

Hysteria: An experiment in historic interactive game narrative

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Taking Charlotte Perkins Gilman's literary short story, "The Yellow Wall-Paper," the paper explores the possibilities for transmediation, or technical mediation,¹ of the literary in interactivity, with the necessity of treating the short story as a text immersed in an intertextual narrative. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wall-Paper" was first published in January 1892 in *The New England Magazine*.² But this short story is itself a story situated within a historical network of several other narratives. Charlotte Perkins Gilman was a prolific writer, publishing over 3,000 works of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. Her life writing also includes an autobiography, journals, and letters. She held radical views that made her a famous figure in gender politics. Charlotte's treatment for "hysteria" by the famous Dr. S. Weir Mitchell is thus one of enormous significance. Mitchell was famous for his "rest cure" prescribed for what he described as "the nerves," as documented in several well-cited publications, including his 1881 *Lectures on the Diseases of the Nervous System, Especially in Women*.³ A remediation of Charlotte's "Yellow Wall-Paper" story as meaningful interactive play is dependent not only on the story itself but on the realization of it in other circulating texts—the journals, autobiography, and medical texts. The story itself is already multitextual in that there exists half a dozen draft texts that preceded what has become the now anthologized version. The narrative is to be made more meaningful by including excerpts from these circulations and by building an intertextual story within story, a complex narrative architecture in a designed digital space.

In the early stages of the design process, the thematic elements of the story and intangible cultural aspects of its history have been integrated into one meaningful narrative that can be used as the basis for a role playing game. This is part of an ongoing experiment to assess interactive storytelling techniques for historic material using Skyrim's Creation Kit for a mod. Modding is used as a way to explore some of the fundamental challenges faced when incorporating historic content into interactive media and games. Historic narratives have untapped potential for bringing complex and powerful ideas to games. However, translating the narratives into an interactive game requires extensive knowledge of history. Typically, domain experts bring in knowledge or review games but this experiment has required a much closer relationship between content expert and game designer. It was necessary to completely re-envision "The Yellow Wall-Paper" in order to have a chance at a successful game. This required that the game designer have a deep knowledge of the topic, which is often not practical. Modding is just one way that humanities scholars can themselves begin to develop historic narratives that meet the educational goals of humanities educators for use in classroom: presentation of complex historic issues that allow students to contextualize and connect with different cultures and times.

The translation of all historical narratives, from one mode to another, will result in a mediated narrative. It is inevitable that a remediation of "The Yellow Wall-Paper" will render its meaning quite unlike its publication in print in 1892. Henry Jenkins would

argue more explicitly that the narrative form of “The Yellow Wall-Paper” must be distinguished from its new transmedia storytelling environment.⁴ But how? We know that Charlotte had a purpose for writing the story. She describes it as “pure propaganda” designed to save other women from madness, and she intended the story to reach Dr. S. Weir Mitchell to convince him to change his treatment. While Mitchell ordered Charlotte (in Charlotte’s words) “never to touch pen or pencil as long as you live,” Charlotte believed it was that confining directive that left her close to mental ruin. We also know that Charlotte approved of critics who referred to the story as “chilling” and “horrific.”⁵ It may be that a new transmedia environment will make the chilling affect desired by Charlotte all more or less or differently compelling and if so, the interrelated rhetorical end may be similarly more or less or differently persuasive. Janet Murray would argue that we must bring every modality of expression to retell this old story in a new way.⁶ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin describe an “aggressive” form of transmediation that marks the presence of the older form but refashions it so that the earlier work is taken out of context and becomes a part of a new mosaic or collage with clear continuities and discontinuities.⁷ The Hysteria mod narrative is an attempt, by necessity, of this kind of “aggressive remediation,” by framing the story in an interactive game space and complex narrative architecture that attend to Charlotte’s intended affect and persuasion.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman uses the story, “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” to comment on an autobiographical experience: her treatment by Dr. Weir Mitchell and his popular “rest cure” for the treatment of cases of “the nerves” or of “hysteria.” While the short story itself was based on a real episode of the author’s life, it was deliberately written in a surreal and unnatural fashion to express the horrific experience undergone by the author. Mitchell’s treatment of nervous disorders with rest required patients to forsake nearly all activity, certainly the absence of “all possible use of brain.” Mitchell’s text records that the cure prohibits the patient “to write or read.”⁸ The story describes the narrator’s descent into madness exacerbated by the treatment protocol administered to the protagonist in an attempt to cure her. In Charlotte’s story, despite of (or as a result of) the treatment, the author worsens, experiences delusions, and experiences “progressive insanity.” The narrator becomes increasingly obsessed with the design in the yellow-ish wallpaper covering the room. She begins to imagine the wallpaper moving, shifting its pattern to resemble faces with glaring eyes. Eventually she sees a full figure of a woman creeping and crawling, a bit like a little girl, behind the paper. By the end of the story the narrator identifies as this woman and an unnerving shift in voice occurs, as the narrator actually takes the identity of the woman in the wallpaper. This identification symbolizes the narrator’s imaginative and intellectual confinement as well as mental deterioration. This powerlessness was not simply personal; it was also systemic and emblematic of the role of women during the 19th century. As such the thematic content focuses on frustration, self-doubt and insecurity, powerlessness, isolation and lack of identity.

