

Oh No I'm Toast!

Mastering Videogame Secrets in Theory and Practice

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Submitted to the Program in Comparative Media Studies in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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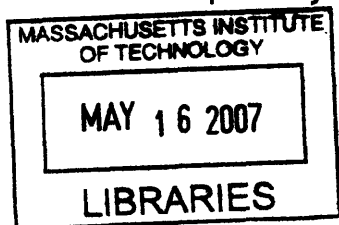
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ABSTRACT

Secrets are a ubiquitous part of contemporary videogame design, yet are largely unexplored within academic discourse and often dismissed as extras. I contend that secrets play a fundamental and influential role within a given gamespace in terms of the way they affect a videogame design and player experience. As such this paper will investigate the nature of secrets in videogames. I shall find where secrets exist in a game and how they function as moments of gameplay. Then I will explore secrets historically and look at how the meaning of secrets have changed and evolved over time. It will be shown that secrets create a window to an underlying structure of gameplay, a meta-level that subverts the regular play of a videogame. Further, I will argue that secrets are a space where players engage in unstructured play, free from the constraints of a game design. Finally I will demonstrate how secrets can be used to personalize or redesign the experience of a videogame and/or remake the game design itself. In order to make this argument I will break down what secrets can mean specifically to players through two very differently structured games: *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* and *Animal Crossing*. Knowing why secrets matter in a gamespace will reveal a reason for why videogames are compelling as a brave new form of media.

Thesis Supervisor: Henry Jenkins III
Professor of Comparative Media Studies

acknowledgements

When I was six I used to sit on my Dad's lap and play computer games. We played games with peculiar and terrifying titles like *Dark Castle*, *Dungeons of Doom*, *Spelunx*, *Boom Boom*, *Planetfall*, *Rogue*, *Realmz*, *Zoombinis*, *Exile* and so many more. Our play was always about finding new things and showing each other surprises and from this I have gained my love of videogames. I would like to thank my Dad for sustaining my game playing and my Mom for supporting me every step of the way and always believing in my ability to finish things in both games and life.

So many people have helped shape my experience of games and my love of the secret over the years. I am forever indebted to those who helped me invent secrets on message boards, those who put secrets in their games and to anyone who ever painstakingly compiled a homemade guide to secrets. By them I am inspired.

I would also like to thank the faculty of Film, Television and Theatre at the University of Notre Dame for allowing me to skew my major and write essays on videogames instead of film and I would especially like to thank the truly wonderful Donald Crafton and Susan Ohmer for their help and advice.

At MIT's Comparative Media Studies I would like to give a nod to my brilliant class: Neal Grigsby, Ivan Askwith, Alec Austin, Peter Rauch, Geoffrey Long, Karen Verschooren, Dan Roy, Rena He Huang, Amanda Finkelburg, and Sam and Amanda Ford, for all their wonderful ideas and good company. I am especially grateful to my friends: Cat Schmidt for being a thing, my brother Alex, for lying on my couch and making me realize why I care about secrets, Zubi and Usi for not even knowing, and my fiancé Dean Tate, for mostly everything in general.

Finally I would like to give a wholehearted "thank you!" to my thesis committee: Henry Jenkins, Scot Osterweil, William Urrichio and Alice Robison for giving me amazing opportunities, sage advice and opening my eyes to the meta of things. I am honored.

This project has been a nearly life-long quest for me, drawing upon everything I know and love about videogames. I hope you, my reader, have fun on my saga of the secret!

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oh no i'm toast!

I am playing *Zelda: Ocarina of Time*. As my avatar "Link" runs he suddenly jolts and takes flight through the air. This is not supposed to happen. I cannot land. My brother enters: "Are you winning? Woah! Awesome! How did you do that?" "I'm stuck in the air" I exclaim. The screen goes dark. The game crashes. "Oh no! You are toast!" exclaims my brother, "Lets do it again!"

What happened? My brother and I encountered one of *Zelda: Ocarina of Time's* secret glitches. By moving in the exact right way we instigated a bug that causes one to fly momentarily and then crash the game. Following this incident the two of us practiced flying to see how far we could break the game. This did not help us win. In fact it increased the amount of time it took to beat the game, but we were having fun. Making Link the avatar fly was not about playing well - we played and crashed because it was a novel and unexpected action within the game.

We are not alone. A web search for "Link flying in *Zelda Ocarina*" yields numerous fan-sites, game guides, and online videos dedicated to exploiting the flying glitch and numerous other secrets within *Zelda*. Nor is *Zelda* alone as a game with secrets. A given videogame is likely to contain various kinds of both planned and unplanned secrets along with a player base dedicated to finding them all. What is notable is the fact that secrets are considered frivolous extras in the grand scheme of a game design. They are not required to play or finish a game, yet players will dedicate loads of time to uncover them and even more

time proclaiming their find to the world. Playing a videogame to find secrets is not experiencing a game as it is designed, rather it is subversion of the gamespace for another kind of play.

What do I mean by another kind of play? It is well known that *play* is one of the messiest concepts in the realm of videogame academia because it has multiple facets and exists in varying modes, styles and degrees. Scholar Johann Huizinga posits in his landmark book on play, *Homo Ludens*, that play, while often seen as a frivolous pursuit, is central to what makes us human. He writes:

“it is a significant function - that is to say, there is some sense to it. In play there is something “at play” which transcends the immediate need for life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something.”¹

In the context of videogame secrets we can take this to mean that despite the fact that secrets may seem frivolous within a videogame, they are indisputably a moment of play within that gamespace and therefore engagement in the play of secrets generates something meaningful for the players who interact with them.

What sort of meaning is generated by the distinct play that happens with secrets? As I see it, the optimal way of approaching the subject is by first examining what videogame secrets are and how they are distinct within the overall structure and culture of videogames. Our examination will lead us through the manner by which secrets are found within a gamespace and how players go about finding them to an examination of the specific kind of interaction that takes place between secrets and players. Understanding why secrets matter within a

¹ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1950), 1

gamespace will help us understand why videogames matter as a medium.

But before we discuss that argument, let us look at what secrets actually are.

1 secrets as play

As one might imagine by the name, *secrets* are similar to what is considered secret in every day life; a person might not expect to come across them but finding them implies certain requirements and privileges earned by behaving a certain way within a situation or space. So videogame secrets can be defined as privileged pieces of information hidden within a gamespace and found by players through luck or shrewd gameplay. In the world of videogames, secrets exist in nearly every contemporary game across every genre and through every platform. A secret usually augments gameplay by changing an aspect of the videogame world, they might divulge information, flesh out a game plotline, change the look of a game, *etc.* Moreover there are certain rules held between all secrets that identify them as such. Secrets, then, occupy a distinct and clearly defined space within a videogame. They are extras, yet they are expected.

What exactly is a videogame secret? A list of characteristics helps define the term. In a gamespace...

- secrets do not affect whether or not you win a game
- are a choice - one can choose to find them or not.
- are clearly identified by the games they appear in as being outside of typical gameplay.

- in gaming culture, are equated with mastery - the more secrets one finds, the better player one is.
- are self-propagating - if there is one secret found in a certain way usually there are others similarly hidden

For illustrative purposes here is a typical example of a secret. Let us say you are wending your way through a castle in order to rescue a naughty prince. You step on a hidden floor tile. *Click*. Suddenly a golden door appears which opens to reveal a herd of corgi dogs frolicking in a wood. One of the corgis hops over and says "Hello friend! You look like you need Bunny Boots." A pair of boots is tossed at you and the door vanishes like smoke. Those odd dogs are never seen nor mentioned in the game again - however you find the boots make you act like a bunny in a silly sort of way every time you put them on.

This example shows us why secrets can be desirable. In a game one is set on certain tasks to achieve within a gamespace. The secret provides both a momentary break from those goals as well as a hidden and inconsequential 'treat.' Potentially the bunny boots could be used in a gamespace to create many visually interesting set-ups (picture an human avatar hopping around and furiously wriggling its nose in the middle of a virtual city and you begin to understand the picture.) Due to funny instances like the one above, secrets have garnered the interest of countless videogame players who search out these types of experiences. As one might imagine, systems have been developed among players for sharing their secret finds.

GameFAQs.com, a popular website archiving player-made guides and walkthroughs for games, has a space dedicated to “secret FAQs.” The information contained within these guides serve as a listing of the many and varied secrets within a given game. Yet, curiously, the guides are not intended for everyone - they are written as instructions for those who have already won the game. This division between who can play is significant because it defines those who use the guides as engaging in a distinct mode of play. Huizinga provides us with insight as to what this means. He writes:

“The exceptional and special position of play is most tellingly illustrated by the fact that it loves to surround itself with an air of secrecy. Even in early childhood the charm of play is enhanced by making a “secret” out of it. This is for *us*, not for the “others”...We are different and do things differently.”²

If we adapt that idea to the idea of game guides, we can see that those who write the guides create a division of those who can engage in their game within the game and those who cannot. Thus when game guide authors write:

“This FAQ is intended for players who have already finished this game and want to try new things.”³

or

“This guide is meant to list all the cool things that you can do...These things have nothing to do with the outcome of the game,

² Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1950), 12

³ Zanapher, “The Legend of Zelda, a Link to the Past: Secrets FAQ v0.97,” *GameFaqs.com* http://db.gamefaqs.com/console/snes/file/zelda_http_glitch.txt (retrieved 12/20/06)

and are just some neat things that can be done, ...Have fun that's what this guide is all about.”⁴

These authors set down lines of division for who can play their game. It is for those who know the game and wish to master it, not those who are just beginning. They reflect Huizinga in that they make a secret out of the act of finding secrets. Secrets are for those who fully understand the gamespace and not for those who do not.

These game guide introductions are written for a target audience of players who have experienced a game and are looking for more within a gamespace. Yet, introductions tell us very little of how the guides are used. Is this a subculture of players, a certain fan base? Since secrets are now an ubiquitous part of videogames and exist in the majority of games across genre and platform, how do we understand how players engage with guides, FAQs, and the secrets of games? Videogame theorist Mia Consalvo, in her book *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames* writes of ‘gaming capital’ as a mode by which to understand the myriad of ways individuals interact with games, game paratexts, industry, and other gamers. She argues that all these relationships are connected and ever changing as such:

“it is somewhat futile to talk about the player or a game in the abstract, as what we know about players can change over time, and be dependent on such elements as player skill or age. Likewise, even the most linear game can be experienced in multiple ways, depending on a player’s knowledge of past games

⁴ Fuzzy Lemur, “Fun with Zelda: The definitive guide for all things in "The Legend Of Zelda: Ocarina Of Time" that are useless but nevertheless enjoyable” *GameFaqs.com*, http://db.gamefaqs.com/console/n64/file/zelda_64_fun.txt (retrieved 12/20/06)

in that genre or series, including previewed information from magazines or Web sites, and marketing's attempt at drawing attention to certain elements of the game. All of that knowledge, experience, and positioning helps shape gaming capital for a particular player"⁵

What this means in terms of secrets is that there is not a certain 'type' of gamer that secrets appeal to. Rather, since a player and engagement in play is ever changing it is hopeless to examine the audience of videogame secrets. The audience can be anyone who has played a game and found a secret. Thus one should consider secret finding not as a *subculture* of gaming but as a *mode* of gaming, a player experience.

To date, very little is currently known of player experiences within the realm of videogame academia.⁶ When it comes to player experience those who speak are game designers and their ideas of the way designs ought to function. Designer Raph Koster, in his book *A Theory of Fun*, asserts that videogame play is about grokking a system. He argues that good game design provokes a player to move on once a system of play is mastered; for him, the continuation of play in a finished space (where all goals have been met) is a power trip and signifies that something is wrong with the gamer.⁷ Further, game designer Jason Booth, in a lecture at MIT on game design asserts that games are systems, and anything outside the framework of the system (*i.e.* narrative elements and secrets) is not a

⁵ Mia Consalvo, *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2007), 6

⁶ Ibid, 120

⁷ Raph Koster, *A Theory of Fun*, (Scottsdale: Paraglyph Press, 2004), 28

game.⁸ Both men are correct in two respects: first that playing a mastered space is pointless in terms of the main goal of a game, and second, that the main game does not exist outside of the system. Nevertheless, their assertions merely state how they believe players should play - it does not take into account what players actually do.

Game creator Scot Osterweil has other ideas of what to expect in terms of players and play. Osterweil believes that "Play has no agenda, the player's motivations are entirely intrinsic and personal"⁹ As such, Osterweil believes when one designs a game it should be designed with the expectation that the way a person plays a game is variable; it will change not only from player to player but by an individual player over time. Osterweil declares that four freedoms must be expected of a player and by a player for any given game:

- the freedom to experiment with play,
- the freedom to fail at the game,
- the freedom to create identities for themselves within the game, and
- the freedom to vary in effort of play.

