

# Making it Unfamiliar in the “Right” Way

## An Empirical Study of Poetic Gameplay

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### ABSTRACT

There has been much discussion of whether games can be considered art. Regardless of the outcome of these discussions, some games stand out as clearly different in a way that can be considered “poetic”. Much work has been done to discuss how these games achieve their effects, and how they differ from mainstream games. There have not, however, been any empirical studies of how players respond to the techniques used in these games, and whether these techniques result in poetic gameplay. This paper describes an empirical study of poetic gameplay in three games: *The Graveyard*, *Thirty Flights of Loving*, and *The Stanley Parable*. Using retrospective protocol analysis and semi-structured interviews with 21 participants, we observed that although these games did encourage participants to reflect upon issues beyond the immediate game experience, this tended to happen when the gameplay was made unfamiliar in ways that directly supported the emerging meaning of the game.

### Keywords

Poetic gameplay, defamiliarization, player experience, art games, empirical study

### INTRODUCTION

Certain video games tend to be perceived as somehow different from the mainstream, not conforming to the expectations that most players bring to games. One common feature of these “art games” (Bogost 2011; Sharp 2015) is the way that they often *defamiliarize* some aspect of the game experience by undermining player expectations so as to achieve a poetic effect (Flanagan 2009; Schrank 2014; Ensslin 2015). This is a phenomena that Mitchell (2016) has termed *poetic gameplay*: “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” (2).

Mitchell’s notion of poetic gameplay draws heavily on Shklovsky’s (1965) concept of defamiliarization, which centers around the idea that “[t]he technique of art is to make the object ‘unfamiliar’, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception” so as to “impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known” (12). As noted by Miall and Kuiken (1994), this is very similar to Mukařovský’s (2014) notion of foregrounding, which is described as “the opposite of automatization, that is, the deautomatization of an act; the more an act is automatized, the less it is consciously executed; the more it is foregrounded, the more completely conscious does it become” (44). This process of deautomatization “push[es] communication into the background... in order to place in the foreground the act of

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expression” (44). Much in the same way that poetic language draws attention to the form of language in poetry, focusing the reader’s attention not just on the content of a poem but also on how the poem achieves its effects, Mitchell (2016) proposes that poetic gameplay, by foregrounding and making unfamiliar certain aspects of the play experience, draws the player’s attention to the ways that the game creates its impact on the player. This in turn encourages the player to reflect on the form of the game.

The parallel that Mitchell draws between poetic language and poetic gameplay raises the question of whether the use of foregrounding and defamiliarization in games actually creates poetic effects that are equivalent to what is experienced by readers of literature. The concept of poetic gameplay in video games has previously been explored using close readings (Mitchell 2014, 2016). In this paper, we describe an empirical study of player response to three games that contain features that tend to violate players’ expectations for gameplay: *The Graveyard* (Tale of Tales 2008), *Thirty Flights of Loving* (Blendo Games 2012), and *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe 2013). The aim of the current study was to understand how players respond to the foregrounding techniques and defamiliarization used in these games, and whether these techniques result in poetic gameplay. In our study, we found that although participants did respond to the techniques used in the games, it was when those aspects of the games that were made strange or unfamiliar supported a broader, emerging meaning in the game that players tended to reflect on these techniques and began to see the game in a new way, suggesting this was an example of poetic gameplay. When the unfamiliar interaction or gameplay conflicted with or was perceived as unrelated to this emerging meaning, players found the defamiliarization problematic and frustrating, and had difficulty engaging with the game.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. We begin with a brief overview of the previous work that has been done to understand defamiliarization in games, which is then used to motivate our research problem. We then describe our method and observations of our study, followed by a discussion of the implications of these observations. We end with some conclusions and suggestions for future work.

## RELATED WORK

There have been numerous discussions of the relationship between defamiliarization and what makes a game “art”. For example, Flanagan (2009) explores the notion of critical play to characterize radical game design, including art games, suggesting that artists “must work like a virus from within to infect and radically change what is expected and what is possible when players play” (62). Similarly, in his discussion of art games, Schrank identifies strategies of “mak[ing] the familiar seem unfamiliar again” (Schrank 2014, 156) in avant-garde video games. Comparing art games and poems, Sezen (2015) identifies similarities in the formal constraints of art games and structural features of poems, describing how gameplay in these games often moves “from familiar to unfamiliar”. Ensslin has investigated the notion of unnatural narrative in video games, which she characterizes as involving “unconventional and defamiliarising structures and experiences” (Ensslin 2015, 8). Drawing from unnatural narratology, Ensslin is interested in “games that seek to defamiliarise and innovate the gaming experience through highly idiosyncratic ludonarrative mechanics” (13). Similarly, Mitchell (2014) suggests, through a close reading of *Kentucky Route Zero* (Cardboard Computer 2013), that art games use specific techniques to make the familiar unfamiliar, resulting in what he refers to as “poetic interaction”. Refining this concept through a close reading of *Thirty Flights of Loving*, Mitchell (2016) identifies several techniques that can be used to create “poetic

gameplay”. These discussions draw a parallel between the use of defamiliarization in literature, and the gameplay structures and player experience of art games.