Hysteria experiments with taking a literary story—a narrative—and “translates” that story to determine whether it can be retellable in a meaningful way using interactive gaming technology. The experiment raises several questions from the start:

- How might the game use primary documents that support the short story in a way to advance cultural heritage?
- How can the game achieve known authorial intent: affect and propaganda?
- How can game mechanics take a complex narrative with a theme of powerlessness, a lack of agency, and provide engaging game play in which an actor does have agency?

The challenge remains as to designing the type of game play that can be effective while supporting the historical cultural context, if the story's themes do not readily map to traditional game mechanics. One of the tradeoffs encountered working with a mod of an existing game is that the major thematic components must be fit into the affordances defined, in this case, by Skyrim. However, this proved to be an invaluable obstacle as it forced the design process to take some bold steps towards narrative reconceptualization. Many of the common quests within Skyrim and other RPGs are based on skill building, fetch quests and a series of escalating battles that are ineffective for many historic narratives. This mod therefore is not based on typical RPG action but instead draws from some of the experiments in interactive narrative such as *Dear Esther*, *Analogue: A Hate Story* and horror classics like *Amnesia: Dark Descent* where the narrative is accumulated/collected by the player through bits of texts, snippets of dialog and gameplay.

Advancing game narrative through material culture and primary documents

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story, "The Yellow Wall-Paper" is frequently anthologized and cited for its commentary on the role of women in the nineteenth century as wives and mothers and their frequent diagnosis of hysteria, a disorder of the nerves, for responding to these roles outside of conventional expectations. Specifically, Charlotte's story is a comment on the treatment of the disorders with S. Weir Mitchell's "rest cure." There are several primary documents that are important to the historical narrative and to the cultural context of the story. Of the primary source material, the most important, perhaps is the story itself. However, this story does not exist in a vacuum. In order to fully appreciate the text, a reader must engage with various other texts, including earlier drafts of this story. For example, while one draft reads the treatment as a directive not to work, another reads as a directive not to write. While work may refer to housework, the word "write" symbolizes a specific forbidden task. The change is significant. The story comprises a collage of events from Charlotte's own life. And so the diaries she kept are equally as important. The diaries record activities of the daily life of a woman who tries to reject the nineteenth-century "cult of domesticity" by lecturing and writing rather than marrying. Once she conforms to societal expectations of marriage and motherhood, she swings from highs to lows but ultimately finds herself failing at the duties expected of her. The diary documents Charlotte's description of her health as poor, "sick with nervous prostration."⁹ And it documents that she must go away for her health and will not be able to bring her journal with her.

We know that Charlotte stayed for months under the care of S. Weir Mitchell. She tells us "I was put to bed and kept there."¹⁰ But to attain a historical narrative for Mitchell's

medicine, treatments, and cures, his medical textbooks need to be consulted. The primary sources for documenting the “rest cure” are: *Fat and Blood: An Essay on the Treatment of Certain Forms of Neurasthenia and Hysteria*, and *Wear And Tear, or Hints For The Overworked*. In *Fat and Blood*, Mitchell describes his rest cure in detail, including a very limiting daily schedule, and this more strict directive: “In carrying out my general plan of treatment in extreme cases it is my habit to ask the patient to remain in bed from six weeks to two months. At first, and in some cases for four or five weeks, I do not permit the patient to sit up, or to sew or write or read, or to use the hands in any active way except to clean the teeth.”¹¹

