

From Play to Poetics: Reconfiguring Pleasure through Defamiliarisation in Game Poems

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ABSTRACT

Game poems – short, affect-driven hybrid works at the intersection of poetry and digital play – have the potential to produce distinct pleasures. Rather than centering achievement, challenge, and fun, they evoke pleasure through defamiliarisation, expressive intimacy, and formal constraint. By blending poetic techniques with interactive systems, game poems renew perception, foreground subjectivity, and create reflective, participatory experiences that unsettle assumptions about what games are for and how playing them should feel. Their constrained, minimalist designs operate analogously to poetic form, transforming limits into aesthetic and messaging. Simultaneously, their hybridity disrupts dominant gaming logics and opens spaces for non-normative, intersectional pleasures shaped by identity, lived experiences, and relationships to slowness, ambiguity, and vulnerability. Presenting both theoretical background and examples, the paper examines game poems and illustrates how they reconfigure pleasure as relational and resistant to market-driven expectations of fun, expanding creative practice and challenging prevailing paradigms of play and its pleasures.

Keywords

game studies, game poems, poetry, hybrid media, interactive art, creative practice

INTRODUCTION

Humans and art have been intertwined for much, if not all, of human history, with cave paintings and tool ornaments as some of the oldest examples (Dissanayake 1990). Across cultures and historical periods, artistic practices have constantly adapted to new technologies, often shaping and being shaped by them in a cyclical relationship (Santos and Girão 2019). The development of art as a human behaviour and technology closely intertwined with play has long been discussed as a necessary

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feature of human life (Dissanayake 1974; Dissanayake 1990). Neuroscience has provided evidence for many of art's beneficial effects: attentional focus, affective sensitivity, interpersonal communication and social bonding, as well as pleasure (Christensen and Gomila 2018). Pleasure may, in fact, act as a psychophysiological hook that enables these broader effects (Christensen and Gomila 2018).

Building on these biological and psychological foundations, pleasure in art also stems from perception itself; from seeing the world anew. Shelley (1821) argues that poetry has the power to make the familiar unfamiliar, turning recognition into a pleasurable sort of estrangement. This idea is echoed by the Russian formalist Shklovsky's concept of *ostranenie*, which postulates that art's main function is to renew perception by making the habitual strange (Pötzsch 2017, Mitchell and van Vught 2024). Poetry, thus, exemplifies art's capacity to restructure experience, drawing attention back to perception, language, and emotion.

If art's (and poetry's) pleasures may arise from defamiliarisation and the renewal of perception, similar dynamics can emerge across different artistic media, including digital and interactive spaces, such as video games. Formalist approaches to video games have foregrounded "poetic gameplay devices", which disrupt familiarity and make specific game elements feel unusual (Mitchell et al. 2020, Mitchell and van Vught 2024).

As Mitchell and van Vught (2020) demonstrate, such devices can generate defamiliarisation by operating in a number of different domains. At the level of interaction, controls and feedback may be manipulated in ways that estrange habitual play, which can be done through the implementation of unconventional inputs, shifting or inconsistent controls, altered tempos, or deliberately uncomfortable feedback. Likewise, gameplay and plot can subvert expectations by destabilising goals, core mechanics, difficulty, success and failure. These strategies demonstrate how video games are capable of operating poetically and disturbing the familiar game experience. The use of poetic devices, however, is but a part of the connection between these media, as video games have been engaging with poetry at various levels of interplay and hybridity (Stone 2022).

These intersections between poetic expression and interactive systems have led to the emergence of experimental forms that explicitly combine the traditions of poetry and video games. Among these are works that approach digital play through the lens of lyric expression, prioritising the subjective over conventional gameplay.

This paper contributes to game studies by clarifying how one such intersection – 'game poems' – operates as a hybrid creative form, and by theorising the kinds of pleasure that may emerge through them, considering how their formal and aesthetic properties open space for embodied, affective, and political engagement. Drawing on existing scholarship and on Jordan Magnuson's definition of "game poems" (Magnuson 2023), the paper analyses how game poems may generate pleasure through three interrelated dimensions: expression (subjectivity and affective resonance), form (constraint and minimalist design) and hybridity (the intersection of poetic and ludic media). The current work also argues that the distinctive mechanics and representations of game poems possess the potential to give rise to intersectional pleasures: manifestations of enjoyment and reflection that challenge normative, dominant forms of gameplay while opening space for diverse, complex identities.

must have poetry as a frequent, central component, deeply intertwined with gameplay, rather than present it sparingly, in specific moments of the game. For instance, in *Elegy for a Dead World* (Dejobaan Games & Popcannibal Games 2014), the core mechanic includes manipulating text (Figure 2).

