Poetic Properties of Video Games

Foundations of Play and Games

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ABSTRACT

Video games that offer players ambiguous play experiences are often referred to as having a poetic

quality, especially those evoking emotive responses. The artistically motivated video game *The

Graveyard* (Tale of Tales, 2008) is an example of a game offering such a response by

utilizing its computational model and player role in order to leave it open to multiple interpretations.

In this paper I have studied *The Graveyard* as an example of how poetical properties can affect the

evocative qualities of video games.

Rhetoric in video games is the main topic in *Persuasive Games* (Ian Bogost, 2007), although merely by

touching upon the fields of politics, advertising and learning, leaving opportunity for an artistic

approach. Bogost's work was studied in conjunction with Brian Sutton-Smith's *Ambiguity of Play*

(Sutton-Smith 1997) as well as *Poetics* (Aristotle, 1997) to support the understanding of ambiguous

play as well as the properties of poetry.

Since the idiosyncratic forms and conventions of poetry are not limited to ambiguity alone, nor will

The Graveyard possess all of them, the former was studied by using a method of reviewing existing

literature illustrated by a qualitative analysis of the game.

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Introduction

Video games that offer players ambiguous play experiences are often referred to by game journalists as having a poetic quality, especially those evoking emotive responses. This point is highlighted by author and journalist Steven Poole who phrases it as:

> "A poem is a marriage of determinacy and indeterminacy. The words in their unalterable order predictably generate a literal meaning, but also give off a cloud of association and implication whose extent is unforeseeable, keeping ambiguities eternally in play. A videogame, too, runs on determinate code to produce predictable effects, but also allows a larger set of possible outputs that cannot be delineated in advance." (Poole, 2009, Edge 201)

The term *Poetry in motion,* often used in the field of sports (especially football, basketball and wrestling) is a phrase that also recently pops up in articles about games like *Limbo* (Playdead, 2010) *Red Steel 2* (Ubisoft Paris, 2010) *El Shaddai: Ascension of the Metatron (*Ignition Tokyo, 2011) and, unsurprisingly give the genre, Wii Sports Resort (Nintendo EAD, 2009). The term poetry is even used as a qualitative term, for example when talking about the motion controls of the game *The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword* (Nintendo EAD, 2011)

Its not only journalists who make the comparison between play and poetry, but also scholars, and not just recently. Dutch historian Johan Huizinga devotes an entire chapter to it in his book Homo Ludens called "Play and Poetry" (Huizinga, 1955). Game scholar Ian Bogost similarly makes the comparison by stating that "Good games, like good poems, are provocation machines." (Bogost, 2010) and he continues his comparison by saying "the stuff of provocation in poems and in games are the same: the behaviour of artefacts." (Bogost , 2010)

The artistically motivated video game *The Graveyard* (Tale of Tales, 2008) is generally regarded as one

of the best examples of a poetic game offering an emotive response. Proven by the fact that there is

hardly any mentioning of the game without using the term poetry. Moreover, popular websites like

Wired, Creative Applications and *Indiegames.com* clearly mention its emotional quality by stating for

example that it is "...an emotional journey of empathy" (Creative Applications Network, 2009)

In this paper I have studied *The Graveyard* as an example of how poetical properties can affect the

evocative qualities of video games. I aim at offering the reader a poetic frame through which one can

look at this game and video games as a whole.

There is only a relatively small amount of theoretical work in the field of game research that talks about

poetry and games. The majority of the texts that appear to be concerned with this topic focuses on

poetics in the secondary meaning of the word, as the form and structure in an aesthetic rather than a

poetic way (see below for a complete definition). This type of structural approach is essential when it

comes to the laying out of a game's properties, or as Georg Lauteren calls it: "regarding the very nature

of the computer game system itself: its rules of functioning, its methods of producing signs and the

involvement of the user in this process – in short: its poetics" (Lauteren, 2002). But it does not examine

the actual poetic qualities of videogames.

Poetry is regarded by many philosopher, from Socrates to Kant, as the part of the highest and most

sophisticated of the arts. It is because of its artistry and great ability to evoke emotion and meaning that

poetry should be studied in conjunction with the provocative and engaging medium of computer

games. Jesper Juul states that: "I do not see any particular contradiction between enjoying an action

game and enjoying the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke." (Juul, 2005, 21) This paper exactly aim at

defining where these two media meet, hopefully contributing to the field of game research by exploring

the analogy between videogames and poetry.

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Research Question and main goals

Using the game *The Graveyard* as a case study I have tried to answer the following question: Do video games have poetic properties? Subsequently I have asked how these properties exist in a game, by examining the ways in which they are represented to the player and what these properties exactly meant for the play experience. By doing so I aimed at defining not the one and only way in which we must look at The Graveyard, or video games and poetry in general, but rather initiating the discovery and acknowledgement of the unique characteristics and qualities that emerge when looking at both media in the context of one another.

Theory

William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1955) are linked with play by play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith in his book *Ambiguity of Play* (1997). Sutton-Smith was in search of the possible reasons for ambiguity of play, he stated 9 different types of play that he used to illustrate the diverse play activities.

