# The Poetics of Game Design, Rhetoric and the Independent Game

**Lindsay D. Grace**
Miami University
501 High Street
Oxford, Ohio, USA
513-529-1809
LGrace@MUohio.edu

## ABSTRACT

This paper approaches the question about games as art from a fundamentally different perspective. Instead of asking questions of visual aesthetics and pursuing analogies to film or commercial arts, it demonstrates an even clearer analogy to poetic forms. Allying common practices in independent games in particular, this paper serves as an illustrative demonstration of the poetics of game design, emphasizing the poetic properties of independent game designs. It frames game design in terms of the rhetorical devices used to create an experience. Such framing is useful to independent game designers, developers of persuasive and critical gameplay, and archivists seeking an effective way to catalog digital games that is driven by structure instead of subject or play mechanic.

### Keywords
Game aesthetics. Poetry and games, Independent game classification

## INTRODUCTION

This work extends the claim of games as rhetoric (Bogost, 2005), toward the specific structures of rhetorical devices in games. It demonstrates what game designers are doing to effect the player aesthetically and emotionally. This is beyond emotioneering techniques (Freeman, 2003), and is instead more akin to the analysis of the poetic structure of games. The demonstrated poetic framing is the decomposition of independent games into their rhetorical moments. It is an exploration of game meter, metaphor, verbs, alliteration and more. It explains the aesthetic structures of independent games that tie them together and distinguish them from non-independent games and other forms of media. In contrast to the framing of game rhetoric encouraged by Ian Bogost, this paper seeks to unpack the rhetorician's tools. This is not an exploration of the ability of games to make claims or teach (Gee, 2003). It is not about a fundamental rhetoric of play (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Where Brian Sutton-Smith offers wonderful material on understanding the "'ways of thought' in which most of us participate" (Sutton-Smith, 1997), the framing discussed here is about rhetorical moments. Sutton-Smith's large-scale philosophical exploration of play types is more similar to the investigation of

themes in literature than it is to revealing the mechanics of the structures repeatedly used to manifest such themes into art.

This essay is instead an analysis of the rhetorical tools used in successful game design. To understand this analysis, games must be analogized to literary forms. Where God of War (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2005) might be analogous to the epic Iliad (Homer, 800 B.C.E.), independent games are practices in poetry. Independent games are the sonnets that punctuate gameplay experiences. They are sonnets in that they have succinct, small, yet persistent poetic moments which may be later employed in other types of games. Much like the way Shakespeare's sonnets punctuate his plays, independent games can play accents to forthcoming genres or recall larger experiences in a much more dense form. It is perhaps this density that most makes independent games like poetry.

The AAA world of game design is largely substantiated by something akin to turn of the century Broadway. On the one hand, many mainstream games are big, sensational, guttural, and commercial. Independent Games on the other hand, are more like tender moments in a sketchbook. They are small, risky or without risk because their aspirations are so personal. Many are better enjoyed in the intimate space of a coffee shop, than the cacophony of an arcade. Review Jonathon Blow's discussion about the experience of authoring Braid (Independent Game Summit, 2007) and you hear much more about what he was feeling than commercial aspiration and pursuits of fame. So to, consider the many authors of poems, who stand in contrast to the prosaic Charles Dickens. Where Dickens may have been paid for his work by the word, large scale game developers are paid by the hour of play. Scale is an important attribute for commercial developers. Often commercial developers must not only deliver an entertaining experience, they must deliver an experience long enough for players to feel they paid appropriately. If commercial game players are Broadway audiences, independent game players are poetry slam visitors. The beauty of independent games lies in their small moments of poetic intensity.

As art historical documents, independent games are also like poems. They may be ephemeral or iconic . They may be one in a series as in Critical Gameplay (Grace, 2010) or as in the work of Jason Rohrer (2010), playing upon a theme. They are often also engaged in the pursuit of a single idea or emotion, much like the notion of poetic theme. The best independent games are unified in theme and experience, and it is the structure of that unification that drives them toward the poetic. These structures are created from the rhythms of play and the cadence of action. They are further explored in the poetic devices section of this essay.

If one assumes this perspective while evaluating games one finds much to discuss. There is the structure of the game, which may follow the structure of poetic rhetoric. There are the poetic argument games (Benmergui, 2010), and the representational (Bogost 2010), just as there are the comedic Don't Shit your Pants (Cellar Door Games, 2010) and the sardonic, I Wanna be the Guy (Nasaki, 2009). Each has a niche which evolved from rich historical references. The references move much faster than literature, but like literature it is informed by all the arts.

