

Hermeneutics and Ludocriticism

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Abstract

This article introduces the concept of ludocriticism as a practice for evaluating videogame artifacts. The primary method of this practice is hermeneutics. If the reader chooses to enter the main article, she or he will find out how the concept of hermeneutics has been previously used in game and videogame research, and how it can also be used to explain and perhaps even cultivate the evaluation of videogame artifacts. If the reader has the endurance to reach the last section, she or he will discover one of the key outcomes of the discussion; the notion of hermeneutic play, which refers to a mode of playing videogames for the sake of understanding their ludo-generic identities.

Introduction

One of the most distinctive characteristics of the videogame as an aesthetic artifact is the manual, which safeguards its use: While the operability of the product remains an enigma, its understanding is ultimately secured. For paintings, films, and novels the situation is quite the opposite: While they operate *ipso facto*, their understanding poses a challenge. The difference becomes most visible in journalistic criticism. Whereas the journalistic criticism of most aesthetic products is governed by guiding interpretation (what they “mean”), the journalistic criticism of videogame products is governed by judging evaluation (are they “good”). This evaluative criticism of videogame products shall henceforth be referred to as *ludocriticism*: a practice that is not so much concerned of understanding the product, but rather of whether the product is worth understanding.

For the academic who normally holds reverse interests, the concept of “worth” provides a lucrative view to the videogame’s unseen mechanisms. A comprehension of how videogames

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become worth the player's time, money, and effort is an analytical donation to ludo-ontology, -phenomenology, and -aesthetics, to name but a few major schemes. A frequent (but not too frequent) emergence of attempts to explain and advance ludocritical values is hence not surprising (e.g. Mitchell & Clarke, 2003; Bogost, 2006; Lundgren, Bergström, & Björk, 2009). Instead of continuing the study of these values, the present article chooses to focus on the scarcity of ludocritical methods, nonetheless.

With reference to Espen Aarseth's (2003a) founding methodological review, the premise is that ludocriticism rests upon two fundamental dominators: empirical play and critical analysis. The idea is to take hermeneutics as a method for explaining and guiding this doubly active practice. Hermeneutics is thus not applied here solely as a pragmatical (Aarseth, 2003a), phenomenological (Sicart, 2009), or meaning-making (Arjoranta, 2011) instrument but as an analytical meta-ludic method for describing and fostering the ludocritical process.

The first section revisits the concept of hermeneutics in game and videogame research. The second section accommodates hermeneutics to ludocriticism. The third section provides ludocritical case studies of three videogames: *Trine* (Frozenbyte, 2009), *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots* (Kojima Productions, 2008), and *Deadline* (Infocom, 1982).

Hermeneutics and Game Studies

The roots of modern hermeneutics are often traced to Friedrich Schleiermacher (1838/1998), who already noted the multidimensionality of the term that had thus far been nothing but a loose referent for activities related to communication:

Hermeneutics as the art of understanding does not yet exist in a general manner, there are instead only several forms of specific hermeneutics ... a) the art of presenting one's thoughts correctly, b) the art of communicating someone else's utterance to a third person, c) the art of understanding another person's utterance correctly. The scientific concept refers to the third of these as the mediator between the first and the second. (p. 5)

Schleiermacher's last, "scientifically" branded concept of actively processing information with the aim to understand an underlying "meaning" is what has today been historicized as *classical hermeneutics*. It is an archeology of truth; a search for the "correct" interpretation of texts, spoken words, and artworks that in its highest form culminates into "an understanding of the utterer better than he understands himself" (266). Because such understanding does not emerge as an instant but by gradual interpretive recursion, the process is essentially circular: Details of the object are interpreted in terms of the whole, and the whole object is interpreted in terms of its details.

During the 20th century thinkers like Martin Heidegger (1962) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989) liberated the hermeneutic method from classical object-oriented interpretation and began to apply it to their universal philosophical theories. These applications, not least phe-

nomenological and ontological, lead to the birth of *philosophical hermeneutics* which

takes as its task the opening up of the hermeneutical dimension in its full scope, showing its fundamental significance for our entire understanding of the world and thus for all the various forms in which this understanding manifests itself: from interhuman communication to manipulation of society; from personal experience by the individual in society to the way in which he encounters society, and from the tradition as it is built of religion and law, art and philosophy, to the revolutionary consciousness that unhinges the tradition through emancipatory reflection. (Gadamer, 1976, p. 18)

In the context of videogame research, then, one can roughly distinguish between two hermeneutics: The classical hermeneutic analysis of the videogame as a textual artifact, and the philosophical hermeneutic analysis of videogaming as a phenomenological process. While the above distinction is not utterly unproblematic, it provides some basic tools for dealing with ludo-hermeneutic perplexities.

