A NARRATIVE DREAM: THE UNFINISHED SWAN

By Eric Guadara

Introduction

I earned my undergraduate degree in English, Creative Writing, and Film Studies, so I have a background that nurtures my naturally analytical brain. I can't read a book without a pencil in hand, and I've even watched movies with pen and paper blazing. It is with this background that I tend to approach video games. One game I have been meaning to write about since its release is *The Unfinished Swan* by Giant Sparrow. From chapter to chapter, *The Unfinished Swan* weaves a compelling narrative by taking the player's hand and guiding him/her through consistently unfamiliar territory. Themes, allusions, and symbols are plentiful throughout, emphasizing the natural wonderment felt by the player and bolstering the experience with rich content. I've chosen to break up my writings into chapters to parallel the game's structure/narrative. As a warning, major plot beats will be discussed openly. *The Unfinished Swan* is a game that partially hinges on the player feeling lost and discovering her way. Therefore, the game's narrative is less effective when the player knows where to go, what to do, etc.

Chapter One – Discovery

Figure 1. T...

The "Play" button on the title screen opens a big white book, immediately hinting at the fact that this is going to be a narrative-driven experience. *The Unfinished Swan* begins with an introductory chunk of animated story-telling, narrated by a female's voice. Monroe, a young child with blonde hair, is sent to an orphanage after his mother passes away. Of the 300 unfinished canvases she left behind, Monroe elected to take one: the painting of an unfinished swan. This is the first symbol the player comes across. Besides for launching Giant Sparrow's bird-themed titles trend (see: What Remains of Edith Finch), a swan is a common symbol for beauty. The bird in The Ugly Duckling is initially perceived to be a turkey until it hatches, at which point it is described as being "…very large and very ugly" (Andersen). After an infancy of persecution, the duck eventually sees itself as "…no longer a clumsy dark-gray bird, ugly and hateful to look at, but a – swan!" (Andersen). The bird that had undergone sustained bullying throughout its life is shaped into a beautiful, respected creature. Monroe's childhood – or the childhood of any orphan – is presumably difficult. It also contains a relative lack of affecting parental expectations. For Monroe, who does not know who his father is, there is no feeling of "when I grow up, I'm going to be like my dad." The closest he

has to this feeling is that his mother was a painter. An unfinished painting can then represent an unfinished realization of an idea, or in this case, a person. Growing up fatherless then having his mother pass away undoubtedly leaves Monroe feeling unfinished. One night, he wakes to find his mother's painting missing. Also, there's a door he had never seen before. Monroe takes his mother's paintbrush – a symbol in it of itself – and treks down the proverbial rabbit hole to discovery.

An immersive technique that *The Unfinished Swan* makes use of flawlessly is the seamless transition from narration to playing. As the narrator's voice fades, the entire screen is white excepting a small, barely visible reticle in the center. The lack of action forces the player to think, "am I… am I playing right now?" After a few seconds of waiting, the next natural step is impatience, which leads to button pressing. It doesn't take long before the player presses a shoulder button, which, in this case, elicits a veritable mind explosion response. For a new player, the initial paint splatter is wonderful. The game's objective is blissfully unclear. The world itself is disconcertingly white; a blank canvas upon which the player is encouraged to paint if he wishes to progress.

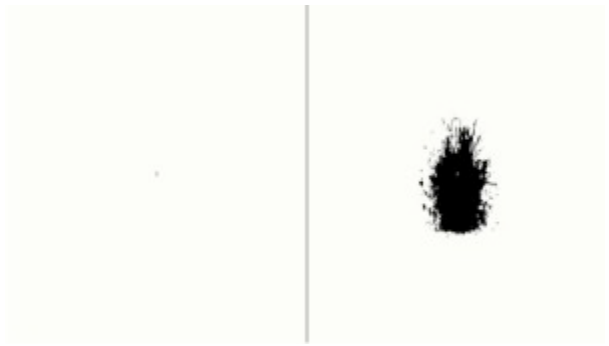

Figure 2. A Blank Canvas.

