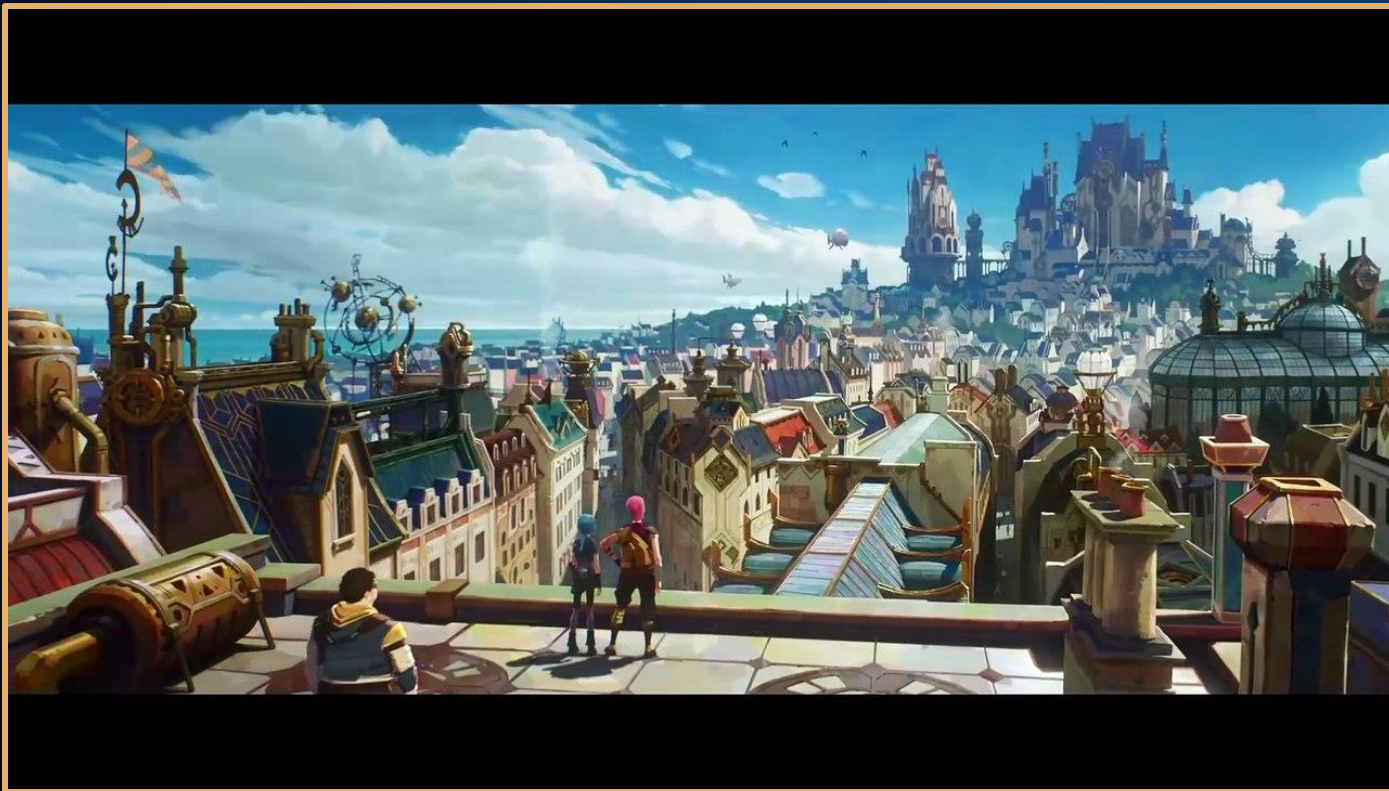
Manufacturing Production needs space, tools and specialist knowledge

Deployment Transport and maintenance determine where a device can work

Waste Outputs leave material traces and environmental costs

Supply and maintenance can connect an invention, for example, to the places around it.

Arcane: technology changes the city



[Arcane \(2021\) · Riot Games / Fortiche](#)

Existing identity

The city already communicates industry and engineering

New possibility

Exceptional capability changes movement and expectations

Spatial consequence

Large systems reorganise where activity gathers

[Official production documentary ↗](#)

New capability should change the relationships between places.

