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Action Mimesis and Existential Meaning in Videogames through *What Remains of Edith Finch*

Mímesis de acción y significado existencial en videojuegos a través de What Remains of Edith Finch

Abstract

In the fields of possible worlds theory and game studies, there is a growing interest in the existential meaning in fictional works. Precisely the world mimesis studied by the theory of poetic possible worlds can be useful to reach this kind of knowledge. In order to answer this question, the article attempts a hermeneutic approach to the play What Remains of Edith Finch. To this end, as a methodological novelty, the study of dramatic structures in the ludonarrative context is incorporated into the theory of possible worlds. First of all, we find that the causal origin of the death of each character is located in their way of dealing with the conflict (valued as a tragic error) and not in the curse in which the Finchs believe. This finding changes the image of a world subdued by doom to one that allows the characters greater freedom. The character's surrounding world is marked from the outset by family problems, often have characters who exhibit obsessive traits, and are developed under the sign of loneliness. The metaphorical nature of the video game suggests an analogical reading of this data. The real underlying semantic reference would be linked to the moral evil that is difficult to evade, that which sometimes seems like a curse from which it is impossible to escape, but which, paradoxically, is inseparable from the free decisions of the individual.

Keywords

Dramatic structure; existential meaning; hermeneutics; posible world; video games.

Resumen

En los ámbitos de la teoría de los mundos posibles y de los Game Studies hay un interés creciente por el significado existencial en las obras de ficción. Precisamente la mímesis de mundo que estudia la teoría de los mundos posibles poéticos puede ser útil para alcanzar este tipo de conocimiento. Con el objeto de comenzar a responder a este interrogante, el artículo ensaya una aproximación hermenéutica al juego What Remains of Edith Finch. Para ello, como novedad metodológica, se incorpora a la teoría de los mundos posibles el estudio de las estructuras dramáticas en el contexto ludonarrativo. Constatamos, en primer lugar, que el origen causal de la muerte de cada personaje se encuentra en su manera de afrontar el conflicto (valorada como yerro trágico) y no en la maldición en la que creen los Finch. Este hallazgo cambia la imagen de un mundo sometido por la fatalidad a uno que permite una mayor libertad de los personajes. El mundo circundante del personaje, de ordinario, está marcada desde el comienzo por los problemas familiares, suele tener personajes que presentan rasgos obsesivos y se desarrolla bajo el signo de la soledad. La naturaleza metafórica del videojuego sugiere una lectura analógica de estos datos. La auténtica referencia semántica de fondo estaría vinculada con el mal moral difícil de evadir, ese que en ocasiones pareciera una maldición de la que es imposible escapar, pero que, paradójicamente, es inseparable de las decisiones libres de la persona.

Palabras clave

Estructura dramática; hermenéutica; mundos posibles; significado existencial; videojuegos.

1. Introduction

This research paper seeks to highlight the value of studying the coherence and causality of action carried out by playable characters (PCs), with a view to understanding the mimesis of the world in a video game. In order to show how a character's actions are not separate from the world in which they take place, and vice versa, the theory of poetic possible worlds (mundos posibles poéticos) is adopted and applied throughout this research paper as the underlying theoretical framework for understanding fiction as a world[1] (García-Noblejas, 2005; Encinas Cantalapiedra, 2022; Abellán-García Barrio, 2023). The study thus offers two new developments. The first is the interpretation of narrative game design from the perspective of poetic possible worlds, which differs in some respects from the theory of ludofictional worlds (Planells de la Maza, 2015a, 2015b), with which it intends to develop a dialogue. The second development is the study's exploration of playable stories in terms of both their dramatic structure and as a way of accessing the world of the game: different worlds make different actions possible in them and generate different consequences for similar actions. The theory of poetic possible worlds starts from an analogy of the world, existential in nature (anthropological and ethical) and is therefore sensitive to the existential meaning conveyed through works of art. Explaining mimesis of the world, which here is attempted by reference to mimesis of action, serves to uncover vital information contained within works of fiction.

The subsequent parts of this introductory section outline the following: firstly, recent studies claiming that we can find propositions of existential meaning in video games (1.1.); secondly, the fact that in recent years, theories of possible worlds have sought to expand into the realm of science in order to obtain scientific knowledge of existential meaning (1.2.); thirdly, exploring mimesis of action potentially opens the way to understanding the mimesis of the world that implies such existential meaning (1.3.), and fourthly, that such mimesis of action may be explained in line with what many scholars of storytelling in film, TV and video games have suggested over the last few decades (1.4.).

1.1. Existential Meaning in Video Games

The debate about existential meaning and the use of immaterial elements in games has been heavy since well into the last century, with the work of Huizinga (1994) being one of the first points of reference. Newsome-Ward and Ng (2022) give a brief overview of existing studies on existential meaning in video games. These games can be meaningful for both creators and players, in that they "accomplish a larger fulfilment of purpose in some existential sense [...] in terms of pointing to or enabling larger understandings of life and being alive" (2022: 553). Video game developer Newsome-Ward and academic Ng explore how the video game design process sheds light on human experiences and puts the developer in a position to understand existential purpose. Furthermore, video games offer insight into our meaning, purpose and place in the world.

The theory of ludofictional worlds (Planells de la Maza, 2015a) also explores existential meaning in games[2]. Studying the static macrostructure and dynamic microstructure of fictional worlds in video games reveals how worlds are structured, their internal logic and laws, how to move between worlds, etc. Results of analysis carried out under the theory of ludofictional worlds show considerable semantic significance, and the relevance of a methodological development aimed at interpreting the structure and dynamics of a fictional world as a bearer of existential meaning. In his study on *Tropico 4* (Haemimont Games, 2011), Planells de la Maza (2015b) argues that the system of worlds in this video game, specifically those established by pressure groups, paints a picture of our own world and, for this very reason, offers insight into our reality and our way of navigating it. He concludes that it would be necessary to study the stereotypes of the social groups that *Tropico 4* aims to reflect and deal with. In this regard, the world in video games (as in all poetic works) should be understood not as a copy of our own world, nor as something completely far-off in terms of make-believe, but instead as the result of a creative process rooted in the gaze of its creators[3], which may be somewhat affected by certain preconceptions, as occurs in *Trópico 4* regarding what the game identifies as a "pressure group". Ricoeur (2004) referred to this stage as *Mimesis I* or 'prefiguration'. What is configured in *Mimesis II* (the act of poiesis itself) and then refigured in *Mimesis III*, is that which, in game development, is provided during prefiguration: a somewhat implied, coherent glimpse of the order and meaning of reality. As discussed below, the various theories of possible worlds are also moving towards this focus on the humanly significant aspects of fiction.

