

# Making the Familiar Unfamiliar: Techniques for Creating Poetic Gameplay

Alex Mitchell

Department of Communications and New Media  
National University of Singapore  
alexm@nus.edu.sg

## ABSTRACT

Just as writers use specific literary devices to deliberately draw attention to a poem's form, in this paper I propose that game designers can make use of the structure of gameplay to draw attention to a game's formal qualities for "poetic" effect. Starting from Shklovsky's notion of *defamiliarization* and Utterback's concept of the *poetic interface*, I draw parallels between poetic language and the techniques used in games to create what I refer to as *poetic gameplay*. Through a close reading of *Thirty Flights of Loving*, I identify three possible techniques for creating poetic gameplay: undermining the player's expectations for control, disrupting the chronological flow of time, and blurring the boundaries of the form. To demonstrate the potential use of these techniques for analysis, I discuss how these techniques appear in a range of games, suggesting that these techniques can serve as the basis for a more general set of techniques for creating poetic gameplay.

## Keywords

close reading, defamiliarization, poetic gameplay

## INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I am interested in techniques used in games that are seen as being in some way different from mainstream games, often labelled as "artgames" (Bogost 2011; Sharp 2015) or "game poems" (Bogost 2010). To begin to understand what makes these games different, it is worth looking at other fields where certain works are identified as being "poetic".

In the area of literature, Shklovsky suggests that "art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony" (Shklovsky 1965, 12). This is done by using techniques that "make objects 'unfamiliar,'... make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception" (12). This process of *defamiliarization* involves the "prolonging [of] the process of perception" through the "[s]ystematic disturbance of the categorization process [which] makes low-categorized information, as well as rich pre-categorical sensory information, available to consciousness" (Tsur 1992, 4). Poetic language accomplishes this through a disruption of the expected patterns of rhyme, rhythm, syntax and meaning. This disruption is a means of drawing attention to the form of poetry.

Similar to Shklovsky's description of the use of poetic language to slow down perception and draw attention to the nature of language, in the field of interactive art Utterback has introduced the concept of a *poetic interface*. In a poetic interface, "[t]he structure of the

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interaction is simple and direct, but the user's control over the system is not absolute. This tension is what makes the works compelling" (Utterback 2004). Utterback is focusing attention on the *tension* created within the work, not just by the content, but by the interactive structures created by the artist both within the system and between the user and the system. Rather than aiming for an invisible (Weiser 1994) or seamless (Ishii 2003) interface, where the user is able to understand how to use the interface through "*natural* signals, *naturally* interpreted, without any need to be conscious of them" (Norman 1990, 4), poetic interfaces draw attention to themselves as a means of creating an aesthetic response in the user.

Both of these approaches suggest ways of looking at the process of making the familiar unfamiliar, and how this process can be used to draw attention to the form of a work for aesthetic purposes. In this paper, I explore the ways that game designers can similarly make use of specific defamiliarizing techniques in the design of gameplay to create a poetic effect, resulting in what I will refer to as *poetic gameplay*.

I am using the term poetic strictly in the sense used by Shklovsky in his discussion of poetic language and by Utterback in her discussion of poetic interfaces. Specifically, I am interested in formal structures within a game that draw attention to themselves and encourage reflection. I consider a game to be "a rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable" (Juul 2005, 36). By gameplay, I mean "how the player is able to interact with the game-world and how that game-world reacts to the choices the player makes" (Rouse III 2010, xviii). By poetic gameplay, therefore, I mean the structuring of the actions the player takes within a game, and the responses the game provides to those actions, in a way that draws attention to the form of the game, and by doing so encourages the player to reflect upon and see that structure in a new way.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. I begin by surveying the related work, discussing how researchers have made comparisons between games and poetry. I then present three techniques that I have identified for creating poetic gameplay, through a close reading of the game *Thirty Flights of Loving* (Blendo Games 2012). This is followed by a reflection on how these techniques relate to defamiliarization in other forms such as literature and interactive art, and an application of these categories to analyse several other games. The paper ends with some concluding remarks, and suggestions for future work.

## **GAMES AND/AS POETRY**

A number of researchers have made comparisons between poetry and games. This includes both work that explores the notion of game mechanics as poetic, and work that looks specifically at the use of unfamiliar gameplay for poetic effect. I will begin by providing an overview of this research.

