

Adventure Games in Kinesthetic Videogame Theory — A Demand-based Framework for Conceptualizing the Narrative

Veli-Matti Karhulahti
University of Turku
Kaivokatu 12
20014 Turku, Finland
+358505336559
vmmkar@utu.fi

DOCTORAL CONSORTIUM

Foundation of Digital Games, 14–17 May 2013.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.8.0: Personal Computing – *games*.

General Terms

Theory.

Keywords

Videogame; ontology; aesthetics; narrative; adventure games

1. EXTENDED ABSTARCT

From Anthony Niesz and Norman Holland's early article "Interactive Fiction" [22], the 'adventure game' has persisted in academic research as a signifier for a specific type of videogames. The primary goal of the present dissertation is to distinguish these classic adventure games as an individual narrative form. This entails arguing for their ontologically and aesthetically unique character. The initiating premise is that the classic adventure game ought not be seen merely as a generic branch of the so-called videogames, for both its textonomy (textual ontology) and its aesthetics (the experience of textonomy) fall between those of classic narrative forms and those of the videogame [1].

The ways in which the term 'adventure game' has been used in academic research vary markedly, yet these alterations [cf. 2, 8, 12] have rarely been taken into consideration. Outside academic theory, between the late 1970s and mid 1980s, the adventure game became a widely used synonym for 'interactive fiction,' the text-based digital novel with story-integrated puzzle solving [e.g. 4, 20, 23]. Along with the era's rapid technological development the adventure game was soon introduced to visual imagery, audio, and graphical interfaces, which resulted in confusion in the term's usage.

As a result, in the late 1980s scholars ended up distinguishing between 'text adventures' and 'graphic adventures' [9, 10, 13, 19, 25], a still-relevant distinction comparable to 'novels' and 'graphic novels' [16].

This undertaking is not, however, a discourse analysis of term usage but an attempt to reveal the ontic and aesthetic foundations of its subject of study; an approach that aims at providing answers to questions concerning videogame narrativity in general. The methodology applied is the analysis of 'ergodic peculiarity,' by which it is referred to the specific efforts that need to be exerted in order to traverse narratives. The model has its origins in Espen Aarseth's book *Cybertext* [2], which he later elaborated with the aesthetic concepts of 'aporia' and 'epiphany' that can be related to overcoming challenges:

When an aporia is overcome, it is replaced by an epiphany: a sudden, often unexpected solution to the impasse in the event space. Compared to the epiphanies of [classic] narrative texts, the ergodic epiphanies are not optional, something to enhance the aesthetic experience, but essential to the exploration of the event space. Without them, the rest of the work cannot be realized. [3]

The model will be brought into use with respect to Walter Benjamin's [7] philosophy of technology, which provides compatible tools for examining cultural forms as classes of objects that set differing demands on their users. Accordingly, the adventure game will be examined as a narrative form the demands of which fall into the essential and the optional categories, both.

Ultimately, Aarseth's view of classic (nonergodic) narratives as works that are realizable without exerting nontrivial effort is questioned. Drawing from reader-response criticism and ontology of aesthetics, it is argued that all narrative works set demands the fulfilling of which is essential for exploring their event spaces. Since empirical items such as books are only material tools for giving stable, relatively unchangeable foundations to aesthetic objects [11, 14], the traversal of a narrative work cannot be reduced to the operation of its materialization. Traversing a narrative by reading, viewing or playing is essentially a cognitively demanding process, which can be further hindered by additional demands set by the narrative's materialization. Consequently, despite the fact that not all narrative materializations set nontrivial demands on their users, no narrative work can be traversed without the

user fulfilling the cerebral demands set by the immaterial narrative itself.

In order to develop the demand-based framework of narration, the dissertation proposes a distinction between *kinesthetic* and *nonkinesthetic* videogames. The distinction is based on the evident but mostly unexplored difference between videogames that provide vicariously kinesthetic challenge and videogames that do not. A challenge, then, is vicariously kinesthetic if overcoming it requires nontrivial psychomotor effort, and it is nonkinesthetic if the nontrivial effort required to overcome it is cognitive alone. Videogame play, *gaming*, is thus either vicariously kinesthetic or nonkinesthetic activity depending on the effort required to overcome its challenge.

The distinction allows the adventure game to be divided in *action adventure games* with kinesthetic challenges, and *classic adventure games* with no kinesthetic challenges—being aware that the former often demand nonkinesthetic effort as well. The primary subject of this dissertation is the latter: a narrative form that does not set kinesthetic demands on its traversal. In regard to the previously stated argument (that classic narrative works also set essential demands on their traversal) the classic adventure game is positioned ontologically closer to the classic, nonkinesthetically demanding forms of narration than to the kinesthetically demanding videogame.