1.2. Possible Worlds from a Phenomenological-existential Approach

In recent years, theories of possible worlds have undergone a unique development with regard to the existential notion of "world". There is a clear search for a "world" not limited to environmental features, nor to the "inner world" of each individual. Instead, it refers to the way in which people experience reality: the world as an existential place where our own possibilities unfold, comprising both natural and cultural elements. This trend can be observed in two particular areas: that of logical-analytical theories, and that of phenomenological-existential theories (Abellán-García Barrio and Encinas Cantalapiedra, 2021).

Some followers of the modal logic approach to fictional worlds have been revising logical-analytical notions in order to adjust their methods, often with the intention of making them more sensitive to the practical human issues dealt with in poetic works. For example, Ryan's (1991, 2015) theory has recently been adapted to embrace the genre of counterfactual historical fiction (Raghunath, 2020, 2022), new relations of accessibility that make it possible to study alternate history (Villen, 2019a) and to incorporate referential worlds, a new category to go with those of "actual world" and "relative worlds" of the characters in order to properly understand the human issues conveyed in fiction (Villen, 2019b). Meanwhile, Hernández Ruiz (2022, 2023) has elaborated on Albaladejo Mayordomo's (1998) semantic theory of possible worlds by adding three articulatory subworlds (ethical, aesthetic and religious) to those already proposed for each character (feared, pretended, desired, believed, etc.). Taking a broader approach, Fort (2016), while remaining close to the logical-analytical principles found in Dolezel (1998) or Ryan, is critical of them and seeks theoretical support from more hermeneutic authors, such as Pavel. Many logical-analytical theorists, such as Ryan (2019), are interested in literary truths—those that go beyond the mere analysis of propositions within a text, referring to the general in an existential way, i.e. major human themes such as death, love or the meaning of life. The recent efforts of Fort, Villen, Raghunath, Hernández Ruiz or Planells de la Maza, as outlined in the previous section, aim to move towards this yet distant epistemological ideal of analytic models that adopt the modal or logical notion of "world" as the primary analogate when studying fictional worlds.

Meanwhile, the phenomenological-existential approach to possible worlds, with authors such as Eco (1994), Pavel (1986) and García-Noblejas (2005), has proposed studying poetic works from a hermeneutic perspective. These scholars do not approach analysis by means of closed methods, but based on principles sensitive to the specific characteristics of each fictional world. Their notion of the world and possibility is not primarily logical or modal (with the partial exception of Eco) but primarily existential. These theories particularly focus on exploring the notion of poetic "meaning" in works of fiction, an idea linked to that of "theme", or "implied author" (Brenes, 2016). Eco (1994) preferred to speak of "topic" or "aboutness", while Pavel (2019) limits himself to the rather simple statement that "literary works were about something" (316). Ultimately, it is about the search for the order and meaning that governs the work of fiction, something that transcends the exclusive parameters of a social, economic and political nature, and that refers to the vital information conveyed in a fictional world. Within this framework of thought, in recent years we find research that delves into the idea of mimesis of the world in fiction as an extension of Aristotelian mimesis of action: the anthropological, ethical and practical aspects that feature in poetic possible worlds (García-Noblejas, 2017, 2020); social reality (vigencias sociales) as the object of mimesis of a part of the world, which we could generically call "culture" (Abellán-García Barrio, 2020); or the ethical processes of world restoration (Rubio de Olazábal and Encinas Cantalapiedra, 2021).

The analogy of the world according to phenomenological-existential approach may be understood by reference to a philosophy that has delved deeper into an individual approach to the world, as seen in Zubiri's (2010) thinking and more recently in Marin's *Mundus* (2019). According to this view, the world is understood as a system of possibilities, both natural and cultural, at the disposal of the individual, who defines their own concept of existence by choosing to pursue one possibility or another. When making choices, the subject projects himself into the future in the hope of successfully reaching his desired end. Insofar as he successfully manages to identify the elements that make up the world, its structure and dynamics, he will be more likely to devise a life plan that achieves a kind of self-realisation known as "happiness" (through action proportionate to his own natural end). Thus, such a notion of the world provides incentive for studying characters' actions in order to gain insight into the world in which they are materially possible, and the impact they have on those implementing such actions. This is the research approach adopted for this study.

1.3. Mimesis of the World Revealed Through Mimesis of Action

The theory of ludofictional worlds has already pointed out that, because of their static macrostructure, the world in video games is predetermined "as a self-contained world in which different paths are available to the player depending on the possible and/or necessary actions performed at any given moment" (Planells de la Maza, 2015a: 12). The existential analytics approach to virtual world design places emphasis on the video game character as a vessel of possibilities that are constantly changing, and whose being is revealed through a chain of actions that create different ways of experiencing the world (Rodríguez Serrano, Martín Núñez and García Catalán, 2021). The theory of poetic possible worlds understands mimesis of the world, and thus mimesis of action, as something that goes beyond the imitation of existing actions or things. Instead, it "imitates the structure and dynamics of the world by reference to the action that unfolds within it" (Abellán-García Barrio, 2023: 286-287).

Aristotle claims that poetics involves the mimesis of human action (1974: 1448a1)[4]. Followers of Aristotelian poetics adhere to the idea that human action is only possible in a world—understood from the existential perspective as described thus far. Therefore, in works of fiction, mimesis of action

presupposes a somewhat implicit mimesis of the world (Ricoeur, 2004; García-Noblejas, 2005). "Mimesis of action appears to be naturally connected to the person who acts and the reality in which they act" (Abellán-García Barrio, 2023: 288). It is a two-way street, as the world, in turn, "allows dramatic action to unfold in an intelligible, meaningful way" (Abellán-García Barrio, 2023: 293).

The actions available to the character broadly tell of their system of possibilities or world, while the interrelationship between the actions they actually perform is what shapes their own concept of existence or world. Such possibility:

> is not so much a *logical possibility*, i.e. that which is assumed, nor is it a *natural possibility*, i.e. that which is likely according to the principles of natural science—a useful distinction when classifying texts by genre. Rather, it is an *existential possibility*, regarding the successes or failures in the lives of the characters (Abellán-García Barrio, 2023: 275).