Bogost grounds his comparison between poems and what he calls "game poems" in the notion of "provocation machines", works that require a reader, or player, to "configure multitudes of similar but distinct meanings" (Bogost 2010, 5). Similarly, by looking at the poetic structure of games based on the notion of game mechanics as verbs, Grace (2011) draws an analogy between art games and poetic form through an analysis of the rhetorical tools

used in game design. Building on these ideas, Sezen (2015) compares Valéry and Guenther (1954)'s notion of poems as machinery to game mechanics. The idea of gameplay as working both within and against structural constraints, with the player engaged in a process of discovery and interpretation, is seen as equivalent to the multiple possible interpretations that can emerge as a reader engages with a poem. Through a close analysis of several art games, Sezen identified similarities between the formal constraints of art games and the structural features of poems. In particular, in her analysis of *Fatale* (Tale of Tales 2009), Sezen describes how the gameplay changes through the course of the game, "from familiar to unfamiliar and to the almost inactive" (Sezen 2015). It is this defamiliarization of the game mechanics that I am exploring in this paper.

There have been several researchers who have touched specifically on the use of unfamiliar gameplay for poetic effect. For example, Asad (2011) examines the similarities between modernist poetry and videogames, looking at how game mechanics can be seen as expressive in a similar way to how language is expressive in poetry. Asad considers three ways that game mechanics can be expressive: as metaphor, by encouraging players to re-evaluate their reading and playing practice, and through intertextuality. The second point is closest to what I am examining in this paper. Also focusing on interaction and game mechanics, in his analysis of *Kentucky Route Zero* (Cardboard Computer 2013-2015), Mitchell (2014) argues that defamiliarization can be used to create what he refers to as "poetic interaction". Similarly, Ensslin (2015) explores the application of the concept of "unnatural narratology" to games. She identifies two approaches to "unnatural" narratives: those that incorporate "both physically and logically impossible narrative structures" (5), and those that defy the conventions of narrative form. The latter approach focuses on "the degree of unexpectedness that the text produces, whether surprise, shock, or the wry smile that acknowledges that a different, playful kind of representation is at work" (Richardson 2015, 5). Building on this, Ensslin is interested in "games that seek to defamiliarise and innovate the gaming experience through highly idiosyncratic ludonarrative mechanics" (Ensslin 2015, 13).

Coming from the perspective of art history, Schrank (2014) introduces the notion of the avant-garde video game. He suggests that one approach to the avant-garde is what he calls the radical formal avant-garde. He describes this approach as "break[ing] conventions in ways that encourage players to reflect on the medium... as they play. The familiar mechanics... are present, but they are also warped and shifting" (38). He argues that this type of game "takes conventions that have become invisible and intuitive, and makes them extraordinary and visible again" (42). Another approach, that of the narrative formal avant-garde, takes the strategy of "mak[ing] the familiar seem unfamiliar again" (156). Similarly, Flanagan (2009) explains that artists have "long reused, worked against, or invented new media forms and conventions" (10). She suggests that to encourage what she calls critical play, game makers "must work like a virus from within to infect and radically change what is expected and what is possible when players play" (62). This use of subversion of form and convention is very similar to the formal avant-garde described by Schrank.

Finally, drawing from theatre rather than poetry, Dunne (2014) explores the use of Bertolt Brecht's "Verfremdungseffekt" or distancing effect, a concept closely related to defamiliarization, to explain the alienating breaks in player engagement that often occur in games. As Dunne explains, this can at times be disruptive, but can also be used to deliberately draw

attention to the artifice of gameplay for aesthetic effect.

## TECHNIQUES FOR CREATING DEFAMILIARIZATION

Although there have been a number of works that explore the intersection of poetry and games, some of which focus on the parallels between the mechanics of poetry and game mechanics as a means to create a poetic effect, only Grace (2011) has attempted to identify the specific rhetorical or poetic devices that are used to create this type of game experience. In this paper, I focus on the ways that gameplay can be seen as poetic. Through a close reading of *Thirty Flights of Loving*, a first-person shooter created using the *Quake 2* engine, I identify the techniques that have been used in this game to create a sense of defamiliarization.

Close reading is an analytical method involving repeated play of a game text, paying specific attention to carefully selected "analytical lenses" chosen to highlight the phenomena being investigated (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 2011). I make use of the lens of defamiliarization, looking for specific sequences in the game that seem to be making the familiar unfamiliar, paying attention to how the structural properties of the game relate to this process.

I will now discuss each of the three techniques I have identified for creating defamiliarization in *Thirty Flights of Loving*: undermining player expectations for control, disrupting the chronological flow of game time, and blurring the boundaries of the form.

