Decomposure

Decomposure is an apocalyptic organization game where players must preserve their room as apocalyptic events compromise their survival items, food, and personal effects. Confined to an industrial and impersonal room, made whole only by the objects on its shelves, players learn about their world through object-based text prompts. What will you save and what will you sacrifice?

I.   Context

In Decomposure, the player explores the confines of their bunker-esque bedroom, learning more about their world through clues hidden within the objects in the space. As they discover more about the narrative, they are faced with disruptions and disasters that compromise their objects. The players have to make quick choices about what is valuable to them and what is worth sacrificing. The disasters themselves are large-scale and uncontrollable, but the player experiences them in small ways – they only appear through effects like flashes in the windows, booming sounds, and camera shakes. Decomposure highlights the small ways in which disaster can slowly wear down a person – trauma is not always a single, devastating crisis. Furthermore, this dissociation establishes a crucial feeling of isolation from the outside world in Decomposure. The truth about the apocalypse is never quite revealed, but it doesn't have to be. Despite the familiar goal of apocalypse games being to survive, Decomposure subverts the narrative to center exclusively around what may initially appear to be frivolous or unimportant. The text prompts that introduce players to Teddy Bears, skipped in the hard-core depths of apocalyptic gaming, are central narrative elements. Decomposure shrinks the lens of the apocalyptic world (and genre).

Video games are incredibly versatile when it comes to settings. They can take us to a variety of places, from virtual versions of real-world locations to complete fantasy worlds. The sheer diversity of video game settings is what makes them so captivating. *Decomposure* takes place in an apocalyptic world with disasters conveyed through physical phenomena and an isolated space that falls apart over time. The tension between meaningful personal narratives and large-scale, disastrous events typical of apocalyptic media appears in our game through the small, personally meaningful space that the player interacts with that is affected by the cataclysms outside.

II.   Genre

Decomposure has gameplay elements from the genres of cozy games and management games, but the aesthetic and narrative elements are more similar to subdued apocalyptic media. Cozy games are a unique genre of video games characterized by their calming atmosphere and relaxing gameplay. These types of games focus on the mundane aspects of life, from cooking to gardening, and provide a sense of comfort and escapism for players. Rather than fighting enemies or engaging in intense action sequences, cozy games typically feature tasks that involve exploring and storytelling.

Management games, on the other hand, are a type of video game that focuses on the player's ability to successfully manage resources and people in order to achieve specific goals. These goals can range

from constructing a successful business empire to managing the resources of an entire city. Management games often require strategic thinking and planning, as well as the ability to make quick decisions.

Finally, Apocalyptic games usually involve playing as a survivor in a post-apocalyptic setting, where the world has been ravaged by some kind of disaster. The player must navigate the game's environment, scavenge for resources, and make tough decisions. Apocalyptic games as a genre are particularly interesting because they explore how humanity responds to disaster and the end of the world. These games offer an opportunity to reflect on the fragility of human civilization, the power of nature, the importance of collaboration and self-reliance, and humanity's capacity for creative problem-solving in extreme circumstances.

However, unlike both apocalyptic and management games, *Decomposure* emphasizes a complete lack of control. Many apocalypse narratives show uncontrollable disasters but then portray a wilful protagonist that navigates these disasters through luck and a medley of heroic traits. In *Decomposure,* the player cannot do anything to increase their odds of success or survival in these disasters and does not have any chance to exhibit heroism. The limited fields of view, lack of communication to the "outside" world, and the withholding of narrative context all work together to remove a sense of agency. Agency within video games is a core element that leads to player satisfaction and immersion, Decomposure subverts these expectations.

III.   Mechanics

Decomposure has repetitive, tedious mechanics, similar to management games. In employing these familiar and calming mechanics, players are invited to feel comfortable with clear and simple operations for exerting control over the space and arranging it. We hope to convey a feeling of familiarity with the space as cozy games do through the comfortable scope of actions that can be taken, while simultaneously defaming these standard practices by inviting the player to slowly realize their lack of agency and control in the space. *Decomposure* subverts these feelings of comfort by introducing an element of risk and loss which is not common to cozy games: objects can be broken and lost, and rather than the progression of growth that management games tend to use, *Decomposure* progresses by removing more and more items from the player's space over time.