This presumed existential possibility, regardless of whether it is realisable or ultimately realised, shapes the present and guides decision-making. Mimesis of action is not the only defining element of the narrative topic in a possible world, although overlooking it would render both the depiction of the world in the game, and the existential meaning it conveys, incomplete.

1.4. Dramatic Structures in Film, TV and Video Games

In order to identify possible peripeteia in a fictional world, we begin with mimesis of action, where coherence and causality are particularly relevant. The concept of narrative structure in video games has received much attention, from the methodological approach of Ip (2011) to more recent case studies (Esteban-Espinosa, 2020), syntheses on storytelling in video games (Cuadrado Alvarado and Planells de la Maza, 2020) and reflections on narrative closure (Rodríguez Serrano, 2020). Nowadays, the conception of the video game as a narrative medium is widely accepted (Planells de la Maza, 2015; Martín Núñez and Navarro-Remesal, 2021).

We prefer to talk of "dramatic structure" as it more clearly captures the Aristotelian notion of whole and complete action (Aristotle, 1974: 1450b23-25), as well as its internal coherence and logic. On the whole, guides on narrative design in video games have adopted a considerable amount of terminology from the area of screenwriting (for example: McKee, 1997; Sánchez-Escalonilla, 2001; Aranda and De Felipe, 2016), which, in turn, draws on theories of plot structure in fiction (for example: Vogler, 1998; Truby, 2007). The concept of dramatic conflict or dramatic issue is often dealt with in these kinds of texts that aim to provide guidance on developing the narrative elements and mechanics in video games (Skolnick, 2014). It is also common to find explanations of how to develop dramatic structure in three parts or acts, using plot points, climaxes, etc. (Skolnick, 2014; Walton and Suckling, 2017; Bryant and Giglio, 2015) or discussions on the impact of Aristotelian poetics on the design of video game worlds (Walton and Suckling, 2017; Bryant and Giglio, 2015). Similarly, many authors make the classic distinction between linear and non-linear structures in narrative design, such as modular or fractal interactive structures and defensive design (Walton and Suckling, 2017).

2. Methodology

Having defined the concepts of existential meaning, mimesis of the world (from an phenomenological-existential approach to poetic possible worlds) and mimesis of action (including insights into the dramatic structure as the logic and causality of action) this section outlines the main objectives of this research and justifies the methodological strategies used for analysis.

The main objectives of this research, in the order they will be addressed, are as follows:

OBJ1. To demonstrate the causality of action in each playable story in *What Remains of Edith Finch* based on the logic of their dramatic structures, in order to determine whether their tragic outcomes are due to the intervention of some agent external to the PC's action, or instead the logical consequence of an error of prudential judgement.

OBJ2. To explain relevant elements of the circumstances in which each plot takes place, and to determine which thematic issues (family problems, loneliness and obsessive traits) are the most significant at each stage of the mimesis of action.

OBJ3. To assess important existential aspects of the world in *What Remains of Edith Finch* in light of the conclusions reached on mimesis of action.

In order to successfully achieve these objectives, a step-by-step methodological approach has been adopted. Thus, subsection 2.1. puts forward a qualitative case study of *What Remains of Edith Finch* as the main object of study, and an analysis of the different storylines it features. Following this approach,

section 2.2. sets out the method for studying the mimesis of action carried out by the characters, dramatic structures and the variable of tragic error. Finally, subsection 2.3. considers the main thematic issues in the game as a form of integrating the narrative structures and the potential tragic error arising from the characters' action.

2.1. The Storylines in *What Remains of Edith Finch*: A Case Study

The hermeneutic approach argues that fiction can be understood through fiction itself, and that each work of fiction represents its own method of analysis (Gadamer, 2017). This research delves into the creative play of a particular video game in order to gain insight for the analysis of mimesis of the world offered by its design. The study concerns *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow, 2017), a first-person exploration game, also known as a walking simulator. This game has met with acclaim from the industry, the public and critics alike, and has captured the interest of researchers in Game Studies. Its symbolic and metaphorical approach lends itself to a variety of interpretations, posing a hermeneutical challenge that this research aims to exploit.

The story of *What Remains of Edith Finch* features the protagonist Edith, the last surviving member of the Finch family. She returns to her family home, a house left abandoned for over a decade, as she seeks to discover the truth about an apparent family curse that has led to the deaths of various family members. Edith explores the bedrooms of her deceased family members, finding her way in through secret passages, as the doors to the rooms are sealed off. Inside each bedroom, Edith finds a small shrine dedicated to its former occupant—except in the bedrooms that belonged to Edie, Dawn and herself. Each shrine, not devoid of religious connotations, contains personal objects relating to the life and mythicised story of the death of each family member. These objects serve to reveal each character's playable story, where the final tragic moments of the character are relived. Several of the family members' plots have been poetically configured, i.e. they have been constructed as an indirect discourse about what "really" happened. The Finch bloodline has believed in the curse since five centuries prior to the life of Odin Finch (1880-1937) who, intent on fleeing the curse, took his family, estate and house across the sea on a reckless voyage from Norway to Orcas Island, Washington. Since then, in their new house, the Finch family have sought to escape the curse without success.

In walking simulators like *What Remains of Edith Finch*, the game design defines the gameplay, or prescribed game experience, with limited leeway for unanticipated actions from players. Walking simulators tend to be plot-focused, i.e. their narratives are highly pre-determined (Martín Rodríguez, 2015), which facilitates and even incentivises the analysis of their dramatic structure. Usually, the walking simulator format greatly reduces mechanical challenges, which serves to underline the predominance of the plot and, in the case of *What Remains of Edith Finch*, to build a paradigmatic case of thematic complexity (Terrasa-Torres, 2021).

The game is structured as a frame narrative, a systematic method of telling stories within other stories (Bozgod and Galloway, 2019). The overall layout of the game and its formal elements are reminiscent of anthology stories in film and literature, episodic in structure. An example would be *Weird Tales*, the pulp magazine founded by Henneberger and Lansinger in 1923. Popular frame stories, which today are widespread and well-recognised, bring together stories with stand-alone plots that vary in terms of how their narratives are handled. They generally convey some kind of moral message, often by reference to errors that lead to tragic outcomes. Conventions of anthology place our expectations on a potential ultimate lesson, intended to guide us on practical issues in life.