### Undermining Player Expectations for Control

One technique that can be used to create a sense of defamiliarization in the player is to undermine the player's expectation of having control over the actions she can take within a game. One way that *Thirty Flights of Loving* disrupts the player's expectations for control is through the extensive use of film-like cuts between scenes. These cuts, which are not consciously triggered by the player, give the player a sense of losing control over the progression of the game. The game also removes control from the player at key points in the game, giving the player a sense that she is watching rather than playing the game.

#### *Disrupting navigational control using film-like cuts*

At the start of the game, I was initially set up to believe that I was playing a typical first-person shooter, with the expectation that I would have control over my movement through the world. The game began with my character descending a staircase into a bar. Using the standard "WASD+mouse" controls, I was able to move around a stylized three-dimensional world. Selected objects could be interacted with using the "E" key. After exploring the bar, I discovered a secret passage and entered what appeared to be a secret hide-out.

The first hint I received that there was something unusual about the game was a quick cutscene that showed when I interacted with either of the two main non-player characters, Anita or Borges, after entering the hide-out. The cutscene showed, in rapid succession, a series of non-interactive shots illustrating the professions of the characters, in a sequence that felt very much like what might be seen in a "heist film" (see Figure 1). This sequence was unsettling in two ways. In most games, approaching a character and choosing to interact by pressing the "E" key triggers a dialogue with the character, rather than a cutscene. This unexpected response to interaction was in direct opposition to my expectations. In



**Figure 1:** Cutscenes introducing characters in *Thirty Flights of Loving*

addition, the "skills" which were associated with the characters included not just those that might be expected given the setting of the first scene (sharp shooter, forger, etc.), but also some unexpected skills (best man and confectioner). Here, both content and interaction are unexpected and unfamiliar.

Despite being interrupted by this cutscene, I could continue to explore the first scene and proceed to board a plane, which then began to taxi out of the hanger. As the plane left the hanger, there was another sudden, unexpected cut, this time to a scene in what appeared to be a storage room, where Anita was sitting beside some crates, pointing a gun at my character, injured and covered in blood (see Figure 2). Unlike the previous cut, this cut to a new scene did not temporarily interrupt the previous scene, but instead completely replaced it. In addition, the new scene was overlaid with titles and a copyright notice, very much like a film. There was no indication given as to how this scene related, either temporally or spatially, to the preceding scene. It was left to me to make sense of what was happening, how this scene related to the previous scene, and whether I had any control over progression.



**Figure 2:** An unexpected cut that creates a feeling of lack of control

Once I managed to orient myself, I discovered that this new scene, unlike the previous cutscene, was actually interactive. I soon figured out that I needed to pick up Borges, who

was lying injured in another corner of the storage room, and carry him out into the hallway. This was followed by a series of cuts, each moving me to a new set-piece: running through a crowd of people in an airport, running through another corridor where time seems to be running at an accelerated rate, and standing in front of an airport departure board where I needed to grab a cart from another passenger so as to carry Borges. All of these cuts were somewhat unsettling, giving me a feeling that I was not entirely in control of what was happening: that events were jumping forward in time without any decision having been made by me, and with only minimal clues as to how the scenes related to each other.

### *Disrupting the player's ability to take action*

Even within the individual scenes, I gradually got the feeling that I was not really in control of what was happening, with my expectation that I would be able to take action within the game world constantly being undermined.

In the first scene described above, in the room where I encountered the first cutscenes, the tables and walls were covered with a wide range of guns and ammunition, all of which I was able to interact with. Upon pressing the "E" key, the guns and ammunition disappeared, making me think that I was collecting this equipment for use later in the game. This type of interaction with the game world is what players have come to expect in a first-person shooter. This illusion is further re-enforced when, for example, I had to press the "E" key to pick up Borges to carry him out of the storage room.

However, it quickly became apparent that this interaction was simply an illusion. There was no point in the game where I had to make use of any of the equipment collected in the first scene. In fact, there was no evidence that I had actually collected these items, other than their disappearance from the game world. Further, in the few scenes where my action *was* indeed required to move the game forward, such as picking up Borges in the storage room, there was no other action available - if I didn't pick up Borges, the game would not progress. Although this could be seen as an example of what Tanenbaum and Tanenbaum (2009) refer to as *commitment to meaning*, the feeling it gave me was not of committing to the actions available in the game, but rather of *watching* the game instead of playing it.

For example, as I was running through the hallways of the airport, there was a moment when a gate began to close, threatening to block the passage. Suddenly, the cart holding Borges was thrown forward, as if I had taken action to use the cart to stop the gate from closing. This was, however, not in response to any action I had taken. Rather, this was triggered automatically, to ensure that the game progressed through to the next set-piece. It was only *after* the gate had been stopped that I was required to do something, in the form of pressing the "E" key to retrieve the cart and continue down the hallway.