The four freedoms of Scot Osterweil map the way a player might experience videogame secrets. First of all, as a player experiments with gameplay they are effectively testing the boundaries of a game to see what is allowed and what is

⁸ Jason Booth "Designer Perspectives" Videogame Theory and Design Class Lecture, MIT, 11/14/06

⁹ Scot Osterweil, Game Creator/Theorist, Personal Interview, MIT, 12/15/06

not. Secrets are often found by probing a space and, in a sense, poking at everything. Thus, players who experiment with the rules and the play of a game are likely to find and be aware of secrets hidden in a gamespace. In the adventure game *Logical Journey of the Zoombinis*, for instance, those who click all over a game screen will find hidden animations, those who drop their avatars off a cliff find the avatars fall and bounce back to no ill effect, and those who experiment with what is allowable in the game itself will find tricks that make a given puzzle harder or easier.¹⁰

The freedom to fail means that one should not always expect optimal play from a player; rather a player should be able to fail, learn from mistakes and continue within a game. This is, in another sense, testing the boundaries of a game in an alternative way. A player who fails at a game might fight a new mode of play through failure. For instance, in the game *Taskmaker* (1995), a player who dies ends up experiencing a maze in hell. Yet the game isn't over - the player simply exits hell and picks up where they left off. If they had not died, hell would remain a hidden world never explored. Further, finding out what constitutes being sent to hell (*e.g.* swearing, misuse of magic) becomes a game unto itself.

The freedom to create identities in the gamespace ties into secrets as well. While many games begin with a character selection screen, the creation of identity and the relationship one has with one's avatar does not end there. Rather, identity is shaped by the way one experiments and plays with a gamespace. Players will develop certain competencies over others and methods

¹⁰ Scot Osterweil, Game Creator/Theorist, Personal Interview, MIT, 12/15/06

of achieving goals. In fact, finding secrets can affect the identity of a player, since secrets often change the look or method by which a game behaves. Case in point: in the game *Animal Crossing* (2004) players are asked by characters what a “cool phrase” to say is or what sort of outfit they should wear. All the characters of the world will take up whatever the response is. As such, the game world takes on the shape of what kind of person the player is within the game and what kind of world they want to make.

Finally, the freedom of effort posits that players will expend varying degrees of effort in play over time. Osterweil illustrates this point by an examination of how kids play tag. He says a kid playing tag might run really really hard, as though their life depended on it in the first part of the game. Over time, though, the player can get bored with that type of play and stand still to receive the tag at another time later in the game. As such, the effort a player puts into a game changes over time. To augment this freedom of effort concept with a videogame example, in the game *Metroid Prime* (2002) the way a player makes their way through the gamespace changes the ending of the game. Players who expend a lot of effort to find every game secret get one (secret) ending while those who play through quickly get a different one. Thus the degree at which one plays yields a different result in the gamespace and changes the end narrative of the game.

Dispelling the secret or creating the secret has always been a fundamental part of human play. Johan Huizinga poses that play is enhanced by making a secret out of it.

“It [play] promotes the formation of social groups which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means.”¹¹

Huizinga poses is that play itself is mysterious to those not engaged in it. This is an element present in videogame play as well. For the uninitiated a videogame screen can look nonsensical - only those who know the particular gamespace can understand its significance. Roger Callois adds to the examination:

“it is meritorious and fruitful to have grasped the affinity which exists between play and the secret or mysterious but this relationship cannot be part of a definition of play which is nearly always spectaculars or ostentatious. Without doubt, secrecy, mystery, and even travesty can be transformed into play activity, but it must be immediately pointed out that this transformation is necessarily to the detriment of the secret and mysterious, which play exposes, publishes and somehow expends.”¹²

What this passage means is that in addition to play itself being mysterious when someone is playing with something made secret or mysterious, the process of play itself dispels the mystery of the space and allows the player to assert knowledge over the subject matter of the play. If we look at this principle through a game space, one will note that within a game itself a map or screen remains hidden until it is found and it is not understood until it is experienced. A player, for instance, who undertakes a battle with a new monster will often have no idea as to how to win. The player will experiment, playing with the tools given to them until they hit upon the correct solution and

¹¹ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1950), 13

¹² Roger Caillois, “The Definition of Play: The Classification of Games” in *The Game Design Reader*, ed. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2005), 124

defeat the monster. After the battle the player will always know how to defeat that kind of enemy. The mystery is dispelled. Thus the functions of traditional play exist within the space of videogames.

Nevertheless, the transition from unstructured “lets pretend” style play of Huizinga and Callois and the play inherent in videogames is not without problems. Media theorist Henry Jenkins notes in his essay *Complete Freedom of Movement: Videogames as Gendered Play Spaces* that some of the most important play spaces for 19th century children were the unstructured places found in “free” space that exist outside the control of adults. He writes of traditional 19th century play:

“The unstructured spaces, the playforts and tree houses, children create for themselves in the cracks, gullies, back allies and vacant lots of the adult world constitute what Robin C. Moore (1986) calls “childhood’s domain” or William Van Vliet (1983) has labeled as a “fourth environment” outside the adult-structured spaces of home, school, and playground. These informal, often temporary place spaces are where free and unstructured play occurs. Such spaces surface most often on the lists children make of “special” or “important” places in their lives.”¹³

Jenkins contrasts that type of play to videogame space. He notes:

“...the video game culture is not a world children construct for themselves but rather a world made by adult companies and sold to children. There is no way that we can escape adult intervention in shaping children’s play environments as long as those environments are built and sold rather than discovered and appropriated.”¹⁴

¹³ Henry Jenkins, ““Complete Freedom of Movement”: Video Games as Gendered Play Spaces” in *The Game Design Reader*, ed. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2005), 335

¹⁴ Ibid. 344

What Jenkins reveals is that there is a troubled relationship between the seemingly tightly constructed world of the videogame and the nature of traditional play. Videogames mediate play through the virtual space we play them in, the rules they impose upon us, and the controller we hold as we play. As such videogames simply do not function like games we imagine on our own.

Yet, certainly games are capable of creating memorable experiences and meaningful play! I argued earlier in this chapter that the engagement of secrets involves a distinct type of play with a gamespace, play that exists outside the main structure of a videogame. Further, through Osterweil's four freedoms I have shown that secrets are experimental, identity shaping and found through effort. It is my belief that secrets are a place where Jenkins' unstructured play occurs within a videogame space, play that is free and outside of the rest of the structured videogame world. If we draw this line of reasoning together we at last come to my thesis.

I contend that secrets play a fundamental and influential role within a given gamespace in terms of the way they affect a videogame design and player experience. This paper will show that secrets create a window to an underlying structure of gameplay, a meta-level that subverts the regular play of a videogame. The significance of this perspective is that the subversive acts of videogame secrets often engage the player in a type of play that is free from the constraints of the rest of a given videogame design. Secrets become a place in the gamespace where players engage in play of a creative and unstructured

nature by creating compelling moments, personalizing a gameplace, and redesigning a gamespace. I believe that understanding how this type of play matters in a videogame will tell us why games are compelling as a media form.

2 mapping spaces, finding places

Raph Koster has written of secret finding and game exploration as a useful catalyst for learning how to solve certain kinds of problems. He writes:

“In many games you are asked to find secrets or to explore an area completely. This teaches many interesting things, such as considering a problem from all angles, making sure that you have all the information before you make a decision, and thoroughness is often better than speed.”¹⁵

What Koster observes is that exploration within the game is a similar activity to finding secrets in that both actions draw on certain problem solving skills. If you are not in a game, however, this can be difficult to picture given the endless variations in game space. Some games, for instance, might have avatars that walk around, others one plays from a first-person perspective, some have map-like views, etc. Thus the possibilities of viewpoints in a game are nearly endless. Given such varying perspective what does it mean to *explore* a gamespace? What is involved in the navigation of a videogame for the purpose of secret-finding and the like? To understand these questions we must examine the space of a game in the mind of a player. You will see what I mean in a minute.

The amount of information within a given gamespace is staggering. Every character imparts some type of sentence, every obstacle requires some sort of knowledge, and the space itself requires some understanding of how to navigate it. Moving between all these competencies requires a certain amount of experimentation and a distinct mode of memory. One parallel example of how

¹⁵ Raph Koster, *A Theory of Fun*, (Scottsdale: Paraglyph Press, 2004), 134

humans map out space can, oddly enough, be found in the manner in which information is structured within the mnemonic memory practices of 15th century Europe. Jonathon Spence writes in his essay "The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci" of the way systems, a sort of architecture of memories, were created within the minds of the past in order to bring order and instant recall to those who needed vast amounts of information at their disposal. He writes:

“...the real purpose of these mental constructs was to provide storage spaces for the myriad concepts that make up the sum of our human knowledge. To everything that we wish to remember, we should give an image and to every one of these images we should assign a position where it can repose peacefully until we are ready to reclaim it by an act of memory.”¹⁶

This construction reflects the experience of a videogame. Mastering the space of a videogame and experimenting within the space is similar to entering a collective and constructed memory palace. All the characters/items/articles within a gamespace have predictable actions and locations. All the spaces are imaginary yet lead to expected pieces of information, and the more one plays in a space the more is discovered time and time again.

To draw another illustrative point, Spence asserts that memory palaces allow one to make associations between instances of knowledge. He describes the way one uses a memory palace:

“Ricci has left us, in his Chinese book on memory, one explicit group of images, each fixed in its own place and described in sequence. The first image was two warriors grappling, the second a tribeswoman from the west, the third a peasant cutting grain, the

¹⁶ Spence, Jonathan, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York: Viking. 1984), 3

fourth a maidservant holding a child in her arms. True to his own injunctions about a simple way to begin a memory system, Ricci chose to place these images in the four corners of one specific room. The room was a reception hall, a fairly large formal space supported by pillars which I take to be the entry way to the memory palace proper...any beginner who was reading Ricci could follow him without difficulty on this first mental memory stroll; we can see them walking together to the door, entering the hall and turning to their right, perusing the images one by one”¹⁷

We can look at this way of knowing a space as the way a player might look at a mastered video game space. Each figure in a given game space yields an expected piece of information. Such a mastery of the space, however, creates a flux in game design. For, unlike a memory palace, whose construction is built in the head of those who imagine it, most videogames are imagined and constructed by teams of designers for players. Yet, it is interesting to note that while companies work together to create the game as a whole, a single player has the capacity to know a game better than the people who created it.¹⁸ Mia Consalvo writes of this:

“...industries can’t dictate the terms of use; individuals are active in how they choose to use (or not) such items as well as how they view such things relative to the games they play. Neither side (the player or the industries) has total control.”¹⁹

What this means is that there is a tension in authorship: a question as to how we play and who is truly in charge.

Memory palaces provide a useful comparison by which to look at gameplay

¹⁷ Spence, Jonathan, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York: Viking. 1984), 10

¹⁸ Dean Tate, Videogame Designer, Irrational Games. Interview, Boston, MA. 12/17/06.

¹⁹ Mia Consalvo, *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2007), 131

control between designer and player. In his writings Ricci suggests that, in constructing memory palaces, one creates the possibility to build on the mental palace. In turn this provides the ability to create new pathways, shortcuts, and secret way fares from one memory point to another.²⁰ In videogames one can create pathways and shortcuts as well. Jenkins observes this in his essay "Complete Freedom of Movement: Videogames as Gendered Place Spaces." He posits:

"Secret codes," "Easter Eggs," and "Warp zones" function in digital space like secret paths do in physical space and are eagerly sought by gamers who want to go places and see things others can't find"²¹

What Jenkins notes is that creative players can push the limits of expected gameplay, often jumping levels, playing things out of order, or pushing the game to yield every ounce of playable levels. This illustrates is that as a master of the *space* you are a manipulator of the *pace*.

From the memory palace analogy we can now see how a videogame space is mapped and mastered. One masters the myriad of information in a gamespace by careful observation and memorization to a point where one knows a game better than the company that created it and can map a game in new ways. While the idea of the memory palace may not seem like complete analogy, (since games are communal entities designed by many, whereas memory palaces are individualized experiences distinct from one person to the next) this

²⁰ Spence, Jonathan, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York: Viking. 1984), 9

²¹ Henry Jenkins, "'Complete Freedom of Movement': Video Games as Gendered Play Spaces" in *The Game Design Reader*, ed. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2005), 340

hardly matters. As we saw earlier when we discussed Osterweil's four freedoms and Jenkins' unstructured play; all players experience videogames differently. As such, a videogame is like a visual representation of a memory palace thrust upon a player and known only specifically to them.