1. Mind or subjective play
2. Solitary play
3. Playful behaviours
4. Informal social play
5. Vicarious audience play
6. Performance play
7. Celebrations and festivals
8. Contests (games and sports)
9. Risky or deep play

(Sutton-Smith 1997, 299-301)

He then continued to present seven different rhetorics of play that he defined as following:

The rhetoric of play as progress

The rhetoric of play as fate

The rhetoric of play as power

The rhetoric of play as identity

The rhetoric of play as the imaginary

The rhetoric of the self

The rhetoric of play as frivolous

(Sutton-Smith 1997, 304-306)

Sutton-Smith's theory was useful because it allowed for an identification of the type of play from a cultural aspect and the characteristics that are responsible for it.

In his book *Persuasive Games: The expressive power of videogames* (Ian Bogost, 2007) Bogost presented *procedural rhetoric,* the art of persuasion through rule-based representation and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images or moving pictures. His theory deals with "...identifying and interpreting the rules that drive the system." (Bogost 2010, 64).

In order to identify this, Bogost says, the following questions should be asked:

What are the rules of the system?

What is the significance of these rules (over other rules)?

What claims about the world do these rules make?

How do I respond to those claims?

(Bogost 2010, 258)

Ian Bogost's concept of *procedural rhetoric* is important because it examined specifically the effective and persuasive expression of games, an aspect crucial to poetry. Bogost stated that it is a technique for

making arguments with computational system and for unpacking computational arguments others have

created. (Bogost 2010, 3-28)

Therefore both texts offered a theoretical basis of the properties of games to which poetry can be

compared with.

In addition to this, the properties of poetry were examined by framing games through the more

foundational knowledge on poetry and drama found in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Poetics deals with the

thinking about poetry and drama and Aristotle regarded all forms of Poetry to be imitation. He defined

the various types of poetry and distinguished them from "other kinds of imitation" by using three

terms: medium, object and mode (Heath 1996, 3-5). He defined the medium of poetry as "imitation in

rhythmical language, with or without melodic accompaniment" respectively diction and lyric poetry

(spoken and sung). The object is defined as the plot, character and reasoning. He also pointed to the

actual speech, the melody and the spectacle. He states that verse is not poetry unless it is imitative, and

since poetry is imitation, he says; "it seeks to create likeness, and the likeness is greater if the words of

those involved in the action are presented directly rather than being mediated by a narrator." (Heath

1996, xvii) The mode in his theory can be described as telling the same story (imitating the same

objects) by using either tragedy or comedy.(Heath 1996, 5)

Aristotle's theory was used in relationship to the performative aspect of games. Poetics focuses mostly

on tragedy, defined by the author as "an imitation of a certain kind of action" (Heath 1996, xviii).

Poetics is a work that offers a strong but classical body of knowledge on poetry, but unfortunately only

focuses on tragic and briefly on epic poetry. This paper made the hypothesis that the game fits into the

definition of a tragedy. The theory fell short when talking about comedy, satyr or dithyrambic (wild and

irregular) types of poetry (and games). Moreover, it discussed the poetic diction in the western

tradition, and thus lacking in knowledge when it comes to encompassing a more global and inter

cultural kind of work. Despite being widely regarded as the most important work of dramatic theory

and poetry, the application of Poetics did potentially cause a problem. A problem that resulted from

using such an ancient text lies in the fact that it deals mostly with text written by Greek tragedians such

as Homer and Sophocles. Even important authors of the Roman Empire during the Augustan period,

like Horace or Virgil are "too young" to be included in Aristotle's theory. This means that the

knowledge and evolution of poetry that derived from even before the Anglo-Saxon Period (450-1066)

all the way up to the current Post Modernism, not to forget other poetry in languages other than English

such as Chinese (e.g. Shi 詩/诗) , Japanese (e.g. Waka (和歌) or Persian (e.g. Rubayāt), is not included

in the comparison, thus only truly dealing with the first principles of this literary form. Lastly,

Aristotle's Poetics is a work that relates more to drama in a general literary sense than to the present

day conception of Poetry and does not cover the stylistic elements of poetic diction.

Methodology

The reasoning throughout this paper is of an inductive kind, since only one instance of a wide range of

various games was taken; evaluation of solely *The Graveyard,* formulating an argument that could

apply to, or support, games in general.

Illustration 1: Controlling the wind in "Flower" (Thatgamecompany, 2009)

One may therefore criticize the choice for *The Graveyard*, since it may very well be that other games offer, to a certain extend, a similar poetic quality. An example is the intended "positive shelter" that is offered by *Flower* (Thatgamecompany, 2009) where the player controls the wind as it blows

flower petals over a natural landscape. Or on the contrary, the alienating sequence in action adventure

game *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves* (Naughty Dog, 2009) in which the player finds himself controller the game's protagonist Nathan Drake, an English speaker, in a Tibetan village where he is unable to communicate to its inhabitants since no-one is able to speak English.

Illustration 2: Ah, does anyone speak English? (Naughty Dog, 2009)

Due to time constraints and the scope of this paper a wide range of examples was not provided, instead

the choice was made to focus on one example game that would most likely include poetic properties.

The Graveyard was such a good case study because it is in the first place a short game, therefore it could be studied in its entirety. Second, it is, like most poetry, almost entirely ambiguous in nature, an ambiguous experience in the sense that the game's affordances are very unclear. Third, from an authorship perspective the game is, according to its developers "An experiment with real-time poetry" (Tale of Tales, 2008) which directly states and promises that it has some kind of poetic value.

The definition of a *poem* according to the Oxford Dictionary was used: "a piece of writing in which the expression of feelings and ideas is given intensity by particular attention to diction (sometimes involving rhyme), rhythm, and imagery:". Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, this research dealt with the primary definition of the word poetics, defined by the Oxford Dictionary as "the art of writing poetry" where the secondary definition read "the study of linguistic techniques in poetry and literature".