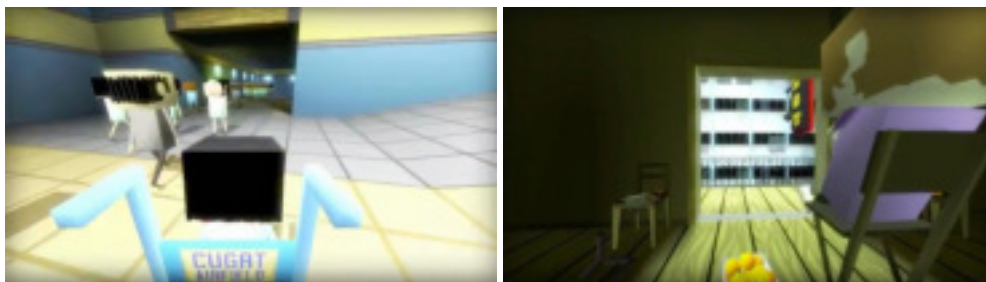
By denying me the ability to take action at the critical moment, when the gate needed to be stopped, and then insisting that I take action to continue the progression of the game only *after* the important action had been automatically triggered, the game is foregrounding the fact that I have no control over what is happening in the game. This, coupled with the disruption of my expectations for control over my movement through space, serves to effectively defamiliarize my experience of playing a first-person shooter.

## Disrupting the Chronological Flow of Game Time

So far, I have described how the disruption of my expectations for control over the game created a sense of the unfamiliar in a form that initially appeared to be familiar: a first-person shooter. This disorientation and defamiliarization became even stronger when the cuts between scenes began to disrupt not just my control over my movement through space, but also the chronological progression of time within the game.

As Juul (2005) argues, in a game, players generally expect there to be a direct correspondence between play time (the time experienced by the player) and fictional time (the time of the events taking place within the game). This expectation is in contrast to non-interactive narrative works such as literature and film, where the discourse often presents the story achronologically (Genette 1980). This is particularly true in "puzzle films", where the complex interweaving of different strands of story time at the discourse level can create satisfying challenges for the viewer (Buckland 2009). Discourse-level complexity is not something players expect to encounter in a computer game. By disrupting the correspondence between play time and fictional time, *Thirty Flights of Loving* not only undermines the player's expectations in terms of control, but also in terms of the chronological flow of time in a game.

Following the sequence of cuts described above, cuts that changed my character's location in the game world but preserved the chronological flow of time, there was a sudden cut to a completely different setting, and what appeared to also be a different time. In this new scene, my character was no longer pushing Borges through the hallways of the airport. Instead, my character was lying in a bed in a darkened flat, with a non-injured Anita sitting on a stool by a door that led out to a balcony, peeling and eating oranges. Looking out the door, I saw that I was in what appeared to be Chinatown, and that it was now night (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3:** Disruption of the flow of game time: before (left) and after (right) the cut

As I moved towards the main door of the flat, there was another unexpected jump in time, with the clock over the door changing abruptly from 5:21am to 7:53pm. Anita and Borges appeared in front of me, holding a cake and drinks. Following them upstairs, I reached a rooftop party, complete with dancing and a speech. This seemed to be a wedding, and we appeared to be guests. How this sequence related to the earlier events in the airport was not completely clear to me, although given the injuries suffered by Anita and Borges in the earlier sequence, and their lack of injuries in this scene, I surmised that this was a flashback.

After my character had a few drinks, there was a cut to the stairs, where I followed Anita back down to the apartment. Anita was stumbling, most likely drunk, so it was safe to assume that this scene was taking place some time soon after the previous scene. Another

quick cut showed Anita in bed, still drunk. When I approached her, there was another cut to a shot of my character falling down an air shaft. I landed on the ground beside an injured Borges, in what seemed to be the same storage room I was in earlier, immediately after the plane took off. At this point, all I could do was move slowly towards where I assumed Anita would be sitting. As soon as I caught a glimpse of her, I was taken, via another cut, back to the airport, to the scene where I was pushing the injured Borges on a cart.

This storytelling strategy, of embedding a flashback within a sequence of events, and then jumping forward to an intermediate time-frame, the meaning of which is altered by the flashback, is not uncommon in film. It is, however, very unusual for a game to make use of this type of complex storytelling. This non-chronological presentation of events created a strong sense of the unfamiliar. Making sense of these flashbacks and trying to reconstruct the sequence of events in fictional time is part of the satisfying challenge of *Thirty Flights of Loving*. This repeated making unfamiliar of the familiar experience of a first-person videogame makes the form feel fresh and innovative, suggesting ways that games can push the boundaries of the medium. It also, as I will discuss below, begins to blur the boundaries of the form, making it feel like you are experiencing something closer to a film than a game.