Two Hermeneutics

In *The Video Game Theory Reader 2* Dominic Arsenault and Bernard Perron (2009) attach hermeneutics to that part of gameplay in which the player interprets “the ramifications and meanings of the plot” (p. 128). Taking *Marvel Ultimate Alliance* (Raven Software, 2006) as an example, they recognized the “classic metaphor of the foreign, evil dictator wishing to rule the world” (p. 123). On the later pages of the same book, Frans Mäyrä (2009) talks about hermeneutics as the line of thinking that enabled one to understand that “games are inherently and principally events and processes,” that is to say, “game is inseparable from its playing” (p. 317). Here the difference between classical and philosophical application is palpable: whereas Arsenault and Perron talk about understanding the videogame as a textual artifact, Mäyrä talks about understanding videogaming as a phenomenological process.

Perhaps the first videogame critic to make a clear hermeneutically termed cut between textual interpretation and the phenomenology of videogaming is Steven Poole (2007), who observed how in films the viewer is required to

reconstruct stories that have been fragmented through cuts and flashbacks, or to deduce the thought processes of a character by reading an actor’s face. This process is hermeneutic: it is about interpretation. But the imagination that videogames require of the player is a different process: it is pragmatic. (p. 319–320)

Let it be stressed that Poole does not claim that his “hermeneutic” and “pragmatic” modes are mutually exclusive: In videogame play both are in use. A similar conclusion can be read from Julian Kücklich’s (2002) distinction between “hermeneutic” and “aesthetic” interaction:

From the perspective of the player, his or her actions make sense as a direct response to the fictional world of the game. This is what I call the mode of aesthetic interaction. From the perspective of the observer, the player's individual interactions with the game are only meaningful as a textual strategy, alternatingly in accord with and directed against another textual strategy of the game. This is what I call the mode of hermeneutic interaction. (p. 107)

To sum, for both Poole and Kücklich, "hermeneutics" is a more or less accurate application of the classic textual interpretation. Both also recognize that videogame play is not governed by this interpretive mode alone, but also by another, "performatively" motivated interpretation.

The problem of the above views is of course that they reduce hermeneutics into its classical form and disregard the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics. The performative mode of interpretation that they correctly see as the governing one in videogaming might also be hermeneutic by nature, albeit in a rather different, philosophical way. Not long after Poole's (2007) and Kücklich's (2002) contributions this reality was realized by Aarseth (2003a), as he called for "a real-time hermeneutics" that "requires analysis practiced as performance, with direct feedback from the system" (p. 5).

Aarseth's (2003a) performance model can be considered as the phenomenological basis on which more recent ludo-hermeneutic applications build on. One such instance is Miguel Sicart's (2009) study of videogame ethics that applies hermeneutics to phenomena "in which a player interprets the game situation and her role in that situation using those values that are a part of her gamer culture, of her gaming community, and of her real-life presence" (p. 101–102). In Sicart's theory the performative-interpretive process becomes an ontology that makes it possible for ethical videogames and players to exist in the first place.

Furthermore, a rather different performative mode of hermeneutics has been suggested by Jonne Arjoranta (2011) who sticks with the classical premise of videogames as texts that "create and transmit meaning to their players" (p. 1). Yet in contrast to Poole (2007) and Kücklich (2002), his hermeneutically pursued "meaning" does not consist simply of thematic elements but of the performative activity itself: "Better interpretations lead to better gaming, and so players can know if they are misunderstanding by failing to succeed in their goals" (p. 12).

Aarseth's (2003a), Sicart's (2009), and Arjoranta's (2011) contributions can be considered ludo-analytical models that rely more on philosophical than classical hermeneutics. They do not apply hermeneutics as a textual strategy for unearthing extra-ludic messages but as a process that gives birth and facilitates comprehending the activity itself. While the importance of theorizing this performative hermeneutic is unquestionable, it is obvious that a general hermeneutic theory of the videogame cannot be founded on it alone. As David Ciccoricco (2010) and many others have convincingly shown, even those videogames that are

commonly considered “pure action” may require consultation of the classical hermeneutic tradition to be “understood to the full” (1).

Double Hermeneutics

As a solution to this situation Veli-Matti Karhulahti (2012a) has suggested what he calls a “double hermeneutic” method for videogame interpretation. His idea is to recognize videogaming as an activity during which players work with both classical and philosophical hermeneutics. Whereas the former “aesthetic” interpretation “aims at generating aesthetic understanding of game elements,” the latter “ludic” interpretation “aims at generating ludic understanding of game elements” (p. 20). In this rubric the videogame is thus simultaneously an aesthetic-textual object and a ludo-performative process, its *ad hoc* appearance depending on which interpretive mode the player is using.

The “double hermeneutic” label of Karhulahti’s method does not, however, derive solely from its dual modality but also from the particular two-way affectivity of ludic interpretation. A ludic interpretation is not only an object-oriented mental configuration but also a potential object-altering material configuration. The fact that ludic interpretations often materialize as physical performance gives them a specific “inducing” instrumental character as they

affect not only the interpreter’s understanding but the interpreted as well [...] the act of playing a videogame is a multilayered double hermeneutic process in which the player’s interpretations repeatedly shape both the player and the game. (p. 20–21)

Accordingly, it appears that Karhulahti’s “double hermeneutic” actually refers to two distinct “doubles” of videogame interpretation: the doublet of classical and philosophical hermeneutics and the doublet of the ludo-interpretive affect.

