

English 230: Milestone 5 (for Tuesday, November 15th)

First, a recap of Milestone 4:

1. *Images are traces.* They point to a physical relationship between this and that, and we use them as source materials for memories and storytelling.
2. *Images are ways of seeing, too.* They demonstrate how seeing is a learned behaviour, and they may document or comment on that learning.
3. *Images are visual knowledge.* They are made and arranged, and we use them as visual language to communicate what we know and experience.

Here are three more themes to recall as we proceed with the course:

People treat code and scripts as source texts. Why? Usually because audiences cannot access them or see them. How does a game like *Gone Home* run? Perhaps the source code would show us. What are all the dialogue options and endings in *Undertale*? A “text dump” of the game’s script should tell us. These dynamics between what’s revealed and what’s hidden, or what’s encountered and what’s missed, mean games are frequently understood as puzzles to be solved or systems to be optimized. But they don’t have to be. They can be made and played more like conversations.

Text tells us what to do. Perhaps text is a game’s dialogue or narration. But it can be more instructive. “FIGHT.” “ACT.” “ITEM.” “MERCY.” It’s an option you can click or perform. “CONFIRM.” “CANCEL.” “SAVE.” “QUIT.” It’s the stuff of menus and configuration. That probably means it’s clear and direct, shaping your decision-making with as little ambiguity as possible. Text is action-oriented when it is instructive. It compels players to do something, even if that something is managing the world in front of them. Put this way, text doesn’t just tell us what to do in games. It teaches us what can be done in (and done to!) a fictional world and—from there—what to expect from the world’s rules and operations.

Text is also playful. It isn’t always direct. It’s more than menus and management. Typefaces abound in *Undertale*: Papyrus, Comic Sans, DotumChe, 8BitOperator, Hachiro, Crypt of Tomorrow . . . The words move, too, and the language is playful. It doesn’t always mean what we think it means. EXP? Those are your execution points, not your experience. LV or LOVE? Not your character level or capacity to love, but rather your level of violence and capacity to hurt. The game experiments with the symbolic capacity of language and the possibilities of connotation. It’s literary in the sense that it takes seriously the word or text as its medium. The style is deliberate, reflexive, and often poetic. Maybe such playfulness is one reason why people return to some games. Playful text rewards each session with more meaning and novelty. And yet, a too-playful text may seem opaque or self-indulgent. A balance is tricky to strike.

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Terminology from Milestone 5: script, symbol, instruction, code, type, mechanics, menus, interactive fiction