## **Blurring the Boundaries of the Form**

In addition to undermining the player's expectations about control over both movement and actions within the game world, and about the chronological flow of game time, *Thirty Flights of Loving* also makes use of a blurring of the boundaries between different forms as a way to defamiliarize the player's experience of the game.

By making extensive use of cuts, both temporal and spatial, *Thirty Flights of Loving* is drawing on language from a different medium, that of film. The use of unconventional temporal ordering discussed above was repeated in the sequence immediately following the "wedding" flashback, but in a more extreme fashion. After moving down the hallway and into a large open space, my character and Borges were ambushed by a swarm of cameras on balloons and birds that seemed to be shooting at us. At one point, there was a sudden change of camera angle, with the camera following a bullet through the wall. The scene cut back to the darkened apartment seen earlier, but this time the woman in the bed was not Anita. This scene only lasted for a moment, after which I was back in the airport.

Once the final balloon was destroyed, I could move through an opening in the wall, towards what appeared to be a police blockade. This led to the third set of temporal cuts. As I approached the police, the scene cut to the inside of a speeding car. My character appeared to be with Borges, and we seemed to be involved in a high-speed car chase, with the police pursuing us. Again, the camera followed a bullet, and the scene cut to a completely different time and location. Now my character was on a motorcycle with Anita, Borges was riding with us on another bike, and all I could do was look around. Anita looked at me, failed to see a car coming directly at us, and suddenly I was back in the car chase.

As before, this sequence of temporal and spatial cuts was disconcerting and disorienting. However, by this point I had become accustomed to the temporal complexity, and I recognized that the cuts signalled by a close-up on the bullet were flashbacks. As I became used to them, the repeated use of temporal cuts was starting to blur the boundaries of the form,



encouraging me to see what I was playing as less like a game, and more like a film.

This blurring of the boundaries of the game was more extreme towards the end of the game, where the relationship between the various levels of framing within the game were put in question, effectively highlighting the artifice of the form. This involves a subversion or breaching of the narrative boundaries (Ryan 1991) within the game, in what Genette (1980) refers to as *metalepsis*. The final sequence of cuts created a slippage between the game world and a narrative frame that seemed to be at once outside of and inside the game world.



**Figure 4:** Breaching narrative boundaries: landing in an art gallery

At the end of the car chase described above, as my character and Borges were fleeing from the police, there was another cut, this time one that was clearly spatial, but also more unusual than the previous cuts. Immediately after what appeared to be a head-on collision with a police car, the game cut to an unexpected location. My character was thrown from the car, and landed on the floor of what seemed to be an art gallery (see Figure 4). Looking around, I noticed that, immediately in front of where my character had landed, a group of people were standing around, sipping drinks, looking at a canvas on which was printed "The End". Turning around, I saw what appeared to be a police car, suspended in the air. A plaque on the wall read "Thirty Flights of Loving, *Doom-Driven*, First-person Shooter, 2012, Blendo Games". The final portion of the game took place in this gallery.

Moving through the space, I first encountered a corridor, filled with gallery visitors, containing a series of canvases on which were displayed the game credits. The next corridor contained a number of objects from the game, including the plane from the first scene. This was followed by a series of chambers, labelled "Bernoulli's Principle", containing interactive exhibits explaining Bernoulli's Principle. Beyond these chambers was a door labelled "exit" that, when opened, triggered a final temporal and spatial cut, back to the earlier scene where Anita and Borges were riding on motorcycles. This scene looped endlessly, with the text "The End" and the instructions "PRESS ESC" showing in the lower right of the screen.

Having become accustomed to the non-chronological sequencing of events, I was no longer surprised by the defamiliarization of the usual correspondence between play time and fictional time. However, this shift from the game world to an unexplained space that seemed to be outside the world of the game, and yet still somehow connected to the game world, was very surprising. This move was almost a breaking of the fourth wall, defamiliarizing not just the flow of time within the game, but also the very boundaries of the game. This is similar to Brecht's notion of "alienation" (Brecht and Bentley 1961), which attempts to draw attention to the artificial nature of the form, in this case the game itself.

## DISCUSSION

In the above analysis, I have looked in detail at *Thirty Flights of Loving*, exploring the ways that I experienced a sense of defamiliarization while playing the game. In the process, I have identified three techniques for creating this sense of defamiliarization: undermining player expectations for control, disrupting the chronological flow of game time, and blurring the boundaries of the form.