At this point it is perhaps good to take a look at the more recent work in field of interpretation, namely at the work of Wolfgang Iser (2003) who reminded his readers that

interpretation is no longer to be identified with hermeneutics, as it has been in the past. Instead, hermeneutics is just a prominent genre dealing basically with texts that are opened up for understanding. But when it comes to interpreting something that is neither textual nor scripted, such as culture, entropy, or even the incommensurable, the procedures of interpretation are bound to change. (p. ix)

One of Iser’s (2003) chief alternative methods of interpretation is *cybernetics* (2), which overlaps significantly with the previously discussed “pragmatic,” “performative,” and “ludic” interpretative modes. What defines cybernetic interpretation is not the digging up of “meaning,” but a control-driven (material and/or mental) configuration of dynamic phenomena that lack stability. Consequently, while hermeneutics can be qualified by an excavatory ten-

dency,

cybernetics, operating in recursive loops, is a means of controlling entropy, elucidating the individual self-maintenance of autonomous systems, and configuring the structural coupling of systems. Its focus is on phenomena that emerge from coping with contingency, from the reciprocal “perturbation” of systems, and from their being bracketed together. Recursivity operates either by an input/output relationship, when control is to be achieved, or by processing noise, randomness, and perturbation, when the self-organization of systems is to be conceived. (p. 8–9)

Before trying to harness cybernetics in ludic use, the “incommensurable,” “contingent,” or “emergent” status of videogames must be probed. As to multiplayer videogaming in the lines of *Counter-Strike* (Valve, 2000) and *FIFA14* (EA Canada, 2013) the answer is certainly positive: There is nothing more “emergent” than a living opponent. Yet, when it comes to single-player activities, the situation is not so clear: While there are arguably “emergent” components in *Tetris* (Pajitnov, 1984) and *Grand Theft Auto* (DMA Design, 1997), finding such components from videogames like *Dragon’s Lair* (Advanced Microcomputer Systems, 1983) that rely mainly on fixed quick-time-events and videogames like *The Curse of Monkey Island* (LucasArts, 1997) that rely mainly on fixed puzzle structures seems to be difficult. Although the cybernetic mode of interpretation can be useful in some videogaming situations, it appears not to be applicable to videogaming as a whole.

If “non-emergent” or *static* ludo-structures conceal an hermeneutically attainable “meaning” or “understanding” in a sense that a fixed solution always resolves the situation without uncertainty or indeterminate consequences (as in puzzles), “emergent” or *dynamic* ludo-structures lack “meaning” or “understanding” in a sense that the cybernetically interpreting player can try to control them (materially and/or mentally) but never reaches her or his target due to the open-endedness of the object (as in strategic challenges) (Karhulahti, 2013). Regardless of this contrast, as long as both interpretive modes aim at ludic success, it appears coherent to discuss them commonly in terms of ludic understanding-generation.

To wrap-up, the idea that players switch between *ludic interpretation* which aims at generating play-contributing understanding of perceived components, and *extra-ludic interpretation* which aims at generating play-extraneous (3) understanding of perceived components, is still valid. These modes should not, however, be identified with hermeneutics as a matter of course, as they might also be discussed in other terms, such as cybernetics. Further analysis of these interpretive modes is not a present concern. The next section will apply hermeneutics to ludocriticism (4).

Hermeneutics and Ludocriticism

A ludocritical approach to videogaming leads to a situation similar to what Dennis Diderot (1883) once coined “the paradox of acting”:

If he is himself while he is playing, how is he to stop being himself? (8)

In the same way as Diderot's actor is supposed to lose himself to the role if he is to do his work in the most professional manner, is the ludocritic supposed to "immerse" totally in her or his ludo-interpretive play to experience the product as it operates in the hands of *hoi polloi*? (5)

The answer is obviously negative, as not even the most "immersed" players interpret with ludic motivations alone (for a comprehensive problematization of "immersed," see Calleja, 2011). While ludic interpretation is a necessity for the videogaming process to transpire, players do interpret videogames and their components with play-extraneous interest as well. The videogame and its components are therefore objects of extra-ludic analysis also for the every player. Put another way, extra-ludic interpretation—be it aesthetical, ethical, or technical—is a natural part of videogaming.

To recall a remark of the previous section, both ludic and extra-ludic generation of understanding that players pursue can, but need not, be hermeneutic. This is because interpreted videogame components need not be stable units of text (*static textons*) but they may also be more and less unpredictably behaving and surfacing dynamic products of the algorithm (*dynamic textons*); or even better, completely erratic extra-algorithmic entities that are controlled by other players or agents. Let that last unit be called a *texzon* (Greek *zo-*, "living being"; note the Latin origins of "text"). In practical terms, whereas static textons might be most efficiently understood via hermeneutic interpretation, dynamic textons and texzons might be most efficiently understood via cybernetic interpretation. The dilemma here is of course that in videogames the textonomic nature of the interpreted components are rarely known at the moment of play (6).

