Establishing Interpretation Design
as a Game Design Method

Emmi L. K. Kärnä
Aalto University
Konemiehentie 2
02150 Espoo, Finland
emmi.karna@aalto.fi

Keywords

interpretative agency, interpretative challenge, game experience, game design, interpretation design

INTRODUCTION

Enabling distinct player interpretations with design can allow for personal and resonating game experiences. Supporting multiple interpretations became prominent in game design during the last decade through well-acclaimed indie classics, such as *Gone Home* (Fullbright 2013), *Journey* (Thatgamecompany 2012), and *Inside* (Playdead 2016). These games do not over-explain the meaning of their narrative but rather leave space by using unanswered questions and cryptic worldbuilding to their advantage, thus allowing players' imagination to explore different interpretations and piece together their own personal understanding. An overlapping instance of player interpretations is also interpretative challenges (Arjoranta 2018), found in numerous mystery and detective genre games, such as *Sherlock Holmes: Crimes and Punishments* (Frogwares 2014) and *Her Story* (Sam Barlow 2015). Especially in the case of Her Story, the game's challenge is designed around interpretations; to solve the case, players must use contextual information and deductive skills to form their impression of what has happened (Arjoranta 2018). These two sets of examples portray *interpretative player experience*, a phenomenon characterized by invitation to interpret and solve the "challenge of understanding" (Cole et al. 2018, 6) during play.

The success of the mentioned games has created interest in designing interpretative player experiences both in the industry and academia (Denisova et al., 2021, Iacovides et al. 2022, Cole & Gillies 2022). However, there is little knowledge of how to design specifically for interpretative player experiences. Though some recent research contributions have suggested related design implications (Arjoranta 2017, To et al. 2016), they still do not offer concrete, practical design guidance when it comes to supporting player interpretations. Learning especially from design professionals' methods and daily struggles could create more understanding of how to design for interpretative and thought-provoking game experiences. Hence, the main objective for my doctoral research work is to build the foundation for Interpretation Design, a design method that facilitates interpretative player experiences.

Interpretative player experience

My current literary review has revealed a range of related concepts to the interpretative player experience. First, the concept of interpretative agency positions that openness for interpretation creates a sense of agency for the player when the challenge of

understanding encourages them to fill in the missing information through conceptual exploration and imagination (Cole & Gillies 2021). Furthermore, interpretative challenges encourage players to apply contextual information outside the game to overcome the challenge (Arjoranta 2018). Ambiguity, a property of the relationship between a perceiver and an artifact, characterized by unexplicit information that gives rise to differing interpretations (Gaver 2013), is also closely related concept to interpretations. Uncertainty (Costikyan 2013, Kumari et al. 2019), and curiosity (To et al. 2016) also appear relevant to the topic, but their relation to interpretations is still unclear. Even with these concepts as groundwork to understand interpretative player experiences, the knowledge of how to design specifically for interpretation is rare. In their work, Denisova et al. (2021) revealed that indie game designers intentionally leave room for thought when designing emotionally compelling game experiences but long for conceptual tools to evaluate their design efforts during development.

My doctoral work takes inspiration from the interpretation design approach originally proposed by Roberts (2014). By incorporating different media forms to the physical space interpretation design originally arose from the museum and exhibition field to promote free movement and choice of the visitors. The experience-driven design method bears resemblance to findings in interaction design research, where Sengers and Gaver (2006) have questioned the role of single interpretation and instead proposed to welcome the existence of multiple, sometimes rivalry interpretations. With this interdisciplinary backdrop my dissertation work develops understanding of the interpretative nature of game experience and its difference to other narrative mediums. This work is continuity to my master's thesis, where I interviewed Triple-A narrative designers who have worked with thought-provoking games (Kärnä 2021). The interviewed designers acknowledged that storytelling in blockbuster games is still risk-aversive, meaning that large game productions more commonly over-explain the narrative rather than let the players form their own understanding. However, according to the interviewees, a slow change is at hand; currently, also bigger games, such as *Returnal* (Housemarque 2021), *Elden Ring* (FromSoftware 2022), and *Control* (Remedy Entertainment 2019), have started to lean towards enigmatic storytelling and give players a chance to fill in the blanks by themselves. As its main contribution, my master's thesis consolidated the practical design approaches of the interviewees into Interpretation Design Tool, which acts as a basis for further conceptualization of Interpretation Design in the doctoral dissertation work.

MY RESEARCH
As stated, the research goal for my doctoral dissertation is to establish Interpretation Design as a game and narrative design method. At this point I wish to clarify that even though this work acknowledges the importance of hermeneutics, paratexts and intertextuality to interpretations, it primarily targets to facilitate interpretative player experience that takes place during play. Interpretation Design aims to diminish the supremacy of a single interpretation of a narrative and rather embraces the potential, dynamic interplay of different interpretations. This way player is granted agency for their conceptual exploration, thus becoming an a more active participant in their own meaning-making. By creating a set of conceptual design tools and frameworks, my work functions as an aid in creating intentionally interpretative, ambiguous, and thought-provoking player experiences for researchers, game designers, and narrative designers. Additionally, the created design implications may be of benefit to my origin domain, the field of pervasive games and alternative reality games (escape rooms, murder mysteries, interactive theatre).