The evocative narrative design of *What Remains of Edith Finch* gives rise to much research potential. The game has attracted considerable interest from various angles. Attention has been drawn to the game's fragmentation of space and time, a narrative element that makes it necessary to navigate between different levels of reality in order to piece together the continuity of the story and learn more about the Finch family legacy (Martín Núñez and Navarro-Remesal, 2021). Another aspect that has caught academic interest is the portrayal of death in the game. Similarities have been drawn between *What Remains of Edith Finch* and gothic fiction, from the theme of death to the trope of the curse (Kirkland, 2020). In applying the approach of myth criticism to the field of video games, it has been claimed that this walking simulator is "one of the titles that has most deeply explored the concept of Ariadne's thread as a single-path journey through life" (Planells de la Maza, 2021: 1090).

From the perspective of cybertext theory, games published by Annapurna Interactive have been used as an example of ludonarrative consistency (a close link between the game mechanics and the narrative), capable of creating a kinaesthetic link between the player and the game as a result of its mechanical diversity (Álvarez Barroso, 2020). Within the context of puzzle-solving, it has been argued that empathy is the ludic skill required to overcome problems that arise in-game, and thus to foster the creation of meaning in terms of intergenerational reconciliation (Reay, 2020). The literary strategies implemented in the game's design have hardly gone unnoticed either, especially intertextuality, the

aesthetic use of text (as opposed to simply functional) and the use of literary structures, forms and techniques (Bozdog and Galloway, 2019). In their study, Bozdog and Galloway conclude that, through the use of literary devices, the game "achieves a new level of interpretive play for walking sims" (2019: 16). There are yet more studies on this recent cultural artifact (for example: LaRell Anderson, 2020; Nielsen Hatling, 2020; Zhao, 2021; Borunda Magallanes, 2022; Håkon Birkeland and Mikal Pedersen, 2022; Van de Mosslaer and Gualeni, 2022).

This research begins with the following question: does inescapable doom drive the world in the game? Furthermore, is there really an inevitable tragic fate, dictated by a curse, that has been punishing the Finch family for over five hundred years? *What Remains of Edith Finch* explicitly mentions the curse on eight occasions, often in distinct ways, which implies that there is no complete, unambiguous understanding of this supposed phenomenon. Around twenty-eight more subtle references to the curse are also made. This suggests that, for the Finch family, the curse may have become as normal and unquestionable as the force of gravity.

With regard to mimesis of the world, it is important to determine whether curses can possibly exist in *What Remains of Edith Finch*, since this would imply a somewhat reduced potential for achieving personal happiness, and would directly affect the depiction of individual freedom and self-possession. This scenario would be totally different to one where the curse had no ontological existence, but was instead a product of the family's own system of beliefs and ideas. Were this second paradigm to be the case, causes other than the curse would need to be determined to explain the deaths of Edith Finch's ancestors. This would drastically change the depiction of the world in the game, as well as the ultimate meaning conveyed, in relation to the first option.

In response to this question, the hypothesis put forward is that the tragic deaths of several of Edith Finch's relatives are not determined by some inescapable curse or unfortunate fate, but rather they are the direct consequences of imprudent action. In the words of Aristotle, this is referred to as tragic error or *hamartia* (1974: 1153a8-10, 1153a16). Thus, in principle, we argue that the world in *What Remains of Edith Finch* is not governed by inevitable doom, and that in many cases the unfortunate denouement of each playable story is the consequence of unnecessary free choice, i.e. the characters could have chosen more appropriate, more prudent action. This hypothesis can be tested through studying the mimesis of the world in the game, which will be gradually revealed as each research objective is addressed.

The study focuses on twelve storylines. The menu in *What Remains of Edith Finch* shows the Finch family tree, displaying a number of preset, specific avatars in each segment (Navarro-Remesal, 2019). At the end of the game, the player can go back and play each different storyline. In just two of the storylines (those of Edie and Dawn, Edith's great-grandmother and mother, respectively), upon selecting one of these characters, the game returns to tell the story of the night where Dawn and Edith leave the house. In this segment, the player first controls Edith when she was seven years old, followed by Edie, as part of a story she herself wrote. At the end of this game segment, the player learns of how both Dawn and Edie died, but the final moments of their lives are not playable. Therefore, at each stage of the analysis, Dawn and Edie will be considered together. Finally, returning to the game menu, upon selecting Edith the system goes back to the beginning of Edith's story, at the gates of the abandoned family home. For this reason, Edith's story is also included among the twelve elements to be analysed. Having justified the study sample, the next subsection sets out the research methodology, in line with the objectives laid out above.

2.2. Analysis of the Dramatic Structure and the Variable of Imprudent Action as Tragic Error

Mimesis of action performed by the characters is studied with the intention of determining whether their tragic end is primarily a consequence of their own actions, or of an intervening curse that either makes genuinely free choices impossible, or subverts the consequences that logically follow from their actions. Once this has been determined, we can identify the kind of world model that applies, since certain actions are only possible in worlds that allow them.

In line with the theoretical approaches to analysing dramatic structures discussed above (1.4.), for each playable story in *What Remains of Edith Finch*, the aim is to uncover: 1) the initial context or ordinary world in which there is a certain state of equilibrium; 2) this equilibrium is totally or partially disturbed by an inciting incident which gives rise to an dramatic question (or conflict) affecting the protagonist; 3) when faced with this break in the initial balance of forces, the PC comes up with a first basic response to restore order to the level that existed prior to the inciting incident, or to create a new order, which is usually referred to as the first plot point; 4) following the progressive complications to be overcome, the PC faces the second plot point, i.e. they are close to achieving their goal and are presented with a final challenge; 5) the PC faces this challenge, leading to an irreversible, final outcome or climax in response to the dramatic conflict raised by the inciting incident; 6) finally, it may be that the plot contains a

resolution, showing how the climax has impacted the PC and/or their world. The playable stories in walking simulators such as *What Remains of Edith Finch* generally follow this linear approach.