I now discuss how these techniques relate to defamiliarization in literature and interactive art, and argue that what I have been exploring in this paper can be considered *poetic gameplay*. I then explore how these techniques can be seen in other games that exhibit poetic gameplay, suggesting that the techniques can form the basis of a more general set of techniques for creating poetic gameplay. Finally, I consider some possible problems with this approach, examining the role of player expectations in the process of defamiliarization, and the issue of games that use defamiliarizing techniques but do not exhibit poetic gameplay.

### Defamiliarization and Poetic Gameplay

Shklovsky's notion of *defamiliarization* involves encouraging the reader to see the familiar in an unfamiliar way, not for its own sake, but as a way to break out of the tedium of everyday life and see what we see everyday in a new, fresh light: "to make the stone stony" (Shklovsky 1965, 12). An important part of this process is the difficulty involved on the part of the reader to make sense of poetic language. In fact, Shklovsky suggest that "the language of poetry may be said to be a difficult, 'laborious', impeding language" (Shklovsky 1991, 13).

Similarly, the techniques I have identified through my close reading of *Thirty Flights of Loving* require some effort on the part of the player, an effort that results from the conceptual distance between what the player expects to encounter in a first-person shooter, and what she encounters in this game. The undermining of my expectation that I would be able to control how I move around and take action in the game world, and that there would be a continuous, chronological flow of the fictional time of the game that would be coincident with the time I was experiencing as I played the game, required me to expend effort to figure out what was happening, and to reconcile my experience with my expectations. This is similar to Tsur (1992)'s description of the prolonging of the process of perception that occurs when reading poetic language. In the process of doing this, I was thinking about *why* I had those expectations, and what it meant for those expectations to be violated. The process of reflection that resulted from this slowing down of perception was further supported by the way that the game blurred the boundaries of the form, encouraging me to make connections to these other forms, film and art, as I was questioning the form of the work I was playing.

There is also a resonance between Utterback (2004)'s description of the poetic interface, and the tension that surfaces between player expectations for control and the chronological flow of time, and the way these expectations are disrupted in *Thirty Flights of Loving*. For Utterback, this tension is created in the contrast between the familiar controls presented to the user when experiencing an interactive artwork, and the often complex relationship between those controls and the way the work responds. A similar tension emerged as I was playing the game, as the controls were clearly drawn from the tradition of the first-person shooter, but my progression through the "levels" of the game was unexpected. I also needed to make a conscious effort to figure out the temporal and spatial relationships between these "levels", encouraging reflection on the nature of what I was experiencing.

These similarities between the experience of poetry and interactive art as described by Shklovsky and Utterback, and my experience of playing *Thirty Flights of Loving*, suggest that what I was experiencing was something that could be considered "poetic". It was not the content of the work alone, nor was it just the interface, that was creating this poetic effect. Rather, it is the overall experience of the *gameplay* - the combination of the actions I took at the interface level, the rules and game mechanics embedded in the game system, and my movement through the game space - that created this poetic effect. For this reason, I consider the effect created by the techniques identified in this paper to be *poetic gameplay*.

## **Generalizing the Techniques**

In this paper, I have identified three specific techniques based on a close reading of a single game. This is part of a larger project, the aim of which is to identify a more comprehensive set of techniques used to create poetic effects in games. Through the use of several examples, I will now suggest that the techniques I have identified in this paper are not unique to *Thirty Flights of Loving*, and therefore can serve as the basis for a more general framework to analyse poetic gameplay.

### ***Undermining Player Expectations for Control***

The technique of framing an experience as a game, but then deliberately undermining the player's expectation that she will be able to exert a certain amount of control over what happens in the game, is an effective way of defamiliarizing the play experience for poetic effect. Here I provide examples of two games that make use of this technique: *The Killer* (Magnuson 2011) and *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games 2016).

Jordan Morgansun's *The Killer* was created in response to the Cambodian killing fields. Played within a web browser, the game consists of a side-scrolling landscape across which are walking two stick figures, one (controlled by the player) holding a rifle. The only action the player can take is to press the "space" key, which causes the player's character to push the other character ahead in a forced march. After several minutes of walking, you see the message "You have reached the fields", at which point the non-player character kneels down, and you are shown the message "Use the mouse to aim". Clicking the mouse will shoot your rifle. No other actions are available. When I played the game, it was only on my second play-through that I realized that I had a choice not to shoot the other character at the end of the game. This defamiliarization of player choice effectively mirrors the way that people can lose sight of their ability to make choices in difficult situations.

