

Inducing and non-inducing interpretations of the sinograph in *Word Game*

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In this research, a close-reading playthrough had been conducted to record the gaming experience of a Chinese text-based RPG computer game, *Word Game* (2021). This research analyzes the experience of playing this game, and how the structure of sinographs (Chinese characters) contributed to the intended and unintended semantic / non-semantic meanings being perceived during the gameplay and how they affect the decisions of the player. While players typically make decisions based on the objective of winning, this paper argues that the literary aesthetics of text appearance and meaning can lead players to consider alternative factors in their decision-making process.

Word Game (2021) is a Taiwanese RPG and puzzle game created by Team9, features a narrative in which the protagonist, referred to as "I," must locate three sacred weapons to defeat an evil dragon that has "ruined the world" and save a princess. Although the storyline may appear cliché, the game's uniqueness lies in its exclusive use of sinographs to represent all objects, including the protagonist. Unlike the usual image orientated games, player in this game is confronted by the literal meanings of all the in-game objects, providing aesthetic experiences similar to watching the works of Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries.

Sinographs, as morphograms, can function as standalone words or combine with two or three others to form compound words. Unlike English, which uses spaces to separate words, Chinese relies on context for understanding character relationships within sentences. This reliance on context is typically manageable in well-constructed sentences for everyday use; However, unlike traditional literary works, computer games are usually non-linear and interactive. In *Word Game*, this interactivity extends to the written text itself, creating an unstable reading environment where players can and must interpret sinographs out of context to uncover alternative meanings and re-shuffle characters to form different words to solve wordplay puzzles.

This paper posits that while these word puzzles primarily serve gameplay progression, they also invite poetic interpretations that coexist with the game's mechanics. As

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Aarseth (2003) notes, one of the biggest differences between traditional games and computer games, is that the latter consist of non-ephemeral artistic contents, such as words, sounds and images, which make computer games more similar to artworks than the traditional ones. Van Looy and Baetens (2003) argue that, even works of interactive text will be changed according to the action of the reader/player, nevertheless close reading is still the best way to study and unearth all possible readings in the text of this nature. While playing a game, our interpretation practice ranges from learning how to play the game to formulating disinterested interpretation of their aesthetic qualities (Aarseth and Möring 2020). This project applied the reading method established by Karhulahti (2012), namely Double Hermeneutic circles (DHCs) which includes, “inducing interpretation that aims at generating ludic understanding of game elements” and “non-inducing interpretation that aims at generating aesthetic understanding of game elements.” In other words, they refer to the functional and decorative sign elements in the games (Aarseth 2003, 3).

By examining gameplay experiences and puzzles within *Word Game*, this paper illustrates how the structure of sinographs facilitates unique instances of dual interpretation—both in gameplay mechanics and aesthetic appreciation. Many of these dual interpretations result from the morphogram nature and standardized square shape of sinographs, which differ from the variable lengths of English words. However, there are also many other factors that contribute to such readings. By analyzing the playthrough experience, this paper will provide a list of features of sinographs that enable game designers to create unique puzzles for gameplay and visual poetic readings.

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