The reliability of the results is weakened by the hypothetical nature of the interpretation of the game as part of the analysis (Bogost's fourth question for example). The application of the methods and its results are however reliable when looking purely at the data. The results are generalizable in their inductive sense that nothing prevents other games from possessing or mimicking the Graveyard's properties.

Empirical basis

Whether certain properties can be found in a particular object, requires an understanding of what the object is made of. A qualitative method was used in order to understand and study the poetic qualities of *The Graveyard;* applying the following technique. The game was played multiple times and observation notes paired with time coded screen-shots registered all the various parts the game consists

of. Both the free version as well as the paid version were examined to the extend where no part of game was overlooked, resulting in 4 play sessions of the free version and 6 play sessions of the paid version of the game, a combination of total completion, repeated play and to a certain extend, expert play. Attention was given to game-play, game-structure and game-world. The website of the game's developers offers a post mortem that offers an interesting insight in the creation of the game. This paper, however, did not look at the game from the way it was intended, but uses a more formalist approach when it comes the gathering of data. (The game's intention *was* used when selecting the game) The analysis itself however, is contextual, but is not – as opposed to formalism – directly concerned with the work's value. An approach was used that primarily looked at the various elements that makes up the work and considered the reason for creating it, the life of its creator and the historical background of secondary importance.

Subsequently this data was analysed by applying the theories of Sutton Smith and Bogost in order to *map* the game's properties. This provided an overview of all the pieces the game consists of. Then the order in which these properties were displayed to the player was looked at. Since the game offers the player the freedom to control the events, up to a certain degree, no single game session was exactly the same. For the sake of evaluating what was most likely to happen when playing the game, the two most logical scenarios were constructed. The theories of Brian Sutton-Smith and Bogost were then applied to the gathered data.

The research subsequently looked at how the basic elements of poetry and their unique characteristics, according to Aristotle's theory of Poetics, could be applied to the collected information.

Existing literature in search of the the poetry in games showed that very few others had asked a similar question. One prominent and two less prominent works were found, respectively Johan Huizinga's

chapter *Play and Poetry* from *Homo Ludens* (Huizinga 1955) and two short essay by Ian Bogost on the

similarities between videogames and poetry *Provocation Machines* and *My Slow Year* (Bogost, 2010).

Huizinga's text is remarkably significant and useful when it comes to the direct comparison between

play and poetry. The text is, however, also limiting and was not used in this paper because of its focus

on seeing poetry in the light of play, rather than in the light of representation, or as Aristotle would call
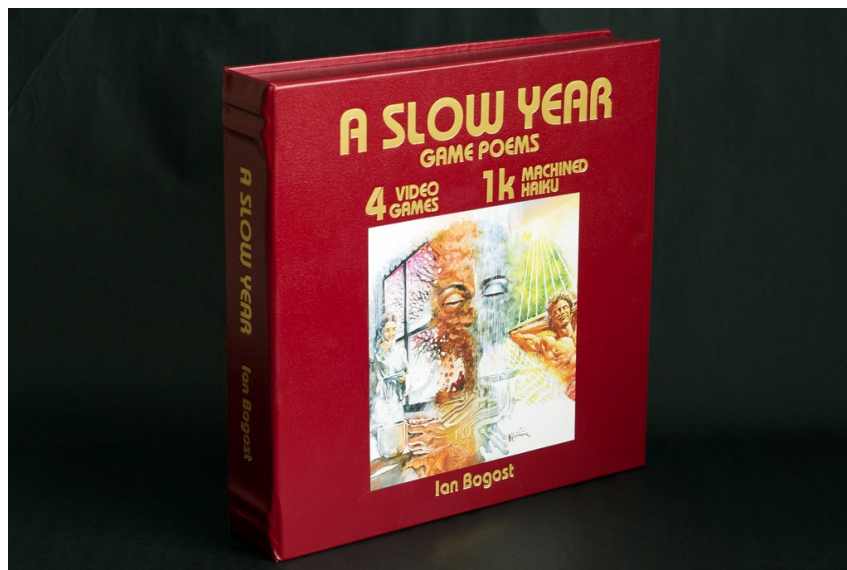
it *mimesis*; imitation.

Bogost's essays were similar when it came to their direct comparison, they were however, very short

and were most likely only intended to introduce the topic rather than to carefully examine it.

Bogost used the poetic movement of Imagism, characterized by clarity in its imagery and precise

language (Bogost 2010, 5), to prove his point. He compared this to the philosophy of Will Wright, who

stated that he uses the mind of the player to fill in the gaps or *offload,* in this case the meaning of

character behaviour in a particular situation, rather than making the meaning part of the simulation. The

meaning emerges from the free movement within an authored system, according to Bogost, using the

term *provocation machines*. He talked about the effect of the system, of the experience, and how the

player's personal response is what really matters. His ideas requires the player to be very self-aware, to

be able to self reflect and constantly trying to understand the semiotics of the game. The result of his

observation comes down to the mechanics, the gameplay, the system and its ambiguity being

responsible for the similarity to poetry. It is this personal interpretation of a poem that makes the action

described in the poem feel so vivid. The vagueness of both a poem and a game, when seen in the

context of the parts clearly defined by its creator, result in what Bogost called an "intimate

relationship" (Bogost 2010, 7).