Although there have been theoretical discussions and close readings that investigate the use of defamiliarization in games, there have not been any empirical studies to specifically explore players’ responses to foregrounding and defamiliarization in games. There has, however, been some work done to empirically investigate users’ aesthetic experience of other interactive forms, such as interactive art and interactive media more generally (Höök et al. 2003; Costello and Edmonds 2007; Bilda et al. 2008; Boehner et al. 2008). In particular, Miall and Dobson’s (2006) studies of reader response to hypertext fiction, building on Miall and Kuiken’s (1994) earlier work on reader response to foregrounding and defamiliarization in literature, suggests that there is a tension between the action of clicking on a link in a hypertext and the process of foregrounding.

## RESEARCH PROBLEM

The various theoretical discussions of defamiliarization in games mentioned above tend to focus on the ways that unfamiliar gameplay structures foreground certain aspects of the game, the assumption being that this will then create an experience for the player that is in some way equivalent to the use of foregrounding and defamiliarization in non-interactive forms such as poetry and literary fiction. However, this may not necessarily be the case, as evidenced by, for example, the issues raised in the Miall and Dobson (2006) study. This suggests that it is important to empirically study how players actually respond to games containing foregrounding and defamiliarization, to determine whether these techniques result in poetic gameplay as described by Mitchell (2016). These are the questions that we investigated in our study.

## METHOD

To explore these questions, we conducted observational studies of players interacting with 3 games: *The Graveyard*, *The Stanley Parable*, and *Thirty Flights of Loving*. Participants were drawn from an undergraduate research methods class. The researchers were not involved in the teaching of this class. Participants were required to be able to read and understand English, and should not be familiar with the game they were asked to play. There was a total of 21 participants, with 7 participants for each game. There were 4 male and 17 female participants, with 2 males playing *The Graveyard*, and one male playing each of the remaining games. Participant ages ranged from 19 to 24, with an average age of 21. Of the 21 participants, 14 reported that they play games, and 2 said that they “used to” play games.<sup>1</sup> 4 participants self-identified as “gamers”. Two of the gamers were asked to play *The Graveyard*, and one played each of the other two games.

## Materials

We are interested in how players describe their gameplay experience when the game they play contains foregrounding and defamiliarizing techniques. Accordingly, we needed to find games that contain these techniques. Based on Mitchell (2016), we identified four specific techniques to explore in this study. *Disrupting the player’s expectations for control* involves “framing an experience as a game, but then deliberately undermining the

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<sup>1</sup>7 reported playing 1-5 hours per week, 5 reported playing 6-10 hours per week, and 4 played more than 10 hours per week. 1 had played *The Graveyard*, 1 had played *The Stanley Parable*, and 5 had played *Thirty Flights of Loving*. Participants were not otherwise familiar with art games.

player's expectation that she will be able to exert a certain amount of control over what happens in the game" (11). *Disrupting the chronological flow of game time* refers to a "defamiliarization of the correspondence between play time and fictional time" (12). For clarity, we divide Mitchell's final category, "blurring the boundaries of the form", into two more specific categories, *blurring the boundaries between different forms*, which involves the use of non-game techniques in such a way as to "question what exactly are the bounds of what makes something a 'game'" (13), and *breaking the fourth wall* (or metalepsis (Genette 1980)), in which "the various levels of framing within the game [are] put in question" (Mitchell 2016, 9). In addition, drawing from Ensslin (2015), we included a fifth technique, that of the *unnatural narrator*, described by Ensslin as "a shape-shifting, intrusive narrator whose would-be omniscience is deconstructed by the player's subversive behaviour" (17). From a long-list of 30 games, we identified three specific games that cover the range of techniques, and are of an appropriate length (roughly 10 minutes of play-time) so as to be practical for use in a lab-based observational study. We now briefly describe the games used in the study.

An early "walking simulator", *The Graveyard* consists of a 3D representation of a graveyard, rendered realistically in black and white. The player controls an old lady, and can walk the old lady along a path to a bench, optionally sit on the bench and listen to a song, and then walk back to the entrance of the graveyard, at which point the game ends. A key feature of the game is the way that the movement of the old lady simulates old age – after walking continuously for a few seconds, the character begins limping, and can only walk normally again after a brief rest. As Papa (2013) explains, this is a good example of a game that makes use of its computational structure to potentially create a poetic effect. This is an example of *disrupting the player's expectations for control*, as the way that the movement controls behave deviates clearly from the usual movement controls found in mainstream games.

Built on the Quake 2 engine, *Thirty Flights of Loving* is a first-person shooter in which the player controls an unnamed character involved in a heist. Although the player can move around a 3D space and collect objects, the most distinctive features of the game are the lack of any dialogue or combat, and a series of film-like jump-cuts that fragment the narrative both spatially and temporally, eventually leading to a surreal museum that contains artefacts from the game as part of an art exhibition. Mitchell (2016) identifies several ways that *Thirty Flights of Loving* exhibits poetic gameplay, including *disruption of the player's expectations for control*, *disrupting the chronological flow of game time*, *blurring the boundaries between different forms* and *breaking the fourth wall*.

Finally, *The Stanley Parable* is a 3D first-person exploration game originally released as a *Half-Life 2* (Valve Corporation 2004a) modification and then later released as a stand-alone game built on the *Source engine* (Valve Corporation 2004b). Gameplay involves exploring an increasingly surreal environment, starting from the main character's office. As Ensslin (2015) describes, *The Stanley Parable* can be considered an example of unnatural narrative, in particular with its use of an *unnatural narrator* and *breaking the fourth wall*.