If the possibility of a curse is ultimately ruled out, then it would be necessary to determine whether the action leading to the character's death results from a miscalculation or technical error, or rather a lack of prudential judgment. Ricoeur (2004), in line with Aristotle (1974: 1153a8-10, 1153a16), claims that tragedy functions as a counterpoint to ethics, pointing to those actions that throw prosperous men into misfortune. While it would have to be determined in what sense Edith's relatives can be considered prosperous, there is no doubt that their deaths carry an air of misfortune. The technical term for a tragic error that inadvertently leads to inevitable harm is hamartia. This error usually follows imprudent action, most likely carried out for lack of moral reflection or some error of judgment. Hamartia has both poetic and moral value. The act of a prudent person will bring happiness in return, even if it also brings death or other lesser evils. Thus, not only are the consequences of the act in play, but also the act itself and how, by performing said act, the person renders themselves as either more or less prudent. Therefore, hamartia is often followed by recognition, or *anagnorisis*, where an important moral dimension is revealed about the state of unhappiness resulting from tragic error, and about rejected or missed opportunities (Brenes, 2021).

Insight into the game's dramatic structures will help identify whether we can speak of tragic errors, and at what stage of mimesis of action they occur. If tragic errors are indeed in play, it would be useful to outline some key points about the circumstances surrounding and driving such imprudent decisions. The concept of the world as a system of possibilities is once again relevant here, therefore it should be determined whether the tragic act was the only possibility, or one of several available.

2.3. Themes and Existential Meaning in the Game's World

Fourthly, in order to appreciate the state of affairs behind those unfortunate decisions, the themes and circumstances involved will need to be identified. Thus, three distinct, major themes that feature in *What Remains of Edith Finch* can be identified, which may give good cause to the imprudent decisions made by several members of the Finch family: family problems, loneliness and obsessive traits. A brief overview of the narrative topic will serve to support these observations.

This final step of the methodology brings the analysis of narrative structures together with that of tragic errors, in order to offer possible ways of interpreting the misfortunes of the Finch family. It will be determined where in the dramatic structure we primarily find family problems, loneliness and obsessive traits, and how they relate to hamartia. Furthermore, insight will be provided into whether these themes are dealt with similarly or differently in each of the plots in the game. It is also important to identify whether these major themes reflect circumstances that the PC has brought about themselves, or whether they arise in a predetermined world to be taken as the baseline.

The vital information provided by the game is able to convey significant existential meaning by means of the types of worlds that give rise to certain ways of living in reality. This hermeneutic exercise goes beyond the confines of the literal analysis of statements by exploring semantic aspects only accessible through an analogy-based interpretation (García-Noblejas, 2005: 215-270). With regard to the very beginning of this walking simulator, where we see the Finch family home, Bozdog and Galloway note, "It looks like a child has precariously stacked various cubes atop each other with complete disregard for architectural rigor, structural logic, or gravitational constraints. It is unlikely that it stands and yet it does" (2019: 7-8). This preface serves to prepare us for interpreting fiction as the mimesis of our world: what seems impossible because of the logical contradictions entailed, may sometimes be possible from an existential point of view.

Following the analysis, we will have obtained the information needed to establish whether the dynamics of the possible world in *What Remains of Edith Finch* are determined by a curse, or whether there is some kind of tragic design in the life of this family of Norwegian origin, but which does not override their ability to choose fortunate actions, although it may seem so at times. If it is found that something other than the curse is actually responsible for the family's misfortune, we would need to determine what poetic meaning can be derived from the fact that these other factors, decisive in the characters' misery, are masked by the appearance of, and belief in, a curse. In short, the ultimate objective of this research, which will be addressed in section 5, is to shed light on the depiction of our own world as reflected by Giant Sparrow's video game.

3. Results

3.1. The Dramatic Structure of Each Playable Story

As shown in Table 1, some storylines, such as Calvin's, reflect the three-act dramatic structure better than others, such as Milton's, where there is no clearly identifiable conflict, hence no significant peripeteia is

triggered. Each game segment is relatively brief, meaning the dramatic exposition is often reduced to the bare minimum.

Table 1: Dramatic Exposition of Each Storyline in *What Remains of Edith Finch*

Character	Ordinary World	Inciting Incident	First Plot Point
Odin	The Finches live in Norway.	Odin's wife and their newborn son die.	Odin and his family set sail from Norway.
Molly	Her mother sent her to bed without dinner.	Molly wakes up very hungry during the night.	She eats toxic things, turns into a cat and hunts a bird.
Barbara	Barbara looks after Walter instead of going to the fan convention.	The radio warns people to be cautious of a violent group terrorising the neighbourhood. A noise is heard coming from the basement.	Barbara shows her boyfriend how to open the basement door to go down and check what is happening.
Calvin	Sam and Calvin vow never to be afraid again.	Sam dares Calvin to go all the way around on the swing.	Calvin starts swinging on the swing.
Gregory	Kay gives Gregory a bath while talking to Sam about their divorce.	The mother leaves the baby alone, and the toy frog is suddenly able to move around freely.	The frog starts freeing the ducklings from the bubbles, making them fall into the water.
Gus	Following the divorce, Sam gets married again and celebrates at the Finch house.	Gus, upset, flies a kite to help contain his anger.	Gus, away from the others, keeps flying his kite as the storm gets worse.
Sam	It is a quiet morning at the Finch house.	Sam wakes his daughter Dawn early to go on a hunting trip.	Sam and Dawn take photos during the trip.
Milton	Milton paints a picture.	A magic paintbrush drops out of the picture.	Milton uses the paintbrush to paint.
Walter	He has spent 30 years locked away in a bunker.	He does not hear the rumbling sound he usually hears every day.	He gets up and leaves the bunker.
Lewis	He overcomes his drug addiction and works at a cannery.	He becomes aware of the monotony of his life and seeks to end it.	He starts daydreaming about his own city, Lewistopia.
Edie and Dawn	Following Lewis' death, Dawn decides to leave home with Edith.	Edith discovers a book written by Edie.	She starts reading a story about the night Edie went back to Odin's house during low tide.
Edith	Edith lives with her mother.	She gets the keys to the house. Edith discovers she is pregnant and leaves the house.	She finds the secret passages and learns of Molly's story.

Source: Compiled by author.

The inciting incident may be external (Walter) or provoked by the protagonist (Sam). The response to the dramatic conflict is just one of several available in the characters' world, as there are always a variety of possibilities available to them (idealistically-speaking, not in terms of the game's mechanics): Walter could have left his bunker through the door; Odin could have planned a safer journey; or Gus could have gone into the tent at the party to avoid the storm. The denouement, consistent with the decisions they make, is disastrous (table 2).