In this paper thus far we have discussed many elements of play that involve secrets:

- The cultural surround of secrets (game mastery and *GameFaqs*)
- The different ways players play within a game (Osterweil's "Four Freedoms")
- The type of play secrets embody within a game (Jenkins' "Unstructured Play")
- The way players map out a memory of a gamespace and find secrets (Spence's *Memory Palaces*)

All these elements establish that secrets embody a distinct sort of play within a gamespace. We cannot yet say, however, why this sort of play matters to players or to videogames at large, in order to do that we have to look at the meaning of the interaction inherent in this sort of play. Earlier we noted Huizinga's famous line "all play means something"²² This concept has been translated to the videogame space by Theorist/Designers Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman. They posit in their essay "Game Design and Meaningful Play" that the way a

²² Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1950), 1

videogame generates meaning is through the actions of the player and the reactions of the game. They write:

“Meaningful Play emerges from the interaction between players and the system of the game, as well as from the context in which a game is played. Understanding this interaction helps us to see just what is going on when a game is played.”²³

Drawing on this statement, if we look at potential actions and reactions between secrets and players we can encompass what type of meaning is generated through the interaction.

²³ Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 60

3 secret attractions

What does an action on the part of the player and a reaction on the part of a secret look like in general within a videogame space? More specifically what is the manner in which secrets appear within the time of the videogame as a *moment* of play and how does it affect the play of a player? Secrets both exist and act within the gamespace. To explore this function we must look at what is at stake when one finds a secret in a game.

In terms of grounding a discussion of secrets in an existing theory base , videogame acadamia has yet to explore the subject of secrets in play at length. Secrets have traditionally been dismissed as videogame extras – nothing noteworthy. So perhaps a more useful framework for us to ground our discussion in would be to look at parallel elements of other media forms. While nothing quite like videogame secrets exist in other mediums, there are elements of other media, particularly early cinema's "attractions" and "gags" that are secret-like in terms of their design, placement and function within a filmic structure. Since there is a solid framework by which the cinema of attractions and early comedic gags are understood in early cinema, it will be vital to draw upon them comparatively, as a manner for understanding how secrets fit into the videogames as a whole and affect play experience.

Tom Gunning argues in his essay "Now You See It, Now You Don't: The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions", that early cinema is not an inherently narrative vehicle. Rather, he asserts that early cinema pre-1908 can be

understood as employed to two purposes: the act of story-telling and the displaying of curiosities.²⁴ In early cinematic history, film had two distinct forms, narrative and attractions. The narrative use of film is the classical form of cinema we know today, where cinema is used to carry the progression of a story. The “cinema of attractions” differs in that, rather than telling a story, the main purpose is to display a curiosity, similar to going to a carnival and watching the strong man. To illustrate, a film of the attraction tradition *Dog Factory* (1904), features a box labeled “Patent Dog Transformator.” The shop owners push dogs into the box and sausages come out the other end, which are then hung on the wall. Patrons then enter the shop, sausages are put into the machine and live dogs exit the other end. All the while the actors look at the audience and gesture at the wonder of the patent dog transformator machine, inviting the viewing audience to marvel at the invention. There is no story at work in this film – simply a display of something unusual.

The gesturing to the audience present in dog factory is another feature of attraction film. Early cinema was marked by audience interaction - it was usual for spectators to heckle the screen, sing along, or interact with those showing the film.²⁵ The cinema of attractions incited this interactive behavior through the actors gesturing towards the seated spectators. The gesturing actors include the audience in the film through the acknowledgment of their spectatorship. Gunning

²⁴ Tom Gunning, ““Now You See it, Now You Don’t”: The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions.” in *The Velvet Light Trap* 32 (1993) 5

²⁵ Pam Wojcik, “The Sentimental Bloke and Early Cinema.” Australian Cinema Class Lecture, University of Notre Dame, 9/2/04.

writes of this inclusion: “The attraction directly addresses the spectator, acknowledging the viewer’s presence and seeking to quickly satisfy a curiosity.”²⁶

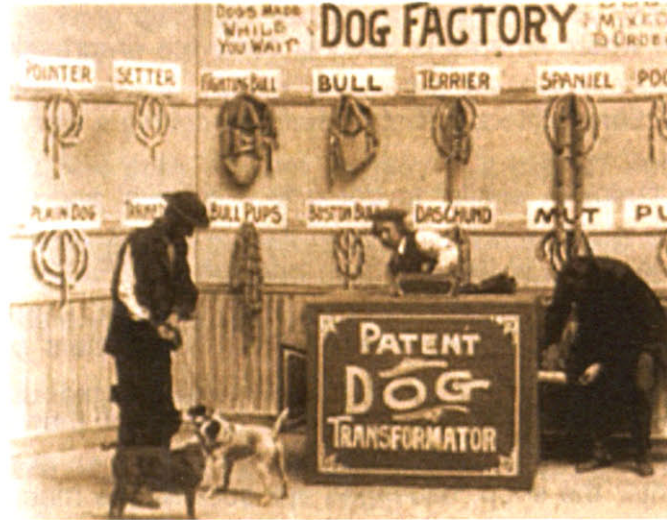


Figure A: Dog Factory Still

Similarly early secrets often engaged the audience in a comparable manner. The secrets would take the player outside of the game world by “gesturing” to the player who found them. For instance, let us say you are playing a game. This game involves wandering the space of a factory. In this factory you find a wall that is less solid than the others. It is, in fact a secret passage. Within the wall you find that the Loch Ness monster has taken up residence and is having a slime party. He gives you a cup of slime (to put a skip in your step) and asks you if you are enjoying your game experience. After the party you are thrown out of the wall and back into the game world. The Loch Ness monster is never seen or

²⁶ Tom Gunning, ““Now You See it, Now You Don’t”: The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions.” in *The Velvet Light Trap* 32 (1993) 5

mentioned in the game again.²⁷ This secret is like an attraction in that it is unexpected (one did not expect the secret passage or the Loch Ness monster), it displayed a curiosity (the Loch Ness monster and a slime party), it referenced the player as an out of game being (by asking if you were enjoying the game), and it was short-lived (the experience cannot be replayed and the game will make no mention the secret). In this fashion, secrets, by being both hidden within and unmoored from the rest of the game space, become an oddity in a given videogame. Gunning writes of cinematic attractions:

“Attractions fundamental hold on spectators depends on arousing and satisfying visual curiosity through a direct and acknowledged act of display...”²⁸

So too do secrets elicit and satisfy curiosity. They confirm that mapping out the territory of a gamespace will be rewarded with a quick flash of pleasure.

Videogame secrets, however, have an added dimension beyond cinematic attractions in that videogames are interactive and finding secrets is a choice presented to a player. Players can find secrets or not and they can be a part of a videogame experience or not. As such, while attraction films were cohesive cinematic moments videogame secrets are optional places within a gamespace. Fortuitously, there is another cinematic parallel to be found in film history that can better account for this difference. Namely film gags in early Hollywood comedies.

²⁷ Kristina Drzaic, “Secret Design” in *Labyrinth Gameshell* ed. Scot Osterweil (Cambridge: The Education Arcade, 2006)

²⁸ Tom Gunning, ““Now You See it, Now You Don’t”: The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions.” in *The Velvet Light Trap* 32 (1993) 6

Henry Jenkins and Kristin Brunovska posit in their book *Classical Hollywood Comedy* that when cinema of attractions became displaced by a more narrative centric cinema attractions themselves became integrated into certain genres of films. They write:

“the fragmented, spectacle-oriented style of the ‘cinema of attractions’ was ideally suited for the presentation of a gag-centered mode of comedy.”²⁹

These gag-centered comedies of the 1920s were often characterized by what film scholars call a troubled relationship between narrative and gags. Film theorist Donald Crafton has posed that gags are subversive of the narrative of a film story. He writes:

“...it was never the aim of comic filmmakers to “integrate” the gag elements of their movies. I also doubt that viewers subordinated gags to narrative.”³⁰

What Crafton means is that gags and narrative existed as separate rather than integrated moments in a gamespace. For instance, if in the middle of a comedic love story, one character throws a pie into the face of another, the narrative is momentarily halted and the audience laughs at the gag. Secrets function in a similar manner in a gamespace. To draw a comparison in a videogame it might seem that when one plays the purpose is to at some point reach the end and “win.” Most elements within the videogame, namely game narrative and gameplay focus on pushing the player towards the games’ conclusion.

²⁹ Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins. *Classical Hollywood Comedy* (NY: Routledge, 1995), 64

³⁰ Donald Crafton, “Pie and Chase: Gag, Spectacle, and Narrative in Slapstick Comedy” in *Classical Hollywood Comedy*. ed Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins (NY: Routledge, 1995), 107

Secrets however, push the player to engage in activities that do not help a player reach the final goal. The videogame *Tales of Symphonia* (2004) demonstrates this through one of its secrets. If the player's avatar stumbles into a certain situation at the right time the avatar will take a break from her mission (no matter that she is on an urgent and supposedly time-sensitive mission to save the world!) to try her hand at being a waitress. Your avatar is ordered to serve assorted grumpy patrons the food of their choice. After the job is completed your avatar is given a secret title "Waitress" and you continue on your merry way no better or worse than you were before. In a sense this is very similar to comedic gags. This secret effectively removes the game's urgency to let you vicariously live the life of a waitress, likewise gags derail a film's narrative and move the focus to a silly moment.

Another facet of the similarity between the filmic gag and the videogame secret are their relationship to the pacing of their respective media forms. In a film gags affect pacing in that they change the digestion of a narrative. We have already discussed how the narrative effectively stops when the pie is thrown. Crafton writes of this:

“... one would say that the gags are the potholes, detours and flat tires encountered by the Tin Lizzie of the narrative on its way to the end of the film.”³¹

Further, Jenkins discusses how the gag's effect on pacing was not accidental.

³¹ Donald Crafton, "Pie and Chase: Gag, Spectacle, and Narrative in Slapstick Comedy" in *Classical Hollywood Comedy*. ed Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins (NY: Routledge, 1995), 111

Jenkins writes:

“gags were often written by gagwriters who inserted them into the preexisting structure provided by the narrative scriptwriters. Or conversely, gags were conceived as autonomous moments of comic spectacle within scripts constructed to provide a framework within which they may be displayed.”³²

Thus gags affected the pacing of a narrative interrupting it from its otherwise narratively coherent course.

Similarly, in videogames, secrets affect pacing. Secrets are a choice; one can choose to find them or not. The consequence is that, when one chooses to find secrets it disrupts the regular flow of the game. Time is taken out of the narrative, the play, to embark on unrelated moments of attraction and this changes the way the videogame is digested. In *Taskmaker* (1993) the player is set tasks by the all powerful ‘Taskmaker’ which supposedly will bring right to a kingdom full of wrong. The tasks are always set with a note of urgency “Do you think I have all the time in the world!?” thunders the Taskmaker to the player on numerous occasions. The player too is aware of how to achieve the various game goals and it would be easy to simply solve that task and move onto the next. However, players can take time out of their tasks to explore the rest of the world and are rewarded by an assortment of secrets ranging from trips to hell to naked ladies hidden behind secret walls. The player experience and digestion of the game are unmistakably changed when secrets are found.

³² Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts?* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1992), 101

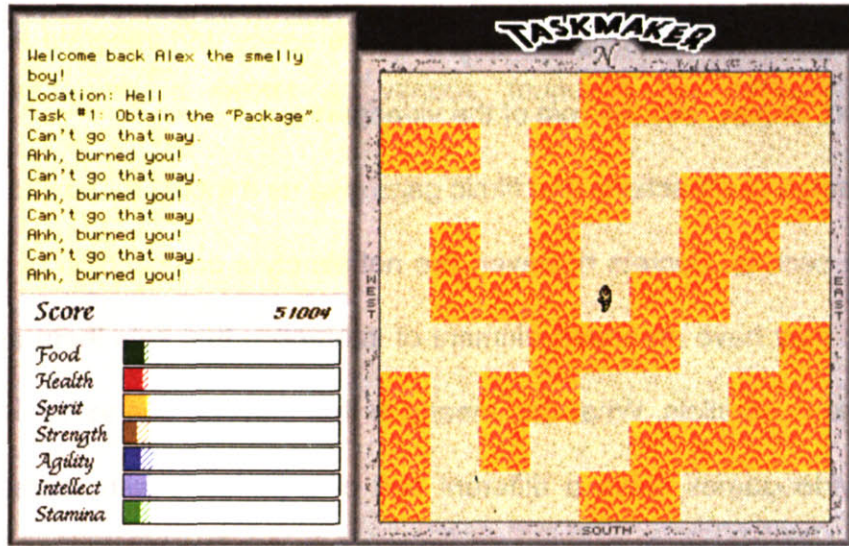


Figure B: Swearing, surprisingly, lands you in hell.

