

Dissertation Proposal

by Frankie Snow

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BA (Hons) Computer Games Design
Independent Project (ACCA6020)

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The Role of Architecture in Shaping Atmosphere and Environmental Storytelling in Video Games

Identifying the Problem

Architecture is not used as a primary narrative device, and the focus tends to fall back on written story and game mechanics. However, it does play a significant role within games;

- Controls and restricts player movement.
- Effective communication of narrative - Historical, narrative, or social themes.
- Changes tone/mood of environments - Style, layout and aesthetics create atmosphere and emotional engagement.
- Building player immersion through believable environments - Different architectural styles evoke different emotional and atmospheric effects.

Why is this project worth doing?

An emphasis on creating believable worlds in games is essential for player immersion, and the environment that the player moves through is a primary focus. This project aims to enhance storytelling and narrative by exploring architecture as a visual language.

Aims

- Analyse how architectural styles can influence atmospheric tone and player mood within various genre of game.
- Explore how architecture can be used as an environmental storytelling device.
- Combine architectural theory and game design theory to understand how the two contribute to creating an immersive experience.

Objectives

1. Identify key features used in narrative design.
2. Conduct research into player perception of architecture from an emotional perspective using a survey, at least 25 will to be completed.
3. Analyse the use of architecture in terms of games design theory (level design, structure and aesthetic choices).
4. Conduct a case study, exploring the use of architecture in four separate games and how it ties into the thematic elements and can affect the atmosphere/tone.
5. Combine researched theories from architectural design and games design to create an immersive experience, showing architecture as an environmental narrative device.

Project Success Criteria

Use primary research such as surveys and demo testing feedback to explore architectural design and its ability to convey narrative elements, emotion and atmosphere to players. Secondary research will also be used to support any theories presented and to aid and inform the creation of an immersive demo showcasing the importance of storytelling through architectural design.

Deliverables

At the end of the project,

1. Research Document: detailing games design theory and architectural theory; styles of real-world architecture, and exploring how this can reflect historical periods, social issues, and narrative themes as well as emotional impact on the public.
2. Case Study: a case study of four different games and how they use architecture as a thematic/narrative device.
3. Player Experiences Survey: A survey that shows a study group images of architecture within games and asks them to describe the emotion and narrative implied.
4. Survey Report: A report documenting the results from the player experiences survey/study.
5. Presentation and Demo: Presentation collating research carried out, showing the role of architecture in narrative design and its impact on player emotional response and a playable experience demonstrating the impact of different architectural environments.

Literature Review

Chapter 11 of 'Chris Crawford on Game Design' [1] goes into detail about effective storytelling within games design, he speaks about the problems surrounding this, specifically in terms of technical vs creative design.

Chapter 2 of 'First Person' [2] explores the use of visual language as a communicative device within games, more specifically speaking about board games, speaking about the importance of visual language and how this can affect player experience.

Chapter 4 of 'First Person' [3] mentions an interview with Don Carson, a Disney Imagineer, talking about environmental storytelling, he goes into detail about 'infusing' storytelling elements into the design of the physical space.

Chapter 5 of 'An Architectural Approach to Level Design' [4] mentions the 'visual power of game spaces' and explores how visual components of an environment can create stir different emotions in players and affect behaviour.

Chapter 9 of 'An Architectural Approach to Level Design' [5] focuses on story telling in game spaces, mentioning 'qualities of space – size, orientation, lighting and views.'

'Videogame Atlas' [6] speaks about the use of architecture in games and how this influences the narrative elements of the game and mentions its use mechanically.

A thesis from the University of Venice [7], explores 'the role of empathy in aesthetics and architecture', talks about the ideas conveyed by architecture and how viewers feel.

Scott Rogers talks about 'illusional narrative' [8] and how players create links when they are given two images/environments.

Models and Concepts

Narrative Immersion – Creating a transition between the player and the game world, with the ability to resonate on a deeper level. [9]

Emotional Engagement – The ability to evoke an emotional response and create a meaningful experience. [10]

The Aesthetics of Play - A piece of the MDA framework, created by Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc, Robert Zubek, focusing on emotional responses aesthetics can evoke. [11]

How does the project relate to the written work?

The research explores the importance of visual design in mediums such as games, and what effect this has on narrative and emotional response. The practical project will consist of designing a playable experience that focuses on architecture and environment design, based on the research in the literature review.

