

The Last Light

Visual Storytelling with Diorama

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Introduction

The Last Light is a narrative work that uses seven miniature, sequential dioramas to visually tell the story of a small child's journey through a surreal "Otherworld." Using characteristics of the Voyage and Return model outlined in *The Seven Basic Plots* (Booker 2004), *The Last Light* allegorically represents the grieving cycle of a small child, a boy named Balder. Torn from the comfort of his bedroom by a nightmarish event (the death of his grandfather), Balder plunges "down the rabbit hole" into a bizarre Otherworld where he copes with the loss allegorically. Balder's single weapon, a lantern called the "Last Light," is an object that only Balder can wield, even though he struggles to accept this responsibility in the wake of his grandfather's death. Balder must come to the realization that he himself is meant to have the Last Light, symbolic of the knowledge and wisdom given to him by his grandfather. In this process, Balder passes through each of the five stages of grieving – denial, anger, bargaining, fear, and acceptance – while traversing



Figure 1- The Installation of the Last Light. Dioramas are arranged sequentially within a gallery wall.

the Otherworld (Kubler-Ross 1997). Each stage is given its own scene within *The Last Light*. As the narrative itself is more implicit than explicit, the goal of the story is not to communicate a direct narrative of loss and coping, but rather to fabricate a rich, believable Otherworld that draws in and connects the viewer on a more emotive, imaginative level.

The seven miniature dioramas are installed within a gallery wall and a small, restricted viewing window is removed and framed for each scene to allow for appropriate visual entry into the work (figure 1). Presented in this way, the pieces can be described as shadowbox dioramas. Using multiple, independent dioramas as a medium to tell one story allows for highly suggestive and interactive storytelling, where the ambiguous links between scenes must be resolved by the viewer. Shadowbox diorama, as a spatial and theatrical medium, also creates connections between interior and exterior spaces. Working within a vast historical context of diorama, literature, and narrative illustration, these independent scenes weave together to create a narrative experience for a viewer that is at once uniquely personal yet undoubtedly universal, by playing off characteristics of archetypes and time-tested story models that have appealed to mankind for thousands of years.

The Nature of Diorama

Diorama, as a three-dimensional medium, provides opportunities for unparalleled richness in suggesting a sense of place and creating space, especially when compared with two-dimensional counterparts (paintings, drawings, prints, etc). This is largely due to the immediate physicality of the medium and the binocular depth cues that

viewers naturally use when looking at the world around them, cues which are not employed when viewing a two-dimensional painting or animation. Additionally, small viewing windows provide an intimate and investigative experience that necessitates interactivity and evokes curiosity from the viewer. The viewer must approach the window and lose sight of the surrounding external environment, immersing himself in the space to have a complete experience with the piece. With a restricted window, a natural reaction of the viewer is to peer around the edges of the frame – to explore the top, sides, and bottom to find what lies beyond the scene's focal point. In much the same way that descriptive literature "draws in" its audience, so too do the visual spaces of diorama in a very literal sense, resulting in an enhanced narrative experience. It is hard to ignore details or narrative moments when they physically exist, frozen in time, only inches from the viewer's eye. Yet despite how tangible such spaces are, the boundary defined by the window creates an odd paradox within the viewer, who is both connected to and separated from these internal spaces. This creates a push-pull dynamic where these spaces both do and do not exist; on the one hand, they are inches away from the viewer, while on the other hand the Otherworld can only exist in the viewer's imagination. Because of these spatial opportunities, *The Last Light* can use each scene and the overarching narrative to establish a very believable Otherworld for the viewer that extends beyond the gallery wall and into its own space, somewhere between the inside of the wall and the viewer's own imagination. By providing independent, sequential scenes or "snapshots" of the world that Balder journeys through, details are

established in the visual language of the dioramas to suggest a vast, expansive Otherworld.

