ARCHITECTURAL MEANING IN VIRTUAL WORLDS: BRUTALISM AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF *THE OLDEST HOUSE*

INTRODUCTION

FICTIONAL ARCHITECTURE

Early in this course, I decided I wanted to do a dissertation [proposal] on fictional architecture, specifically in video games where I think there has been less academic attention on the topic. While the architecture of other mediums has been fairly well analysed, such as Alberto Pérez-Gómez's (2018) essay analyzing the novel *Jealousy,* videogames have only achieved the fidelity to portray architecture as explicitly intentional in the last two decades or so. Throughout this course, I was frequently frustrated by much of the high-minded architecture of the post-modernists that function quite well as art pieces, but are less successful in my mind as constructible/occupiable buildings. In a way, I think video games would be a better medium for many of these buildings, where the limitations of reality do not apply and form is completely within the control of the designer. This however feels like too broad of a thesis, so I would instead propose a limited exploration of the game *Control* (Remedy Entertainment, 2019).

Within the industry, it is considered to be a pinnacle of level design for its bold use of brutalism and modern ritualism to create a strikingly unique, yet wholly internally coherent world. It has inspired several casual fans to look further into the architectural precedents that inspired it ((Polygon, 2019), (Polygon, 2020), (Geller, 2019)) as they attempt to parse the many themes of the story.

CONTROL

Control is set within a fictional office tower called the Oldest House. It takes place in a world where "paranatural" elements and entities exist and the Federal Bureau of Control (FBC) exists to collect, study, and contain them. The game world draws a lot of inspiration from the writings of 20th century Swiss Philosopher Carl Jung (Future Press, 2021, p. 31)[1], taking his ideas of the Shadow, the Collective Conscious (Jung, 2014), the Id, Synchronicity, etc. as literal and running with them. The Oldest House serves as the FBC's headquarters, but was notably *discovered* by them, not built. It takes the form of a brutalist tower in New York, but its interior vastly exceeds its external appearance. It is heavily implied to be a manifestation of Yggdrasil, the World Tree in Norse mythology, positing an office tower as the modern root from which all is connected. The game has the player controlling Jesse Faden, a civilian with some kind of psychic/telekinetic abilities who becomes the Director of the FBC within the opening minutes after finding the Oldest House in a state of lockdown. Control's gameplay is a mix of exploration, combat, and reading various FBC documents that expand on the world.

A key theme of the game is, unsubtly, control. The central conflict of the story revolves around an extradimensional hive entity called the Hiss compromising the FBC and possessing most of the agents. This is an added layer to the more conventional loss of agency that comes within any bureaucratic environment, and further fleshed out by various disagreements between characters over personal ambition versus collective safety. The FBC itself is technically under the control of the American government, but Director reports to The Board, an unexplained group of entities that are only interacted with through their proxy: an inverted black pyramid within the Astral Plane. It communicates telepathically, using corporate language and often expressing multiple interpretations ("<We provide/offer better Bonus Package/Health

[1] The book quotes the Creative Director, Sam Lake saying "there's a lot of 'union theory' in Control's scientific archetypes", but goes on to mention the collective unconscious and synchronicity, leading me to think the transcriber misheard Lake saying "Jungian theory" in his Finnish accent.

Plan. If you leave you will be sorry/dead and you will never work/exist in this town/cosmic reality again.>"), with an underlying sense of hostility if their desires are contradicted. Jesse herself has a different entity in her head, which she calls Polaris because of how it guides her.

Architecturally, the Oldest House is barely understood, let alone controlled by its occupants, and seems to have a will of its own. Only by performing cleansing rituals can Jesse stabilize localized areas. The Oldest House can be read as a manifestation of Jung's Collective Consciousness. Uncleansed areas are found in total chaos, with the usually rigorous brutalist order distorted and scattered. Stairs on walls, wall panels spiraling into cramped tunnels, and pillars of floor jutting in all directions indicate the Oldest House (and thus the Collective Consciousness) requires frequent maintenance for safe human interaction (Figure 16). Spirals are a frequent motif (Figure 14), evoking Jung's mandalas and the journey for self determination.