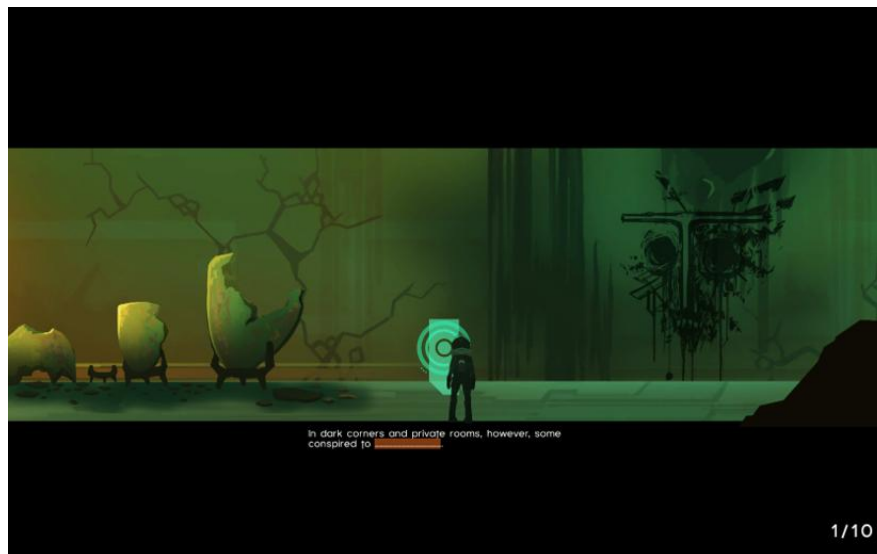


Figure 2: *Elegy for a Dead World*, an example of a “poetry game”.

“Poetic games”, in contrast, are a looser classification of ‘soulful’, ‘expressive’ video games that adopt poetic meaning-making strategies, including ambiguity, symbolic parallelism and irresolution without necessarily embedding actual verse. *Gris* (Nomada Studio 2019) fits such a classification, as its symbolic environments invite players to interpret its imagery rather than rely on explicit textual narrative. While it provides ludic closure through completion, its metaphorical elements encourage reflection beyond normative play (Figure 3).

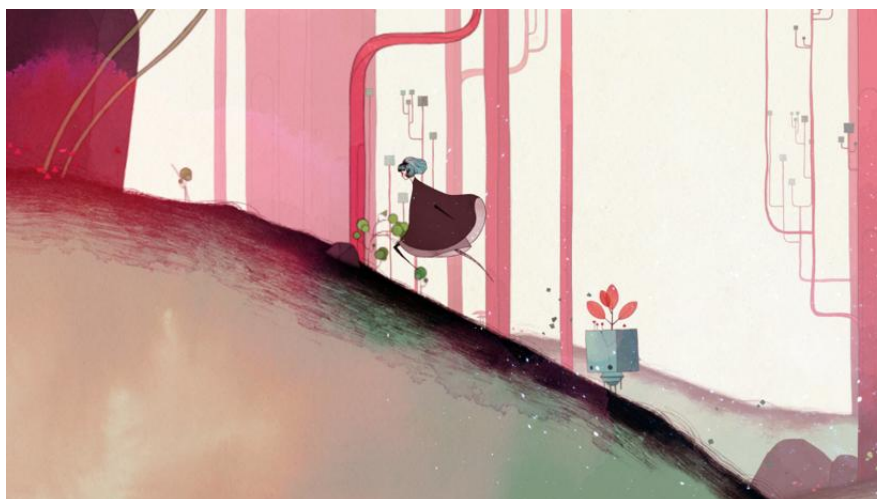


Figure 3: *Gris*, an example of a “poetic game”.

Magnuson (2023) expands on Stone’s discussion of “poetic games” to propose a more detailed framework for conceptualising how videogames can be played and created as a form of poetry irrespective of their reliance on words or language. A “game

poem” is a short, expressive video game designed according to principles associated with lyric poetry. These works are typically concise and focused on a single affective moment or theme, relying on minimal mechanics, symbolic imagery and constrained interaction to evoke reflection rather than challenge. Rather than prioritising traditional gameplay structures such as progression, optimisation or high scores, game poems invite players to engage with a subjective experience through an interactive system.

Game poems are thus, in Magnuson’s framing, subjective and affect-driven works with a blended nature that effectively creates a new type of media; this originality assists their defamiliarisation effect, which is enacted by transforming linguistic and mechanical structures alike, creating experiences (and pleasures) that are simultaneously emotional, reflective, and participatory.

On Second Thought (Kotěšovcová 2026; Figure 4), published in *Game Poems #1* (2026), exemplifies game poems through its brevity, minimal interaction and tightly focused affective core, using a single timing mechanic and iterative failure to evoke ideas of hesitation and emotional vulnerability. The player must correctly time their reaction, pressing the spacebar or clicking to fit the moving blue circle into the larger purple one. Every time the circles fit, the character’s arm approaches the back of the other character on the left. The moving circle becomes progressively faster, and when the player fails, a variety of animations play out, ranging from a coffee mug spilling to a temple collapsing. The character’s arm then returns to its initial position. The entire experience lasts less than five minutes. The game’s interruptions with symbolic animations of failure and timed difficulty spikes transform its simple mechanic into a tool for inviting the player to reflect on it at the levels of both gameplay and meaning.