Creating a believable "Otherworld" has been the goal of many creative works across the spectrum of storytelling, including visual art and literature. HP Lovecraft, an early 20th century horror author, generated his own "mythos" or system of gods and supernatural beings, using short stories that often contained the repetition of characters, environments, and objects. Oftentimes, one character may serve as the central protagonist of a story, while he is only mentioned in passing in another. Such overlapping threads help weave all of Lovecraft's stories together

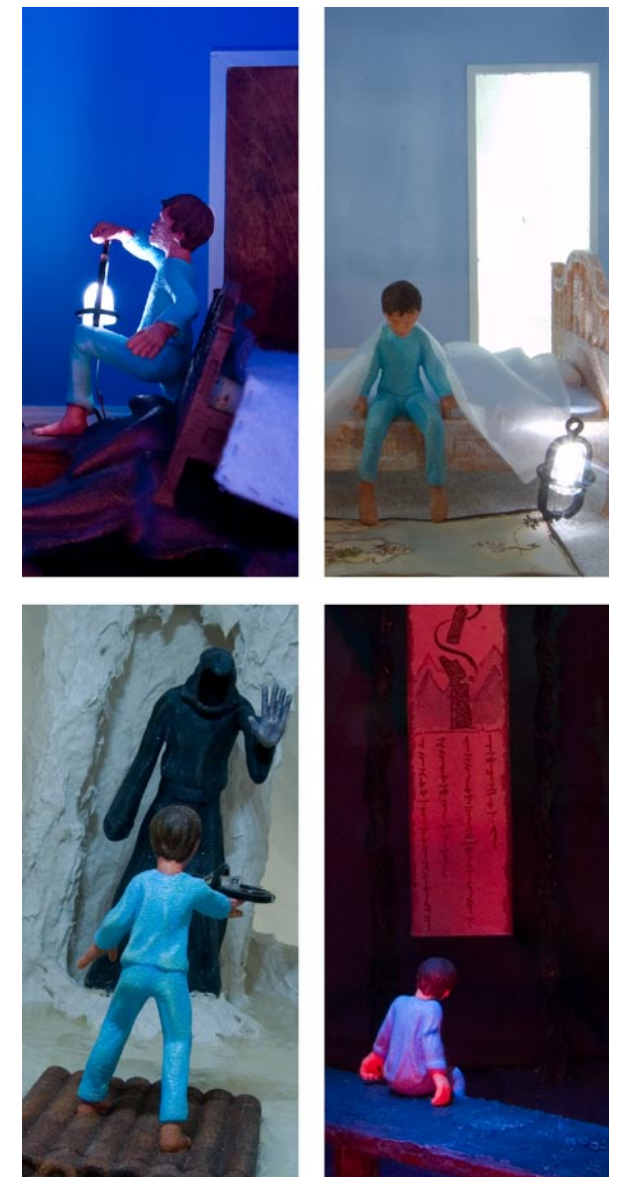


Figure 2- Balder, the narrative protagonist, appears in every scene.



Figures 3 and 4- The Shadow from diorama 1 is a repeated visual element in the tapestries of number 3.

into their own world and space, and this alternative sense of place in turn enhances the richness of each individual story. Similarly, each scene within *The Last Light* uses visual repetition to enhance the overarching narrative, while this overarching narrative in turn enhances the richness of each individual scene.

Balder is the most obviously repeated visual element, appearing in every diorama as a link between scenes (figure 2). The nightmarish monster from the first diorama shares similarities in form to the watercolor tapestries from the fourth (figures 3 and 4). An invented alphabet and telltale symbol of

the Last Light itself (figure 5) both appear throughout the narrative, with varying degrees of emphasis and visibility. Just as Lovecraft and many other authors use words as a tool to craft believable worlds, *The Last Light* uses the nature of physical space and visual language in dioramas as a tool to enhance the richness of place felt when viewing the work.