His second essay was a reflection on the process of his own creation of four poetic games combined

with 1024 machined (computer generated) haiku bearing the title: *A slow year* (Bogost, 2010). A work

both simplistic and ingenious at the same time. Simplistic in its visual representation and mechanics,

ingenious in its details: Bogost for example cleverly used haiku instead of formal instructions in order

to stay true to the ambiguous nature of his work. The essay used the term *ludic poetry*, implying that his

games are not a category or type of game, but rather a kind of poem, like the earlier mentioned poetic

movement Imagism. This is a term not corresponding to the definition of poetry as a written work

(Oxford Dictionary).

His work resulted in the realization that it is not at all about the technological development of

videogames but rather about looking at existing art forms and learning from the history of art. "We just

have to slow down enough to listen" (Bogost 2010, 18).

Illustration 3: A slow year:Limited Edition (Bogost, 2010)

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Analysis

The Graveyard is a game developed by Belgian independent game developer *Tale of Tales*. It was

released as a down-loadable game for Windows and Mac OS X in 2008 and later for iOS and Android,

distributed initially via *Steam* (Valve Corporation) and the *App Store* (Apple), followed by *GamersGate*

(GamersGate AB) and the *Android Market* (Google). The game is currently priced at $5 for Mac or PC

and $1.99 for iPhone or Android. It gained critical acclaim at the Independent Games Festival 2009

where it was nominated for the Innovation Award. The game also won the 2008 European Innovative

Games Award as well as being selected at the 2008 IndieCade festival.
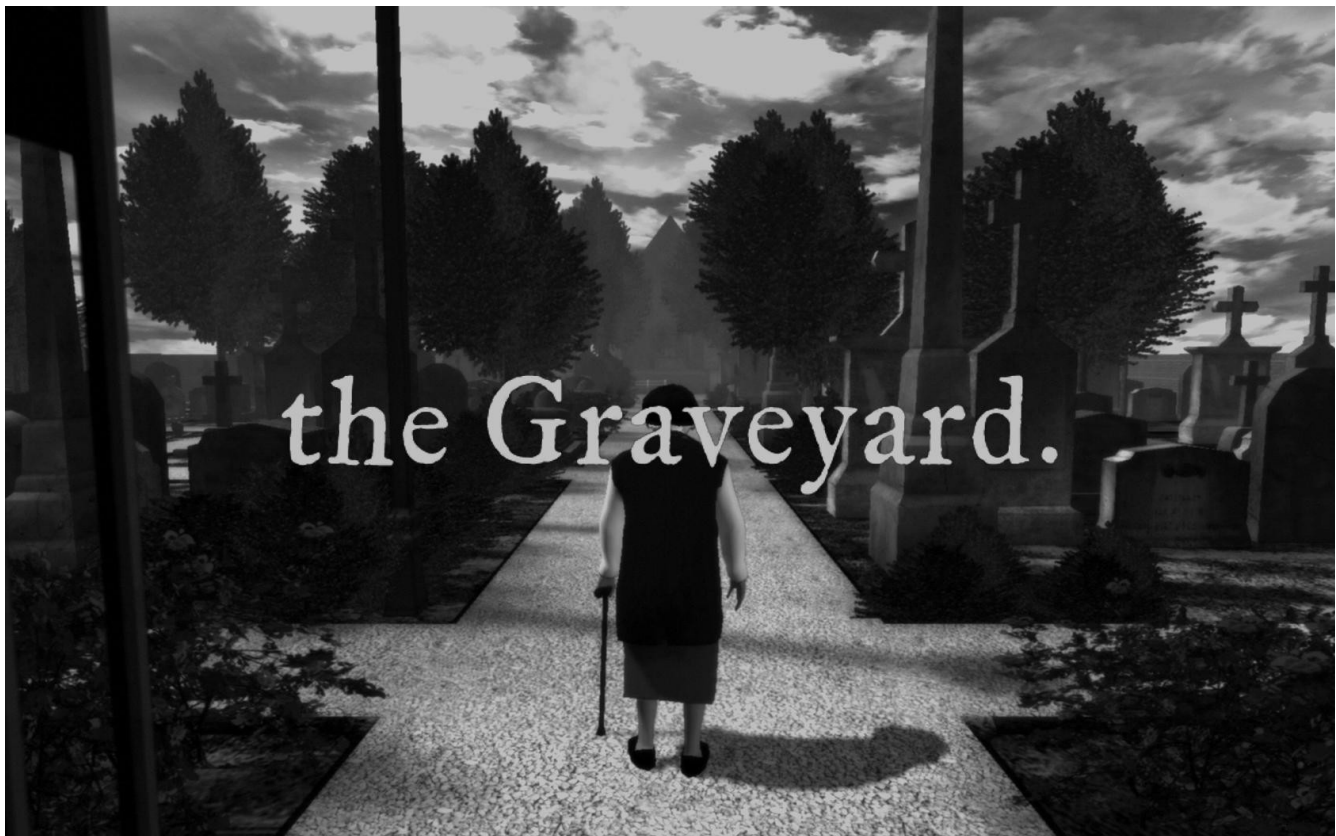
Illustration 4: The Graveyard (Tale of Tales, 2008)

Game-play

In The Graveyard you play an old lady visiting a graveyard. The gameplay consists of gently moving the character by using the arrow keys on the keyboard. The up and down arrow keys move the woman forwards and backwards, the left and right arrow keys turn her in place. The movement of the character happens at a very slow rate, every action step by step. When constantly keeping the up arrow pressed and thus moving forward, the old woman will start to limp after a few seconds. Halting for a short while enables the normal walking again, reminding the player that a woman of old age is not able to continuously walk forward. This motivates the player to be somewhat considerate and to give the woman some time to catch her breath, or regain her strength. It results in a style of gameplay where the player is guided to alternate frequently between walking and standing still. Carefully moving about in a modest fashion, in sync with the character, but also with its setting. As opposed to the rushing pace one is able to move at in games where the player controls a character.