During the initial design of the mod, primary source material was used to develop an overarching narrative for the gameplay. The player follows a feminine hero’s journey that loosely recreates Charlotte’s life. Several smaller quest branches move the main narrative forward and are used as a means of developing emotional states parallel to those encountered by the protagonist of the story. The documents themselves also provide mechanisms by which the game moves forward and is imbued with cultural meaning as part of the heritage of nineteenth-century women’s roles and medical treatment. The game play is a type of narrative puzzle in which the player must assemble meaning from the reaction of NPCs, texts (primary source documents) and journal entries which help contextualize the texts.

Like Charlotte’s biographical account of her treatment by Mitchell, the protagonist of the game, whom we’ve named “Lotta,” becomes increasingly isolated and confused. In the story narrative, the protagonist gradually becomes more obsessed with the pattern of the wallpaper. She imbues it with additional meaning, creating an alternate mental universe in which she lives. The story accomplishes this by describing a woman trapped behind the pattern of the wallpaper that the protagonist can hear and eventually see. The protagonist immerses herself in her mental, hallucinatory, constructs resulting in her ultimate disconnection from reality. In order to accomplish this within the game, the team decided to frame the story using different, competing perspectives. A character, “Charlotte” was created and split into two personalities: Lotta and Charlotte. Charlotte, affectionately called Lotta, is the wife of the NPC John Gilman and she is modeled on Charlotte Perkins Gilman. The player steps into the shoes of half the personality, Lotta, and is led to believe that she is a single character. While the textual story could only indicate a ghostly woman and the world exterior to the bedroom, in the game we could actually create a character that no one else could see and a “real” alternate reality. The story itself relied on an unreliable narrator contradicted by the jarring notes of reality. The blurred boundary between madness and reality is defined by the different perspectives given by the narrator and other characters. In the game, we felt that any type of textual narration would remove the player from the immediacy possible through game play. The tension between the real and irrational is instead created by tension in dialog between the player and NPCs. Throughout the story, the woman in the wallpaper represents a splitting of the narrator into two selves. In the game this was accomplished by creating an NPC, Charlotte, as the second self. Charlotte appears to the player but other NPCs cannot see or hear her. The player is initially unaware of Charlotte’s true role and does not know that they (playing Lotta) are only half of a whole character. However,

the player must ultimately realize that the two characters need to be reconciled in order to bring the game to its conclusion.

Duality was identified as an important thematic element of the original story and could be linked to Victorian culture. The idea of a public face, hiding all that was imperfect or different, was reflected throughout 19th century society from personal lives to the decoration of one's house: public front rooms such as the parlor had all the new best things with less care being given to the private spaces such as bedrooms, for example. The Yellow Wall-Paper focuses on the crushing consequences of hiding the true, personal self in order to present the perfect public face. Charlotte Perkins Gilman tried unsuccessfully to hide her personal self behind the public, domestic façade and she uses the device of a ghostly, trapped figure to express the wild trapped portion of herself. Hysteria was developed around this understanding of duality and the tensions it creates. There are also two places: Tranquility and Charlotte's garden. The texts, dialogue and gameplay are intended to simultaneously give information and challenge the player to dig for the truth.

During the middle stage of the quest, the player "Lotta" meets our figure of Charlotte, and has no way of knowing initially that Charlotte is not a real actor but a part of themselves. Charlotte is helpful to the player, appearing an ally of sorts and gives them her diary. The diary in the game contains excerpts from Charlotte Perkin Gilman's diary (see Figure 1) and the subsequent game journal entry advises the player to look for other 19th century materials in the library. Charlotte also gives the player the key to the library which has been locked to the player up to this point. One of the narrative goals of the game is to use the character/NPC of Charlotte as a means of making the player doubt or question their own perceptions. In order to achieve that, Charlotte at first appears to be an ally but she will later become strange and even unreliable. Once the player decides to enter the manor, "Tranquility", there is no going back, they are now "Lotta/Charlotte" to everyone within the building, where they are locked without escape. The player is also infected with the disease of Melancholia, which increasingly impacts their Health stats. As the NPCs attempt to cure the player's disease with rest and with 19th century tonics, the level of the disease actually increases causing incrementally more damage to the player's health.