Historical and natural dioramas have provided a rich sense of place for over a century, though typically in a more straightforward, museum oriented setting. The American Museum of Natural History in New York city offers some of the most technically precise life-scale dioramas ever made, using meticulously painted, curved backdrops to erase the transition from three dimensional foreground to two dimensional background in a seamless illusion. The miniature dioramas of the museum, on the other hand, must rely more heavily on the stylistic manipulation of space to spark the narrative imagination of the viewer. Two particular

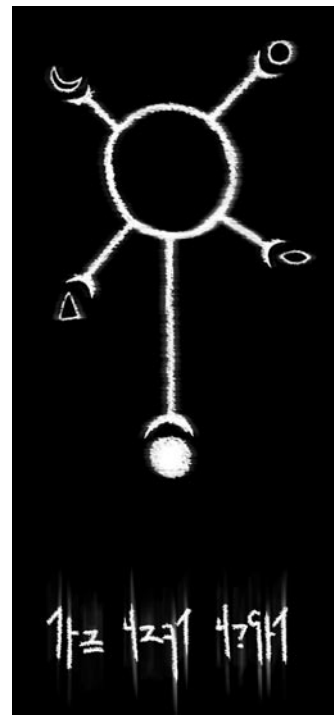


Figure 5- This symbol is repeatedly used as the sign of the Last Light itself, and the alphabet appears in several dioramas.



Figures 6 and 7- Two dioramas from the New York City American Museum of Natural History. The one on the left demonstrates the illusionistic nature of miniature diorama, while the image on the right plays with interior and exterior space by shaping the viewing window.

dioramas both do this in separate ways. The first, a scene from a Persian city in the first millennium (figure 6), contains a small, hidden figure in the top corner of the diorama, visible only when viewing the space from an extreme angle. In the nautical scene (figure 7), the window itself is shaped like that of a ship window. This establishes a dynamic where the external world of the viewer suddenly becomes the interior of an environment; they no longer look into a scene, they look out on it. This inversion of interior and exterior space bends reality similar to

the way that the aesthetic of *The Last Light* bends reality. Chiefly, this is achieved by using miniature scale as well as vaguely familiar objects to define the interior spaces of each scene as separate physical spaces existing beyond the mere viewing window and into an alternate reality.

The Use of Allegory

While museum dioramas tend to be straightforward and educational in their narrative content, *The Last Light* explores not only the



Figure 8- In this scene, Balder reaches the stage of "bargaining." At the end of the Earth, he attempts to give the Last Light back to his grandfather, who placidly refuses.

physical narrative space of Balder's Otherworld, but the psychological space it inhabits as well, using allegorical elements and archetypal characters in its telling of the coping and suffering that Balder endures. In the fifth scene (figure 8), Balder extends his hand to a shadowy figure, offering the Light to him, while the figure holds up a hand in peaceful protest. This is the moment of "bargaining" in Balder's stages of grief; he believes that giving the Light back to his grandfather will relieve him of the burden that Balder himself seems destined to bear after viewing the prophetic tapestry from the previous scene. Yet his grandfather, having already left Balder's world, raises a hand to indicate that he is at peace and rest without the Light, and that he has passed the Light onto Balder not as a burden, but as a gift.

Allegory is a powerful device to explore concepts in creative work. Dante Allighieri's *Inferno* is almost entirely allegorical in nature in order to simplify his commentary on the nature of sin and punishment. The Poet's encounter with a lion, wolf, and leopard represent different types of vices that block his path to Heaven. Just as the Poet wanders the woods as a symbol of the confusion he feels in midlife, so too does Balder find himself lost in the allegorical forest of the third scene, astray from the path and his subconscious guide, the Sphinx (figure 9). Balder must listen to the Sphinx - to himself - to find his way out of the forest.

This Sphinx, along with the other major characters of the narrative, are all Jungian archetypal figures that are manifested extensions of Balder's own psyche. These include the Shadow, the Mother, the Father, and the Trickster. Jung emphasizes that these concepts are too broad and all-encompassing



Figure 9- The Sphinx plays the role of the guide, sitting on the path through the forest as Balder's own subconscious introspection.

to be typically represented by any one image, but that they often manifest as such in one's dreams (Jung 1981). *The Last Light* connects these archetypes to one another and to Balder with their physical appearance, as they all share a fuzzy, storybook quality derived from the nature of their creation.

