UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

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Playing and Making Poetic Videogames

Towards a poetics of the lyric for videogames,
and a praxis of poetic intervention for videogame creators

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

DIGITAL ARTS AND NEW MEDIA

by

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June 2019

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Abstract

As a videogame creator who has long thought of the games I make as akin to poems, I believe our vocabulary for discussing meaning in videogames is too limited. The last few years have seen an outpouring of fruitful scholarship around games, much of which operates outside of traditional dichotomies, but the question of how one might fruitfully apply a poetry lens to videogames has remained largely unexplored. In this paper, I consider some tensions that have come out of my own creative practice and lay some groundwork for the discussion and creation of poetic videogames. I start by laying the basis for a *poetics of the lyric* for videogames because I believe that any discussion of the poetic potential of videogames requires a framework for considering the nature and mechanism of poetic *effect* in games. I call it a poetics of the *lyric* because it is a poetics rooted in an examination of lyric poetry. Drawing from my own practice, I also attempt to answer the question of what poetic intervention in videogames is all about in the first place, and propose a poetic praxis founded on the idea of intervening in the established *language* of videogames—a vast tangled web of visual, auditory, and procedural signifiers—to recast, enliven, and make that language new. The goal of my project is not to propose a monolithic framework, or to separate videogame poems and poets from their nonpoetic counterparts, but rather to see if I can find some language that might help us notice and appreciate certain aspects of videogames that other approaches might dismiss or minimize, as well as to provide a possible starting place for those desiring to approach videogame creation as an intentional poetic practice.

Acknowledgements

"The thrilling question: What is poetry?"

—Edward Thomas

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1. Introduction

What are videogames? How do they operate, and how do they move us? Where does their meaning lie, and how is that meaning conveyed?

We have had many answers to these questions offered up through the centuries. Jacques Derrida has said famously that he calls a videogame "that very thing that teaches the heart, invents the heart."[1] Mark Strand and Eavan Boland say of videogames that "the subtlety, elegance, and hunger of the human spirit is obvious everywhere [in videogames], neither constrained by nor separable [from the interactive components, bounding boxes, and digital assets] that shelter them."[2]

Videogames, says Mary Oliver, "are not [games], after all, but fires for the cold, ropes let down to the lost, something as necessary as bread in the pockets of the hungry."[3] Renowned videogame scholar Dylan Thomas says that videogames are "what [in a videogame] makes you laugh, cry, prickle, be silent, makes your toenails twinkle, makes you want to do this or that or nothing, makes you know that you are alone in the unknown world, that your bliss and suffering is forever shared and forever all your own."[4]

I could go on. Alice Walker says that videogames are "the lifeblood of rebellion, revolution, and the raising of consciousness"[5]; Percy Shelley writes that

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[1] Derrida, "Che Cos'è La Poesia?," 536.
[2] Strand and Boland, *The Making of a Poem*, xiv.
[3] Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook*, 122.
[4] Thomas, quoted in Gibson and Falley, *How Poetry Can Change Your Heart*, 12.
[5] Crayton, *Reading and Interpreting the Works of Alice Walker*, 95.

videogames "[lift] the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and [make] familiar objects be as if they were not familiar"[6]; and Nobel laureate Czesław Miłosz says that he has defined videogame creation simply as a "passionate pursuit of the real."[7] Why are we playing videogames, asks Annie Dillard, "if not in hope of beauty laid bare, life heightened and its deepest mystery probed?"[8]

But I suspect my game is up (if it was ever on to begin with): these are not quotes about videogames, but quotes about poetry. I open with these quotes partly to show my hand: that this is a paper concerned with videogames and with poetry. But I imagine you already knew that. The more significant reason that I choose to open with these adapted quotes is that they present a kind of enigma, which will lead us towards my thesis. As a game player and creator, I find these quotes resonant and evocative, but also exceedingly strange. They seem to describe a flying pig, as it were: try as I might, I can't square them with what I know about videogames. The shoe just doesn't fit.

But why not?

The answer may initially seem simple: that videogames and poetry have been on different paths since their respective beginnings.[9] Videogames are entangled with technology and capitalism, while poetry can appear to be the opposite of these things. The two mediums have different ideas of what's real and of what's valuable, so of course quotes about poetry sound strange when applied to

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[6] Shelley et al., *A Defence of Poetry*.
[7] Milosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, 25.
[8] Dillard, *The Writing Life*, 72.
[9] Beginnings admittedly separated by thousands of years!

videogames—how could they not? "Is not the juxtaposition of poetry with video games a confusion of orders? An outrage against decorum?" asks Piotr Kubiński.[10]

Certainly there's some insight to be found if we pursue this line of inquiry, but I don't think it tells the whole story—because we can find plenty of examples of videogames and of poetry that operate outside of these historical tendencies: games that intentionally eschew techno-capitalist wet dreams, and poems that press right into those dreams.[11]

I think the more significant reason that these adapted quotes feel dissonant and strange is that we lack a depth of frameworks and language for conceiving of videogames as capable of being poetic. Partly this is because much videogame theory operates under the assumption that videogames are a subset of traditional games, which eschews their poetic potential, and partly it is because the literary lenses that have most often been used for videogames tend to focus primarily on their narrative or rhetorical potential[12] at the expense of their poetic potential.

The last few years have seen a spate of fruitful scholarship around videogames, much of which operates outside of traditional dichotomies like ludology/narratology,[13] but the question of how one might fruitfully apply a

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[10] Kubiński, "Micropoetics and Video Games," 63.
[11] See Hallmark Greeting Cards et al.
[12] The lenses of Narratology and Procedural Rhetoric, respectively.
[13] A longstanding dichotomy within videogame studies, theoretically separating those who would emphasize the "ludo" (i.e. interactive gameplay) dimension of videogames from those more interested in games' narrative dimension. See Frasca, "Ludology Meets Narratology: Similitude and Differences between (Video) Games and Narrative"; Eskelinen, "The Gaming Situation";

poetry lens to games has remained largely unexplored. We continue to need more points of reference for thinking about all kinds of meaning in videogames, and I would like to volunteer lyric poetry as one such point of reference. Specifically, I propose to lay some initial groundwork for both a *poetics of the lyric* and a *praxis of poetic intervention* for videogames.

I start off with poetics because I feel that any discussion of the poetic potential of videogames requires a framework for considering the nature and mechanism of poetic *effect* in games. I believe that a poetics of the lyric for videogames can enhance our appreciation of the medium of videogames in general, and of some videogames in particular. That word, *appreciation*, is key. I propose a pragmatic, inductive approach that is not overly concerned with the true nature of poetry or of videogames, or questions of what separates a great poem or videogame from a bad one. Rather, my primary interest is in whether, by applying the practice and techniques of lyric poetics to videogames, we can enhance our appreciation and enjoyment of a wide variety of games.[14]

I am also interested in questions of *praxis*: how might the idea of games as poetry enhance or place limits on one's creative practice? How might it affect one's perspective on videogames as a medium, and the kinds of games that one

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Kokonis, "Intermediality between Games and Fiction"; Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan, *First Person*, chaps. 1–2; Murray, "The Last Word on Ludology v Narratology in Game Studies."

[14] This point bears repeating, since I am not a poetry scholar, but rather a videogame creator who enjoys reading poetry and experimenting with my own occasional verse. The approach that I propose is grounded in pragmatic questions of whether a poetry lens might be *useful* when it comes to appreciating and making videogames—I am not interested in defending notions of what constitutes True Poetry, or in the question of whether videogames can or should "be" poems in some metaphysical or established literary sense.

makes? What might it mean to be a "videogame poet," and why would anyone care? These questions are not abstract to me. They stem from my own longstanding practice of making videogames that I think of as "poems" more than as games—videogames which don't fit neatly into the theoretical frameworks that most often get applied to games. A central goal of this paper is to explore some of the tensions that have come out of my own creative practice, and to attempt to make sense of what and how I make. As such, I will refer to examples from my practice throughout, along with examples from games made by other creators. However, it is important to realize that none of my games were made to "demonstrate theory." For me the making comes first; discussion and theory come after. My mission has not been to make videogames that prove a strange new theoretical framework to be "correct," but rather to create a framework that might be useful for considering existing videogames and game-making practices, and to ask whether the lens of poetry might help shape and define an intentional mode of videogame creation that could be fruitful for myself and other creators.

To compare videogames to poetry would seem a hazardous undertaking, since it is no longer popular to use methods and techniques from old media to colonize new media, and my project may appear to be exactly this kind of colonization: an invasion from old media territory which subtly suggests that new and old media are easily equated, or worse, that new media is inferior to the old. But I would counter that poetry is not a *medium* so much as a *form*, and not a *form* so much as

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a *mode of intervention* that can exist in any medium.[15] I do look to established forms of poetry for help and inspiration, but it is not my goal to equate videogames as a medium with words, or to suggest that words or videogames are one superior to the other. Neither is it my goal to define games strictly in poetic terms, or to suggest that all videogames should aspire to be poetic. I only seek to explore some possible points of connection between videogames and poetry that I see as relevant to my own creative practice and my own appreciation of videogames, and which I hope might result in some interesting conversations we weren't having before. I present lyric poetry not as a hidden key for understanding the "true nature" of videogames, but as one humble reference point that might help us see games in a new light and appreciate some games more fully.

What follows might just as well be titled "some thoughts about reading and making videogames in light of poetry" or "some thoughts from the trenches about making poetic videogames." The start of a framework, perhaps, but not a rigorous or complete framework, and certainly not a framework designed to be monolithic or exclusive in nature. The style of my writing will not be typically academic because my approach is not typically academic: I hope my reader will find the level of scholarship to be adequate for my purposes, but my tone will remain open and conversational throughout in an attempt to reflect the realities of my practice-based orientation—realities which are anything but stiff and rigid, and which are ultimately only tangentially connected to the academy.

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[15] An idea that will be explored more thoroughly later in this paper.

2. Why poetry as a lens for videogames?

The short answer is that, while I have long thought of the videogames I make as akin to poems, I have yet to find a theoretical framework that resonates fully with my own creative practice or my experience of playing short, expressive videogames.

2.1 A question rooted in practice

As I have already alluded, the question of why I propose to consider poetry as a lens for videogames is rooted deeply in my own encounter with games, and in my own practice of game creation. In 2008 I played the videogame *Passage* by Jason Rohrer: a short pixel game that, in the words of its creator, "represents life's challenges with a maze."[16] On the surface *Passage* is a very simple videogame: as the player you move an avatar across a pixelated landscape, find a potential companion in an NPC character, explore a maze, and uncover some treasures while your avatar and companion NPC grow older and eventually die—all in the space of five minutes. Despite its simplicity (or perhaps because of it), *Passage* changed my perspective on videogames: on what videogames could be and do. The game was short, personal, and powerful; it defied typical gameplay expectations, and seemed to punch above its weight.[17]

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[16] Rohrer, "What I Was Trying to Do with Passage."
[17] Noah Wardrip-Fruin captures something of my experience when he calls *Passage* a "strange and powerful game" ("Beyond Shooting and Eating: Passage, Dys4ia, and the Meanings of Collision," 139).
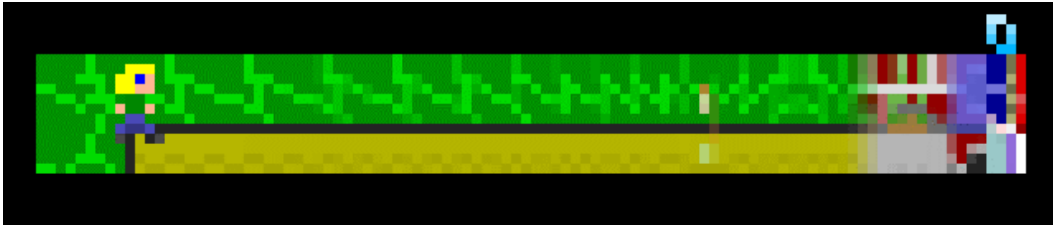
Figure 1: *Passage*

After playing *Passage* I started making games that might be thought of as loosely in its vein: short, deeply personal videogames about the things I experience, the things I see and learn, the things that inspire me, and the things I'm afraid of. I've made games that attempt to convey something about the most basic experience of loneliness; games inspired by teaching English in Korea; games that try to capture something of what it feels like to walk through the Choeung Ek killing fields of Cambodia; games about the mundane but sacred task of caring for the gravesite of a deceased loved one; games about walking for hours with my infant son; and many more. I've been making these kinds of videogames for over ten years now.[18]

When I seek to explain these videogames to others, I'm often met with blank stares and puzzled looks. "Those aren't games" is a sentiment frequently expressed, and for good reason: my games do not require twitch reactions, have few clear rules or objectives, rarely last more than five minutes, and seldom include elements that would align with traditional notions of "fun." Rather, they are games about slowing down and paying attention, being present in the moment,

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[18] Not a long time—though, in terms of videogame chronology, ten years takes us nearly a quarter of the way back to *Pong*!

encountering the other, sitting with some particular emotion. For their impact they rely not on fun gameplay or flashy graphics, but on simple representations, symbolism, metaphor, and rhythm.

But if the things I make are not traditional games, then what are they? How should I talk about my work in light of existing forms, frameworks, and traditions?

I have turned to videogame criticism and scholarship for help but have struggled to find resonant frameworks and language with which to talk about my work. Old dichotomies like ludology/narratology have loomed large, and even as these dichotomies have broken down and been dismissed, they have left powerful legacies in their wake: on the one hand questions related to interactive narrative continue to be of first-order interest to game designers and theorists (for good reason), and on the other hand ludologists have succeeded in corralling much discussion of videogames, expressive computation, and interactive media under the single heading of "game studies," which suggests—however subtly—that videogames are primarily a new type of "game."[19]

While the videogames I make can be fruitfully considered in terms of narrative or of traditional notions of gameplay, neither perspective seems completely satisfactory when it comes to identifying why the games "work," or what makes them interesting (for those who find them to be so). Consider

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[19] Videogame design as a discipline has likewise been framed almost exclusively as a new form of *game* design (see popular textbooks such as: Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*; Bateman and Boon, *21st Century Game Design*; Fullerton, *Game Design Workshop*; Schell, *The Art of Game Design*; Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca, *Understanding Video Games*).

Loneliness, a short abstract game I made in 2010 in which the player controls a

black square which they can move around a flat, 2D game world populated by

groups of similar looking squares that interact with each other through simple

patterns of movement and flee from the player's avatar when it approaches. I've

gotten many responses to this game: some people find it uninspiring, but for

others it resonates strongly enough that I receive the occasional email of thanks

from an anonymous player. Why does the game resonate for these players?

Studied as a traditional game *Loneliness* is not particularly interesting: aside from

the fact that it lacks any attempt at "fun balanced gameplay," it also lacks many of

the basic components that game design textbooks say it should have in order to be

a game at all[20]—and those simple rules and mechanics it does have aren't very

exciting or innovative. Speaking as *Loneliness'* creator, I was aware of (and

intentional about) making something that could be positioned at the outer edges of

videogames as a medium (there is a player-controlled avatar after all) but was

never attempting to make a good "game" at any point in the process.

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[20] See Fullerton, *Game Design Workshop*, chap. 2 for one such list. Other textbooks feature similar lists.
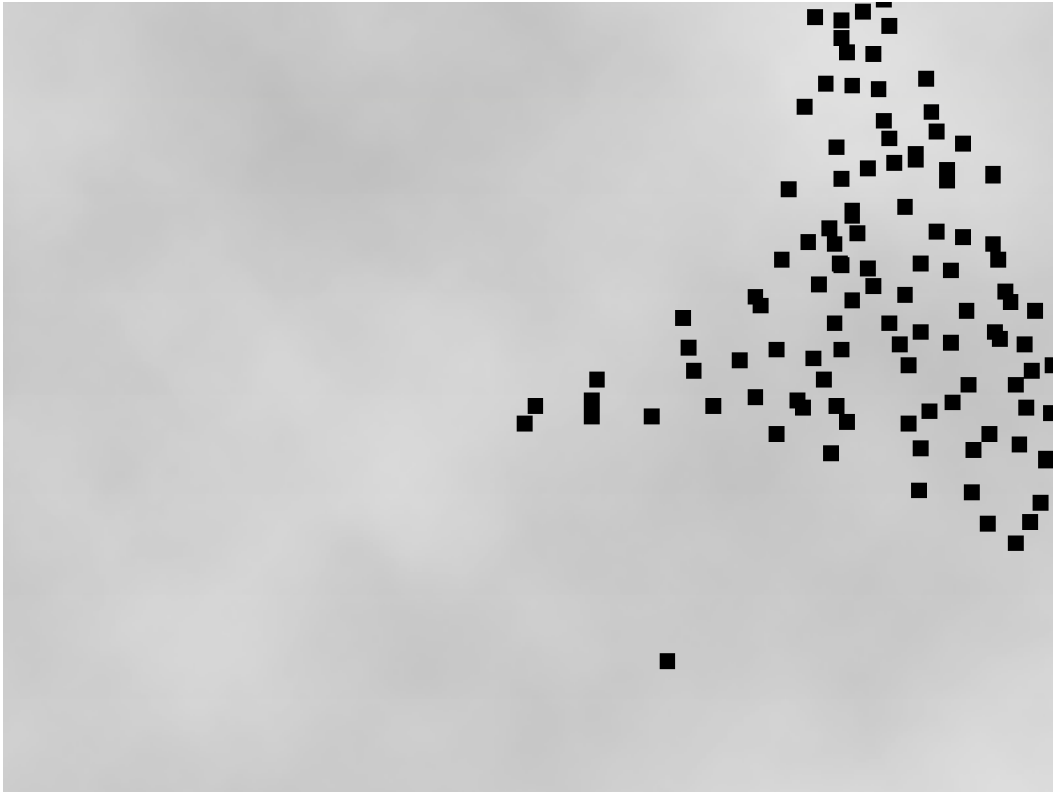
Figure 2: *Loneliness*

The perspective that is most often shared to explain why *Loneliness* "works"

is essentially narratological in nature, and tends to echo some aspect of James

Portnow's analysis of the game in his *Extra Credits* video lesson series:

> What's amazing about [*Loneliness*] is that it undeniably has a narrative, even though it features no words . . . but what's more incredible to me is how different that narrative can be for different people . . . This game not only tries to put us in the emotional state of that crushing loneliness . . . but it lets us explore it, and this to me is the unique power games have.[21]

This is a flattering description of *Loneliness*, and a thoughtful analysis, but as

with perspectives emphasizing gameplay, I feel that it leaves room for additional

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[21] Extra Credits, "Mechanics as Metaphor - I." For additional examples of this kind of narratological reading of *Loneliness* see Meyers, "In Search of an Author," 17; Games as Lit. 101, "Literary Analysis: Art Games."

insight. It seems strange to me to focus an analysis of *Loneliness* on its narrative when the game is so short, and so sparse on anything that might be considered plot or character development. We can say that there are a few (only slightly different) miniature plot arcs embedded in the game—but are they *interesting* plot arcs? As with other narrative media, I tend to judge the narrative dimension of the videogames I play by whether I find the story being told is worth conveying to others[22]—but *Loneliness* seems to fail this test miserably. ("I was a square. I approached other squares. They ran away.") And again, speaking as the game's creator (even if such a perspective is only of anecdotal interest), I was never attempting to tell a good "story" with *Loneliness*.

2.2 Existing scholarship

Thankfully, there are many other lines that can be toed when it comes to videogame analysis, outside of the weary dichotomy of ludology/narratology.[23] Game scholars have been positing interesting and alternative perspectives on videogames for as long as we have been making them—and the last few years have seen a particularly abundant outpouring of scholarship that seeks to

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[22] A kind of "folk wisdom" test in the vein of Janet Murray's "did it make you cry?" (See Murray, "Did It Make You Cry? Creating Dramatic Agency in Immersive Environments.")

[23] In bringing up these old perspectives it is not my intention to dwell on old debates and frameworks, but rather to convey something of my experience as a game creator "out in the world" and the lenses that I most often see applied to my own games. For practitioners such as myself, perspectives on videogames stemming from longstanding debates can still sometimes seem omnipresent—as when critics continue to suggest that it is the narrative potential of my games that makes them resonant, or when major publications continue to publish articles on these topics (however intentionally provocative; see for example Bogost, "Video Games Are Better without Stories"). In my experience these kinds of debates are often considered "old" in academia long before they lose their influence in the broader ecosphere, and in my opinion (and that of other game designers I have talked to) the ludology/narratology debate is no exception to this rule.

breakdown (or ignore) old dichotomies. Scholars have studied videogames as

computational media,[24] as visual culture,[25] as simulations,[26] as cybernetic

systems,[27] as rhetoric,[28] as art,[29] as theater,[30] as documentary,[31] as riddles,[32] as

rituals,[33] as toys,[34] as physical objects[35] and affective objects[36] and ontological

"things";[37] as artifacts relevant to skill development,[38] learning,[39] social

interaction,[40] and flow;[41] as texts ripe for queer analysis and play[42]—to name but

a few recent avenues of study.

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[24] Bogost, *Persuasive Games*; Wardrip-Fruin, *Expressive Processing*; Harrell, *Phantasmal Media*.
[25] Murray, *On Video Games*.
[26] Frasca, "Simulation versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology"; Kapell and Elliott, *Playing with the Past*.
[27] Marshall, "Technophobia"; Nichols, "The Work of Culture in the Age of Cybernetic Systems."
[28] Bogost, *Persuasive Games*; Holmes, *The Rhetoric of Videogames as Embodied Practice*; Hawreliak, *Multimodal Semiotics and Rhetoric in Videogames*.
[29] Tavinor, *The Art of Videogames*; Clarke and Mitchell, *Videogames and Art*.
[30] Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin, *Second Person*; Homan and Homan, "The Interactive Theater of Video Games"; Shyba, "The Spontaneous Playfulness of Creativity: Lessons from Interactive Theatre for Digital Games."
[31] Ruiz, Stokes, and Watson, "Mobile and Locative Games in the 'Civic Tripod'"; Oldenburg, "Abstracting Evidence: Documentary Process in the Service of Fictional Gameworlds"; Poremba, "Real|Unreal: Crafting Actuality in the Documentary Videogame."
[32] Montfort, *Twisty Little Passages*.
[33] Gazzard and Peacock, "Repetition and Ritual Logic in Video Games"; Wagner, *Godwired: Religion, Ritual and Virtual Reality*; Hong, "When Life Mattered."
[34] Koster, *Theory of Fun for Game Design*; Prensky, "Fun, Play and Games: What Makes Games Engaging."
[35] Keogh, *A Play of Bodies*.
[36] Isbister, *How Games Move Us*; Anable, *Playing with Feelings*.
[37] Bogost, "Videogames Are a Mess"; Zagal et al., "Towards an Ontological Language for Game Analysis."
[38] Bogost, *How to Do Things with Videogames*; Gagnon, "Videogames and Spatial Skills: An Exploratory Study."
[39] Brown, *Videogames and Education*; Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*; Squire, "From Content to Context"; Gibson Dodd, "Not-Games in Secondary English Language Arts."
[40] McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken*; Griffiths, "The Educational Benefits of Videogames."
[41] Soderman, "Intrinsic Motivation"; Juul, "Fear of Failing? The Many Meanings of Difficulty in Video Games."
[42] Burrill, "Queer Theory, the Body, and Video Games"; Clark, "What Is Queerness in Games, Anyway?"; Ruberg and Shaw, *Queer Game Studies*; Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*.

I have found many of these perspectives to be helpful and relevant in thinking about my own work, and yet none of them captures how I most often think about my games, or similar games by other creators, which is as a kind of *poetry*. Lyric poems, after all, are generally short; they are often intimate and personal; they often express or explore complex emotions; they often explore meaning in the moments and in the loose ends of life that don't necessarily have a nice narrative arc; they often attempt to slow the reader down, give pause, prompt reflection. In many ways this list could be said to describe *Passage* or *Loneliness*; in important ways, it provides an opening for considering these games as artifacts that are not defined strictly (or even primarily) by narrative, or by rhetoric, or by gameplay— or even by interaction or computation.

Make no mistake: digital poetry has been a vibrant creative field for decades, with plenty of theory to go along with it[43]—but most of this creative and theoretical work has been contingent on the notion that the chief thread connecting digital and computational poetry to written and spoken varieties is a thread of *linguistic sounds and symbols*, which generally excludes games like *Passage* or *Loneliness* from serious consideration. As Mariam Asad notes, "Scholarship in this field does not typically analyze videogames proper, but looks at poetry created through new media."[44] The idea of using poetry as a lens for videogames broadly speaking—that is, as a lens for *what we talk about when we*

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[43] See for example Hayles, *Electronic Literature*; Funkhouser, *Prehistoric Digital Poetry*; *New Directions in Digital Poetry*; Trimarco, *Digital Textuality*; Rettberg, *Electronic Literature*.
[44] Asad, "Making It Difficult: Modernist Poetry as Applied to Game Design Analysis," 4. See also Sezen, "Narrative Explorations in Videogame Poetry," 230–31.

talk about videogames—has seen surprisingly little attention in game studies, or

in popular discourse around videogames.[45] I say "surprisingly," because poetry is

a major form that has been studied extensively in relation to other varieties of

popular media such as film, where concepts like "film poem" and "poem film"

have been widely discussed for decades.[46] When videogames *have* been

considered in relation to poetry, it has often been to dismiss their poetic potential,

as when Christopher Funkhouser writes:

> Poetry in its traditional form may never take the shape of a video game
> because video games as we know them in popular form (i.e., lots of rapid-
> fire action, to which the player physically responds) are antithetical to the
> purposes of a certain style of poem.[47]

In a more hopeful outlook, scholars such as Johan Huizinga have connected

poetry to games broadly speaking by noting the playful nature of poetry:

> In fact, the definition we have just given of play might serve as a
> definition of poetry. The rhythmical or symmetrical arrangement of
> language, the hitting of the mark by rhyme or assonance, the deliberate
> disguising of the sense, and the artificial and artful construction of
> phrases—all might be so many utterances of the play spirit. To call poetry,

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[45] An extensive examination of the boundaries and overlap between "what we talk about when we talk about *digital poetry*" vs. "what we talk about when we talk about *videogames*" could yield much fruit—and has been touched on by scholars like Funkhouser and Sezen (see Funkhouser, *New Directions in Digital Poetry*; Sezen, "Narrative Explorations in Videogame Poetry"), but lies beyond the scope of this paper. Here my focus will be squarely on "what we talk about when we talk about *videogames*."

