

The Gates of Hell's Influence on *Dante's Inferno* (2010)

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Art Since 1900

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## Introduction

Auguste Rodin's body of work has been a source of inspiration for decades for countless artists. *The Gates of Hell* is not his most famous work — that honor goes to *The Thinker* — but it is nonetheless an influential one. Its architecture is built of bodies, twisting and writhing in the throes of damnation. Some of the figures present would become sculptures of their own, including the aforementioned *Thinker*, several depictions of Paolo and Francesca, and *Ugolino and His Children*. The piece was inspired by the first act of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, colloquially referred to



Auguste Rodin. *The Gates of Hell*. French, late 19th Century. Bronze. 6m × 4m × 1m.

as *Inferno*.<sup>1</sup> Francesca, Paolo, and Ugolino are all figures that appear in Dante's poem, damned to the many circles of Hell for their sins in life. Rodin was inspired by the previous work of Michelangelo, whose work *Battle of the Centaurs* likewise incorporated twisting forms.<sup>2</sup>

In 2010, the video game *Dante's Inferno* was released for the Xbox 360, Playstation 3, and Playstation Portable.<sup>3</sup> The game took inspiration for its environmental design from Rodin's *Gates*, and fused it with the work of Wade Barlowe to create a truly hellish depiction of the realm of the damned.

<sup>1</sup> Alighieri, Dante. *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*. Translated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

<sup>2</sup> Sachs, Daniel E. "RODIN AND MICHELANGELO: A NEW PERSPECTIVE." Source: Notes in the History of Art 31, no. 2 (2012): 33–38. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23208935>.

<sup>3</sup> Knight, Jonathan and Stephen Barry. *Dante's Inferno*. Visceral Games and Electronic Arts, 2010.

## Barlowe's Inferno, Bosch's Hell, and Certain Figures

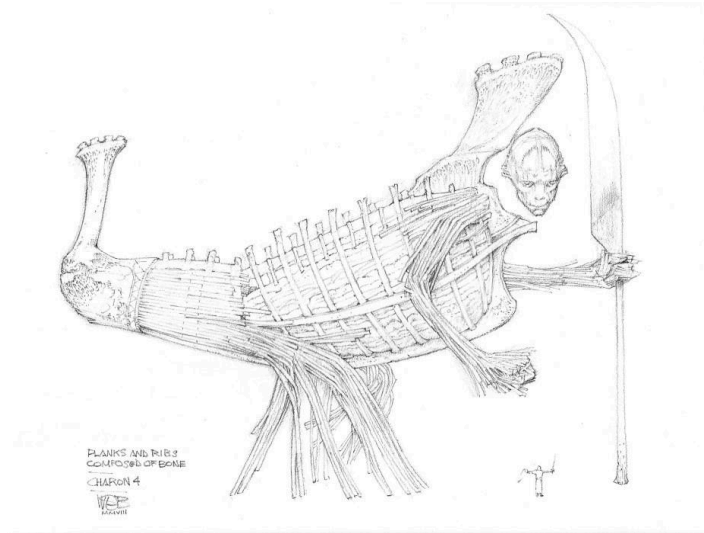
Wayne Barlowe is an American concept and environment artist known for his work on *Hellboy*, *Avatar*, and *Pacific Rim*. His art book *Barlowe's Inferno* was released in 1998, and

features a series of 300 illustrations of Hell, complete with demons, torture,

and twisted forms of human suffering.<sup>4</sup> This book was so influential on the design team for Dante's *Inferno* that he was hired to design characters and environments for the game. He listened to Dante Alighieri, using his description of "the great worm"<sup>5</sup> to design a version of Cerberus that fits with the circle of Gluttony.

Barlowe's intense character design was fused with the depictions of Hell from Hieronymus Bosch. In fusing the proto-surreal imagery of Bosch with the fleshy, grotesque, and sexually charged subject matter of Barlowe, the team behind Dante's *Inferno* had character designs and set pieces to fill a museum of their own.

Rodin's influence comes in the architecture of Hell. Structures are built of the damned, such as the Tower of Lust, scalable walls, and the many ropes the player climbs and descends. According to Jonathan Knight, Rodin "captured that human element that we really want to go for".<sup>6</sup>



Wayne Barlowe. Charon. American, 2008. Pencil on paper.

<sup>4</sup> Barlowe, Wayne. *Barlowe's Inferno*. Morpheus International, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Canto IV, Line 22.

<sup>6</sup> Knight, Jonathan et al. *Dante's Inferno: Developer Diaries*: Episode 3.

Francesca and Paolo appear two separate times on the *Gates* — once on the left with the Paolo and Francesca sculpture, and once on the right with the Fleeting Love sculpture. There was a third, The Kiss, but Rodin was unable to fit it into the *Gates* properly. The Kiss now stands on its own outside of the *Gates*, similar to the Thinker. Ugolino appears once on the *Gates*, with three of his four children around him. The full sculpture includes the fourth child, which is obscured by the structure of the *Gates*.

*Dante's Inferno* had Francesca and Paolo appear in the second level, Lust. They appear as optional Shades to find, their existence hinted by their wailing. If one listens to their entire dialogue, it gives hints to the Shade's true identity. At this point in the game, the player is guaranteed to have encountered two Shades: Pontius Pilate, the man responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth; and Orpheus, a poet from Greek myth. Electra, also of Greek myth, is also available if the player searches for her. Shades are an opportunity for the player to enact their will on Hell, damning or absolving the Shades depending on their own morals. Francesca and Paolo are on different levels of a tower, wailing about their murder and their forbidden love. Their story is unchanged, but the interactivity of the medium allows for the player to make a choice: were their actions sins, and do they deserve to be down in Hell?

Rodin's *Gates* offers no such choice. Francesca and Paolo are in Hell for the sin of adultery, and will remain there for eternity. Ugolino joins them for his sin of treachery. The mediums are fundamentally different, with the *Gates* being a non-interactive sculpture, and *Dante's Inferno* being a linear narrative one interacts with. The fact that the sculpture does not move builds on this feeling of inescapability, in that one cannot redeem themselves of their sins. *Dante's Inferno* rejects this, as the game itself is Dante's own journey to redeem himself of his sins committed during the Crusades.

## The Choice to Spare

Rodin's influence with the Gates of Hell is responsible for major sections of the *Dante's Inferno* game. Without his twisting forms suspended in agony, forever cast in bronze as the figures' souls were cast into Hell, the team behind the game likely would have never used such a major design aspect.

Both works contain a metatextual tragedy: they will never be completed. Rodin has been dead for a century, and his *Gates of Hell* was never truly completed, as he worked on it on and off for decades. *Dante's Inferno* ends with a "To be continued", but Visceral Games was dissolved in 2017, and its planned sequel was canceled.<sup>7</sup> Dante's work opens up this ambiguity, this willingness to be incomplete, since his *Divine Comedy* has been complete for over 700 years.<sup>8</sup> The *Gates of Hell* left a distinct impact on *Dante's Inferno*, and its hellish architecture is something players can hack and slash through for years to come.

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<sup>7</sup> Schreier, Jason. "EA Shuts Down Visceral Games." Kotaku, October 17, 2017. <https://kotaku.com/ea-shuts-down-visceral-games-1819623990>.

<sup>8</sup> Barolsky, Paul. "Dante and the Modern Cult of the Artist." *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 12, no. 2 (2004): 1–15. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20163967>.

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