Games often include trial and error, but few make use of players' innate discovery drive as deftly as *The Unfinished Swan*. Painting The Garden (chapter one's title) can represent Monroe's painting of his own identity. Without societal or parental constraints, his identity is utterly blank. Tossing paint at a canvas to see what sticks is an effective way to experiment what makes up that complex idea of the self. The old adage of "you are what you do" holds humorously true in today's society. I dread updating my Twitter profile because it only allows for 160 characters, a dreadfully low number to describe any human. How can I fit all that I do – write, read, study, design, make, laugh, love, debate, cook – into such a short space? In *The Unfinished Swan*, Monroe is figuring out what he is going to do. A good start is to figure out where he is going to go.

The game is played in the first-person perspective, meaning the player is cast in the role of a young male orphan – not a typical 'good hero vs. bad guys' narrative right off the bat. The game's controls are very similar to those of a first-person shooter. This particular scheme is used in order to be user-friendly for a wide audience. For many gamers, shoulder buttons are intuitively shooting buttons. The fact that paint is being shot at environments rather than bullets at humans is a refreshing twist. After navigating out of the starting point, a few non-white objects pepper the world.

Figure 3. Motivation.

Floating golden objects beckon the player to paint on/near them. It becomes evident that Monroe is painting sculptures in a garden, many of which bear a resemblance to his mother's paintings. The player might have the notion that he is finishing the mother's works, which, in a way, he is. The black paintballs bounce off of golden pieces, representative of a nontarnishable symbol of royalty. Besides for the statues, there are occasionally swan prints on the floor that show the player where to go. This ties into the swan as a symbol of motivation for Monroe. He doesn't know why he's following it, but he is. The player undoubtedly empathizes with the idea of being motivated by ideas or objects that remain just out of reach. Colorful balloons dangle in the distance, another symbol of fleeting motivation or youthful, innocent desire (see: Le Ballon Rouge). Every once in a while, the player comes across a letter that, when painted, turns into a narrated story beat.

One of the initial expositions reveals that the King decided no colors were good enough for his garden, so he painted it white. This could be a commentary on homogeneous societies, gentrification, or exclusionary authoritative rule. In any case, Monroe is splattering black paint about the garden, effectively ruining the whiteness of it all. The next narrative development includes people settling in the King's garden, painting it out of unrest (banging their shins, losing their houses, etc.). The theme of authority vs. revolution is strengthened. As this is made known to the player, shadows start to populate the world, giving a bit more liberty to the hitherto hesitant act of walking.

Figure 4. Shadows or Diversity?

The King created a labyrinth that was designed to be beautiful, not practical. The implicit characterization here is that the King is shallow and garish, more concerned with beauty than practicality. This ties into later characterizations of vanity and fickleness. For example, at the close of the first chapter, the King leaves, promising he'd come back to finish. Of course, he never did. Perhaps he was sick of his subjects ruining his creations. Perhaps he was like John Mayer's Walt Grace: "Done with this world," ready to create a new identity in a new place, on his own terms.

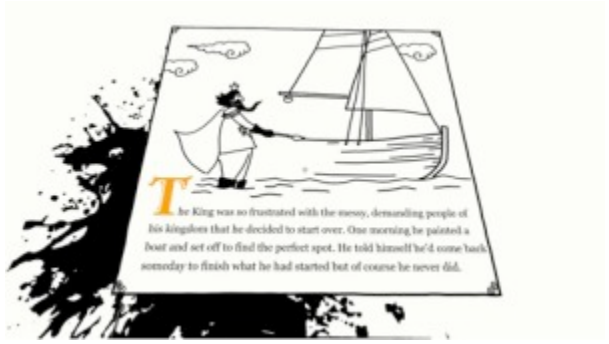

Figure 5. Start Over.