Ethical Issues

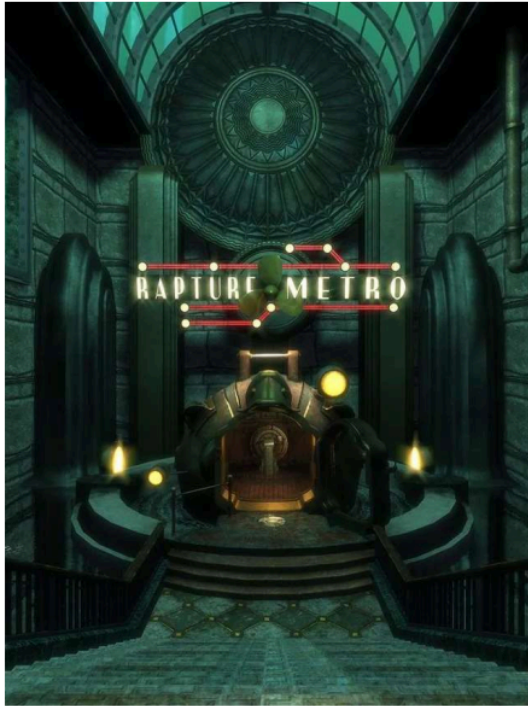
Ensure consent is gained from survey participants and that GDPR data protection guidelines are followed. All participants must be of appropriate age, and content must be carefully selected to avoid negative representations.

What has already been done in the field?



[12]

The game '*Control*' [13] makes use of strong environmental design to imply culture/social issues and emotions without the use of text, instead using architecture to symbolically represent the idea of bureaucracy and themes of dehumanisation.



[14]

Another example of this is found in '*BioShock*' [15], the art-deco style architecture reflects the dystopian ideology, playing on themes of optimism and decay.

Topic Familiarity

I have previous experience in games design from the last few years of academic study and practical work; and have skills in 3D modelling, texturing and level construction as well as concept design which is of importance for my demo.

I still have room to develop my skills in 3D modelling, and this project will serve as a chance to further this as I will be spending more time in *MAYA* and *Substance Painter* to create my environment. It will give the opportunity to conduct deeper research into a topic I have an interest in.

I have experience in *Unreal Engine* from previous academic tasks and have spent time outside of this learning different techniques to enhance my workflow. I plan to utilise the research gathered over the course of this project to enhance my knowledge of environment design and how that affects player immersion and emotions, through the medium of architecture.

References

- [1] C. Crawford, "11 Storytelling" in *Chris Crawford on Game Design*, Indianapolis: New Riders Publishing, 2003.
- [2] E. Aarseth, "II. Ludology, Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation" in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance and Game*, Massachusetts: N. Wardrip-Fruin and P. Harrigan, 2004.
- [3] H. Jenkins, "IV. Game Theories, Game Design as Narrative Architecture" in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance and Game*, Massachusetts: N. Wardrip-Fruin and P. Harrigan, 2004.
- [4] C. Totten, "Chapter 5: Communicating Through Environment Art" in *An Architectural Approach to Level Design*, Second Edition, Florida: CRC Press, 2019.
- [5] C. Totten, "Chapter 9: Storytelling in Gamespaces" in *An Architectural Approach to Level Design*, Second Edition, Florida: CRC Press, 2019.
- [6] L. Pearson, "Chapter 1.1 Parisian Parkour" in *Videogame Atlas: Mapping Interactive Worlds*, New York: Thames and Hudson, 2022
- [7] B.Conta, "The role of empathy in aesthetics and architecture," MA. thesis, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Venice, Italy, 2024. [Online] Available: <https://unitesi.unive.it/handle/20.500.14247/1368?mode=full>
- [8] S. Rogers, "Chapter 9: Illusional Narrative" in *Level up! the Guide to Great Video Game Design*, John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2024. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/detail.action?docID=31808327>.
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- [10] Meegle, 'Emotional Engagement', Meegle. Accessed: Oct. 19, 2025. [Online] Available: https://www.meegle.com/en_us/topics/game-design/emotional-engagement
- [11] Chariot Rider. The Aesthetics of Play, (May 30, 2018). Accessed: Oct. 19, 2025. [Online video]. Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4pCnHUwjeXc>



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[13] S. Lake et al. Control. (2019). 505 Games. Accessed: Oct. 19, 2025. Computer Game [Online]. Available: <https://store.steampowered.com/agecheck/app/870780/>