## Study procedure

Participants were asked to play through their assigned game on a MacBook Pro with an attached 2-button mouse. For *The Graveyard* and *Thirty Flights of Loving*, participants were asked to play through the game once. In the case of *The Stanley Parable*, we asked the participants to play through the game twice, as we were interested in the relationship

between the player's choices and the narrator's descriptions of those choices, something that only becomes evident on repeat play.

To understand the participants' experience of the games, we made use of retrospective protocol analysis (Ericsson and Simon 1993; Knickmeyer and Mateas 2005). The participant's interaction with the game was video-recorded. Immediately following the play session, we asked the participant to watch a playback of the video recording, and to describe what she was doing and why. The researcher asked questions to clarify if necessary, but tried as much as possible not to interrupt the participant. This approach attempts to avoid interfering with the player's experience of the game, as would be the case with the use of traditional think-aloud protocols, while still capturing as fresh a perspective on the experience as possible. The retrospective protocol was followed by a semi-structured interview. This interview started from a set of standard questions, but the researcher was free to probe deeper based on both the participant's responses to the questions, and the issues that arose during the retrospective protocol.

All on-screen actions were video-recorded, and both the retrospective protocol and the semi-structured interview were audio-recorded. These recordings were coded by three researchers. The researchers worked independently during the open coding phase, with each researcher coding all 21 recordings. During the open coding phase, researchers were looking specifically for incidents where participants described aspects of the gameplay as being unfamiliar or in some way not in line with their expectations, and for moments when participants reflected on how these unfamiliar aspects of the game impacted their experience. The researchers then worked together to carry out axial and selective coding. The resulting axial codes form the basis for the categories discussed below.

## **OBSERVATIONS**

All three of the games raised certain expectations in the participants, and then undermined those expectations in various ways. All the works begin to encourage reflection and create a "poetic" experience through this deliberate undermining of expectations. However, in *The Graveyard* and *Thirty Flights of Loving* this process of reflection was often overshadowed by additional problems with interaction and knowing "what to do" or "what was happening" that limited the participants' attempts to experience the game in any meaningful way. In contrast, with *The Stanley Parable*, participants tended to engage in some reflection on the form of the game and its potential meaning, while still playing the game as a game. We will now describe these observations in more detail.

### **The Graveyard: "What is the point of this game?"**

Participants who played *The Graveyard* initially formed expectations in terms of gameplay, objectives and interaction. These expectations were quickly undermined by the structure of the work. Some of the descriptions participants gave of the resulting experience could be considered examples of poetic gameplay, as they involve some degree of reflection on the form and structure of the work. However, players were often distracted by other user interface issues and the lack of any clear gameplay or objective, both of which did not support the emerging meaning of the game.

#### *Undermining of interaction and gameplay expectations*

Participants initially expected to be able to explore and interact with the environment, and for there to be some form of gameplay. In terms of interaction, for example, participant 9 expected that "when I click something then something will pop out or something... I was

hoping that at certain points in time, there would be something for me to pick up.” Regarding gameplay, participant 12 described how she “walked around, because, instead of just walking straight, I thought at the sides that there were other things that I could at least do... I clicked around because I was looking for clues of the game, the motives of the game.” Some participants also expected to encounter either a story that they could engage with or the backstory of the character that they could uncover. When asked about her expectations, participant 21 said “I guess it was to figure out something like why is she here and any troubles regarding how she came to meet this, why is she here.”

These expectations were quickly undermined, as participants discovered that there were no game objectives. As participant 1 explained: “There’s no pay-off, there’s no narrative. I don’t know what she is, I don’t know where the place is, I don’t know why I was there.” According to participant 4, “There’s no outcome to it, there’s no steps along the way, or things you have to collect in order to achieve something.” Summing up these reactions, participant 1 asked “what is the point of this game?”

Even at the level of interaction, participants expected to be able to “do something”. Participant 4 felt frustrated “because like there isn’t much to do at the tombstones.” Similarly, participant 5 described how he “was trying to walk to the left to see if I can explore more places and after that couldn’t.” More broadly, participants complained that the instructions were not clear. As participant 9 said, “[t]here is no clear cut direction you’re supposed to go. So, you’re just following and you don’t know what you’re supposed to really do.”

### *Constrained movement as poetic gameplay*

Despite these frustrations, participants reflected on how the foregrounding of the deliberately slow movement created a sense of what it would feel like to be the character. As participant 21 described,

*At first like I was oh why is this so slow, yes but I guess it makes sense if the character seems to be that way... and I guess she, she seems quite, I mean I don't know but the character seems quite tired... it gave a bit more of the feeling since she's on a walking stick.*

Some of the participants began to develop an interpretation of the meaning of the game based on this constrained interaction. As participant 1 explained,

*She's so sad. She doesn't have a purpose... [it's] a metaphor for the certainty of death. Oh, my gosh, she has no purpose. I don't know where she's going. I don't know how to make her, make the character accomplish anything. I don't know how to make her happy.*

Here, participant 1 is beginning to view the limited actions available to the player as having a direct connection to the experience of the character, an experience that is being conveyed through the interaction mechanics. Participant 5 also made a connection between the limited actions, the slow movement, and the situation of the character:

*Because the old lady was walking at a very slow pace, I guess it was trying to let you expect what it's going to be when you're old, when you have lost control of most things of your life, and all you can do is accept what you have. Because you can only walk in this place.*

Going beyond this, he suggested that “its quite artistic... the sounds, the graphics and the motions actually are quite consistent in conveying the message like making the game very different”. Here, participant 5’s attention is being drawn to the form of the work, and he is starting to see the game as something unfamiliar, which in turn encourages him to reflect on the content and see it in a new way.