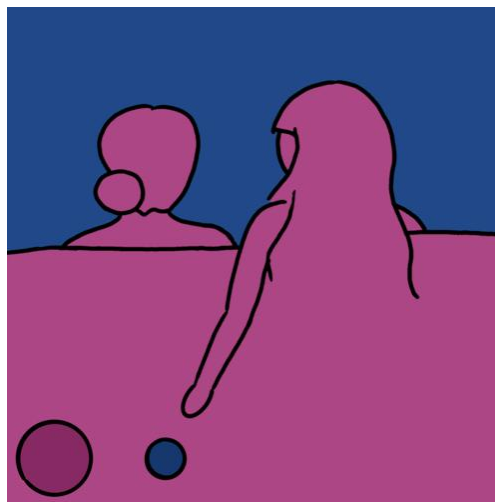


Figure 4: *On Second Thought*, an example of a “game poem”.

To understand the intersectional pleasures of game poems fully, it is necessary to consider how they are shaped by the identities of those who make and play them. Adrienne Shaw (2018) argues that while intersectionality has long been part of critical inquiry, game studies has struggled to translate its theoretical promise into methodological practice. Intersectionality, she notes, is not simply about adding more categories of difference, but about examining how multiple structures of power

influence the conditions of play, access, and representation. This framing is essential for understanding how pleasure itself can be intersectional.

In light of this debate, game poems offer a particularly productive site for game studies. Their hybrid and often experimental nature emphasises intersections and invites slower, more reflective forms of engagement, implicitly asking what it means to take pleasure in art that resists conventional measures of fun (Ruberg 2015). Though not concerned with access or representation per se, game poems embody intersectionality through their nature, with language, code, and affect converging to create new conditions for experiencing art and play. Understanding how these hybrid works produce pleasure therefore requires situating them within broader discussions of why games are pleasurable and how players may experience enjoyment in digital play.

PLEASURE IN GAMES

Over the past several decades, digital games have expanded into a global cultural force and one of the world's most profitable entertainment industries, attracting a remarkably broad and diverse audience (Dörner et al. 2016; McKernan 2013; Saucier 2022; Wolf 2007).

Research has sought to explain why people are drawn to playing digital games and what makes these experiences enjoyable. Works grounded in self-determination theory indicate that games are inherently pleasurable because they fulfill fundamental psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, giving players a sense of efficacy, volition, personal agency and social connection (Ryan et al. 2006). More recent reviews further suggest that these motivational mechanisms intersect with broader gratifications such as achievement, social belonging, immersion, and escapism, explaining the enduring appeal of video games across varied audiences, and why digital play is widely experienced as pleasurable (Cheah et al. 2022; Ryan et al. 2006).

Traditional game design often focuses on these dominant, expected pleasures, connected to mastery, flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1990), and fun. There are, however, other emotions players voluntarily engage with, such as frustration, disappointment, and failure, often connected to challenge and competition (Juul 2013). Juul (2013) describes this "paradox of failure", where players willingly endure negative emotions to achieve the satisfaction of mastery and, ultimately, hard-earned success. Thus, Juul's work still, in some sense, focuses on the usual pleasures video games evoke (Ruberg 2015).

In contrast, Ruberg (2015) challenges the dominant assumption that video games must be primarily or exclusively designed for fun. They argue that the emotional spectrum of play extends far beyond this, and that experiences characterised by frustration, failure and discomfort hold "queer potential", Queerness, in this case, also means a method of designing, playing, and even feeling games. Ruberg suggests that "no-fun" affects destabilise normative notions of play and open up space for marginalised players and practices. Rather than simply reframe negative emotions as temporary stages toward eventual success and happiness, Rubert defends that these emotions can be ends in themselves, enabling alternative forms of pleasure. From this perspective, games become sites where frustration, disappointment, slowness and

melancholy are not deviations from what is considered “good” or “ideal” play; they instead represent distinct modalities of the experience.

Ruberg’s notion of “no fun” highlights how conventional ideas about enjoyment in games can exclude or overlook certain feelings (Ruberg 2015). By considering these overlooked feelings as a natural dimension of play, Ruberg challenges the belief that pleasure must always mean mastery or happiness. This perspective invites a broader reconsideration of what pleasure itself means, and who it is for. Pleasure is often trivialised or dismissed as escapist; it has long been regarded with suspicion in Western thought, from Plato’s distrust of sensual delights to Augustine’s framing of worldly joys as temptations. The pleasures of play, in particular, have often been looked on as childish or frivolous (Sutton-Smith 1997). Pleasure is, however, complex and deeply political: who is allowed to feel pleasure, and how? Emotions are shaped by social hierarchies and power relations, with the capacity to feel positive emotions not being equally distributed (Ahmed 2010; van Kleef and Lange 2020). In games, Ruberg presents the absence of fun as redefining, rather than rejecting pleasure, thus positing discomfort and reflection as spaces of resistance and imagination.

