Playful readings and deeper meanings

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Abstract

I explore the specific case of interactive artworks which are predominantly based on the use of speech, text or language (ergodic literature) and which utilise this materiality to deliver a profound or somewhat serious message about a specific topic. Through case studies, a technology survey and a practical project, I look at both the history and current and future state of language as material for play in interactive arts.

1.Purpose of the research and its importance to the field

There is nothing new in the creative use of speech, text and language in (interactive) arts, yet computers are becoming ever better at processing this type of material. This implies an imminent expansion in the possibilities of the materiality of language for artistic use. Language is a powerful medium with extensive capabilities for rhetoric. A digital, ergodic literature allows for interaction and play, and play can be quite engaging. The purpose of this research is to understand how artists can strike a balance between the construction of rhetoric and the creation of a space for play. It is an important area to study because technology trends will make language more accessible as a material.

2.Brief survey of background and related work

Ergodic literature implies that *"nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text"* (Aarseth 1997, 1). By contrast, nonergodic literature would require only *"eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of pages"* (ibid.). Or in the words of Katherine Hayles: *"less an object than an event, the digital text emerges as a dance between artificial and human intelligences,machine and natural languages, as these evolve together through time"* (Hayles 2006, 187).

Such an interactive text or ergodic literature could be understood as procedural media, media in which meaning and representations are created through processes. Furthermore,*"the logics that drive our [systems of procedural representation] make claims about who we are, how our world functions and what we want it to become"* (Bogost 2007, 340). Although the concept is native to videogames, Bogost notes that *"procedural rhetoric [is] a domain much broader than that of videogames, encompassing any medium - computational or not - that accomplishes its inscription via processes."* (Bogost 2007, 46).

But does media really "accomplish its inscription via processes" as Bogost claims it does? Sicart draws our attention to the fact that the notion of procedural rhetoric as a core design principle in the game design process implies that the players' behaviour in the game can be predicted or even contained by the rules of the game (Sicart 2011). Furthermore, such a proceduralist perspective would assume that *"the meaning of the game, and of play, evolves from the way the game has been created and not how it is played"* (ibid.). However, for Sicart *"game systems can only partially contain meaning, because meaning is created through an activity that is contextual, appropriative, creative, disruptive and deeply personal"* (Sicart 2011, 87).

While meaning is created through appropriative play, the *"designers role is to open the gates for play in an object and with a purpose"* (Sicart 2014, 90). Thus the designer is needed for creating spaces for play, yet the design needs to allow space for this play occur. Indeed, this discrepancy was already pointed out by Aarseth in 1997: *"I feel it necessary to focus on broad, highly visible issues, such as the conflicts between the desires of users and the ambitions of creators."* (Aarseth 1997, 183).

It is at this juicy divide that I position my task at hand. I want to build a deeper understanding of this interplay between design of rhetoric and play, specifically within the context of ergodic literature which deals with distinct issues, topics or ideologies.

3.Description of the proposed approach

I intend to answer my research question through a two-phase approach. In the first phase, I discuss relevant concepts and theories related to ergodic literature, conduct case studies of existing works and present a survey on current technologies related to speech, text and language. For the case studies, I choose pieces which grapple with a distinct issue or ideology. I try to understand how the experience has

been designed with the aim of placing a rhetoric based on procedural elements whilst also creating a space for play through the interactive elements. I try to understand whether the experience, as a whole, ends up being playful as well as successful in conveying the deeper message imbued in the piece.

In the second phase of my research, I apply the findings from the case study into my own work, attempting to create a work of ergodic literature which is at once both playful yet engages the user with its deeper meanings. Importantly, I utilise the possibilities afforded by the latest technologies to take a stab at creating a novel approach to playful reading.

4.Expected contributions

I survey this field to understand what has been done historically by artists, creating a selection of exemplary ergodic literature which can be categorised as communicating deeper meaning through a playful reading. A minor contribution is made as I look at what the technology landscape looks like today and in the near future from the perspective of speech, language and text and computers. I construct my own interactive piece which serves to exhibit the findings of the research process.

Finally, though the artistic project, this thesis contributes new knowledge about the experiences of migrant women.

5.Progress towards goals

I have completed one comprehensive case study which showed me that the approach of contrasting procedural rhetoric and the experience of play was of interest. I have conducted a preliminary technology survey which needs more depth. I need to distil my approach to the practical project and to be more specific about what technologies I want to play with. I need to understand exactly what aspects of migration (which is my topic of choice) I wish to problematise. I also need to conduct my first trial dialogue with a migrant woman in order to learn about the possibilities and limitations of dialogues as a means of collecting sentences for my project.

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