Table 2. Dramatic Denouement of Each Storyline in *What Remains of Edith Finch*

Character	Second Plot Point	Climax	Resolution
Odin	They are hit by a storm at high tide.	Odin dies and the house sinks.	The survivors make it to Orcas Island, Washington, and start a new life there.
Molly	Molly, in the form of a monster, devours three sailors before going into her own bedroom.	Molly writes the last page of her diary before being devoured.	-
Barbara	Barbara fights with the killer.	The attackers enter the house and kill Barbara.	Barbara and Rick disappear, leaving Walter traumatised.
Calvin	Calvin gives the final push needed to go all the way around.	Calvin goes around a few times, the swing breaks and the child dies.	His mother Edie seals off Calvin's part of the bedroom.
Gregory	After the bath has been emptied, the frog jumps up and turns on the tap.	The bath fills up, Gregory turns into a frog and is sucked down the drain.	Gregory drowns to death in the bath.
Gus	Gus bears the brunt of the storm with his kite.	Gus dies after being struck by a tent blown away by the storm.	Gus' relatives find him dead.
Sam	Dawn finds a deer and they get ready to kill it.	They catch the deer and take a photo of the moment.	The dying deer launches Sam off a cliff while Dawn is taking a picture of them.
Milton	He finishes painting a door.	Milton opens the door and goes through it.	The door closes and Milton disappears.
Walter	He exits through the train tunnel.	Upon seeing the sunlight, he is hit by an oncoming train.	-
Lewis	He goes into a golden palace to complete the passage into the other world.	He is about to be crowned, together with the princess, when he is guillotined to death.	His mother, Dawn, receives a letter from her son's psychiatrist following his death.
Edie and Dawn	As Edith is reading, Dawn comes in and they struggle over the book.	The book rips and Dawn leaves with Edith, leaving Edie alone at the house.	Edie dies alone. Dawn gives Edith the key to the house and dies following an illness.
Edith	After learning about everyone's story, she goes to her old room.	Edith relives the time she left Edie's story half unread, since her mother interrupted and took her away from the house.	Edith dies in childbirth, leaving her son with the journal that tells the story of her return to the family home.

Source: Compiled by author.

The climax (usually the death of the character) is consistent with the first plot point, which inciting incident an action that logically leads to an unfortunate outcome: if Barbara had listened to warnings from the authorities on the radio, perhaps the attackers would not have been able to get into the house; if Calvin had refused to accept the challenge of going all the way around on the swing, he surely would not have fallen down the cliff; if Lewis had not escaped reality in his imaginary world, there's a chance he would not have died by suicide at the factory. In all the stories that end in the PC's death, we find that the system of possibilities, or the world, offers more prudent alternatives that were not pursued. This observation gives us a broader picture of the game's world than that provided by the individual worlds of Edith's relatives.

3.2. Error and Imprudence

Below (Table 3), we determine the exact point in each playable story where the imprudent action that leads to misfortune occurs. Action is not simply imprudent because of the consequence it brings, which is usually the death of its instigator. The main focus should be the act itself, measured by reference to the good it seeks to achieve, the means of achieving it, intent and prior judgment.

Table 3. First Plot Point as Error and Imprudence in *What Remains of Edith Finch*

Character	Imprudent Choice as a Response to Conflict
Odin	To escape the curse, he embarked on an extremely dangerous journey across the Atlantic Ocean with his entire house and family in tow.
Molly	She uncontrollably consumes things that are harmful to her health.
Barbara	She ignores police warnings against attacks from the gang of masked killers and leaves the basement door unlocked.
Calvin	He accepts the dangerous challenge his brother Sam dares him to do.
Gregory	-
Gus	He separates himself from the others at the party and flies his kite during a storm that is gradually getting worse.
Sam	-
Milton	Unknown.
Walter	He leaves the bunker through a dangerous exit (the train tracks) instead of using the door.
Lewis	He decided to escape reality and got carried away by his elusive fantasy.
Edie and Dawn	Unknown, although for Edie we observe slight imprudence (drinking alcohol with dinner despite this being contraindicated by her medication) and also for Dawn (she tried escaping the curse as her great-grandfather Odin did).
Edith	Unknown.

Source: Compiled by author.

In many cases, although the character's circumstance (i.e. their world) is tainted by a certain degree of doom, it is the character her/himself that ends up constructing her/his own downfall from the first plot point. For example: ignoring the advice from the authorities leaves Barbara at the mercy of the attackers; retreating to an elusive, imaginary reality separates Lewis from the ordinary world, making him lose sense of what is real; and Molly's relentless hunger fails to distinguish between the edible and the poisonous. The demise of these characters cannot be fully understood without reference to the factor of imprudence. The fact that their misfortune is closely related to the first plot point, as opposed to the inciting incident event, implies greater importance of the character's volition over the events they endure. In other words, it reveals a degree of freedom of choice in their world.

There are some exceptions to this general observation: Gregory, whose lack of awareness and self-possession indicates that the imprudent action is carried out by his guardian and mother, Kay; Sam, as his imprudence occurs at the second plot point; Milton, since it is not known for certain whether his disappearance is owed to imprudent action; and Edie, Dawn and Edith, whose narrative lacks sufficient information to be able to comment on this matter.

Calvin's playable story reveals that these errors are not one-off instances in the lives of the Finch family, but that their approach to life is rife with imprudent decisions. The way the swing is set up is itself dangerous: ahead of it lies a cliff and a spiky wooden fence; behind it and to the right sits the house, meaning a sharp roof edge projects out into the swing's path; and the swing hangs from a tree with weak branches. Hardly a solid structure. The detail of Calvin's leg cast and plasters is also telling of the character's nature and how careless he can be. These findings lead us to conceive of their tragic error not as an unfortunate, one-off instance in the characters' lives, but as integral to the surrounding context shaped in part by the Finch family themselves.

3.3. Themes Throughout the Narratives

Three themes that tend to feature in the playable stories in *What Remains of Edith Finch* have been provisionally identified: family problems, loneliness and obsessive traits. This will be useful for developing a first attempt at mapping out the themes in the game, a general outline to determine the existential meaning conveyed by this collection of stories that come together through the special focus on Edith Finch's journey. Table 4 indicates (1) circumstances out of the character's control and (2) those caused by the character. In cases where a circumstance has a mixed origin, (1) (2) is shown.