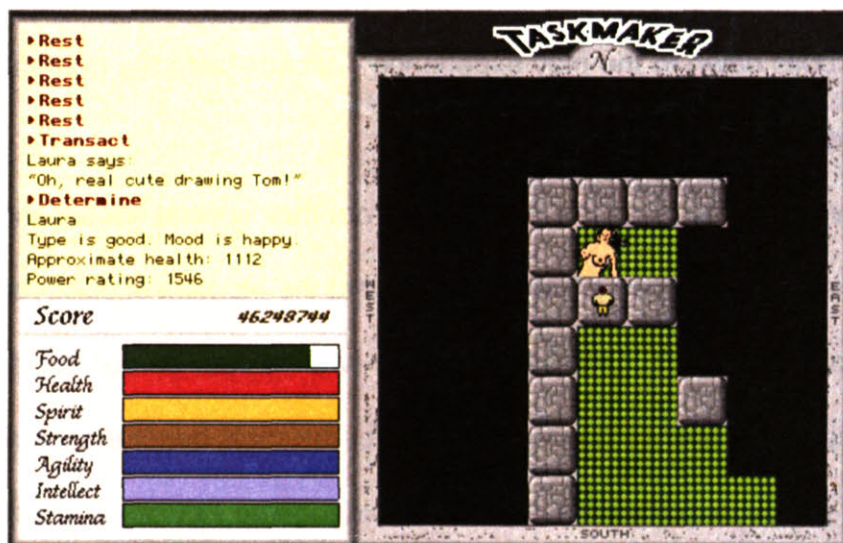


Figure C: A secret passage leads to a naked lady who exclaims "Oh, real cute drawing Tom!"

Gags in cinema often were related to a comedian playing. They were said to come out of the vaudeville tradition and their part in cinema had much to do with their attempt to integrate their "act" into the narrative of a film.³³ Similarly secrets

³³ Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts?* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1992), 96

are a space where designers play with the space and integrate their act, a side moment of play, into the rest of the videogame.

The cinema of attractions and filmic gags give us a model for how to perceive videogame secrets. Secrets however, are not simply a combination of gags and attractions: they have an added element of interaction that sets them apart from their cinematic parallels. What this means is that players, due to the interactive nature of videogames, have a different sort of experience with secrets than a cinema audience would with attractions and gags. Some players, for instance, might never look for secrets whereas others might make it the focus of their gameplay. It all boils down to the play experience - secrets have the potential to change the way a game is played.

Thus far I have given an overview of secrets: from their special relationship to *play*, to how players *map* them in gamespace, to what the *moment* of discovery is like in a gameplay experience. One might wonder what is next on our survey of the videogame secret. While we have accounted for the most general aspects of secrets we have not yet explored the impact that videogame industry and culture have had on secrets. Jenkins asserts that comedic gags displaced attractions in cinema due to certain shifts in technology, industry and culture.³⁴ In a similar manner, so too have secrets been affected by these factors over time. Outside influences in industry, culture and technology have shaped what secrets have been and molded them into what they have become. Let us devote some time to

³⁴ Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins. *Classical Hollywood Comedy* (NY: Routledge, 1995), 65

exploring the history of videogame secrets so as to better understand what it means to be a secret at various moments in videogame history.

Historical Snapshots 1 2 3

While the last chapter dealt with the subversive effects the placement of secrets has on any videogame, this chapter will look specifically at videogame secrets over the span of videogame history. The purpose of this historical look is not to catalogue every existing videogame secret over the span of videogame history. Such a task, aside from not being useful to my thesis, would require the length of a book! Rather, our examination can be achieved by briefly looking at significant moments and trends in videogame history. Think of this examination as a series of historical snapshots.

- Snapshot #1: The 1980s A Confusion of Secrets
- Snapshot #2: 1990s and Secret Commodities
- Snapshot #3: The years 2000: Secrets Remade

It has been noted that it is difficult to point at the exact moment videogames were invented. Historians Steven Mailliet and Gust de Meyer write of this:

“Like other media, such as film or recorded music, it is difficult to connect the emergence of the video game to one brilliant inventor who started from scratch and decided it was time to invent something new.”³⁵

What we do know is that videogames made their entrance into the world sometime in the middle of the 20th century with the inception of games like *Space War!* (1958) and *Tennis for Two* (1962). Similarly videogame secrets do not have

³⁵ Steven Mailliet and Gust de Meyer, “The History of the Videogame” in *Handbook of Computer Game Studies* ed. Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 23

a specific moment of appearance. They appeared sometime around the early 1980s, a time in which videogames were gaining mass appeal: creating an entertainment space in videogame arcades as well as invading the home on consoles and personal computers. Secrets appeared on all of these technology platforms in some shape or form. The computer, the arcade machine and the home console each had different technological strengths which dictated the kinds of games made on each platform as well as the type of secrets in a given game design. What we have then for our first snap-shot is a look at secrets as they appeared in each entertainment space: *Zork* for the personal computer, *Adventure* for the home console, and *Galaga* for the Arcade.

Snap Shot #1: Games and Technology in The Early 1980s

While many attribute the first videogame secret to the 1982 home console game *Adventure*, games in arcades had long had hidden content. *Galaga* (1981), one such early arcade game, has multiple bonus levels, one secret weapon, and special moves that allow for better scores.³⁶ The videogame secrets of *Galaga* were simplistic indeed. *Galaga* was a straightforward shooting game. The player takes the role of the ship and move from side to side as they attempt to shoot down formation of aliens that float in the sky above them. The aliens, for their part, attempt to bring the player down by either by collision or gunfire. *Galaga* is significant because despite being a rip-off of other earlier successful arcade

³⁶ RGantela, "Galaga: Hints and Tips," *GameFaqs.com*
<http://www.gamefaqs.com/coinop/arcade/file/583972/9747> (retrieved 4/16/07)

games it contained one unique feature: the bonus level.³⁷ This bonus level allowed players a sort of death free zone that allowed them to behave as freely as they wanted for the span of the level without losing a life (*i.e.* their avatar was safe from destruction no matter what.) This innovation allowed a certain exploitation of game scores and glitches, which is where secrets enter the picture.

Secret maneuvers in *Galaga* span from moving in a certain way in order to generate two onscreen ships (useless for gameplay but fun) to exploiting the scoring system to get unbelievable scores (200% accuracy).³⁸



Figure D: The Arcade Game *Galaga*

What this means is that these secrets, while not helping players garner a high score did move to the game itself to behave in unexpected ways. I can only posit that in the communal and performative atmosphere of the arcade space utilizing

³⁷ William Hunter., "Player 2 Stage 3: Arcade Games" *The Dot Eaters: Videogame History 101*. <http://www.emuunlim.com/doteaters/play2sta3.htm> (retrieved 4/10/07)

³⁸ RGantela, "Galaga: Hints and Tips," *GameFaq.com* <http://www.gamefaqs.com/coinop/arcade/file/583972/9747> (retrieved 4/16/07)

these secrets in front of ones friends and cohorts created a stir or reaction. Secrets did not help one play the game well but would certainly capture attention from a *Galaga*-fluent audience.

The first use of a secret in a console video game is attributed to the Atari video game *Adventure* (1982). Designer Warren Robinette placed an inconspicuous gray square in one level of the game. If clever players found the square and figured out the square's designated function, they were able to access a secret room that displayed the designer's signature in gaudy flashing lights.

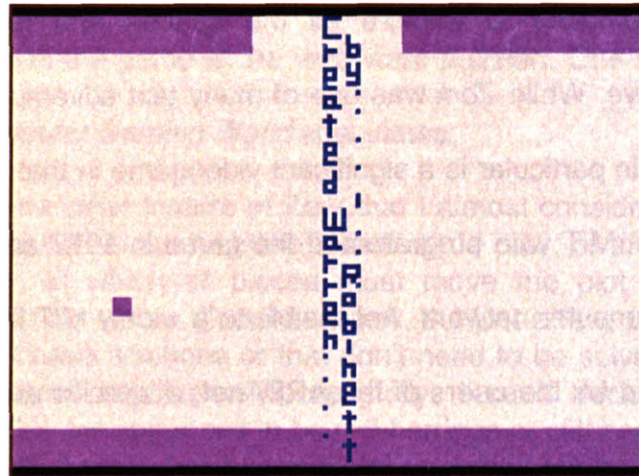


Figure E: The Adventure Secret

The grey box was another way to finish the game. It was not needed but it extended gameplay and took the player out of the 'adventure.' Robinette poses of his innovation, "For the players, the secret room was the 'meta-level', the way to

truly beat the game and get to the real conclusion.³⁹ Whether or not this is true it poses something about Robinette himself. He believed that his secret led to the real conclusion of the game, his name, a playful moment he designed to introduce himself to the player.

Home computer games at this time spanned a variety of genres from simple maze games like *Rogue* (1980), to puzzle games like *Tetris* (1984) to text adventures, a type of game where players explore a space through typed commands.⁴⁰ *Zork: The Great Underground Kingdom* was one such text adventure. You, the player, explore the vast underground realm of 'Zork,' seeking treasure and attempting to explore all the spaces and reach the game's concluding narrative. While *Zork* was one of many text adventures, and certainly not the first, *Zork* in particular is a significant videogame in that it was made by a group of friends at MIT who programmed the game in 1977 and then set it free on ARPAnet, a computer network. Accessible to a widely MIT literate population, *Zork* was designed for the users of the ARPAnet, a specific audience. Later the programmers formed the company Infocom and redesigned *Zork* for commercial release in 1982. While the game underwent extensive revision it still retained many MIT in-jokes as well as references to friends and events that clearly have

³⁹ Warren Robinette, introduction to *The Videogame Theory Reader*, by Mark J.P Wolf and Bernard Perron. (New York, Routledge, 2003) pxviii.

⁴⁰ William Hunter., "Player 4 Stage 1: Computer Games" *The Dot Eaters: Videogame History 101*.<http://www.emuunlim.com/doteaters/play4sta1.htm> (retrieved 4/10/07)

nothing to do with the gameworld.⁴¹ Players passed around knowledge of the meaning of such jokes and became aware of the entirety of meaning the game could provide.⁴²

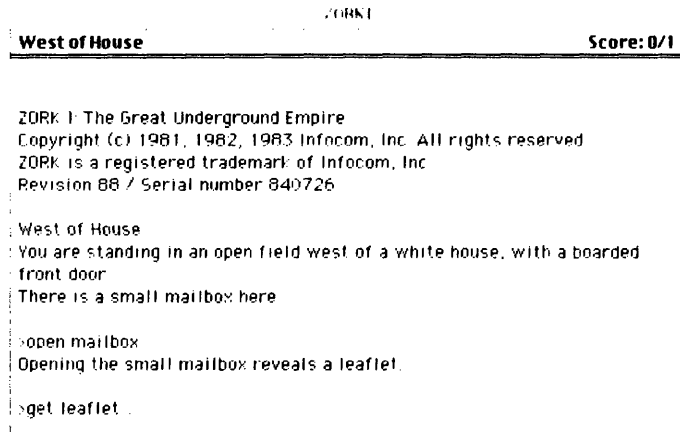


Figure F: A Screenshot of *Zork*

Yet, reviewers of the game at the time were puzzled. One such writer, David

P. Stone, for *Computer Gaming World* speculates:

“There is one other feature of *Zork* that I almost considered a flaw, but am now not so sure. Unlike a well-made play, or a well-written short story, in which all pieces must move the plot forward or contribute to the whole, *Zork* has a few, but just a few, puzzles that either don’t have solutions or that don’t need to be solved to reach the adventures conclusion successfully. I can’t decide whether these puzzles are supposed to be red-herrings or cliff hangers.⁴³

While such in-game secrets would be confusing to the uninitiated (as evidenced by Stone’s confusion) it is interesting that they are likened to the literary devices ‘Cliff-Hangers’ and ‘Red Herrings.’ In literature these entities that are traditionally

⁴¹ TUI: The Unknown Individual, “Zork I: FAQ Walkthrough: Version 1.3” *GameFaq.com* <http://www.gamefaqs.com/computer/doswin/file/564446/20848> (retrieved 4/10/06)

⁴² Paul Drzaic, Text Adventure Gamer, Interview, Morgan Hill, CA, 1/22/07

⁴³ David P. Stone “Zork! An Overview of the Series” *Computer Gaming World* Mar-Apr 1983, 18

associated with pacing (cliff-hangers) or narrative dead-ends (red herrings.) Stone notes that Zork's secrets stop gameplay or change game pace. Strangely enough this literary-flavored observation mirrors our earlier comparative exploration of filmic gags and attractions and their connection to secrets. Clearly secret-like entities with show-stopping functionality are a prevalent element in media! However, that is a thesis for another day.