If the player chooses to do nothing, the woman will rest on her cane, taking in her surroundings. The character automatically sits down at the bench in front of the chapel when you position her and turn her around. A song will start playing. When pressing the up arrow key, she will stand up and the song will stop. You are able to stand up and leave the graveyard at any time, this will quit the game.

Game-structure

When starting the game, the player is presented with a configuration screen, similar to other Unity applications (the game engine with which the game was made). Here the player can set the graphical settings and controls. Upon hitting the *Play!* button the game loads and the player finds himself, without the intervention of a menu screen, directly inside the game world.

Illustration 5: The game's configuration screen, with a double role of explaining the game's affordances. The Graveyard (Tale of Tales, 2008)

The game is then structured in such a way that there are no explicit rules, apart from the simulation

rules. It is basically a character in an environment. The game does not initially present the player a

clear goal, or an end state, nor does it force the player into a particular time frame. Even though the

game is presented as being short, there is no limit as to how long the player can have the character sit

on the bench or stand near a grave. It is only after pressing the ESC key that the player is able to read

the instructions. The simulation rules are facilitating rather than explicitly punishing or rewarding. The

limp mechanic may be regarded as such a simulation rule, it simulates walking at an old age. Similarly

the sitting down only happens when the woman is positioned correctly. The game, in its 2 versions (the

free trial version and the paid version) allows for 2 general structural experiences. Both experiences

may be regarded as having 3 acts where the following actions happen:

– Structure 1:

– Act 1: Start near the gate and walk towards

the bench

Act 2: Sit down and listen to the song

Act 3: Get up and walk out.

Illustration 6: Walking out. The Graveyard (Tale of Tales, 2008)

– Structure 2:

– Act 1: Start near the gate and walk towards

the bench

Act 2: Sit down and listen to the song

Act 3: Die
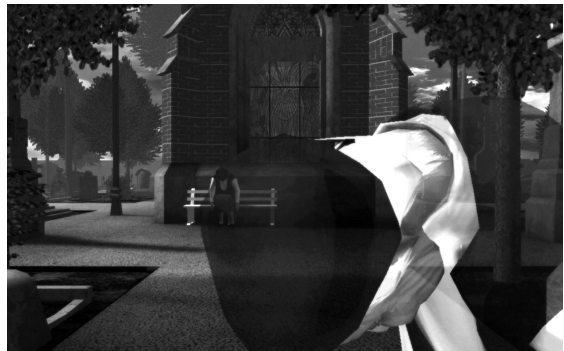
Illustration 7: Death. The Graveyard (Tale of Tales, 2008)

Game-world

The game is set in a black and white 3D environment, a graveyard typical to the western world, under a

cloud-filled sky. It consists of a gate, a main gravel path with side lanes and various graves with

interlining trees and bushes. At the end of the path there is a chapel with a bench, and some streetlamps.

The desaturated world is of a detailed quality featuring rich dynamic shadows of not only the character

and the game world, but also those of the clouds on the landscape. The eye for detail is also visible in

the game's atmospheric details such as the realistic sound effects, moving trees and the presence of 3d

animated birds populating the scene.

The boundaries of the playable area make it possible to move into the isles left and right of the main

path, but only for a couple of meters. The level is designed in a rectangular shape, with the camera

gliding over a straight path from the gates to the chapel, according to the position of the player, only

moving backwards and forwards, never rotating or moving along any of its axis.

The visual style is realistic, this is shown through the game's usage of dynamic lighting, its realistically

modelled environment and usage of photo realistic textures. Moreover, the character model used in the

game both looks and moves with great detail. The animations are very precise and included a realistic

walk cycle, the changing of shape of the woman's skirt while walking, animation of the head and eyes

including blinking, and animated mouth movement. The little details make the game very natural and

believable, even during the moment of death, when the woman collapses on the bench and the cane

falls to the ground.

The game's second act, the song, is presented and also structured uniquely within the game because it

places a second slightly transparent camera layer over the initial view, blending two images into one.

Allowing for a more personal observation of the woman up close, as well as the context she is in. The

railed camera also automatically and slowly distantiates itself slightly from the bench, resulting in a

bigger contrast between the two overlaying shots. The song is sung in Dutch and is subtitled in English.

It is a musical piece with lyrics about the death of various people, various ways to die, the risk of dying

oneself, dying here at the graveyard and death in general. It can be interpreted in a way in which the

song's lyrics correspond to the woman's thoughts, illustrated by the line: "Next time perhaps, I will

stay" (Gerry De Mol, 2008).

The game fits into various forms of play as defined by Sutton-Smith. One might even state the the

forms themselves have a certain ambiguous quality to them.

> - *Mind or subjective play:* the game is set in an imaginative world.

> - *Solitary play:* One is able to play the game alone.

> - *Playful behaviours:* The game allows the player to *play around* in the game world.

> - *Informal social play:* The game may be enjoyed in one's leisure time.