Chapter Two – Growth

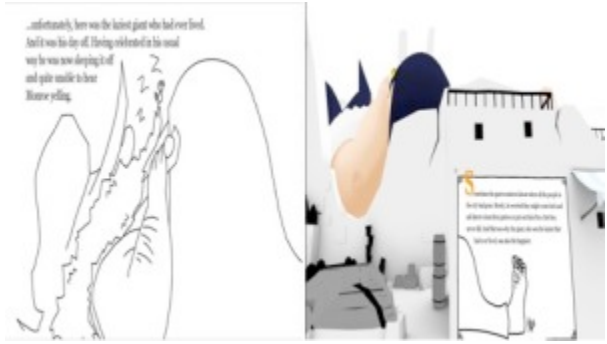

Figure 6. Laziest, happiest.

The second chapter of *The Unfinished Swan*, The Unfinished Empire, begins with narration about a giant who inhabits the kingdom. During the King's reign, the giant helped smaller folk with their chores and responsibilities. Nowadays, he sleeps as the sole resident of the kingdom. It is emphasized several times that the giant is both lazy and happy. People no longer badger him, so he's happy. The player can see parts of the giant's body and infer from the rising and falling of his belly that he is sleeping. The lack of requests for aid translates to a lack of responsibility, which in turn results in bliss. It may be a stretch, but it can be surmised that the giant's happiness is partially derived from the fact that he is nobody's dependent. Conversely, the King doesn't seem to be having a whole lot of happiness as his subjects' major dependent. Heavy is the head that wears the crown, so the saying goes.

Seeds of revolution start being sewn by way of public defecation and urination. It is revealed that the King used to be a potter, enjoying the simplicity of creating small objects. When the King refuses to build a sewer system, the populous found his creations a suitable place to relieve themselves. In this way, necessity leads to innovation. Pots are easier than kingdoms to construct and keep in one piece. It will take many lessons before the King

understands this valuable lesson. The fact that he was once a potter – a creative, artisanal pursuit – plays into his voracious appetite for creating. He has a knack, though, for not finishing his creations. Notice that pots almost by definition have an opening; an unfinished end.

Figure 7. When you've got to go...

When the player reaches an open courtyard with black bramble, a few developments come to light. First of all, in a particularly dark segment near this courtyard, the player encounters red-eyed creatures. This foreshadows potential dangers to come. After flipping a few switches, the player unleashes water into a canal. The flood is described as being the King's solution for cleaning up the garbage brought on by his subjects. This could be a commentary on human beings' penchant for creating waste as well as an allusion to a flood myth that is inherent in many cultural belief systems. The King floods his kingdom as an act of monarchical retribution, sweeping away filth and a few of the smaller children. The smaller children bit is an injection of dark humor in the narrative, a subtle but encouraging pat on the player's back to keep moving. Besides for the rich literary snippet of narration, another, more important revelation comes to light.

The player might have noticed that at the beginning of chapter two, she is no longer splattering black paint on a white canvas.

This time around, the paint color is blue. Also, it doesn't last quite as long as the black paint did. When the canal floods and a green vine protrudes from that black bramble – remember the black bramble? – a wave of realization crashes over the player. It's water. With that new information, it should be relatively apparent that the green vine in the middle of the screen is screaming for blue water. Water represents life whereas vines represent… freedom? After watering the vines up a wall and across a few open spaces, the player becomes comfortably in control of where the vines will grow. A sliver of story tells that the vines refused to stay where the King wanted them. The vines – wild, living, growing plants – are representative of the freedom-hungry subjects in the kingdom. The idea of growth is also important to keep in mind since the protagonist of the game is a young orphan. Suffice it to say that the King hates the vines because they don't stay in place. To the player, though, the vines are climbable objects that grant more freedom in the three-dimensional game space.

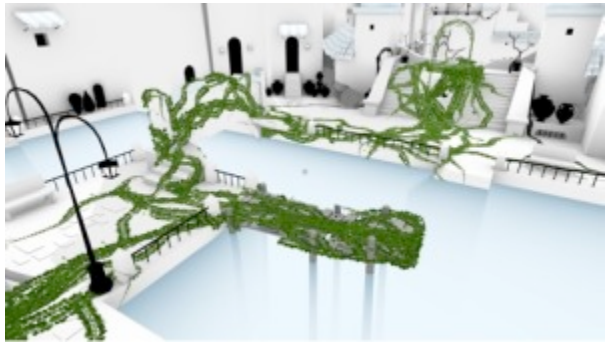

Figure 8. Linear?