Such perspective also brings significant and important practices to questions. What happens when we have more means of evaluating them? What is the role of independent game festivals in the selection of a game playing canon? What does an understanding and mastery of such aesthetic rhetoric facilitate? Can the poetry of independent games

inform the slogans of advergames? Are there new approaches to the archiving of games that are facilitated by indexing them not as electronic media or as genres, but instead as themes or elements in a continuum of practiced art?

This work seeks not to answer all of these questions, but merely to provide an alternate lens through which independent games can be understood. This lens is designed to apply primarily to independent games, but it may also be applied to the collection of art games as well. Just as the rhetorical devices of language permeate 16th century literature and modern rap, the described poetic framing is applicable to thought provoking games and button mashing funfests.

## DEFINING INDEPENDENT GAMES

Defining what is meant by independent games can easily consume an entire tome in itself. It is important to understand that the borders that define independent games are not rigid. They are like art, evolving and interpreted. There was a time when an independent game was quite literally a title produced by one or two people, lacking any official studio or publisher agreement at the time of production. This definition, when widely applied could cover non-independent games like Breakout (Atari, 1976). For that reason, the number of developers is not itself enough to distinguish independent games from others.

Instead, defining independent games is a bit like defining poetry. The definition evolves, as new mechanics for construction change. Where the distinctly structured styles of E.E. Cummings (1994) may have been considered rubbish by predecessors, it rests firmly in essential poetic canons. It does so because it moved independent of convention.

More clearly related to the experience of making games, new technical affordances allowed Futurist poets to make genre defining poetry whose independent trajectory exposed opportunities for the more popular works of poetry like Ginsberg's Howl (1956). Much of this work begins from outliers, whose creative path diverges very intentionally, allowing futurist Mina Loy (Shreiber, 1998) to influence the more widely recognized William Carlos Williams. Independent games can be political, artistic and even experimental in their efforts. Independent games do endeavor toward the activist inclinations of Nikki Giovanni (2010) or the structural divergence of elliptical poet Susan Wheeler(2010). Although ascribing equivalent games to the creative efforts of these poets may be too bold, it is important to recognize the liberated aspirations of these poets as similar to those of the independent game maker.

It is then perhaps more accurate to define independent games as play experiences designed and implemented with a self-governed goal outside the status quo. Independence is a declaration of deviation. It acknowledges a standard, and attempts to ratify a space of its own. For the discussion framed within this paper, independent games are games that seek and achieve the attributes of independence. They are developed free from the restrictions of contracts and the unstated obligations of profit seeking. While they may be profitable, they do not seek profit through the affirmation of standards. Independent games are interesting in their insistence to be free from standards and their effort to escape conventional play experiences.

Such definition may be unsuitable to rigid sciences, but is quite appropriate to the qualities of art analysis. It may suffice to understand that it is easiest to define independent games by their negatives, as for some researchers it is easiest to understand what is not poetic. It may also suffice to understand independent games as a confluence of timing and design intention. At the very least, the games discussed as independent games here are games that purposefully diverge from their contemporary standards in an effort to explore new play experiences.

## THE POETIC STRUCTURES

To understand the poetics of game design, it is important to understand the atomic unit of game design. The verb serves as the foundation of all games. The game verb is the set of actions executed by the player, typically to accomplish a goal. Common verbs for a side scrolling game like Super Mario Brothers (1985) are "run", "shoot", and "jump." In independent games the number of game verbs tends to be fairly small. Structurally, an independent game may rely on the repeated use of a single verb, as in the game Canabalt (2009). Arguably, in this game there is but one verb, "jump", as run is forced upon the player. In other games, the game verb is an invention itself. Like gyre and gimble or other Jabberwocky word inventions (Searls, 2001), the player is introduced to a previously non existant game verb. Manifold (Lesler, 2007) introduced the "create anomaly verb", while the Unfinished Swan [Giant Sparrow, 2011] employs a real world verb in a new way – "splatter to see." These moments are akin to the invention or reinterpretation of words demonstrated in historical literature from Shakespeare to Snoop Dogg. Where Shakespeare provided an audience with new words like eyeball and invulnerable (Metcalf, 2002), independent game designers are routinely creating new verbs for play.