Horizon: machinery as environmental history



[Horizon Zero Dawn](#) · [Guerrilla](#) / [Sony](#)

Familiar behaviour

Animal-like forms give complex machinery readable cues

Engineered detail

Components signal construction and specialised capability

Historical question

Machines in landscapes invite questions about their origins

[Official machine-design feature ↗](#)

Readable function can coexist with an unresolved technological origin.

Castle in the Sky: surviving technology



Castle in the Sky (1986) · Studio Ghibli

Persistence

A device can continue after its makers have disappeared

Changed setting

Vegetation and ruins alter the meaning of engineered forms

Different use

Care and destruction can coexist within one technological history

Surviving technology can reveal a gap between the past and the present.

Failure, absence and repair



[Stray \(2022\)](#) · [BlueTwelve](#) / [Annapurna](#)

Failure

A broken system makes dependence visible

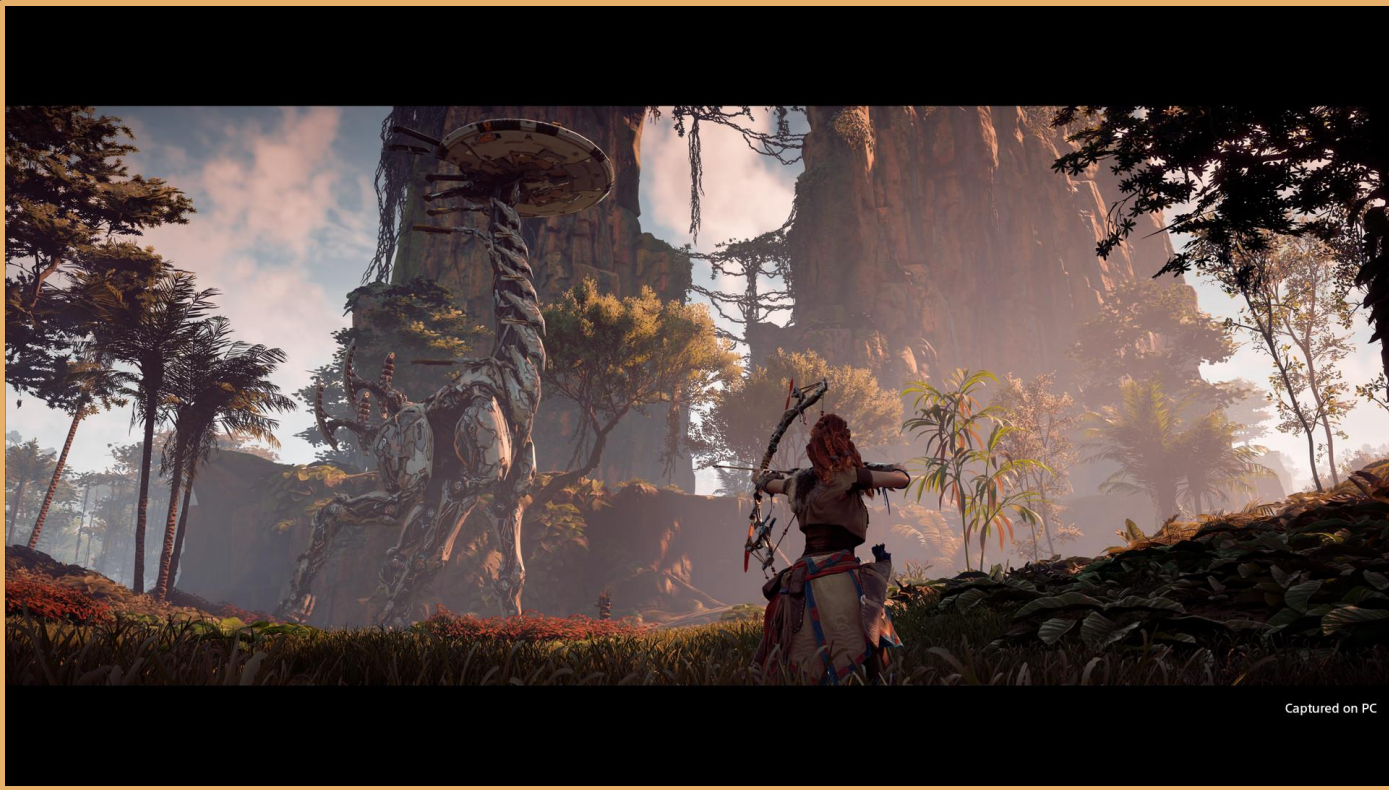
Absence

Missing capability shapes routes and routines

Repair

Adaptation reveals priorities, knowledge and available materials

Natural worlds as narrative conditions



[Horizon Zero Dawn](#) · [Guerrilla](#) / [Sony](#)

Geography

Landforms establish distance, enclosure and possible routes

Climate

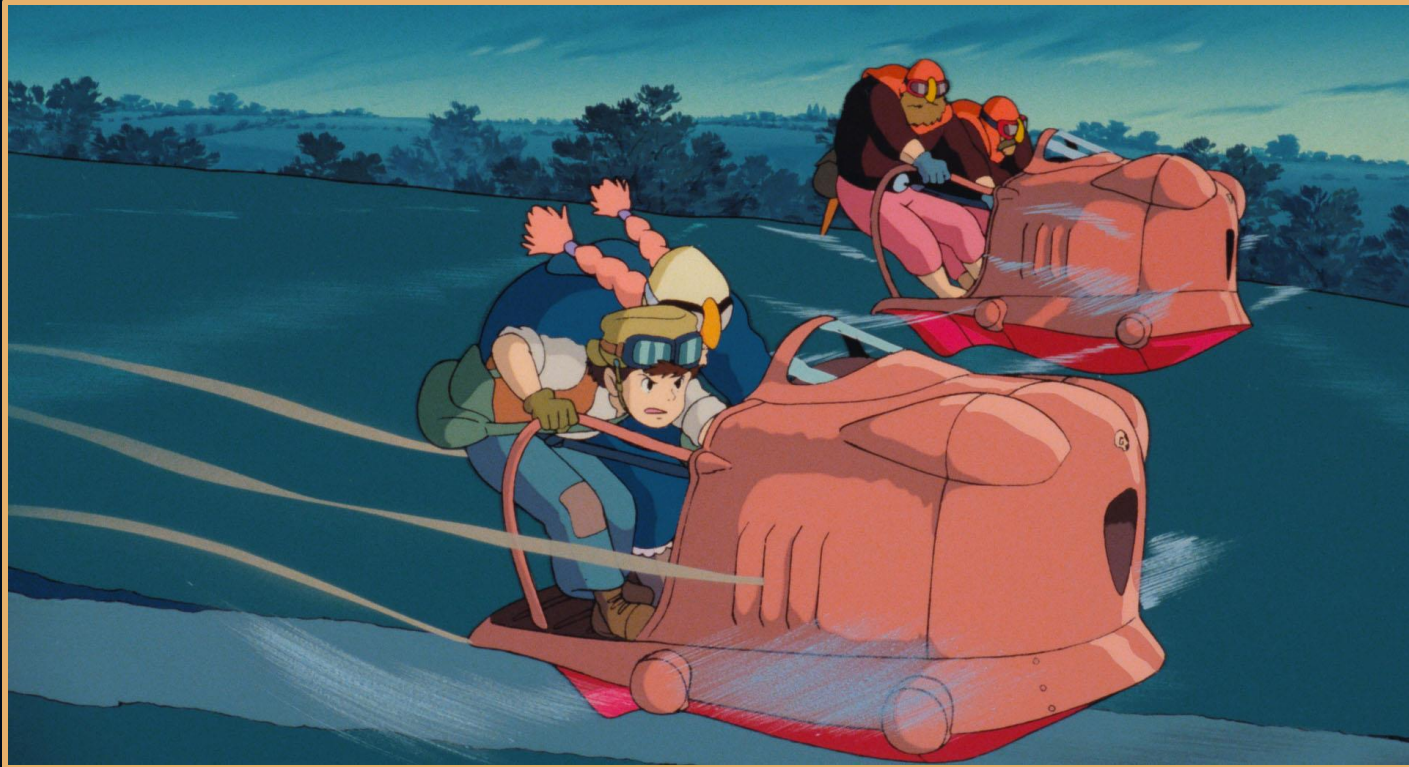
Long-term conditions shape settlement and adaptation

Ecology

Living relationships give a place processes beyond human activity

Natural conditions gain narrative purpose through their consequences.