As a game mechanic, the vines veil the surprisingly linear story in *The Unfinished Swan*. Besides for hidden balloons and a couple of optional, supplementary plot points, the game is straightforward in its narrative. There are no branching paths or ending-altering decisions to make. However, linearity is not necessarily a

negative attribute in most media. Take for example your favorite book, poem, film, etc. It is always the same, every time. The interactivity that defines video games as a medium often seeks to blur or otherwise obfuscate linear storytelling. When the player feels like she is simply trekking from checkpoint to checkpoint, a game begins to feel more like any other medium that includes moving pictures and accompanying sound. More effective stories come from player creation rather than player discovery. Cinematics, cut-scenes, etc. are not as immersive storytelling techniques as experience, real or virtual. The reason why Gaffgarion's traitorous actions in Final Fantasy: Tactics are so genuinely felt by the player is because he played with that character; geared him up and had a hand in how he was built. A heel-turning character is far less effective than a heel-turning character that the player helped develop. This may also explain the impact behind Aeris's iconic death in Final Fantasy VII. As a character in the story, Aeris is the main love interest to the protagonist. As a practical character in a Role Playing Game, Aeris is the main healer up until she suddenly meets her demise. Besides for losing a character in a story, the player must contend with the forlornness of being out an integral, useful part of the whole that makes up the party. Experience and player interaction (predetermined/designed or not) are what make video game stories different from the ones written on paper or acted out on screen. In *The Unfinished Swan*, the vines make the world and story seem, ironically, much less constrictive.

Following a revitalizing run-in with a hose, the player is introduced to one of the game's major themes: legacy. The King hates the sea because it ate away his first castle; his first attempt at crafting a kingdom. This is an idea more artfully described by Jimi Hendrix in his song "Castles Made of Sand." To build a castle made of sand means to construct something – a structure, a plan, an identity – out of a degradable material or with a shoddy foundation. The waxing and waning of waves, the rising

and collapsing of empires, the hunger and disgust for authority are all instruments of time's constant progression. With the collapse of his first castle, the King is realizing that perhaps his legacy isn't as indelible as he wishes is to be. "And so castles made of sand fall in the sea eventually" (Hendrix). What he doesn't realize quite yet is how his narcissistic attitude plays into his failures. At one point, the player comes across a statue of the King that reads "Of all his creations, his greatest was himself." The allusions to the Greek myth Narcissus are plentiful throughout the game. The King's figurative drowning in egotistic wonderment may not be as obvious as the statues, paintings, etc. that visually portray the myth. However, the subtle foreshadowing of his impending downfall is purposefully penned.

Before closing the chapter, the player is allowed to look into a telescope that shows a view of a black object in the distance. With some zooming, the player discovers that the blotch of black is actually a monument of the King on an island in the sea. Continued zooming allows Monroe to see into the eye of the memorial statue, where a chair is turned toward a fireplace and a hippo lay to the side. The implications of looking into or through someone else's eyes are many, and this is not the last time the player gets to see from a point of view other than Monroe's. Moments later, the narrator describes how the King created a horrible creature to kill the vines. The creation gets out of control (sound familiar?), and he is afraid for the first time in his life. It takes the force of his pet hippo and the giant to drive the creature into the water. The consequence of the creature's banishment was that the sea turned black for a while. The player just saw a concentrated mass of black in the distance, in the shape of the King. In a way, the King is the monster that drove his people out and ruined his kingdom. He made his bed and is currently sleeping in it, so to speak. Donne writes "No man is an island, entire of itself" to drive home the universalities of

mankind and the importance of interdependence in society. The King is no longer a part of the whole of mankind. By his own accord, he is exiled with nothing but his hippo, who is a symbol of sleep or dreams as can be seen in later portions of the game.