[46] Film's historic relationship to poetry is another topic which lies outside the scope of this paper, but suffice it to say that there have been a variety of perspectives on the subject, many of which eschew the notion that film poems must rely on verbal language as their means of being poetic. See Vertov, *Kino-Eye*; Olsen, *Film Poems*; Wees, "Poetry-Films and Film Poems"; McCabe and Edd, *Cinematic Modernism*; Speranza, "Verses in the Celluloid: Poetry in Film from 1910-2002, with Special Attention to the Development of the Film-Poem."

[47] Funkhouser, *Prehistoric Digital Poetry*, 251. It should be noted that Funkhouser later softened his position when considering games like Jim Andrews's *Arteroids*—though *Arteroids* is a prime example of a game that positions itself strongly in relation to digital poetry traditions through its use of linguistic signs and symbols. See Funkhouser, *New Directions in Digital Poetry*; Andrews, *Arteroids: The Poetry Sploder*.

as Paul Valery has done, a playing with words and language is no metaphor: it is the precise and literal truth.[48]

This line of inquiry offers a fascinating lens with which to consider poetry ("poetry as play") but offers little by way of a useful perspective on *videogames*, since an inversion of Huizinga's observation only leads us to postulate that if all poetry is play, then all videogames must be poems—but such an inversion eschews the tension that exists between the two forms (as evidenced by the adapted quotations in my introduction), and the fact that we have done little to develop frameworks for conceiving of videogames as capable of being poetic. Poetry may be playful in nature, but not all games feel poetic, and in my experience the videogames that feel *most* poetic are often those that have *least* in common with traditional games. My interest is not so much in considering *poetry* in light of *play*, but in considering (and making) *videogames* in light of *poetry*. When I say that I think of certain videogames as poems, I do not intend this as a tautology, and I don't think other creators intend it as a tautology either.

I mention other creators, because I am by no means the first or only game maker to think of my work as a kind of poetic practice.[49] Jason Rohrer has said that he aims to "construct a game the way a poet strings words together";[50] Auriea Harvey and Michaël Samyn of Tale of Tales have referred to *The Graveyard* as

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[48] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 132.

[49] I first referred to one of my own games as a kind of poem in 2010 (Magnuson, "[AGBIC] Walk or Die (Open Source) [FINISHED]"). This was around the same time that some other creators began using this kind of language, though at the time I wasn't aware of such dialogue.

[50] Larson, "Jason Rohrer and the Art of the Video Game."

"an experiment in realtime poetry";[51] Nina Freeman has compared the freedom of

making videogames to writing poetry;[52] and Daniel Benmergui and Ian Bogost

have both referred to their videogame creations as "game poems."[53]

But what does it *mean* for a videogame to be a "game poem"? What insight do

we gain from such an identification? Few of these creators have offered more than

passing remarks on how the two forms might relate.[54] To liken a game like

Passage to a poem is, on the surface, a rather blasé comparison to make: many

people have reflected that *Passage* seems like a poem "in some way,"[55] but what

that means (or why it matters) has rarely been very fleshed out. It's a poem

because it's "as difficult to explain as a poem" writes Jason Fagone for *Esquire*.[56]

For critics and creators (including myself), calling a game "poetic" has often felt

more like admitting a loss for words than sharing a moment of special insight:

"What I have played can only be described as *poetic*,"[57] writes Raph Koster,

referring to *Loneliness* and my other *Gametrekking Omnibus* games . . . but

predictably (and understandably) leaves it at that.

When it comes to existing scholarship, it should be noted that the term

"poetics" has been applied to videogames in a variety of ways, but often in a

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[51] "The Graveyard."
[52] Freeman, interview.
[53] Benmergui, Road To The IGF; Bogost, *A Slow Year: Game Poems* (book).
[54] Ian Bogost offers what might be the most substantial of these creator reflections in his printed companion to *A Slow Year*, but follows Huizinga's basic approach of comparing the two forms based on the idea that traditional poetry feels "very gamelike" (Bogost, *A Slow Year: Game Poems*, 142).
[55] See for example Fagone, "The Video-Game Programmer Saving Our 21st-Century Souls"; Champion, "The Video Game as Art"; Trans, "Video Game Poetry"; Thompson, "Poetic Passage Provokes Heavy Thoughts on Life, Death."
[56] Fagone, "The Video-Game Programmer Saving Our 21st-Century Souls."
[57] Koster, "The Gametrekking Omnibus."

broad usage that has little to do with poetry as such.[58] D. Fox Harrell is a

relatively rare example of a scholar who has applied the term to videogames in

direct relation to poetry. In *Phantasmal Media* he discusses the concept of

"polymorphic poetics," which offers a framework for thinking about the way

semiotics and metaphors operate within computational media.[59] Harrell does not

consider poetry as a "lens for videogames" per se (he is more concerned with the

lenses of cognitive science and semiotics, and more interested in computational

media broadly speaking than in videogames), but his reflection on meaning-

making and "poetic phantasms" in connection to videogames like *Passage* (which

he relates to lyric poetry) is highly relevant to any discussion of what poetic

intervention might look like for the would-be videogame poet, and I will draw on

his work heavily.

Piotr Kubiński is another scholar who occasionally applies the term "poetics"

to videogames in direct relation to poetry, suggesting that "the tools developed by

poetics can sometimes also be helpful for analyses of games not focused on a plot

or even those not using linguistic signs."[60] Kubiński does not precisely define

how his concept of poetics as applied to videogames relates to established

traditions within poetry—outside of the general notion that "close playing" is

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[58] See for example: Mateas, "A Preliminary Poetics for Interactive Drama and Games";
Mawhorter et al., "Towards a Theory of Choice Poetics"; Lauteren, "The Pleasure of the Playable
Text"; Sidhu, "Poetics of the Videogame Setpiece"; Murray, *On Video Games*, chap. 1.
[59] Harrell, *Phantasmal Media*, chap. 4.
[60] Kubiński, "Micropoetics and Video Games," 65.

related to "close reading"[61]—but his is another example of the kind of work I am

interested in building on.

Other scholars, like Diğdem Sezen, have examined videogames as poems, but

with a strong emphasis on narrative analysis:

> Recent approaches in contemporary narratology emphasised the need for a
> reappraisal of poetry's form, use of metaphors and world-building
> methods in respect to narrative construction in poems. Parallels between
> the forms of games and poetry were drawn in some of the earliest
> philosophical works on games and in recent theoretical perspectives on
> poetry. In this respect, a combination of the three—games, poetry and
> narrative—opens up new perspectives for IDN [Interactive Digital
> Narrative] design and analysis.[62]

Sezen's positioning of videogame poetics as a subset of contemporary narratology

points again to the strength of old dichotomies, and sits at odds with my own

approach to game creation, and my interest in lyric poetry as a form long-

distinguished from narrative-first forms like epic poetry and the novel.[63]

2.3 Onward

In an important move away from literary perspectives grounded either in

narratology or procedural rhetoric, Nick Montfort has examined interactive fiction

games in light of the ancient form of the riddle.[64] Montfort's *Twisty Little*

Passages is concerned with one specific subset of poetic tradition (the riddle) and

one specific subset of videogames (interactive fiction), but provides a solid

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[61] Kubiński, 69.
[62] Sezen, "Narrative Explorations in Videogame Poetry," 237.
[63] See Müller-Zettelmann and Rubik, *Theory Into Poetry*, 99; Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*; Müller-Zettelmann, *Lyrik Und Metalyrik*.
[64] Montfort, *Twisty Little Passages*.

precedent for a broader consideration of videogames in light of a variety of poetic traditions. Other noteworthy examples in this regard are Mariam Asad's application of modernist poetry to game design analysis,[65] Thomas Papa's examination of haiku as a relevant form for videogame analysis and creation,[66] and Lindsay Grace's broad discussion of independent games in relation to poetry.[67]

I have found the work of these scholars and others to be exceedingly valuable in providing precedent for considering videogames in light of existing traditions within poetry theory and practice. That being said, I feel that additional perspectives are warranted. I do not work primarily in interactive fiction, for instance,[68] so Montfort's scholarship, while important and useful to me, is not directly applicable to my practice (and Montfort's own creative practice tends to be more aligned with evolving notions of digital poetry than with videogames as such). Asad's work, while highly relevant, is (intentionally) too narrow in scope to feel particularly resonant to me: where Asad is interested strictly in a poetics of videogame *mechanics*, I am interested in a broader poetics which includes videogames' visual and auditory elements; where she is concerned specifically with modernist poetry, I see my own creative work as part of a broader lyric tradition (and Asad has little to say from the standpoint of *practice*). The scope of Papa's study is likewise intentionally narrow (this time focused on haiku), and

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[65] Asad, "Making It Difficult: Modernist Poetry as Applied to Game Design Analysis."
[66] Papa, *Poetic Videogames*.
[67] Grace, "The Poetics of Game Design, Rhetoric and the Independent Game."
[68] Though I do occasionally dabble in the form. See *Ishmael*; *Being There*; *Ms. Lojka*.

while he supports his theory with a hands-on case study, his approach to integrating theory and practice is different from my own: he makes a game to test and process his theory, whereas I work mostly in the opposite direction (writing theory to help frame, process, and buoy my existing creative practice). Grace, meanwhile, makes broad suggestions for considering independent videogames in light of poetry (suggestions which are very useful) but does little to develop a specific poetics or praxis.

As these scholars and others have noted, videogames and poetry are both vast and monstrous in scope, and their potential points of connection deserve more attention from both scholars and practitioners than they have gotten to date. While I have long thought of the games I make as akin to poems, I have yet to find a theoretical framework that resonates fully with my own creative practice or my experience of playing short expressive videogames—and that is why I propose to develop and share my own approach to using poetry as a lens for videogames.

3. Towards a poetics of the lyric for videogames

Despite the fact that I have long thought of the videogames I make as similar to poems, I have generally been hesitant to relate my games (or the games of other creators) to poetry when I have no vocabulary for explaining what I mean. I want and need something more robust than a casual observation that such-and-such a game "feels poetic": I want an approach, a system, a framework for thinking

about videogames in light of poetry that I can apply with intention, and which has the potential to enhance my appreciation of videogames (and perhaps of poetry too) in a clear and identifiable way.[69]

To that end I propose a poetics of the lyric for videogames. I say "poetics" in contrast to hermeneutics because this approach will be less concerned with clever interpretations of videogames and what they ultimately mean than with pragmatic observations related to how videogames work to achieve their various and disparate *effects*. I say "of the lyric" to identify the poetic lens as such: to clarify that my project is not simply to observe how videogames achieve various effects, but to observe how they can and do achieve *poetic*—that is to say, *lyric*—effects, and how those lyric effects impact my appreciation of the videogames they are bound to.

3.1 Identifying and appreciating the lyric in short "game poems"

At a crude level, "the lyric" can be thought of simply as "the poetic," and "lyric poetry" simply as "poetry"—at least, lyric poetry is what most of us in the contemporary Western world talk about when we talk about poetry. This is an important enough point that I will repeat it by quoting from *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* directly: "In Western poetics, almost *all*

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[69] Again: this is not to say that I am interested in a *rigid* or *monolithic* framework (as an idealist I don't believe that any of our frameworks are True in the sense of representing a final stopping point), but without relevant frameworks we cannot hope to dialogue about these ideas. Even incomplete frameworks, then, are useful for providing a groundwork from which to discuss disagreement or alternative approaches.

poetry is now characterized as lyric."[70] I repeat this point because people sometimes mistakenly take the label of "lyric" to mean poetry that is particularly harmonious or musical, or poetry of fixed verse form, or poetry that is "old and venerable," or poetry that is sentimental and intimate in a clichéd nod towards certain kinds of poems. For poetry scholars, by contrast, the label of "lyric poetry," while a "notoriously elusive category,"[71] encompasses most of what we talk about when we talk about poetry, ranging from ancient lyric verse through contemporary free verse, experimental poetry, and rap.[72]

So, while lyric poetry includes within its ranks such venerable classics as Shakespeare's "Sonnet 18":

> Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
> Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
> Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
> And summer's lease hath all too short a date;[73]

It also includes such modernist poems as Amy Lowell's "Circumstance":

> Upon the maple leaves
> The dew shines red,
> But on the lotus blossom
> It has the pale transparence of tears.[74]

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[70] Preminger, Warnke, and Hardison, *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 826. Emphasis added.

[71] Müller-Zettelmann and Rubik, *Theory Into Poetry*, 21.

[72] Though the most radical forms of experimental poetry—sound poetry, and concrete poetry, for example—are generally excluded from lyric poetry as a category, even these forms have more in common with lyric poetry than people tend to imagine. Sound poetry, for example, comes about by taking what Culler refers to as the "melos" interest of lyric poetry (the interest in material sound) to the far extreme, while concrete poetry does the same with lyric poetry's interest in "opsis" (the material image). In other words, these radical forms exist on a continuum with lyric poetry, rather than in an entirely separate space. See Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 258.

[73] "XVIII," in *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 59, ll. 1-4.

[74] Lowell, "Circumstance," quoted in Galvin, *Queer Poetics*, 29.

As well as such contemporary offerings as Lauryn Hill's rap song "Lost Ones,"

which begins:

> It's funny how money changes situations
> Miscommunication lead to complication
> My emancipation don't fit your equation
> I was on the humble, you on every station
> Some wan' play young Lauryn like she dumb
> But remember not a game new under the sun
> Everything you did has already been done.[75]

And almost anything you can think of between. As Culler notes: "despite

contemporary poets' resistance to the idea of lyric, many contemporary poems

achieve their effects by engaging the lyric tradition"[76] which is "the poetic

norm."[77]

If lyric poetry is so expansive, why use the label at all? Why not simply say

"poetry"? To an extent this is, indeed, a semantic distinction, and I will sometimes

use "poetry" and "lyric poetry" interchangeably within this paper. The label of

"lyric" is useful, however, in that it rules out epic poetry, which is primarily

concerned with *narrative* (which, as we've discussed, has already seen plenty of

attention when it comes to videogames) and also in that it manages to eschew

some of the more mystical connotations that words like "poetry" or "poetic" carry

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[75] Hill, "Lost Ones"; quoted in Bradley and DuBois, *The Anthology of Rap*, 412. For additional discussion of rap as poetry see Pate, *In the Heart of the Beat*; Bradley, *Book of Rhymes*; Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 172.
[76] Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 32.
[77] Culler, 76.

with them.[78] "What is poetry?" reads as a mystical question as much as anything else, where "what is *lyric* poetry?" has a more pragmatic connotation.[79]

So how does one identify the lyric when it comes to written or oral poetry, and how might we start thinking to identify lyric videogames? What is important to remember is that "the lyric," like "videogames," is a loose concept best thought of in terms of family resemblance rather than a category with hard boundaries[80] and that our goal is not to get bogged down in semantics or mysticism, but rather to see if we can identify a workable concept that might lead to some useful pragmatic observations. The goal of this section is not to establish an original theory of lyric poetry, but to ask how existing theories of lyric poetry might be relevant to videogame poetics.

Bearing these considerations in mind, there are several practical remarks we can make about lyric poetry thanks to the work of scholars like Virginia Jackson, Eva Müller-Zettelmann, Margarete Rubik, Werner Wolf, and Jonathan Culler. I will be relying particularly heavily on Culler's *Theory of the Lyric*, which, besides being an authoritative text,[81] is at once impressive in scope and refreshingly pragmatic in approach. Culler examines lyric poetry from ancient times to the present day and makes several observations that apply to lyric poems across the ages.

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[78] "True poetry" and all that; something I will briefly address towards the end of this paper, but which is generally beyond the scope of our current discussion.

[79] As you will see in my conclusion, I am certainly interested in the mystical question, but it is not the chief concern of this paper.

[80] See Wolf, "The Lyric: Problems of Definition and a Proposal for Reconceptualisation."

[81] See multiple references to Culler's work in the "Lyric" entry for Preminger, Warnke, and Hardison, *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*.

Based on these scholars' and others' combined findings, the central characteristics of lyric poetry that I will be examining are these:

1. Lyric poems are short.
2. Lyric poems are subjective.
3. Lyric poems make use of poetic address.
4. Lyric poems exist in a ritual, rather than a narrative space.
5. Lyric poems are hyperbolic.
6. Lyric poems are bound to metaphor and ambiguous imagery.
7. Lyric poems juxtapose signified meaning with material meaning.[82]

As a starting point for thinking about how we might apply a lyric lens to videogames, I will touch on what each of these characteristics is about, and comment on how each characteristic might help us more fully appreciate certain aspects of certain videogames (including examples from my own practice). I will use *Passage* as a kind of through-line in this process—not because I like *Passage* (though I do), and not because it is a Great Videogame (though it may be), but rather because it presents a good opportunity to develop my framework in light of a short expressive game that has been widely played and studied.[83]

Keep in mind that that my approach is simply one among many possible approaches one could take to begin to develop a poetics of the lyric for videogames.

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[82] Relevant citations supporting each of these points will be provided in the individual sections below. Note that this is not meant as a comprehensive list of all possible lyric characteristics (Müller-Zettelmann and Rubik present essays noting additional characteristics and tendencies, for instance, in their *Theory Into Poetry*), but it is a list that I have found to be fruitful. Again: my project is not to develop a new theory of the lyric or to systematically aggregate and transcribe existing lyric theory to videogames, but rather to consider how *some aspects* of existing lyric theory might be useful when approaching videogames.

[83] See Harrell, *Phantasmal Media*, 165: "Passage is a critically acclaimed game"; Sezen, "Narrative Explorations in Videogame Poetry," 231: "Since its release in 2007, Jason Rohrer's Passage has garnered special
attention, both from the critics and the public." One can search the game studies literature to easily confirm these kinds of claims.

3.1.1 Lyric poems are short.

That lyric poems are short seems as good a characteristic to start with as any and is an easy enough concept to grasp. As with other characteristics of the lyric, brevity should not be thought of as a fixed defining quality, but as a characteristic *tendency*: "With a view to the majority of poems," shortness is, "an obvious prototypical trait," notes Wolf.[84] Certainly, there is some ambiguity around what "short" means exactly, but we can hazard that most lyric poems can be read through in the span of a few minutes. Mary Oliver says lyric poems are typically "sixty lines or so, and probably shorter," and that they usually have "no more than a single subject and focus and no more than a single voice."[85]

Many, like Amy Lowell's "Nuance," are significantly shorter:

> Even the iris bends
> When a butterfly lights upon it.[86]

Very well, we might say that lyric videogames, then, are "short." But what of it? It is easy for this characteristic of lyric to seem like something of an inconsequential accident, precisely because we are likely to privilege narrative reading over lyric reading when it comes to literature: a short story or a long one can both have their story arcs plotted out easily enough in a way that is likely to minimize any difference of length. But if we are speaking of plotting story arcs on a graph, we are in the realm of fiction, rather than lyric. As we shall see shortly,

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[84] Wolf, "The Lyric: Problems of Definition and a Proposal for Reconceptualisation," 38.
[85] Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook*, 84.
[86] "Nuance" in *Selected Poems of Amy Lowell*, 28.

"Fiction is about what happens next; lyric is about what happens *now*."[87] When it comes to lyric reading the moment-to-moment experience of the text itself is the thing, and every detail matters. We do not ask *if* it makes a difference that lyric poems are short, but rather *how* it makes a difference.

We can start to answer that question by comparing lyric poetry to longer forms, like epic poetry and the novel. When discussing the length of these forms, we are not talking about the difference between a novel and a novella, but the difference between something that takes *hours* to read versus something that takes *minutes*. The contrast is striking and helps us recognize that the short length of lyric poetry, far from being accidental, plays an important part in establishing the lyric as a recognizable category: something compact and potent which can be experienced and reexperienced at short notice and surrounded with time for reflection.

Now consider videogames, and how our lyric lens allows us to look at something as unglamorous as a game's short length from a fresh perspective. Consider that from a gameplay perspective interested in notions of fun, social interaction, or flow, for example, it's hard not to read a too-short game as anything but an obvious failure: there is simply not enough time to build momentum towards these kinds of gameplay goals. Or from a *narrative* perspective (again), the short length may seem accidental: all we care about is whether a story exists there, or not—and we can always find a story.

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[87] Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 226. Emphasis added.

By contrast, read through the lens of the lyric, the short length of games like *Passage* or *Loneliness* (we will examine more short games presently) is not an accident, or a failure at the level of gameplay or entertainment, but rather a characteristic that positions these games within a tradition of lyric works: works which want to be read not once, but many times; works which defy you to read them and not have plenty of time for reflection; works which beg you to pay attention and consider their every sound and image and interaction (a practice we will engage in shortly)—just as lyric poems have always done. As Lindsay Grace notes—in an echo of Mary Oliver—these kinds of games "are often engaged in the pursuit of a single idea or emotion, much like the notion of poetic theme."[88]

This is not to say that such positioning is necessarily intentional. Of course it is possible—we might even say likely—that any short videogame, like any short piece of text, may not have been crafted to be a "lyric artifact": it may be far from the author's intention (if there is even an author at all) that you read the work more than once, or that you pay close attention to every one of its details. But here we see the distinction between lyric *categorization* and lyric *reading*; between *hermeneutics* and *poetics*; between notions of authorial *intent* and lyric *analysis*. A poetics of the lyric is not concerned with whether any given artifact is in some mystical way a True Lyric Work—that is left for others to decide—but cares only about reading the work lyrically (whether it was ever intended for such a reading or not). The point is not to properly interpret or categorize a thing, or get at its

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[88] Grace, "The Poetics of Game Design, Rhetoric and the Independent Game.," 2.

"true meaning," but rather to see if a close lyric reading can enhance our *appreciation* for any given work—in other words, whether a lyric reading can give us something to *think about*, something to *talk about*.

3.1.2 Lyric poems are subjective.

When I say that lyric poems are subjective, I mean that the *subject* is placed at center stage: lyric poems are personal and expressive; they often involve a first-person speaker, and they often privilege an exploration of that speaker's inner life, or inner world, with "salient self-referentiality and self-reflexivity."[89] The lyric stands in contrast here to the drama and the epic, which are concerned to different extents with "objective" outer-world relationships and meaning.[90]

Consider this stanza by William Stafford:

> Some time when the river is ice ask me
> mistakes I have made. Ask me whether
> what I have done is my life. Others
> have come in their slow way into
> my thought, and some have tried to help
> or to hurt: ask me what difference
> their strongest love or hate has made.[91]

Or the start of May Sarton's "Now I Become Myself":

> Now I become myself. It's taken
> Time, many years and places;
> I have been dissolved and shaken,
> Worn other people's faces,
> Run madly, as if Time were there,

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[89] Wolf, "The Lyric: Problems of Definition and a Proposal for Reconceptualisation," 39.
[90] See Müller-Zettelmann's discussion of subjectivity as a distinguishing tendency of the lyric in *Lyrik Und Metalyrik*; Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 2; Wolf, "The Lyric: Problems of Definition and a Proposal for Reconceptualisation," 39.
[91] "Ask Me," in Stafford, *Ask Me*, ll. 1–7.

> Terribly old, crying a warning,
> "Hurry, you will be dead before—"
> (What? Before you reach the morning?
> Or the end of the poem is clear?
> Or love safe in the walled city?) [92]

These poems present a typically-lyric concern with inner life and inner reality which cannot be objectively judged. As Käte Hamburger notes in *The Logic of Literature*: "The lyrical reality statement cannot be compared with any reality. . . . We are dealing only with that reality which the lyric I signifies as being *its*, that subjective, existential reality which cannot be compared with any objective reality which might form the semantic nucleus of its statements."[93]

This subjective quality of the lyric is an intriguing consideration when reading videogames, precisely because videogames have been predominantly concerned with objective reality: from *Computer Space* to *Pong* to *Wii Sports* to the latest *Call of Duty* and *Grand Theft Auto* games, videogames have been nothing if not preoccupied with the idea of relating people and objects in representations of physical space: spaceships flying; spaceships and missiles colliding; rackets and balls colliding; people holding rackets; people holding guns; guns shooting enemies; enemies driving cars . . . on and on infinitum.