### *Unfamiliar controls interfering with poetic experience*

Although participants began to interpret the game’s difficult walking interaction as a way to mirror the character’s experience, they were also distracted by the unfamiliarity of the controls and the difficulties they had interacting with the work.

One issue was a disconnect between participants’ expectations for how the camera and movement controls would work and how they actually worked. The camera was designed to stay focused on the church, rather than tracking the main character. This, combined with the design of the movement controls, which work relative to the character’s current facing, caused participants to have trouble controlling the character when she was facing any way other than directly away from the camera. As participant 4 explained, “it was very difficult because of the directions... when it's from our point of view, it's easier to control, but when it's like a mirror image, it's more difficult. Like the left and right are upside down.”

It wasn’t just the movement controls that caused problems for the participants. The controls for sitting on the bench were also challenging. To have the character sit on the bench, the player needs to turn the character so that she is positioned in front of the bench, ready to sit, and then leave the controls untouched for a moment. Many participants found this need to give up control, rather than actively move the character backwards to sit down, extremely hard to figure out. As participant 19 described: “[it was] a bit frustrating. Cause I didn't know how to sit. The instructions wasn't clear, it just said make her turn around. So, after I made her turn around, I had to experiment once again, to try and make her sit.”

Although the participants began to reflect upon the ways that the defamiliarization of the character’s walking created a feeling of what it was like to be the main character, they also tended to focus on the ways that their expectations for gameplay and interaction were not satisfied. This was exacerbated by the user interface issues and the lack of clear instructions. There is a tension here between the unfamiliar walking mechanic, which supports the emerging meaning of the game, and the additional user interface and gameplay issues that, rather than supporting this meaning, distracted players from it.

### **Thirty Flights of Loving: “It’s very confusing as to what’s going on.”**

In *Thirty Flights of Loving*, we observed a similar tension between the struggles the participants had understanding what was happening in the game, and their ability to reflect upon the poetic gameplay. Rather than specific difficulties with the user interface, here the difficulties were in terms of making sense of what they could do and what was happening in the game. While this did begin to create a sense of poetic gameplay, it also tended to distract participants from an appreciation of the poetic structures in the game.

### *Undermining of expectations for gameplay and character interaction*

As with *The Graveyard*, participants quickly formed expectations about the experience of the work. Participants generally felt that the game would involve some form of combat. This was encouraged by the presence of guns and bullets that can be picked up. As

participant 8 said, “When they showed the gun and you have to pick up the gun, I thought it’ll be like a first-person shooter game. But it wasn’t.” By placing objects in the environment and allowing the player to collect them, the game is setting up an expectation that there is a use for these objects. Participants expected that they could keep track of what they were collecting, presumably so that they could make use of these objects later in the game. As participant 10 observed, “I thought I would be able to shoot, with the bullets that I collected. Yeah, I thought there’ll be bad people in front here. But there’s no inventory?”

Having collected guns and ammunition in the early part of the game, most participants expected to be able to use these weapons later in the game. However, when an opportunity finally seemed to present itself, these expectations were also frustrated. Earlier, participant 17 had explained that “I thought when I pick up the gun I could do something with it. But then I realise in the end I have nothing, I don’t even have an inventory.” Later, when the opportunity came to engage in combat, he explained that “I tried clicking a bit but then after that I just gave up because it was auto.” In this scene, the player is simply moving the cart that Borges is sitting on, while Borges shoots without any player control.

In addition to collecting objects such as guns and bullets in expectation of combat, participants also came to expect dialogue and character interaction. The presence of several unnamed characters in the first room, and of the main character’s companions Anita and Borges in the second room, led participant 18 to observe that “At first I expected I was supposed to talk to the characters, because, I mean, that’s mainly how games are like. You see the characters you go talk to them first.” The expectation that the game would involve character interaction was quickly undermined: “There’s no form of interaction with any of the characters, which was what I thought was the basis of the game. It became more of interacting with objects.”

These expectations are being set up by the interaction provided, but also undermined by the absence of corresponding features such as an inventory, points or dialogue. This disruption of the expectations created by the first-person shooter format foregrounds the lack of combat and character interaction, defamiliarizing the gameplay experience for the player. This was something that participant 18 reflected on:

*In the game there are parts where you can control and you can't control. So like, the car [is] coming and you're like oh my god there's a car but you can't do anything about it. And then it's kind of like the unpredictability of life.*

Here, participant 18 is starting to see a connection between the unfamiliar interactions within the game and some possible broader meaning. As with *The Graveyard*, there is the beginning of a reflection on the form of the game, and some attempt to see how this form relates to the meaning of the game.