Table 4. Themes in *What Remains of Edith Finch*

Character	Family Problems	Loneliness	Obsessive Traits
Odin	His wife and son died (1).	He died alone, sunk at sea together with his own house (2).	Escaping the curse (2).
Molly	Her mother sends her to bed without dinner (1) (2).	She is locked alone inside her room (1) (2).	She uncontrollably consumes all kinds of things (2), and her ruthlessness and pleasure grows whiles hunting for prey (2).
Barbara	Sven, Barbara's father, cuts off his hand with a saw (1).	She is left alone to watch over Walter (1) and kicks her boyfriend Rick out of the house (2).	She was obsessed with regaining fame (2).
Calvin	His sister Barbara had recently died (1) and he felt the need to stand out from his twin brother (2).	He attempted Sam's challenge alone (his brother had gone for lunch), so nobody was there to warn him that the branch was breaking apart (2).	He was too stubborn to pass up the challenge (2).
Gregory	His parents' divorce is the surrounding context (1).	He died because his mother left him alone in the bath (1).	His fixation with the tap and jumping frog (2).
Gus	His parents get divorced (1), he rejects his stepmother and is angry with his father (2).	He separates from the others at the wedding (2).	His determination to keep flying his kite (2).
Sam	He makes his daughter do something she is strongly against: killing a deer (2).	Upon his death, his daughter is left alone in the middle of the forest (2).	The photo and the hunt for the deer (2).
Milton	-	His room is somewhat isolated from the rest of the house (1) and he depicts himself as a loner in his own stories (2).	-
Walter	Following the death of his siblings (1) he isolates himself from his family (2).	He spent 30 years alone in a bunker (2).	He was very afraid of the dangers of the outside world and ate peaches every day (2).
Lewis	After Milton disappeared (1), he blamed himself and distanced himself from his whole family (2).	His uncontrollable fantasy isolated him from the rest (2).	He had an addiction, took drugs and was obsessed with imaginary stories that took him away from reality (2).

Character	Family Problems	Loneliness	Obsessive Traits
Edie and Dawn	They saw their whole family die (1) and ended up estranged as they did not get along (2).	They were left alone after the deaths of their relatives (1) and because Dawn left (2).	Edie was fixated with telling family stories and Dawn had the same paranoia as her great-grandfather (2).
Edith	All her family is dead and the remaining relatives were estranged (1).	She is the last remaining Finch in the present day of the game (1), before her son is born (1) (2).	-

Source: Compiled by author.

Family problems are the defining element of the character's world. The character themselves is also often the source of these difficulties, as they reject other relatives. The recent death of some relative is the most repeated family misfortune, followed by the events surrounding Kay and Sam's divorce.

Loneliness is usually a result of the characters' action, and sometimes features as part of their initial context. In many cases, the death of a child is connected to the absence of their mother and father, their protection and guidance: Molly, Barbara, Calvin, Gregory and Gus. Those that die are always alone when it happens, except Edith, who dies in childbirth, and perhaps Dawn and Edie, although again there is a lack of information available in this regard.

It is always through an obsessive trait that the character addresses the dramatic conflict. This obsessive trait is often highlighted by the core mechanics of each story and tends to be tied to the conflict, and thus to achieving success within the game, something that drives each character. This goal, once reached through the obsessive, ritual repetition of said mechanics, leads to the death of the character, even if such misfortune was not the character's original intention: Calvin swings; Lewis removes the fishes' heads from their bodies; Gregory's frog jumps, etc.

Table 5 shows where these three themes are most evident in the dramatic structure of each character's story.

Table 5. Location of Themes in the Dramatic Structures in *What Remains of Edith Finch*

Character	Family Problems	Loneliness	Obsessive Traits
Odin	Ordinary World and Inciting Incident	Climax	First Plot Point
Molly	Ordinary World	First and Third Act	First Plot Point
Barbara	Ordinary World	Ordinary World and Third Act	Ordinary World and Inciting Incident
Calvin	Ordinary World and Inciting Incident	Second and Third Act	First Plot Point
Gregory	Ordinary World	Inciting Incident	First Plot Point
Gus	Ordinary World	First Plot Point	First Plot Point
Sam	Second Plot Point and Climax	Resolution	First and Second Plot Point
Milton	-	Throughout the Story	-
Walter	Ordinary World	Throughout the Story	Ordinary World
Lewis	Ordinary World	First Plot Point	First Plot Point
Edie and Dawn	Ordinary World, Inciting Incident and Climax	Second Act and Resolution	First Plot Point
Edith	Ordinary World	Ordinary World	-

Source: Compiled by author.

In most cases, family problems feature at the start of the story, and sometimes form part of the inciting incident. This major theme therefore plays a key role in shaping the initial context of each playable story.

Loneliness, on the other hand, is a personal circumstance that is more spread out at different points in the dramatic structure. It pervades the playable segments of Milton, Walter and Edie, and is almost a constant in Calvin's. Apart from that, as already indicated, an ambience of loneliness runs through the final stretch of each storyline.

The first plot point usually sets off the obsessive trait that later features throughout the character's story. Therefore, their recurring obsessions are somewhat linked to choice, thus emphasising the elements of free choice and imprudence surrounding their decisions.

4. Discussion and conclusions

At the beginning of this research paper, we put forward the hypothesis that the world in *What Remains of Edith Finch* is not dominated by a curse, but by the imprudent acts of the characters within it, and that this is at the core of the game's existential meaning. This underlined the need to achieve at least four objectives, primarily related to the game's narrative design.

Firstly, upon close study of each playable story's dramatic structure, it is clear that the unfortunate climax is a logical consequence of the first plot point, i.e. the way in which the protagonist initially responds to the dramatic conflict set off by the inciting incident. This seems like an obvious statement, as the majority of dramatically balanced stories work in this way. However, this observation is necessary to explain how it is not inevitable destiny pulling the strings in the game's world. The freedom of the character who experiences misfortune is a key factor in the poetic denouement, precisely because it is allowed in the system of possibilities in which the characters operate. Mimesis of action, specifically the causal logic that shapes the dramatic structure, proves to be an essential semantic indicator for subsequent inquiry into existential meaning.