What we can draw from these examples then is that while Robinette designed his secret as an alternative "conclusion" he was, in essence, playing with his own game. *Zork*, as a counter, was referencing friends and places of the games' origin providing a nod and wink to players in the know, and *Galaga's* secrets served as a way to show off to friends in the community space of the arcade. These secrets all have a common thread in that they were places where gameplay and narrative break down and the game becomes host to a subversive type of play.

Snapshot #2: Franchise and Commodity

Let us travel ten years or so into the future to the 1990s. With the advent of new technology the types of games available from platform to platform converged. Now games of the same genres, from flashy fighters to heroic adventures, were available in arcades, at home on consoles, and on personal computers. Moreover with the introduction of the handheld platforms of (Gameboy, Gamegear) gaming became accessible at all times, potentially as

part of one's life at any given second. With similar technology supporting each game platform iterations of games were often available on all.⁴⁴ What is note-worthy about the 1990s, however, is that game length and game size had increased dramatically since our last snapshot due both to technological improvements (faster processors and larger memories mean bigger games) and the popularity of games themselves.⁴⁵ These developments allowed for an increase in a given game length, a more involved game narrative, and a larger gamespace to explore. Consequently, secrets had a greater space to inhabit, and following this trend the amount of secrets in a game increased dramatically. For instance, a game guide from the previous generation, say the arcade game *Galaga*, lists a total of four possible secrets.⁴⁶ In contrast, the computer game *Taskmaker* (1993) boasts well over fifty secrets. This increase in secrets was not an isolated event - rather it was universal across platforms. Two trends in this time period contribute directly to this proliferation of secrets, the rise of the game guide and the inception of the videogame franchise.

Popular games spurred the development of popular sequels. While sequels to games were nothing new (*Zork* for instance, had several similarly designed text adventure sequels) the sequels to games in the 1990s had new

⁴⁴ William Hunter, "Player 2 Stage 3: Arcade Games" *The Dot Eaters: Videogame History 101*. <http://www.emuunlim.com/doteaters/play2sta3.htm> (retrieved 4/10/07)

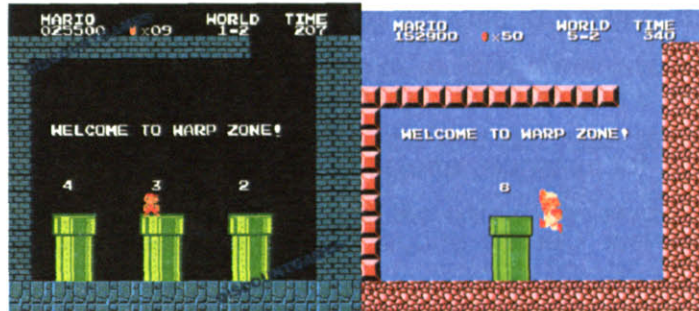
⁴⁵ Steven Malliet and Gust de Meyer, "The History of the Videogame" in *Handbook of Computer Game Studies* ed. Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 35

⁴⁶ RGantela, "Galaga: Hints and Tips," *GameFaqs.com* <http://www.gamefaqs.com/coinop/arcade/file/583972/9747> (retrieved 4/16/07)

challenges, arising from advances in technology and the evolution of game structure. For instance, while the an early *Mario* game *Super Mario* worked successfully in arcades and on the Super NES, using the same game design template on the next generation of technology - technology that supported better graphics and game saves, would not be acceptable by gamers, especially when the market was flooded with better looking games. Therefore, designers had to take the original games' aesthetic redesign it for new audiences, Additionally, they faced the requirement of making the redesigned game acceptable to gamers both in terms of the way it evoked the original game and in how well it made use of the new technology. Significantly, the design of secrets over several games in a franchise is an useful way of tracing how secrets came to be regarded as an integral part of gameplay. Let us examine the manner in which secrets changed in the Mario franchise games over the span of several systems.

Super Mario is a game that first made its advent in the arcade. The game stars the hero 'Mario,' a generously mustached Italian plumber who must jump like an flea and run like the devil through assorted side-scrolling worlds in order to rescue his love, the 'Princess Peach' from her captor, the evil monster 'Bowser.' The game was long for an arcade adventure, involving eight different and rather lengthy levels (and one additional secret world), as well as a rather long boss fight against the evil Bowser. To make the entire game more accessible certain levels have places where one's Mario can jump outside the frame of the game, literally disappear from the screen, and land in a secret space

called “the warp zone” where the player may then jump into the pipe and warp to another level of their choosing.



The warp zone allowed savvy players to skip earlier levels and reach the games conclusion faster. This did not help a player win better, for higher scores on Mario were considered desirable and using a warp zone negated to ability to collect more points, however, it did allow a player to move through a game in the order of their choice and play with the structure of the game itself. Moreover, one such warp zone leads to a secret negative world. This world is not helpful in game progression or high-score seeking. I will posit, though, that players felt like they were engaging with unexplored territory and playing the land the wrong way especially since, in the negative land, the world moved from right to left as opposed to the standard left to right.

Later Mario Games would play off the secret warp zone conventions as established in *Super Mario*. While this may have been partially due to a need for stylistic unity, it nonetheless continues the trend of secrets within the Mario franchise. *Super Mario World* is a different kind of game from *Super Mario Bros*. While the game maintains the same narrative conventions (Mario must rescue

Princess Peach from Bowser!) the game has the added luxury of the save point. Rather than being constrained to the amount of time one can play in a single session, a player can play the game over an endless amount of time and consequently the game is much larger and the world more immersive. While *Super Mario Bros*, for instance, labeled worlds with numbers, *Super Mario World* gives them names like “Cheese Bridge” “Cookie Mountain” and “Donut Secret 2”



Figure D: The Secret Star Road Leads to Super Secret Special Land

In this game Mario enlists the help of his friend Yoshi, a kind of lizard/pony, and moves across various lands on a map, picking and choosing which worlds he wishes to complete. The completion of one world would open up pathways to several more. Warp zones appear sporadically through the game map, appearing as both pipes and stars.

As in *Super Mario Bros*, the warps lead the player to hidden content within the gamespace. For instance, some warp zones lead to a special star world. Each level in Star World contains a secret Yoshi with a special ability. Moreover,

players who complete the entire star world and open up the entire network of warp zones are, treated with access to a series of even more secret levels and lauded with the words “YOU ARE A SUPER PLAYER.” Yet again these secret worlds do not help a player win the game. In fact, these secret levels become easier to play after you finish the boss battle and complete the narrative. These levels then expand the world and extend the gameplay beyond a simple game win. What we can see from this development in the Mario franchise is that games build upon the manner secrets are found within the gamespace. Players who play in the Mario tradition know that warps lead to secret spaces.

Following this trend. In 1996 Nintendo launched a new console called Nintendo 64. Along with the release of the system came a new iteration of Mario. *Mario 64* features our hero Mario in an immersive 3D world. The game once again maintained the same plot (save Peach, defeat Bowser) and gameplay (run and jump) and yet, despite the massive aesthetic change, *Mario 64* still used warp zones as a way to explore the secret. If a player opens every world in every possible way (in a manner similar to opening up the special land in *Super Mario World*) Mario gains the ability to converse with his friend Yoshi, and gain endless game lives, potentially giving players the ability extend the game over a limitless amount of time.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Walton Dell, Personal Site “Beyond 120 Stars” 6/27/06
<http://www.wdell.com/videogames/sm64/> (accessed 4/16/07)



Figure E: Mario finds the secret and reunites with Yoshi,

What we have seen is that Super Mario set up the expectation for secrets with their invention of the secret warp zones. Later incarnations of the franchise evoked that tradition by building on the warp zones and solidifying their connection to the secrets of the Mario games. For instance a player who played *Super Mario Bros* and knew about that warp tunnel might become suspect about warps in all Super Mario games and look for secret lands. This tradition continues in Mario games today as new franchise games like *Super Mario Sunshine*, *Paper Mario*, and *New Super Mario Bros* evoke warp zones in connection to secrets as well. Nor is the Mario franchise alone in their tradition of maintaining similar secrets. A similar story of secrets could be told about the franchises of Nintendo's *Zelda*, Blizzard's *WarCraft*, and the Maxis' *Sim* games. Franchises set up expectations for secrets to be present and franchise-fluent players know where to look for them.

Another trend in the videogame industry of the 1990s that led to the cementing of secrets as a videogame element was the development of the game magazine and game guide market. Players in the 1980s had to rely on pure luck or word of mouth to find secrets. By the 1990s, however, gaming magazines, most notably *Nintendo Power* and *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, turned secrets into a commodity. Videogame Theorist Mia Consalvo poses of this transformation of the secret:

“its eager reception [by gamers] set the stage for a paratextual industry to spring up, to alert players about what to look for in games, help them through the games...”⁴⁸

Consalvo goes on to examine how both cheats and secrets became the bread and butter of the paratextual industry, used to sell guides, magazines, and promotional items. Further, she argues, these magazines and guides solidified the idea amongst the gaming community that finding secrets and other hidden content was part of the gaming experience by promoting the idea that better gamers have more complete game knowledge. She writes:

“the businesses that rose up to teach players about these secrets and how to play games also participated in the creation of a lively paratext [magazines and guides] that has become nearly indistinguishable from the core game development industry...the game industry had to market that as a form of gaming capital which the power gamer would possess and the lesser players would lack.”⁴⁹

Thus the idea that better players find hidden content became a stable mindset

⁴⁸ Mia Consalvo, *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2007), 28

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 59

within videogame culture. By being accepted and commodified by the game industry, secrets have solidified their place as an expected convention in the videogames.

Snap Shot #3 The Wii Cat Secret and Xbox Live's Galaga Remade

Now it is time we travel back to the present. As the present is not yet history it is challenging to attempt to gauge the present state of games from a historical perspective. However I would like contrast two contemporary secret trends against those we have previously discussed. For this final snapshot we shall look at the game console Xbox Live and its remake of the classic arcade game *Galaga* as well as the the Nintendo Wii's console's home interface secret.

Of the many innovations on the current generation of videogame consoles one of the most significant is the addition of a homescreen that gives the player an option of engaging in a variety of gaming-related activities. For example, the Wii's homescreen, the Dashboard, allows one to enter a variety of programs from picture sharing applications to a news channel. The Nintendo Wii has its own meta take on a videogame secrets through its home interface. In that the home interface is host to a secret that exists outside of any game at all! When one navigates the console menu one will notice a little cat character that appears in several of the program options from the news channel to the picture-sharing channel. This cat shows up when one enters a channel and stalks around

mewing. When a player clicks on the Cat it announces that it is a “Secret Help Cat,” upon which it delivers a hint and runs away. The cat labels itself as a “secret” yet serves an important service in the interface. Game designer Dan Cook, writes of this system:

“From a simple efficiency driven point of view, this is a baroque UI that makes very little sense. Surely, just putting up a hint button that says “hint!” would have been more efficient and discoverable. This is what most programs do. Yet, we know from long experience that no one ever reads the hints. Designers often resort to placing the hint dialog at the startup of the application so that the user is forced to jump through the hoop of reading one hint every time. Most people immediately turn this ‘feature’ off after using it once ...The Help Cat uses traditional game mechanics to help acclimate the first time Wii user to the new controller and the dashboard. In the process, it provides an interesting test case on how game mechanics can be used help users master new functionality.⁵⁰

Cook aptly notes is that by taking a hint system and turning it into a ‘secret’ the hint system suddenly become desirable as opposed to onerous and annoying. In an interesting moment of unity the help cat symbolizes mastery, both in its function as a console guide as well as its position as a secret. By evoking the word ‘secret’ players are compelled to hunt down the cat and hear what it has to say. This shows that secrets have cultural current as a desirable piece of content within a videogame.

To close our historical snapshot section I shall end with a bookend example. Let us to explore the state of the grand old game *Galaga* in the videogame-scape of today; namely, its place on the Xbox 360 console.

⁵⁰ Dan Cook “The Wii Help Cat: A lesson in interaction design” posted on *Lost Garden Blog*. 12/27/06 <http://lostgarden.com/2006/12/wii-help-cat-lesson-in-interaction.html> (accessed 4/18/07)

In a manner similar to Wii's homescreen, the Xbox 360 also has an interface where one can engage in a variety of activities. One such space lets players visit a download shop where games can be browsed and downloaded directly into console through an Internet connection. This space allows users to download classic games and in a manner of delightful convergence, one of the games available for download is the classic Arcade game *Galaga* (1981). Yet this is not quite the original version of *Galaga*. While it looks, sounds and plays in a manner similar to the original it has been remade for modern sensibilities. Let us explore the difference.