QUESTION

How does Control use architecture to reinforce its themes?

Through my dissertation I will analyze the Oldest House as a precedent for how videogames can use architecture to enhance their narratives, particularly by evoking metaphor (in *Control*'s case, Jung's writings on psychology) in ways that are harder to accomplish in reality. The Oldest House has several distinct sectors (or levels, in traditional videogames parlance) that have in-universe purposes (Research, Maintenance, Executive, etc.), as well as narrative functions (understanding and controlling paranatural objects, controlling the Oldest House, and controlling the Bureau itself, respectively). Each of these sectors have a unique visual style to reinforce their purpose and themes, and present different moods for analysis.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

VISUAL BASED STUDY

I would combine screenshots of the game (which conveniently has a photo-mode to position the camera and remove characters), its maps and concept art, photographs of precedents, and my own diagrams to show the different atmospheres within the Oldest House and how they tie into the games themes. I would compare the areas as presented in-game with the concept art featured in the making-of book (Future Press, 2021) to check the stated motives.

My primary lines of inquiry will be questions of interpretation, and experience. I will review the symbolism, geometry, and atmosphere of the many sectors of the Oldest House to analyze how the game uses architecture to add to its themes. I will present the screenshots with descriptions of how I interpret the ideas they seem to present. Where relevant, I will compare areas from the game side-by-side with architecture that the developers have cited as inspiration to discuss why these precedents were used, what their use might mean, and the significance of the how the references are distorted in the game.

PERSONAL WRITING

In tandem with the Visual Based Study, I would structure the exploration to follow the narrative and sequencing of a playthrough of the game. I could use language and formatting similar to the many memos found in game (Figure 12), which are themselves often hypotheses. Writing an entire dissertation like that could be challenging (and potentially academically unacceptable), but perhaps for chapter introductions such a style could be useful to make a more coherent dissertation that is interesting to readers. The rest of the writing would be more traditionally academic writing, with structured chapters, citations, etc. I would discuss the form and geometry of the architecture in the game, the moods or feelings it evokes, and how it is used both mechanically and narratively. I would also try to extrapolate on how some of its ideas could be applied to more physical architecture.

Robert Ingram

THEORIZED AND INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDY

As an analysis of a fictional building, this dissertation would inherently be an interdisciplinary study. I would do some research on Jung and his ideas that prove to be influences on the game, and explore how the game used those ideas to generate imagery. My current understanding of his work is limited, so I would need to read more of his work to ensure I have a broad understanding of all the ways he could have influenced the developers, especially his work on archetypes, geometry, and collective conscious. I would also explore the use of postmodern architectural theories such as semiotics and tectonics by evaluating the many explicit and implicit iconographies (such as the inverted triangle), and how materials are used to create spaces that feel plausible despite their incredible scale.

PRECEDENT: THE OLDEST HOUSE

Note: All screenshots are taken by the author using Control's in-game Photo Mode, unless noted otherwise.

Figure 1. Executive Affairs.

Figure 2. Central Executive.

Figure 3. The Director's Office.