Innovative or hybrid forms of games have the potential to generate unexpected pleasures precisely because they twist or destabilise players’ expectations of what games should do, departing from conventional notions of fun and play. In this sense, game design is inseparable from the politics of pleasure, with choices about mechanics, pacing, narrative and interaction all affecting what players ultimately feel. Experimental formats serve as models for how designers can cultivate alternative affects.

GAME POEMS

Magnuson’s description of game poems as short, expressive video games designed according to principles associated with lyric poetry represents a distinct design and interpretative stance that draws from lyric traditions rather than narrative or ludic conventions. While game poems may contain text, the use of poetic language is not a crucial aspect of these pieces. Game poems are characterised by concision and subjectivity: they are short, focused, and often centred around a singular affective moment, memory, or encounter. These works often employ poetic address, inviting the player into an intimate relation with the game designer or speaker, and unfold within a ritual space, rather than a regular narrative or goal-oriented one. The experience is usually cyclical or meditative, defined by repetition and constraint rather than by plot progression. Game poems also operate through hyperbole, metaphor, and ambiguous imagery, layering the signified meanings of textual or visual symbols with the material meanings of mechanical and procedural design. This interplay between representational and procedural registers produces a dense lyrical texture in which play essentially functions as reading and performance (Magnuson 2023).

Game poems should be distinguished from broad notions of literary games (Ensslin 2014) and from the wide label of ‘art games’, a term that emerged in the early 2000s to describe small, often non-commercial games framed primarily through an art-world discourse of reception, with works aiming to be received or interpreted as art (Holmes 2003). While the art game category was useful as a cultural label, legitimating games as aesthetic and intellectual objects, it offered little analytical vocabulary and specificity for describing how such games operate or what makes them experientially interesting. As Parker (2018) observes, discourses that seek to legitimate games as art

tend to construct a particular vision of the medium by appealing to familiar cultural notions of art, such as personal expression or formal beauty, rather than examining how games function in play.

The lyrically-grounded game poems framework, by contrast, offers a more concrete analytical and creative vocabulary, situating short expressive games within a long-established poetic tradition that emphasises subjective experience, affective density, and formal constraint. In this sense, the game poems concept articulates a “born-video game poetics”, where video games are treated not merely as art objects, or as vessels for poetic content, but as viable poetic media in their own right, thus capable of expressing intersectional and affective complexities unique to digital play.

It should be noted that Magnuson (2023) resists the idea of defining game poems as a rigid genre. The author rather positions “game poem” as an open-ended, conversational label, a loose framework for thinking about and making games that remains deliberately porous and inclusive. This open definition supports a game-making practice heavily grounded in accessibility and everyday creativity, in which anyone, regardless of technical expertise, can make a game poem in the same way that one might jot down a haiku or doodle on a napkin. The constraints of scale and expectation act as invitations rather than barriers, since game poems do not need to be fun, polished, or commercially viable. Their value lies in their capacity for lyric expression, reflection, and accessibility (Magnuson 2023).

GAME POEMS AND PLEASURE

Game poems invite a reformulation of gameplay and pleasure, which connects both to their form and hybrid nature. Their playful structures and affective, poetic textures create a space where subjectivity, authorial voice, and poetic resonance emerge through acts of play. They also generate pleasure through their constrained forms, which rely on video game equivalents of poetic devices, such as meter and rhythm. Finally, their hybrid nature positions them at the meeting place of games and poetry, creating pleasure from this unexpected intersectionality itself.

Pleasure as Expression: Subjectivity, Voice, and Affective Resonance

Game poems occupy a unique intersection between lyric traditions of poetry and immersive digital play. Like lyric poems, game poems invite the player into a space of intimacy and resonance, where expression, voice and affect are foregrounded, rather than subordinated to goals or progression like in most commercial games. In lyric traditions, poetry has often been seen as a form for subjective expression, through which emotion, interior experience, and affect are rendered palpable (Culler 2015). Game poems translate these same dynamics into procedural and interactive video game form, turning play itself into a mode of feeling and articulation, and reframing the pleasure of gameplay as a relational and expressive encounter.

Unlike mainstream video games, which have historically emphasised and defined normative play as fun (Ruberg 2015), game poems often resist these instrumental logics. They offer players and creators an alternative form for expressing their identities, emotions, and situated knowledge – queer, Indigenous, black, neurodivergent, or other – in ways that dominant game paradigms have rarely accommodated. The pleasures generated by such works arise from the intimate

nature of the encounter and the feeling of being seen, as opposed to completion or success.

In this sense, the pleasure of game poems is both expressive and relational. Player engagement echoes the dynamics of reading or writing lyric poetry, where meaning is often expressed or processed via subjective interior expression or feeling. This affective connection recalls poetry's personal address, but situated within a game frame, where aesthetics, code, and mechanics collaborate to produce subjective encounters.