If you will recall, the original *Galaga* had four possible secrets ranging from an exploitation of glitches to various ways of manipulating the game score. While the basic gameplay and aesthetic look of the remade *Galaga* is the same (the Xbox Live version even simulates the casing of the classic game by framing the game screen in arcade box style images!) the remake differs from the original version in only one aspect: the Xbox's *Galaga* has an increased menu of secrets. As one plays the game certain behavior leads to secret enemies becoming unlocked, a choice of avatar colors, and a change in weaponry for one's avatar ship.⁵¹ These secrets set smaller prizes for players to strive for in addition to the main game goal of garnering the high score. What is interesting about this game is that simply releasing the classic version of the game was not seen as good enough in

⁵¹ Anonymous, "Galaga Unlockables" posted on *Gamespot.com*
<http://www.gamespot.com/xbox360/action/galaga/hints.html?mode=unlockables>
(accessed 4/16/07)

the current standards of today's industry. The old *Galaga* did not have the right kind of secrets.

What we can draw from this brief look at contemporary secrets then are two important pieces of information. First, the secrets of the early 1980s, secrets like those found in *Galaga* and others, simply do not match what we expect of secrets today as evidenced by the influx of new content in the *Galaga* for Xbox Live. Secondly what the Wii Help Cat shows us is that the word 'secret' has gained a truly desirable quality as something to find, hold and experience. Together these secrets tell us part of the story of secrets today. The new *Galaga* has served as a way to gauge how secrets have changed their place in the industry in the past twenty-six years. The Wii Cat, however, poses a question for the future: Is this Cat the future of secret design, motivating play simply by evoking 'secret' or is it merely an aberration? At present it is too soon to tell. Beware.

one shot snap summary

- Videogame secrets began as a way for designers to play within their games and speak to their audiences directly (*Zork/Adventure*) as well as a space for players to show off to their friends (*Galaga*)
- Secrets became an expected part of videogames due both to the expectations set up within games (The *Mario* Franchise) as well as their new role as a lucrative game commodity.
- The standards for secrets have changed over time (Xbox *Galaga*) and

secrets have gained new functionality within videogames (the Wii Cat)

What we have seen through these snap shots that, from their inception, secrets have been and continue to be both a space where designers play with and personalize their designs as well as a place where players engage in a performance of knowledge. Secondly players have, due to the design of franchise games and commoditization of secrets come to expect secrets as a given part of any game. Through the redesign of *Galaga* we have seen that the design of old secrets simply will not cut it in the game industry of today. Finally, the Wii help cat demonstrates that secrets are desirable; the very word spurs players to play hunt the cat and receive information they would otherwise not want. What has happened over the span of videogame history then, is that secrets have evolved from simply serving one role as a moment of attraction to being both attractions as well as serving a variety of other functions.

But what sort of auxiliary functions do secrets have? You will recall from the beginning of my paper that all secrets hold certain elements in common, namely secrets are:

- a choice - one can choose to find them or not.
- clearly identified by the games they appear in as being outside of typical gameplay.
- A surprise, presenting burst of attraction in an unexpected way

- do not affect whether or one you wins a game
- equated with mastery in videogame culture - the more secrets one finds, the better player one is.
- self-propagating - if there is one secret found in a certain way, usually there are other similarly hidden

While these elements are true of all secret we know that some secrets serve extra functions outside of these fundamental characteristics. To gain a better sense of what this means let us develop a typology of secrets. In creating this list I am not seeking to dictate exact roles of secrets. Rather, in most cases, secrets bleed into each other and can serve any number of these functions. This list instead will outline the possible roles of secrets and help us get a sense of what designers and games specifically do with them.

a secret typology

Signatures

Designers will sometimes hide their names in a game as a way of giving themselves credit. The hidden credits we examined earlier in Warren Robinette's *Adventure* is a good example of this.⁵² Ever since, designers have been following his lead and leaving their personal mark. Designers in *Banjo-Kazooie* (1998) for

⁵² Warren Robinette, introduction to *The Videogame Theory Reader*, by Mark J.P Wolf and Bernard Perron. (New York, Routledge, 2003).ix.

instance, stamps their nicknames to in-game characters⁵³ and sound designer Kazumi Totaka has gained notoriety for including a secret signature song in every game he has worked on over his very extensive career.⁵⁴

Outside References

Secrets will sometimes reference other media or moments outside of the videogame at hand; anything from books to television to film to other videogames to things that simply do not seem to belong in a given gamespace. In the game *Tales of Symphonia* (2003) for example, one can find, on the bow of a ship, a couple who will enact for you the famous “Jack I’m flying!” scene from *Titanic*.⁵⁵ The naked lady in the wall whom we examined earlier from the game *Taskmaker* (1993) is another example of secrets that remove one from the gamespace.⁵⁶

Meta-References

Sometimes characters will reference the structures of games. This is the videogame equivalent of direct address to the camera in film. In the game *Disgaea* (2003) for example, you can stumble through a wall and end up behind the “stage” of the videogame where all the “characters” are out of costume talking

⁵³ Donkey Kong Song “Banjo/Kazooie Walkthrough/FAQ” *GameFaq.com*
<http://www.gamefaqs.com/console/n64/file/196694/11906> (accessed 4/10/07)

⁵⁴ Kyle Orland, “Totaka’s Song, the search is on,” *Joystiq.com* 12/14/06
<http://www.joystiq.com/2006/12/14/totakas-song-the-search-is-on/> (accessed 4/10/07)

⁵⁵ Ket Shi, “*Tales of Symphonia* Affection Faq” *GameFaq.com*
<http://www.gamefaqs.com/console/gamecube/file/561316/32197> (accessed 4/10/07)

about the pains in the life of a video game world.⁵⁷ Similarly in the game *Contact*, a certain character spends the entire game popping up on screen to remind you that the avatar does not know you are controlling him and to “please keep that a secret.”

Expanded Plot-lines

Secrets can lead to learning more about a character, space or plot point. This sort of information can change a game experience but is not necessary to the overall game narrative. In *Super Metroid* (1994), for instance, a secret game ending involves one’s genderless avatar removing its spacesuit to reveal a dancing, bikini-clad female. This revelation does not change the overall narrative but re-contextualizes the game as female. In another example, certain behavior in the game *Tales of Symphonia* reveals hidden narrative content, the secondary character one’s avatar “becomes closest to” in the game allows one to have a special moment with that certain someone. These special moments range from exploring a (scary to me) teacher/student love interaction to sweet young love to male bonding.

Expanded Gameplay

Secrets sometimes expand the range of movement a player has with their character. For instance, in *Metroid Prime* (2002), one can obtain an extra, an ice gun that allows one to freeze things (but does not progress the narrative or solve any puzzles) It simply exists to look/make things cool. *StarCraft* (1999) has

⁵⁷ Alec Austin, *Disgaea* Fan/Game Designer, Interview, Cambridge, MA 12/12/06

another kind of extended gameplay - hidden levels that break narrative progression but allow one to engage in a fun level without fear of dying or failure.⁵⁸ Other good examples are the secret star levels of *Super Mario World* that we discussed earlier.

Global Rule-Changes

Occasionally secrets allow one to remap or fundamentally change a gamespace. In *Animal Crossing* (2002) one is able, after discovering the hidden process, to change the textures of the world, the sound of the world, and the types of things the characters within it say. These manipulations vitally change the look and feel of the world. The game *SimCity* (1989) similarly allows for a restructuring of gamespace by letting players type in hidden codes that change rules within the game world.

Glitches

Glitches are oddities in the realm of secrets as they are the only kind of secret that is not intentionally designed yet still hold all the same properties of other secrets. The best way to describe might be to say they are undersigned global rule changes. Fundamentally glitches are mistakes in a game where game rules break down and manipulations of game design are possible. Glitches often cause game software to crash or game data to become corrupted. My “Oh No I’m Toast” moment is an example. If you recall the opening story of this paper my avatar took off from the ground and began to fly. Similarly in *Legend of Zelda:*

Majora's Mask (2000), a skip in frames allows a player to accidentally obtain the most powerful item in the game, and gain limitless power in the regular gamespace (an action that is simply impossible without the glitch) and also cause one's game to become impossible to win.

What we can see from this list is that secrets can have a wide-ranging variety of specific functions within a gamespace. Some might question why I did not include the term 'easter egg' in my typology. Easter eggs are a common term for a certain kind of information in a gamespace. I have avoided using it thus far because it is a loaded term. Game designer Dean Tate describes the nuance, he remarks"

"Easter eggs are totally unrelated to the game world, the gameplay and the game story – they reach out of the game completely."⁵⁹

Secrets, like signatures, outer references and meta-references would be classified as easter eggs because their attraction elements take players outside of the context of the gameworld. On the other hand secrets with functions like expanded gameplay, expanded narrative, and global rule-changes focus player attention *inside* the game world and act as attractions within the gameworld itself. A classic example of an easter egg would be *Taskmaker's* naked lady in the wall. She is shocking (in a 256 color sort of way) and she pulls the player outside the game by remarking "real cute drawing Tom". In a single moment the naked lady surprises the player by displaying the only nudity in the game and then pulls the player out of the game by chastising the game designer "Tom."

⁵⁹ Dean Tate, Game Designer, Irrational Games, Interview, Cambridge, MA 4/25/07

How can we redesign the naked lady something that would be classified as a secret and not an easter egg? What if a player found the lady and she, instead of mentioning Tom, exclaimed: "I am so glad you found me! I am your long lost sister and a nudist!" This instantly changes the connotations of the secret. Suddenly you have a sister and she is a nudist. This makes you reflect on who you are in the gameworld and the context of the world itself. No longer is the lady in the wall sexy. Instead you learn you come from a naked family. Perhaps the game lets you become a nudist as well. That is really quite the secret!

What I want to get at here is that there is a clear division we can draw between what is commonly referred to as an easter egg and how it differs from other secrets. Easter eggs are secrets that focus attention outward, taking the player outside of the gameworld. Other secrets, on the other hand focus attention inward, bringing the player further insight and reflection on the gameworld itself. In our examination of history we noted that secrets have diverged from their original state as easter eggs into something that means much more in terms of the gaming experience. The redesign of the naked lady from easter egg to other secret demonstrates that secrets can have far reaching consequences in terms of the way a player views a game. Thus we can see that many secrets are no longer easter eggs but in fact, far more interesting: they can change a viewer's relationship to the videogame text itself!

At the beginning of this paper I contended that secrets expose the underlying structure of a videogame and frequently when players play with them

they are breaking free of game rules and engaging in a sort of play subversive to game structure, a mode of play media theorist Jenkins' calls "unstructured." Now that we have seen the practical and intentional purposes of secrets in videogame design, explored what they mean in gaming culture and lastly picked apart how certain functions of secrets might change the game experience we can finally explore what it means to engage in unstructured play as well as how secrets are subversive to a given game design. Now let us get at the heart of what secrets are!

The coming chapter will look at the ways players have used the games *Zelda: Ocarina of Time* and *Animal Crossing* to subvert intended gameplay. We will look at how players use different kinds of secrets to engage in space or play with space and redesign the possibilities of within a given game. In *Zelda: Ocarina of Time* we will see how players stretch the content of a game for new play possibilities. In *Animal Crossing* we shall investigate how players use secrets to truly redesign a game. These examines will allow us to see into the heart of the secret.

5 I am toast and a-ok

In the beginning of this paper my brother told me I was toast and so began my adventures with secrets.

The year was 1998 and the game in which I became the toast was *Zelda: Ocarina of Time*. It was at this moment in my life that I invented my own videogame secret. I was not a designer. Nor was I in the videogame business. I was sixteen years old, a single player and a fan. New to videogames at the time, I often frequented *Zelda* message boards and chat rooms for help with the game. Over the course of a few months I learned the space of the videogame, found all the recorded secrets, mastered *Zelda* and then I got bored.

The message boards I frequented were full of less experienced players than I, players looking for unknown content, players who were gullible. One of the most often discussed topics in the message board was where one might find and collect a part of a *Zelda* game, 'The Triforce.' Rumor had it that there was a space on a certain screen that implied that this Triforce could be collected. In a moment of juvenile and rather silly behavior I decided to tell people I had found this 'Triforce' and they could find it too. I announced that if one went into the most confusing dungeon in the game and leapt through the air to hit a particular wall in just the right way they would be able to find a hidden chest that contained, of all things, wings for your horse 'Epona.' The wings would attach to the horse and she would and fly up into the air and take you into a hidden sky temple. There you would find the Triforce in all its glory.