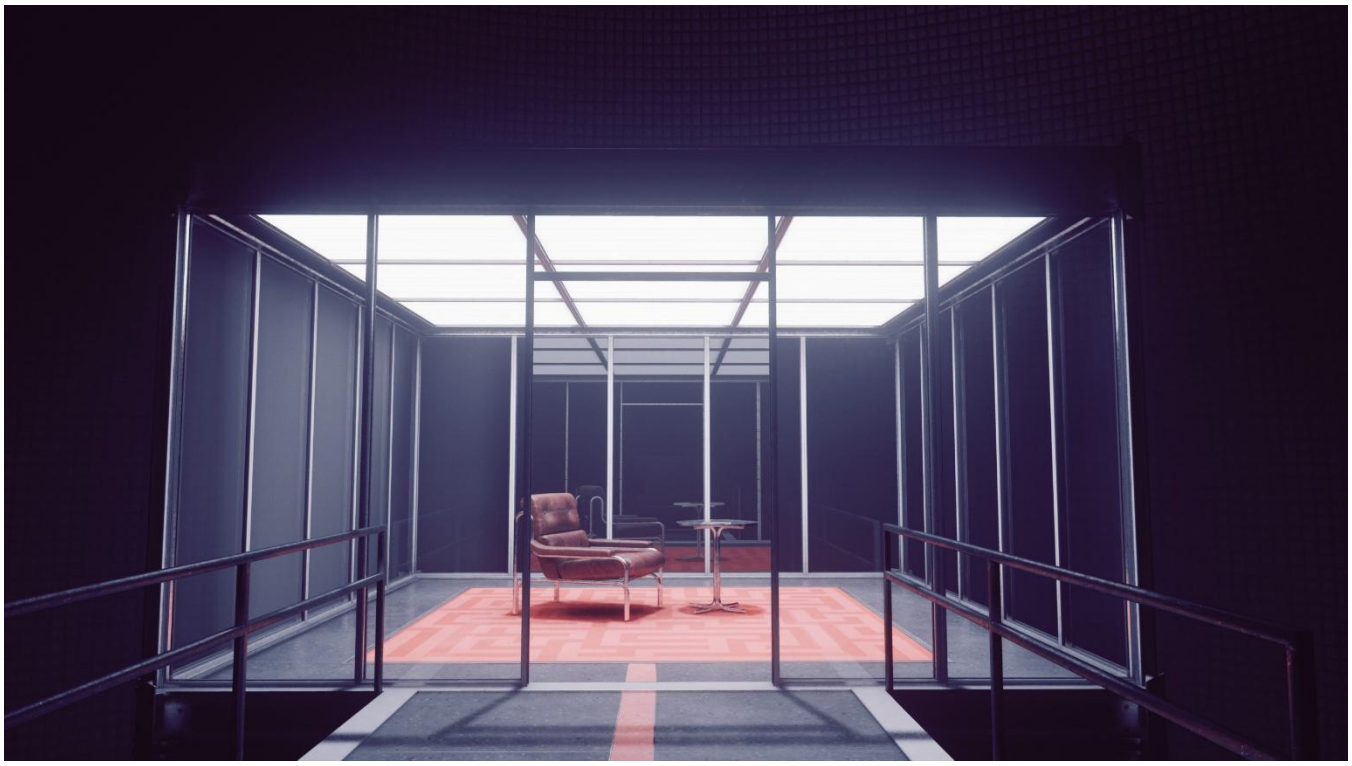

Figure 4. The Hotline Chamber.

Figure 5. The Board Room.

Figure 6. The Mail Room.

Figure 7. Dead Letters.

Figure 8. Communications Department.

Figure 9. Firebreak.

Figure 10. Central Research.

Figure 11. Atlas Chamber.