### ***Defamiliarization through the non-chronological presentation of time***

The non-chronological presentation of time, in the form of film-like jump cuts, was also something that most participants noticed and reflected upon. This was initially a source of confusion, as the participants did not expect to encounter this technique in a game. For example, the first scene is followed by an abrupt jump cut to a scene overlaid with the opening titles of the game. As participant 15 explained, “this part felt like the end of the

game.” These jump cuts were frequently described as confusing. As participant 8 said, “the part where it keeps jumping also is like ‘what? what is going on?’ ... it keeps jumping in the storyline or the gameplay, it’s very irritating, very confusing and irritating.”

In fact, participants 15 and 17 thought they were being “transported” during the cuts. As participant 17 described, “somehow, I just get transported to different areas... when I was being transported there were a few times that it didn’t make sense because I was going to somewhere, and then after that they put me in the next place.” Both participants 15 and 17 had difficulty reconciling the abrupt change of scene with their expectations of a direct correspondence between play time and fictional time (Juul 2005). The only way they could explain what was happening seemed to be in terms of the usual spatial operational logics encountered in a first-person shooter (Mateas and Wardrip-Fruin 2009).

Other participants, however, quickly began to make sense of these jump cuts as cuts in *time* as well as space. As participant 2 said, “Yeah, there was this sudden jump into a different time I think? It just feels a bit jarring? But eventually it becomes like the mechanic of the game.” Similarly, participant 18 attempted to explain these cuts in terms of film techniques: “I don’t know if they’re flashbacks or is it, when like pushing the friend around [it] went into different scenes.”

Some participants saw the use of the non-chronological presentation of time as an interesting technique. For these participants, this approach was considered part of the appeal of the game. As participant 2 explained:

*I think it's a quite interesting way of presenting the story, of the game? Yea, and it felt like, I don't know, like there were elements of interactivity, but it was like, not really a lot. You're more carried through the story, and more of like pushing buttons and stuff, you don't really do much. But it engages you to a certain level I think, to keep playing... when jumping through time you have that confusion of what is going on that I don't think you will get if you don't play through... So it's like an experiment? With how you can tell a story.*

In fact, participant 13 explicitly reflected on the similarity between this approach and the type of complex storytelling that occurs in “puzzle” films (Buckland 2009):

*After you finish the game you still kinda think ‘so what exactly is going on’ - it doesn't really answer your question... like Inception or something? you still think of the game like so from this time to this time what is going on, I was trying to piece the bits together... you know some movies are also like this. So, they don't really show you everything in continuous flow, so they break into a certain fragment then after that they'll do some flashback and then there are some retracing of step or something like this. Then you get to understand, at the end then you're like oh I see.*

Participant 2 suggested that this approach may encourage the player to feel something of what the character is experiencing, “cause this way it just shows the present and the past, they keep overlapping, showing there’s no order to it. So you feel like the character, you’re always looking to the past, every now and then.” For participants who recognized

that the technique was drawn from film, there was some reflection on the impact of the use of jump-cuts on their experience.

### *Struggling to make sense of what is happening*

Although they recognized the technique, some participants found the cuts confusing. As participant 8 said, “there’s a somewhat story to it - but you can’t really piece it together as a linear storyline... [it] keeps skipping here and there, it’s very confusing as to what’s going on”. The experience became even more confusing with the rapid series of jump-cuts at the end of the game, which lead to the final scene in the museum. The transition from a car chase to the museum was something that required considerable effort to understand. For example, at this point, participant 18 initially thought the game had ended: “I guess it was like the end of the game? Cause it said, ‘The End’, but then it could still continue playing, so I just started walking around again.”

As with *The Graveyard*, some participants began to engage in a certain amount of reflection and a move towards deeper meaning-making as the result of foregrounding and defamiliarization. However, other participants were more focused on struggling to make sense of the game at a surface level. Here the difficulty is not so much at the interface and gameplay level, as was the case in *The Graveyard*, as at the level of comprehension of “what is happening” in the story. There was a certain amount of effort required to get beyond these difficulties to see the poetic effects at work, an effort that not all participants were either willing or able to make.

### **Stanley Parable: “It was like, making fun of me, you know?”**

In *The Stanley Parable*, the tension surrounding the techniques being used to create poetic gameplay was somewhat different. Here, many of the participants did not find anything particularly unfamiliar about the game. Participants instead tended to see the game as a game, focusing on “saving Stanley” rather than struggling with either what they were supposed to do or what was happening in the game. Despite treating the game as a game, they did reflect on the foregrounding of the lack of agency, the unreliability of the narrator, and the breaking of the fourth wall, suggesting that they were experiencing some amount of poetic gameplay.

### *Expectations for agency*

Looking and behaving like other 3D first-person games, at least on the surface, *The Stanley Parable* tended to raise expectations that participants could move around the world, explore, and solve puzzles. Although these expectations were largely satisfied, the participants experienced some limitations in terms of interactivity and gameplay. As participant 3 observed,

*When it started, then I became very confused. Like why can't I do anything? Cause I kind of had this expectation of a little bit of those exploration adventure type of games, where you go around and you pick up things and solve puzzles.*

However, as she played, participant 3 started to understand the bounds of the system, as she “encountered different instances when I could interact with stuff... and when I couldn't. Then it seemed to me I can kind of interact with some things, but it's selected by the game.” These limitations in terms of gameplay and interactivity eventually created a feeling of a lack of agency.