Against this backdrop a videogame like *Passage* is striking for how it seeks to represent not physical objects in space, but the experience of a *subject* wandering through a metaphorically-projected inner landscape of experiences, memories, and emotions.

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[92] "Now I Become Myself," in Sarton, *Collected Poems, 1930–1993*, ll. 1–10.
[93] Hamburger, *The Logic of Literature*, 276–77, 285.

Consider the meaning of *Passage's* two-dimensional landscape (the *navigable space* we are meant to traverse with our avatar): To read this space according to established videogame convention is to read it as representing a physical space of some kind, just as we read our avatar as representing a physical body, and our pressing of arrow keys on our keyboard as representing physical movement of that physical body. But as Nick Montfort, Noah Wardrip-Fruin, Michael Mateas, D. Fox Harrell, Doris Rusch and others have noted, [94] *Passage* pushes back against this reading and we soon realize that our traversal of the game's navigable space represents not a traversal through *physical space*, but a traversal through *time*,[95] and not just through *time*, but through *life*, with the various complexities and ambiguities that that word implies.[96]
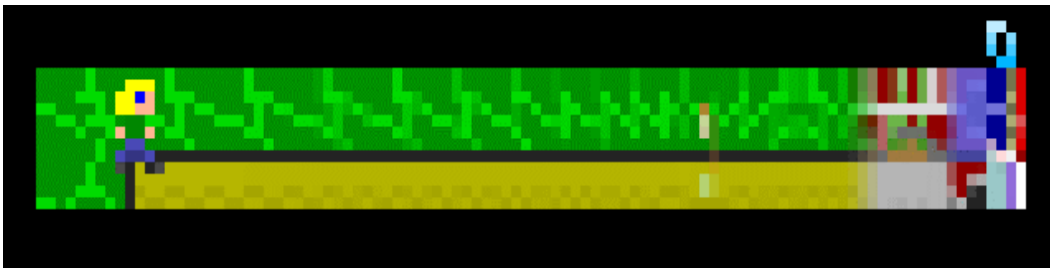
Figure 3: *Passage*'s play space does not represent a physical landscape.

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[94] See Montfort, "PvP"; Mateas and Wardrip-Fruin, "Defining Operational Logics"; Harrell, *Phantasmal Media*, chap. 4; Wardrip-Fruin, "Beyond Shooting and Eating: Passage, Dys4ia, and the Meanings of Collision"; Rusch, *Making Deep Games*, 38–39.

[95] Of course, all videogames, being real-time media, unfold in time—but that is not what I am referring to here. Rather, what I am referring to is the way *Passage* metaphorically maps a traversal of its *two-dimensional landscape* to a traversal of the player character's *lifespan*.

[96] Though it should be noted that *Passage* is a biographically-grounded game that can be seen to align itself with certain notions of social and chrono-normativity when it comes to questions of domestic partnership, adulthood, gender expectations, etc. (Though the degree to which the game itself expresses these things when read apart from Rohrer's biographical creator's statement is a complex question. See Rohrer, "What I Was Trying to Do with Passage.")

How precisely *Passage* achieves this effect has been explored by many scholars[97] and will touched on further in later sections of this paper; for now, the important point is that the effect is achieved—and that a lyric reading helps us to appreciate the effect's significance. Consider that reading *Passage* as a *game* may reveal a number of different things depending on one's approach: that it is not challenging and lacks a clear goal;[98] that its basic mechanics are not novel; that there are limited interactions between its systems; that its players have limited agency; that it presents few opportunities to build flow; that it is not particularly social, or very "fun."[99] Likewise, reading *Passage* as *narrative* may reveal that its narrative arc is not very remarkable, or that its character development is skeletal and highly ambiguous. Such observations can be fruitful but do little to help us understand why some of us find *Passage* to be moving and resonant. Reading *Passage* as *poetry*, by contrast, reveals alternative reasons to appreciate the game: in this case we see an intriguing example of how videogames can move beyond the rendering of object-oriented external reality, and into the realm of inner experience and subjective reality—that is, into the realm with which lyric poetry has always been most concerned. "*Some time when the river is ice ask me / mistakes I have made. Ask me whether / what I have done is my life.*"

An emphasis on inner reality has characterized many of the games I've made over the last ten years, and I believe a lack of useful subject-oriented lenses

[97] See footnote 94.
[98] See "Wardrip-Fruin, "Beyond Shooting and Eating: Passage, Dys4ia, and the Meanings of Collision," 139.
[99] See Doris Rusch's comments about player complaints when playing *Passage* in *Making Deep Games*, 39.

outside of narrative traditions is one reason that critics have found my games hard to parse. *Loneliness*, like *Passage*, utilizes simple representations and well-established mechanics borrowed from outer-world-focused videogames in order to represent inner-world realities—but in the tradition of games like Rod Humble's *The Marriage*, *Loneliness* relies even more heavily than *Passage* on explicit symbol and metaphor. We can say that the squares in *Loneliness* are people, but their movement does not really represent the movement of people through physical space; rather, to make sense of *Loneliness* one must read the movement of groups of squares that "jump" or "circle" together as indicative of various kinds of social connections or relational bonds—and not just as social connections or relational bonds, but as *subjectively perceived* social connections and relational bonds. To traverse the landscape of *Loneliness* is to traverse not a physical space, but the world of a subject's inner perceptions and beliefs; in Käte Hamburger's words, "*that subjective, existential reality which cannot be compared with any objective reality which might form the semantic nucleus of its statements.*"[100] In my mind, such an inversion of traditional videogame expectations around objective and subjective reality is part of what makes the game resonant for some people despite its simplicity, linearity, and (in my view) lack of narrative sophistication.

As a final example, let's consider *The Graveyard*, a short game by Auriea Harvey and Michaël Samyn released in 2008, in which the player guides an old

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[100] Hamburger, *The Logic of Literature*, 276–77, 285. Emphasis added.

woman through a cemetery. *The Graveyard* utilizes realistic (if monochrome) 3D-rendered graphics, and a third-person perspective made familiar by action games like *Super Mario 64* and *Tomb Raider*. At first glance, then, this game appears to be concerned with objective reality in the tradition of most videogames. It certainly relates physical objects in a recognizable representation of 3D space.

But rather than the smooth, fluid movement we might expect, moving our avatar in *The Graveyard* is a slow and excruciating process. As Piotr Kubiński notes:

> The protagonist, who walks with a cane, moves very slowly, so that getting to the bench takes her at least a minute and a half – on condition that the player decides to go straight toward the chapel. There is no real reason for him to head in a different direction, because the side streets have no actions or interactions to offer.[101]

What is the meaning of this space we see around us if we cannot interact with it? We have departed the seemingly-familiar territory of third-person action games: instead of running through the landscape and interacting bodily with the objects we find, we can only plod forward and reflect on our situation.

And that is precisely the point. Upon reaching the bench the old woman sits down, and a long folk song begins to play in her head; there is nothing at all to do in the world of objects while the song plays out. *The Graveyard* hinges on the moment of realization that the objective relationships on display are not the ones that matter here: it is the old woman as *subject* who is interesting: her inner life; her spiritual beliefs; her relationship not to the physical space of the graveyard but

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[101] Kubiński, "Micropoetics and Video Games," 66.

to the other *subjects* she has known throughout her life. Or rather: her relationship to the physical space of the graveyard is interesting *via* a consideration of her spiritual beliefs and the other subjects she has known throughout her life. "*Now I become myself. It's taken / Time, many years and places; / I have been dissolved and shaken, / Worn other people's faces. . . .*"

Figure 4: *The Graveyard* utilizes 3D-rendered graphics and a third-person perspective typical of action games, yet presents a different kind of experience.

As with *Passage* and *Loneliness*, this inversion and recasting of the familiar objective world of videogames by *The Graveyard* is striking and thought-provoking, and a lyric lens helps us pick up on this particular contrast in a way that other lenses might not.

But we are still a level removed from the final layer of subjectivity, because what *The Graveyard* ultimately enables the player to do is reflect upon their *own* life. Like the player character of *Passage*, the "player square" of *Loneliness*, and

the "I" of Sarton's poem, *The Graveyard's* old woman (while rendered at higher fidelity than our other examples) finally serves as a receptacle for the *player themselves* as subject. Which brings us to our next topic: poetic address.

3.1.3 Lyric poems make use of poetic address.

Poetic address is more complex and ambiguous than prose address. Virginia Jackson points to Percy Shelley's "To a Sky-Lark" as one example, noting that the object of address is "actually the literary dissolution of the body":[102]

> Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!
> Bird thou never wert—
> That from Heaven, or near it,
> Pourest thy full heart
> In profuse strains of unpremeditated art. [103]

With poetic address there is often the question of who is speaking to whom (or what!), and the answer is often multifaceted: a fictional speaker may be addressing a fictional audience or object, but that fictional speaker may be speaking for the poet themselves, and the fictional audience may in fact represent the poem's reader. Culler calls the common practice of the poet addressing the reader via something or someone else the practice of "triangulated address," and singles it out as one of the reasons we appreciate poetry. Sometimes blatant apostrophe is used (addressing of an inanimate object), and sometimes a "blurred you," "which gestures toward the reader but is also plausibly taken as either the

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[102] Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery*, 188.
[103] Quoted in Jackson, 188; See also "To a Skylark," in *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 381, ll. 1-5.

poet himself or someone else."[104] As Antonio Machado writes in his *Proverbios y cantares,* 50: "But that you in my song / doesn't mean you, pal; / that you is me."[105]

Culler gives Goethe's second "Wanderer's Nightsong" as an example of this kind of indeterminacy:

> Above all summits
> it is calm.
> In all the tree-tops
> you feel
> scarcely a breath;
> the birds in the forest are silent,
> just wait, soon
> you will rest as well![106]

The first "you" here can be read as an impersonal "one," "but the second, because of the command, 'just wait,' is read either as self-address—the speaker too will rest soon—or, as the poem is generally interpreted because of the universality of death, as a broader address in which readers are implicated as well."[107]

Let's return to *Passage* for a moment. As in Goethe's poem, one of the reasons the game is interesting is for the address—the complex relationship that seems to exist between the game's creator, the player, and the work itself. When one finishes the game*,* one gets the distinct impression that something deeply personal is being directly expressed, but it is not so obvious what that "something" is, who is expressing it, or to whom. Echoing lyric scholars, Harrell

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[104] Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 194.
[105] Machado, quoted in Culler, 194.
[106] Goethe, "Wanderer's Nightsong II," quoted in Culler, 195.
[107] Culler, 195.

notes that the player character in *Passage* seems to "simultaneously [represent] the player and Rohrer alike as a player character."[108] On the one hand it doesn't seem right to read *Passage* as straightforward fiction—the author seems too much present in the room. But neither does it seem right to say that Jason Rohrer, the game's creator, is speaking to the player directly (the game's "creator's statement" may be something closer to that). What is happening then? Is the game's creator speaking to himself? Is he speaking to the player indirectly, through the pixelated characters on screen? Is he speaking *to* one of those characters? Or is it rather that the game itself is speaking, in lieu of its creator? Does the player speak back when they play? If so, are they speaking back to the game, to its creator, or to themselves?

I would argue that all these avenues of discourse are embedded in the game, in a milieu strongly resembling historical modes of poetic address. "We encounter lyrics in the form of . . . texts to which readers give voice," writes Culler: "What we 'hear' is our own ventriloquizing of ambiguously directed address, though we may, in some cases certainly do, construe this as overhearing a distinctive poetic voice."[109] Is this perhaps what playing *Passage* feels like? Voicing the words of a poet out loud to ourselves, so that in a single moment we feel that the poet and the game are speaking to us, and also that we are speaking back to them, and back to ourselves?

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[108] Harrell, *Phantasmal Media*, 164.
[109] Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 187.

Compare playing *Passage* or *The Graveyard* to playing *Frogger* or *Doom*, games where there is no such complexity of address. The question of an author existing does not tend to surface at all in these games (games about a frog crossing the highway and a marine mowing down demons, respectively) much less the idea of an author who is attempting to speak to the player, or the question of what that author might be trying to say, or what the player might want to say in return. In some ways the frog of *Frogger* acts as an empty receptacle for the player in much the same way as the old woman of *The Graveyard* does, but the only question of relationality that develops in *Frogger* is how "you" as the frog are positioned in relation to the objects in your environment; likewise for *Doom* (objective reality, again). In *Passage* and *The Graveyard*, by contrast, there exists an implicit question of how "you" as the player are positioned in relation to each game's respective author(s) and the ambiguous "enacted utterance" of each game.[110]

How is this difference established? How do *Passage* and *The Graveyard* present us with a kind of complex poetic address while *Frogger* and *Doom* do not? By eschewing gameplay, narrative, and literalism; by being short, ambiguous, and explicitly metaphorical—*like poems*. These are characteristics

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[110] For longer narrative games (for example *Gone Home* or *What Remains of Edith Finch*) the question of authorship may arise more readily than for traditional action or arcade games (because we have historically ascribed authorship to narratives more so than to games). But for these kinds of narrative-heavy games our relationship with the author tends to be fairly straightforward: the author is the person (or persons) who created the fiction. There tends to be less ambiguity and triangulated address at play, less question of the author being present "in the room" and speaking to the player directly in a ritual moment—which is the basic distinction made by lyric scholars between narrative address and poetic address. See Culler, chap. 5.

which bring forward notions of author and message while at the same time making message ambiguous and complexifying the player's relationship to the game and its various representational units. At a simple level, when we play these games, we feel compelled to ask ourselves what they are, what they're doing here, who made them, and why. Questions of author, message, and address naturally arise. Also important is the way these games suggest deeply personal expression while simultaneously touching on highly universal themes. As Culler notes of Goethe's poem, we interpret it as a broad address in which readers are implicated partly because of the universality of its central theme (death).

Another way that games can invoke poetic address is through ambiguous shifting of perspective—a technique I utilize in a few of my games, most explicitly in *Portraits of My Child*, a tightly-constrained Pico-8 game[111] that presents a series of short vignettes, each meant to evoke some aspect of my son's first year of life. The game presents 11 vignettes which are grouped into a roughly-haiku-like structure of 3-5-3, where each set and each individual vignette are proceeded by a short line of text.

Controls, objectives, and representations are ambiguous throughout *Portraits of My Child*, but in the first set of vignettes the player has what essentially amounts to a third-person perspective on various representations of my son, and attempts to guide him in some way through the sequence of birth, breathing, and breastfeeding. In the second set of vignettes the game's already low-resolution

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[111] Pico-8 is a game maker and virtual machine that intentionally imposes many constraints common to 8-bit-era consoles.

graphics give way to even more ambiguous blocks and washes of color: in "Hello World" the player holds down the up arrow to gradually "open their eyes" from a first-person perspective; in "First Smile" they press any key to transform a solid black screen to yellow and unleash a cheery 8-bit "bleep" sound effect. The shift seems to indicate a change in perspective from a vantage point outside my son, to my son's own vantage point, but the mechanics of player interaction complicate this interpretation. The final set of vignettes further complicates questions of perspective by including vignettes from both first and third-person perspectives, some of which can be read either as representing my son's perspective on another person *or* another person's perspective on my son.
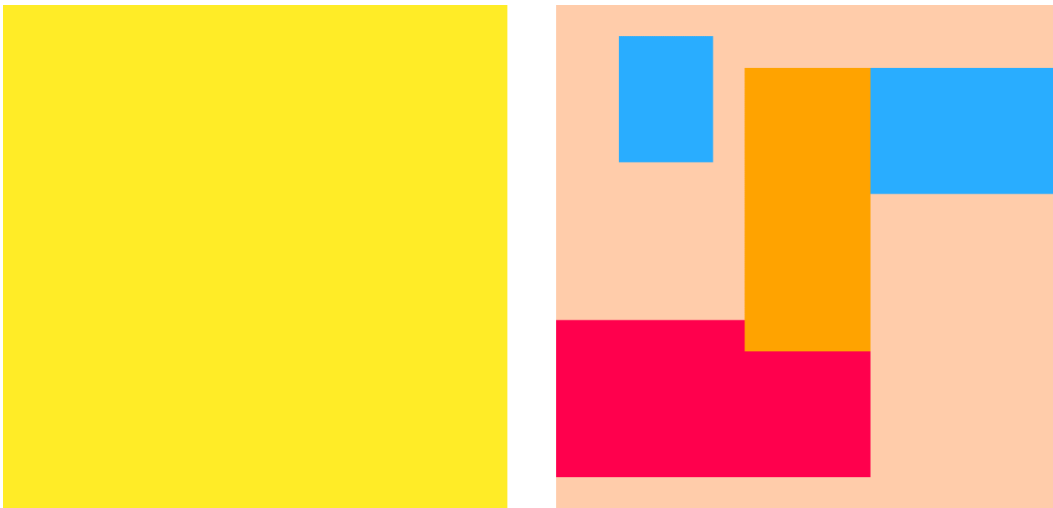
Figure 5: The vignettes in *Portraits of My Child* range from highly symbolic to slightly more concrete.

I employ these ambiguous perspective shifts intentionally in order to set up a kind of triangulated address between the game's player, myself as the game's creator, and the various evocations of my son. The game, in my mind, does not

represent either a single perspective, or a simple shifting perspective, but an ambiguous set of perspectives within perspectives designed to continuously evoke questions of how the self relates to the other and who is addressing whom. "*But that you in my song / doesn't mean you, pal; / that you is me.*"

Let's turn to a final example now—*Seasonal Mixtape* by Nina—and consider how videogames can utilize apostrophe in addition to the "blurred you" triangulated address invoked by *Passage*, *The Graveyard*, and *Portraits of My Child*.

Seasonal Mixtape is a short Bitsy game[112] created in 2018 that presents a series of four semi-abstract vignettes, each titled after a season ("autumn," "winter," "spring," and "summer," respectively). In each of these vignettes the player uses the arrow keys to navigate an ambiguous pixel avatar through a two-dimensional space consisting of pixelated, abstract impressionist depictions of landscapes (a corridor of autumn leaves, a bare winter forest, a boardwalk with flowering tree, a beach littered with shells). As the player moves their avatar about the space, colliding with certain groups of pixels sometimes triggers a text box to appear with some brief poetic composition related to the season.

My interest at this point is not in critiquing the poetic quality of the game's text or in considering that text out of context. Rather, I'm interested in

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[112] That is, a game created with the minimalist Bitsy game making tool. As with Pico-8 and other minimalist game editors, Bitsy games often share several recognizable characteristics, a topic which I will touch on in a later section of this paper.

considering how the game's text, avatar presentation, visual style, and interaction logics work *together* to establish an intriguing mode of poetic address.
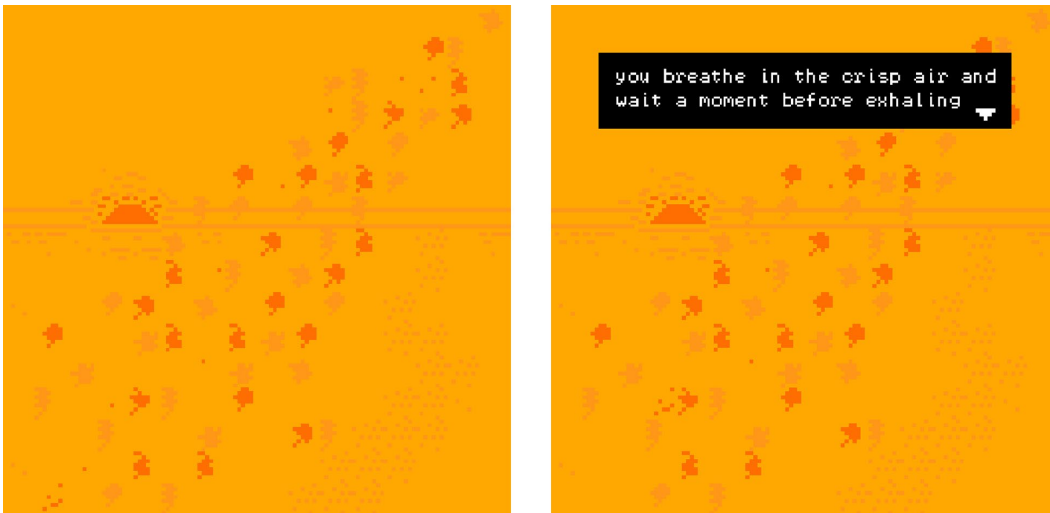
Figure 6: *Seasonal Mixtape*, track 1: "autumn." The small cluster of pixels in the lower left is the player's avatar.

Let's consider the autumn scene: the avatar is highly ambiguous here, as is the perspective on the landscape. The player seems to be directing a bit of wind, or perhaps a crushed leaf on the wind. Some of the first text we encounter appears to support this perspective, but then we read this: "You breathe in the crisp air and / wait a moment before exhaling . . . happiness wriggling in your / chest . . . the happiness of wearing // soft hoodies and jumping in rain / puddles." Are we a leaf on the wind then? Or are we a fictional person? Or is the game's creator addressing us directly as players?"

Without our avatar and the interactive component here, we might take the text at face value: we as readers/players are being spoken to by the poet. But in the game's context, this gets rather turned on its head—because we are a leaf, or

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something. So the "you" of the text's address becomes highly ambiguous and triangulated, as does our relation to the avatar we are controlling: perhaps our peculiar avatar represents a person after all (if so, does it represent a fictional person, or does it represent us as players, or does it represent the game's creator?), or perhaps we are the leaf on the wind speaking out to a person (perhaps speaking back at the poet with the poet's own words?). This is a fascinating case of triangulated address and poetic "ventriloquism" that can only really be achieved by interactive media. It is also an example of complex apostrophe, where as players we find ourselves uncertain about whether we are addressing a leaf on the wind (whether via text or interaction), or whether someone is addressing *us* as a leaf on the wind; either way, the game positions itself in the lyric tradition of apostrophe:

> The most blatant invocation of triangulated address is the invocation of impossible addresses, such as unseen powers: "O wild West Wind, though breath of autumn's being" (Shelley, "Ode to the West Wind"), or creatures and things unlikely to answer—a lion, a ship, death, a swan, the earth.[113]

Seasonal Mixtape's subsequent vignettes play on and intensify the triangulated address established in the game's first scene. They also bring out additional aspects of the game's poetic quality as it becomes increasingly clear that the game's creator is not relaying a fictional narrative, but attempting to say something True about life, autumn leaves, and footsteps in the snow. But now we are entering the domain of our next topic: ritual space.

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[113] Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 187.

3.1.4 Lyric poems exist in a ritual space, rather than a narrative space.

Poetic address is one example of how lyric poems tend to exist in a kind of ritual space: they don't *describe events*, so much as they exist to *be events*:[114] to be performed and reperformed in what Culler calls the "lyric present." To engage a poem is to "participate in a *ritual* of sensitivity and self-awareness," says Marjorie Perloff.[115] Rather than describing a fictional scenario, the lyric poem can often be seen as a "forum for direct truth claims about the world on the part of the poet,"[116] due in part to the "existence of one seemingly unmediated consciousness or agency as the centre of the lyric utterance or experience."[117] Again, this sets the lyric apart from mimetic, narrative-first forms like fiction.[118]

Culler cites Philip Larkin's "This Be the Verse" as a poem that offers an obvious example of this kind of truth claim positioning,[119] though we could just as well point to Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise":

> You may shoot me with your words,
> You may cut me with your eyes,
> You may kill me with your hatefulness,
> But still, like air, I'll rise.[120]

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[114] Culler, 16.
[115] Perloff, "Avant-Garde or Endgame?" 554. Emphasis added.
[116] Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 121.
[117] Wolf, "The Lyric: Problems of Definition and a Proposal for Reconceptualisation," 39.
[118] A distinction noted by Culler and by Müller-Zettelmann in *Lyrik Und Metalyrik*. See also Müller-Zettelmann and Rubik, *Theory Into Poetry*, 99.
[119] Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 122.
[120] "Still I Rise," in Angelou, *The Complete Poetry*, 159, ll. 21-24.

This poem presents "utterance" more than narrative, and "not fictional utterance but the real utterance of a subject of enunciation."[121] (We could also look back to Lauryn Hill's "Lost Ones" as another example of this kind of positioning.)

Passage can be read easily in this tradition of performed event, utterance, and truth claim. We have already observed that *Passage* is not particularly interesting from a narrative standpoint if read as "fiction." The game moves us, and yet if we attempt to recount the "story" of what happens in a given playthrough, we find that the recounting misses the mark; in fact—I would argue—there is nothing very interesting to say at the level of story: "I was this person, and then I think I got married to this other person, and then we collected treasure which I think was a metaphor, and then we died."[122] We are left clutching for words, and might finish with something like, "If you had *been there* you'd understand; if you *played the game yourself*, you'd get it." From a lyric standpoint we might say that this is because *Passage* does not "describe an event"; rather, playing the game *is* an event, and it is *participating* in that event—a kind of ritual—that matters in this case. As with poetry, it is not the narrative arc of *Passage* that moves us, but the moment-to-moment *encounter* as we read/play: "This is a time of discourse, rather than of story . . . Fiction is about what happens next; lyric is about what

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[121] Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 121.
[122] As with *Loneliness*, I find that narratological readings of *Passage* can be fruitful, but also miss the mark for me. It seems strange to describe *Passage* as a "good narrative," for instance, as Sezen does, even if it has some narrative elements (though I appreciate Sezen's analysis of the game). See Sezen, "Narrative Explorations in Videogame Poetry," 234.

happens *now.*[123] Similar observations can be made about *Loneliness*, *The Graveyard*, *Portraits of My Child*, and *Seasonal Mixtape*.