> - *Vicarious audience play:* Included the term virtual reality, the game indeed simulates a form of
> physical presence in a virtual world.

> - *Performance play:* The graveyard may be viewed as a game in which one acts as the old
> woman.

> - *Celebrations and festivals:* The game may be regarded as a celebration of death. (Not to
> mention the fact that the game is offered for free during the Mexican celebration Day of the
> Dead (Día de Muertos).

It is only when having examined the last two types: *Contest (games and sports)* and *Risky or deep play*
that Sutton-Smith's theory does not apply. As short as the game may be, the conclusion was drawn that
The Graveyard offers many types of play.

Comparing the Graveyard to the Seven Rhetorics resulted in the following:

> - *The rhetoric of play as progress:* One may note the possibility of developing one's notion of
> death, as seen in the light of old age and optimism, as it is depicted in the game.

> *The rhetoric of play as fate:* This featured very strongly in the game, as death is inevitable when
> one plays the paid version of the game, there is no free choice in this aspect. When sitting down
> on the bench the player will eventually watch the old woman die.

> *The rhetoric of play as power:* none existent

The rhetoric of play as identity: This was only present when the game is regarded as a celebratory tool, as mentioned in the types of play.

The rhetoric of play as the imaginary: A very strong presence in the game, as it offered the possibility of improvisation within the game world because of its freedom of play.

The rhetoric of the self: Playing the game is primarily a solitary activity, it offered an escape from the real world as well as the possibilities of intrinsic and aesthetic satisfaction.

The rhetoric of play as frivolous: none existent, the game's topic, character and context immediately gave the game a serious value.

Bogost's theory of *procedural rhetorics,* with its four questions, proved to be very difficult when applying it to *The Graveyard* because the game is not (very) rule or goal based. The only rules that governed were the simulation rules (question 1). They are significant to the extend of framing the gameplay (question 2). These rules did not necessarily make claims, but hinted at the fact that being of old age means that walking can be problematic and, more importantly, that one can be at peace with death (question 3). The response the game triggered is one of empathy, when the player adapts to the woman's pace by pausing every few steps. Another response is the feeling of relativation and acceptance of death, because of the woman's positive stance towards her own death. Procedural representation is still an important part of the Graveyard, as the game system is essentially a process (question 4). In his book Bogost sets apart process (rules) from language (letters or text) (Bogost 2010, 9). When examining the game from this point of view the following structure becomes visible: 1. The game's title is nothing but text. 2. Walking to the bench is procedural part of the game. 3. The subtitles, as well as the lyrics themselves, are not procedural, but purely textual. 4. Both death (in ending player control) and walking back are procedures in the game.
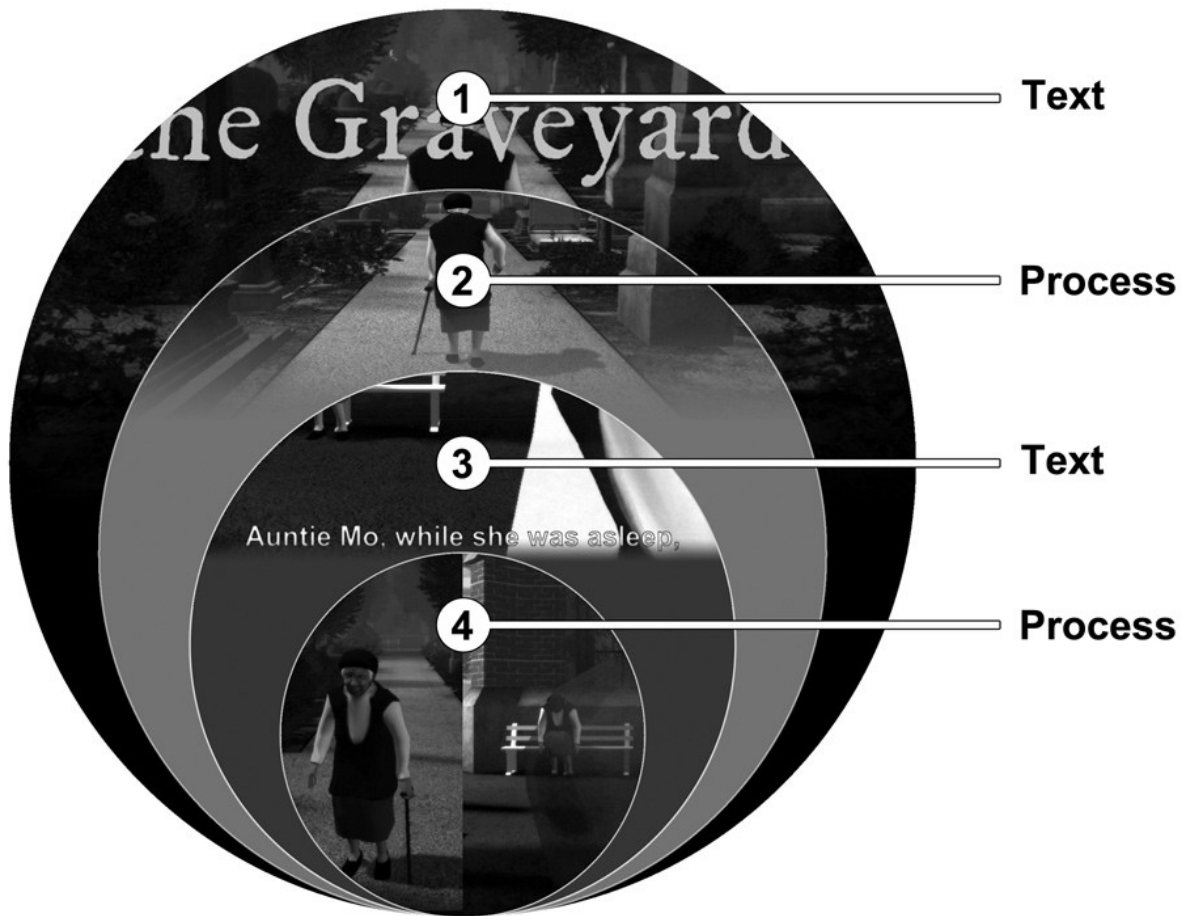
Illustration 8: How The Graveyard seems to work