This lack of agency became particularly clear during repeated play. When the game ends, it immediately reloads, placing the player back in the initial scene, in Stanley's office. As participant 14 describes, "either way you would just end up here... I felt a bit cheated... cause towards the end you reach like, he escaped right? but he still went back to the office, so that means the whole thing was like an illusion." Some participants began to see this as a deliberate strategy on the part of the game designer. As participant 3 reflected:

*It's quite evident that it's done on purpose, by the game designers... Because a lot of it fits in with the narration as well... Like no matter how much you go around the office touching everything, you're not going to change anything.*

The lack of agency was something that some participants identified as part of the "meaning" of the game. As participant 14 explained,

*Maybe it's a metaphor for how things are like in life. It's the negative part, the pressure on you is so great that you may make negative decisions, because you're so used to the routine already, so it's hard for you to break out of it, and to explore that uncertainty also.*

Participant 20 took this connection a step further, suggesting that the game was saying something not just about conformity in society, but about how players behave when playing games:

*Regardless of whichever route he takes because he's just following instructions either ways, so that's about I don't know, how humans behave, or something? Yeah about conformity as well, but not Stanley, but of the player, yeah that's me, like whether I conform to the stupid instructions or not. And then when I don't, I receive my punishment.*

This was also something that participant 3 reflected on in detail:

*[in mainstream games] I can interact with a lot of things, and it feels like I can interact with everything, because there's a level of consistency... by removing the consistency that makes you think that you are in control of everything... it breaks you away from that, and it helps you to realize that actually, a lot of these games, where you kind of go through a certain set of paths, even if you feel like you're creating the path in your own way, you're actually kind of on rails.*

Here we can see some reflection by the participants on the nature of the work and how the game's structure is making the familiar process of playing the game unfamiliar, creating poetic gameplay.

### ***The narrator as unreliable***

In addition to the repeating structure of the game and the associated lack of agency, the narrator was also a focus of the participants' comments. While the narrator was initially seen as a guide, eventually he was perceived as somewhat unreliable, and indeed as controlling or even "evil", by some participants.

Most participants initially saw the narrator as a guide, coming to depend on him for instructions. As participant 11 said, “I would say his role is quite important, in the sense that, at some points I really wanted him to speak. I didn't know what to do.” There was also an emerging sense that somehow the narrator was trying to influence the player. In fact, as participant 14 explained, this came to suggest that there is a “right” and “wrong” way to play the game:

*There are clear implications by which you make the right decisions he will praise you, if you don't he is very against you... if you don't then this is the result of your actions, which is also negative, so you have to follow the supposedly right path.*

In addition to being perceived as a controlling force, the narrator was also seen by some participants as unreliable. Although participant 3 initially saw the narrator as a guide,

*Eventually you also feel he's a bit unreliable... Especially at the corridor, the escape corridor that I went to? Then he started telling me you're going to meet a horrible gruesome death at the end. The door is still open, you can still walk back. Then I was like uhh. And then I didn't die for a quite long while, I was just like, he's lying to me, he wants me to stay and go into the mind-control place.*

As Participant 14 said, the narrator came to be seen as “too intrusive, every single thing he's dictating your decisions... he obviously knows the result of each choice, but yet he's still try[ing] to change your decision, and he's quite critical of your desired choice.”

The constant attempts to “control” the player on the part of the narrator eventually created a distrust for the narrator. As participant 11 says, “you don't know whether to trust what the person says. But the thing is when you're helpless I guess you would try any way out.” In fact, the narrator was seen by some participants as “evil”. As participant 6 states, “At first I thought the narrator was very kind, navigating me everywhere, but I realise at the end of the day, the narrator is the one that's the evil one I guess.” In fact, participant 11 saw the narrator's comments as a personal attack. As she described, “it was like, making fun of me, you know? ... I was so helpless that I just walked back in and I tried to off it [the bomb], but... after hearing what he said I just felt even more stupid.”

### ***Breaking the fourth wall***

The way that the narrator directly addresses the player, and the perception by the participants that he was somehow controlling their actions, can be seen as a form of breaking the fourth wall, an example of level transgression or metalepsis (Genette 1980) in which an element of the game world seemingly spills over into the player's world. Some participants noticed this, and did acknowledge that the fictional levels within the game were being violated. As participant 11 observed, “somehow, I feel like there's someone watching me... when I'm moving around or when I try to click on something and I fail, then the narrator will speak and then laugh at me.” For many of the participants, there was a sense that somehow the narrator was “watching” them, implicitly violating the separation between the fictional game world and the player's world.

Generally, their comments were limited to expressing how they found this “scary” or disturbing. However, participant 3 began to see this as a commentary on the form and structure of games and gameplay. As she reflected,

*It was quite unconventional? In the sense that you know usually narrators narrate things that happen in the past? Whereas this narrator right, he does things in past tense, but he's actually giving you directions. Like when you arrive at the pair of doors, when he said, oh Stanley took the one to the left... it seems that they are commenting on the idea behind the whole process that you just went through.*

Participant 3's response, which involves stepping back and reflecting on how the narrator's behaviour is a commentary on the form of the work itself, is a clear example of poetic gameplay as the result of the defamiliarization of the role of the narrator.