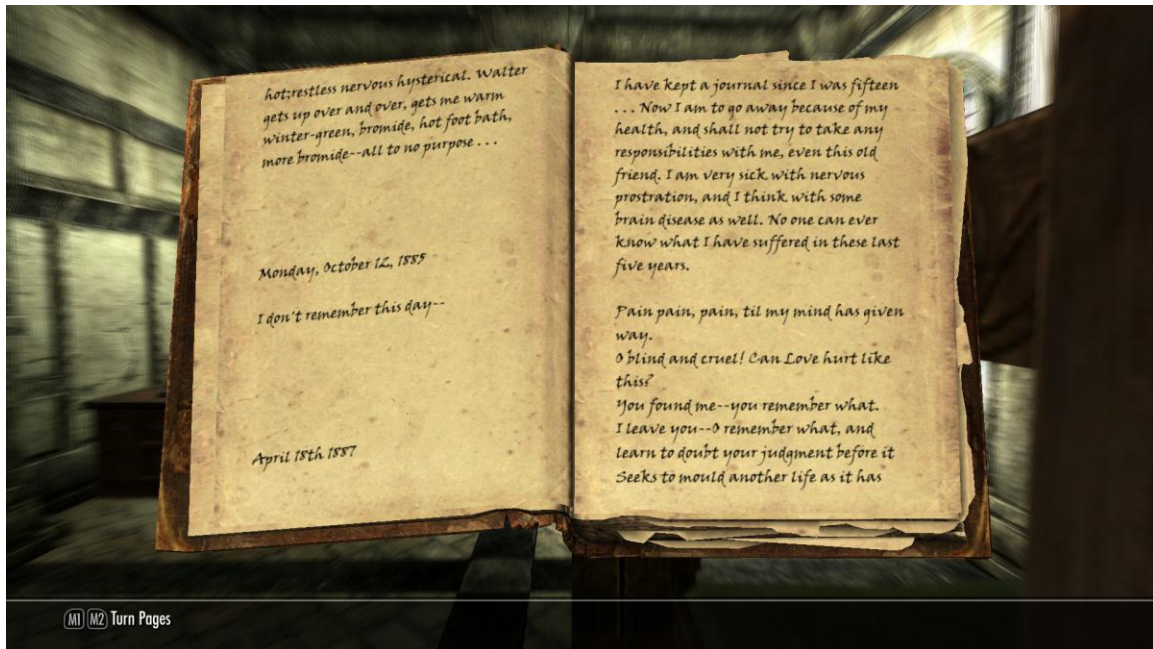


Figure 1: Entry from Charlotte Perkins Gilman's diary of 1887 appearing in the Hysteria mod.

The Tranquility library contains three key books by S. Weir Mitchell which contain selected extracts from the real documents. Player journal entries are used to highlight key points made by the books (Figure 2). The books and journal entries show the player that this treatment is medically sanctioned and involves ideas repugnant or strange to us today. For example, that girls shouldn't use their brains or be forced to think extensively until after the age of 18 or they would permanently damage themselves and make them unfit for their "natural" womanly duties.