Secondly, the characters' decision-making is usually flawed in several respects, starting with the lack of prudential judgement exercised when addressing the matters at stake. The characters did not consciously seek some kind of evil, but rather to move away from something they considered inconvenient. It just so happens that this course of action, which is neither inevitable nor the only one available in their world, leads to their demise. It is therefore appropriate to describe these lethal actions as tragic errors. The family tragedy, i.e. the non-curse, effectively comes down to their blindness to the best course of action among the several available in the character's system of possibilities. The second aspect of mimesis of action that illustrates mimesis of the world is the extent to which success in life plays a part in the action throughout the plot, which tells of the implied designer's reflective stance on concepts of existence.

Thirdly, certain aspects of the circumstances surrounding each character are somewhat constant and particularly prominent at specific points in their playable stories. Family problems tend to precede the characters' actions, forming part of the ordinary world and inciting incident in each plot. Obsessive traits usually come into play at the first plot point. They inform the character's response to the conflict created by the inciting incident, thereby sowing the seeds of tragedy that eventually bloom in the dramatic climax as a logical, coherent consequence of their action. Finally, loneliness often features at various points in each tale, although it becomes more evident towards the denouement of each plot. We must also explain the "topic" or "aboutness", according to Eco, or the "something" in Pavel's words, that manages to convey such a poetic configuration, where existential meaning is determined.

Edie Finch worked hard to preserve the memory of her relatives, building shrines in the deceased's bedrooms. Through these memorials, somewhat religious in nature, Edith uncovers stories and engages in simple, repetitive rituals, bringing paradoxically meaningful actions into the PC's present-day: swinging, taking photographs, or opening cans of peaches. These shrines allow for reflection and consideration of existential meaning, something Edie regarded as important for addressing the problem that "goes back a long ways" for this family, as Odin Finch's storyline reveals.

The night Dawn leaves the house with Edith, grandmother Edie says to her granddaughter: "*The thing you're afraid of isn't going to end when you leave the house!*". What Dawn Finch fears so much is something that can often only be understood by taking a fragment of life and crafting it into a piece of fiction from which unambiguous meaning can be drawn. Sometimes, the story is explicitly metaphorical, as seen in Molly's theriomorphic transformations, or the toy frog that springs to life in Gregory's bath. In other cases, the story uses symbolism in the form of a cultural artifact, such as the poem about Gus tied to a kite, or the photos of Sam's hunting trip. Attempting to escape from the curse serves to uphold it, while interacting with this "problem", reflecting on it and subjecting it to a process of fictionalisation serves to extract vital information that can only be accessed by relating actions to the world in which they make sense and hold value. The communicative power of the denouement of their lives is strengthened by

a process of poeticisation, the dramatic structure of which has been analysed above. This means the stories of these unfortunate deaths could have been told in different ways, as evidenced by the pulp comic that recounts the death of Barbara: it is only one of several possible stories going around about her murder, yet this is the one Edie chooses to lay on the shrine to Barbara. We might now think that this story was chosen for the way its context and plot structure served the overall purpose of Edie's narrative. Barbara's comic ends with the narrator's voice: "*Now that's what I call a real ear-ie tale!*", suggesting a moral purpose to the story, which this study recognises as being consistent with the lessons drawn from the other fragments of the characters' lives.

In response to the question posed by the title of the game—*What Remains of Edith Finch*—we can say that what remains of Edith Finch is her journal, which is still a narrative form (sometimes fiction) but, at the same time, is the holder of the Finches' stories. The most devastating tragedies have accompanied this family for centuries. This evil presented itself to them in such an incomprehensible way, that many believed their world was tainted by a curse. As established, this is not true. They are, in fact, the ones ultimately responsible for their own misfortunes, given their imprudence. Thus, we may conclude that, through a hermeneutic approach to this walking simulator, the story's reflective stance signals the perplexity with which these characters confront moral evil. What could be likened to a social group that constantly commits the same moral errors, consistently incapable of choosing the best course of action? It resembles a family in which most members meet their untimely death or die in terrible circumstances because of a curse. The semantic reasoning of each character's storyline reveals a poetic architecture in which the curse functions as an anthropological red herring (decoy), a poetic trompe l'oeil that masks the truth revealed by a close analysis of the storylines in the game: the first plot point is a mistake with moral overtones, an imprudent act that triggers misfortune. The family is not cursed, just incapable of understanding, and therefore overcoming, the fact that their misery is owed to a lack of prudence bound to the destruction of core family ties. This family breakdown creates a divide between its members, causes loneliness and is often met with obsessive behaviour that blinds them to other, more appropriate possibilities available in their surrounding world. *What Remains of Edith Finch* is the kind of fiction that Ricoeur was talking about; that which conveys meaning for us to apply to our everyday world, through poetic examples of prosperous characters thrown into misfortune.

This concise overview may, first of all, be a starting point for studying each plot in more detail, and for determining the nuances of the taxing moral evil, akin to an inescapable curse, implied in each of them. Secondly, the results could be discussed in other studies that focus on level design, or on the artistic side of game design. Thirdly, analysis of the logic of action as a way of explaining mimesis of the world opens up new ways of interpreting existential meaning in video games, put forward as a reliable way of identifying possible anthropological red herrings that conceal, yet also reveal, vital information about the practical issues often found in fiction.

5. Contributions

Contributions	Authors
Research Idea and Design	Author 1
Literature Search	Authors 1 and 2
Data collection	Authors 1 and 2
Critical Data Analysis and Interpretation	Authors 1 and 2
Revised and Approved Versions	Author 1

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The authors declare no known conflict of interest.

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Notes

1. The distinction between the terms "possible world" and "fictional world" has been important in the historical development of the discussion, especially from a logical-analytical point of view. However, as this study adheres to the phenomenological-existential approach to possible worlds, particularly the theory of poetic possible worlds, the level of analysis involved here does not require such a distinction. This is not for lack of awareness as to the conceptual distance between each term from a logical analysis perspective, but because the tradition used as the basis for reflection (Aristotelianism, as developed by Ricoeur) problematises issues different from those where this distinction would be relevant, i.e. in studies rooted in modal logic or analytic philosophy.

2. There are other perspectives that study the video game as a "world", for example, the theory of virtual worlds as poetic allegories (Gualeni, 2015).

3. For this reason, the concept of implied author or designer (Van de Mosslaer and Gualeni 2020) is particularly useful when applied to video games. We identify this implied designer with the meaning of the work of fiction, rather than a specific person.

4. In line with international standard practice, we refer to Bekker pagination when citing Aristotle's *Poetics*, as this is the most common, accurate way of citing this work.