Fabrication

The Last Light uses a digital to physical fabrication process to create Balder and his archetypes. Figures are sculpted primarily in Zbrush, a 3D modeling program that allows for high-resolution detail while sculpting as well as flexibility in workflow. A model can be reduced to its primitive shape to make large changes to the form while preserving the high level detail of the sculpt. Once a sculpture is finished, it is rapid prototyped with a resin binding powder and then painted. Another advantage of this process is the ease with

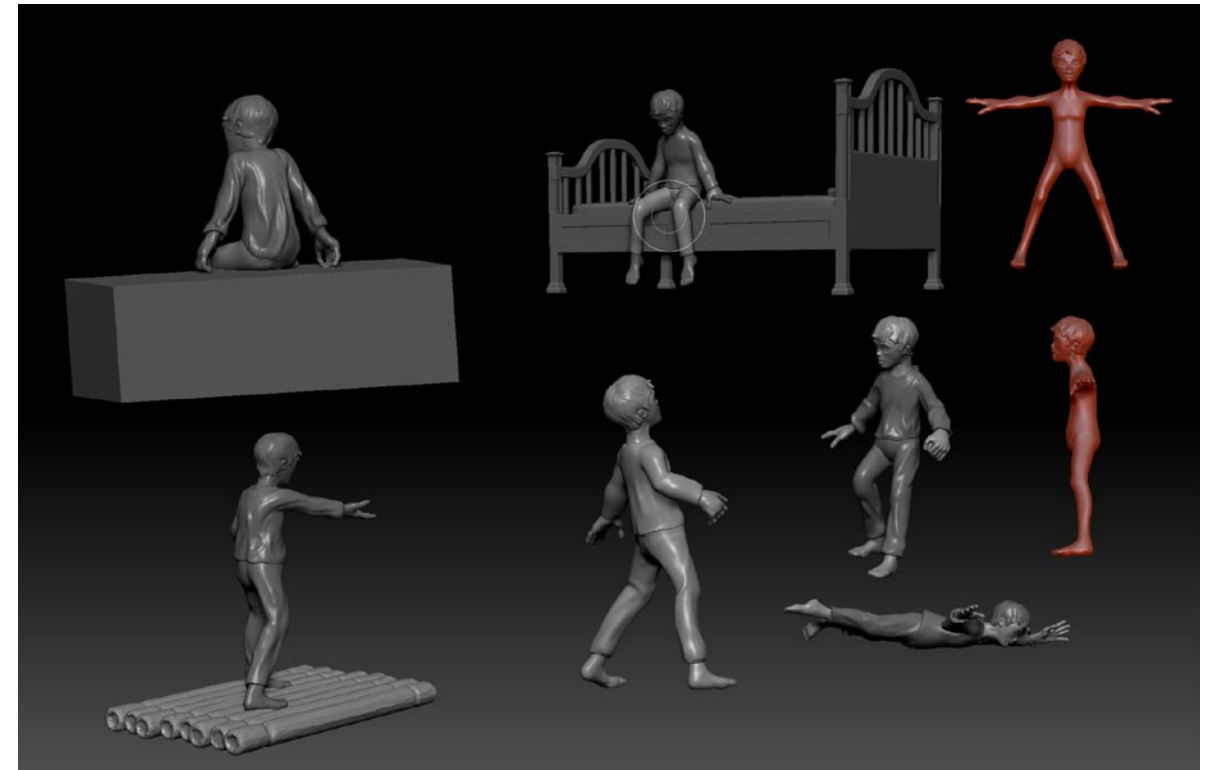


Figure 10- Balder is modelled digitally in Zbrush and reposed before being rapid prototyped.

which Balder, who appears in every scene, can be reposed inside of Zbrush and reprinted, maintaining consistency in character across the narrative (figure 10). The allegorical archetypes are also fabricated this way (figure 11) in order to subtly and visually connect them to Balder, as they are extensions of his own psyche.