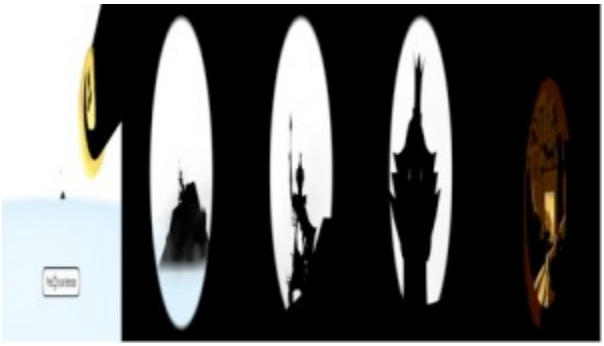

Figure 9. The mind's eye.

Chapter two ends with a mass desertion. Everyone but the giant, who was quite loyal and very lazy, leaves the King. Again, laziness is being tied to a generally positive concept: loyalty. It takes sedentary subjects to keep an authoritative ruler in place, and they won't be found in this kingdom. Monroe boards an airship in ever-pursuit of the swan. He loses sight of it and finds himself in a dark forest. One piece of text in this portion that sticks out is "…no matter how fast he went, the swan was always just out of reach." If it wasn't apparent before that the swan is a symbol for motivation, it sure is now. What makes Monroe progress? What makes anyone do anything? The prospect of catching and finishing that elusive, metaphorical swan.

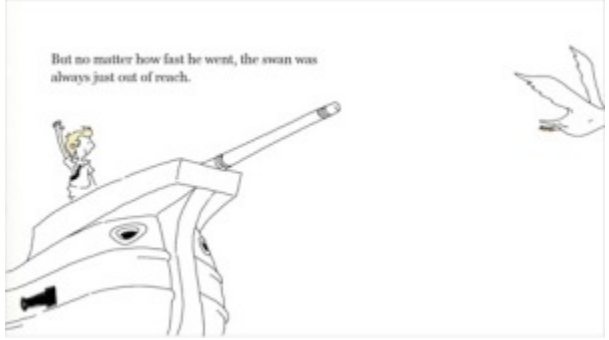

Figure 10. Raison d'être.

Chapter Three – Motivation

Figure 11. Motivation Lost.

Monroe is chasing after this unfinished swan and feels like he is being led. Consider the idea of wanting. What is it that human beings typically want? Food? Water? Good grades? Money? A job? A family? Then consider those manifestations of desire as end-points. There is often a metaphorical or literal journey to each end, and the journey is rarely devoid of problems. What moves us from a start point – "I would like to obtain a job that pays enough to support a family" – to an end point – "I have obtained said job. Hooray!" – is motivation. Sometimes, motivation is nowhere to be found. Monroe follows the swan (his motivation) into darkness (the age-old symbol for troublesome times) and crashes into a tree. When the clouds

lift, the swan is gone. Now Monroe must find his way without a swan intermittently hinting at where to go. Chapter three, Nighttime, commences.

After hopping out of a tree, the only two visible objects in the distance are a glowing bulbous fruit and the previously discovered monument of the King. The monument is much larger, which orients the player as to where he has traveled. It's still far in the distance, though, so the closest inkling of light and warmth is that fruit. En route to the fruit, the player is forced down a dark hole, another possible allusion to Alice's plight. This is a jolting occurrence to the first-time player; being denied a chance to reach the only lighted space in sight. After landing, navigation becomes literally and metaphorically difficult in this dark world. It is troublesome to walk through the pitch-black terrain, much like the hesitancy produced by the shadowless white world in chapter one. The player will often bump into logs, ledges, and other objects on her way to the nearest fruit-light. Metaphorically, it is troubling and sometimes impossible to progress during dark times when motivation is nowhere to be found. The player intuitively moves toward the light, at first for familiarity's sake, then for safety's.