This was not true. Honestly I did not even think it was all that believable. However when I went to research this paper I found endless accounts of people still discussing the Triforce and the sky temple I invented. I even found fan-sites dedicated to the journey players made there, photo-shopped images of the Triforce as it was supposedly found within the game and message boards fighting over the validity of the temple's existence.



Figure F: The Photoshopped Triforce.⁶⁰

I was shocked.

What was it about my invented secret that caused such discussion that a small Internet event in a fan community would still maintain vestiges of the discussion on the internet after eight years? What made this sky temple secret so believable as something that might be found within the game content? While all the factors involved here could potentially be overwhelming ranging from Consalvo's gaming capital to the fan community makeup and more, I believe there are certain elements within the *Zelda: Ocarina of Time* text itself that especially enable belief

⁶⁰ Peter Paltridge "My Ocarina of Time Photo Album" 10/5/05
<http://www.platypuscomix.net/interactive2/ocarinaphotos.html#textdump> (retrieved 3/30/07)

in this secret. I contend that examining what made my secret successful provides a window into the interaction between players and secrets and will allow us to look at the meaning of this interaction itself. I pose then that the credibility of my secret boils down to two factors within *Zelda Ocarina of Time*: narrative plot-holes and unresolved gameplay. Building on this we shall see that the “Oh No I’m Toast” glitch moments within the game illustrate what players hope to achieve in their interactions with the secret.

To understand what this means we must look at the game itself. *Zelda: Ocarina of Time* debuted on the Nintendo 64 console in 1998. Widely regarded as one of the best games on the platform, *Ocarina* is a game that translates the *Zelda* franchise from its past history as a pixelated two-dimensional adventure game and re-imagines the *Zelda* world as a lively and realistic space. The world had forests to explore, lakes to dive in, ponies to ride and a variety of towns, cities and villages to explore. It was a whole new notion of what the *Zelda* franchise was about. To illustrate the change, *Zelda* went from looking like this:



Zelda: Links Awakening, 1993

To looking like this:



Zelda: Ocarina of Time, 1998

What this means for the *Zelda* franchise is that the player had gained greater freedom of movement. No longer confined to the tightly and cohesively two-dimensional maps of previous *Zelda* games, the new *Zelda* felt like a real world. As game reviewer Matt Casamassina gushed at the time:

“its a game that enables players to go anywhere and do just about anything in an immense 3D world. A world so vast that it takes literally minutes to walk across a tiny portion of it. It's huge...whether it be the title's endless secrets or enormous selection of characters, weapons, items, spells, and the like... there's always something new.”⁶¹

What we can take from this breathless statement are two important facts about the *Ocarina* gamespace, first, the game is chock full of content, both hidden and not and secondly, the game functions in such a way that the reviewer felt like he could do anything. These two elements tell us something important about the gamespace: namely that *Zelda* is a game of meaningful play.

In the book *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* we may recall that

⁶¹ Matt Casamassina and Peer Schneider “*Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* IGN64 reviews the biggest game of the decade. Does *Zelda 64* live up to the hype?” *IGN.com* 11/25/1998 <http://ign64.ign.com/articles/150/150437p1.html>

theorists Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman pose that the relationship between action/reaction is a foundational part of good game design and meaningful play. What this means is that, when players act in the world, the world should act back in an expected manner. This type of interaction is what fosters good game/player communication and allows the player to build meaning from the game.⁶² Players expect certain things about of the gamespace and the game itself has many rules that keep play cohesive. When there is a place in *Zelda* where a narrative is left unresolved or where a space in a game does not seem to have a point, rather than thinking the game is broken, players look for an expected reaction simply because they are expecting meaningful play. In my typology I noted that some secrets have the capacity to expand gameplay or expand narrative. Therefore when narrative or gameplay are left seemingly unresolved in *Ocarina*, players attempt to fill in the blanks by finding secrets. Let us look at some rules that guide the secrets of *Ocarina*:

Example 1: As a rule, every door in *Zelda* opens to reveal a room. Doors are never for decoration. Therefore, when a certain door in Kakariko village appears impossible to reach players look for a way to get around obstacles and enter the door and find the surprise (a secret potion shop)

Example 2: Players are told that butterflies often lead to fun surprises, If one runs around an area with a butterfly, often one falls down through the ground and into a grotto full of treasure.

Example 3: The fish guru tells players that there is a legendary Hylian Loach in the fishing hole but it is probably impossible to catch (being legendary and all.) Persistent and very lucky players will catch the loach even though it was said to be impossible.

⁶² Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 32

What these examples show is that when players are told about something in the gamespace they expect there is a solution to finding it. This tells us why my false secret worked on players. If the game sets up expectations for a secret, then when one presents a method by which to obtain this secret that conforms to the ideas of meaningful play the secret becomes believable. Therefore the fact that Ocarina briefly refers to a sky temple and that there was a Triforce-shaped entry on a screen opens up the possibility of a hidden journey on a winged horse. In that sense, parts of my secret map to expectations the game sets up and, as such, seem probable. Players are led to believe, by the otherwise meaningful play the game engages in, that there must be a secret way to resolve the unfinished plot points or pieces of gameplay.

From this we can draw a pattern of player experience. Players I have interviewed about their experience with this game cited that they wanted to find everything in the world and master the space. When places were found, the world changed, so effectively players, in their search for secrets, were trying to remap the world. Gamer Steven Busey reminisces:

“everything in *Zelda* changes when you find a secret so you want to find them all and then find all the changes...it makes the world grow.”⁶³

It is significant that Busey connects the growth of the gameworld to the flux in gamespace. He acknowledges that secrets are connected to the over all rules of the game world. Thus in playing with secrets one is modifying the rules of the

⁶³ Steven Busey, Interview, San Jose CA. 1/6/07

game. These Rule modifications are taken a step further with the engagement of glitches in *Zelda*.

You will recall in the beginning of this paper that I related my experience with a secret glitch and I was toast. I noted at the time that it was simply a fun thing to do in the gamespace. Now that we have the necessary background information on what secrets are and what they do we can finally examine what was fun and meaningful in that interaction. Namely that glitches break the rules of a game allowing the player to remap the space in creative ways.

My experience with glitches in *Ocarina* is not solitary. A search on youtube.com for “*Zelda Ocarina Glitch*” yields well over one thousand hits.⁶⁴ What is interesting is often users will use the language of design in describing their glitches. One user ‘[btermini](#)’ writes of their video (in the writing of the internet)

“I came upe with this idea after doing my test of super mario 64 cartridge tilting glitch i remebed *The Legend of zelda ocarina of time* is built of the same engin as in super mario 64. so i did some tests....see for your self”⁶⁵

What this user is saying is that he came up with this glitch from experiences with glitches in other games, he tested it out and it worked. Finally he invites players to try out the glitch and enjoy his design. What btermini did then is plan, design,

⁶⁴ youtube.com “*Zelda Ocarina Glitch*” search http://www.youtube.com/results?search_type=search_videos&search_query=zelda%20ocarina%20glitch&search_sort=relevance&search_category=0&page=1 (retrieved 4/5/07)

⁶⁵ btermini, video description of “*The Legend of Zelda Ocarina of Time cartridge tilting glitch*” on youtube.com, posted 5/13/06 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ocufF_zHZ9s

and display his glitch. Other users often talk of authorship in terms of their glitches. User 'Banana555' writes:

“**I Found this Glitch by Myself so I dunno if its been found, even though every glitch known to man has been found for OoT lol**”⁶⁶

Interestingly many other users chastise him for attempting to claim ownership.

User 'rkonbon' replies back:

"yeah, you didnt find this out, this is one of the oldest tricks in the book for OoT anyways."⁶⁷

What this shows is that these users see glitches as something designed by them and not gaming companies. These glitches are described as creative endeavors! For one final example the user 'Nam8Macs' posts "his" glitch the "*Zelda Ocarina of Time* Super Bounce Glitch" along with credits for editing, camera work, and gameplay. His glitch is not simply a secret game moment but also a production! He writes of his work:

"These Rooms are 100% real and have never before been found! i find it a privilage to be able to show you the secrets of *Ocarina of Time* =D"⁶⁸

What we can distill from this then is that players, in their engagement of glitches feel a sense of authorship and design control over the way they interact with and

⁶⁶ banana555, video description of "Unlimited Health ANYTIME...from a fish? Glitch" on youtube.com, posted 3/3/07. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ky7uHbs90LM>

⁶⁷ rkonbon, reply post to "Unlimited Heath ANYTIME...from a fish? Glitch" posted 4/8/07 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ky7uHbs90LM>

⁶⁸ Barnythefrog, video description of "Hacking Ocarina of Time: The Secret Rooms!" on youtube.com, posted 3/20/07. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mU6o75mc2P4>

subvert the rules of the game. The intention of these gamers is to strive to redesign or warp the gamespace and then claim credit. They are the designers of the glitch. These players make their own secrets.

From *Zelda: Ocarina of Time* we have seen why players look for secrets and how glitches specifically subvert a space by breaking game rules. We have seen why players can be toast and are a-ok with not winning. What would a game look like that allows and accommodates players to remake a game as they see fit? We have seen that secrets are ways for players to personalize a videogame space and feel a sense of authorship. What happens when playing for secrets and being toast become the focus of play? To explore that let us look at *Animal Crossing* (2002) a game of secrets.

The premise of *Animal Crossing* is that the player moves to a village populated by animals with only the clothes on his or her back. A conniving raccoon named Tom Nook swindles the player into buying a house on a loan. The player is told to pay off one's mortgage (eventually) and to do so the player will have to devise ways to make money. Thus *Animal Crossing* draws on a secret-based form of gameplay in that the player is never told directly what to do in the space or how to make money, rather the game is open for exploration, design of game goals etc. Once a player pays off the house the game keeps going and in fact never ends. As such the player must devise their own game goals and find secrets in order to expand the playability of the game. *Animal*

Crossing offers a variety of gameplay options that serve to significantly change the focus of the game.

Animal Crossing allows one to fundamentally change the space and mood of one's animal village through textual manipulation. For example, as a rule there is a keyword or two added to the end of each animal villager's orations. The cat 'Tangy' might say at one point "I love toast in the morning meow" However, when the player is given the option to change the characters speech a simple substitution of words can completely change the connotations of the previous phrase. For instance Tangy's previous phrase could become "I love toast in the morning idiot" effectively transforming Tangy from a simple cat to an aggressive character. By changing the meaning of a character with the game, the player is allowed to participate in a perceived subversion of game rules. Indeed this textual manipulation is not limited to character speech. Players can post signs, send letters, name the town and engage in other atmospheric manipulations. These mechanics, when used in this manner function like a game glitch. The player can inject nuances of character into the villagers that were not designed in the original game. This is a perfect example of how a game designer can design a secret and a player can take it and subvert it into a new type of game design.

This mode of secret interaction is carried over into the game function that controls the ability to design and modify the walls, floors, clothing and umbrellas of the villagers. This option gives the player the power to decide how the village looks and how the villagers portray themselves, which in turn allows a huge

amount of individualization within a game. No *Animal Crossing* village looks like any other. For instance, gamers Filip and Zvonimir Sola transformed their village into an ethnically Croatian one. They made their animals wear Croatian colors, designed a Croatian flag, and made their animals speak Croatian phrases, (certainly a modification the programmers never imagined.)⁶⁹ In contrast, gamers Will, Neil, Nic and Dan Secor, in their village “E” caused all the animal villagers to wear naked human clothing. This modification effectively transformed the village into a nudist colony, another unsanctioned alteration within the game.⁷⁰ The game itself does not suggest modifications to the game image, rather, it allows the characters the liberty to customize their own villages for their own pleasure. Further, *Animal Crossing* lacks clear game goals and spurs the player to develop their own. For example, here is a game goal design created by a user of the game:

1st: Player goes to the store to buy candy.



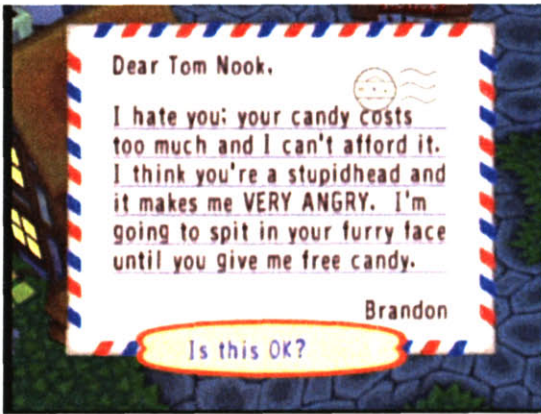
⁶⁹ Filip and Zvonimir Sola, Interview, San Jose, CA, 10/17/04.