As with most characteristics of the lyric, this aspect of ritual quality does not stand on its own, but is tied in a mutually-reinforcing web to all of the other characteristics we are examining: the ritual nature of *Passage* comes out in part through its short form and the way that it eschews traditional gameplay and narrative; this ritual nature points us, in turn, to aspects of poetic address at play, and the idea that the game doesn't seem to be concerned with telling a story, crafting a simulation, or building flow so much as with making truth claims about the world.

Let's consider the relation between ritual space and truth claims with another example: Pippin Barr's *A Series of Gunshots*, a short game from 2015 that offers the player a simple series of single-screen vignettes. The game displays some initial text asking the player to "press any key to continue," then moves on to an initial randomly chosen vignette. Each vignette presents a black-and-white illustration of a different urban or suburban scene (an apartment complex, a house), along with some ambient white noise; no instructions are given to inform the player of how to proceed. But the game's initial text is the only instruction that's needed: press any key, and the player sees a window light up, and the sound of a gunshot is played. This can be repeated once or twice, and then the current

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[123] Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 226. Emphasis added.

scene fades away and gives place to a new one. After a few scenes like this the game ends.

Upon release, *A Series of Gunshots* garnered widespread attention and praise for its treatment of gun violence. Game creator and critic Paolo Pedercini called it "a minimalist gem that may be the most poignant playable commentary on gun violence to date,"[124] and the game culture website Kill Screen published an article titled "A Series of Gunshots Calls Out Senseless Gun Violence in Games."[125]

Pedercini and Kill Screen are not precisely "wrong." But to take their comments at face value is to fail to notice something about *A Series of Gunshots*: namely, that it is a very *lyric* videogame. If violence is being called out here, we should also take notice of *how* it is being called out. Kill Screen, for instance, goes into detail on what kind of "statement" the game is making about guns—but a lyric reading would note that the game itself is *not that statement*. The game is not so much a statement at all, as it is an *enactment and re-enactment of an ambiguous event* (something that is in many ways closer to Amy Lowell's ambiguous "Circumstance" poem than it is to being a "commentary").

Why, then, do we want to read it as making truth claims? *Precisely because it is such a lyric game*: short, metaphoric, hyperbolic, and ritualistic in the time-honored tradition of poetry.[126] Poems, as Culler points out, have always been forums for expressing "direct truth claims about the world." It is the fact that *A*

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[124] Pedercini, "Top Ten 2015 Games You Don't Have to Play."
[125] Rudin, "A Series of Gunshots Calls out Senseless Gun Violence in Games."
[126] We will examine metaphor and hyperbole shortly.

Series of Gunshots is so poem-like that allows us to recognize that it is making truth claims—but because we lack a language that would allow us to successfully read videogames as poems we fail to note that the game expresses its truth claims not through statement or commentary, but by being a kind of ritual event—an "enacted" truth claim—in the same way that lyric poems have always been.

Figure 7: A scene from *A Series of Gunshots*. The right frame shows a window lit up by gunfire.

As I have already noted, many of my own games operate in the same basic ritual mode as *Passage* and *A Series of Gunshots*, but in several cases I have unintentionally blurred the line between the enacted truth claim of ritual event, and the more explicit or didactic truth claim of statement or commentary. *Loneliness*, for example, presents a kind of ambiguous ritual utterance which, in the tradition of lyric poetry, attempts to say something True about my deeply personal, deeply subjective (but at the same time universal) experience of loneliness—but it also presents an end screen full of textual information about the

game's context of creation and studies relating to loneliness in South Korea.[127]

This juxtaposition has caused confusion for some players who have been unsure

of whether to read the game as poetry or as an educational message (or worse: as

some sort of propaganda).[128] I think of the game as a poem, and the end-text as

nothing more than a bit of context, but an explicit (and forced) indication of

context always carries with it the danger of diminishing a poem's ambiguity and

breaking the ritual moment on which lyric poetry tends to rely. I think this is

especially true for *game poems* since we lack a well-developed conception of

videogames as poetry, and it is an uphill battle to get players to receive a game as

a form of poetic expression in the first place. Had I to do it over gain, I would

leave this kind of contextual information out of any games I intended as poems,

or, at most, provide it in a frame that is clearly separate from the game proper (as

Rohrer does with the "creator's statements" he distributes with some of his

games).[129]

Cautionary tales aside, there is a sense in which videogames as a whole lend

themselves naturally to ideas of "ritual space" (as some scholars have noted[130])

because they are inherently interactive and performative: they must *be performed*

to be encountered, and every performance results in something unique (which

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[127] I originally made the game while living and teaching in Korea.

[128] See for example Walker, "Ghosts of the Horseshoe," in which *Loneliness* is read as a "message" game (18) "about the loneliness faced by Korean children" (19).

[129] I do believe that words can be used for poetic intention in videogames (and will look at an example of this shortly in Anna Anthropy's *Dys4ia*), but because of their semantic nature such use requires careful thought and attention. It can be easy to convey an impression of didacticism, to fall into a narrative mode, or to position's one work closer to digital poetry than to videogames—of course, none of these outcomes are problematic if they are intended or desired.

[130] See Gazzard and Peacock, "Repetition and Ritual Logic in Video Games"; Wagner, *Godwired: Religion, Ritual and Virtual Reality*; Hong, "When Life Mattered."

goes for everything from strategy games to narrative-focused games). But as we have just seen, that ritual dimension can easily be overshadowed by other aspects of the experience—particularly if we are focused on another interpretive lens and don't have the language for talking about ritual space as part of some larger tradition.

3.1.5 Lyric poems are hyperbolic

Some poems are explicitly hyperbolic, as when Anne Bradstreet writes:

> I prize thy love more than whole mines of gold,
> Or all the riches that the East doth hold.
> My love is such that rivers cannot quench,
> Nor ought but love from thee give recompense.[131]

But scholars note that lyric poems have an *implicit* hyperbolic character even when they are more reserved, due to their short form and tendency towards direct truth claims: "Like indirect address, hyperbole is a fundamental characteristic of the lyric which, when not manifest, takes the form of an underlying convention: that apparently trivial observations are of considerable significance."[132] Wolf calls this the "relative unimportance" found commonly in the lyric tradition.[133]

Whether they are making grand claims about the world, or asking you to care about a blade of grass, lyric poems hazard to animate the world, "investing mundane objects or occurrence with meaning,"[134] and constantly risk the reader

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[131] Bradstreet, "To My Dear and Loving Husband," in Hall, *Puritans in the New World*, 188–89, ll. 5-8.
[132] Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 259.
[133] Wolf, "The Lyric: Problems of Definition and a Proposal for Reconceptualisation," 39.
[134] Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 38.

responding with either a snicker or a shrug of the shoulders—"why should I believe?" or "why should I care?"

As with written poetry, we can identify multiple levels at which hyperbole operates in videogames. In *Passage* we see explicit hyperbole at work in the game's mechanical handling of what seems to be a clear metaphor for marriage or civil union: when the player character approaches the non-player character a heart spawns between them, after which point the player character can no longer go on alone: wherever they go, the NPC goes too. It's as if the two sprites have become, effectively, a single avatar for the player to control; because the two sprites together have a larger pixel footprint than either of the sprites alone, choosing union means that certain narrow passages between obstacles will no longer be accessible to the player to pass through. Very well: *uniting with a partner may have its joys and benefits, but also means that certain life trajectories available to a single person are no longer an option*—the basic metaphor at work here appears fairly obvious, and has been noted by many scholars:[135] But how is this metaphor driven home? Through *hyperbole*. Consider the intractable mechanic which governs the union: the game is in effect saying that civil partnership is like being *glued* to another person—you can't even take two steps without them! As Doris Rusch points out, some players "complain that, once you run into the companion, you're stuck with her."[136] But at the same time, we realize that *Passage* is not

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[135] See, for example, Rusch, *Making Deep Games*; Wardrip-Fruin, "Beyond Shooting and Eating: Passage, Dys4ia, and the Meanings of Collision," 140.
[136] Rusch, *Making Deep Games*, 39.

making this glue-marriage claim *literally*: it is a form of speech—it is hyperbole. "Rohrer uses simulation as a declaration of love for his wife: life is richer and more rewarding with you"[137]—or in Bradstreet's words, "*I prize thy love more than whole mines of gold.*"

Implicit hyperbole is also at work in videogames, and in multiple ways. First, let's consider the kind of implicit hyperbole that Culler points out, where mundane objects are invested with meaning, and "apparently trivial observations are of considerable significance . . . a leaf falls; an old man sits on a doorstep; a dog barks in the distance."[138] We see this kind of hyperbole at work clearly in Ian Bogost's game *A Slow Year* (right down to the particular image of a leaf falling).[139]

In *A Slow Year* (a game made in 2010 for the venerable Atari 2600) the player is presented with a series of short vignettes ("game poems" as Bogost calls them[140]), one for each season: the first vignette is about collecting a pile of leaves from an autumnal tree; the second is about drinking coffee on a cold winter morning; the third involves timing lightning strikes on a rainy spring day; the fourth centers on a floating stick in a summer stream. Each game is difficult, slow, and enigmatic, accompanied only by a riddling haiku for instructions. The process of playing *A Slow Year* goes something like this: one starts the game and

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[137] Rusch, 39.
[138] Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 260.
[139] Additional examples of this kind of implicit hyperbole can be found in Ed Key and David Kanaga's *Proteus*, Joost Eggermont's *The Wanderer*, and my own *Walk or Die*, among many other games.
[140] A relatively rare example of a videogame's creator explicitly positioning their work in direct relation to poetry.

doesn't understand what to do; one searches for instructions and eventually finds the instructional haikus hidden deep within the game's accompanying *physical book*; one attempts to decipher the instructional haikus while returning to the game, and eventually, after much patience, determines that the goal of the first vignette is to painstakingly catch leaves with a basket as they fall off of the autumnal tree—painstakingly, because the wind may take them in any direction, and can only be read well with much practice.
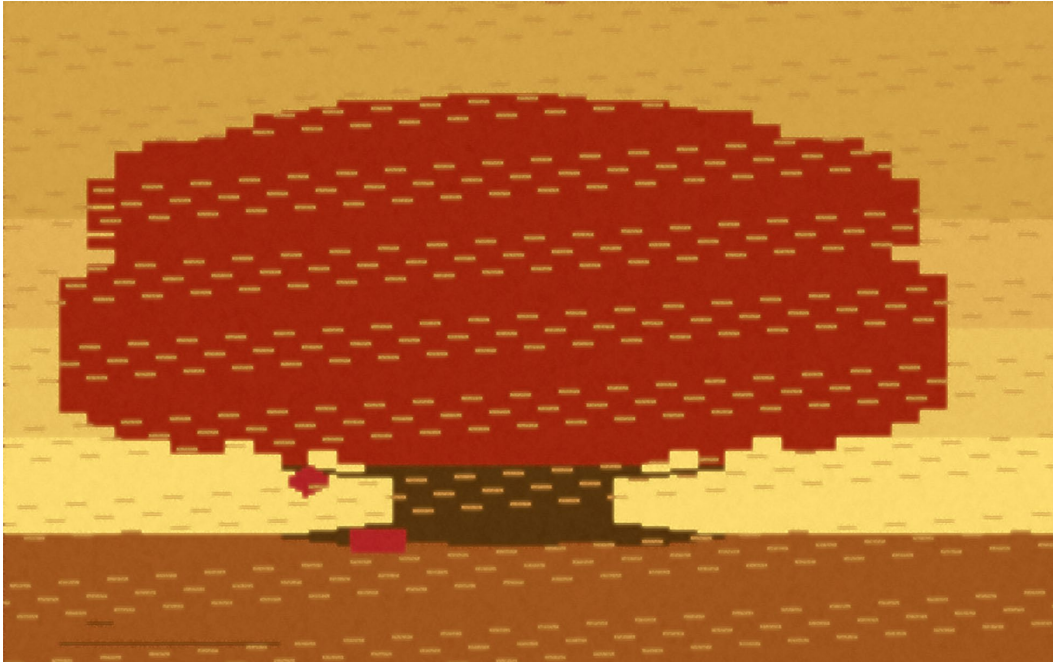
Figure 8: *A Slow Year*'s first vignette. The speed and direction of wind is indicated by an ever-shifting check pattern.

As an example of implicit hyperbole in written poetry, Culler gives one of William Carlos Williams's observational poems:

> munching a plum on
> the street a paper bag
> of them in her hand

> They taste good to her
> They taste good
> to her. They taste
> good to her.[141]

Culler notes that in this poem we are expected to take the proposition "They taste good to her" as somehow revelatory, "a suggestion that such simple pleasures as eating a plum that tastes good should be central to our experience of the world."[142] Similarly, in the first vignette of *A Slow Year*, we are invited to take as revelatory an interactive and computational analog of a statement to the effect of, "A leaf falls. A leaf falls. A leaf falls."

It is the pomp and ceremony, the difficulty and the enigma that surrounds *A Slow Year* that makes it particularly hyperbolic: the fact that you must pay attention, work hard, and decipher haikus in order to arrive at a statement/image about a falling leaf. Most striking, perhaps, is the fact that the game was painstakingly crafted in 2010 for a console that went out of fashion decades earlier—and one which is notoriously difficult to program.[143] The game as an artifact seems to practically scream at the player: *pay attention to this falling leaf! It's important!* If Williams's Old Woman poem is implicitly hyperbolic for how it suggests that something perfectly ordinary is central to our experience of the world, *A Slow Year* is even more so.

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[141] Quoted in Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 260; See also "To a Poor Old Woman," in Williams, *Selected Poems*, 97.
[142] Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 260.
[143] See Montfort and Bogost, *Racing the Beam*; Bogost, *A Slow Year: Game Poems*.

Passage is not implicitly hyperbolic in precisely the same way that *A Slow Year* is, from the perspective of content: *Passage*, after all, is about life and death, and most people will acknowledge the importance of those themes (as compared, for example, with eating a plum or observing a falling leaf). Why, then, have some people made accusations that amount to *Passage* being a kind of hyperbolic overstatement?[144]

The reason for these accusations is that *Passage* is hyperbolic for how it makes implicit claims about the place of *videogames as a medium*. It is hyperbolic not because its content is seemingly trivial, but because of the formal characteristics it brings to bear on that content: it is hyperbolic for daring to be a game about life and death while also being uncompromisingly short, lacking substantial narrative or gameplay "hooks," and being technologically backwards facing (like *A Slow Year, Passage* eschews high fidelity 3D visuals and sound for pixelated 8-bit era sprites and chiptune music). By essentially claiming that a short, 8-bit videogame can handle themes of the magnitude of human life and death, *Passage* is making a strong claim about the capacity of videogames as a medium, and one which could easily be perceived as exaggerated.

Returning to my own game-making practice, I see much of my work as defined by an interplay of these various kinds of hyperbole: explicit hyperbole at the level of metaphor (people "running away" from you in *Loneliness*) combined

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[144] The best-known example of this type of reaction is perhaps Marcus Richert's interactive parody, *Passage in 10 Seconds*. See Wardrip-Fruin, "Beyond Shooting and Eating: Passage, Dys4ia, and the Meanings of Collision," 140–41.

with an insistence that the mundane as well as the sacred aspects of human experience are both squarely within the purview of short expressive videogames. Consider my game *Grandmother*, a short HyperCard-like game in which the player clicks on a series of still images to traverse a columbarium, then navigates an ambiguous input scheme to slowly wash a headstone using a bucket and sponge.

Grandmother plays with the intersection of the mundane and the sacred along with the juxtaposition of understatement and hyperbole. As in *Passage*, *Grandmother's* manifest theme of death is self-evidently important and serious, but unlike *Passage*, *Grandmother* intentionally plays down the drama and gravitas of its theme, pressing instead into the mundane nature of the player's task: there is no background music, the photos are full of ordinary objects and castoff construction materials, and the player's final act is not to die, but to squeegee a headstone and leave the space. The game is thus simultaneously understated while also being hyperbolic at the level of medium-specific claims. By implying that a contemporary gamer should take the time to play a patently ugly game about cleaning a headstone (with its dull photos, lit by a glaring midday sun, the game lacks even the retro-aesthetic draw of games like *Passage* or *A Slow Year*), *Grandmother* suggests that such mundane tasks should be "central to our experience of the world,"[145] while also claiming that videogames

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[145] Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 260.

at their most rudimentary can and should be concerned with *every aspect* of that experience—much as lyric poems have always been.

Figure 9: Cleaning the headstone in *Grandmother*.

The value of identifying lyric hyperbole in games is twofold: first, the ability to identify explicit hyperbole gives us room to consider that videogames—like poems—may intentionally overstate something in order to get at a certain truth. This offers an important alternative to reading any form of exaggeration as simply "unrealistic," which has been a common tack when it comes to videogames, since it is often presumed that the goal of all games is to attain higher and higher levels of indexically-grounded "realism" [146] (tied to what Alexander Galloway calls mainstream gaming's "fetish for realistic gaming scenarios"[147]).

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[146] As a reminder, in semiotics "indexicality" refers to the phenomenon of a sign denoting a signified because of some *actual connection* between sign and signified (see Peirce's discussion of

Second, the ability to identify implicit hyperbole in games like *Passage*, *A Slow Year*, and *Grandmother* allows us to position these games relative to other forms (like lyric poetry), which have always had implicit hyperbole as part of their DNA. This positioning, in turn, allows us to normalize such hyperbole, and to see its value as a long-utilized device that can uniquely call our attention to the surprising possibilities found in the aspects of our lives we might otherwise ignore or diminish—whether the falling of an autumn leaf, the movement of a sponge on stone, or the potential of an 8-bit videogame.

3.1.6 Lyric poems are bound to metaphor and ambiguous imagery

Lyric poems eschew indexical realism, literalism, and mimesis; they rely instead on metaphor and establish meaning via image, context, and comparison. "A definition of poetical style could be to say that it begins with metaphor," says Jacques Lacan.[148] Or in Mary Oliver's words: "The language of the poem is the language of one thing compared to another thing."[149] "'Hope' is the thing with feathers" writes Emily Dickinson.[150] Or consider this passage from Shakespeare:

> Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care,

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indexicality in *Writings of Charles S. Peirce*). This phenomenon has been extensively studied in relation to photography and film (see Bazin and Gray, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image"), because these forms of media present an image of reality that is in some sense created by the thing imaged (and so we might say when speaking informally that the image of a woman in a photo *is* the woman). When I refer to indexicality or indexical realism in relation to videogames I am speaking loosely of videogames' attempts to mirror indexical media in order to borrow their indexical-realism "cachet" (as discussed by scholars like Galloway). Indexical notions of realism tied to the objective world ("this image is real because it's a photo") stand in stark contrast to subjective conceptions of The Real as explored by metaphoric forms like poetry.

[147] Galloway, "Social Realism in Gaming."

[148] Cook, *Poetry in Theory*, 318.

[149] Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook*, 99.

[150] "254," in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 253, ll. 1.

> The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,
> Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
> Chief nourisher in life's feast. . . . [151]

In these few lines Shakespeare compares sleep to knitting, to death, to bathing, to a balm, and to the most nourishing course of a meal, in an extravagance of metaphor that one rarely (if ever) encounters in prose. In "comparing one thing to another" lyric poems *create new meaning*, since every new metaphor casts a word or phrase in new light. As Owen Barfield notes, "Shakespeare enriched the content of 'balm' (and of 'sleep', too) when he called sleep the 'balm of hurt minds.'"[152] The lyric thus stands in contrast to prose, which tends to rely on the established "literal" meanings of words in order to be understood.

In so far as they are tied to metaphor and image, lyric poems are also ambiguous and (to use Harrell's language) *phantasmal*, relying on "combinations of mental imagery and ideology constructed by embodied, distributed, and situated cognitive processes." [153] "A poem should not mean but be," writes William K. Wimsatt, famously,[154] and his advice seems to be taken. What does it mean for hope to be "the thing with feathers," as Emily Dickinson writes? That hope is like a bird perhaps, but what then? Images and meanings for "hope" on one hand and "feathers" on the other will spring to mind for each reader that will

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[151] Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, 2.2.37-40. Note that Culler treats parts of Shakespeare's plays as examples of lyric poetry. See Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 222.
[152] Barfield, *Poetic Diction*, 107.
[153] Harrell, *Phantasmal Media*, 343.
[154] Wimsatt, "The Structure of the 'Concrete Universal' in Literature," 47.

necessarily be heavily tied to each reader's personal history, cultural context, inner and outer experience.[155]

It is this characteristic of ambiguity that often allows poetry to speak more powerfully and universally than prose—but also makes poetry harder to explicate.[156] Where successful prose relies on being clear and unambiguous, good poetry is appreciated, in part, for lines and stanzas which can be mulled over time and again, and which continue to suggest new meanings to a myriad of readers (which connects again to the ritual aspect of poetry: an event to be performed and reperformed).

Can videogames utilize metaphor and ambiguous imagery to give us some of the same satisfaction as lyric poems?

The answer is clearly yes, as has been demonstrated by a wide variety of scholars.[157] Consider *Dys4ia*, an autobiographical game by Anna Anthropy about the experience of transitioning as a trans person. The game presents a sequence of minigames in quick succession, and overflows with metaphor in a way that recalls the Shakespeare passage above. Metaphor in *Dys4ia* works on a number of

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[155] With no possible appeal to dictionary definitions, because no dictionary yet holds this line's meaning: "hope" and "feathers" are being recast in relation to one another, and this recasting is necessarily ambiguous.

[156] Owen Barfield goes so far as to say that our entire conception of poetry is indelibly tied to ambiguity: "The question of whether or no I can call a given group of words 'poetry' is, in fact, immediately dependent on my own inner experiences" (*Poetic Diction*, 34).

[157] There is no shortage of interest in metaphor within game studies. See as a few examples Rusch, *Making Deep Games*; Wardrip-Fruin, "Beyond Shooting and Eating: Passage, Dys4ia, and the Meanings of Collision"; Harrell, *Phantasmal Media*, chap. 4; Bogost, "Frame and Metaphor in Political Games"; Möring, "Games and Metaphor: A Critical Analysis of the Metaphor Discourse in Game Studies"; Kromhout and Forceville, "LIFE IS A JOURNEY"; Gazzard, *Mazes in Videogames*; Grace, "The Poetics of Game Design, Rhetoric and the Independent Game."; Othenin-Girard, "Bodies, Games, and Systems: Towards an Understanding of Embodiment in Games."

different levels, as scholars like Alexei Othenin-Girard and Noah Wardrip-Fruin

have shown.[158] For the moment I would like to focus at the level of *explicit*

metaphor provided by the game's use of text.[159] Most of the minigames in *Dys4ia*

force a comparison between the semantic meaning of a given word or phrase, and

the interactive, representational meaning of the given minigame itself. Sometimes

text appears immediately at the start of a minigame, while at other times it

appears after playing for a few moments. This subtle interplay highlights the

metaphorical nature of the game as it shifts the order of comparison (the "ground"

and "figure" of the metaphor[160]) from minigame to minigame: sometimes the

ground is the interactive, representational component of the minigame, and

sometimes it is the text. Anthropy then mixes up this formula with minigames that

present *some* text at the start, with *additional* text that appears during play—thus

forcing interpretation and reinterpretation of image, text, and play in quick

succession, based on ever shifting semantic cues and comparisons. It is this

constant play around "one thing compared to another" that makes *Dys4ia* a game

about metaphor as much as it is a game *containing* metaphor.

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[158] Othenin-Girard, "Bodies, Games, and Systems: Towards an Understanding of Embodiment in Games"; Wardrip-Fruin, "Beyond Shooting and Eating: Passage, Dys4ia, and the Meanings of Collision."

[159] Strategic use of text is something that "poetry-films" (films which mix words and image) have been incorporating for some time. *Dys4ia*, like a poetry film "expands upon the specific denotations of words and the limited iconic references of images to produce a much broader range of connotations, associations, metaphors. At the same time, it puts limits on the potentially limitless possibilities of meaning in words and images, and directs our responses toward some concretely communicable experience." (See Wees, "The Poetry Film," 109.)

[160] The two parts of a metaphoric comparison have been studied under various names, including "ground and figure," "tenor and vehicle," and "target and source." See Kovecses, *Metaphor*.
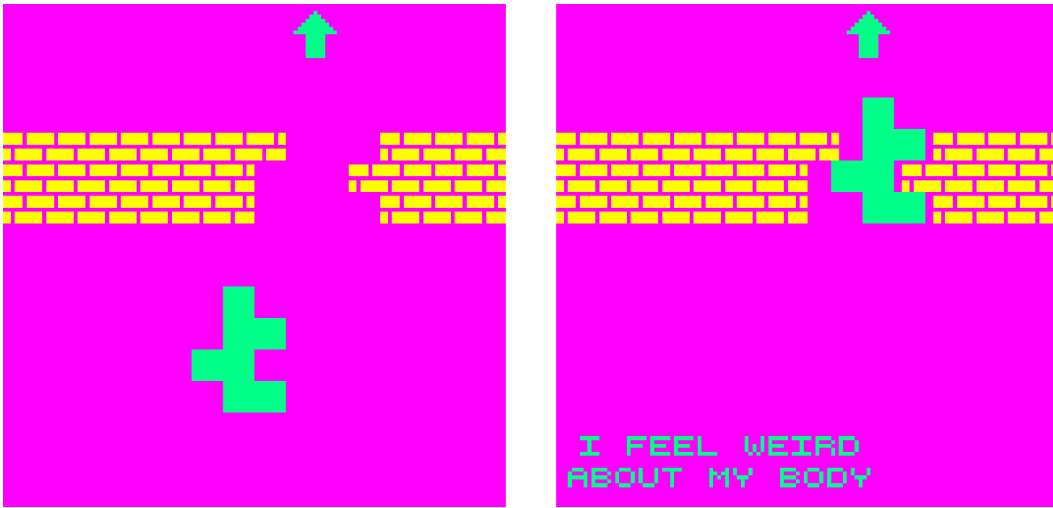
Figure 10: *Dys4ia*'s first minigame.