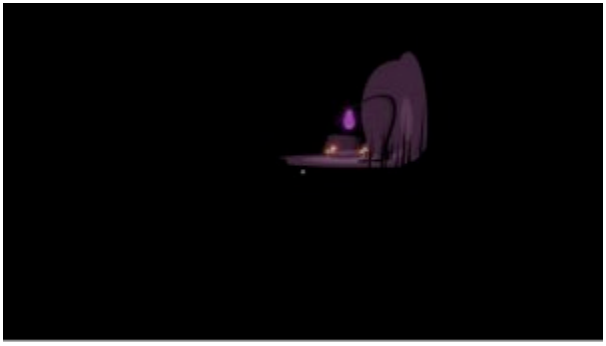

Figure 12. Follow the Light Rabbit

The distance between lighted areas increases from fruit to fruit, which builds suspense. During the lengthier blackouts, the

player is attacked by red-eyed, arachnid-looking creatures. Red slashes rip across the screen accompanied by Monroe's cries of pain. This is the first time the player can be attacked and 'killed' (really, the player is just sent back to the nearest checkpoint) if she does not complete a task quickly enough. Coupled with the typical gaming desire to progress, avoiding attack becomes the player's new motivation. After getting a hang of hopping from light to light, the player is introduced to a new mechanic in the form of a moveable ball of light.

The rolling light allows the player to move safety with her. This builds confidence and freedom in the same way that the vines did in the previous chapter. The player now feels like she can move about the gamespace on her own terms, safe from the outside negative forces that inhibit her progression. There is one sequence where the lightball rolls down a hill, requiring the player to chase after it. Safety, in this case, is fleeting, forcing the player to move quickly to keep from being consumed by darkness. At the end of the lightball portion of chapter three, Monroe comes to a house.

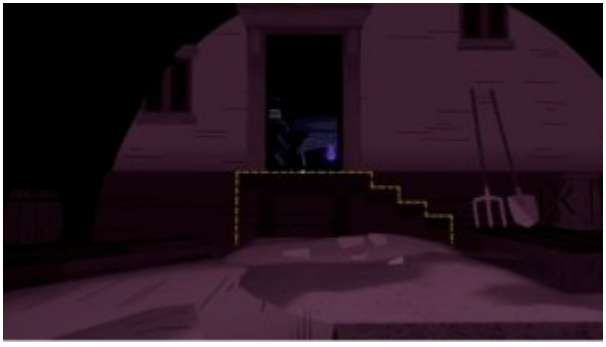

Figure 13. A House is Not a Home.

The story page outside of the house clearly states the thematic idea of legacy, claiming that "The King… decided he'd have to leave a legacy the old fashioned way: with a family." Walking by the house, the player will recognize a yellow dotted line in

the shape of a staircase that hints at the radical gameplay shift to come. Poking around in the decrepit, desolate nursery will reveal another narrative development about the creation of the Queen. The page itself is an allusion to Michelangelo's The Creation of Adam. It depicts the tip of a paintbrush touching an outstretched finger. Again the narcissistic tendencies of the King come to light, as it is explained that his wife is so beautiful because she is a female version of himself. This also paints the King as a divine figure, a possible allusion to the Christian God creating man in His own image. Directly after learning of the King's human creation, the player is invited to jump into a blank canvas.

Figure 14. Here We Go!

With a few ball tosses on the blue playfield, the player becomes quickly acquainted with building in *The Unfinished Swan*. This is another example of intuitive mechanical design. The white space at the beginning of the game, the growable and climbable vines in chapter two, and now an all-out building mechanic are spaced out in a way that refreshes the playable experience before it ever stales. Another interesting gameplay mechanic in this part of the game is how the player's creations in the building world translate to traversable in-game objects in the main world. The cyclical action of building then progressing then building again could speak to ideas of returning home time after time. Analytically

speaking, the connotations of 'home' are complex. The fact that Monroe currently resides in an orphanage emphasizes the desire to feel at home. If home means family, then Monroe might not feel at home for some time. However, his family is the subject of the next few pages of narrative.