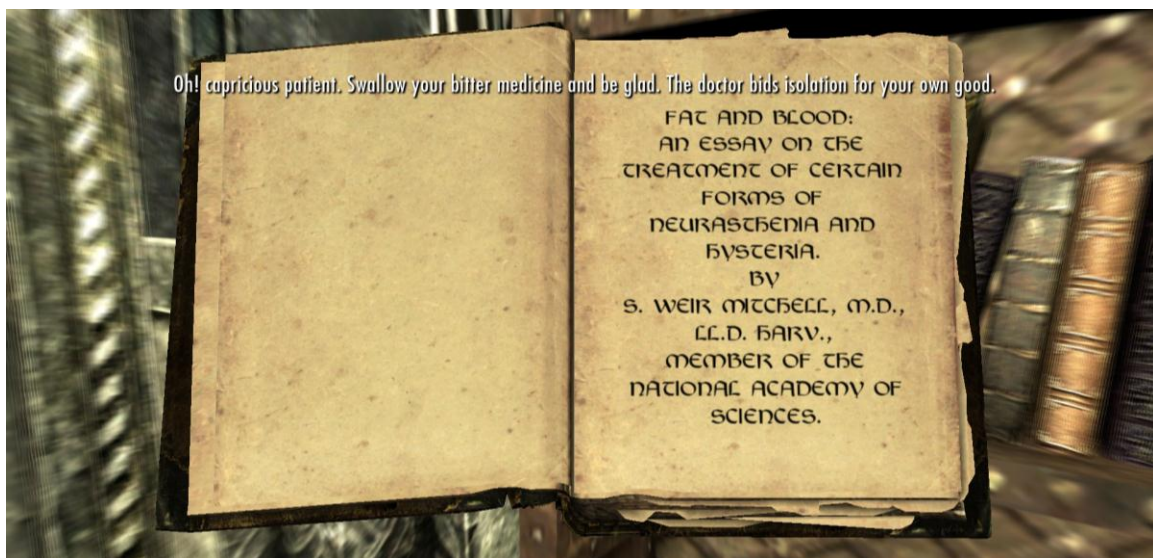


Figure 2: Fat and Blood excerpts are placed in the library for the player to read. The books are linked to quest stages which update the player's journal. They are also skill books which increase skills the player will need for the next stage of the quest.

As the player leaves the library, Charlotte appears in an unrealistic way. She doesn't travel, she simply materializes. This is the first indication that all is not as it appears. Later, she will become completely invisible to the player and exist only in her reality (Charlotte's Garden) and in the player's head. Charlotte again helps the player in this encounter and leads them further along the quest by having them look for three keys to unlock the chests they will need to escape (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Charlotte magically appears and helps the player find potions for the illness and to a means of escape.

At this point in the game, the player thus can choose to look for keys that will restore health or take potions that will provide only temporary cures and destructive side effects. Eventually, they will find the keys and unlock the three chests, which contain notes that are meant to help contextualize the legal lot of women in the 19th century (Figure 4).

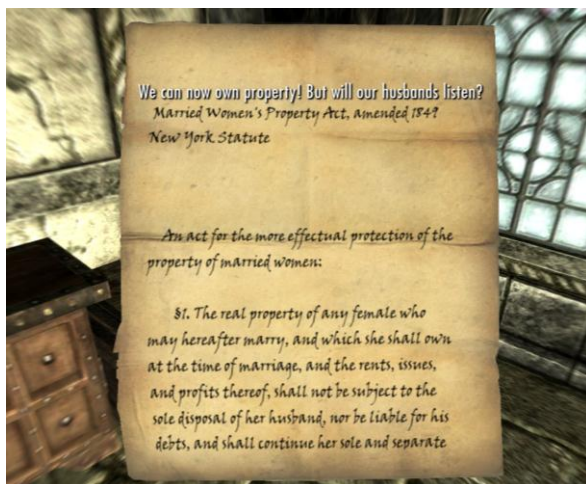


Figure 4: Note and journal entry to help player connect with real documents highlighting the rights women had in the late 19th century.

Achieving known authorial intent: affect and propaganda

In Charlotte's published essay "Why I Wrote the Yellow-Wallpaper," she explains that she wrote the story to "save people from being driven crazy."¹² If the game is to be true to the historical narrative, it ought also understand Charlotte's authorial intent, its intended impact on readers and its intended meaning to be interpreted by readers. Notably, at least one editor described it as so terrible and dire that it ought not be printed. And Charlotte's agreement at the description of her story as horrific tells us something about the affective impact she hoped it would have on readers. For Charlotte, the treatment of rest without books or paper or pen was indeed horrific. She believed such treatment worsened any symptoms of mental illness.

The tension Charlotte builds throughout the story is one in which domestic tranquility seems to be at odds with the intellectual work of writing. She resists societal expectations of marriage and motherhood by keeping her journal. But the private scriblings are not enough to satisfy her imagination. Andrew Glassner describes the importance in creating an interactive story of introducing a character who must confront their own nature by reconciling a conflict between external and internal worlds.¹³ A character with the dilemma of appropriating the values of her society or deliberately disregarding these values can draw sympathy or illicit strong affect. In defining "critical" or "activist" games, Mary Flanagan describes games in which characters, for example, engage in social issues.¹⁴ By building external/internal tension between domestic duties and intellectual work, the character in the game represents tension in gender roles in the nineteenth century. The story is terrible, however, because of the medical treatment Charlotte refers to in the story. She intends the story to challenge S. Weir Mitchell, warn other women against the rest cure, and thus guide some social change in the practice of early professional psychiatry. Given the authorial intent of the game, it is difficult to imagine a complex procedural morality of the type Ian Bogost advocates for. It may indeed be ambiguous as to how this tension might be played out—whether the player will "adopt the represented value system."¹⁵