### ***Continuing to approach the game as a game***

However, some participants seemed more concerned about the in-game narrative, and whether they had managed to save Stanley. Unlike *The Graveyard* and *Thirty Flights of Loving*, participants were generally more engaged with the fictional world of the game, and actually wanted to "win" the game. As participant 11 described,

*The ending wasn't something that, it wasn't very satisfying... I feel like the story is still not finished. In a sense that I still don't know what happened to his co-workers, and what exactly happened, and how did he even end up in this whole situation.*

Participant 11 is engaging with *The Stanley Parable* as a game, honestly wanting to know why Stanley is in this difficult situation, and whether he can be saved.

A key difference between *The Stanley Parable* and the other two games that we have discussed is that *The Stanley Parable* can still be engaged with as a game, whereas participants who played *The Graveyard* and *Thirty Flights of Loving* were much more focused on their difficulties figuring out what they can and cannot do with the game. Although the defamiliarization of the narrator and the player's sense of agency in *The Stanley Parable* does lead to a certain amount of reflection and what can arguably be considered poetic gameplay, this defamiliarization does not get in the way of the experience of playing the game. In addition, unlike the other two games, the unfamiliar aspects of *The Stanley Parable* all work together to encourage reflection on the central theme of lack of agency. This allows players to engage with the game both as a game and at the level of poetic gameplay.

## **DISCUSSION**

In the games we examined in our study there were clear elements of poetic gameplay. However, in *The Graveyard* and *Thirty Flights of Loving*, the players also faced difficulty making sense of the games, either in terms of the user interface, the gameplay, or what was happening in the game. In contrast, in *The Stanley Parable*, players were able to experience poetic gameplay while continuing to play the game as a game. We will now discuss these observations, arguing that the key difference is that in *The Graveyard* and *Thirty Flights of Loving*, unlike in *The Stanley Parable*, the additional difficulties are not integrated into the meaning that emerges from playing the game. At the same time, we will suggest that, by making the process of interpretation almost *too* easy, a game such as *The Stanley Parable* can possibly be perceived as somewhat less poetic than *The Graveyard* and *Thirty Flights of Loving*.

## Difficulty Appreciating Poetic Gameplay

In *The Graveyard*, participants were expecting to be able to explore the graveyard, gather information, and interact with objects. They were also looking for some form of gameplay goals and objectives. Instead, they found that “nothing happens” in the game. The only form of interaction available is the constrained, slow walking of the main character, an old lady. While some participants reflected on this constrained movement and the lack of any other agency, seeing this as an attempt to capture something of what it feels like to be the main character, other participants didn’t “get it”, as they were more focused on the lack of gameplay and interaction, and the difficulties they had with the user interface. These issues tended to distract them from the way the foregrounding of the movement controls defamiliarized the character’s walking, creating a feeling of what it is like to be the main character.

Similarly, in *Thirty Flights of Loving*, participants had specific expectations, in this case to be able to engage in combat and take part in dialogue with non-player characters. At the same time, they were trying to make sense of the narrative of the game. However, they found that all they could do was move through the 3D space. Their attempts to understand the narrative were often confounded by the fact that it was conveyed in a non-chronological fashion. While some participants acknowledged the use of film-like techniques, and reflected on how this was similar to “puzzle films” such as *Inception* (Nolan 2010), others focused on figuring out what they were supposed to do and what was happening in the story. The difficulty they had deciphering the story distracted them from focusing on the ways that the game experience was being defamiliarized.

In both cases, while there were specific poetic devices being used in the design of the game to defamiliarize the player’s experience, there were also other factors that interfered with the player experience, factors that were not necessarily congruent with the poetic effect being sought. In the case of *The Graveyard*, players were distracted by the lack of gameplay and interaction, and by their problems with the user interface. In *Thirty Flights of Loving*, players were overwhelmed by the difficulty they had making sense of the non-chronological presentation of the story, a difficulty that distracted them from reflecting more deeply on the nature of the form of the game. In contrast, *The Stanley Parable* largely conformed to participants’ expectations. Although there were certain limits to the interaction and gameplay, there was also a clear goal to the game, and there were clear actions the player could take to move towards achieving that goal. Participants did reflect upon their limited agency, particularly after replaying the game, and they commented on the unusual and at times unreliable nature of the narrator and the way the narrator seemed to be trying to “control” the player. At the same time, participants continued to engage with the game as a game, without the hindrances to playability that were encountered by participants who played *The Graveyard* and *Thirty Flights of Loving*.

## What is the Appropriate Difficulty?

To understand how techniques such as defamiliarization can be used to create a poetic experience in games, it is worth examining what is happening in each of these situations. Both *The Graveyard* and *Thirty Flights of Loving* come across as difficult in certain seemingly inappropriate ways. In *The Graveyard*, the movement controls are difficult due to their lack of conformity with standard approaches, something that does not directly contribute to the poetic experience. Similarly, *Thirty Flights of Loving* presents a less-than-straightforward story using a puzzle-film-like complex narrative structure, making the story doubly difficult to understand. This interferes with the player’s reflection on the blurring of the boundaries between film and games.