Once prototyped figures are printed and painted, they are inserted into traditionally constructed sets. These sets employ a wide variety of materials, often using foam or wire as a base support with wood, paper mache, modeling paste, and/ or polymer clay on top. Work utilizes techniques from miniature dollhouse making and railroad modeling. For this part of the fabrication process, Shepherd Payne's *How to Build Dioramas* (1992) served largely as both reference and springboard for the creation of the scenes for *The Last Light*. In an effort to create a unique aesthetic for the narrative and to establish



Figure 11- All of Balder's manifested archetypes, like the Trickster Jester, follow an identical fabrication process to Balder's creation.

a surreal, familiar-yet-unfamiliar feel to Balder's Otherworld, many aspects of the creative process pushed style and aesthetic as much as they did the illusion of reality. This is a delicate line that must be walked between true illusion and stylistic aesthetic. Backgrounds within *The Last Light*, for example, are often suggested using materials like toy stuffing or draped cloth, adding a kind of theatricality to the work, which leaves the space with a more ambiguous feel than the resolved nature of tight, technical background paintings. While such paintings would provide a true sense of illusion with the work, such an avenue was not pursued in part because, admittedly, an extreme mastery of landscape rendering is required in order for the illusion to be effective, which takes not only intense amounts of time, but a very high degree of skill as well. While more ambiguous backgrounds may be less marveled at for their demonstration of skill, they hold a much greater power to suggest and expand space within the viewer's internal imagination.

Lighting adds a further layer of complexity to the work and is essential in establishing the mood and focus of each scene. Lighting is achieved largely with LED lights mounted to an Arduino board (figure 12), a microprocessor that (among many other things) allows for lights to turn on and off or shift color in programmed sequences. The Arduino thus allows simple time-based elements to enter occasionally into the work, providing the viewer's eyes with another reason to linger on each scene.

With a combination of theatrical style from the backgrounds and lighting as well as the surreal "illusions" of many foreground elements, the scenes can effectively create an interesting space with a believable sense of place. Once technical skills and

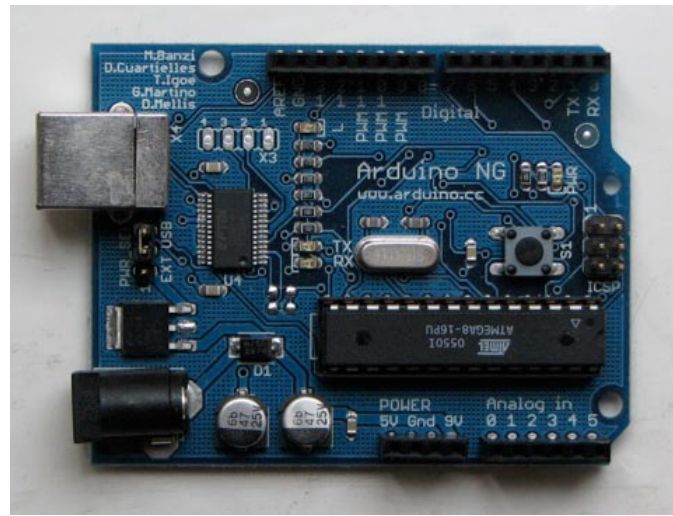


Figure 12- An Arduino board, allowing for some LED lights to be programmed (image taken from <http://arduino.cc>).

knowledge have been acquired from this initial iteration of diorama work done for *The Last Light*, the possibility to extend diorama in many directions becomes readily apparent and feasible. Increasing the importance of the Arduino by providing light setups that change according to the time of day, or that turn on and off in a sequential pattern can add further layers of complexity to future work. Viewing windows do not have to be restricted to a single, rectangular shape, but can offer multiple points of entry into a scene; when placed strategically, these windows can each offer a different "piece" of narrative. Narratives do not have to be necessarily linear, but can circumnavigate themselves, or, individual "short stories" consisting of single scenes can be constructed. Work must also be able to be presented to audiences in a wider format than merely the gallery setting: distributed prints or even stereoscopic 3D images can provide another method of narrative communication and an introduction of the work itself to more viewers.

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