The game attempts to re-create the horrifying treatment by a loose recreation of the story. To Charlotte Gilman Perkins, caught in between the roles of domestic or professional female, there was little choice but to bow to the demands of family and society and attempt to become the ideal of Victorian womanhood. Thus, the yellow wallpaper simultaneously denotes a material object linked to setting up house in a color connected to warmth and the prison that domestic activities can bring. To Charlotte, the paper is dingy and full of ugliness that nevertheless ensnares her and she becomes lost in the pattern. In order to express the feeling of being trapped, we made the decision to make the house itself the prison. Players begin the story with a torn note that tempts them to find the manor, Tranquility, and begin the quest. We deliberately decided not to begin the quest in the manor house itself to help accentuate by contrast the frustration of having options removed by some external source of power. The player is given as much freedom as possible at the quest beginning because once they enter Tranquility, there is no return until the quest has ended, and they are literally locked in. In addition, they are stripped of all their goods and clothes on entering, again, taking power away from the player (Figure 5).



Figure 5: The player has all possessions taken from on entering the Tranquility. They are re-clothed and infected with Melancholia.

The initial stages of the quest involve the player talking to the family and staff within the manner. We wanted to create a feeling of frustration first by trapping the player in the house and second by the NPCs refusing to acknowledge that the player is anyone other than Lotta/Charlotte. The NPCs, through their dialogue, dismiss the player's protestations that they aren't Lotta as due to the illness. No one in the house really sees or listens to the player (Figure 6). The NPC dialogue plays on the idea of mirroring the player/protagonist. In *Hysteria*, the mirror held up to the player through the NPC dialogue, which is twisted, shows the player a reflection with which they do not recognize or identify. Much like Charlotte Perkins Gilman didn't identify with the reflection of domesticity held up to her by Victorian society, the player can't help but reject the identity forced on them. However, it also creates frustration and undermines confidence. What is the player to make of this reflection? That they are to play a part, take on a role, that is foreign and undesirable. They are not allowed to be themselves.



Figure 6: NPCs insist on thinking of the player as Lotta, wife of John Gilman to create a feeling of frustration within the player.

The player progresses through the stages and finally, as described earlier, they have unlocked the last chest and found the final document. On reading the document, the player is slipped a note called *Escape!* which instructs them to access a secret book in their room. The book transports the player to Charlotte's garden. This is another geographical space in the mod which resembles the exterior of *Tranquility*. Charlotte greets the player and promises escape (Figure 7). However, the player cannot escape the garden. They are trapped there as well. It is at this final stage of the quest that the player must determine the true path to escape: is it the garden with endless meaningless quests and the promises of eventual escape from Charlotte? Or must they run the gauntlet and figure a way out of *Tranquility* themselves?

Using game mechanics to translate a complex narrative stressing the lack of personal power to one of player agency.

Among the multiple drafts of "The Yellow Wall-Paper," two are most often reviewed, the draft Charlotte sent to her agent, and the draft as it was edited prior to appearing in print. When the story appeared in the *New England Magazine*, it appeared with what one scholar has identified as "400 major or minor variants from the manuscript."¹⁶ Some of these are changes in significant word choices; for example the pronoun "he" was replaced by "we" when describing sleep. When printed in the nineteenth century in the literary publication, the story appeared as sections of text set apart by asterisks to indicate a narrative broken into individual journal entries. The story was to be read as the narrator's diary with each entry becoming shorter and more bizarre as the narrator switches voice and begins to experience a mental break with reality. The text was accompanied by sketches designed by the publication. The first depicts a woman, well-dressed and well-kept, sitting in a rocking chair by a barred window and writing in her diary. The next

depicts the narrator with her hand touching the wallpaper, her expression one that mirrors iconic nineteenth-century images of madness, and her hair beginning to loosen from her tight bun. This sketch depicts a transition from engagement with the diary to the obsession with the wallpaper and descent into madness. The third sketch depicts the narrator creeping around the room, crawling over her fainted husband as she does so. Now her hair is long and wild. There is little doubt that this is an image of a mad woman.