Finally, the adventure game will be studied against what are here termed ‘kinesthetic videogame theories.’ These theories—such as those of Steve Swink [22] and Graeme Kirkpatrick [18]—see gaming as an aesthetic activity that is defined by its distinctive vicariously kinesthetic form. Following the kinestheticians’ premise and taking vicarious kinesthetics as the defining element of the videogame, the study of nonkinesthetic videogames (turn-based strategy games, puzzle games, classic adventure games) is suggested to entail its own aesthetic discipline, the establishing of which this dissertation initiates. Eventually, the nonkinesthetic discipline that bases on cerebral demands is traced back to the enigmatic nature of all narration [6, 15] and arts [5, 21]. This will support the central thesis of conceiving of the classic adventure game as an individual classic narrative form, distinct from the non-enigmatic or, to be accurate, the differently enigmatic [17], videogame.

2. REFERENCES

- [1] Aarseth, E. 1994. Nonlinearity and Literary Theory. In *Hyper/Text/Theory*, 51–86. Ed. George Landow. Johns Hopkins University Press: 1994.
- [2] Aarseth, E. 1997. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore.
- [3] Aarseth, E. 1999. ‘Aporia and Epiphany in Doom and the Speaking Clock: Temporality in Ergodic Art.’ In *Cyberspace Textuality*, M. Ryan, Ed. University of Indiana Press, Bloomington, 31-41.
- [4] Addams, S. 1985. Interactive Fiction: Emphasis on Character Interaction and Story Line Makes These Text Adventures the Computer Games for the Literate. *Popular Computing*, 4 (5), 96–99.
- [5] Adorno, T. 1970/2004. *Aesthetic Theory*. Continuum: London.
- [6] Barthes, R. 1974/2000. *S/Z: An Essay*. Hill & Wang: New York.
- [7] Benjamin, W. 1968/2007. The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction. In *Illuminations: Essays and Reflectionism*, H. Arendt, Ed. H. Zohn, Trans. Schocken, New York, NY, 217–252.
- [8] Buckles, M. A. 1985. *Interactive Fiction: The Computer Storygame ‘Adventure.’* Doctoral Dissertation. University of California.
- [9] Buckles, M. A. 1987. Interactive Fiction as Literature. *Byte*, 12 (5) 135–142.
- [10] Crawford, C. 1984. *Art of Computer Game Design*. McGraw-Hill: New York, NY.
- [11] Dewey, J. (1934/2005). *Art as Experience*. Penguin Group: New York, NY.
- [12] Fernández-Vara, C. 2009. *The Tribulations of Adventure Games: Integrating Story Into Simulation Through Performance*. Doctoral Thesis. Georgia Institute of Technology.
- [13] Gilbert, R. 1989. Why Adventure Games Suck. *The Journal of Computer Game Design*, 3 (2), 4–7.
- [14] Ingarden, R. 1973. *The Literary Work of Art*. Northwestern University Press: Evanston.
- [15] Iser, W. 1974/1978. *The Implied Reader*. Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore.
- [16] Karhulahti, V. 2011. Mechanic/Aesthetic Videogame Genres: Adventure and Adventure. In *Proceedings of the 15th International Mindtrek Conference*, pp. 71-74. A. Lugmayr et al. (Eds.). ACM: New York.
- [17] Karhulahti, V. 2012. Double Fine Adventure and the Double Hermeneutic Videogame. In *Proceedings of Fun and Games 2012 Conference*, pp. 9-26. R. Bernhaupt et al. (Eds.). ACM: New York.
- [18] Kirkpatrick, G. 2011. *Aesthetic Theory And the Video Game*. Manchester University Press: Manchester, UK.
- [19] Laurel, B. 1986. *Toward the Design of a Computer-Based Interactive Fantasy System*. Doctoral Dissertation. Ohio State University.
- [20] Liddil, B. 1981. *The Captain 80 Book of Basic Adventures*. Northwest Publishing: Tacoma, WA.
- [21] Nehamas, A. *Only a Promise of Happiness*. Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ.
- [22] Niesz A. & Holland N. 1984. Interactive Fiction. *Critical Inquiry*, 11 (1), 110–129.
- [23] Schuette, K. 1984. *The Book of Adventure Games*. Arrays Inc.: Los Angeles, CA.
- [24] Swink, S. 2009. *Game Feel: A Game Designer’s Guide to Virtual Sensation*. Amsterdam,
- [25] Ziegfeld, R. 1989. Interactive Fiction: A New Literary Genre? *New Literary History*, 20 (2), 341-372.