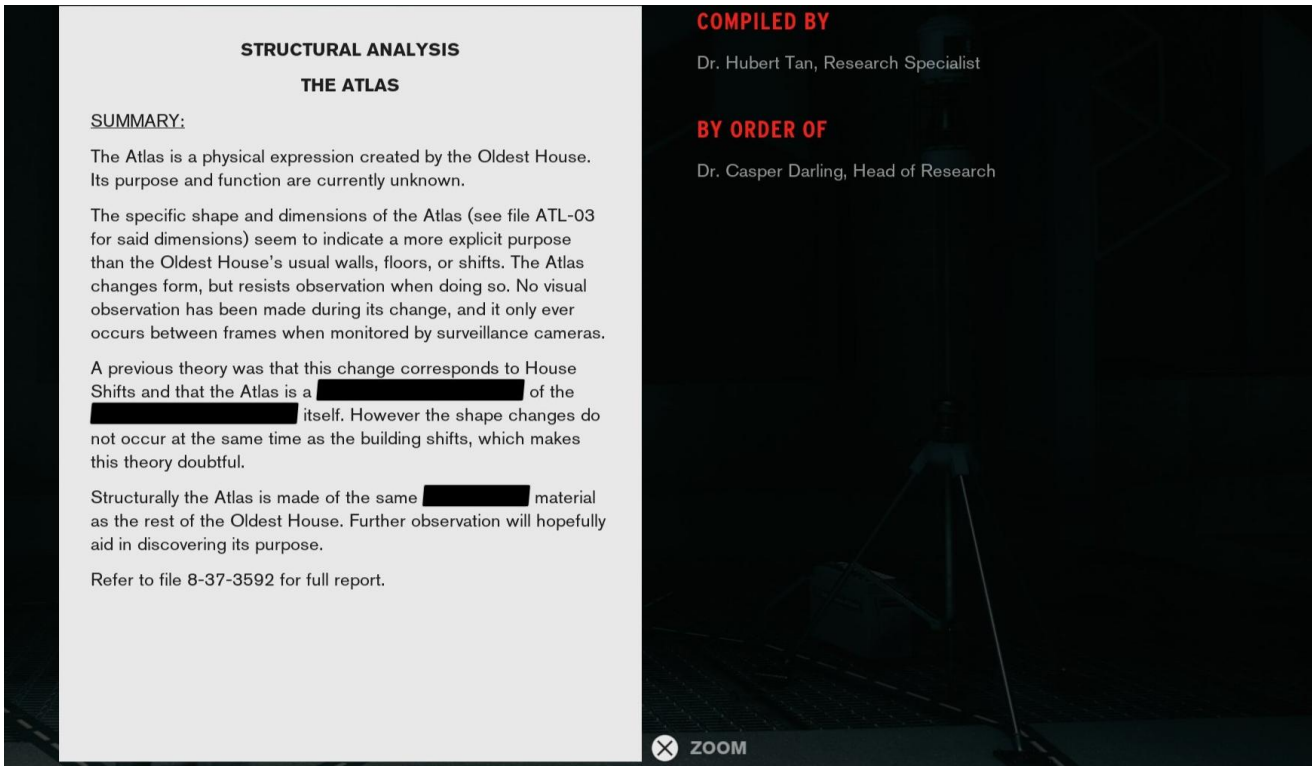

Figure 12. The Atlas analysis.

Figure 13. Panopticon.