For instance, as players encounter a fellow character for the first time in *Journey* (Thatgamecompany, 2012), they might not know whether it is a pattern-repeating static entity that every player meets, or a dynamic entity with random algorithmic behavior, or perhaps another individual player; a texzon whose behavior is limited but not controlled by the product. Be the last case true, classical hermeneutics (which departs from the premise that the object of interpretation conceals a meaning) is virtually useless since the logic of the perceived motion is not that of a "text" even in the broad algorithmic sense, but that of an organic being. Uncovering such logic is hardly achievable by means of the hermeneutic circle but requires recursive cybernetic looping that responds to the continuous renewal of the entity's impulsive dynamic state.

Lucky as players are, the textonomic statuses of videogame components are normally implied in the paratextual or in-game instructions; or if not, disclosed along play. This means that a devoted player eventually learns the use of appropriate interpretive strategies. For a devoted ludocritic, likewise, learning to play the videogame is unconditional, but not the undertaking. What delineates the ludocritic's work is not so much the understanding of the

videogame, but the estimation of whether the videogame is worth understanding.

To be able to estimate the “worth” of a videogame, it is not enough for ludocritics to switch between ludic and extra-ludic interpretation as players. Because the operability of the product gets defined firstly by their experiences as players, they also need to interpret “themselves at play;” or as Olli Leino (2010) put it more smoothly, the “game as played.” This metaphorical third-person observation is henceforth referred to as *meta-ludic* interpretation.

Meta-ludic interpretation differs from ludic and extra-ludic interpretation firstly by the interpreter’s position: Whereas the latter two are made as a player, the former is made as a critic. The second point of difference is the interpreted object: whereas ludic and extra-ludic interpretation target the components of the videogame, meta-ludic interpretation target the videogame as a singular aesthetic artifact. This singular but multimodal “text” can in no conditions be sensibly considered “incommensurable,” “contingent,” or “emergent,” for it is a fixed manmade creation by definition. For this reason the primary method for interpreting it must be hermeneutic rather than cybernetic (7).

From Meaning to Knowledge

- They write the script with one part missing. It’s a new idea. The home-maker, that’s me, is the missing part. When it comes time for the missing lines, they all look at me out of the three walls and I say the lines.

– What’s the play about?

– I just told you.

(Bradbury, 1953)

Meta-ludic interpretation is exercised primarily on two regimes. On the *thematic* regime the critic interprets the “meaning” of the videogame. A fine example is Ian Bogost’s (2007) interpretation of *Tooth Protectors* (DSD, 1983) as “a game about the responsibility of oral hygiene” (p. 202). On the *evaluative* regime the critic interprets the operability of the videogame. Another fine example is Bogost’s (2007) interpretation of *Chase the Chuck Wagon* (TMQ, 1983) as a “rather forgettable, neither entertaining nor of particular interest as an early example of videogame advertisement” (p. 203).

The first thing of notice is that meta-ludic interpretation is not the exclusive privilege of authorized ludocritics. Drawing on George Dickie’s (1969) renowned aesthetic theory, the critic of any cultural product “differs from other percipients only in the motives and intentions and not in the way he attends” (p. 39). There is no reason to deny meta-ludic interpretation from any player.

The second thing of notice is that on both meta-ludic regimes the object of interpretation is the videogame as a stable artifact (as played) and not a process of “emergence.” Despite the fact that Bogost’s (2007) interpretations derive from processual videogaming experiences that most likely include many “emergent” events, entities, and their cybernetic interpreta-

tions, the final object of interpretation has taken the form of a stable videogame artifact.

Although there seems to be no binding reason for ludocritics to entirely disregard the thematic regime, a reality is that they do (see Zagal & Bruckman 2008). This is because, as in Bradbury's above-cited play, the "about" of videogames is often more easily done than said. This is also the reason for the present article to discuss ludocriticism as an evaluative practice in contrast to general videogame criticism in which evaluation is typically suppressed by the intrinsic value of interpretation (cf. Konzack, 2002; Consalvo & Dutton, 2006; Malliet, 2007; Gursoy, 2013). The contribution of hermeneutics to the ludocritical practice thus differs somewhat radically from its classical role as a "meaning-seeking" endeavor. With an awareness of the coming collateral damage, hereinafter the majority of thematic concerns are intentionally left aside.

An understanding of videogames was earlier stated as a matter of course. The point of reference for that slightly hyperbolic statement was *ludic understanding*, the faculty of knowing or learning how to play (to know how to play does not automatically result in winning). The object of this ludic understanding was the videogame component as part of the phenomenological videogaming process (handled by means of ludic interpretation). Furthermore, it was remarked that the same videogame components could be understood also in *thematic* or other terms with extra-ludic potential (handled by means of extra-ludic interpretation). What follows next is a formulation of *generic understanding* that determines the ludic identity of the videogame as played. Here the object of understanding is no longer the videogame component but the videogame artifact.