Consider *Dys4ia's* first minigame (Figure 10). Here we are presented with

something that appears to be a classic puzzle-game-sort-of-challenge: we must

figure out how to move or reshape our avatar in order to pass through a barrier.

But it quickly becomes clear that the challenge is impossible with the toolset the

game provides. As this realization hits, we are presented with the text, "I feel

weird about my body." Our abstract interactive experience must now be

reinterpreted in light of this text, and the text itself must be interpreted in light of

the interactive experience—and in this process, abstract representation, interactive

experience, and text are all "enriched," as Barfield would say. The perplexing

angular shape of our avatar takes on new meaning when juxtaposed with "body,"

and the word "body" takes on new meaning too. The very idea of a videogame

avatar is enriched and enlivened here, as we consider that a jutting piece of a

polyomino can represent not only the abstraction of a physical feature of a human

body—but also the abstraction of a *subjective perception* of a physical feature of a

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human body (objective vs. subjective reality again). Or consider how "feel weird about" is transformed, as the interactive experience here suggests an urgency of frustration (even an impossibility) which the words do not. But those words are no longer the same now. For anyone who plays *Dys4ia*, the phrase "feel weird about" (especially in relation with "body") may now summon a memory of this interactive experience and the impossible challenge presented: the words themselves have been enriched and changed, along with every puzzle game puzzle.

If poetry is about enriching concepts through the process of "one thing compared to another thing," then *Dys4ia* may well be poetry. But regardless of categorization, the important point here is that a lyric lens again helps us appreciate aspects of the game which we may otherwise have overlooked or minimized.

The basic challenge of carving out rich but comprehensible metaphoric meaning is something that I have consciously attempted to navigate in most of my own work. In many of my games I make use of explicitly symbolic representation, relying on simple lines, shapes, and colors to represent player avatars and other aspects of the game world (the use of an abstract aesthetic involving black squares has become something of a trademark style for me[161]). My goal has never been *abstraction*, but rather *complexification* and *ambiguity* through metaphor: my games are about human experience and people after all—

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[161] A style I first employed in 2010 in *Freedom Bridge*, then subsequently in *Loneliness*, *A Brief History of Cambodia*, and my *Stations of the Cross* triptych.

not about lines, shapes, or colors in the abstract. Of course lines and shapes and colors can and do contain meaning "on their own," based on one's experience of these elements in the world—but without grounding (in the sense of "ground" and "figure" when discussing the two parts of a metaphor) that meaning is often so dispersed and phantasmal that it is useless to the poet or game maker. In my experience this is where metaphor breaks and abstraction begins: in an abstract work a square will still be interrogated and interpreted, but it will be interpreted in the context of its broad political, cultural, and ideological positioning, rather than any notion of intentional metaphor. I have found that establishing successful metaphoric meaning in games depends on at least one side of the metaphor being understood and "concrete" enough (we might even say "prosaic" enough) to the player that they can start to think about the comparison being made *as a comparison*, rather than as a one-sided statement (or as nonsense).

To illustrate my point: people have sometimes told me that *Loneliness* is a failure of a game because people cannot make sense of its central meaning without knowing the game's title. I think such comments are misguided because they seem to suggest that an abstract-platonic-mechanical-universal game about loneliness could exist somehow: that is, a kind of metaphoric game consisting only of figure, with no ground (or only ground, with no figure). In my mind it is the game's title that serves as the central ground for *Loneliness*'s intended

meaning, producing a metaphor to the effect of, "loneliness is like *this*."[162] That grounding is what allows the subsequent experience of playing the game, with its ambiguous symbolic representations and mechanics, to be interpreted and considered in a particular light. ("If this game is loneliness, then what are these squares? What is the meaning of these movements?" etc.)[163] In other words, I believe that it is precisely *Loneliness*'s concrete title that allows it to succeed as a metaphoric game, rather than flounder as a mostly abstract one.[164]

Of course, as Mariam Asad reminds us, "a game does not need to explicitly incorporate language in order to be metaphorical."[165] In my game *Freedom Bridge*, it is not the game's title that serves to illuminate the meaning of the player character's square avatar and the red pixels that flow behind it, so much as the square's relation to a recognizable *image* of barbed wire. As another example, in *Portraits of My Child* I rely on both text and image, as well as basic sound and color associations, to craft metaphoric meaning (this button press is a smile because of the text that precedes it, but also because of the color wash and sound effect that ensue from it).

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[162] Or, "This *is* loneliness." I am less concerned with a distinction between simile and metaphor here, than with considering metaphor broadly speaking as any direct comparison of words, images, or signs.

[163] I also believe that, as with *Dys4ia*, the experience of playing the game works to recast and enliven the word "loneliness" itself—not because *Loneliness* is a "great game," but because comparisons always work to subtly alter both the figure and the ground of comparison.

[164] A conclusion that has been supported by some scholars. See for example De Lucena and da Mota, "Games as Expression: On the Artistic Nature of Games," 820.

[165] Asad, "Making It Difficult: Modernist Poetry as Applied to Game Design Analysis," 79.
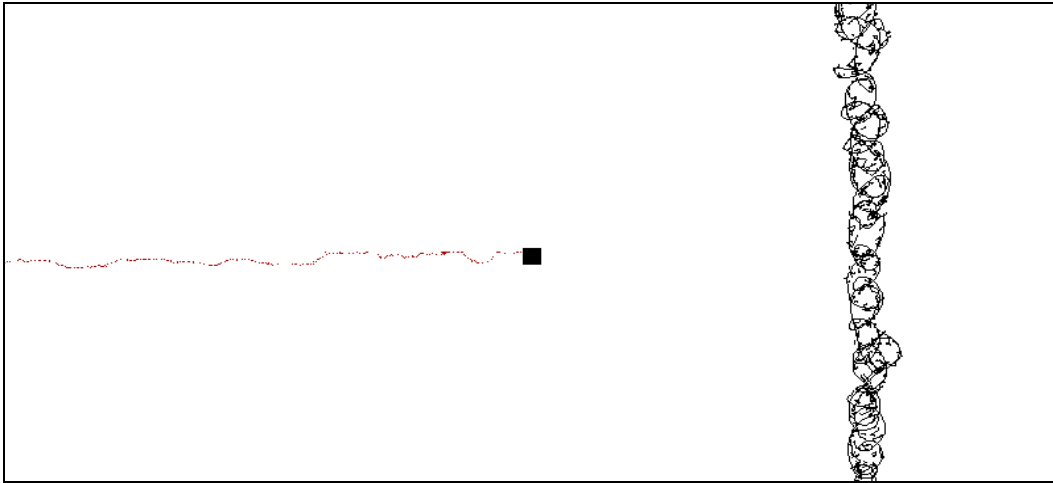
Figure 11: *Freedom Bridge* creates a readable metaphor by comparing a square and some red pixels to a recognizable image of barbed wire.

As scholars have noted, most games feature many layers of metaphor, at different levels of explicitness and intentionality.[166] If we return to *Passage*, there is the metaphor of the compressed, pixelated play space, which we are invited to compare to some idea of "life." There is the metaphor of the avatar that represents the player character, the metaphors of the chests and obstacles the player encounters as they move around the space, and the metaphor of marriage or civil union already discussed.[167] Beyond these, *Passage* (like every videogame) has embedded within it subtle metaphors connected to pixelated representation, user input, and the most basic computational logics (things like sprite movement and collision detection): metaphors that we may take for granted and not even

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[166] See footnote 157.

[167] None of these observations are original. For rich discussion of metaphor as it operates within *Passage* see Rusch, *Making Deep Games*, 38–39; Harrell, *Phantasmal Media*, chap. 4; Wardrip-Fruin, "Beyond Shooting and Eating: Passage, Dys4ia, and the Meanings of Collision."

notice.[168] Pressing the right arrow on your keyboard is compared to the movement of a few pixels on a screen, and those pixels are compared to the image of a person, which is in turn compared to you the player as a person—so you press a bit of plastic, and "you" move through a space that somehow represents your life. Metaphor, within metaphor, within metaphor.

It is easy to get lost here: if all meaning is established through metaphor, then what separates poetry from prose, or a "lyric" videogame from any other kind? An investigation of this question will be the topic of section 4 of this paper. For now, suffice it to say that metaphor works on a continuum ranging from common metaphors that are accepted and "literalized" as part of prose language, to metaphors that are so unexpected (or so abstract) that they risk being broken and unreadable (if we can make no sense of a given comparison). Lyric videogames, like lyric poems, function somewhere in the far middle ground: they make new and unexpected comparisons that enrich concepts and carve out new meaning, while attempting to remain conscious of meaning's breaking point.

3.1.7 Lyric poems juxtapose signified meaning with material meaning.

The sound of words spoken, their shape on a page—these things are of vital concern to lyric poetry, which constantly holds the tension between signified, semantic meaning, and the meaning present in the specific material incarnation of printed or spoken words: the attraction of rhythm, the effect of a line break, the

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[168] See Mateas and Wardrip-Fruin, "Defining Operational Logics." I will discuss these ideas in more depth in section 4 of this paper.

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significance of vibrating vocal cords. An abstract word in a dictionary is not the same thing as a word spoken in a particular context, by a particular human being, at a particular moment in time. "Poetic discourse measures rhythm against the meaning of language structure" says Julia Kristeva in "The Ethics of Linguistics."[169] This play of material vs. signified meaning lies at the heart of the lyric's fascination with metaphor (as we have just seen), and is ultimately what all the major lyric devices (rhythm, repetition, rhyme, turning of the line, etc.) attempt to explore in one way or another.[170]

Let's consider rhythm. "There seems widespread agreement among poets and theorists about the centrality of rhythm to lyric," writes Culler. It is the "basis of any poetic work," says Vladimir Mayakovsky.[171] But what is rhythm? It is a bodily experience of repetition and beat, a felt happening, "an event without representation."[172] And so in a poem, words with their semantic meanings are carefully and intentionally brought into contrast with this material aspect that lacks semantic meaning, but which is an undeniably significant aspect of the poem as encountered experience: "One can argue that it is the rhythm above all that makes lyrics attractive, seductive, and memorable."[173]

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[169] Kristeva, "The Ethics of Linguistics," 444.
[170] See: Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, chap. 4; Wolf, "The Lyric: Problems of Definition and a Proposal for Reconceptualisation," 39; Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook*; Nänny, "Diagrammatic Iconicity in Poetry."
[171] Mayakovsky, "How Are Verses Made?," 147.
[172] Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 138.
[173] Culler, 137.

Eavan Boland points us to Blake's "The Tyger," with its famous opening

stanza:[174]

> Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
> In the forests of the night,
> What immortal hand or eye
> Could frame thy fearful symmetry?[175]

"This is a lyric that has generated a vast literature of interpretation," notes Culler,

"most of which passes over its rhythmic structure, but what is most striking about

it, what makes it a compelling poem, rather than a prose reflection on the power

of creation, or on the threat of the French Revolution, or anything else, is its

rhythm"; a rhythm that creates a kind of "hypnotic incantation" that connects back

to lyric conceptions of ritual space.[176]

Do videogames have rhythm? Of course they do: rhythms of sound and

image, but also rhythms tied to inputs and interactions, as has been noted by other

scholars comparing videogames to poetry.[177] As Lindsay Grace points out:

> All of the rhythms of game verbs, and all the rests between experiences
> come in the form of a level. Even when level is less explicit, the stanza
> reveals itself as a marker of moment. Achievements become stanzas, as
> progress is formed into stanza through leveling up. . . . In fact it is this
> rhythm of game play that is so essential to game experiences.[178]

Contrast the experience of playing a game like *The Graveyard* to playing

Adam Saltsman's infinite runner, *Canabalt*. Both of these games, like Blake's

[174] Strand and Boland, *The Making of a Poem*, xxv.
[175] "The Tyger," in Blake, *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience*, 37, ll. 1-4.
[176] Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 141.
[177] See Asad, "Making It Difficult: Modernist Poetry as Applied to Game Design Analysis"; Papa, *Poetic Videogames*; Grace, "The Poetics of Game Design, Rhetoric and the Independent Game."
[178] Grace, "The Poetics of Game Design, Rhetoric and the Independent Game.," 4–5.

"The Tyger," contain signifying aspects which can be fruitfully considered from a hermeneutic standpoint—but as with "The Tyger," to neglect the material meaning present in each game's rhythm is to neglect a central part of our encountered experience. I would hazard that *Canabalt* is a game which, like Blake's poem, I find "attractive, seductive, and memorable" *primarily* for its rhythm: a fast, staccato repetition of sounds, images, and inputs that is nothing if not a "hypnotic incantation." *Canabalt*'s rhythm is why I keep playing it, and why the game's images stay with me long after I have stepped away from my controller. Like a hypnotic lyric poem, the game stays in my body and in my mind until I slowly start to parse questions of what it *means* at any number of levels[179]—but would I bother to consider this game's narrative, its politics, its systems, or other aspects of its meaning if I had not first been so completely captured by its rhythm? I think not.

The Graveyard is a different case: its rhythm is much subtler than *Canabalt*'s, but it is present in my long-press of the forward key, the soft repetition of the old woman's shuffling gait (first faltering steps, then a consistent hop that creates a "crunch, crunchy-crunch" rhythm of her shoes on the gravel), and the occasional siren passing outside the cemetery. It is a rhythm which instills a quiet reflectiveness (or boredom) in the player, in stark contrast to the effect of *Canabalt*'s high-octane tempo.

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[179] Questions which I and others have investigated. See Magnuson, "Canabalt: A One Button Miracle"; Parkin, "Don't Stop"; MacGregor, "What I Talk about When I Talk about Endless Running."
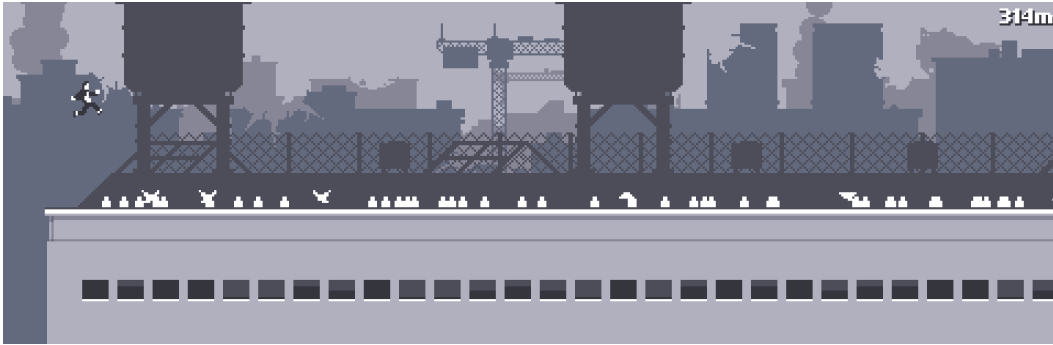
Figure 12: *Canabalt*

Of course, it is possible (and right) to say that all videogames contain rhythm, just as it is possible (and right) to say that all writing contains rhythm. The distinction between lyric poems and most prose is the way in which lyric poems intentionally bring that rhythm to bear. Sometimes they do this by utilizing particularly striking rhythms, as in "The Tyger" (and in most metered verse). But even unmetered lyric poems shine an implicit light on their rhythm, as a byproduct of their short form.[180] As I noted in section 3.1.1, the fact that lyric poems are short *is not an accident, or a failure at the level of entertainment, but rather a characteristic which positions them within a tradition of lyric works, works that beg you to pay attention, to consider their every word, every line break, every sound and image.*

It is *The Graveyard's* short form and lyric positioning that suggest the potential fruitfulness of a lyric reading, which leads us to pay attention to its every detail, and which consequently brings the game's quiet rhythm and intentional

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[180] "This quick response to the prevailing rhythmic pattern is true of 'free' verse as well as metrical verse, even though the pattern in free-form poems is less mathematically measurable than it is in metric verse" (Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook*, 43).

pacing to bear. And once we are considering that rhythm and pacing, it is easy to see what a strong effect it has on our experience of play. Imagine the old woman with any other kind of gait; imagine the bench placed half the distance away from our starting location; imagine an input scheme which required the player to tap the forward arrow key over and over rather than simply holding it down. Each of these slight alterations would produce a significantly different experience of play, though the game's signifiers (its recognizable images and such) would remain the same. This is the juxtaposition of signified meaning and material meaning that lyric poetry (or from a reading standpoint: lyric *poetics*) is interested in, as it explores the question of how every material detail impacts our experience of encounter with a signifying artifact (even if we lack words to express exactly why or how)—an observation that other kinds of reading are prone to miss.

Given our foundational understanding of lyric devices—that their core function is to draw attention to the interplay of signified and material meaning present in lyric poetry—we can easily explore ways in which others of these devices might have analogs in videogames, as well as the potential of videogames to utilize new and unique lyric devices of their own.

In my own creative practice, I have found that the questions I am asking constantly while making my games are questions that correlate strongly with poets' historical interest in lyric devices and the interplay of signified and material meaning. Questions like:

1. What is the best word [mechanic] to use at a particular place in the poem [game], and why?

2. How does the rhythm of a certain string of words [inputs] create an effect which compliments and heightens a poem's [game's] theme?
3. Where should the line [interactive flow] break?[181]

Consider my game *The Heart Attack*, a fictional game about two disparate lives (one Vietnamese, one American) that collide in conflict during the Vietnam/American War. The game presents a kind of double slideshow that juxtaposes images of these two individuals growing up through the years: we see them with their parents, playing with friends, going to school, etc.; the player, meanwhile, must press inputs in time with a steady beat to keep two different hearts going as represented by two pulse graphs that overlay the images. Initially this is an easy task, but as the two lives are drawn into the chaos of war the racing heartbeats become more and more difficult to preserve.

The Heart Attack creates a constant, explicit rhythm that is highly intentional, because I see it is a game *about* the rhythm of daily life—and how that rhythm is broken down by war (it doesn't matter how hard the player tries: they can't keep the rhythm going). The game also utilizes a kind of visual/thematic *rhyme scheme* by juxtaposing images for the two individuals that are initially identical (at the embryo stage), and then consistently thematically linked—something that is not necessarily clear during play, but which becomes evident when the photos are played backward together at the end of the game, and provides, I believe, an increased formal and thematic unity.

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[181] As just one reference point, Mary Oliver's *A Poetry Handbook* is full of these kinds of questions.

Figure 13: *The Heart Attack* challenges the player to keep an impossible rhythm going.

To touch briefly on two more examples from my practice: when making *The Killer* (a game about a single murder during a genocide), I thought a lot about lyric building blocks like pacing, rhythm, turning of the line. There's a long, long march, then a sudden, single decision: a structure I use to try and prompt reflection, draw attention, and wake the player up. This kind of slow build towards a single "line break" or "rhythm break" or "rhyme break" moment is evident in many of my games, with subtle variations, in a way that recalls the consistent presence of these features in lyric poetry. As Mary Oliver states,

"Always, at the end of each line there exists—inevitably—a brief pause. This pause is part of the motion of the poem, as hesitation is part of the dance."[182]

Figure 14: *The Killer* hinges on rhythm, pacing, and a sudden "turning of the line."

When Gold Is in the Mountain (a "digging simulator" about the quest for gold, in dialogue with a poem from Rilke's *Book of Hours*[183]) utilizes a similar basic structure to *The Killer*, but rather than holding down a button to walk (an input scheme designed to invoke stillness and prompt reflection in *The Killer*), the player of *When Gold Is in the Mountain* must press the main input button multiple times to complete a single dig cycle with their shovel—resulting in a relentless and futile pounding of the controller designed to invoke the themes of invasion

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[182] Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook*, 54.
[183] See Barrows, *Rilke's Book of Hours*.

and insatiability at play. (I experimented with using multiple different buttons to activate the dig cycle, rather than a single button, but found that such a scheme resulted in an input rhythm that felt like a dance, or a song, where I wanted something that evoked the pounding of a piston or drill.) The question of how to map inputs in games like these—and how that mapping impacts the felt experience of the game—is not an afterthought for me, but a central concern that I see as deeply connected to lyric poetics and the historical use of lyric devices.

Figure 15: *When Gold Is in the Mountain* demands a relentless pounding of the player's controller.

3.2 Final thoughts

I hope that I have begun to show that lyric poetry can be a useful lens for videogames: that such a lens can help us understand and appreciate certain games and certain aspects of certain games better. I see my probing as a start towards

one possible version of a poetics of the lyric for videogames—but just a start, and just one possible version.

As I have tried to capture in the sections above, most of the lyric characteristics that I have been examining build on and reinforce each other: short form, poetic address, and hyperbole come together to naturally reinforce conceptions of *ritual space*, for example; short form, metaphor, and ritual space meanwhile lend themselves to reinforcing the exploration of *subjectivity*; etc. This is only natural, since these characteristics have reinforced each other for centuries through the development and evolution of lyric poetry. I've attempted to examine each characteristic somewhat independently, but such an approach has its challenges.

In my experience, as poems or games feature more of these interdependent characteristics, they position themselves more and more strongly as lyric artifacts, which then encourages further lyric reading and explication (and indeed, we start to look to such artifacts to provide hints regarding what "the lyric" is all about in the first place). Because of this, it is easy for the practice of lyric *reading* to turn into a kind of lyric *categorization*: such and such poems are *lyric poems*, such and such games are *lyric games*.

This kind of classification process may have its useful place,[184] but I am also wary of ways it may serve to encourage dichotomization, as taxonomies tend to do. For pragmatic reasons I have limited my analysis above to short expressive

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[184] As Lindsay Grace suggests in "The Poetics of Game Design, Rhetoric and the Independent Game" (6).

games that might easily be classified as "game poems," but as I have already

mentioned, such *classification* is not my primary interest. I am not keen to

separate "lyric" or "poetic" games from their "nonlyric" or "nonpoetic"

counterparts, but rather to ask how a lyric reading might help us better appreciate

a wide variety of videogames.[185] Does such a reading provide us with any new

insight, anything new to talk about, etc.? I do not see the lyric lens as precluding

or replacing other lenses, but rather as complementing other lenses. The point is

identifying and illuminating aspects of games that other lenses may disregard or

downplay.

I have already noted that there are several characteristics of the lyric that

seems to lend themselves in special ways to videogames as a medium—

videogames are naturally enacted, performative, and ritualistic, for instance—so it

should not be surprising that longer games which might be more focused on

narrative, or traditional modes of gameplay, could still contain moments that feel

"lyric" or "poetic." Where a holistic lyric reading of short expressive games like

Passage or *Loneliness* may give us a new angle from which to think about the

value of these games and their place in the world, a lyric reading of longer, more

traditional games may help increase our appreciation of some particular aspect of

such games: the kind of felt effect a certain moment has, and how it achieves that

effect.

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[185] I am particularly wary of creating a category of "lyric videogames" comprised of games that
might be thought of as "sentimental" or "intimate" in a clichéd nod towards certain kinds of
poems—which is not what lyric poetry or lyric poetics is about in my mind.

Figure 16: *Super Metroid*'s "broken" save portal (screenshot by Jeremy Parish[186]).

I will share two brief examples of the sort of thing I am thinking of. First: in Yoshio Sakamoto's 1994 action-adventure game *Super Metroid*, the moment of encountering a broken save portal. *Super Metroid* uses a convention—common in many games of the era—of allowing the player to save their progress by positioning their avatar over "save portals" scattered around the game's levels and pressing a certain button on their controller. There is one save portal, however, that initially seems to be broken: no matter what buttons are pressed, it does not allow the player to save their game. When I came upon this portal when first playing *Super Metroid* I was confused and frustrated—until I realized that the save portal didn't work because I was in a wrecked ship within the game's world,

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[186] Parish, "The Anatomy of Super Metroid: The Phantoon Menace."

and the ship's "power" was cut off. At that moment my mind was blown to see the diegetic and non-diegetic aspects of the game and its UI come together that way. It was a powerful moment that has stayed with me, and one that turns on what might be thought of (from a lyric perspective) as the breaking of a simple, functional "rhyme."

Figure 17: Brothers on a bench in *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons.*

My second example is from *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons*, a 2013 adventure game directed by Josef Fares about two brothers who go on a quest to save their ill father. The game alternates between tricky puzzles, wondrous encounters, scary moments, and heavy themes. In all of this, one of my favorite design features is the presence of park benches scattered throughout the game's world which serve no obvious purpose except to allow the brothers to sit down for a moment and take in the landscape. From a lyric perspective, these benches strike me as functioning like "line breaks" or "stanza breaks" within the game: they disrupt the rhythm of the game, create space, a moment for pause, a moment to

appreciate what's going on and realize that that there is intentionality here—*someone is crafting this, pay attention*.