*That Dragon, Cancer* is an autobiographical game chronicling the experiences of Amy and Ryan and their son, Joel, who was diagnosed with cancer. The game limits player action to highlight the parents' feeling of helplessness in the face of Joel's cancer. For example, in the chapter "Dehydration", the player controls Joel's father, Ryan, as he walks around a hospital room. In the background is a constant crying. The player is not able to take any action other than walking around the room, triggering a series of voice-overs reflecting Ryan's thoughts and feelings. The player's inability to take any action to stop the crying is a powerful representation of the frustration and anguish Ryan must have been feeling.

Both of these examples make effective use of the undermining of the player's expectations for control in a game to create a heightened awareness of the form of the game, while at the same time linking that awareness to the player's process of meaning-making.

### *Disrupting the Chronological Flow of Game Time*

The defamiliarization of the correspondence between play time and fictional time can also be found in a number of games that are considered poetic. Examples of this approach can be seen in *Kentucky Route Zero* (Cardboard Computer 2013-2015) and *That Dragon, Cancer*.

*Kentucky Route Zero* is a magic-realist, episodic adventure game. In Act III, Scene VII, "Where the Strangers Come From", the main characters Shannon and Conway are looking for a mysterious group of "strangers". Reaching a churchyard, unexpectedly the two main characters, Shannon and Conway, go off into the church and the player's control is given over to a third character, Ezra, who stays behind together with two non-player characters, Johnny and Junebug. Eventually Shannon and Conway emerge from the church. When Junebug asks what happened, Conway says "It doesn't matter." The scene ends, with the player unaware of what has happened. In Scene XI Junebug once again asks "Alright, what happened?" In response to this, the scene transitions to Scene XII, "Where the Strangers Come From". The new scene begins in exactly the same manner as Scene VII. However, this time the player is controlling Conway, and the player then proceeds to play through the previously off-screen portion of the earlier scene in an extended, interactive flashback. This type of complex storytelling, using multiple layers of framing of narratives and non-chronological sequencing of events, is uncommon in games.

Situated part of the way through the game, the chapter "I'm sorry, guys, its not good" of *That Dragon, Cancer* recreates the moment when the doctor explained to Amy and Ryan that Joel's cancer had returned. In the second half of the chapter, Amy and Ryan are sitting in what is clearly a doctor's office. The two seats across from Amy and Ryan are occupied by the doctor and a care worker. The doctor begins by saying "I'm sorry, guys, its not good". The player's view is initially situated above a "See 'n Say" toy, which can be "spun" by clicking on a control connected to the toy. Instead of animals, the arrow points to a representation of one of the four adults in the room. Spinning the arrow causes the camera view to shift to the perspective of the targeted adult. The scene moves forward through a predetermined sequence, as the doctor explains the implications of the re-emergence of the cancer. However, this sequence is overlaid with a voice-over of the thoughts of the targeted adult. After this sequence, the camera moves back to its position over the "See 'n Say" toy. The player can now spin the arrow again, and advance the scene from a different perspective. An additional "rewind" control allows the player to repeatedly view the same sequence, but from different

perspectives. This repeated playback of the scene from different perspectives, breaking both the single perspective and the linear flow of time found in most games, effectively captures the way that the parents must have mentally revisited this scene time and again.

In both of these games, the use of the disruption of the flow of game time, through the use of an interactive flashback in *Kentucky Route Zero* and the ability to repeatedly replay a scene from different perspectives in *That Dragon, Cancer*, effectively defamiliarize the play experience for poetic effect.

### ***Blurring the Boundaries of the Form***

Finally, the use of blurring of the boundaries of the form to create a sense of defamiliarization can be seen *Kentucky Route Zero* and *Lets Play: Lets Play: Ancient Greek Punishment: Art Edition Edition* (Barr 2014).

*Kentucky Route Zero* makes use of a number of instances of blurring of the boundaries between different forms. For example, in Act III, Scene III, "The Lower Depths", Ezra, Shannon and Conway arrive, together with Johnny and Junebug, at the bar after which the scene is named. In the middle of the scene, Johnny and Junebug perform a song, "Too Late to Love You." As the song begins, the roof of the bar rises up into the sky, and Johnny and Junebug's costumes change. The overall effect of this transformation is to give the feeling that you are no longer playing a game, but instead watching a performance on a stage, with the characters played by actors. The interaction provided to the player during this sequence is also somewhat unusual. Before each verse of the song, the player is presented with a choice, in a manner very similar to the dialogue choices presented elsewhere in the game. Selecting an option, rather than triggering a dialogue response, selects the next verse that Junebug will sing. As she sings each verse, the lyrics are shown, with the current word being sung highlighted in green, much like a karaoke machine. Once the song ends, the roof comes back down, and everything returns to normal. The techniques being used here, both of involving the player in an interactive song, and peeling back the borders of the game world to reveal the stage on which the action is taking place, serve to defamiliarize the experience and question what exactly are the bounds of what makes something a "game".