Because the ludic identities of videogames are crucial for their evaluation, generic understandings are a considerable ludocritical factor. As the roots of generic understanding go way back to pre-videogame criticism, let it be described via Schleiermacher's (1838/1998) general critical principles. Accordingly, the critic

must include the work in a specific genre, attribute a specific purpose to it, and then the question is: to what extent does it achieve its purpose, and is it appropriate to its genre? (p. 161)

Even though Schleiermacher (1838/1998) theorized criticism as a disparate practice from hermeneutics, it is evident that attaining a generic understanding of a work is a result of hermeneutic processing. This fact was later given special highlight by theorists of philosophical hermeneutics; not least Gadamer (1989), for whom the "working out the hermeneutical situation means acquiring the right horizon of inquiry for the questions evoked by the encounter with tradition" (p. 302).

A ludocritic can match Gadamer's (1989) "right horizon" (cf. "fusion of horizons") with the generic understanding of the videogame, that is, with the understanding of the regulated methods of interpretation that allow the videogame to be played and criticized in the context of its cultured conventions. It is not insignificant to emphasize that the range of these cul-

tured conventions goes far beyond the common notion of “videogame genres.”

Generic videogame understanding comes close to what Karhulahti (2012a) has previously discussed as videogame-specific “double hermeneutic circles”

into which players must come in the “right way” to experience games according to their designs. This means possessing both skills that correlate with challenges and knowledge that supports those skills and helps understand the language of the game in general. (p. 21)

Notwithstanding the visible overlap, a major difference lies between generic understanding of videogames and their “double hermeneutic circles.” This difference is found in Karhulahti’s “skills” that correlate with the challenges of the videogame in question. Because videogames are rarely mere interpretive products but often demand nontrivial physical performance too, even the most comprehensive generic understanding is not always a certificate of successful performance. In the “double hermeneutic circle,” then, generic understanding can perhaps be equated with its play-supporting “knowledge;” an understanding of cultured videogame-specific conventions.

A generic understanding of a videogame (the “right horizon” for playing it) does not, to repeat, assure successful performance. While a cultivated generic understanding of a videogame most likely empowers its player’s performance, more importantly it enables the player to locate the videogame, as played, in a culture-historical context; and thereby, to construct refined meta-ludic interpretations of it. The hermeneutic generation of generic understanding makes refined ludocritical judgments possible.

From Completion to Depletion

How are we to assess or evaluate this mode of spectator engagement: sensuously rich and dynamic in terms of perceptual activity, yet semantically compromised and relatively quiescent in terms of interpretative activity?
Andrew Darley, *Visual Digital Culture* (2000)

As should be evident by now, the difference between the ludocritical practice and the majority of aesthetic criticism is quite drastic. One way to explain this is the logics of consumption: If readers are dignified by the number of books they read and filmgoers by the number of films they watch, what makes players is the amount of hours they play. In Markku Eskelinen’s (2012) more strict wording,

In literature, theatre and film everything matters or is conventionally supposed to matter equally—if you’ve seen 90% of the presentation that’s not enough ... the player [in contrast] either can’t or doesn’t have to encounter every possible combinatory event (p. 278)

The videogame can be considered a genuine temporal cultural artifact: The more there is

to enjoy, the better the product. While players do not usually have to exhaust videogames to enjoy them, if the product is one of quality they will (or at least are tempted to do so). Accordingly, it would not be totally inadequate to declare length as a positive criterion in ludocriticism; contra film criticism, for instance, in which you can hardly find judgments like “at least it was long.” If *intensity of experience* is the first ludocritical criterion, *length of experience* is the second ludocritical criterion. By additionally taking into consideration the fact that *price* is a regular factor in videogame reviews, the framework in which the ludocritical process takes place could be described happily in mathematical terms:

intensity multiplied by length divided by price (8)

The serious purpose of the less-serious formula is to signpost the specific position of the videogame as a cultural product. Keeping in mind that the videogame is a polygonal phenomenon to the most extreme degree, a careful oversimplification will not do harm: for the consumer the worth of a videogame is defined by the duration of its *depletion*.

While videogames are by no means the only cultural products with “depletion charge” (see Nehamas 2007), the process of ludic depletion is quite different from the hermeneutic depletion that dominates Western consumption of aesthetics. As Ragnhild Tronstad (2003) correctly observes, a videogame

may be experienced as exhausted independently of any “fusion of horizons”—that is, independent of the player’s experience of having reached a (more or less complete) understanding of the text. (p. 237)

What Tronstad means by “understanding” is of course the word in its meta-ludic sense. A player may be able to “complete” a videogame without constructing coherent thematic or evaluative interpretations of it. Following this remark, one might even claim, with Andrew Darley (2000, p. 199), that the videogame differs from the unendingly interpretable “real texts” in the exact reality that it *is* depletable. Be it correct or not, the fact still remains that unlike the orthodox art critic who works for “educating his readers” (Berleant, 1970, p. 136) and making “judgments of existence” (Dufrenne, 1973, p. 62), the ludocritic seeks knowledge of her or his artifact rather with an eye of a jeweler, on quality and quantity.

The next and final section takes a ludocritical look at three videogames as played: *Trine*, *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots*, and *Deadline*. Because the focus of this article is on the method rather than on the values investigated by it, the function of that analysis is not to find out what makes these videogames “enjoyable” and how that “enjoyment” gets depleted, but to concretize the ludocritical process. The selection shows how even those videogames that can be examined in same taxonomical classes—in this case “single-player storygames”—may turn out to require very different ludocritical treatment.