One story piece tells how of the many presents given to her by the King, the queen only keeps a little silver paintbrush. If your a-ha lightbulb is having trouble brightening, another tidbit of story reveals that the Queen becomes pregnant, and another still shows the pregnant Queen leaving with a small painting of an unfinished swan. The Queen is Monroe's mother, which means that the negatively portrayed King is Monroe's father. New meaning is cast over the entire game. Monroe isn't wandering through a remote surreal story of a King's rise and fall; he's strolling through his father's memories, experiencing them as his own. Monroe was just practicing exactly what his father did his entire life – building. He put together parts of an unfinished house, completing a job that his father started. To go back to the Queen's departure, what she takes with her is literally an unfinished painting. Figuratively speaking, the unfinished work of art is actually inside of her; it is Monroe. Before leaving the nursery section of chapter three, the player is treated to a cheeky allusion to Journey, another game about life's travails. Looking out into the darkness, one of the only visible features is a set of swan prints. Monroe's motivation is found once more. Onward!

Figure 15. Motivation Found.

The player rides in a boat that takes her to the monument's island. The penultimate page reports that the King mourned for nine years after the Queen left, unable to build anything. The final thing he wants to build is a gigantic monument of himself; a last-ditch effort for people to remember him. His powers begin to fail, and it turns out he can't finish another painting again. He can't even finish his dream. Failing powers can represent failing health, while the propensity for sleeping rather than waking life can represent denial. "Living is easy with eyes closed," so The Beatles have told. The King has locked himself away from the world, a role reversal of the typical tower-bound damsel in distress. It's up to Monroe to climb up and confront his father.

The ascension of the monument is a suspenseful affair. The accompanying music's cadence increases, the rising water acts as a harrying timer, and the platforming is relatively ramped up in difficulty. All of these elements blend together to make the act of literally climbing up a statue of your father a memorable experience. At the apex of the scaffolding, Monroe swings across a platform and climbs up into an eyehole. As Monroe sees his dad, he can't figure out what to say, the narrator explains.

"Ah, it's you, the boy from my dream" the King utters.

Figure 16. A Boy Within a Dream.

Chapter Four- Realization

Figure 17. Helpless.

Chapter four begins with the player listening to the King as he recounts his life story. A hippo urges the player to "come, sit by the fire," a surreal anthropomorphic instance that elicits a puzzling response. A close look around the room reveals that the King is surrounded by pictures of himself and of his accomplishments. Some of the pictures, like the statue in the upper-left corner, capture where the player has previously ambled. Others seem like commissioned selfies of a narcissistic monarch. It's telling that the man is sitting by his lonesome, considering he surrounded himself with himself throughout his life. He built his island and now has to live on it. The blank pictures on the mantle are what interest me most because they

represent the son he never knew, or regret for unfulfilled accomplishments. In any case, the King is about to tell you the details of his dream. To know the King, we must first be the King.

The player is transported into a picture that depicts the house the King grew up in. Exploring a bit, the curious player will realize that there's a mirror on the wall. Jumping on a nearby table allows the player to realize that she is now playing as the King, albeit a younger version with shorts and an underrealized moustache. The King's narration moves the player through a door, and a familiar site comes into view. The space is completely white, much like the opening sequence in the game. By now, this trick isn't quite as impactful, but it is soon explained that by painting to find your way, you have ruined the King's garden. The common response here is recognition that you, as Monroe, negatively affected your father's dream. You ruined everything; a potential nod to growing up and creating your own path as opposed to following in the footsteps of the one that came before you.

Figure 18. Fourth Wall.

The game breaks the fourth wall when credits start showing up. The King mentions that his dream has credits and subtitles, too. Like the rest of the game, this is done with creative spirit. The first credit the player comes across proclaims that *The Unfinished*

Swan is "a dream by Giant Sparrow." Notice the omission of the word 'game'. *The Unfinished Swan* successfully weaves a compelling narrative by allowing the player to explore its world. Throughout, the player feels almost completely immersed. The only aspect of the game that causes a hiccup in said immersion is the lose condition; the false death that places the player a few steps back from where he met his demise. Thankfully – and, I submit, purposefully – death doesn't come too often throughout the game.

Peering over a ledge, the unfinished labyrinth comes into view. Words like 'abandoned' and 'forgotten' are used, highlighting the King's remorse. An interesting effect is the fact that as the King is narrating, he's speaking in the first person, the very same view that the player is donning. You are playing in a memory, a dream, and it actually feels like that due to the narration. In addition, MC Escher-esque architecture starts jutting out everywhere, challenging the player's perception of up. About the vines that took over his kingdom, the King poignantly claims, "I built it to stand a hundred lifetimes. Instead it'll be buried in one! A monument for weeds." Everything crumbles and the dust returns to the earth by the earth. How long a legacy lasts varies, but none lasts forever.