Geography, routes and encounter



Castle in the Sky (1986) · Studio Ghibli

Barrier

Terrain can make an apparently short journey difficult

View

Height and openness determine what people can see

Opportunity

Waterways, passes and sheltered ground support activity

A route becomes meaningful when terrain explains its difficulty or value.

Climate, seasons and weather



The Last of Us Part I · Naughty Dog / Sony

Climate pattern

Recurring conditions shape how inhabitants build and live

Seasonal rhythm

Predictable changes create preparation and dependence

Weather event

A local event can expose vulnerability or alter visibility

Weather becomes narratively useful when it changes an established condition.

Settlement as environmental adaptation

Exposure Wind, water and temperature affect orientation and form

Materials Local resources influence construction and repair

Routine Environmental patterns shape storage, travel and working time

Adaptation explains choices while still allowing more than one solution.

Wildlife and fictional ecosystems



[Princess Mononoke \(1997\)](#) · Studio Ghibli

Relationship

Food, shelter and reproduction connect living things

Behaviour

Repeated activity helps an audience infer a species' role

Change

A disturbance should have consequences elsewhere in the system

A fictional species gains depth through a role within its environment.

Horizon: a landscape with engineered processes



Horizon Zero Dawn · Guerrilla / Sony

Organic appearance

Forests and terrain support familiar expectations of nature

Manufactured presence

Machine behaviour disrupts a simple nature–technology divide

Layered history

Ruins and living growth invite a reading of different periods

A green landscape can still carry a technological history.

Princess Mononoke: conflict through environment



[Princess Mononoke \(1997\)](#) · [Studio Ghibli](#)

Living presence

The forest's beings give environmental loss tangible form

Material use

Human activity links landscape to tools and settlement

Competing needs

The setting supports conflict without a simple visual answer

Environmental conflict becomes richer when the world makes competing needs visible.

Decay, reclamation and the passage of time



The Last of Us Part I · Naughty Dog / Sony



Castle in the Sky (1986) · Studio Ghibli

Decay

Material damage indicates exposure and reduced maintenance

Reclamation

Living growth transforms earlier human functions

Interpretation

Beauty and vulnerability can coexist in the same place

A changed environment connects earlier use to present conditions.

Natural wonder and meaningful scale



Castle in the Sky (1986) · Studio Ghibli

Recognisable measures

Clouds and built forms make the island's vast scale legible

Unfamiliar form

A distinctive landmark invites curiosity

Narrative relation

Wonder gains purpose when it changes expectation or understanding

Discussion: What does this view change in our understanding of the world?

A worked Section 3 paragraph

Description “The settlement has elevated walkways and tidal generators.”

Analysis “Flood exposure makes raised routes essential. Their narrow junctions bring travellers together and leave districts vulnerable when crossings fail.”

Justification “Coastal infrastructure research informs the design. Generator failure stops protective gates working, allowing floods to cut off lower routes.”

The explanation should make the connection between feature and purpose explicit.

Research, evidence and design justification

Primary production sources Interviews, official artwork and documented design explanations

Contextual research Architecture, industrial processes, climate and ecology

Critical synthesis A specific principle adapted to your own narrative purpose

Accurate attribution Image source, production title and the claim a source supports

A source should support the particular claim attached to it.

Brief Task: Section 3: connected narrative choices

Environments

Evidence and atmosphere support an interpretation of place

Architecture and infrastructure

Form and use establish relationships between locations

Technology and industry

Capabilities and dependencies shape the world's conditions

Natural worlds

Geography and living processes affect action and change

Design choice, evidence, narrative purpose and critical judgement belong together.