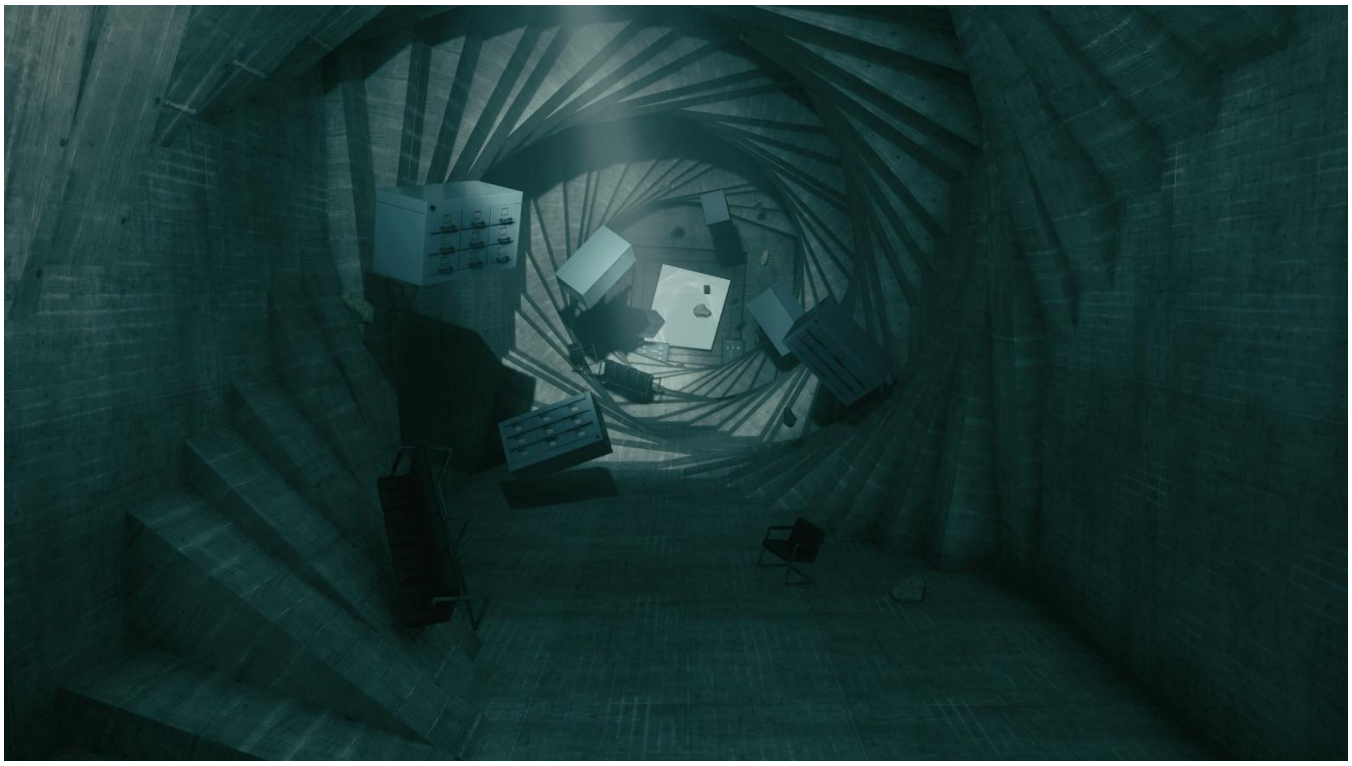

Figure 14. Twisted Chamber.

Figure 15. The Foundation.