[14] LucianolvanDiaz, 'Another image of BioShock, this time a screenshot of actual gameplay. Art is in the small details.', Reddit, 2019. Accessed: Oct. 19, 2025. [Online] Available: https://www.reddit.com/r/ArtDeco/comments/ea49zt/another_image_of_bioshock_this_time_a_screenshot/

[15] K. Levine et al. BioShock. (2007). 2K. Accessed: Oct. 19, 2025. Computer Game [Online]. Available: <https://store.steampowered.com/app/7670/BioShock/>

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Books:

C. Crawford, *Chris Crawford on Game Design*, Indianapolis: New Riders Publishing, 2003.

N. Wardrip-Fruin, *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance and Game*, Massachusetts: N. Wardrip-Fruin and P. Harrigan, 2004.

C. Totten, *An Architectural Approach to Level Design*, Second Edition, Florida: CRC Press, 2019.

B. Conta, "The role of empathy in aesthetics and architecture," MA. thesis, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Venice, Italy, 2024.

S. Rogers, *Level up! the Guide to Great Video Game Design*, John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2024.

Websites:

'Narrative Immersion' - https://www.meegle.com/en_us/topics/game-design/narrative-immersion

'Emotional Engagement' - https://www.meegle.com/en_us/topics/game-design/emotional-engagement

'The Aesthetics of Play' - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4pCnHUwjeXc>

'Brutalism bolstered Control's success, but why is the movement still so trendy?' (Image) - <https://www.archpaper.com/2021/08/brutalism-bolstered-control-success-why-is-the-movement-so-trendy/>

'Another image of BioShock, this time a screenshot of actual gameplay. Art is in the small details.' (Image) - https://www.reddit.com/r/ArtDeco/comments/ea49zt/another_image_of_bioshock_this_time_a_screenshot/



Software:

Control (Computer Game) - <https://store.steampowered.com/agecheck/app/870780/>

BioShock (Computer Game) - <https://store.steampowered.com/app/7670/BioShock/>



Dissertation Proposal

GRADEMARK REPORT

FINAL GRADE

GENERAL COMMENTS

74/100

BA GAMES – PROJECT PROPOSAL – ACCA6020
INDEPENDENT PROJECT (5%)

Student – Frankie Snow
74%

Mark –

Intro / A&O (500 words)		
Project title; Identification of a specific problem to be investigated; Well-defined aims and SMART objectives; Explaining why this project is worth doing; Discussion of what the project needs to do in order to be a success; Description any deliverables that will be produced at the end of the project	40	28
Good project title that precisely captures architecture's dual role in atmosphere/storytelling, core to level design.		
Problem has been identified with good clarity on architecture's functions (movement control, narrative comms, mood,		

immersion) – ties directly to emotional/atmospheric effects. There is a good justification for the project that emphasises immersion via "visual language" – relevant to modern games (e.g., UE5 Nanite for detailed environments). Deliverables have been outlined well but would benefit from potentially a proposed success metric. (e.g. survey results of >75% in a particular area.) SMART objectives evident in report but could be improved with introduction of metrics/timelines.		
Background to the Project (500 words)		
Description of how the work to be done by in the project relates to the work identified in the literature review; Discussion of any ethical issues raised by the project Identifying what has already been done within the field; Topic familiarity; Brief literature review using appropriate sources – 6-8 journal papers and book chapters rather than just websites; Selection of relevant models & concepts There is a solid grasp of potential ethical considerations with the project – GDPR/consent/age-appropriate; content sensitivity. Good identification of work already completed in field, with excellent examples	40	30

(Control [13] Brutalism for bureaucracy [12]; BioShock [15] Art Deco decay [14]). Skills (Maya, Substance, UE) directly applicable; honest growth areas. Literature review has a strong core of relevant, academic sources that reinforce the work you are proposing. Well done. Relevant models and concepts have been referenced in relation to the proposed project with a clear contextual connection.		
Document Presentation		
Correct spelling, grammar and punctuation; Flow of narrative/fluency; Coherence; Word processed ; Correct use of referencing with bibliography; Strict word limit There is a professional level of formatting – using an academic tone and flow to the document with a clear narrative. Good use of headings and bullet points to streamline information and increase readability. IEEE Referencing has been used correctly throughout with an extensive bibliography.	20	16
TOTAL	100	74

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