I think that the systematic application of a lyric lens to longer videogames like these could yield surprising food for thought and discussion, with the potential to enhance our appreciation of games that we might never think of as particularly analogous to lyric poems.

4. Towards a praxis of poetic intervention for videogame creators

I believe that a poetics of the lyric can be a valuable tool for the videogame scholar and critic because it allows them to identify and talk about appreciable characteristics of videogames that can slip through the cracks of other approaches.

Additionally, as a game maker who thinks of the games I make as poems, I am happy to find that developing this kind of poetics helps me talk about my own work in a way that feels resonant. But speaking as a creator, I believe that something more is needed. Poetics is a useful tool when it comes to reading and explicating, but I don't think it is adequate to serve as a foundation for creative *practice*. I have been searching for a vocabulary that would allow me to discuss the interesting bits of the games I make, and a poetics of the lyric offers some assistance in that regard. But I am also keen to develop a vocabulary for discussing my *approach* to game creation itself—which begins before poetics and is not about checking off a list of lyric characteristics as I make my games. This

section of the paper will thus be focused on the development of a personal, subjectively-grounded *praxis* of poetic intervention that I hope might be useful for myself and other videogame creators seeking to engage with videogames as a medium of poetic expression. In this section I will seek to investigate two questions of practical interest to the hypothetical videogame poet which are not answered by poetics; namely: *what is the material of the videogame poet?* and *what is the purpose of the videogame poet?*

4.1 What is the material of the videogame poet?

Making videogames is a messy business. Visuals must be created, pixel by pixel, or polygon by polygon; sounds must be recorded or synthesized; code must be written, and for that purpose a programming language (or two) must be chosen, and perhaps a development environment. Basic mechanics and interactions must be crafted; narrative arcs and dialogue trees must be written and organized. Platforms must be considered, ranging from operating systems to consoles to virtual machines; hardware configurations and input devices must be taken into account.

How does one make poetry from all this? If poets are "workers in words,"[187] then what is the material of the aspiring videogame poet? Is it game rules and interaction design? Is it operational logics and computational processes? Is it pixels and waveforms? Is it code? Is it the physical underbelly of transistors and circuits? Is it somehow all of these things taken together?

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[187] Cook, *Poetry in Theory*, 144.

In *Racing the Beam*, Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost suggest that creating a "video game, a digital artwork, or a work of electronic literature" is a "creative act that is similar in many ways to writing a poem or taking a photograph,"[188] except for some question of material:

> The creator of a computer work might design circuits and solder chips. Or, this author might write instructions for the integrated circuits and microprocessors of a particular computer, or write software in a high-level programming language, or create 3D models to be added to a virtual world, or edit digital video for embedding in a Web site.[189]

Montfort and Bogost go on to describe five levels at which videogames, due to their complexity, might be considered and analyzed, ranging from reception/operation to interface, form/function, code, and platform. They then give a fascinating account of the expressive constraints and affordances of the Atari VCS, but leave the question of the material of the videogame poet (and how it might differ from the material of the "digital artist" or writer of "electronic literature") hanging tantalizingly in their introduction.

This question of material should not be essentialized any more than the question of the true nature of poetry, but it is nonetheless an important question to consider. The point is not to separate True Videogame Poets from imposters (as if this were a discussion we could even attempt at the present time), but rather to give a starting place to those who might desire to approach videogame creation as an intentional poetic practice, but feel that they are missing a crucial touchstone, namely: a clear perspective on the material they are working with—which is not a

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[188] Montfort and Bogost, *Racing the Beam*, 1.
[189] Montfort and Bogost, 1.

trivial concern. If we know one thing about poets it is that they care for their material very dearly, very particularly: every word, ever punctuation mark, every line break is chosen with care[190]—as Oscar Wilde is said to have said, "A poet can survive everything but a misprint."[191]

Should our videogame poet, then, show this same kind of care as they write the code their programs are composed of, paying careful attention to every *if–then–else* statement and every variable name? Should they focus more broadly on the interactive or procedural nature of what they are crafting? Should they be as particular as possible, and aspire to craft the hardware their creations are played on? And what of "details" like graphics and sound? Are these core concerns, or peripheral matters?

From the perspective of creative practice, it quickly becomes clear that it is impossible to speak meaningfully about fashioning anything like a videogame poem if we cannot identify the core of the material we aspire to work with. As Montfort and Bogost point out, there are *lots and lots* of ways one can start to craft a videogame, and it's easy to get lost on any number of levels.

4.1.1 A few analogies with written poetry

Let's start at the bottom of our messy videogame heap and consider a few analogies with written poetry that might help us narrow our focus. In my practice

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[190] You can find clear and succinct discussion of this topic by a single poet in Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook*. Or if you prefer, vast and unwieldy discussion by many poets in Cook, *Poetry in Theory*.
[191] Pearson, *Oscar Wilde*, 111.

I tend to see the programming languages, the IDEs, the frameworks, the engines as vaguely analogous to poetic forms: some (like free verse) provide few formal constrains, while others (like the villanelle or haiku) are tightly bound and limited, with finished poems/games in the latter case bearing a strong family resemblance because of the shared constraints.[192]

Because I tend to make mostly simple 2D games that can easily be ported between systems, in practice I feel like I am writing free verse much of the time. Java? GameMaker? ActionScript? Python? Multimedia Fusion? Unity? Processing? It makes little difference to me, and I often port my games between engines for the sake of distributing on new platforms. Tightly constrained engines like Pico-8, PuzzleScript, or Bitsy are a different matter, though: these engines make me feel like I'm writing a villanelle or a haiku—I move to them when I am tired of free verse and wish to work within tighter constraints.[193] (As with poetic forms, those adept with these constrained engines can make them do amazing, unpredictable things, but one is still likely to recognize the resulting efforts based on the constraints that birthed them—which is why we can speak somewhat categorically of "Bitsy games" or "Pico-8 games."[194])

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[192] Another analogy that might resonate for some creators is that different programming languages are akin to different spoken languages for a multilingual poet, each with their own sets of sounds and images: a poem in French vs. a poem in German, let's say. This analogy doesn't resonate with me as strongly as the analogy of poetic form, since the range of constraint doesn't seem to match up as well, but it is another perspective to consider. All of my analogies are personal, fluid, and up for debate.

[193] Which has resulted in some of my most fruitful labor.

[194] See for example Daniels, "Bitsy Makes It Easy to Design Small Narrative Games"; Altice, "The Modest Fantasy of the Pico-8."

If programming languages and game engines function as formal constraints for the videogame poet, then is code itself the poetic material I am searching for? Writing code is *writing* after all (assuming one does not use a visual scripting language, God forbid!) and written or compiled code is essential to any videogame. As with the words that make up a poem, a videogame's code can be poured over and written out line by line, and the end result can be messy, or it can be elegant. But these parallels belie the fact that at the code level we are actually fairly distant from the expressive realm with which poetry is most concerned, which is the realm of *felt experience*: that which the reader sees, hears, perceives, and imagines.[195] And here is the issue for game poems: when it comes to instantiated code there are many ways to create nearly identical *felt experiences* for the player, who generally has no ability to discern whether an *if-then-else* statement or a *switch* statement is used to craft any given *effect*—much less whether a visual scripting language was employed. This isn't to suggest that code does not matter, or does not have meaning—code leaves a material trace that is deeply entangled with many layers of meaning, which is the suggested basis for critical code studies[196]—but only that it is not the chief concern of the *poet* who is working with code.[197]

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[195] See Felman, "On Reading Poetry: Reflections on the Limits and Possibilities of Psychoanalytical Approaches." Studies of affect in videogames are highly relevant in regard to poetic notions of "felt experience." See Anable, *Playing with Feelings*.

[196] See Marino, "Critical Code Studies"; Montfort and Bogost, *Racing the Beam*, 147; Montfort et al., *10 PRINT CHR$(205.5+RND(1));*; Harrell, *Phantasmal Media*.

[197] Unless, of course, we are speaking of *code poetry*, a creative practice which involves foregrounding computer code as something to be directly experienced and encountered by the reader—but this is not the realm of most videogames.

From the videogame poet's standpoint we might draw an analogy from a game's code to the ink that marks the page as one writes. The ink matters: it leaves a material trace that is relevant to the nature of poetry,[198] and the words themselves cannot exist on the page without it; beyond this the ink is deeply entangled in important questions of politics, economics, and ideology: where did it come from, how was it attained, what ideological structures are embedded with it on the page?[199] These things can be fruitfully studied and expounded upon, and some poets address them directly—but they are not the major concern of most lyric poets, who might write out what they consider to be the same poem in red ink or in blue.[200] In fact, lyric poems are often said to exist in the poet's head, or in an oral recitation, without being contingent on being written down at all[201]—and this is a crucial idea for game poems (that the core of the poem can exist in the mind of the poet before anything is instantiated in code), because it helps narrow our material focus.

All of this being said, in my own practice I find myself caring rather passionately about the elegance of the code that underpins my games. But rather than feeling that this represents an essential aspect of my work, I tend to feel that spending too much time and attention crafting elegant code takes away from what

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[198] Strictly speaking, because of poetry's emphasis on materiality, that trace is of significant interest. But it is beyond most poets to coordinate poetic unity down to the atomic level.

[199] Videogame code is in some ways even more messy than this, as large parts of any given codebase are often written by distant programmers (in the form of frameworks, libraries, etc.), and this code itself will not run without additional code written by yet more programmers (virtual machine code, operating system code, etc.). Layers and layers of meaning which are outside of the videogame poet's control.

[200] Of course, certain traditions of poetry, such as concrete poetry, are very much concerned with such "details."

[201] See Wolf, "The Lyric: Problems of Definition and a Proposal for Reconceptualisation," 24.

I consider to be the "real work" of making my games (much as I would consider that too much attention given to calligraphy or papermaking could take away from a poet's central work of writing poems). Again, this is not to say that elegant code and beautiful calligraphy are not important or meaningful but only that I see these things as adjacent but different *kinds of work* to the poet's (I wouldn't know how to begin to compare the meaning or importance of beautiful calligraphy to that of a finished game or poem). At the end of the day I generally force myself to focus on the games instead of the code, and many of my finished game poems are consequently built on a mess of code (or visual scripting) that feels like it was scrawled out on a wrinkled restaurant napkin. And despite my aversion to wrinkled restaurant napkins, I can live with this because in my mind the *poem* is the thing—not the paper or the ink or the quality of my handwriting.[202]

If the videogame poet's material is not code, then what is it? Let's jump to the other end of our messy "videogame heap" and consider the devices and platforms a videogame is released on. I would suggest that these things are in many ways analogous to where a poet might choose to distribute or publish their work. One might write a poem on a napkin for a friend (as Emily Dickinson was wont to do[203]), or send it out in an intimate newsletter, or publish it in a well-established journal or in a bound book. Again, the questions involved in distribution and publication are far from irrelevant: they change not only the poem's audience, but

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[202] Following a longstanding tradition of artists, poets, and makers throughout history, I sometimes scrawl new work directly over old work, which leaves an interesting and meaningful material trace in itself, even if not "elegant" or "pretty" (e.g. *The Killer* and *Walking with Magnus* were both built on top of *Walk or Die*; *When Gold Is in the Mountain* was built on top of *Icarus Also Flew*).
[203] See Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery*.

also its material manifestation—how and where letters and words appear on a physical surface. These details matter to the poet—for some poets and some poems they are non-negotiable—but still we are at the periphery of our art, since the crucial part of *most* poems can survive a transcription.[204]

I would say, then, that the core material of videogames as far as the poet is concerned lies somewhere between these questions of programming languages/frameworks/engines and code on one side and questions of devices and platforms on the other.[205]

4.1.2 Thinking in terms of language and signifiers

To go deeper than this it is helpful to remember that when we say the material of lyric poetry is *words*, this claim should be understood in the context of *language*. One *line* is the basic gesture of a poem, says Robert Hass: not one *word*, but multiple words in *context*, words together *signifying* something.[206] Poetry is "*language* in a state of dreaming," says Gerard Genette.[207] Or Julia Kristeva again: "Poetic discourse measures rhythm against the meaning of *language structure*."[208] In the tradition of the language poets, then, I see poetry as a form that explores the tension between signified meaning and material meaning present

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[204] If they cannot, then my copy of *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* contains no poetry at all, in which case we are lost.

[205] There are plenty of additional analogies and alternative angles that could be explored here, such as the relationship between videogames as a performative medium and traditions of oral recitation within poetry. Again, I must emphasize that the analogies I make are neither complete nor intended to be exclusive; they simply reflect a few thoughts stemming from my own particular practice. I welcome alternative analogies and perspectives from other practitioners.

[206] Hass, *A Little Book on Form*, 1.

[207] Genette, "Poetic Language, Poetics of Language." Emphasis added.

[208] Kristeva, "The Ethics of Linguistics," 444. Emphasis added.

in a given context, and works to recast words in order to create new meaning—

that is, I see it as a particular kind of intervention in *language*.[209] As poet and

language theorist Lyn Hejinian states in her introduction to *The Language of*

Inquiry:

> Poetry [is a] dynamic process . . . that can turn language upon itself. . . .
> Language is nothing but meanings, and meanings are nothing but a flow of
> contexts. Such contexts rarely coalesce into images, rarely come to terms.
> They are transitions, transmutations, the endless radiating of denotation
> into relation. Poetry, to use William James's phrase, "is in the transitions
> as much as in the terms connected."[210]

Such a conception of poetry may at first glance seem to exclude videogames as a

medium from poetic consideration. But on the contrary, "language" broadly

defined is not limited to written or spoken words. Every medium has its language,

and its vernacular—a conventional network of signifiers and signifieds that

becomes established and prosaic over time. This kind of broad conception of

language (or semiotics, if we wish to be more precise) is the basis for fields of

study ranging from visual semiotics[211] and cognitive semiotics[212] to specialized

disciplines like the semiotics of film[213] and photography[214] (and even the

semiotics of comics, as explored creatively by Scott McCloud[215]); scholars like D.

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209 A close examination of the theories of language poetry is beyond the present scope of this
paper. I would point my reader to the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine and the theories and
writings of its various contributors. See especially Silliman, "The New Sentence"; Hejinian, *The*
Language of Inquiry. Also relevant (as always) is Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*.
210 Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, 1–2.
211 Saint-Martin, *Semiotics of Visual Language*; Crow, *Visible Signs*.
212 Zlatev, "Cognitive Semiotics"; Brandt and Brandt, "Cognitive Poetics and Imagery."
213 Metz, *Film Language*; Buckland, *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film*.
214 Scott and Scott, *Spoken Image*.
215 McCloud, *Understanding Comics*.

Fox Harrell have made proposals for how existing semiotic frameworks might be particularly applied to computational media.[216]

I will examine the question of what I mean by the "language of videogames" in more detail presently but must note that a thorough investigation of semiotic theory is beyond the scope of this paper, and I will consequently be standing on the shoulders of the many theorists who have laid the groundwork for a broad conception of language as operating within all kinds of media.[217] If Christian Metz can say that cinema functions as a "specific language,"[218] I would like to be bold and make a similar claim for videogames. I would then like to go one step further and suggest that this *language* of videogames (that is, the web of essential *signifying facets* within the medium) is the core material of the videogame poet. This claim is still broad and ambiguous, and consequently may not seem like a helpful step forward, but it allows us to make a few important observations.

For starters, the videogame poet cannot discount the visual or auditory components of games, because these components form a key part of the established language of videogames: the network of signifiers through which games mean what they mean.[219] As a creator or theorist it is easy to dismiss these representational aspects of games in favor of their more "unique" and "exciting"

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[216] Harrell, *Phantasmal Media*.
[217] I would point my reader to those sources I have already noted (see my previous few footnotes), as well as the work of foundational semioticians like Saussure, Peirce, and Barthes.
[218] Metz, *Film Language*, 97.
[219] As visual studies scholars are right to point out. See for example Murray, *On Video Games*.

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interactive or computational dimensions,[220] but for the videogame poet it is wrong-headed to say that a videogame's graphics and sound represent old territory that has already been trod by other mediums like music, painting, photography, or cinema—and the reason why it is wrong-headed largely comes down to the poet's interest in *specific language* over *abstract form*.

If we take the visual component of games, yes, we can say that painting and photography and cinema all feature flat surfaces that can be filled with various visual patterns and shapes, which is also true for videogames—but if we consider the question of *visual language*, we can see that each of these mediums have overlapping but unique patterns of established semiotic conventions. Put another way, the established visual language of painting and photography are not precisely the same, even if visual representation in both mediums relies on the same building blocks of color, shape, and line, and even if any individual painting can look very much like any individual photograph—in fact, a painting that looks like a photograph is a perfect example to consider, because while the basic visual elements will be nearly identical, photorealism in painting means something very different from photorealism in photography. In painting, photorealism requires careful and laborious technique and is pregnant with questions about the ultimate purpose of art and what it means to be "real," as well as meta-questions about the nature and value of painting in relation to another specific medium (photography).

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[220] As one example of this kind of dismissal, Espen Aarseth, when discussing the popular *Lara Croft* videogame franchise, has claimed that "the dimensions of Lara Croft's body, already analyzed to death by film theorists, are irrelevant to me as a player, because a different-looking body would not make me play differently" (Aarseth, "Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation").

In photography, on the other hand, photorealism is simply an assumed (we might say "vernacular" or "prosaic") mode of visual representation.

Now consider videogames. The nature and meaning of various visual styles (pixel art, cartoon graphics, photorealism, etc.), as well as the meaning of particular visual representations (a pixel, a crate, a gun, a woman) is different in videogames than it is in cinema, or in photography, or in painting. That's not to say that the meaning is entirely disconnected (of course videogames draw on traditions of visual representation and semiotics established in those older mediums), but it is certainly not identical: each of these mediums has its own set of visual conventions.

I would suggest that the videogame poet's particular interest in a game's graphical representations is not so much an interest in shape and color and line per se (like it might be for a formalist painter[221]), but rather in the way that particular shapes and colors and lines—certain visual styles, signs, and symbols—have come to mean certain things *in videogames as a medium* over time, and in interrogating and recasting those signifiers (or introducing new signifiers) in order to intervene in the established language of the medium.[222]

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[221] Setting aside questions of whether formalism itself is attainable or approachable as an abstract ideal.

[222] I will consider the specific nature of this intervention in the next section of this paper. Note that it's quite possible for any artist to approach any medium (painting or photography, for instance) with this kind of perspective. Which, in a way, is my point: that one can approach any medium—*including videogames*—as a kind of language, with poetic intervention as the intended goal. In my mind this is part of what distinguishes the idea of being a multi-media "poet" from being an "artist" more broadly speaking—but I will explore some of these questions shortly and am getting ahead of myself.

Figure 18: A platform game.

Consider Figure 18. This screenshot says a lot about the nature of Sean Velasco's 2014 action-platformer *Shovel Knight* before we ever start to interact with the game itself. After seeing this screenshot an experienced game player could likely start playing this game in their head, even if they have never encountered it before. How is this possible, when videogames are interactive computational experiences that unfold in time? Couldn't *anything* happen when we start to play this game? Technically, yes. But the vernacular of videogames has been so established over the last few decades that a simple screenshot like this comes laden with a significant number of specific expectations; the visual signifiers here are numerous and substantial, and they operate very differently in videogames than they would in any other medium. As Harrell notes in *Phantasmal Media*:

Signs come in *systems*: signs become signifiers in new systems and are incorporated within other signifiers. In other words, the differences in meaning of the signs reveals phantasms—each meaning involves shared epistemic and image spaces and each meaning can be revealed by contrasting different phantasms.[223]

We could say similar things with regards to sound in games. The sound of a "bleep" or a "chirp" or a shotgun reloading all have significant connotations in games, and those connotations are different in videogames than they are in other mediums like film or music. Consider a game that opens with a simple black screen and the sound of a shotgun reloading. The meaning of this sound in videogames is so entrenched that the overwhelming expectation for such a game is that it would fade in to reveal the trappings of a first-person shooter. Our experienced game player may hear such an opening and automatically position their hands on their keyboard and mouse (or gamepad) in a way that corresponds to typical inputs used in such games, and may even have ideas in mind for how the game will look, and what the first few seconds of gameplay will entail.[224] Videogames have established visual and auditory vernaculars that are ripe for poetic intervention; as such, for the videogame poet, these dimensions are a crucial part of the *material* they are working with.

Let's move on now to consider the computational and interactive nature of videogames. If we consider our hypothetical player's reaction to a game that

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[223] Harrell, *Phantasmal Media*, 126. Emphasis added.
[224] All of this is to explore the *connotative* layers of meaning present in this sound. On the denotative level there is nothing really interesting to say with regards to this particular example: we assume the sound of a shotgun indicates what it seems to indicate, because videogames have not historically questioned indexical signification; at least, not the indexical signification of sounds related to firearms!

opens with the sound of a shotgun reloading, this reaction reveals the extent to which the various layers of signification and convention in videogames are entwined: aside from whether they are correct in their prediction of a first-person shooter game, our imaginary player is only able to grip their gamepad in a particular way—only able to imagine how an FPS will look and how it will play—because the language of videogames broadly speaking (and first-person shooter games specifically, in this case) is deeply entrenched and highly predictable, from the visual and auditory levels down to computation, interaction, and interface logics, and each layer of expectation is attached to and built on top of the others.

For the aspiring videogame poet, it is crucial to realize that the clusters of computation and interaction which are built into games can act as signifiers and establish a kind of vernacular language just as much as words, images, and sounds can.[225] Scholars like Janet Murray, Ian Bogost, Michael Mateas, and Noah Wardrip-Fruin have laid the groundwork for a linguistic-poetic approach to interactive computational systems with their discussion of concepts like procedural authorship, unit operations, procedural rhetoric, and operational logics.

Each of these concepts has its own framing and scope, but the important point that each of them has in common is the idea that computation and interaction logics (loosely speaking: "if this happens then this happens") can be bundled

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[225] An important point, naturally, is that this kind of vernacular is only *vernacular* to those who engage consistently with videogames as a medium—but this holds true for all language (that it is only understood prosaically by a certain group of people, within a given context).

together in consistent ways and tied conventionally to certain meanings and interpretations—that is: that they can form the basis for a kind of *language*. Bogost's "unit operation" is the most abstract and general of these concepts, describing a "conceptual frame for discrete, compressed elements of fungible meaning" that can, in theory, be applied to *any* medium—though Bogost's focus is on computational media.[226] It is a useful concept for considering how units of meaning can operate at a foundational level across media but is somewhat broad and abstract for our purposes.

Bogost's concept of procedural rhetoric, which builds on Murray's discussion of procedurality in connection with authorship,[227] is far less abstract, and describes the basic idea that interactive systems mount claims about the world through the *procedures* that govern those systems (apart from considerations of *content*). This basic concept can be applied to videogames at a number of different levels, though Bogost's focus in *Persuasive Games* is the rhetoric of procedural systems *taken together as a whole*. Gonzalo Frasca's well-known political game, *September 12th: A Toy World*, is an example of a rather simple system[228] that can be seen to contain a clear rhetoric about the War on Terror. In this game the player controls a reticle with their mouse and clicks to launch missiles at a middle eastern-looking village, ostensibly to wipe out "terrorists" who can be seen running around in the village carrying guns. When innocent

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[226] Bogost, *Unit Operations*, xiii.
[227] See Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, pt. 3; Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, chap. 1.
[228] Of course, all modeled systems can be seen as "simple" at some level compared to what they represent, but *September 12* is markedly so.

citizens are inevitably killed in the missile's blast radius, more terrorists are

spawned, and this cycle continues until the player chooses to quit the game. In

Bogost's words:

> The interface between missile, terrorists, and citizens works, insofar as it produces a result in the game world. However, the result it produces is undesirable, the converse of claims that long-range precision warfare is "surgical." Thus *September 12* claims that this logic of counterterrorism is broken; no one is made any safer by following it, and in fact many more innocent lives are lost.[229]

September 12's procedural message is so strong that some, like Doris Rusch, have

posited that it's "impossible to not get the message when playing the game."[230]

Figure 19: A missile lands in *September 12.*

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[229] Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 87.
[230] Rusch, *Making Deep Games*, 41.

The basic concept of procedural rhetoric, while somewhat imprecise, is highly accessible, and can be easily applied to any number of videogames. For example, *SimCity*, the popular city simulator, contains procedural systems that can be said to make claims regarding how best to deal with challenges like crime, traffic, and pollution in real-world urban environments ("do $X + Y + Z$, and traffic will improve").

Procedural rhetoric is a highly useful concept for advancing an understanding of how interactive computational systems operate as a kind of language, which is important for our purposes. Rhetoric, however—that is, "the art of using language effectively so as to persuade or influence others"[231]—is not precisely the aspect of language that poets are most concerned with. Rhetoric makes use of vernacular language in order to mount *arguments*, where poets are interested in the core of vernacular language itself: the *weight*, *sound*, and *meaning* of words and phrases in various contexts, and how that meaning can be explored and interrogated.[232] (Of course one can interrogate rhetorical arguments by making counter arguments, but this is the realm of debate rather than of lyric poetry.)