Since the game is so non-procedural in terms of rules and goals, the usefulness of Bogost's theory

ended here. His presence in this paper, however, is not yet over. There was a parallel between Bogost's

A Slow Year and Tale of Tale's *The Graveyard* that was worthy of highlighting after having applied

Aristotle's work.

Aristotle's theory of poetics had particular commonalities when applied to *The Graveyard*. There was

no apparent *imitation in rhythmical language*, nor was there *melodic accompaniment*, although one

may regard the song to be an approximation of the melodic aspect. There was however a big overlap

with the term, imitation, as such. Since in the game one clearly imitates the visiting of a graveyard.

Aristotle's first term, medium, was regarded as partially correlating.

The application of the term *object* to the plot reads: "One should also, as far as possible, work plots out using gestures. Given the same natural talent, those who are actually experiencing the emotion are the most convincing; someone who is distressed or angry acts out distress and irritation most authentically." The gameplay of walking and sitting can be compared to the action and gestures mentioned in the theory. Looking at the *The Graveyard* through Aristotle's eyes one can regard the player to be both acting out as well as observing, in this sense the player becomes both the actor as well as the audience.

An unexpected results was observed in terms of *mode:* the game was, contrary to the earlier hypothesis, comedy, as opposed to tragedy; since death in The Graveyard is presented as something natural, something safe There was no reversal, but more continuation: one thinks about death and one dies (at least in the paid version of the game). Nor was there recognition, described as "a change from ignorance to knowledge", the woman in the game clearly knows that she will soon die, this was nothing new to her. Suffering was also absent: death was more embraced as a safe heaven, illustrated by the text "Stone flower will suffice, to keep me nice and warm", "Here is calm, here is safe" (Gerry de Mol, 2008).

The game persuaded the player using a combination of "traditional" rhetoric (spoken and written words) and procedural rhetoric. By utilizing its computational model and player role in order to leave it open to multiple interpretations The Graveyard succeeded in creating what I suggest to name a *poetic videogame*. The adjective *poetic* refers to "relating to or used in poetry, written in verse rather than prose, having an imaginative or sensitively emotional style of expression" (Oxford Dictionary) and is

therefore the perfect term, since it offers the possibility to either "consist of" or "be like" poetry.

When reading the 5 short and concise lines that Tale of Tales uses to advertise their game, on both its

own website and the leading online game stores such as *Steam, Gamersgate* and *Gamestop,* it was the

last sentence that is surprisingly misleading. "An experiment with realtime poetry, with storytelling

without words." (Tale of Tales, 2008) suggests that the game does not include words. The empirical

part of the research, however, clearly shows the prominent presence of words as a form of symbolic

expression that uses language, particularly in the song. Not only were the lyrics heard of a textual

nature (they are words, not sounds) they were, more importantly, subtitled in English. This subtitle was,

as noted earlier, unable to be toggled off, thus making it an inevitable and important part of the game.

The storytelling, contrary to the game's description, did indeed use words. It is therefore important to

note that as much as *The Graveyard* is praised for its poetic qualities as a game, it relies heavily on text

in order to express itself.

This was nevertheless not the only aspect where text came into play. The problem with the comparison

of games and poetry is the rule based nature of poetry. In a skilful way, these rules offer a vast array of

possibilities within their own unique framework. For example within the 5, 7, 5 system of Haiku

poetry, the poet has a lot of possibilities to express himself. Even though the topics dealt with in Haiku

poetry are often about nature, the seasons, and man, the variation and freedom it offers is of a great

scale.

The structural and rule based nature of poetry is exactly – how contradicting this may even sound – the

problem of games. If games want to be of a more poetic nature they must abide to certain rules of form

and style, in order to provide not only the poet – or developer – with a frame of constraints. But also to

act as a point of reference, a point of view, for the reader – or player – to relate to and contextualize the

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game in. The fact that the Graveyard as well as *A Slow Year* (as poetic they may be when compared to other games) still rely on (completely different) instructions to properly play is what makes them anything but a poem. Even the configuration screen that allows the player to see the controls, gives away too much information about the affordances of the game (see page 17, Illustration 5: The game's configuration screen, with a double role of explaining the game's affordances. The Graveyard (Tale of Tales, 2008)).


Illustration 9: The text that pops up after a few seconds. The Graveyard (Tale of Tales, 2008)

It is like explaining the reader of a haiku poem to take note that there is indeed a second line, not to be over read. Or explaining to the audience of a lyrical poem recital the particular way one *should* listen to this poem. The difference lies in the fact that *reading* and *listening* are the main verbs of poetry, and *playing* the main verb of games. Poetry follows the conventions of language, games however differ so much in shape and style, that they unfortunately (still) rely on individual unique instructions.