Similarly, *Lets Play: Lets Play: Ancient Greek Punishment: Art Edition Edition* blurs the boundaries of the form of game to encourage reflection and create a poetic effect. Played within a web browser, the game consists of an image of a picture frame hung on a white wall, within which is a playable version of the artist's earlier game *Lets Play: Ancient Greek Punishment* (Barr 2012). Overlaid on the game, computationally processed to look like a reflection in the glass of the picture frame, is a live video of the player, captured by the player's webcam. This creates the feeling that the player is standing in front of a framed artwork in an art gallery, while at the same time playing a game within that frame, within a web browser. The work confronts the player with the tensions that exist when a game is recontextualized as a static artwork, further complicating the situation by re-remediating this static artwork as a playable, web-based game.

In both of these works, the blurring of the boundaries between game and song in *Kentucky Route Zero*, and between game and a picture on the wall of a gallery in *Lets Play: Lets Play: Ancient Greek Punishment: Art Edition Edition*, effectively makes the familiar unfamiliar,

drawing attention to both the limits and possibilities of the game form.

### **Necessary, but Not Sufficient?**

Although I have highlighted several games that make use of the defamiliarizing techniques I have identified in this paper, there are some issues that have not yet been addressed. I will now briefly touch upon these issues, suggesting possible directions for future research.

One important point to consider is whether the impact of these techniques comes in part from the expectations that the player brings to the experience, rather than simply from the techniques themselves. These expectations arise both from the framing of the experience, and from the player's familiarity with the form. *Thirty Flights of Loving* was clearly framed as a *game*. As an experienced game player, I approached it with a set of expectations as to what it means to play such a game. It is worth considering whether these defamiliarizing techniques would have been effective had I not been familiar with the conventions of the first-person shooter, or had I approached the work as, for example, a film rather than a game.

Another issue to consider is why some games that use these techniques do not create a poetic effect. For example, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (Infinity Ward 2009) contains a "museum" level. Much like the final scene in *Thirty Flights of Loving*, this is a detailed, navigable space containing props, characters and scenes from the main game. And as with *Thirty Flights of Loving*, the appearance of this museum level is unexpected, and should be defamiliarizing. It does not, however, seem to create the type of poetic effect that is seen in *Thirty Flights of Loving*. There are also examples of these technique being used to create poetic effects at specific points within an otherwise mainstream game, such as the selective removal of control during the "a man chooses, a slave obeys" cut-scene in *BioShock* (2K Games 2008), and the scene in "Chapter 6: The Keys" of *The Walking Dead: Season 1* (Telltale Games 2012) where the player has no choice but to attack Lee's brother to get the keys to the pharmacy office. In these cases, the defamiliarization encourages momentary reflection, and creates a heightened experience during that specific moment of gameplay, but does not impact the overall feeling of the game. One possible explanation for this is that it is the degree to which the defamiliarizing techniques are used as an integrated part of the overall design of the game that leads players to see a game as poetic.

These issues suggest that defamiliarizing techniques such as those identified in this paper, while perhaps a necessary condition for poetic effects, are likely not a sufficient condition. An important next step is therefore to examine in more detail what combination of techniques, in what particular play contexts, lead to the type of poetic effect that I am exploring.

### **CONCLUSION**

In this paper, I have explored the possibility of extending the concept of defamiliarization, introduced by Shklovsky in the context of poetry and literature, to the analysis of games. Through a close reading of *Thirty Flights of Loving*, I have identified three techniques that create what I refer to as *poetic gameplay*: gameplay made unfamiliar so as to slow down perception and encourages the player to see things anew, similar to the way that poetic language works in poetry and literature. These techniques - undermining player expectations for control, disrupting the chronological flow of game time, and blurring the boundaries of

the form - can provide a starting point for the analysis of games that create a poetic effect. They can also potentially be used by game designers to create similar poetic effects.

The techniques listed above were identified through a close reading of a single game. As such, they are preliminary, and will need to be validated both through analysis of a wider range of games, and through empirical study of player response to these games. For these techniques to be used for design, as well as for analysis, they will need to be articulated in the form of actionable theory, or design knowledge. Finally, the resulting design knowledge will have to be tested through the design and evaluation of games using these techniques.

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