Noah Wardrip-Fruin's concept of an "operational logic"[233] offers something much more analogous to an individual *word* in spoken language. Operational logics can be divided into various domains (graphical logics, resource logics,

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[231] "Rhetoric, n.1."

[232] See: Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, chap. 4; Wolf, "The Lyric: Problems of Definition and a Proposal for Reconceptualisation," 39; Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook*; Nänny, "Diagrammatic Iconicity in Poetry"; Kristeva, "The Ethics of Linguistics."

[233] A concept Wardrip-Fruin first proposed in 2005 and has since developed in collaboration with Michael Mateas, Joseph Osborn, and others (see Mateas and Wardrip-Fruin, "Defining Operational Logics"; Osborn, Wardrip-Fruin, and Mateas, "Refining Operational Logics").

character state logics, etc.[234]), and are concerned with the meaning of such basic things as collision detection, avatar movement, and resource counters: essential procedural elements that—like words—can be used and reused in a variety of games, in a variety of contexts. Operational logics "connect fundamental abstract operations . . . with how they are understood at a human level,"[235] which is very similar to something we might say of words in the context of language (that they connect fundamental abstract *markings* or *sounds* with how they are understood at a human level).

For a concept as basic and conventional as sprite movement or collision detection, we might wonder what there is to say about its meaning: isn't the meaning obvious? What could collision detection mean apart from the notion that two objects collide in space? But as Wardrip-Fruin and Mateas remind us, "processes, on their own, have no intrinsic representational power."[236] The basic computational logic of pixels on a display overlapping and triggering a further process does not inherently represent two physical objects colliding in space any more that the letters making up the word "c o l l i s i o n" do. Our understanding of collision detection has been built up subtly and consistently over time as videogame after videogame, dating back to *Spacewar!* and *Pong*, have utilized metaphors that reinforce this meaning. Though videogames have offered up alternative metaphors (collision detection as used to indicate Pac-Man eating, for

[234] See Mateas and Wardrip-Fruin, "Defining Operational Logics"; Osborn, Wardrip-Fruin, and Mateas, "Refining Operational Logics."
[235] Mateas and Wardrip-Fruin, "Defining Operational Logics," 1.
[236] Mateas and Wardrip-Fruin, 7.

instance, which is hard to interpret as a collision of two physical objects), the fact that it is generally hard to imagine alternative meanings for collision detection is a sign of just how established and prosaic the language of procedural signifiers in videogames has become—and how little videogame poetry there is to help us reimagine the meaning of these basic "words." How and why does a basic computational operation like collision detection come to mean certain things in videogames, and how might one intervene to question or recast that meaning? This is precisely where the poet's interest lies (*Passage* and *Loneliness* both attempt to recast collision detection, for instance) and answering these kinds of questions will be the focus of the next part of this paper.

To conclude our discussion of material, I will repeat my central thesis: the core material of the videogame poet is the *language* of videogames—a vast tangled web of visual, auditory, and procedural signifiers, with all of their established ways of signifying (both denotatively and connotatively) in relation to one another and to the world at large. This perspective admittedly leaves us with an immense, complex, and ever-shifting material,[237] but it also serves to distinguish the perspective of the game poet from that of other practitioners working in videogames[238] and allows for some possibility of "getting down to business." Intervening in an established language is a comprehensible project, after all, and one that we will consider in more detail moving forward.

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[237] Of course, language is never static, and neither is the material of the poet: prosaic language changes over time, which is one of the things we will touch on in the next section of this paper.
[238] Those who might consider their material to be code, or game mechanics, or pixels, or 3D models, or sound waves, etc. in a more focused and specialized sense.

4.2 What is the purpose of the videogame poet?

The question of "purpose" is always present for the creator, and operates at a number of different levels, ranging from "why create at all?" down to minute details of medium-specific technique. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine this question broadly, but there is a particular facet of it that is of significant interest to us, which is the question of what separates the specific purpose of the videogame poet from that of other creators working in videogames. Consider the roles of game designer, software engineer, level designer, narrative designer, pixel artist, sound engineer, or animator; at a broad level all of these people are "making videogames," but at a more specific level they all have very different goals and purposes: the level designer seeks to design a good level, where the pixel artist seeks to paint a good sprite, and the narrative designer seeks to tell a good story.

Our discussion of material provides an entryway for thinking about the purpose of the videogame poet: if the poet's material is the *language* of videogames, then surely their purpose must be related in some way to crafting that language. But where we might say that a level designer's purpose is to design a "good level," it doesn't seem right to say that a videogame poet's purpose should be to craft "good language." If the language of videogames consists of "a vast tangled web of visual, auditory, and procedural signifiers," then doesn't "good language" translate broadly to "good videogame"? And now we've lost the thread of poetry.

There are two important realizations to be had here. First is that the poet's interest in videogames is indeed broader than the interest of the software engineer, level designer, narrative designer, or pixel artist: the videogame poet is in some way interested in the "whole package" of videogames (at least all those parts involving sensory stimuli and signification).[239]

The second realization is that the poet's task is not to craft "good language," but rather, as has already been alluded, to *intervene* in language—to craft good *interventions*. This sets the purpose of the videogame poet apart from the purpose of the "game designer" broadly speaking, in much the same way that we might separate the purpose of the traditional poet from that of the "writer," broadly speaking. Still, to use the word "good" with regard to poetic intervention is both lazy and useless. Given some criteria we might speak of virtue or quality or artistry when it comes to either poetic intervention or poetic language, but for now I want to set these notions aside. The question of what makes a "good" game poem is a question we can tackle another time (if we have the inclination to do so), when we have built up the language and criteria necessary for such judgement; for now, my interest is more basic: what does poetic intervention look like, and how might such intervention translate to videogames?

This is, in some ways, where the "rubber meets the road" for the would-be videogame poet. The question of what it means to intervene poetically in games demands many answers from many videogame poets—just as we have had many

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[239] Which is likely why many of the videogames that can be readily analyzed as "game poems" are crafted by one person.

historical answers from many historical poets of what it means to intervene poetically in oral and written language.[240] I will attempt to answer the question from my own practice, in relation to one particular vision for poetry. As with every other significant claim in this paper, my answer is not meant to be *the* answer, but only *an* answer.

4.2.1 One vision for poetry: an intervention in vernacular language

My answer begins with a vision for poetry perhaps most clearly expressed by Owen Barfield, who says that poetry is about intervening in vernacular language. More specifically, poetry is about intervening in vernacular language to recast that language and make it new—in order to help us see the world itself anew.[241] Julia Kristeva expresses a similar perspective in "The Ethics of Linguistics," when she notes that poetic language carries on the struggle against the "death" of a world where rhythm and felt experience have been lost.[242] Percy Shelley also echoes this view when he writes in *A Defence of Poetry* that poetry "lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar."[243]

Language, notes Barfield, relies fundamentally on metaphor: words are cast in relation to physical objects first, and then in relation to other words whose

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[240] As one starting point for considering some of these historical answers see Cook, *Poetry in Theory*.
[241] Barfield, *Poetic Diction*, 40–41.
[242] Kristeva, "The Ethics of Linguistics."
[243] Shelley et al., *A Defence of Poetry*.

meaning has become established.[244] Barfield postulates that new words start out with an explicitly metaphoric quality: everything is "like" something else, and no word can be thought of as having a "literal" meaning—all is image, comparison, and contrast.[245] But gradually, as early metaphors are used over time and become part of vernacular language, their meaning becomes prosaic and literalized; the ambiguous power of the original metaphor is lost, and we start to read some words as having a specific, *literal* meaning.[246] This development of literal meaning is part of what allows vernacular, prose language to work as an effective tool for communication—but that communication comes at the expense of an appreciation for the ambiguous felt experience at the heart of all our language. We gradually lose an appreciation for the sound and rhythm of familiar words and for the way they first helped us see the world in a "new and strange light"[247] by arousing "cognition of the unknown."[248]

Poetry, then, is about recasting familiar words, often via the use of new metaphors. It is about reviving language, making it fresh, and mysterious, and concrete once more—and simultaneously reviving our stale conception of the

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[244] Metaphor, according to Barfield is essentially any attempt to "arouse cognition of the unknown by suggestion from the known" (*Poetic Diction*, 106).

[245] Barfield's strong emphasis on metaphoric meaning aligns with certain theories within cognitive linguistics as well as object-oriented ontology. See for example Lakoff, *Philosophy In The Flesh*; Johnson, *The Body in the Mind*; Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, chap. 2.

[246] The important point here is not to what extent Barfield's perspective accurately reflects the development and evolution of prehistoric language, but rather how it relates to a more contemporary evolution of language that we can see in operation around us: the way newly introduced metaphors gradually go from being striking and ambiguous, to having accepted "literal" meanings as they become part of vernacular language. See, for example, Barfield's discussion of the evolution of the painter's expression "point of view" from metaphor to accepted vernacular (*Poetic Diction*, 106).

[247] Barfield, 41.

[248] Barfield, 106.

world. Thus, as we have already noted in an earlier section of this paper, "Shakespeare enriched the content of 'balm' (and of 'sleep', too) when he called sleep the 'balm of hurt minds.'"[249]

Can we imagine this kind of poetic intervention taking place with regards to the established language of videogames?

This question is of particular interest because videogames have long been enamored with literalism. If I write a sentence in the hope that it can and will be understood in precisely one way, that is literalism; that is prose. It is not hard to read the history of videogames as an infatuation with literalism: the desire to achieve ever higher fidelity in graphics, sound, and physics rendering in order attain a kind of hyperrealism that has no use for metaphor. [250] As Merritt Kopas notes:

> Games have a photorealism problem—mainstream games in particular have become so focused on emulating film that the industry has come to believe the highest calling of video games is to visually reproduce reality perfectly.[251]

In one version of the dream of virtual reality, no conscious semiotic interpretation will have to take place in the mind of the player: the spaceship is a spaceship; the sword is a sword; the hand you see is *your hand*. There is no need of or desire for metaphor in such a world; every representation is simply taken, *literally*, for the thing represented. And many videogames are fast approaching this dream. Most

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[249] Barfield, 107.
[250] See Galloway, "Social Realism in Gaming"; Kopas, "Ludus Interruptus: Video Games and Sexuality"; Pedercini, "Videogames and the Spirit of Capitalism"; Poremba, "Real|Unreal: Crafting Actuality in the Documentary Videogame," 42.
[251] Kopas, "Ludus Interruptus: Video Games and Sexuality."

commercial first-person shooters, for instance, rely on indexical-inspired representation and established conventions so heavily that there is little if any conscious semiotic interpretation going on for those well-trained on the genre: you are this person, running through this environment, carrying this gun . . . that is that.[252]

But videogames can also work outside this paradigm. Contrast a game that relies on easily accepted literal meaning to a game like *Passage*, with its backward-facing aesthetic. In a world where photorealistic 3D environments are increasingly the norm, a 2D side-scrolling game takes on a certain metaphoric quality from the get-go: after playing a photorealistic first-person shooter, it is not quite as easy to accept that the pixelated avatar in *Passage is you* in the same way as your player character in the FPS: rather than "you are this character," we are met with something like, "let this avatar stand in for you *in some way*," and are consequently primed for metaphoric meaning before we even start playing the game.[253]

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[252] The established conventions are of course key. Metaphoric language and literal language are both a negotiation between writer and reader and mitigated by *context* (as noted by Saussure, Peirce, and others, and emphasized by Harrell—See Harrell, *Phantasmal Media*, 129). Established meanings are built up over time, and something that begins its life as strongly metaphoric (press these buttons to move this perspective on the screen), can take on established prosaic meaning over time for a given group of people (where we start up a first-person shooter and use the arrow keys and mouse to move around without even thinking about it).
[253] It should be noted that even as AAA games (that is, high budget mainstream games) continue to pursue cutting-edge photorealism, the emerging popularity of indie games in recent years has simultaneously given rise to the normalization of what might be called a "retro-chic" aesthetic. I would argue that this retro aesthetic tends to rely on metaphor more explicitly than photorealistic rendering, but its normalization over time can still serve to break down a player's need to "work" for semiotic interpretation—requiring new modes of poetic intervention. This kind of development reflects the constant evolution of vernacular language, and the need for evolving strategies of poetic intervention.

Of course, even as it eschews representational realism, *Passage* still relies on convention and some amount of established semiotic meaning—if it did not, the game would come across as gibberish, much like a poem concocted only of words that had never been used before or words completely out of order.[254] Thanks to *Adventure*, *The Legend of Zelda* and many other classic videogames we understand the basic conceit of a side-scrolling game with a user-controlled avatar. But importantly, rather than simply embracing established conventions in a way that would encourage literal reading, *Passage* pushes back against those conventions in a denial of literalism, and an explicit invocation of metaphor.

In *Phantasmal Media*, Harrell provides a framework which he calls "polymorphic poetics" for reading the many layers of metaphor in *Passage*—a framework that can also serve as a strategic guide for creators looking to imbue their games with this kind of metaphoric meaning. Harrell's language is dense but seeks to rigorously investigate the basic question of how one might start to think of "mapping" metaphors like *life is a journey* into a videogame's semiotic space.[255] *Passage* succeeds in being a richly metaphoric game, in Harrell's view, because of the way it effectively translates broad phantasmal concepts like "life

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[254] See Ron Silliman's investigation of the boundaries of "sense" and "nonsense" ("bring me sugar" and "bring me milk" vs. "milk me sugar") in "The New Sentence," as well as D. Fox Harrell's discussion of gibberish in the context of "polymorphic poetry" in *Phantasmal Media*, 145. (Some sound poetry is, of course, intentionally made up of "gibberish," but that is another topic for another time.)

[255] Harrell's polymorphic poetics is based on the concept of semiotic morphism developed by computer scientist Joseph Goguen (see Goguen, "Semiotic Morphisms"). Semiotic morphism is the mapping of meaning "from one semiotic space, called the source space, to another semiotic space, called a target space," (Harrell, *Phantasmal Media*, 142) and provides a basis for thinking of metaphors as "semiotic morphisms from one system of concepts to another" (Goguen, "An Introduction to Algebraic Semiotics, with Application to User Interface Design," 5).

journey," "past, present, and future," and "death" into the *language* of videogames[256] via the use of ambiguous medium-specific signs: a pixelated play space, a maze, an avatar, compressed "past" and "future" areas, the image of a tombstone, etc. [257]

Whether understood through the lens of polymorphic poetics or another framework, the important point is that the meaning of *Passage's* two-dimensional landscape (to take one example) is better read as a metaphoric representation of "life" than as the representation of a physical landscape (a point we began to consider in section 3.1.2). The idea of navigable space in videogames is being recast here, being given new and ambiguous meaning. It was understood to mean one thing (physical space), and now it can somehow also mean "your life." This power to recast the world and help us see things anew is the power of poetry. Because of *Passage*, *Adventure* and *Zelda* are not the same anymore. *Adventure* and *Zelda* defined the conventions which allow us to read *Passage*, and *Passage* alters those conventions in a way that redefines our reading of *Adventure* and *Zelda*: the play spaces, the avatars, the visual icons, and the operational logics of those older games have become visible anew, and bear within them more potential meaning. As Noah Wardrip-Fruin notes:

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[256] Or in Harrell's terms, the "semiotic space" of videogames.

[257] Harrell's framework is too robust and complex to consider in detail here but should be noted as an important tool for anyone seeking to understand the creation of ambiguous metaphoric meaning in videogames. My only contention with his poetics as it is laid out in *Phantasmal Media* is that it is rather clinical in its consideration of the mapping of metaphors as a "design problem" to be approached scientifically (141, 153, 164), more so than a poetic problem to be approached artfully. I would also have liked to see more discussion of how the mapping of existing metaphors might relate to the poetic creation of *new* metaphors—even if every new mapping is in some sense a new metaphor. That being said, Harrell does touch on questions of artistry and intuition (165), and I think his impressive poetics framework could be expanded in many relevant directions.

> What makes *Passage* remarkable is how it works with common meaning-making strategies of video games—in particular, how it takes them apart and reassembles them so that they are active both in traditional and in new ways, making them visible to us again.[258]

Notice how Wardrip-Fruin's language seems to echo that of Percy Shelley, who speaks of making "familiar objects be as if they were not familiar."[259]

It is my belief that this kind of intervention in the established language of videogames can be pursued with intention, and that we might consider such work (for lack of other present alternatives) the special domain of the videogame poet. The title is certainly less important than the work, but the title is not *unimportant* if it can help us to identify and distinguish a mode of creative engagement with videogames that has been minimized or overlooked.

4.2.2 Making poetic videogames in practice

Intentionally pursuing this kind of intervention in the language of videogames is, in many ways, what I consider to be the core of my own game-making practice: from the visual and auditory levels down to input mappings and operational logics, I seek to carve out new metaphors, recast established signifiers, and open avenues for new meaning.

At the visual level, one of the reasons I use abstract symbolic representation in much of my work is to challenge the longstanding trend towards literalism and photorealism in videogames that we've just been discussing (which suggests that

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[258] Wardrip-Fruin, "Beyond Shooting and Eating: Passage, Dys4ia, and the Meanings of Collision," 191.
[259] Shelley et al., *A Defence of Poetry*.

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the visual representation of a square can only stand for a box or a crate, for example), and create room for more subtle and ambiguous visual meaning. Consider my games *Loneliness*, *Freedom Bridge*, and *A Brief History of Cambodia*, for example. In *Loneliness* and *Freedom Bridge* I attempt to remind the player that in addition to being a box or a crate, a square in a videogame could just as well be a person.[260] Then in *A Brief History of Cambodia*, I push this metaphor out further: in this game the player is presented with a single screen that shows some black squares floating up and down on an abstract sea; there is also a hand cursor icon familiar from operating systems and web browser interfaces; the player can move the hand cursor with the mouse and use it to grab hold of and toss the squares about. They can also hold the squares underwater, which results in violent jerking along with ambiguous underwater noises and the release of air bubbles; if the square continues to be held underwater the jerking eventually stops, and the square falls slowly to the bottom of the screen and disappears. (It is a grim game in dialogue with a grim history.)

We could say that the squares represent people here, much as in *Loneliness* or *Freedom Bridge*. But read in light of its title, *A Brief History of Cambodia* suggests that each of its squares represents not a single person, but rather a *multitude* of people—or a single person standing in for a multitude. Through this kind of use of explicit and shifting symbolism I attempt to enrich and enliven

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[260] Returning to a convention established by *Adventure* in an era when symbolic representation was commonplace. Barfield notes that returning to "archaic language" is a common technique for poetic intervention. See Barfield, *Poetic Diction*, chap. X.

depictions of squares in videogames (they can no longer be read automatically as crates or boxes)—but more importantly: to enrich and enliven depictions of simple lines and shapes in general, and to suggest that any game, at any time, could be using visual representation in symbolic and ambiguous ways.
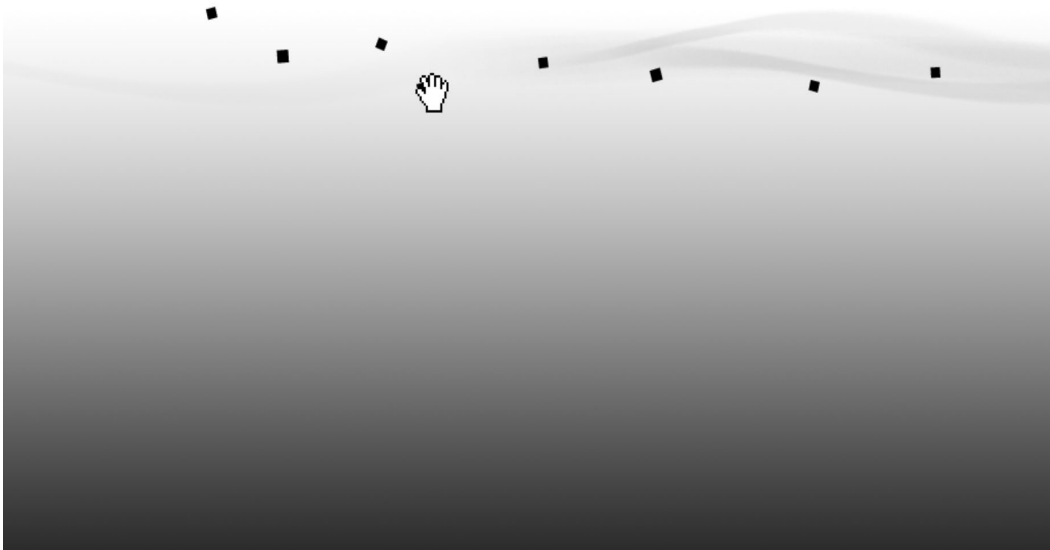

Figure 20: The squares in *A Brief History of Cambodia* do not represent individual people as such.

Many of my games make use of less symbolic, more representational 8-bit-style graphics, but in these cases I still attempt to challenge and overload conventional videogame representations (as Jason Rohrer does in *Passage*) rather than simply recreate nostalgic iconicity. Sometimes I seek to recast a specific representation (as in the case of the visual representation of a square, above), and sometimes I seek to broaden the expectations that exist around a particular *mode* or *style* of representation (such as pixel art or photorealism in games). *Walking with Magnus* may look like a classic 8-bit-era side-scroller, for example, but

instead of shooting or collecting things the player takes a long walk with a baby—the game thus challenges and expands expectations tied to this visual style and genre. Likewise, *Grandmother* attempts to expand the expectations around photorealism in games (through its use of actual photos): instead of shooting photorealistic bullets from a photorealistic gun, the player of *Grandmother* uses a photorealistic sponge to clean a photorealistic headstone.

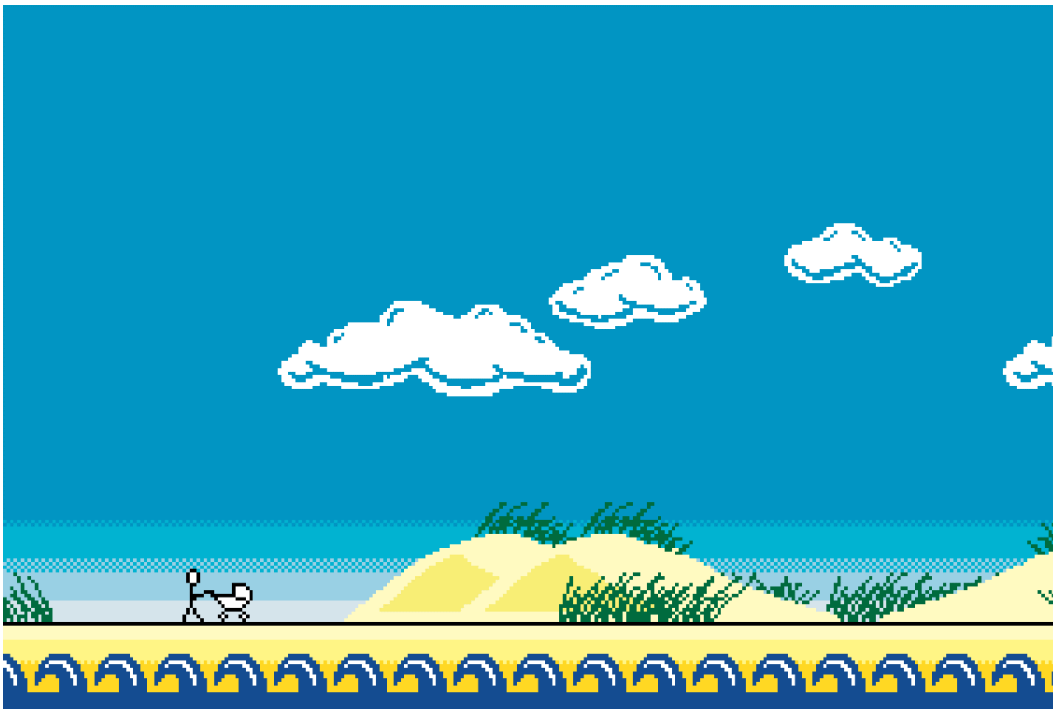
Figure 21: *Walking with Magnus* is not a typical 8-bit-era side-scroller.

As we have already noted in section 4.1, the various layers of signification and convention in videogames are tightly entangled, from the visual and auditory levels down to computation, interaction, and interface logics, and I have found that my attempted interventions are typically likewise entangled. In *Loneliness*,

for example, my use of abstract shapes to represent people primes the player to look for symbolic meaning within the game, which sets up further interventions at the level of operational logics, where the game attempts to recast basic logics tied to sprite movement and proximity detection. As we have already noted, these are logics which, historically, have most often been used in videogames to represent the movement and interactions of physical objects in space: a spaceship flying, a tank moving and shooting, etc. But in *Loneliness*, these logics represent something very different. We can say that the squares represent people, but as we noted in section 3.1.2, they do not represent physical bodies in space so much as *subjective perceptions of people as tied to subjective perceptions of social connections and relational bonds*. The circular movement of certain groups of squares in *Loneliness* does *not* represent circular movement of bodies in space; consequently, approaching a group of squares with your player avatar and watching them flee cannot represent a group of people literally running away from you as you draw physically near to them. Like the symbolic visual image of the squares themselves, drawing close to other squares as determined by proximity detection logics is an explicitly symbolic metaphor, and the resultant movement of these squares away from your avatar is likewise an explicitly symbolic metaphor.