An example of this type of gameplay experience can be seen in Anna Anthropy's *Queers in Love at the End of the World* (Anthropy 2013), a ten-second game in which players guide a brief, text-based interaction between two lovers in the moments before a world-ending apocalypse. The tight time constraint denies the player the sense of agency and control associated with conventional "fun" or flow-based gameplay experiences, and the game's rules and objectives are vague and uncertain. One might conceivably read the game's initial text ("You have ten seconds, but there's so much you want to do") as an imperative to do as much as one can before the time runs out, but one soon realizes that there is no "winning" this game, and that the pleasure to be found here is not in mastery or completion. Instead, it lies simply in witnessing — and participating in — each moment of this fleeting encounter (Figure 5).

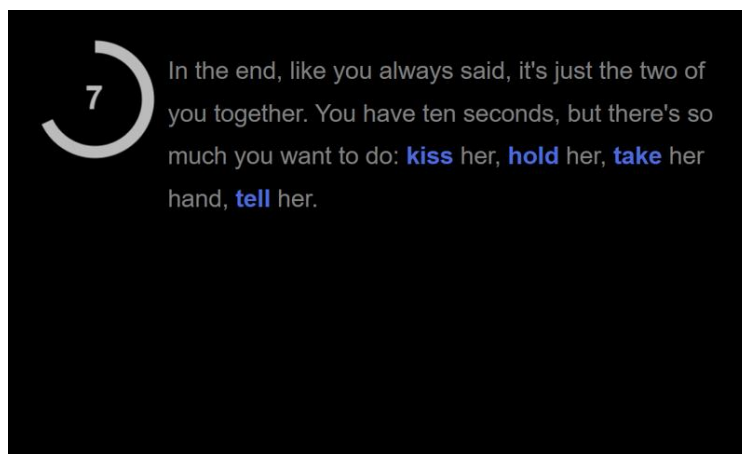


Figure 5: *Queers in Love at the End of the World* and its limited time for progressing the story.

A similarly intimate poetics emerges in Magnuson's *Portraits of My Child* (2018), which translates the early months of parenthood into a sequence of minimalist vignettes, sometimes quite abstract, sometimes more concrete (Figure 6). The challenge that the game presents is tied to the ambiguity and interpretive work needed to make sense of each scene, as opposed to the more common connection to dexterity or other particular gaming skills. The player's limited agency, reduced to hesitant movements and unclear observations, mirrors the ambiguous sensory experiences of an infant, as well as the uncertainties and hesitations that often accompany new parenthood. As with *Queers in Love at the End of the World*, the player is not asked to *win*, but rather to engage in participatory *listening*. When the game has been shown in exhibition contexts, some players have remarked that while they were initially disoriented by the fact that *Portraits of My Child* played very differently from what

they expected when they first picked up the controller (“It wasn't what I expected from a video game... none of the buttons seemed to do anything at first”), they eventually found the experience to be rewarding for the way it caused them to reflect on the sensory experience of infants and young children. These sorts of observations reflect a clear shifting of players’ expectations around pleasure and enjoyment when encountering the game: the initial expectation is for pleasure associated with past experiences of video games and gaming controllers — but the eventual pleasure that is found emerges through encounter, reflection, and recognition: a subtle attunement to new perspectives and new rhythms tied to the emergence of a new subject in the world.

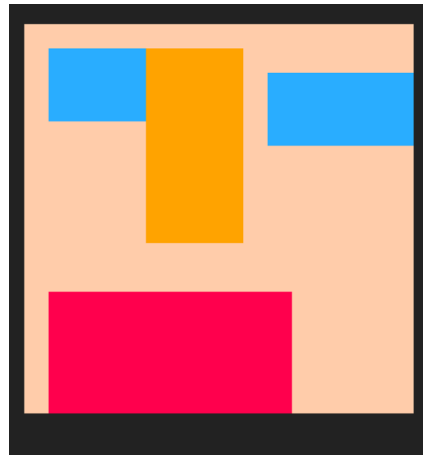


Figure 6: *Portraits of my Child*, which uses simple colours and shapes to illustrate early parenthood.

It could be argued that this turn toward subjectivity remains relatively new within games. Video games have been dominated by commercial imperatives and formal constraints that leave little room for subjectivity or voice (Anthropy 2012). Some indie and experimental creators have positioned their work explicitly against this corporate system, using games as tools of self-articulation and community-making. Game poems extend this lineage by explicitly foregrounding subjective expression in game mechanics and aesthetics.

Pleasure as Form: Constraint and Design

If pleasure as expression concerns voice, emotion, and subjectivity, pleasure as form turns the attention to the structures that enable expression to take shape as a particular form — as a game poem. In this context, the constrained form of the game poem becomes materially tied to the particular aesthetic and affective experience that is created. Like poetry, game poems thrive on constraint, being designed within a deliberate restriction of scope, mechanics, and material. These works are small, focused worlds whose beauty and emotion often arise from what is withheld as much as what is presented (Magnuson 2023). Designing a game poem thus involves negotiating boundaries.