Three Case Studies

As a ludocritic begins to work on a videogame, her or his prime enterprise is to evaluate whether the videogame artifact is worth temporal and monetary sacrifices; and if yes, to what intensity and extent in relation to the others of its kind. To succeed in the enterprise the ludocritic must construct a fitting generic identity for the videogame in question. This is a hermeneutic process that runs throughout her or his play sessions: The generic understanding of the videogame refines along with the ludocritic's observations of it.

Ludocritical Process (*Trine* [Frozenbyte, 2009])

Trine begins with an introduction in which a narrator tells of a dead king and his ruined empire attacked by an undead army. After a few minutes the ludocritic is in control of an avatar to save the kingdom. This moment reveals *Trine* as what the popular discourse calls a "side-scrolling platformer;" a videogame in which virtual events take place in a continuous two-dimensional space. Soon the ludocritic makes note of a significant feature: there is no single avatar but three, each owning special skills that allow different actions. The avatars can be changed on the fly, which turns out to be crucial in the challenges that emphasize kinesthetic performance.

As the ludocritic progresses, occasional puzzles occur too. In the mid-way a puzzle halts the progress for a full ten minutes, which makes the ludocritic refine the gameplay part of her or his generic understanding of *Trine* from a straightforward action-based model into a hybrid puzzle-action one. The ludocritic also notes how after each 20-minute level the narrator returns with a few storytelling sentences. In this manner the ludocritic keeps on playing and observing until all fifteen levels are completed.

Post hoc, the ludocritic continues to shape her or his evaluative meta-ludic interpretations. As a specific type of "platformer," *Trine* needs to be evaluated first and foremost in the light of its puzzle-action gameplay. While *Trine* does produce a fantasy story in the process, the ludocritic interprets it primarily as a reinforcing element of the videogame's fantastic mood. The visual side of this mood is seen through generic requirements as well: in a videogame of this sort the number of details is secondary as the looks are principally to serve paced kinesthetic performance.

These and other observations eventually lead the ludocritic to situate *Trine* in the "tradition of puzzle-action platformers" next to videogames like *Castlevania II: Simon's Quest* (Konami, 1987) and *Probotector* (Konami, 1988). The words "tradition," "puzzle-action," and "platformer" are unimportant here, as they merely represent the ludocritic's multipart generic understanding of the videogame in question. They are components of the ludocritic's foreknowledge, which structures the horizon from which all of her or his interpretations are made. Note how interpreting and playing *Trine* restructures this horizon.

In order to evaluate *Trine's* operability in the contemporary context, the ludocritic compares

it to videogames like *Limbo* (Playdead, 2010) and *Bastion* (Supergiant Games, 2011). Such comparison was not available at the time when *Trine* came out in 2009: the horizon of a contemporary ludocritic can thus be assumed to differ from those of earlier ludocritics, perhaps most markedly because of the proliferation of indie videogames that have had a significant effect on the “tradition of platformers.” This is a result of temporal distance, which shall be given a more detailed examination in the last subsection.

Hermeneutic Play (*Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots* [Kojima Productions, 2008])

In this subsection the attention is directed to the aspects that make *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots* (*MGS4*) a rather different videogame from *Trine* in terms of ludocritical handling.

First some basics: *MGS4* is what the popular discourse recognizes as a “stealth-action” videogame; a videogame that provides the player with the tactical option to avoid the most hectic action by means of careful movement. Its challenge thus varies depending on the style in which the player chooses the play. Regardless of the chosen style the player’s success depends also heavily on strategic factors, for instance when the avatar’s camouflage is configured for stealth missions. Not unlike *Trine*, *MGS4* is driven by story components that emerge mostly via prescribed narrative scenes between its more ludically intensive segments.

Two major elements make *MGS4* a demanding case for the ludocritic. The first one derives from the tactical options that entail very dissimilar ludic engagement: a player who employs stealth progresses the videogame in an entirely different dimension than a player who employs direct aggression. Whereas “platformers” like *Trine* and *Bastion* do offer tactical options too, in *MGS4* players who decide to avoid combat are literally forced to walk separate paths from those of aggressive players. Hence, for a ludocritic whose work is to evaluate the artifact as a whole and not only parts of it, it is not enough to evaluate the videogame as played: The videogame needs to be evaluated as *hermeneutically played*, that is, played so as to understand the generic identity of the videogame as a single artifact.

As to exploring the operability of its alternative tactics, *MGS4* is obviously not the most laborious possible case. In comparison to roleplaying games like *The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall* (Bethesda Softworks, 1996) and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (BioWare, 2003), the ludocritic of *MGS4* gets off light: There are no side quests or alternative endings but all missions and their outcomes are fixed, more or less. This is true also when it comes to gameplay architecture, as in *MGS4* players are given navigational freedom solely on the tactical domain.