Currently, the plan is to reach the research goal from two directions: forming the concept of interpretative player experience and collecting, creating, and iterating a set of design tools and practices. My work in progress involves analyzing critically-

acclaimed detective and mystery genre games to map what constitutes mystery in games and what design practices afford these experiences. A player experience interview study about interpretative challenges is later on the research agenda. Both studies support the aim, facilitating the design. Finally, as an extension to my master's thesis project, the plan is to gather more industry knowledge through an additional study with design professionals. By leaning on relevant game design research, such as Reflective Game Design (Khaled 2018), and my design background, I will mold the findings of the designer interviews into an enhanced Interpretation Design Tool. Moreover, one part of my doctoral work will validate the created design tools, which will be done through observational design study or personal design work.

From DIGRA doctoral consortium, I wish to gain support on my research journey. The most significant contribution from DIGRA 2023 doctoral consortium would be different points of view, peer support, and new connections. Furthermore, coming from a design background, I especially welcome the perspectives of fellow game design researchers to aid my understanding of the current discourse in game design studies.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Arjoranta, J. 2017. "Narrative Tools for Games: Focalization, Granularity, and the Mode of Narration in Games". *Games and Culture.* 12 (7-8), 696–717. http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1555412015596271.

Arjoranta, J. 2018. Interpretive Challenges in Games. Preprint. SocArXiv, 25 July. https://osf.io/jwb49.

Cole, T. and Gillies, M. 2021. "Thinking and Doing: Challenge, Agency, and the Eudaimonic Experience in Video Games." *Games and Culture.* 16 (2), 187–207. http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1555412019881536.

Cole, T. and Gillies, M. 2022. "Emotional Exploration and the Eudaimonic Gameplay Experience: A Grounded Theory". In *CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, New Orleans LA, USA, April. 1–16. Association for Computing Machinery (ACM). https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3491102.3502002.

Costikyan, G. 2013. *Uncertainty in games.* Playful thinking series. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Denisova, A., Bopp, A., Nguyen, T D. and Mekler, E D. 2021. ""Whatever the Emotional Experience, It's Up to Them": Insights from Designers of Emotionally Impactful Games". In *Proceedings of the 2021 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, Yokohama, Japan, May. 1–9. Association for Computing Machinery (ACM). https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3411764.3445286.

Frogwares. 2014. *Sherlock Holmes: Crimes and Punishments*. Frogwares.

FromSoftware. 2022. *Elden Ring*. PC game. Bandai Namco Entertainment.

Fullbright Company. 2013. *Gone Home*. PC game. The Fullbright Company.

Gaver, W. W., Beaver, J. and Benford, S. 2003. "Ambiguity as a Resource for Design". In *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in*

Computing Systems CHI '03, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, USA, 5-10 April. 233–240. Association for Computing Machinery (ACM). https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/642611.642653.

Housemarque. 2021. *Returnal*. PlayStation 5. Sony Interactive Entertainment.

Iacovides, I., Cutting, J., Beeston, J., Cecchinato, M. E., Mekler, E. D. and Cairns, P. 2022. "Close but Not Too Close: Distance and Relevance in Designing Games for Reflection." In *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction,* Bremen, Germany, October. 6 (CHI PLAY), 1–24. Association for Computing Machinery (ACM). https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3549487.

Khaled, R. 2018. "Questions Over Answers: Reflective Game Design". In *Playful Disruption of Digital Media,* edited by D. Cermak-Sassenrath, 3–27. Singapore: Springer Singapore. http://link.springer.com/10.1007/978-981-10-1891-6_1.

Kumari, S., Deterding, S. and Freeman, J. 2019. "The Role of Uncertainty in Moment-to-Moment Player Motivation: A Grounded Theory". In *Proceedings of the Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play*, Barcelona Spain, October. 351–363. Association for Computing Machinery (ACM). https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3311350.3347148.

Kärnä, E. L. K. 2022. Invitation to interpret: crafting interpretative agency as a tool for narrative designers. Master's thesis. Espoo, Finland: Aalto University.

Playdead. 2016. *Inside*. PC game. Playdead.

Remedy Entertainment. 2019. *Control*. PC game. 505 Games.

Roberts, T. 2014. "Interpretation design: an integrative, interdisciplinary practice". *Museum & Society*. 12 (13), 191–209. https://journals.le.ac.uk/ojs1/index.php/mas/article/view/259/271.

Sam Barlow. 2015. *Her Story*. PC Game. Sam Barlow.

Sengers, P. & Gaver, B. 2006. "Staying open to interpretation: engaging multiple meanings in design and evaluation." In Proceedings of the 6th ACM conference on Designing Interactive systems - DIS '06, University Park, PA, USA. 99–108. Association for Computing Machinery (ACM). 10.1145/1142405.1142422.

Thatgamecompany. 2012. *Journey*. PlayStation 3. Sony Computer Entertainment.

To, A., Ali, S., Kaufman, G. and Hammer. 2016. "Integrating Curiosity and Uncertainty in Game Design." In *DiGRA/FDG '16 - Proceedings of the First International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG.* 13 (1). Digital Games Research Association (DIGRA). http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/paper_428.pdf