The relationship between constraint and creativity has long been a productive paradox in art. In literature, the *Oulipo* movement proposed that creative restriction, such as writing without a certain letter, following specific patterns, or obeying algorithmic rules, fosters creativity rather than limiting it (Le Lionnais and Queneau

1973). In filmmaking, the Dogme 95 movement, founded by Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg, defines a set of strict creative rules: for example, shooting must be done entirely on location; all sound and music must originate within the filmed scene; the camera must be hand-held; the film must be in colour and the story must only unfold in the present (Von Trier and Vinterberg 1995). A similar ethos is echoed in minimalist game design, where developers intentionally choose restrained mechanics, themes or graphics to focus on and draw attention to particular images and themes, as well as elements like the game’s rhythm, pacing, and structure of play.

Adam Le Doux’s *A Lake Sketch* (2020) exemplifies this ethos of deliberate limitation, using constraint to focus attention on a single moment of encounter. Built in Bitsy, a tiny game engine Le Doux himself created, *A Lake Sketch* is bound by hard-coded restrictions on resolution, colour palette, sound, and interactivity. Rather than act as an obstacle, these limits help shape the core experience the game creates. The game involves moving a deer through some trees to a lake and seeing the reflection of the sky therein — the colour palette suddenly shifts, highlighting a monochrome yet unexpected and consequently glorious reflection of the clouds and sky (Figure 7). The player can stay at the lakeside for as long as they like, watching the drifting of the clouds; importantly, the clouds only drift as long as the player continues to actively “observe” the lake by repeatedly pressing the down arrow on their keyboard. Nothing more happens, yet the experience is pointed and striking.

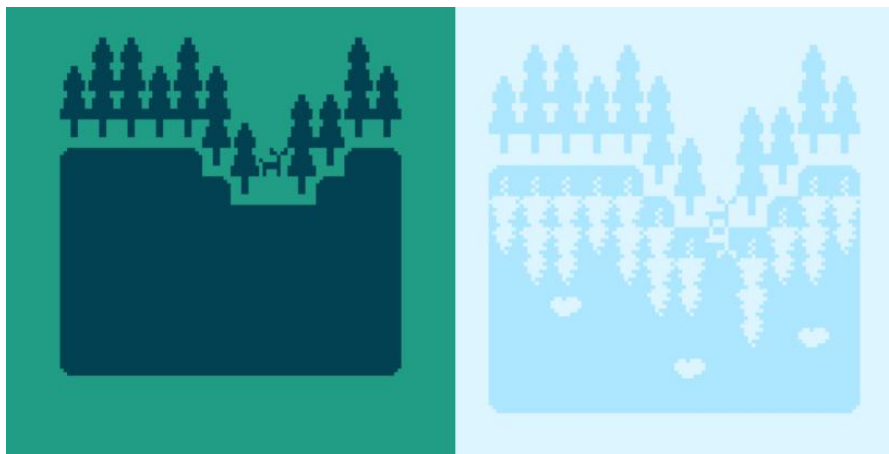


Figure 7: *A Lake Sketch* and its minimal gameplay with the changing colour palette and the moving clouds.

In classroom settings, Magnuson has found that the game design students he teaches are often puzzled when first exposed to tiny Bitsy games like *A Lake Sketch*. Can video games be so small, and so simple? Aren't games supposed to be *fun*? But the all-important follow-up question is: what does “fun” mean, and how do we understand it? The revelation for students is that there are undeniable pleasures to be had in this tiny hybrid experience — but the lens one employs to reflect on those pleasures is key. *A Lake Sketch* functions less like a traditional video game, and more like an effective imagist poem: by stripping away narrative, dialogue, and complex mechanics, it heightens awareness of the central image and the player’s own attention, turning a tightly bound system into an opportunity for unexpected pleasure and play.

Where *A Lake Sketch* offers a constrained yet leisurely experience, Anthropy's *Queers in Love at the End of the World* (2013) offers a contrasting model, where the central constraint as experienced by the player is temporal, rather than mechanical. As previously mentioned, the player has ten seconds to make a series of branching textual choices before the world ends, and this persistent limitation is central to establishing the game's core experience. The player's awareness of the ticking clock becomes the work's affective "engine", as it were, producing a pulse of urgency that amplifies and highlights the central themes of love and loss. The clock defines the rhythm of one's reading, serves as the impetus for every click and interaction, and turns any decision to pause and reflect into a strikingly defiant act. Imagine the work without this defining constraint, and it becomes apparent how much of the core experience would be lost. *Queers in Love at the End of the World* thus demonstrates how temporal constraint can serve as a structuring principle of poetic play, turning restriction into a source of intensity, resonance and pleasure.

Constraint also has an ethical and social dimension. For game studies, limitation is not only a formal principle; it also represents a mirror of lived experience. As Bourdieu (1993) argues, cultural production always occurs within fields of power that determine what kinds of work are possible, visible, or valued. Creative expression thus operates within a constrained social structure. In independent and alternative game design, these structural limits – economic, technical and cultural – often paradoxically breed creativity. Anna Anthropy (2012) celebrates this dynamic, urging marginalised creators to embrace constraints as strengths. She argues that working with limited resources can yield intimate, original and distinctively expressive works. The pleasure of constraint, then, is both formal and political, emerging from transforming the limits imposed by one's context into originality and voice.