If a group of games can follow a particular set of rules that are uniformly understood by its audience, without the need of a "how to use" screen, perhaps then can games can truly posses a poetic quality.

This brings up another comparison between games and poetry, the question of which one is actually more playful. Taking into account that a poem *essentially* requires play in order to be experienced and following the instructions can suffice for a game experience, makes a poem the most playful of the two.

Does this mean that the nature of reading poetry is more playful than the nature of playing computer games? The difference lies in the fact that one knows how to read, but one does not always know how to play.
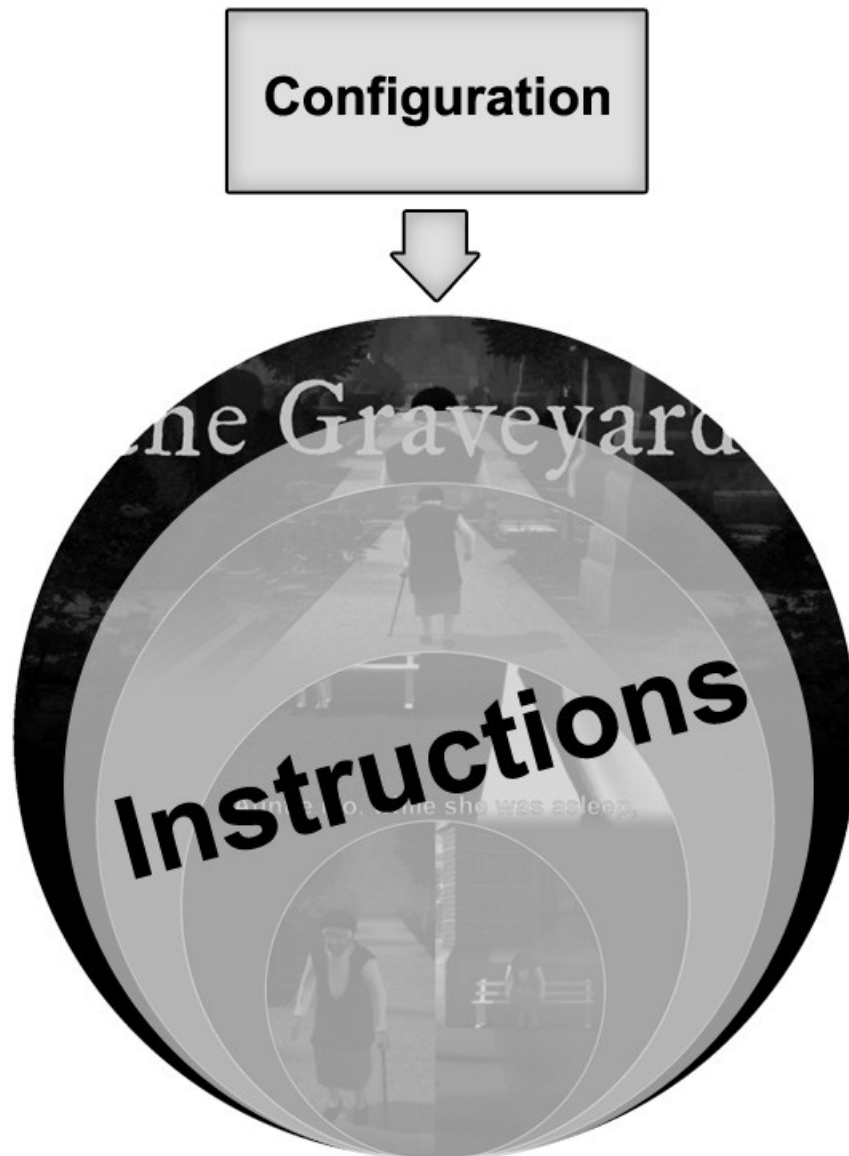
Illustration 10: How The Graveyard really works

Conclusion

This paper has shown that video games have poetic properties, using *The* Graveyard as a case study. The game's poetic properties are found not in its medium but rather in the two other parts that make up poetry, *object* and *mode*. This research has however disregarded the personal baggage and hypothesized the individual psychological response as well as the cultural context of this work. This is illustrated by Bogost when he talks about the question of "How does this work?" in relation to processes. He states that as much as one tries to dissect a process mechanically: "taking a set of gears apart to see how they mesh" one must realize that this cannot lead to the full understanding of how such complex and non obvious processes work. Since it also requires taking a set of cultural systems apart to see what logics motivate their human actors (Bogost 2010, 8) . Research of a more deductive kind is required to better understand the functioning on games such as The Graveyard. Another interesting aspect that deserves a critical comparison to games that was not included in this paper, are poetry's various stylistic elements.

When acknowledging Bogost's term of ludic poems and reading this paper, one could ask: Is *The Graveyard* a contribution to the development of games or to that of poetry? This paper, however, did not try to answer the question of whether games are poems or if poems can be games (and vice versa) but it tried to understand both video games and poetry hermeneutically, by referencing to one another. It also did not try to algorithmically explain how the poetic properties of video games affect the mind of the player, since the ambiguity of *The Graveyard* can only objectively be defined by looking at the intrinsic parts that make up the game. Its experience is not only defined by, or part of, the logical part of our thinking, but also of the illogical. One may say it is "a process that takes place in an opposable mind, where right and left (side of the brain) are actually collaborating" (Roger Martin, The Opposable Mind, 2007) Extrinsically, like poetry, games can be something personal and something different for every player.

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