Changing Perspectives
The players' control is undermined right from the beginning in limiting their perspective. Perspective in video games plays a major role in how players approach and understand game narratives. Depending on the type of game, the player's point of view can inform their interpretation of the story, as well as their overall experience. In first-person shooters, for example, players are viewing the world from a protagonist's perspective and can directly control that character's movements and actions. In third-person games, on the other hand, players take control over a protagonist but are able to observe them from an outside view. In implementing the former in *Decomposure*, players are encouraged to feel a sense of control in their perspective, yet they are only welcome to view one of four sides of the room at a time, the field of view entirely out of their control as well.

The Typewriter

Introduced in the beginning of the game, the typewriter is a key mechanic of *Decomposure*. Because there is very little context of what may be happening outside of the room, the typewriter and its journal entries are the only way the narrative is explicitly shared with the player. This mechanic is crucial as it bolsters the idea that the story of *Decomposure* is actually hidden within the objects around the room. It cannot be found outside of the walls. It cannot be discovered by escaping and saving yourself. It can't even be *entirely* revealed by investigating the room. In implementing this mechanic, *Decomposure* establishes a fundamental element of the game, which is that the world in which the player lives is limited and out of control. The only elements of narrative importance are objects whose importance may not be obvious at first. Any piece of story that was held within an object is destroyed with it.

Organizing and Reorganizing

In *Decomposure,* players are able to pick up objects and place them on shelves in various arrangements or drop them on the floor. As cataclysms knock the shelved objects to the floor, the player will have to replace these objects on the shelves, or else they will eventually become broken and disappear. While many mechanics in *Decomposure* are very limited, such as the four-orientation turning, the object- moving and -organizing mechanic grants the player some freedom as to how they arrange their personal items. This freedom, in combination with the first-person "blank-slate" avatar of the game, allows players to insert themselves into the character to an extent: while they cannot choose what objects are in the room, they can organize them on the shelves according to their preferences. Unlike in games like *Unpacking,* where the way you organize objects is crucial to success, there is little practical use to how you arrange objects in *Decomposure* – how the player arranges them, then, becomes a representation of them, or at least of their choices with no relation to any intrinsic "objectives" of the game. The one practical aspect of how objects are arranged is that objects closer to the typewriter, where the player will focus when typing journal entries, can be picked up more quickly than ones on other walls that must be rotated towards and then picked up. This, however, also becomes an aspect of representation of the player's preferences, as the objects they have deemed more important to protect might be kept closer to the typewriter, although no one object is intrinsically more important than any other.

Although this mechanic allows for some choice and representation of self on the side of the player, the game will also constantly disrupt these decisions with cataclysms. The cataclysms will topple objects from the shelves, disrupting the arrangement the player made, and they will also destroy objects at random, often removing ones that the player viewed as more important and arranged in a way that they hoped would protect them. The mechanic by which the player can have the most self-expression is also the one most disrupted by the game's procedures, creating an almost petulant tension between player and operational logics in which the game knocks over the arrangements of the player periodically, to the player's increasing frustration. This tension against the player's choices and expression aims to be another subversion of the idea of control in apocalypse – even the small, limited avenue of choice that the player has becomes a constant struggle to exert control over, and the player will put less and less effort into meaningfully arranging the objects as the cataclysms get more intense, opting instead to

replace items onto shelves quickly. The intended design of the game was even more destructive towards the player's organizations: there were meant to be certain locations on shelves (e.g. shelves away from pipes) that were safer from cataclysms and that players could put their more treasured items on to protect them. At some point in the game, there would have been a specific disaster such as a pipe rupturing that would target and destroy objects in these locations that were perceived to be safe, taking away the most important items to the player. This was intended to further uproot ideas of control and even a modicum of safety, and to force players to learn how to continue on with the items that they had valued less and had never planned on being left with. Due to time constraints, this feature did not make it into the final game.

