Interpretive Challenges in Games

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Keywords
interpretation, challenge, interpretive challenge, hermeneutics

INTRODUCTION
Challenge or "player effort" (Juul 2003, 35) is one of the features that is often named as a defining quality of games. Similarly, "non-trivial effort" is what separates texts from a game-like cybertexts (Aarseth 1997).

Games include many types of challenges. In informal discussions of games, genres are sometimes divided according to the primary activities involved: some games are strategic (in real-time or not), some focused on shooting or platforming. These often refer to the main challenge the player is facing when playing the game.

In more formal analysis, games are seen to have physical or mental challenges (e.g. Karhu-lahti 2013). Physical challenges relate to the dexterity, speed and accuracy of using different kinds of controllers while playing. Mental challenges are usually logical or strategic. Logical challenges require deduction, strategic challenges can involve deduction, but also inductive things like prediction of future events. Often games are a combination of both physical and mental challenges. For example, proficient players of *Starcraft 2: Wings of Liberty* (Blizzard Entertainment 2010) will come up with efficient strategies against their opponents while performing more than a hundred physical actions per minute.

This paper argues that there is a type of challenge possible in games, *the interpretive challenge*, that is only used by few games. The interpretative challenge is a type of mental challenge separate from the logical challenge. Recognizing this type of challenge will help understanding some games better, while giving designers a new tool in their repertoire.

INTERPRETIVE CHALLENGE
Interpretive challenges are challenges that are based on players succesfully interpreting some aspects of the game. This is different from logical challenges, which only require players to logically arrive to a conclusion. Interpretive challenges cannot be solved by simple logical deduction and instead require understanding the object of interpretation in a more comprehensive way.

Games with interpretive challenges require understanding other players or cultural contexts. They may draw upon large amounts of background knowledge that is not directly present in the game but necessary for understanding it. This knowledge cannot be simply picked up from the game while playing, and must instead be acquired outside it. Most, if not all, games have interpretation in them, but *a game has interpretive challenges if you have to succesfully use contextual information from outside the game in order to proceed or win in it*.

Figure 1: Image from a video in *Her Story* tagged "murder"

Interpretive challenges focus on ambiguity and contextuality. They have to balance leaving some room for interpretation and not being too vague or complex for players to understand them. Interpretive challenges can be understood as a hermeneutic practice of interpretation. Therefore understanding interpretative challenges is best done by applying hermeneutic theory of interpretation (see Arjoranta 2015; Karhulahti 2012, 2015; Tanenbaum 2015; Vella 2015 for applying hermeneutics to games).

HER STORY

This paper uses *Her Story* (Barlow 2015) as an example of a game that relies on interpretive challenges.[1] *Her Story* consists of short clips of video, where a woman is being questioned about a murder. The clips are not in order and can only be accessed by typing the correct search phrases into a database. The woman being questioned is clearly answering to questions or comments, but these are not available to the player.

The user-interface to access the videos is clunky and the videos are grainy and full of noise. The game simulates a desktop computer from 1994, when the interviews would have been recorded on VHS tapes. The game's interface enables tagging videos with keywords, allowing them to be cross-referenced later.

Playing *Her Story* requires the player to enter a hermeneutic circle (Gadamer 2004) of interpretation where they watch some videos, form an idea what the story is about and then based on that understanding, query the database for more information. In order to play *Her Story*, the player has to "read" (Garcia 2016) it succesfully, connecting the vague statements in the videos to (possible) events that have transpired in the game's narrative. To succeed, it

is not enough to understand what is being said on the videos. The player has to understand complex issues like law, murder, relationships and evidence in order to navigate the web of meaning created by the videos. In other words, the player has to solve the *interpretative challenge* presented by *Her Story*.

BIO
Jonne Arjoranta is a postdoctoral research at the University of Jyväskylä, The Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ENDNOTES
1 Other games that employ interpretive challenges are *King of Dragon Pass* (A Sharp 1999) and *Dixit* (Roubira 2008). Also, the dating sim genre seems to mostly rely on interpretive challenges.

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