It is important to note here that we are not suggesting that a game must be easy to engage with for there to be poetic gameplay. In fact, as Shklovsky argues, defamiliarization is intended to “make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception” (Shklovsky 1965, 12). The key observation is that, although some of the difficulty is in line with the poetic effects, other aspects of difficulty seem to be interfering with the player’s ability to appreciate those poetic effects. In literature, the process of reflecting on and making sense of defamiliarization, which Miall and Kuiken (1994) refer to as “refamiliarization”, requires that “the novelty of an unusual linguistic variation is defamiliarizing, defamiliarization evokes feelings, and feelings guide ‘refamiliarizing’ interpretative efforts” (392). In the context of poetic gameplay, we would argue that the unusual elements of gameplay, such as the limping of the character in *The Graveyard*, are Miall and Kuiken’s “unusual linguistic variation”. In addition, Miall and Kuiken suggest that “foregrounding, by creating complexity of various kinds, requires cognitive work on the part of the reader” (392). Thus, in *The Graveyard* and *Thirty Flights of Loving*, it can be argued that the additional difficulties faced by players, difficulties that do not directly relate to the process of interpretation evoked by the foregrounding, involve cognitive work that interferes with the work required to appreciate the poetic gameplay.

In *The Stanley Parable*, in contrast, the game can still be played as a game, and the unfamiliar nature of the narrator and the lack of agency both work together to create the meaning of the game. Here, the process of refamiliarization is directly supported by the various forms of defamiliarization, which all work together to allow for successful interpretation. This does, however, raise an interesting issue: is it possible that the process of interpretation in *The Stanley Parable* is *too* easy, and that as a result it may fail to adequately foreground the unfamiliar features that would otherwise lead to poetic gameplay? This can be seen in the fact that many of our participants continued to be focused on the game-level goals of saving Stanley, and the related narrative goals of figuring out what had happened to Stanley’s co-workers. Note that we are not suggesting that it is necessarily problematic for players to be able to simultaneously engage with the game as a game, and appreciate the poetic gameplay created by defamiliarization. It would be worth investigating whether there is a sense in which a game such as *The Stanley Parable*, by supporting relatively “easy” refamiliarization, is somehow “less poetic” than games such as *The Graveyard* and *Thirty Flights of Loving*.

These observations suggest that for a game to be effectively poetic, the way that the interaction and gameplay are made strange needs to be *unfamiliar in a meaningful way*. Defamiliarization is about slowing down perception to make things new again (Shklovsky 1965). For this to work, we argue that what is defamiliarized needs to directly relate to the aspects of the form and/or subject matter to which the artist is trying to draw attention. In *The Graveyard*, the slow walking is the main poetic technique, but this is obscured by the unusual relationship between the movement keys and the camera. In *Thirty Flights of Loving*, the use of temporal cuts gestures towards the similarities and differences between film and games, something that is obscured by the participants’ fundamental difficulties understanding what is going on. In *The Stanley Parable*, in contrast, the design of the narrator and the lack of agency highlight the way that game designers create an illusion of agency. The associated poetic techniques did not interfere with the game being played as a game, but instead directly supported the process of interpretation and reflection. There were also no additional difficulties faced by the players, difficulties that could have potentially interfered with their appreciation of the poetic gameplay.

## **Impact of Player Background on Poetic Gameplay**

One final point to acknowledge is that although the above discussion is largely focused on the impact of structural aspects of the game on poetic gameplay, the way that a player approaches the game and the background she brings to the play experience is also bound to influence the resulting experience. A detailed discussion of this is beyond the scope of the current study. However, it is worth noting that there were some correspondences between players' responses to the games and their previous play experience. For example, the three participants (1, 5 and 21) who reflected most strongly on the relationship between the constrained movement and the experience of being the old lady in *The Graveyard* all reported that they played games for at least 10 hours per week, whereas 3 of the remaining 4 participants who played *The Graveyard* reported less than 5 hours per week of gameplay. Similarly, although the three participants (3, 14 and 20) who suggested that the lack of agency in *The Stanley Parable* was a comment on the nature of games reported widely varying amounts of play experience, they all reported that they usually played "hardcore" games such as first-person shooters and computer-based role-playing games, whereas the other participants either played casual games or did not regularly play games. While neither of these observations suggests a clear connection between player background and perception of poetic gameplay, this is certainly an area that warrants further study.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this paper, we have presented the results of an empirical study of players' responses to three games that exhibit some form of poetic gameplay. In *The Graveyard*, the movement of the character was slowed down, creating a sense of what it's like to be the main character. In *Thirty Flights of Loving*, expectations for gameplay, character interaction, and the chronological flow of time were disrupted, blurring the boundaries between games and film. Finally, in *The Stanley Parable*, expectations of agency and an impartial, reliable narrator were undermined, together with a suggestion that the narrator was in some way controlling the player, thereby breaking the fourth wall. In *The Graveyard* and *Thirty Flights of Loving*, participants tended to focus on other disruptive aspects of the experience that were not directly related to the poetic gameplay. In *The Stanley Parable*, on the other hand, the poetic techniques did not interfere with the game as a game, allowing participants to continue to treat it as a traditional game while still commenting on the poetic elements. This suggests that care needs to be taken when designing poetic gameplay to create the appropriate emphasis on the poetic techniques that the artist wants to highlight, without introducing inappropriately unfamiliar elements that could distract from this focus.

These findings are a first step towards identifying actionable design knowledge to support artists and designers who want to create poetic gameplay. Future work will involve exploring ways to communicate these techniques to artists and designers in the form of design patterns. We also plan to conduct both close readings and further empirical studies of other games with the aim of compiling a more comprehensive taxonomy of techniques for poetic gameplay. This will provide a better theoretical and practical understanding of the ways that art games differ from mainstream games, and how the underlying techniques can be used to create specific forms of poetic gameplay.

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