IV.   Endings and Failure

One critical component of *Decomposure* is the end state. There is no way to win *Decomposure*. Failure in video games can be a complex concept. It can range from simply not progressing in the game to death of a character or loss of progress in the narrative. It is an integral part of the experience and has a huge impact on players' understanding of the narrative, as well as their overall satisfaction with the game. *Decomposure* elicits a sense of doubt and discomfort and ultimately a lack of control. It would seem uncharacteristic for you to finish the game satisfied, no? Games without clear win states rely on more abstract rewards, such as exploration and discovery, as is the case with *Decomposure*. Failing is an intrinsic part of the game that encourages players to reflect upon their choices and decisions. Without clear objectives or goals, failing can become a part of the narrative itself. Failure can also add emotional weight to gaming narratives; when faced with death or destruction during gameplay, players may feel connected to their character or story on an emotional level. Our hope with *Decomposure* is to elicit a feeling that translates outside of the game in the context of their control, their choices, and what "objects" (literal or metaphorical) compose the narratives of their own lives.

V.   Critical Components

Ultimately, the context, mechanics, and genre of *Decomposure* have established broad ground for critical analysis. The first established critical component is spatial storytelling. Spatial storytelling is one of the most powerful tools in video game narrative design. It helps to create immersive, interactive experiences that can be deeply engaging and emotionally resonant. In *Decomposure*, the space of the room acts as a canvas for expressing key themes and creating meaningful connections between players and their digital environment. The space is designed to elicit reactions and create context for the story. The room itself is the entire world map in *Decomposure*; through lighting, textures, colour palettes, object placement, and shapes, the room is meant to convey much more about the story than just its setting.

Guy Debord's concept of dérive is an idea that was developed by the French theorist in the 1950s. It refers to a kind of aimless wandering through city streets or other urban areas with no predetermined destination, designed to allow its adherents to observe and experience the city from new and unexpected perspectives. This is a critical component of the context of *Decomposure*. The space is the extent of the

world; the extent of the game. With the apocalypse raging outside, the player is mostly unaware of what that means. There is no distinct interaction with why the earth is ending, just that it is. The world outside of the room exists only in that it is coming to an end, making the room in *Decomposure* that much more precious.

Debord explains that spaces possess their own "psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones." One notable characteristic of the space in *Decomposure* is your ability to do such "wandering". In confining the player to four views of the room, with no mechanic to move around the space, the room becomes an element with which interaction is limited. The room is a psuedo-octagonal shape. Octagonal shaped rooms are used in architecture to create a sense of enclosure due to the structure being composed of two intersecting squares with four corners. This creates a distinct visual shape, allowing for the room to feel more enclosed and intimate. Octagonal shapes are also often found in public spaces, as they allow for improved visibility from all angles, mimicking a kind of panopticon of unease.

Thus, *Decomposure* uses spatial storytelling as an effective way of limiting the narrative world. By using spatial storytelling, we were able to control the environment and how players interact with it, as well as create meaningful connections between players and their digital world. With careful consideration of the space and the limitations both within it and with the theoretical world beyond it, *Decomposure* is able to achieve its critical goals of isolating players, eliciting feelings of lack of control, and inviting personal critique about importance in the scale of our own worlds.

Decomposure also veers into ludonarrative dissonance. Ludonarrative dissonance is a term coined by Clint Hocking, and it refers to the simultaneous presence of two conflicting elements in video games: the ludo (gameplay) and the narrative[1]. This tension occurs when the narrative or story of a game clashes with its gameplay mechanics, resulting in an inconsistent experience for players. In the case of *Decomposure*, we have intentionally contrasted the comfort and control of organizational cozy games with the lack of control or understanding of apocalyptic context. The players are aware that there is some kind of end--game situation beyond the walls, but they are never invited to become a part of the outside world. Instead, their room, and the few actions they are able to perform within it, conflate the player's entire purpose; their entire lives. They are forced into discomfort as they repetitively complete actions they believe award them with control. They must identify their own importance in a context in which their world is all that's left. Instead of easing their lack of control as the mechanics of cozy games usually do, the fact that it is the only mechanic (and not a very effective one in terms of the traditional apocalyptic goal of survival) conflates its importance and, thus, diminishes their control.

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[1] Hocking, C. (2007). *Ludonarrative dissonance in Bioshock*. Click Nothing. Retrieved December 5, 2022, from https://clicknothing.typepad.com/click_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html