The fixity or “linearity” of *MGS4* in contrast to the RPG titles affects not only its ludic but narrative structure as well. This is an important part of *MGS4*: Massive narrative chunks are delivered in a prescribed order, save some of the dialogue that can be triggered manually via the avatar’s codec equipment. Numerically speaking, a half of the 16-20 hours it takes to

complete *MGS4* consists of cutscenes, the longest sequence being no less than 71 minutes (full length of a feature film). In view of the above numbers one can safely conclude that the generic identity of *MGS4* cannot be constructed merely according to its ludic properties.

A ludocritical evaluation of *MGS4* must take into consideration that the artifact is a ludo-narrative hybrid of the highest degree, a product that operates evenly on two radically diverse modes of engagement. Nonetheless, its narrative content is not absolutely dominant: unlike in *To the Moon* (Freebird Games, 2011) or *Beyond Two Souls* (Quantic Dream, 2013) the player of *MGS4* is still overcoming heavy obstacles half of its length. What makes the narrative content of *MGS4* ludically awkward is the way in which it is delivered: Excluding a few quick-time-events and switchable viewpoints, the cutscenes are static so that the player's agency is eliminated for their duration. Whereas in the majority of narratively dominated videogames the player still has a sensation of control by advancing dialogue via mouse clicks, in *MGS4* the player is to only watch. In the same way as the ludocritic of *To the Moon* becomes simultaneously a literary critic, the ludocritic of *MGS4* becomes simultaneously a film critic.

Contextualizing Hermeneutic Play (*Deadline* [Infocom, 1982])

In his seminal contribution to the generic understanding of videogames, Richard Ziegfeld (1989) correctly observed how ludocritics

must explore several paths through a work, seeking at some point routes that others are likely to choose ... [they] must not settle for a single "reading" when they are studying a "work" that offers several paths. (p. 365)

With regard to the modern ludocritic, this hermeneutic undertaking must not, however, be limited to "path" exploration. Like the previous subsection showed, identifying the generic identity of a videogame also entails exploring the variety and operability of its ludic and non-ludic modes of engagement. The activity was termed *hermeneutic play*: a play activity that pursues an understanding of the videogame artifact in terms of its generic identity.

The present and final subsection makes note of one more aspect in the ludocritical process that may or may not be considered part of the hermeneutic play activity itself: spatiotemporal contextualization. What is meant here by spatiotemporal contextualization is the acknowledgment of the cultural conditions in which the videogame emerges or has emerged (cf. Genvo, 2014). The academically exhausted example used for illustrating this aspect is *Deadline* (9).

Deadline is what the popular discourse recognizes as a "text adventure;" a puzzle-heavy videogame the output of which relies solely on text. Since in *Deadline* videogame states do not alter without the player's input, its challenges are purely cerebral by nature. While this videogame is once again driven by scripted narration, it is not fitting to talk about distinct narrative scenes because almost every output in *Deadline* is narrational to some degree.

The present function of *Deadline* as a concluding example is temporal distance: It was released in 1982. Before analyzing this function, it is fitting to outline the role of temporal distance in Gadamer's (1989) hermeneutics. Gadamer does not consider "original" historical conditions as the optimal interpretive horizon: "Every age has to understand a transmitted text in its own way" (p. 296). In the present discussion this means that the optimal conditions for playing and interpreting *Deadline* did not take place in 1982, for every age redefines the optimal conditions. Still, knowledge of the "original" conditions may and often does have an important role in the generic understanding of videogames, and this is what the below lines try to illustrate.

Like in most of its era's videogames, the difficulty level of *Deadline* is high. Reaching the final reply requires the player to solve several intricate puzzles within a limited number of moves. Since a wrong move easily produces an unwinnable state, the player will have to restart all over again dozens of times. By today's standards the interface is not a user-friendly one either: the player needs to experiment with the parser for hours in order to learn it. These features have made scholars (see Aarseth, 1997; Sloane, 2000; Montfort, 2003) analyze the play of *Deadline* in terms of frustrating autism; as an uncanny attempt to communicate with a disordered system.

The frustrating gameplay of *Deadline* can be explained partly by acknowledging the historical conditions in which it emerged: Many of the era's "text adventures" were intentionally designed to be so difficult that the player could not solve them without external aid. While this was mostly due to the marketing strategies that involved selling hint books (see Appleby & Harris, 1987; Sheff 1993), it was also a significant constituent of the time's videogaming culture: Hints and solutions were sent to and read in computer magazines (see Consalvo, 2007; Kirkpatrick, 2012). These historical conditions signal the phenomenological complexity of *Deadline* as played: at the time of release its frustrating aporias were balanced by the epiphanies of paratextual discoveries. Hence, in order to truly understand the generic identity of *Deadline*, the ludocritic must recognize its position in time.

As per Gadamer, the bridging of temporal distance does not refer to an exact imitation of historical conditions. Equipped with instant-access walkthroughs and superior historical knowledge, a contemporary ludocritic (as long as she or he is historically alert) is able to construct conditions that are even more suitable for playing *Deadline* than its "original" setting.

