

# Characteristically Tensive: The Unreal in Poetic Gaming

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## INTRODUCTION

In *Literary Gaming* (MIT Press, 2014), Astrid Ensslin asserts that there is a fundamental tension, or paradox, between ‘reading’ and ‘playing’, which she maps to N. Katherine Hayles’ concept of dualistic cognitive modes called deep attention and hyper attention. Ensslin therefore approaches hybrid literary games as existing on a spectrum, the L-L (literary-ludic) continuum, on which ludicity and literariness appear as separate measures. When she comes to consider poetry games, she regards them thus:

“The particular combination of deep-attentive close reading and hyper-attentive gaming afforded, or, indeed, required by poetry games creates a phenomenological paradox – a receptive and interactive clash that game designers deliberately build into their designs to make players reflect on their own expectations and habits of gameplay.”<sup>1</sup>

Digital poet Jim Andrews, the developer of poetry game *Arteroids*, has similarly attested that “the relationship between poetry and videogames is mostly of the oil and water variety”<sup>2</sup>; that is, a game may be both ludic and literary but these elements will not mix into a seamless play experience. Poetry games, therefore, have a necessarily self-reflexive character, since the joins, as it were, are highly visible.

It is the premise of this paper that this degree of segmentivity (to borrow a term coined by poet and critic Rachel Blau DuPlessis) is in fact a characteristic feature of poetry, and to a lesser extent computer games in general, and that the ludic and the literary may be combined into a coherent *ludic-poetic* agenda, with particular application

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<sup>1</sup> Ensslin, Astrid, *Literary Gaming* (The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts/London, England. 2014), p.124

<sup>2</sup> Andrews, Jim, 'Videogames as Literary Devices' (2007),  
<<http://vispo.com/writings/essays/VideogamesAsLiteraryDevices.pdf>>

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to embodying the ‘unreal’; that is, a tensive state where simulated reality overlaps with metaphor. In terms of computer games in general, I will argue that the deep attention/hyper attention dualism is too crude a model for describing player engagement in games with a literary component. Many genres of game tend toward a “highly segmented experience” (Newman, 2002), requiring players to shift between styles of play and degrees of involvement, between menu systems and 3D environments, action sequences and cut scenes, mini-games, inventory management and decision trees, for example. It is not, therefore, unique to literary gaming that a player should have to develop fluency in multiple cognitive modes of engagement and an ability to consciously navigate between them.

The more fundamental strand of my argument is that poetry is itself dependent on tension. In *Metaphor and Reality* (Indiana University Press, 1962), Philip Wheelwright argues that the basis of poetry is a consciously wrought “pervasive living tension” in its language. Such conflicts exist in a wide variety of forms, to differing degrees of subtlety. Wheelwright talks of poetic language tending toward “semantic plenitude”, similar to linguist Roman Jakobson’s description of poetry’s “throughgoing symbolic, multiplex, polysemantic essence”<sup>3</sup>, while poet and critic John Shoptaw uses the terms *measure* and *countermeasure* to describe how the different linguistic units of a poem (line, stanza, sentence, phrase, word, letter) are counterpointed to one another. These principles may be extended beyond spoken or written language to signs and symbols more generally. Numerous examples already exist of poetry extending beyond the limitations of *litterae*, letters of the alphabet, to embrace visual and sound design, or material components. The traditional components of a computer game (levels, lives, platforms, sprites, textures and so on) may similarly be utilised (and ‘read’) as poetic units, whose semantic import can only be grasped through their interactions – in other words, by playing the game. Measure and countermeasure may here describe the tensions between segments of a game, including between textual and non-textual components. What Ensslin regards as a paradox between the ludic and literary elements of a poetry game can therefore be regarded as a coherent expression of its poetics.

With reference to games such as *Hyper Light Drifter* (Heart Machine, 2016), *INSIDE* (Playdead, 2016) and *RymdResa* (MorgonDag, 2015), and to my own practical research, I will concentrate on embodiment of the ‘unreal’ as one such coherent poetic agenda. By playing on the tension between the encoded game world, with its simplified rules and forms, and the implied reality which is being simulated, as well as other realities implied by way of metaphor, poetry games (and, more generally, poetic games) both subvert the expectation of escapism, and advance the literary trajectory described by Marjorie Perloff in *Radical Artifice* (University of Chicago Press, 1991): they emphasise the character of the text as a contrivance, a ‘made thing’, and the audience’s role in constructing meaning from it. The player is invited to regard play as a process of meaning-making, and the game world as a space that relates to the real world while remaining apart from it. They are thereby offered the opportunity to enact what

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<sup>3</sup> Jakobson, R. (1960) Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics. In: Sebeok, T.A., ed., (1960) *Style in Language* The MIT Press, p.370

Wheelwright characterises as man's groping "to express his complex nature and his sense of a complex world"<sup>4</sup>.

## OPTIONAL BIO

Jon Stone is studying toward a part-practice-based PhD in poetry and computer games at the University of the West of England, exploring the various ways poetry and gaming intersect both digitally and non-digitally. His background is as a practicing poet and poetry publisher; he won a Society of Authors Eric Gregory Award in 2012 and the Poetry London Prize in 2014 and 2016. His collection, *School of Forgery* (Salt, 2012), was a Poetry Book Society Recommendation, and republished in paperback in 2018.

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