Figure 19. A Lonely Viewing.

Moving forward, the player reaches a dark portion of the dream

as the King waxes poetic about finite legacies. Soon, the player walks into the King's funeral. Nobody is in attendance "except you." At this point, the player swaps back to controlling Monroe, which is confirmed by looking into the mirror on the coffin. I was initially shocked to find that the character models are so basic. Monroe looks like a cardboard cutout, shoeless and gesture-less. With some thought, I came to the conclusion that this is the same feeling human beings have in their infancy. The player is practically forced to move left and right, jump up and down to realize that the image in the mirror is the character she is controlling. This realization of self is a very human trait, one that is learned early on. Educational psychologists Teresa M. McDevitt and Jeanne Ellis Ormrod describe it thus:

> "In the second year, infants begin to recognize themselves in the mirror. In a clever study of self-recognition, babies 9 to 24 months were placed in front of a mirror (M. Lewis & Brooks-Gunn, 1979). Their mothers then wiped their faces, leaving a red mark on their noses. Older infants…touched their noses when they saw their reflections, as if they understood that the reflected images belonged to them" (450)

What seems like the use of cheap assets is actually a clever trick by Giant Sparrow.

Walking through the open window, the player grows larger and larger ("like a teenager", the King proclaims), pushing over the giant monument. His final hope at leaving a legacy is now toppled, and the King comes to terms with the fact that when he's gone, he will be painted over "the same way I painted over what was here before me." At this point, his tone has evolved into a gentle acceptance of his fate. When he reflects in solitude on all the things he'd built and left unfinished, he recognizes that he had fun making them. The journey is the important part, not the end result. As cliché as it sounds, life is the same way. It's not the end but the means that define the journey. We've all got the same ending coming up, but how we get there varies from person

to person. I'm reminded of Prince's "Let's Go Crazy," when he philosophizes:

> We're all excited/ But we don't know why/ Maybe it's 'cause. We're all gonna die/ And when we do/ What's it all for?/ You better live now/ Before the grim reaper come knocking on your door. (36-43)

A similar sentiment was held by carpe diem poets. In "To His Coy Mistress," a poem wherein the speaker attempts to win the affection of a lady, Andrew Marvell writes, "But at my back I always hear / Time's winged chariot hurrying near" (21-22). His main argument is that coyness will lead to a joyless (sex-less, in this case) life, which will end unceremoniously in death. There is a way to live on after death, though, and the King realizes this.

Figure 20. Passing the Torch.

"I have something for you," remarks the King. "This brush isn't mine anymore. My work is over. It belongs to you now." The King figuratively passes the torch to his son. When he adds "I hope it makes you happy, and that someday they will say he is a better man than his father", I admit I choke up a bit. I don't have any personal issues of living up to my father's legacy or being a better man than him, but I think Giant Sparrow has chosen a feeling that strikes a chord with a wide audience. I don't have children yet, but there's an innate feeling that I already possess of wanting them to have a better life than I've had. Psychologically

speaking, I honestly don't know if this is a universal human trait. I do know that when the camera pans toward an open door and the player is forced toward it, the deeper meaning is that life is a blank canvas waiting to be painted. "None of this will last for long", the King prompts, an attitude echoed by artists throughout human history. The game ends with an image of Monroe sleeping in his bed after finishing his mother's painting. In addition to filling in the swan's neck, he paints a couple of Cygnets. In general, this could symbolize having and raising offspring. In the context of this story, I imagine the big swan represents the King while the smaller two, who were created by the bigger, represent Monroe and his mother. The storybook conclusionary "The End" sends the player off with a warm and fuzzy feeling. The book closes, and from here on out, the player sees the blank back cover on the title screen, an image that beckons, "The story is over. Go out and chase your own swan."

Figure 21. The Finished Swan.

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