Hidden Entrance

micro-games, puzzle-poems

A selection for DiGRA '23:
Limits and Margins of Games
Universidad de Sevilla

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Introduction

I'm a writer and writing lecturer based at Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge, UK. My research to date has focused on the different ways that games and other ludic artefacts interact with poetry. What I mean by 'poetry', broadly speaking, is expressive parallelism – the use of patterns of harmony and contrast in communication and meaning-making. It seems to me the combination of the poetic and the ludic is particularly provocative in terms of leaving the reader/player room (inviting them, in fact) to take part in the meaning-making.

Why am I interested in this? I believe that where people are able to exercise a degree of autonomy and expressivity in their interactions with texts, and where they regard those texts as having some bearing on reality, they are well-placed to develop a stronger sense of their own selfhood. A person who understands themselves to be an active, imaginatively charged ingredient in the culture they consume, and who sees this as a role that entails responsibility, is one who has less need of status, affirmation or external rewards in order to feel present and accounted for. I believe that much of the bitter reactionary sentiment that impairs progress toward a more just world stems from people having a limited or crude sense of who they are, and that this is engendered partly (though not entirely) by the passive role the audience is said to play in regard to art and entertainment, along with the apparent disconnect between art/entertainment and reality.

The player of a game acts. The reader of a poem seeks to discover its meaning. To do both these things at once, and to feel that the resolution you reach is your own, is to wear down the boundary between producer and consumer, and to explore facets of self and world – as we do when we critically engage with games for research purposes. So here are some practical examples of poem-game crossover that are intended to encourage action and discovery.

Character Creator

Put together an avatar for yourself from fragments of public domain poems. Scan the QR code or head to www.gojonstonego.com/games/cc/

Starting on the page opposite are three tiny single-player role-playing games based on three video games I've played in the past year. They sometimes ask you to choose between different options, eg. [Option 1 | Option 2 | Option 3], or to contribute something from your own experience or imagination.

Micro Roleplay Poem#1:
Citizen Sleeper

Go through the numbered items below, in order, then return to the top to start a new day. At the beginning of each cycle you have exactly ● ● ● to spend.

1. Waking again. Wild gleam. Bright dust. Overcrowded satellite town. Either: *go straight to work*, or <u>*Do Some Thinking*</u> (cost: ●).

2. If you have <u>The Medicine</u> and <u>The Money</u>, you buy passage on a freighter. Any freighter. To anywhere. END.

3. Either: *swing by the canteen for **[pale peppery mushroom ale | street meats | bar scraps]*** (cost: ●), or *work a full shift*, or, if you have <u>The Gift</u>, *trade it for* <u>The Money</u>.

4. Either: *get talking to Havel **[choose a topic of conversation]*** (cost: ●) or *trade <u>any one item in your possession</u> for* <u>The Information</u>.

5. Either: *solve <u>Havel's problem</u>* (cost: ● ● ●), or *try to fix **[a phone | a watch | an MP3 player] [Who does this belong to?]***.

6. Either: *forage for spare parts* (cost: ● ●), or, if you solved <u>Havel's problem</u>, *receive <u>The Gift</u>* (cost: ●), or *daydream to gain* ●.

7. Either: if you've used up all your dots, *gain <u>The Medicine</u> from Ula, who says you look worn*, or, if you've <u>Done Some Thinking</u>, *gain* ●, or *go for a stroll by the tracks, which are frosted* (cost: ●).

8. Either: siphon water for a bath (cost: ● ● ●), or *give <u>The Information</u> to Ula*, or *read from a damp little manual*. Lie burning in your nest of rags.

based on *Citizen Sleeper* (Jump Over the Age, 2022)

Micro Roleplay Poem#2:
Stray

Plip. Plip plip. Water from a low ceiling. Oodles of gloom. You've tumbled a long way, and now there are eyes about you, hovering in pairs like dragonflies. How many?

[Look for double 'o's on this page. Continue when you've found five of them.]

The trogg-folk take you in. Give you little jobs to do. Your favourite is **[musical notation | jailbreaks | turning electrical devices on or off]**.

Still, the lack of daylight seeps in. It muddies your blood. When you curl up to sleep, you try to replay reels of your former life. **[Who were you? What did you like to drink? What was your favourite toy?]**

In time, you start to believe this is all there is or ever was. Not a cave. Not an underworld, but *the* world. Its neon bloom. There was no fall; you were merely born. Above you, in the streets – are those stars?

[Count the number of dots on this page. Stop when you get to twenty.]

based on *Stray* (BlueTwelve Studio, 2022)

Micro Roleplay Poem#3:
Sable

You slide your head inside **[the desire mask | the rust mask | the tornado mask | the keen shy mask | the shepherdess mask | the crucifix mask | the honeycomb mask | the dog mask]**, then load yourself, like an overstuffed suitcase, onto the seat of your jetbike.

Look about you. I mean really look about you. What point lies furthest in the distance? Pin your gaze to it for a good long breath or two. That is an outpost of Surrenderpity.

[Idly finger the throttle].

What is the highest visible peak, stage or spot? Skewer your gaze on it. That is a minaret of the City of Seize Everything.