Pleasure in Hybridity: Games as Poetic Media

Game poems occupy a liminal position between media, simultaneously drawing from traditions of poetry and of play. As poems, they continue the lineage of interactive and digital poetics. As games, they overlap with practices often described as "art games", "experimental games", or "queer games" (Holmes 2003, Ruberg & Shaw, 2017, Jagoda 2020). While all these categories share an emphasis on creative experimentation, affective depth, and reception, game poems explicitly invoke poetry as both a formal and conceptual framework. Their hybrid nature inherits strategies of experimental game design, but also troubles the boundaries that define both what a game is, and what a poem is.

Early 2010s discourses, such as the "notgames" movement, explicitly rejected conventional gameplay goals, like challenge and mastery, arguing instead for interactive experiences freed from instrumental play (Samyn 2010). Game poems similarly resist the normative purposes of games, such as winning and progression, but not by rejecting games outright. Instead, they inhabit an interstitial space where the categories of game and poem interpenetrate, generating new modes of authorship, address, and play. The pleasure of game poems often lies precisely in this instability, in the joint sensation of reading and playing, reflecting and interacting.

Such hybrid forms invite players to experience alternative pleasures, which are not necessarily those of fun, mastery, or excitement that dominate mainstream gaming culture, but rather of ambiguity, interpretation, and emotional resonance. The pleasures of pushing away from the gaming space – akin to the 'notgames' term – are

complemented by the pleasures of moving toward poetic experience: rhythm, density, brevity, and affective precision. Together they constitute a poetics of play that reframes video games as a site of introspection rather than only achievement.

The different priorities of game poems also expand the potential audience for games as a medium. As the “experimental” and “art game” labels, it situates playable works within artistic contexts; but “game poems” specifically position them within literary settings, including literature-focused museums and events. This helps reach publics who might not identify as gamers, but who are drawn to poetic and interactive art. Magnuson has curated exhibitions of game poems and offered game poem workshops at “traditional” poetry festivals and other events that have not historically hosted video games (Figure 8). This cross-pollination highlights the potential of the term to operate as a space where literary and ludic sensibilities meet and where new forms of creative pleasure can emerge.



Figure 8: An exhibition of game poems at Winchester Poetry Festival (2025), curated by Magnuson. Photo credit: Jordan Magnuson.

The Crying Game (2020) by Sophie Mallinson offers a good example of a work that can be approached both as a game and as a poem. It defines itself as a “crying simulation”, but it could be accurately described as an interactive lyric about the act of crying. The work presents minimalist pixel art: two downcast eyes, eyebrows, and freckles, accompanied by the pastel blue tears. The interaction is deliberately sparse, as with the other game poems discussed in the previous section. There is a single simple mechanic: the user presses the down arrow to make the tears roll down, and lines of dialogue appear in the lower portion of the screen (Figure 9). The speaker narrates the experience of crying, discussing both what triggers it and the effects it has on their body and emotions. This mechanic produces a connection between playing, reading, and crying: the player must make the avatar cry in order to access the poem, implicating them in the scene of emotional expression. *The Crying Game* occupies a hybrid space characteristic of game poems; its ludic dimension is simplified and intertwined with the narration and its pacing, making it readable both as game

and poem, and making it approachable to players from a variety of backgrounds. The player's input is both functional and symbolic: the action that advances the text also enacts the emotional cry that the game describes. The pleasure from this piece comes from the duality of interactivity becoming an act of empathy, where the work's emotional arc unfolds through the player's willingness to participate in vulnerability. Here, the affordances of digital play are leveraged to create an intimate, introspective experience that rejects conventional gaming expectations.



Figure 9: *The Crying Game* presents dialogue as players “cry” by pressing the down arrow. Some of the quotes are randomised, adding replay value to the game poem.

INTERSECTIONAL PLEASURES IN GAME POEMS

The intersectional nature of game poems is central to the kinds of pleasures they produce. Their hybrid form, merging the expressive tradition of poetry with the interactive nature of games, creates experiences that are poetic and ludic. This hybridity itself becomes a source of pleasure, as players navigate an intersectional space that includes both reflection and interaction. In this sense, pleasure arises due to the crossing of boundaries between media. Following Shelley's notion of poetry as making “familiar objects be as if they were not familiar” (Shelley 1821), game poems defamiliarise both games and poems, allowing each to be rediscovered through the other in this merged form. What is recognised as “poetic” or “playful” becomes unsettled, opening the possibility for new forms of aesthetic and affective engagement. Magnuson has seen this play out first hand when showing game poems at unexpected venues such as the Winchester Poetry Festival – where some attendees have made a point of sharing comments such as “this has changed the way I think about video games”, and on the other hand, “this has changed the way I think about poetry”. By thus collapsing the categorical borders that have historically separated the pleasures of poetry from the pleasures of playing video games, game poems expand the field by creating new and rediscovered pleasures.