⁷⁰ Will, Neil, Nic and Dan Secor, Phone Interview, Bend, OR, 10/10/04.

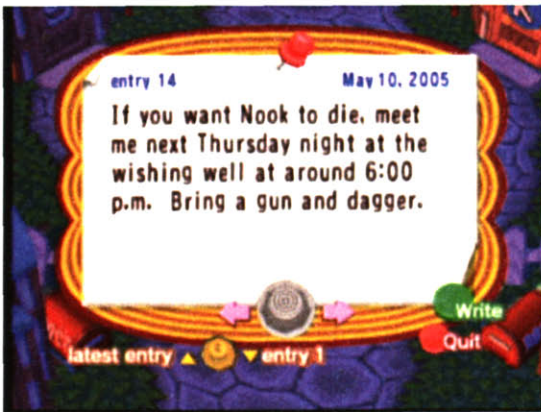
2nd: Player lacks the funds to buy candy.



3rd: Player writes a letter to the store expressing anger



4th: With the threats unacknowledged the player organizes a town riot against high candy prices.



While Nook cannot actually be hurt within the gamespace the creation of this gamestory shows that players can manipulate the game and its goals in order to engage in imaginative play. The player uses the ability to send letters to characters as well as the ability to post messages to the *Animal Crossing* community as a way in which to create their own game within the game. This player subverted the game structure and made their own secret!

Fundamentally, the creation of player made secrets sustains *Animal Crossing* as a game. In effect, the rule modifications function as self-created attractions. Game play is maintained through the attraction of secrets and the display inherent in perceived subversion. The game has no narrative and no end, instead the player jumps randomly from self-made attraction to attraction. In essence, *Animal Crossing* is an endless jolt of surprise or (if you will) a video game of player-generated secret attractions.

The franchise of *Animal Crossing* has since expanded. In 2005 a sequel, *Animal Crossing: Wide World* was released. While much of the gameplay remained the same in that players can still manipulate the game in a similar way as *Wide World* allows players across the world to connect and visit each other's villages via a wireless Internet connection. Now instead of the game being limited to four players as it was in the original *Animal Crossing*, players can play with an endless parade of visitors. One can imagine, however, given the subversive nature of play in *Animal Crossing* that this results in interesting behavior. Dean Tate admits to booby-trapping his village. He remembers "I placed holes all

around the village entrance and anyone who came in was caught!...Then I would laugh” There have also been cases of characters inflicting player designed graffiti on each other, chopping down each others trees and plants or in a positive case, engaging players engage in a wide-scale remodeling of a player’s village.⁷¹ This behavior is simply the play of the game impressed onto others but what is significant about it is that players are thinking more specifically of their village design in how it interacts with visitors.

Behavior like this is explored by game writer Nadia Oxford in the article “Secret Lives: Beneath the Surface of Animal Crossing.”⁷² In this article she chronicles her adventures in visiting the animal villages of a friends and documents the way they interacted with her. Of her first visit Oxford writes:

“As soon as I entered the town, Friend No. 1 made his presence known by running tight circles around me while wearing a ninja mask...so I was wary until No. 1 calmed down and gave me a master sword, claiming it to be an idol from the original Church of Hyrule. We headed back to his house. He handed me plenty of other presents on the way, possibly to distract me from the state of his property, which might’ve been regarded by some as a call for help. Weeds and smashed fruit dotted the grass, and unfilled trenches blocked bridges.... It was time to leave. No. 1 urged me to stay a little longer and pray for prosperity and fertility at his master sword idol, but I declined.”

Oxford writes of another friend:

“Taking advantage of *Animal Crossing’s* boundless opportunity for freedom of expression, No. 2 dressed as a male and spent a good part of my visit hitting on me. A sprite’s orientation is their own

⁷¹ Alex Drzaic, Interview, Morgan Hill, CA, 1/3/07

⁷² Nadia Oxford “Secret Lives: Beneath the Surface of Animal Crossing,” *Iup.com* 4/20/06. <http://www.1up.com/do/feature?pager.offset=1&cId=3149750>

business, but when a male who's actually a female makes a pass at you, you can't help but feel confused.”⁷³

And finally:

“Things were off to a great start when No. 3 met me at the town gate and began watering me. Apparently, I “needed nutrients.” She then bestowed an owl clock on me, though whether through generosity or as a part of my newly prescribed diet, I'm still not sure.”⁷⁴

What all these interactions between Oxford and her friends show is that if we look at the behavior of each friend (the friend who ran circles and urged her to pray, the friend who hit on her, and the friend who watered her) each player put on a show for their visitor assuming distinctive behavior and exchanging text which effectively shaped the way their town was viewed. In *Wide World* players build off the secrets they design and create a gameplay experience for another player.

As a game of secrets, *Animal Crossing* allows for the kind of play behavior that players strive for in their play with secrets and cheats. Warren Robinette wrote that his videogame secret in *Adventure* allows for players to reach the game's real conclusion: his name, his easter egg.⁷⁵ Secrets today are about players reaching their own conclusion by designing and implementing their own secrets in a gamespace. Players have gained the ability to have some say into the nature of a given game design. Secrets then, while originally a place for

⁷³ Nadia Oxford “Secret Lives: Beneath the Surface of Animal Crossing,” *Iup.com* 4/20/06. <http://www.iup.com/do/feature?pager.offset=2&cId=3149750>

⁷⁴ Nadia Oxford “Secret Lives: Beneath the Surface of Animal Crossing,” *Iup.com* 4/20/06. <http://www.iup.com/do/feature?pager.offset=3&cId=3149750>

⁷⁵ Warren Robinette, introduction to *The Videogame Theory Reader*, by Mark J.P Wolf and Bernard Perron. (New York, Routledge, 2003) pxviii.

designers to play with their designs has now become a place where players can create their own game within a larger gamespace. With the advent of online gaming across all technological platforms the manipulation of secrets has turned into a way for players to design for other players. Secrets have become player-generated game moments shared with other players the world over.

6 conclusion: that secret meaning

Through *Zelda: Ocarina of Time* we have seen that secrets engage players in moments of gameplay outside the game structure. In *Animal Crossing* we have seen how a videogame design itself can be changed on the whim of the player. These interactions between secrets and players show that players who engage with secrets are engaging in unstructured play. In playing outside the design of the game secrets allow players to generate meaning for themselves within a gamespace. Secrets then show us why a game experience can be highly personalized and memorable for the videogame player. Secrets matter because they are a space where players generate a personal connection to a videogame.

It is fortuitous that players have become the designers of secrets for, in the current age of gaming, traditional easter egg-type secrets are on the decline. In 2001 the game *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* included hidden content (not a secret, but a game modification that involved complex manipulation of game code to access) that allowed one's avatar to have sex with a naked lady as a sort of mini-game. This mini-game, widely known as 'hot coffee' sparked outrage due to the possibility that children might gain access to the mini-game and see adult content. The scandal resulted in incredibly costly lawsuits and gave all videogames a bad name.⁷⁶ Unfortunately this instance has caused a decline in videogame secrets and easter eggs. As one grumpy game designer told me so

⁷⁶ Nich Maragos "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas Re-Rated AO, Take-Two Drops Forecast" *Gamasutra.com* (4/20/05)
http://gamasutra.com/php-bin/news_index.php?story=5983

memorably in an interview at GDC “secrets are dead *sweetheart*,”⁷⁷ While this is not necessarily true it is true that the nature of secrets by game designers has changed. Warren Robinette designed the entirety of *Adventure* (1981) by himself. Today massive teams of hundreds of people might work on a single game. Since this is the case rarely do single designers have the chance to submit individualized content. Rather, secrets are for the most part, safe, sanctioned and planned by teams. What this means simply is that the nature of secrets have changed. They are not dead but they are in flux. If we look to games like *Animal Crossing* and *Zelda* we can see the new role of secrets. Secrets have become player-generated.

In a way, this final section is a fourth snap-shot of the current cultural state of secrets. Due to ‘hot coffee’ secrets are currently in decline as designed and planned aspects of modern games. On the other hand, the emergence of an economy of player-designed secrets has drastically changed the way players approach games. Let us examine this fact in terms of what we have discovered about secrets. You will recall in the beginning I noted these rules:

- secrets do not affect whether or not you win a game
- are a choice - one can choose to find them or not.
- are clearly identified by the games they appear in as being outside of typical gameplay.
- in gaming culture, are equated with mastery - the more secrets one finds, the better player one is.

⁷⁷ “Anonymous Linden”, Second Life Designer, Interview, 3/5/07 San Francisco, CA

- are self-propagating - if there is one secret found in a certain way usually there are other hidden in a similar way.

All these rules still hold true for secrets designed by players. Yet the relationship is different. In fact they could be modified to:

- *making* secrets does not affect whether or not you win a game
- *creating* secrets are a choice - one can choose to make them or not.
- Secrets are clearly identified by the games they appear in as being *player-made*. (As evidenced by the plethora of *Animal Crossing* variation)
- in gaming culture, secrets are equated with mastery - the more secrets one *makes*, the better player one is. (As evidenced by the *Zelda* glitch designs)
- are self-propagating - if there is one secret found in one person's game certain way usually there are other hidden in a similar way in the games of others.

Given this change, it may very well be that in the future, given the current circumstances, secrets become solidified in gaming culture as something for players to create for each other, an element outside the realm of game designers. I know that I loved being toast in my flying glitch and I am certain that if I could have flown to that *Zelda* Sky Temple on Epona I would have in an instant. Secrets have always been a way for designers to stretch their worlds beyond the expected limit. My created message-board secret was not really

mean-spirited, but the voicing of a wish for my imagined *Zelda* gameworld, a world where Epona the pony flies.

The gaming industry may currently distrust secrets, but, as players have demonstrated, they are an unstoppable element of videogames. They will be present, designed or not.

For me, Shigeru Miyamoto, designer of *Zelda* and *Mario*, expressed the superlative promise of secrets. In his keynote at the 2007 Game Developers Conference he related the story of his design scheme for *Zelda*. When he designed *Legend of Zelda*, he told the audience, he created multiple paths through levels and rooms that were hidden. People were initially confused by the design, he said, but this was intentional because he did not want everyone to play the same way. He wanted people to share ideas, collaborate, and create their own experiences. This is an element that he has tried to design into every game he has ever made. Miyamoto posed that for him, creative collaborative play, where the player is the designer is when the best kind of play occurs. Secrets are inherently related to this mode of play. They are hardly extras, unneeded in a gamespace. Rather, secrets are one reason for why videogames matter as a medium. They make the play experience special.

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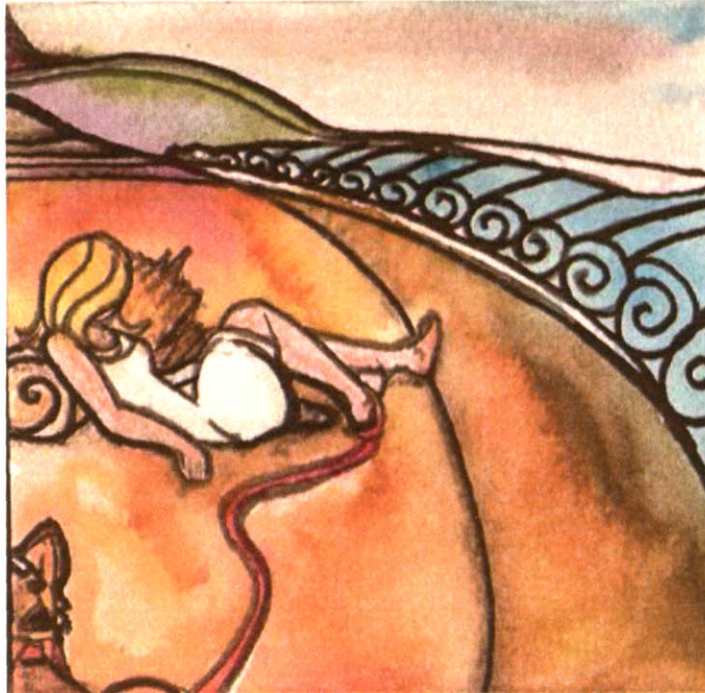
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Hello dear reader, Now I am finished and it is time for the beach.



This is the end...or is it?

This is my secret ending. If you dare you can go back and find the secrets of my thesis. There are many but more I really cannot say. You will have to find them for yourself.

They may have something to do with *ponies*...