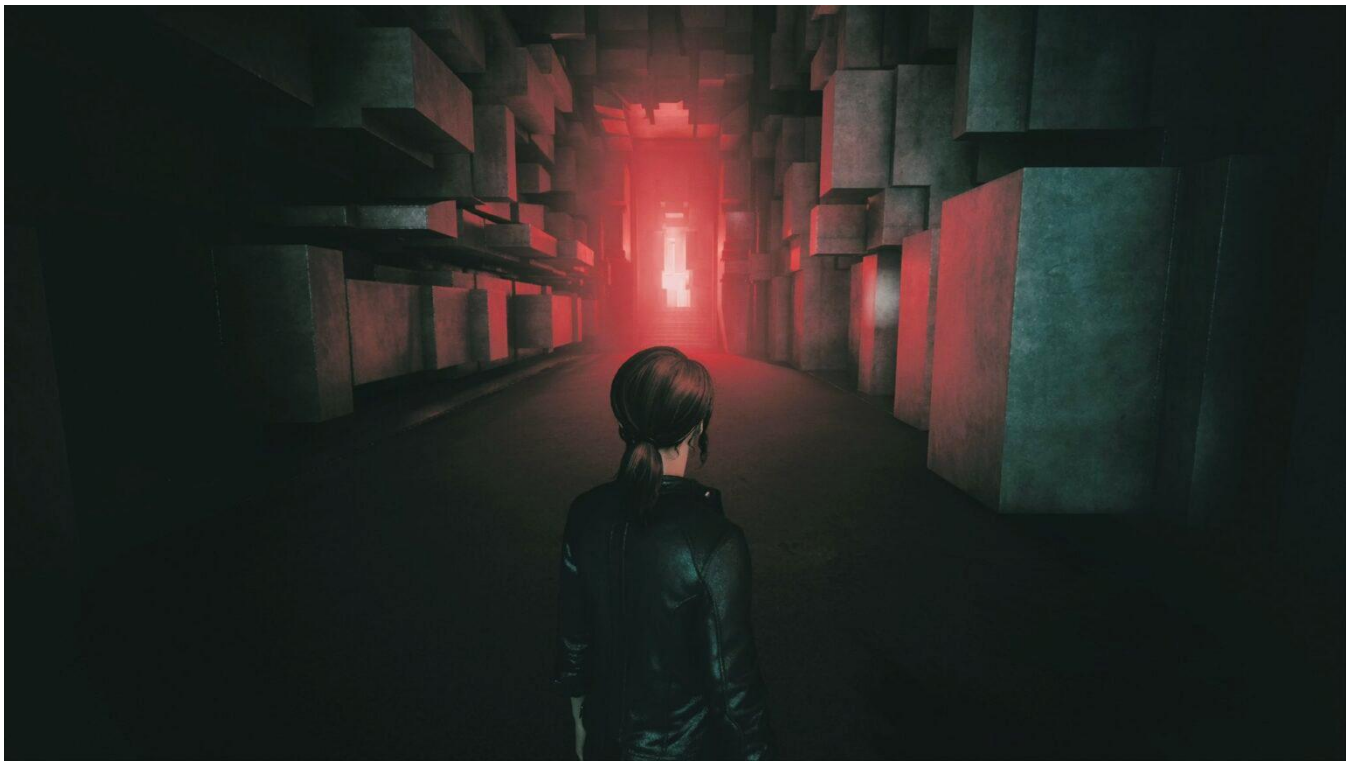

Figure 16. Nostalgia Department. (Holo_Daxy, 2024)

PROPOSED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adams, E. (2002, October 8). *The role of architecture in video games*. Retrieved from Game Developer: https://www.gamedeveloper.com/design/designer-s-notebook-the-role-of-architecture-in-videogames

An article in a major industry publication by and for game developers, a useful insight into how they themselves see architecture as a tool for themselves.

Aroni, G. (2022). *The semiotics of architecture in video games.* London: Bloomsbury Academic.

One of few academic works analyzing videogames through a lens, it should be helpful to see what has already been covered and how those ideas might have appeared in *Control*.

Derrat, M. (2019, August 30). *Control - Story explanation and analysis.* Retrieved August 24, 2025, from YouTube: https://youtu.be/DUlGbiE8ekw?si=LDG9cgR8S6z51M1r

A video summary and analysis of the story of Control, helpful for reminding me of some of the game so I don't have to keep playing through it all.

Fiddler, M. (2007). Panopticon. In Y. Jewkes, & J. Bennett (Eds.), *Dictionary of prisons and punishment*. Willan Publishing. Retrieved May 14, 2023, from http://0-search.credoreference.com.aupac.lib.athabascau.ca/content/entry/willandpp/panopticon/0?institutionId=1122

An exploration of the original idea of a panopticon, which I will refer to as a point of comparison for the in-game sector of the same name (Figure 13).

Frampton, K. (1983). Towards a critical regionalism: Six points for an architecture of resistance. In H. Foster (Ed.), *The anti-aesthetic: Essays on postmodern culture* (pp. 16-30). Seattle.

I will refer to Frampton's groundbreaking piece that pushed tectonics to the forefront of architectural theory as a launching point for how the Oldest House uses tectonics.

Frew, S. (2023, August 4). *Back to basics: What is the meaning of "tectonic" in architecture today?* Retrieved from Architizer: https://architizer.com/blog/inspiration/stories/meaning-of-tectonic-in-architecture-today/

A more contemporary explanation of tectonics which I have found to be a helpful reference.

Future Press. (2021). *The art and making of Control.* Hamburg: Future Press Verlag und Marketing GmbH.

An official book that is full of concept art, interviews, and behind-the-scenes context about the making of *Control*, and a primary source for finding developer influences and intentions.

Game Developer Staff. (2019, October 14). *The real buildings that inspired Control's Oldest House.* Retrieved August 24, 2025, from Game Developer: https://www.gamedeveloper.com/art/the-real-buildings-that-inspired-i-control-i-s-oldest-house

A well-researched article that gathers several architectural precedents, both stated by the developers and reasonably assumed, providing me with a launch point to look at which architects they drew from and why.