Rather than having "clear and obvious" meanings as we think of these logics as having in videogames ("a spaceship is moving through space; when it gets too near to an asteroid it crashes"), the meanings of these logics in *Loneliness* are thus

symbolic and highly ambiguous: perhaps the circular movement of a certain group of squares together represents people playing boardgames with friends, or perhaps it represents people getting coffee at work; perhaps drawing near to them represents an attempt to engage a particular social group, or perhaps it represents only an *imagined* attempt at such an engagement, or a *memory* of the last such attempt. By breaking with established conventions and proposing new metaphors, *Loneliness* attempts to forge new meaning onto these established logics in the way that Owen Barfield would speak of poets forging new meaning onto words.

I could go on and on with this. *A Brief History of Cambodia*, for example, attempts to overload and shift the meaning present in the input logic of a mouse click: in videogames we are used to the click of a mouse button being tied to the pull of a trigger and a spray of bullets, but here that same click is recast to mean the shooting and drowning and clubbing of multitudes—without requiring any depiction of bullets or human beings or blood. *Portraits of my Child* attempts to recast things as basic as a button press, a solid wash of color, and the sound of a "bleep" by suggesting these things can hold within them some connection to a newborn's first cry, or first smile. *The Heart Attack* attempts to enrich the possible meanings of rhythm, collision detection, and sound in relation to rhythm game conventions.

Always it is my hope that after playing one of my games a player's experience of some aspect of the world is enriched and enlivened (that they see another's smile in a fresh light, for instance) and also that their experience of *other*

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videogames is enriched and enlivened because the basic building blocks of the medium have been endowed with little bits of new potential: that a simple shape bears more possibility, that a "bleep" is richer, that a sprite's movement on screen is more pregnant and interesting than it was before—even if ever so slightly. This, for me, is what the question of being a "videogame poet" is all about.

Which brings me to a last point, a point about the importance of framing to conceptions of "videogame poetry." People have sometimes asked me why I choose to position the things I make as "videogames"—why not show the work in gallery spaces and simply call it "art"? The reason is that I see myself not simply as an artist, but also as a poet whose medium is *videogames*: my desire is to intervene in the language of a particular, established medium—an intervention which becomes impotent if the medium in question is not clearly defined. Which is not to say that I or other videogame creators should not show our work in art spaces (which I sometimes do), but only that if the thread connecting what we make to videogames becomes too thin, the work ceases to be an intervention in the language of that particular medium.

A case in point is found in the various possible framings of my *Stations of the Cross* triptych. *Stations of the Cross* is an interactive installation project in dialogue with traditions of spirituality, pilgrimage, and contemplation, as well as artworks like Barnett Newman's *Stations of the Cross* series.[261] The installation consists of three enclosed booths, or "stations," each of which presents an

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[261] For more information about this installation see Magnuson, *Stations of the Cross Art Game Installation* (documentary video).

abstract, contemplative, touchscreen experience that can be encountered in the space of a couple of minutes or over a longer time frame depending on the pace and inclination of the player. As with historical Stations of the Cross images, each game is presented as an object available for contemplation, spiritual reflection, and aesthetic encounter—centered around the core theme of suffering.
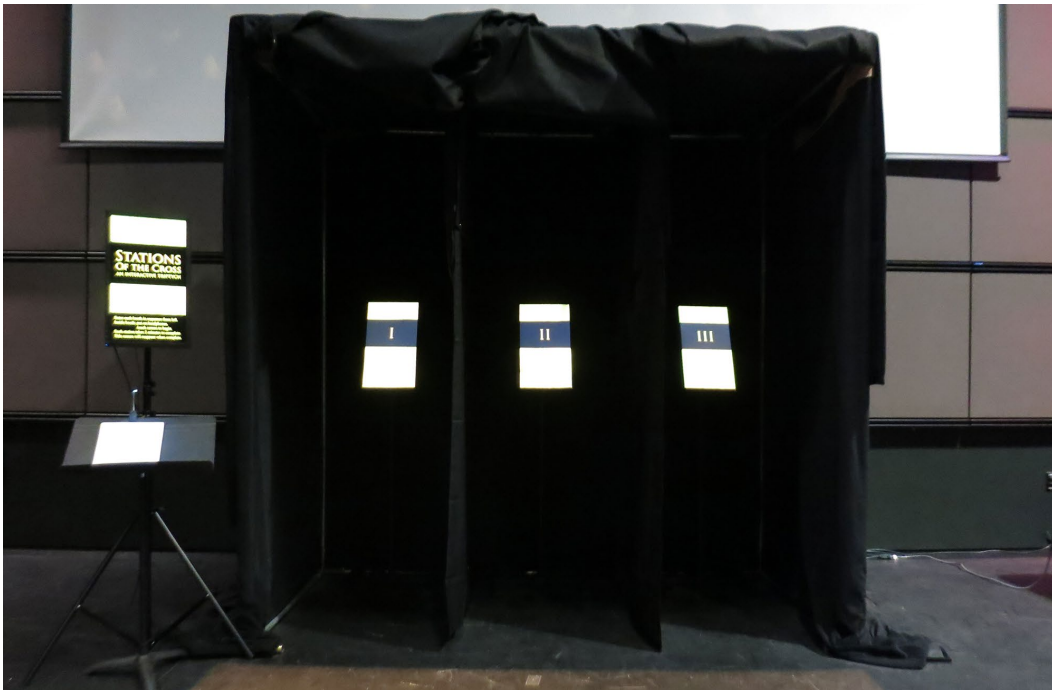

Figure 22: My *Stations of the Cross* installation, with all three stations open and revealed.

Framed as a videogame installation, *Stations of the Cross* intervenes forcefully in the medium of videogames at a number of levels, recasting expectations around what videogames can do and be, in addition to crafting

specific interventions at the level of representations and operational logics.[262]

These interventions are forceful partly because *Stations of the Cross* is so far from

being a typical videogame. And yet *because* it is so far from being a typical

videogame, any positioning in relation to videogames risks being lost without

adequate context and framing—in which case the medium-specific interventions

go from being forceful to non-existent. This is what happened when I showed the

work in an art space in 2017:[263] the context of the work and the work itself were

so far from viewers' mental conception of "videogames" that for many the piece

failed to register as relating to videogames in any way. For this particular

installation I didn't necessarily mind the dissociation,[264] but it was an interesting

lesson to observe, and one that I think is highly relevant to discussions of what it

means to intervene in the established language of a given medium.

I learned from that experience when presenting a collection of five

"videogame poems" as my part of the *Receivership* exhibition at the University of

California, Santa Cruz.[265] Because this was again an arts context rather than a

videogame festival I made sure to frame my work strongly in relation to

videogames so that viewers would be able to make the connection, and hopefully

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[262] It extends the work of *Loneliness* and *A Brief History of Cambodia*, for example, by suggesting that a square in videogames can represent such ambiguous concepts as "death," or "the weight of the world."

[263] "Open Studios," University of California, Santa Cruz, December 8, 2017.

[264] I don't see the categories of "game poems," "new media installation artworks," "spiritual/religious artifacts," and "contemplation games" as mutually exclusive any more than I see the categories of "videogame" and "poem" as mutually exclusive, and I believe that my *Stations of the Cross* installation can be fruitfully considered from any of these perspectives.

[265] "Videogames After Poetry" in *Receivership*, Digital Arts and New Media MFA Show, University of California, Santa Cruz, April 26–May 12, 2019. See appendices for more information about this exhibit.

perceive the interventions I was attempting for the medium (even if

subconsciously).[266] In my mind this kind of intentional positioning is a large part

of what separates the practice of creating "videogame poems" from a more

general interactive art practice.[267]

Figure 23: In my MFA thesis exhibit ("Videogames After Poetry") I made use of unadorned videogame controllers (including a garish dance pad) as one means of positioning my work strongly in relation to videogames.

During the show people asked me why I chose to use a stock *DDR* dance pad

as an input device for a videogame poem about walking with my infant son—why

not paint the pad to be less garish? My answer: because I see my work as relating

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[266] At videogame festivals the framing of "videogames" is generally strongly enough entrenched that any presented work is automatically assumed to relate to videogames in some way (videogame distribution platforms like Newgrounds and Steam can also provide this kind of "videogames assumed" framing in an online context).

[267] This kind of intentional positioning in relation to videogames can be seen in much of Jason Rohrer's work (*Passage*, for example, makes use of recognizable videogame iconography, point collection, etc. as various scholars have noted), as well as games like Bogost's *A Slow Year* (situated strongly as it is in relation to a famous videogame console, down to the cover art designed to invoke Atari 2600-era videogames).

not just to the art world, but also explicitly to *videogames as a medium*. Because I want players to see that dance pad and recognize it as a dance pad and consider that the controllers and technologies we've been using in videogames for a long time, for certain kinds of expressive ends, can also be used for other kinds of expression. Because I want your next experience of playing *DDR* to be altered ever so slightly. *Because this thing is a videogame poem.*

5. Conclusion

I opened this paper with a quote from Derrida, who asks the question, "what is poetry?" and answers: "I call a poem that very thing that teaches the heart, invents the heart, *that which*, finally, the word *heart* seems to mean."[268] It is a striking image. For Derrida, a poem is that which gives rise to the desire, the dream, of *learning by heart*. "So: your heart beats, gives the downbeat, the birth of rhythm. . . . [There can be] no poem that does not open itself like a wound."[269] Rhythm, ritual, incantation. Mystery.

Whatever poetry is, it is more than words on a page; it is more than poetics; it is more than technique; it is more than praxis. In truth, when I think about my practice of making videogames, it is those opening quotes from my introduction that resonate with me most strongly: those are the games I want to play; those are the games I want to make. "Poems are not words, after all, but fires for the cold,

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[268] Derrida, "Che Cos'è La Poesia?" 536.
[269] Derrida, 536.

ropes let down to the lost," says Mary Oliver.[270] I am cold, and I want to play

more videogames that are fires. I want to play more videogames that embody "the

subtlety, elegance, and hunger of the human spirit," as Mark Strand and Eavan

Boland say. With Dylan Thomas, I want to play more videogames that make my

"toenails twinkle."

I opened my paper with those adapted quotes because, for me, they

represent—*in poetry*—a vision for what poetic videogames might be. They

represent a paradox, a tension, an itch that I want to scratch. They represent what I

see as a hole in videogame theory and practice: a lack of frameworks and

language for thinking about videogames as capable of being poetic, and a lack of

practical guidance for those wishing to pursue poetic videogame creation.

I don't believe it's possible to write a paper on how to craft videogame poems

that make one's "toenails twinkle" or that are "fires for the cold." I don't believe

it's possible to write a paper on how to make videogames the way Emily

Dickinson or Czesław Miłosz write poetry. But then: I don't believe it's possible

to write a paper on how to craft those kinds of poems, either. What we *can* do, for

videogames just as well as for poetry, is start to talk a little bit about poetics, a

little bit about technique, a little bit about poetic praxis—so that little by little we

build up a vocabulary, build up some frameworks that help us talk about

videogames as a medium capable of poetic expression, so that we can better

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[270] Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook*, 122.

appreciate the poetic videogames in front of our faces, and better attempt to make more of them.

That is what I have endeavored to do in this paper: to explore some tensions that have come out of my own creative practice, and lay some little bit of groundwork for discussing and making poetic videogames (following the precedent of scholars like Nick Montfort, Mariam Asad, Thomas Pap, Lindsay Grace, and others). I start by laying the basis for a poetics because I believe that any discussion of the poetic potential of videogames requires a framework for considering the nature and mechanism of poetic *effect* in games. I call it a poetics of the *lyric* because it is a poetics rooted in an examination of lyric poetry. I offer it as one possible starting point among many, one possible poetics among many. The point of such a project is not to help us separate True Videogame Poems from common videogames, but rather to see if we can find some language to help us notice and appreciate certain aspects of videogames that other approaches might dismiss or minimize. A broader poetics for videogames should of course extend beyond lyric concerns: the lyric lens will help us see certain things, but it will miss other things; it is one particular perspective that resonates with me as one particular creator.

From the beginning, this project has been grounded in practice, and had a very personal dimension: writing this paper has been, in large part, my own attempt to make sense of what and how I make. As such, I was not content to draft a poetics without also attempting to bridge the gap to *praxis*, which for me involved

attempting to answer the question of what poetic intervention in videogames is all about in the first place. I answer that question from my own practice, in relation to one particular vision for poetry, and propose a praxis founded on the idea that poetic intervention in videogames is about intervening in the established *language* of videogames—a vast tangled web of visual, auditory, and procedural signifiers—to recast, enliven, and make that language new. As with my proposed poetics, this is only one possible praxis among many, and the point of drafting it is not to help us separate True Videogame Poets from imposters, but rather to provide one possible starting place for those who might desire to approach videogame creation as an intentional poetic practice. I don't see it as *defining* my own practice in a constrictive sense, but rather as *illuminating* certain aspects of that practice.

By tackling the topic of poetic videogames in such a broad and multifaceted way, I leave myself open to charges of spreading myself too thin—and indeed, I have not been able to go as deeply as I would have liked into either the theoretical or practical implications of my project. But considering that so little work has been done in this particular domain, a broad approach seemed warranted. This paper does not aim to be the end of a conversation, but the beginning, and my hope is that it might act as a springboard for those who care to dive deeper.

5.1 Future directions

There are many avenues that could be taken to build on this work. My poetics of the lyric could be expanded by proposing additional characteristics of lyric poetry

to examine or by fleshing out and expanding on the existing characteristics I propose. Another avenue could be to consider lyric effects that might have no analog in written poetry, but are unique to videogames. More games could of course be examined, and in more detail. As I mention in section 3.2, I believe one fruitful avenue of exploration would be to apply lyric reading to longer games— something I hope to investigate in the future.

On the praxis side, there is plenty of work that could be done to expand and strengthen the theoretical grounding of my framework, particularly in terms of discussing how poetic intervention in games might relate to poetic intervention in other media, as well as fleshing out the semiotic groundwork. One could also lay out more detailed theory around questions of how the vernacular language of videogames becomes established over time, and how one can work to disrupt it.[271] I would also like to see a more in-depth analysis of intentionally-restrictive game engines/tools and how these might serve as a kind of analog to poetic forms (as I discuss briefly in section 4.1.1), as well as more consideration for how aspects of a poetic videogame practice may align with (or differ from) poetic traditions like oral recitation.[272]

Venturing further out from the groundwork I have attempted to lay, one could of course propose and develop parallel and alternative poetics, as well as parallel

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[271] I would have liked to complete a planned section on this topic that was also going to examine the distinction between metaphor in older language / older games vs. the intentional metaphor of poetry, drawing particularly on the work of Noah Wardrip-Fruin, D. Fox Harrell, and Owen Barfield.
[272] This paper makes no real attempt to distinguish written poetry from oral traditions, and generally foregrounds written poetry, though oral poetry has an explicitly performative dimension that is in some ways closer to the performativity inherent to videogames.

and alternative praxes. These could be developed in relation to lyric poetry, or in relation to other poetic traditions. As we have already noted videogames and poetry are both vast and monstrous in scope, and I believe that scholars and practitioners have only just begun to explore their potential points of connection.

Appendix A: MFA show opening day artist talk[273]

Hi, my name is Jordan Magnuson, and I want to introduce my project by asking a question: can videogames be poetry?

It's a bit of an odd question, isn't it?

Most of the time poetry and videogames don't really seem like they have a lot in common. In fact, sometimes it seems like videogames are sort of the anti-poetry, deeply entangled as they are with certain aspects of industrialism, capitalism, and militarism; they often seem to be about building things, collecting things, or blowing things up.

But what if I asked a different question. What if I asked: can videogames tell stories? I think most of us—if we're familiar with videogames—would probably answer that, of course they can; many of the most popular videogames today focus on telling elaborate stories. But that answer wasn't always so clear: early videogames were often seen as games and toys, not as narrative media. But gradually our conception of videogames changed as we started to realize that they weren't simply a new kind of game—they were also a new kind of story machine.

Well, just like videogames can tell stories, I think that they can also be poetry. For the last several years I've been making what I think of as videogame poems: deeply personal games about the things I experience, the things I see and learn, the things that inspire me, and the things I'm afraid of. These games don't require twitch reactions, have few clear rules or objectives, and rarely last more than five minutes. They're about slowing down and paying attention; being present in the moment; sitting with some particular emotion. For their impact they rely not on flashy graphics or sounds, but on simple representation, symbolism, metaphor, and rhythm. They are tiny little games that attempt to stretch the medium of videogames ever so slightly and suggest that games are capable of creative expression that falls outside of traditional notions of "gameplay" or "simulation" or "narrative."

Which brings me to my MFA exhibit. My exhibit is a collection of five of my most recent "game poems." One of them—*A Murder of Crows*—is a kind of ambiguous Imagist game poem inspired by a haunting dream; two of them—*Icarus Also Flew* and *When Gold is in the Mountain*—are game poems that are actually in dialogue with written poetry; and two of them—*Walking with Magnus* and *Portraits of my Child*—are game poems inspired by my recent experience of parenthood.

The exhibit makes use of a variety of classic videogame controllers which have not been adorned in any way. People have asked me why I insist on using a

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[273] The transcript of an artist talk I gave at the opening of the DANM 2019 MFA show ("Videogames After Poetry" in *Receivership*, Digital Arts and New Media MFA Show, University of California, Santa Cruz, April 26–May 12, 2019). For relevant images see Appendix B.

stock *DDR* dance pad as an input device for a poetic game about walking with my infant son—why not paint it to be less garish? But for me, the use of these undecorated controllers is important, because I see my work as relating explicitly not just to the art world, but also to *videogames as a medium*. I want to insist on a kind of alternate history, where the controllers and technologies we've been using in videogames for a long time for certain kinds of expressive ends can also be used for other kinds expression.

     I'm not going to explain what any of my games "mean," precisely because I think of them as poems—as ambiguous, and embodied, with meaning that is tightly bound to individual encounter. But I will say that what they have in common, for me, is the idea of poetry being a particular kind of intervention that helps us see things in a fresh light—both in terms of our perspective on some aspect of the world broadly speaking, and also in terms of our perspective on the capabilities and potential of a specific medium. Percy Shelley expressed this sentiment this way: he said, "Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar." And that's what I hope these games might do, at some very small level. I hope that when you see this plain yellow screen [slides were used to illustrate the original talk], for instance, in the context of playing *Portraits of My Child*, that it will help you see some aspect of the world in a fresh light, and also help you see videogames as a medium in a fresh light. Thank you.

Appendix B: MFA show images

Figure 24: My MFA show installation, titled "Videogames After Poetry," consisting of five videogame poems.

Figure 25: *A Murder of Crows*
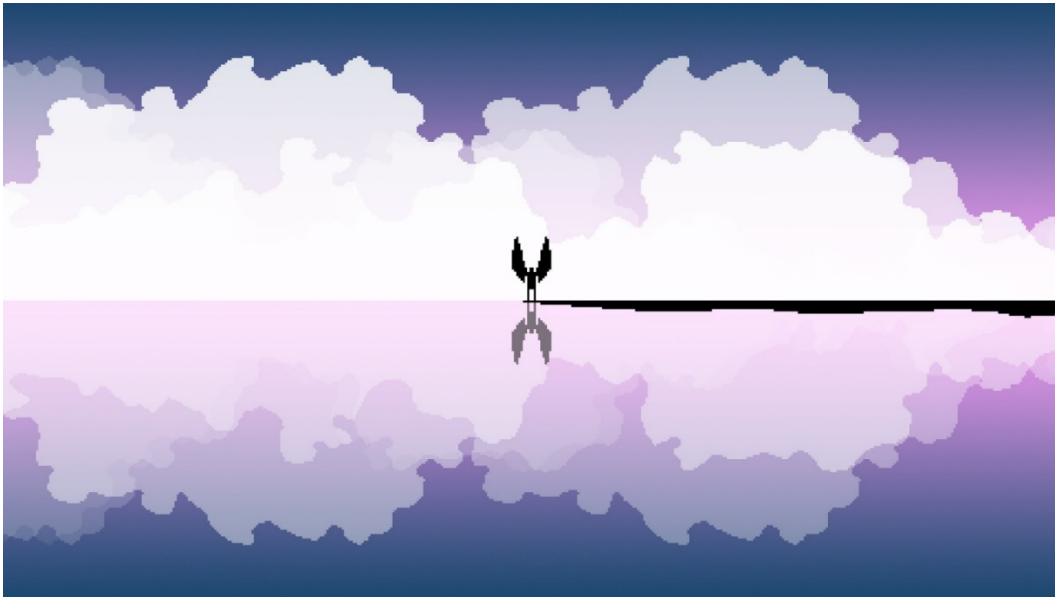
Figure 26: *When Gold is in the Mountain*

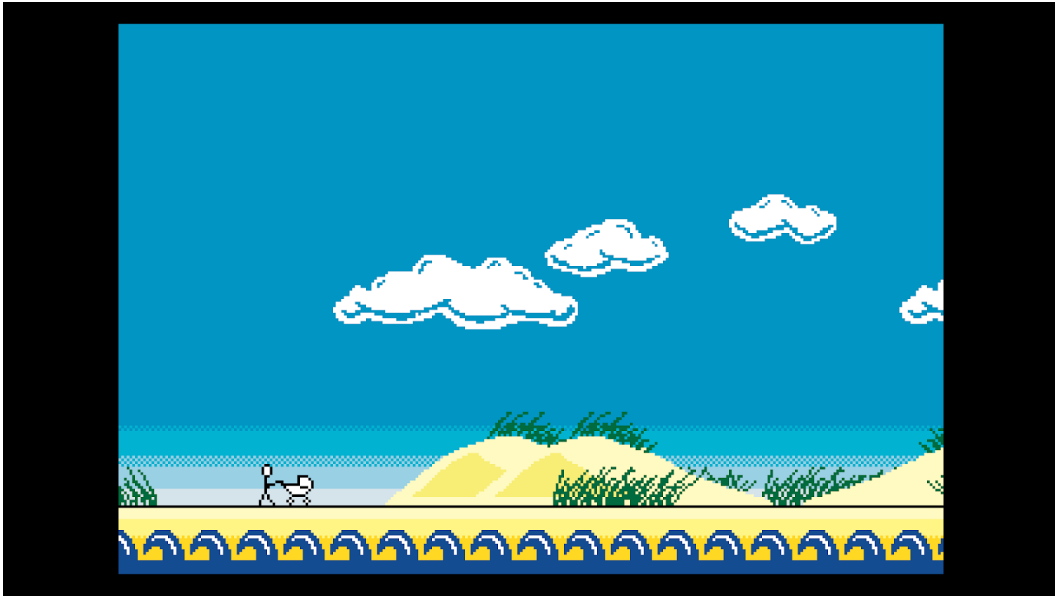Figure 27: *Icarus Also Flew*

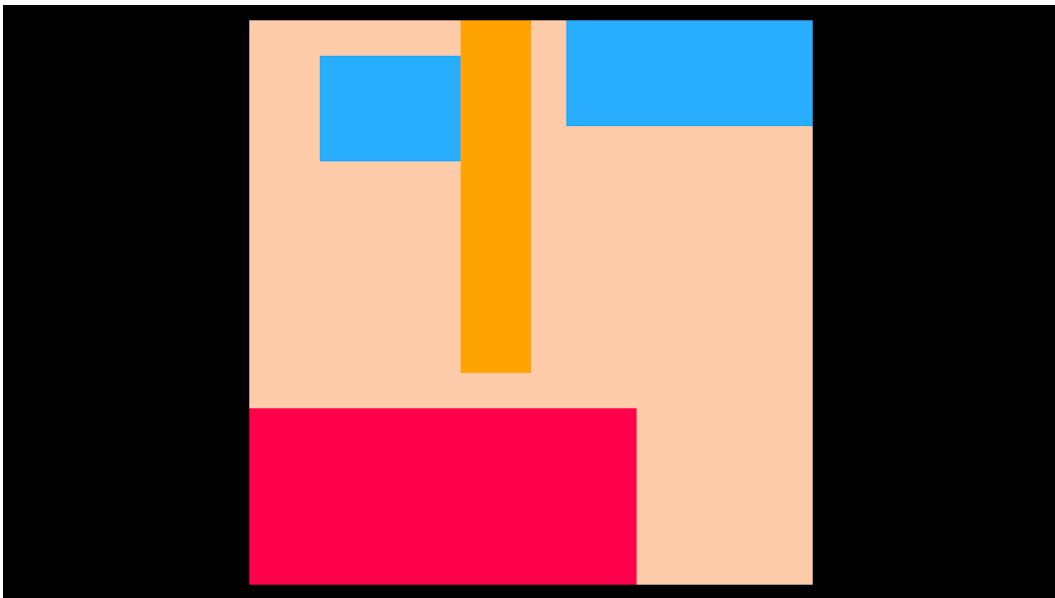Figure 28: *Walking with Magnus*

Figure 29: *Portraits of my Child*

Figure 30: UCSC Digital Arts and New Media MFA show, 2019: *Receivership*.

Figure 31: My MFA show installation, consisting of five "videogame poems."

Figure 32: Controller used for *When Gold is in the Mountain* and *A Murder of Crows*.

Figure 33: Controller used for *Icarus Also Flew.*

Figure 34: Controller used for *Portraits of my Child*.

Figure 35: Dance pad controller used for *Walking with Magnus* (note the stroller prop, barely visible in upper-right).

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