The game verb is also integral to poetic devices like alliteration and assonance, as players press poetically through their game play experience. If the game designer chooses to use the devices of repetition, there is a distinct cadence and emphatic moment. Such moments may emphasize the impossibility of efforts, as in throwing axes at the Smiling Colossus in You Have to Burn the Rope (Bashiri, 2007). But, such moments are not your typical button mashing; rather, they are rhetorical devices. The game begins with a very trivial and sedate experience of walking, punctuated by the closing of a door and the presentation of high conflict through repeated axe fire and change in music. Such games emphasize the satisfying rhythm of collecting rings in Sonic the Hedgehog (Sega, 1991), but in ways distinct to their smaller experiences. They remind players that bosses are hard to beat with the emphatic power of alliteration or they make political claims by asking us to discriminate repeatedly as in Arizona Justice (Social Activist Games, 2010).

If the game verb is the atomic unit of game design, these game verbs are also subject to the larger structure of rhythm. In the study of poetry, the most commonly considered aspects of poetic rhythmic form include meter, repetition, and stanza. To understand this framing, consider the analogy of stanza to level. Stanzas are often the unit of organization, binding meter to them. All of the rhythms of game verbs, and all the rests between experiences come in the form of a level. Even when level is less explicit, the stanza reveals itself as a marker of moment. Achievements become stanzas, as progress is formed into stanza through leveling up.

Stanza is particularly pronounced in algorithmic games which often repeat emphatically, revisiting game verbs through rhythms that are both metered and interrupted like stanzas. In fact it is this rhythm of game play that is so essential to game experiences. As Jenova Chen borrowed the sense of Flow (2007) from Mihály Csíkszentmihályi [1991], the sense of stanza and meter demonstrate an older, more established practice in rhythm. Digital games in particular are highly dependent in these rhythms.

Meter is the typical current by which the stanza is carried. In Mihály Csíkszentmihályi and Jenova Chen's perspective, this is a kind of flow. There can be no flow, without a clear understand of meter. For successful designers the game verbs must fall at a pace appropriate to the intention of the game. This is fundamentally how players differentiate the soothing experience of Flower (That Game Company, 2009), from the enjoyable chaos of a hectic shooter. Flower is independent in its intention in pacing and experience. Yet, like poetry this pacing is enforced by design. Just as a reader can attempt to rush through Dickenson's "A Light Exists in Spring" [1999] they can go as fast as their fingers will allow through Blueberry Garden (Svedang, 2009). Yet, the stanzic forms of levels persist, and the rhythms of game verbs remain themselves. In most games, independent or otherwise, there is often a rhythm which can be rushed or slowed, but remains omnipresent.

Meter is demonstrated not only in how challenges are presented to players but also in how players handle challenges. Where the designer architects the meter, the player, like a reader executes that meter. This is only entertaining through a proper construction of accents and moments. In games these accents are not vowel and consent sounds, but instead they are elements set forth by challenges, conflicts, conflict resolutions and the result of executing game verbs. There are hectic meters, demonstrated by high stress, fast games. There are sleepy rhythms, that lull and placate, soothing player into their rhythms as in Bohm (Monobonda, 2010). There is, a perceivable iambic pentameter and a free verse to games. There is an Iliad to Howl, just as there is A House in California [Cardboard Computer, 2010] to a Nidhogg [Essen, 2011]. Games may require the rhythm of hack and slash mechanics of Nidhogg, or the free verse aesthetic of exploration play presented by A House in California.

This is perhaps where the attraction of watching others play games begins. Like a performance or recitation, the experience may be the same, but the tempo and accents a player employs vary. It is an engaging experience to witness with all the senses the designed experience as interpreted by player. As the attuned ear of a musician or literary scholar may call attention to a specific moment of poetic alliteration, players and their audiences demonstrate those same sensitivities. A player's tempo may emphasize a moment of drama within a game, or like a poor reader, diminish the aesthetic experience through clunky articulation of game verbs.

Like poems it is also important to note than many independent games are not narratives. Where these games could be described as structurally similar to the classic three act structure, there is also a meter to the experience that demonstrates more attention to poetic effect than narrative. Where some independent games do spin tales in the deep and rich manner of a Beowulf, most are more inclined to provide shallow characterization among a wide ranging depth. Even when a design is epic in its aspirations, the narrative around the character is often shallow in comparison to the aesthetic efforts of its meter and stanza forms. Examples include Braid (Blow, 2008) and Gravitation (Rohrer, 2008).