Geller, J. (2019, September 6). Control, Anatomy, and the legacy of the haunted house. YouTube. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mexs39y0Imw

A video essay comparing *Control* to another game, and how the archetype of the haunted house has evolved, providing some context for the broader reception and interpretation of the game.

Goode, P. (2009). Brutalism. In *The Oxford companion to architecture.* Oxford University Press. Retrieved September 7, 2025, from https://0-www-oxfordreference-com.aupac.lib.athabascau.ca/view/10.1093/acref/9780198605683.001.0001/acref-9780198605683-e-0189

A reference for Brutalism to review what its use in the game might mean.

Harms, D. (2011). The geometry of C. G. Jung's Systema Munditotius mandala. *Jung Journal, 5*(3), 145-159. Retrieved September 1, 2025, from https://doi.org/10.1525/jung.2011.5.3.145

An academic paper that does a deep dive into the geometry of Jung's mandalas, useful as a primer and as a point of comparison for the geometry of the Oldest House.

Holo_Daxy. (2024, November 29). *Faden Friday - November 2024.* Retrieved from Control Game: https://controlgame.com/faden-friday-november-2024/

A screenshot submitted to the developer's monthly community photo contest.

Joson, J. (2022, January 15). *How video game architecture is speaking to you*. Retrieved from Arch Daily: https://www.archdaily.com/974690/how-video-game-architecture-is-speaking-to-you

A piece from the architectural press about how videogames can be read, with some examples from *Control*.

Jung, C. G. (2014). Archetypes of the collective unconscious. In G. Adler (Ed.), *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung* (R. F. Hull, Trans., Vol. 9, pp. 3-41). Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. doi:10.2307/j.ctt5hhrnk

The primary work of Jung's that the game draws its ideas from, I would need to read it to have a better grasp of the implications of the many references to it.

Karacalı, A. O. (2022, June). Fictional vernacular architecture as a worldbuilding element: Structure samples from the World of Warcraft video game. *IDA: International Design and Art Journal, 4*(1), 109-127. Retrieved May 24, 2025, from https://idajournal.com/index.php/ida/article/view/157

Another academic piece about videogame architecture, useful as a point of reference and understanding what has come before.

Khong, E. (2021, February 5). Unreal cities: Urban architecture in video games and anime films. *Times Literary Supplement*(6149), 14. Retrieved from https://www.the-tls.co.uk/arts/visual-arts/virtual-cities-konstantinos-dimopoulos-anime-architecture-stefan-riekeles-review-en-liang-khong

Another academic piece about videogame architecture, useful as a point of reference and understanding what has come before.

Pérez-Gómez, A. (2018). Literary language and architectural meaning: Mood in Alain Robbe-Grillet's House of Jealousy. In J. Charley, *The Routledge companion on architecture, literature and the city* (pp. 179-189). London: Routledge.

A good example of writing about fictional architecture, in this case a book.

Polygon. (2019, November 27). *Control taught me to love the ugliest architecture.* Retrieved September 7, 2025, from YouTube: https://youtu.be/7n7ylXPueYE

A video essay that touches on how effective *Control* is at using Brutalism as the foundation of *Control*.

Polygon. (2020, October 19). *Video game architecture is full of secrets*. Retrieved September 7, 2025, from YouTube: https://youtu.be/d-xDKpEzmG8

A video essay that discusses the similarities between architecture and game development, and how both use similar practices to influence people moving through them.

Remedy Entertainment. (2019). Control. 505 Games.

Control will be the primary source which I will be analyzing.

Walz, S. P. (2010). *Toward a ludic architecture: The space of play and games*. Pittsburgh: ETC Press. Retrieved from https://press.etc.cmu.edu/books/toward-ludic-architecture

A significant study of videogame architecture, focused more on the gameplay implications but nonetheless an important reference.