Such pleasures are radical and inclusive precisely because they resist normative and consumerist logics that define mainstream gameplay (Ruberg 2015). Instead of perpetuating the market-driven imperatives of fun, mastery, or player achievement, game poems create space for reflection, emotion, and embodied experience. Their small-scale, experimental, and often intimate, personal nature allows for the representation of identities and affects that are marginalised within the commercial games industry (Anthropy 2012; Ruberg & Shaw 2017). In refusing the commodification of play, they articulate a politics of pleasure that values multiplicity, situatedness, and care. The result is a mode of play that is both expressive and transformative, expanding who can play, how, and what playing can feel like.

While game poems resist normative pleasures and dominant forms of play, their intersectional nature also complicates the very experience of enjoyment. Intersectional pleasures emerge not simply through inclusion or representation; the ways through which players' identities mediate their encounters with the game poems are also crucial modulators of this experience. The slow, reflective pacing common to many game poems might resonate differently for players with distinct lived experiences, such as ones marked by marginalisation or fatigue, transforming slowness into a form of pleasure rather than constraint. In this sense, intersectional pleasures, while also being about who can access pleasure, focus additionally on how pleasure itself is reconfigured through poetic play, becoming a practice of expression and resistance.

IMPLICATIONS FOR GAME STUDIES AND DESIGN

For designers, game poems open a space for crafting small, self-contained, and poetic experiences that prioritise feeling, reflection, and expression over duration, scale, competition, and productivity. By framing games as poetic expressions, they provide an alternative lineage of game design grounded in lyricism, intimacy, and affect.

Game poems' modest scope and formal restraint challenge normative expectations about what a video game should be, or how long it should last. A five-minute interactive poem, a moment of stillness, or a work with minimal mechanics can still constitute a complete and meaningful experience. In this sense, game poems help legitimise a new creative practice. Although game poems may be targeted for comments that have been seen towards art and experimental games — often dismissed as “not a real game”, which has, in turn, led to the creation of the “notgames” term — the poetry framing offers a specific positive tradition for creators to engage with (game poems as lyric artifacts), in addition to the rejection of status quo implicit in the “notgames” label. Designers who engage with this form participate in a redefinition of what it means to make and play games, affirming that brevity and simplicity can be as powerful as complexity or long duration (Magnuson 2023).

For scholars, game poems offer fertile ground for rethinking aesthetics, politics, and epistemologies of play. They invite analysis that moves beyond conventional frameworks like fun, flow, competition, and mastery (Ruberg 2015) and centralises subjectivity and expression instead. Game poems, thus, extend the scope of game studies by proposing new models of engagement that cannot be captured through existing ludological or narratological paradigms. They also resist the economic logics that often shape even independent game production, still pressured by commercial success. This fits Bourdieu's (1993) idea that creative work is subject to the social, economic, and cultural environment where it is created, thus being subject to the

need for visibility, profitability, and market recognition. As such, studying game poems enables scholars to examine emergent, non-commercial practices that redefine what counts as play and what values are attached to it.

For communities, game poems model how games can be made, circulated, and valued outside capitalist and market-bound structures, since they prioritise expression over revenue. Their accessibility, often small-scale, free, or made with open tools, allows for participation across diverse creators and audiences, including beginners or people who would not identify themselves as game designers. These works encourage experimentation and alternative design, lowering the barrier to entering the game design space. Again, Magnuson has seen the pedagogical and expressive impact of this framing firsthand (Figure 10), having led several classes and workshops on game poem creation since writing his book (2023). Many of these workshops have taken place at poetry festivals or arts spaces, and attendees often included poets, artists, and lay members of the public who do not identify as gamers, much less have technical game making experience. The use of simple, constrained tools, and the conceptual framing of “you can make a game in the same way that you would write a small haiku” offers an invitation that resonates for people who might otherwise never make a video game – and thus expands the voices being heard, and the possibility space of the medium.



Figure 10: Magnuson (second from the right) guiding a game poems workshop at an arts festival in Bergen, Norway; many of the participants had never made a video game previously. Photo credit: Olive Alfaro Tonheim.

CONCLUSION

The rise of hybrid art forms opens intersectional spaces for both practice and emotion. Game poems, particularly, represent a convergent medium featuring game aesthetics

and mechanics, as well as poetic lyricism not dependent on words (Magnuson 2023). Their existence challenges the normative notion of pleasure in games as being connected to fun, completion, competition and mastery (Ruberg 2015).

Game poems inaugurate an interesting avenue for research in game studies. Future directions for this emerging field might include the creation of archives of game poems to document works; comparative analyses between poetic and non-poetic indie games to explore how form, constraint and rhythm shape player experience; and the development of additional design workshops that treat poetic form as both a game design method and a critical or appreciation lens. Such approaches could elucidate how game poems are articulated and their capability to generate intersectional, non-normative pleasures, while also expanding our understanding of what can be considered a game, a poem, and a site of creative resistance.

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