There is no doubt that enforced treatment by the “rest cure” and the prohibition of the act of writing caused the narrator to go mad. There are readers who interpret the last lines in which the narrator tells her nurse that she has freed herself from the wallpaper, a symbol of domesticity, and will not be put back, to indicate a kind of power and agency in madness that could not be experienced in sanity. Such readings find agency to be hard won and hardly enviable. Other readings find the story to be a condemnation of the subordination of women and a warning for women who are forced to choose between conventional roles and intellectual endeavors, and find it very hard to understand madness as something Charlotte would have found to be an acceptable alternative.

In her own life, Charlotte attempts to follow Mitchell’s prescription not to touch a pen and to spend time caring for her husband and son. But she soon decides to leave her family and move away. She lives out her life as an activist for women’s rights. She lectures and is a prolific public writer on the subject of women’s rights. She also sends Mitchell a copy of “The Yellow Wall-Paper” hoping to influence his practice and the psychiatric treatment of women for “the nerves.”



Figure 7: Charlotte’s garden - The player’s field of vision is blurred as they have drunk a tonic to improve their health. However, the tonic contains opiates and thus impairs their vision.

The mod, *Hysteria*, focuses on the changing role of the NPC, Charlotte. Charlotte changes from a solid, “real” ally to something perhaps supernatural with her rapid materialization and omniscient knowledge of the environment. However, Charlotte is not another character in this game but an extension of Lotta, the part that is willing to accept madness as a permanent escape. In the final stages, Charlotte becomes an agent for the player’s continued entrapment by giving advice whose sole purpose is to keep the player in the garden, a construct of Charlotte/Lotta’s mind. The mod conclusion draws from the win state of Charlotte Gilman Perkins’ life. She finally returned to her own voice and took control of her life by turning her back on domesticity and fleeing. In other words, she realized she had power, she had choices to make. Those choices weren’t easy or enviable but she did have them. *Hysteria* recreates these choices by those that the player must ultimately face of selecting the “correct” reality. Once the player has learned the word of power, they may close a door forever – but only one door and the wrong choice is irreversible. To win, and finish the quest the player must destroy the fantasy environment and then flee *Tranquility* to write the story “The Yellow Wall-Paper” and prepare to send it to Dr. S. Wier Mitchell.

The development of this mod was an experiment in the integration of material culture, quest based game play, history and fictional narrative. One of the goals was to work towards developing a game to be used in college level classes in English and History. However, a secondary but no less important goal was to create something that could be accessible to a wide range of people as a form of public outreach, to increase the audience for the short story and to help contextualize the story for those outside the classroom. Creating a mod allowed a rapid, free and relatively easy method of putting our ideas to the test. The initial level design and creation of the story setting involved the incorporation of existing assets within *Skyrim*, thus minimizing art creation. Almost all of the assets needed for the game were easily created by minor modification of game objects, such as books, keys and buildings. Interpretation of the story indicated that the driving forces of the game had to be emotional, not action based as typical of many RPG quests. An underlying emotional development was created with the game taking the player on a journey from bewilderment to frustration, self-doubt and, ultimately, empowerment. However, the end of the story leaves the reader in limbo, and the team made the decision to add a win state reflecting self-empowerment, and player agency, to the mod. While not true to the story, this is true to the historical context of the story and the author. It’s up to the player to eventually follow in the footsteps of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and find their own cure by turning their back on society (NPC helpers) and trusting their own judgment as to what is real. Thus the resultant game play merged the story with real events in the author’s life. “The Yellow Wall-Paper” is a fictional story but it is very much part of the historic record regarding 19th century psychological treatments and gender roles. The story itself describes, in a fictional way, a period of the author’s life and so is somewhat biographical in nature. The story was meant to raise awareness at the ineffectiveness of the “cure” applied to depressed and mentally ill women. We know from her autobiography that the author in fact believed the treatment actually worsened her condition, and she eventually left her marriage in a desperate attempt to cure herself. In this case then, the merging of the fictional tale with historic fact seemed appropriate. This approach would give the game an ending, a win state the

story lacked, while supporting overarching educational goals by historically contextualizing the fictional content.

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