## ABSTRACT USES OF POETIC DEVICES

Beyond structure, independent games are easily understood by their use of abstract elements like metaphor, simile and personification. In particular, metaphor and personification are standard across a wide range of game genres and types. These poetic devices find themselves in games like Paper Plane, where players must use their paper airplane to give back life to figments of memories (Potron, 2010).

What is more interesting in this analogy is the application of personification to complete the fiction of a game environment. Notable independent games are complete in their efforts. Consider Flipside (Team 3, 2007), which personifies the two realities of the player character, providing game verbs and aesthetic cues that juxtapose a fictive happy-go-lucky world, and the brutal reality for the player.

The conceptual scale of players' personifications is often proportional to the player's conflict. Where the characterization of non-player characters and light coloring of the game environment in Akrasia (Gambit Games, 2008) is not an ideal demonstration of personification, its rhetorical aim to demonstrate addiction is supported by this device.

Consider the poetic moments planned by That Game Company's Journey (2011). While the original concepts are largely illustrative, there is clear reliance on the language of vision over the language of execution and programming. For many designers games are essentially translations of image into experiences, just as poetry is a translation of image to language.

The poetry of games is also present in its use of literal imagery. Beyond the pursuit of technical photorealism, effective games employ imaginative imagery. They present scale, they make motion believable, and they illustrate imagined actions in way we understand. They marry sound to image, helping us belief or invest in fictions. They color a scene with artistic style. Consider how many of the 2010 and 2011 Independent Game Festival finalists employ distinct aesthetic styles, describing themselves as surreal explorations (Hazard, 2010 ) and abstract (Fract, 2010).

## TYPES OF POETRY

The framing of independent games as poetry offers substantial potential. An analysis and identification of poetic forms could be useful in the archiving and organization of independent games. Instead of attributing games by their structural genre (e.g. shooter, side-scroller) or subject type (e.g. Wild West, Science fiction) a system for organizing games by their formal devices could be derived. Just as ode distinguished itself from beat poetry, independent games could be understood by the structure of their meter, stanzas, subjects and verbs. It is clear that there are comedic games and there are reflective games. As researchers we need only construct the formal boundaries of each.

Constructing such ontologies provides a few distinct advantages. It helps articulate relationships clearly. Games such as Crayon Physics (Purho, 2008) would no longer rest in the vaguely distinct space of action puzzler, but instead could be discerned as a slow-metered, marginally metaphor dependent, and narrative bare game. In subsequent research, a single term for such games could be defined, giving much more definition games if its type.

In future studies, it might be clear to analogize casual independent games as haikus and alternative gameplay experiences as period free verse. It also clear that there is a kind of satirical poetic form arising, demonstrated by games like Layoff (Flanagan, 2008). Most interestingly, as designers employ these rhetorical devices the potential for demonstrating clear claims and appropriately expounding rhetoric evolves. This provides a very clear opportunity for persuasive, news and critical gameplay experiences to address their goals with even more effectiveness. In commercial terms, the persuasive goals in advergames can evolve from replication of successful designs, to the invention of subject appropriate ones.

**CONCLUSION**

This framing of poetic device in games not only benefits those that are looking to analyze or historicize games, it is also useful to design practitioners. Instead of framing and communicating games in terms of their implementation, designers could be afforded a common language and framework through which games can be understood. It moves the design practice from the restrictions of implementation, toward a concept liberating practice. The practice moves from explaining how things will be done, to what is intentioned. It also affords a more succinct vocabulary, distinct to games, but supportive of them. A poetic framing prevents the need to borrow the linear media concepts of film, or the non-aesthetic concepts of interactive media. It brings independent games closer to their foundation, as pointed creative practice.

If we continue to frame game designs as poetics we find a new set of priorities. There is the need for to improve the way games are archived, paying as much attention to the content and intention as the subject and implementation. There is the need for critical analysis that extends beyond the visceral, toward the context, asking how this has effected others, and the deep, asking what does this due to its audience.

By applying a poetic device framing we can understand what makes such experiences successful and encourage future designers to either diverge from the structure and offer yet another new experience, or to follow and improve upon it. At the very least, it provides evidence that independent games are like poems, orbiting meaning but sounding and looking beautiful the whole time.

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