Look the other way. What is right in the centre of your gaze? Around there, according to the map: the hidden entrance to the catacombs of Diegodly.

[Choose a destination. What is it you've tied about your waist, which is now caught and teased by a wind you neither feel nor hear?]

based on *Sable* (Shedworks, 2022)

(not squeeze or snatch)

yOur stash
of weed-fleeced silver
yOur half-hidden creek
yOur midden
yOur rath

(with what I have)

yOur stilted
Maunsell towers
yOur sawmill
yOur
mussel beds
yOur pillbox

(in duteous play)

yOur
curdled slick
of sea plastics

▼

I could kiss, say ❜

Above is a screenshot from a playable online 'ludokinetic poem'. Use the touchscreen to bounce around a comma/ curled tongue and land the kiss.

Scan the QR code or visit https://thenewriver.us/icouldkiss

The Nightwatchman

Nocturnal creatures are hidden in these couplets.

i.

I bathe all night. I stew, as in a chair
of oxblood leather in a club somewhere.

ii.

What the rooms beyond my bathtub lack,
rather, is lather.

iii.

I prune. I am the dying emperor
whom some slim inkling pilots from afar.

iv.

The point approaches when the water grows
its own loose skin.

v.

Ah, bury me with soap and cinnabar
now love's no longer in my repertoire.

The poems in this last section are all reproduced from *Look Again: A Book of Hidden Messages,* one of four Hipflask Books I edited with Kirsten Irving and published with Sidekick Books in 2022.

See www.sidekickbooks.com/booklab/hipflask-series/

Stereoscopic Masks

These next three pages contain stereograms – images (or, in this case, texts) which contain hidden three-dimensional shapes.

Hold the page close to your face, so that the words are out of focus (almost as though you were putting on the poem like a mask). Move it slowly away from you, adjusting your focus so that the two columns of text merge into one central column. Your brain should be fooled into thinking that some of the words are further away than others. The words which stand out betray the mask's real mood.

Anaglyph versions of these poems are also available online, and can be viewed with 3D red cyan glasses.

Scan the QR code or go to www.gojonstonego.com/games/masks/

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Mask #1
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Wooden, painted beetle-    Wooden, painted beetle-
black. A slight scuff      black. A slight scuff
on the nose-tip, the       on the nose-tip, the
holes for the eyes         holes for the eyes
round as a bloom – and     round as a bloom – and
the mouth? Roughly cut,    the mouth? Roughly cut,
a flash of cochineal       a flash of cochineal
on the lip (the female     on the lip (the female
insects are farmed,        insects are farmed,
gathered and crushed       gathered and crushed
to produce the dye).       to produce the dye).
This spare style was       This spare style was
all the rage in Sar-       all the rage in Sar-
ganserland at the turn     ganserland at the turn
of the century, not        of the century, not
worn but hung, a ward      worn but hung, a ward
against malignancies.      against malignancies.
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Mask #2

Cloth. Cut from a flour bag. A faint set of features drawn in ink, slits to look through. At the end of summer, when all that could be grown was harvested, costumes would be made from whatever had reached the end of its life, and a festival marked the beginning of winter, as the long, hot days wound to a close and the new dark settled like snow.

Mask #3

Ghost porcelain, representing the character of *El Cabra*. This is an early example, one of a set – would most likely be worn to a street carnival like Fat Tuesday, by a young member of the gentry in disguise. The chin can be moved to allow the wearer to eat or kiss. What do you see in its gaze? Do you sense that it's somehow up to no good?

Some Disassembly Required

Below are three individual anagrams. Their letters can be rearranged to produce a sentence of six words, written in iambic tetrameter. Four of the six words are the same for every anagram. Together, they tell a love story.

Spooky gumshoe. Stairway banjo.

White drugstore. Pulpy jambalaya.

Jarred impurity. Hot passageway.

My talk:

Thursday 16:30-18:00 Session 12G: Moral Justifications
'Detective — What Were You Hoping to Accomplish?': Benign Violation as Means of Moral Detection in Disco Elysium

This is the beginning of a new avenue of investigation for me. I want to explore the idea that we use certain kinds of media to help develop and refine our moral principles in relative seclusion (ie. where we can't actually 'hurt' anyone through action or inaction). The traditional view of art as rhetoric casts the reader/audience as mere receivers or interpreters of a message. Even when games and interactive artefacts are interrogated, it's often through the lens of Ian Bogost's 'procedural rhetoric', where the lesson is imparted to players through rule-based representations of systems. What I'm interested in is the extent to which art (including games) gives its users the opportunity to trespass, to cross moral boundaries and ask questions of themselves that can only be answered by themselves. In this talk I'll be contrasting the ludonarrative framework of *The Forgotten City* (Modern Storyteller, 2021) with that of *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019).

My book:

Dual Wield: The Interplay of Poetry and Videogames (DeGruyter, 2022) is my first academic monograph. It investigates the phenomena of poem-game hybrids and other forms of poetic-ludic interplay, making use of both a multidisciplinary critical approach and the author's own experiments in building and testing hybrid artefacts.

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