

Regret in Play and in Paint: Authorship, Narrative, and Intertextuality in *Pentiment* (2022)

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Pentiment is a point-and-click adventure released by Obsidian Entertainment in November 2022. This research is concerned with approaching the experiential play of the game in relation to the artistic phenomenon of pentimento, or pentimenti, after which it is named.

The following abstract proposes an interdisciplinary study linking a games and art history scholar in the investigation of the rich interaction of pentimento and regret explored ludically through the game's narrative, play, and intertextual references.

Pentimento derives from the Latin *paenitēre*, meaning to 'repent' (OED, 2022). The phenomenon, as spoken of in fine art, denotes a 'sign or trace of an alteration in a literary or artistic work; a visible trace of a mistake or an earlier composition seen through later layers of a point on canvas' (OED, 2022). For pentimento to be recorded, an under-drawing or underpainting is typically revealed for one of two reasons. Paint has either thinned over time and revealed prior layers; or, non-invasive technologies such as XRF (X-Ray Fluorescence) or IS (Imaging Spectroscopy) are used to analyse the different thicknesses of paint, materials used, and layers comprised (Rebello et al. 2013). In a 2013 study, researchers overturned a 2003 allegation of an undetermined authoring of an underpainting under Van Gogh's, *Flowers Still Life* (Alfeld et al. 2013). This is one of many examples of the artistic phenomena of underpaintings that with recent findings have generated new and insightful claims regarding cultural artefacts.

Given these reasons, it is not at first immediately clear why *Pentiment* refers to this phenomenon as its namesake. This paper is focused on uncovering where such clues point and what they reveal about the intricate marriage of art, history, and play.

The game progresses and is told via the format of a medieval manuscript that is continuously being written by your gameplay. You embody Andreas Maler, an artist

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working for a fictional abbey set in sixteenth-century Bavaria. The game's narrative and themes converge on the socio-economic shifts that characterised the early modern period in Europe. Of the many significant characteristics of this period, the game is most interested in two. First, how the popularisation of the printing press and printed literature pushed 'Monastic scriptoria' (Eisenstein, 1980) to its 'last golden age' (Arnold, 1974). And second, the Reformation of the Roman Catholic Church following the publication of Martin Luther's *Ninety-five theses* in 1517 (Hendrix, 2015), and ensuing debates about secularisation. The game is particularly interested in how these intersect with one another and operationalises the medium of manuscripts to tell this story.

Andreas is tasked with uncovering multiple murders, the truth of which is never explicitly revealed to the player. At the outset, questions of authorship pervade both ludically and thematically. The player is asked at various points to define their background, natural inclinations, university degree, and more. This furthers the notion that the act of play is continuously associating itself with the act of writing and re-writing history.

Along with extensive dialogue options, these choices function in the same way that normal tree branches do in various videogames, but also communicate an important quality to the game: replayability. Any game is virtually replayable, but to possess the specific quality which Griesbach et al. (2011) call 'randomization', a game needs to be replayable by virtue of a colossal number of narrative avenues not yet explored in an initial playthrough. In this sense, the game's replayability points to the re-paintable quality of a canvas. In the same way the game's narrative is continuously pushed into new paths — so too can the canvas be re-painted on, preserving new and old narratives.

It is difficult to discuss *Pentiment* without acknowledging Umberto Eco's novel, *The Name of the Rose*, published in 1980. The novel is based on Abbé Vallet's French, seventeenth-century, neo-gothic rendition of a Latin manuscript depicting the memoirs of a German monk, Adso of Melk, of the fourteenth century (Corry, 1992). Eco's allusions to the themes, plots, and literary techniques of Jorge Borges—particularly his 1941 short story, *The Library of Babel*—highlight the complex intertextual medley that shape this fictional take on medieval history. As with *Pentiment*, the plot involves auspicious murders set within a medieval monastery and explores growing, collective challenges to Catholic authority. Beyond narrative reference, *The Name of the Rose* is particularly pertinent as it opens the game. The game invites the player to use a rock to scrape off the Latin translation of Eco's work, to pave way for their own re-writing of the story.

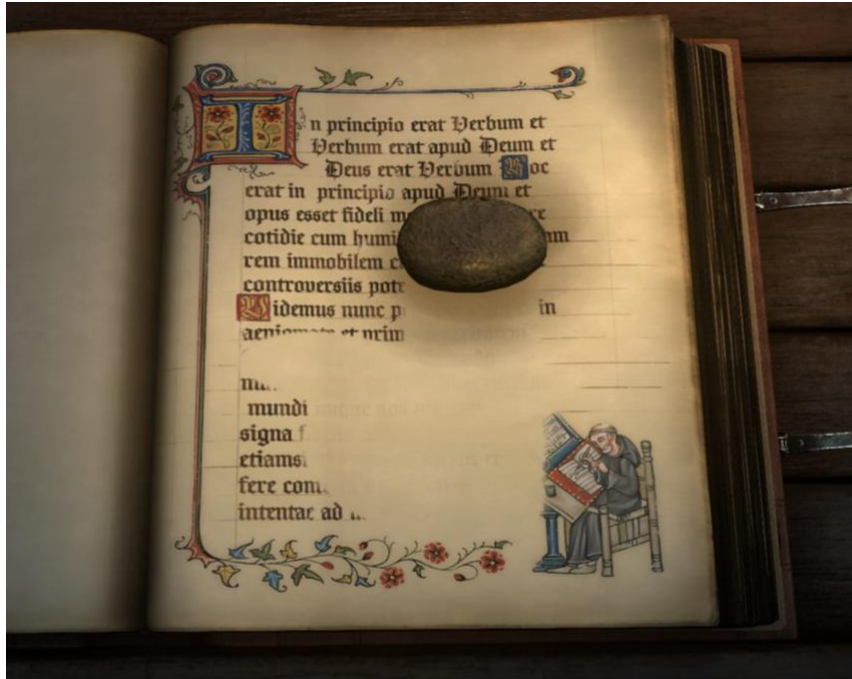


Figure 1: The opening screenshot of the game reveals a manuscript with the opening paragraph to Eco's *The Name of the Rose*.

The purpose of this paper is to show what affordances *Pentiment* can build on from Eco's intertextual exercise in lieu of the game medium. Our methodology will combine two disciplinary approaches to *Pentiment*, using historiographic and visual-textual examination with a reflexive analysis of the game. Two individual playthroughs have allowed each scholar to conceive distinct paths in the game and apply their own academic angle, enriching the collaborative analysis. The player-as-analyst approach is one widely used in games and merits the framework conceived by Carr (2019). It is tempting to think that every element of the game needs to be uncovered, but as Carr writes, 'what does it mean for a player-as-analyst to document each version of a dialogue exchange, if that is not how anybody actually plays?' By collecting fragments of gameplay to connect them to larger thematic strands, the analyst reaps from their ability to maintain the semblance of a play experience whilst still producing granular ludic analysis.

Pentiment provides fertile ground for which to approach textual study using ludic analysis and art historical methods. In understanding what *Pentiment* can do with its dense and heavily researched narrative and setting, we may also begin to define how games are incredibly well-suited to produce narratively complex, educational, and layered intertextual experiences.

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