It is obvious that hermeneutic play of *Deadline* under the refined modern-day conditions does not equal to mechanical consultation of walkthroughs. The purpose of (re)constructing play conditions is only to enable modes of play that are generically significant. In *Deadline* and other videogames of its kind, a substantial part of their generic identity consists of what Jeremy Douglass (2007) has termed "frustration aesthetics," or "the art of error message design" (p. 210). This means that, unlike the many videogames that lean on simplified interfaces, fast progression, and addictive development, *Deadline* as played is a time-consuming experimentation in which failures are often countered by rewarding feedback. In this game-

play category it is not uncommon to spend several hours with a single puzzle, repeatedly restart from the beginning, and compete with the parser (10). While such trying gameplay and its puffed up aporias do have their aesthetic risks, in order to be able to evaluate the discharged epiphanies the ludocritic must first acknowledge the “frustrating” design (cf. Wilson & Sicart, 2010).

Conclusion

The best-rated videogames are also the best-selling videogames. This is rarely true for other aesthetic artifacts. The present article has been an attempt to explain this peculiarity by introducing *ludocriticism* as a hermeneutically funneled practice for evaluating videogame artifacts.

In the process the view that players switch between *ludic interpretation* (aiming at generating play-contributing understanding of perceived components) and *extra-ludic interpretation* (aiming at generating game-extraneous understanding of perceived components) was deemed valid. It was argued, however, that these modes should not be identified with hermeneutics as a matter of course, as they might also be discussed in other terms such as cybernetics.

The article concluded by determining the notion of *hermeneutic play*: a mode of playing videogames for the sake of understanding their *ludic identities* as artifacts played.

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Endnotes

1. Scholars too often simplify all mental processes under the label *interpretation*. One of the most convincing critics to comment on those simplifications is John Dewey (1929), in whose theory of (human) experience *perception* is given at least equal weight to interpretation. For the present topic, Dewey's thoughts about the cooperation of “aesthetic” and “operative” perception (p. 375–376) are of special interest.

2. Cybernetic interpretation, as an interpretive mode, naturally has its roots in cybernetics.

Previous applications of cybernetics to videogaming (e.g., Jayemanne, 2005; Dovey & Kennedy, 2006; cf. Kirkpatrick, 2010) do seem to engage in discussions that are somewhat distinct from those that cybernetic interpretation tackles here, nevertheless.

3. “Play-extraneous” is a strong word with many unhappy connotations. Its present function is to imply thematical, aesthetical, ethical, technical, and other “understandings” of videogame components that are potentially insignificant for succeeding in the videogame. But as all players know, sometimes thematical, aesthetical, ethical, and technical understandings of components also enhance (or debilitate) play performance, for which such specific naming is of mere exemplary use. It is the intention behind the interpretation that defines its mode.

4. Alexander Galloway (2006) can probably be considered one of the few skeptics of applying hermeneutic strategies to videogame interpretation: “I suggest that the game critic should be concerned not only with the interpretation of linguistic signs, as in literary studies or film theory, but also with the interpretation of *polyvalent doing*. This has always been an exciting terrain for hermeneutics, albeit less well traveled, and in it one must interpret material action instead of keeping to the relatively safe haven of textual analysis” (p. 105).

5. Michel Chaouli (2005) might be right: “only when participants are released from the labor of constructing a text on a material or topological level (becoming “passive recipients” in that respect) can they become hermeneutically active” (p. 608). Cf. Brendan Keogh (2014).

It is probably worth noting that the “ludocritic” does not have to be an authorized or professional videogame evaluator. Ludocriticism is a practice; hence anyone can become a ludocritic by practicing ludocriticism.

6. The terminology derives and is compatible with Aarseth’s (1997) “textonomy.” The choice of dealing with textuality here is a result of the topic at hand (interpretation and hermeneutics). With an ontological approach to videogame components, for instance, one should naturally consider different terminology (e.g., Aarseth, 2003b; Giddings, 2007; Karhulahti, 2012b).

7. Mäyrä (2008) describes videogame artifacts under meta-ludic analysis as “multimodal signs that are constituted by other signs” (p. 157). Obviously, videogames as multimodal texts or signs are stable artifacts only until the next patch. This need not concern the ludocritic whose work is to evaluate the videogame in its given material state.

8. Note the interesting position of the presently thriving freemium videogames in this model. Barry Atkins (2008) has a point: “players are perceived as demanding value for money measured rather crudely as potential play length, while rarely remaining engaged to the point of seeing the end game. Somewhat perversely, this would suggest that something is wrong, on one side or another, about what represents ‘value’ in terms of games” (p. 252).

9. For earlier investigations of *Deadline* besides main text references, see for example Peter

Weyhrauch (1997), Clara Fernández-Vara (2008), Veli-Matti Karhulahti (2012c), and Jonathan Lessard (2013).

10. Another illustrative instance in which the difference between “frustration” and “aesthetic frustration” depends on the generic identity of the videogame is what player jargon knows as “pixel hunting:” visual puzzle solving that entails tracking minimal details from an image. Whereas in most videogames this type of challenge tends to promote frustration, in casual videogaming and especially in its “hidden object” genres it seems to be an aesthetic standard. See also Jesper Juul (2010).

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