

Press Pause to Play: Stopping the Game as a Form of Engagement

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“A good book has no ending.” – R. D. Cumming

As I sat down to write this paper, I looked up and noticed across from me were three sets of double-sided shelves about twenty feet long that comprised the local public library’s collection of mystery novels. Each book contained within its pages the answer to its riddle – the “who” that did “it.” I have not read these books, nor will I, nor do they need me to read them. If a book contains a mystery and no one is around to read it, the mystery is still solved.

Espen Aarseth’s book, *Cybertext*, constructs a genre and method of literary analysis for video games which he calls *ergodic literature*. In his conclusion, Aarseth distinguishes between ergodic literature and the mystery novel:

For the reader of the detective novel...the mystery is revealed in the standard course of the reading. Even if the reader engages in the activity of trying to solve the case, this in no way influences the outcome for the novel. On the other hand, for the player of a detective adventure game the anamorphic dilemma dominates the experience completely, as the player tries to change the work from one state (unsolved) to another (solved). There is a clear, perceptible distinction between these two states, and typically, once the mystery is resolved, the work loses its enigmatic aura, and usually the player’s interest along with it.¹

Ergodic literature is defined by the essential role the reader or player serves in the traversal of the text.² In other words, the text, narrative, or story, is not independent of the reader-player’s contributive efforts. This opens the cybertext to interpretive and political analyses of the relationship between the author-designer and the reader-player that can offer a poststructuralist challenge to the game’s metanarrative.³

However, while what Eric Hayot and Edward Wesp call a player’s “style” may offer this poststructuralist critique of the game’s politics they do not engage such a criticism of the game’s narrative structure.⁴ This paper seeks to offer that challenge – that ergodic literature not only on the level of content may offer a poststructuralist critique, but that it does so at the level of literary form. In other words, by taking the role of player’s choice a bit further than Aarseth does, specifically through the use of game stoppage and the creation of alternative win conditions, ergodic literature can break with what I will refer to as the *structural semiotics* of literature specifically at the level of its *teleological determinism*.

The conventional novel follows a trajectory towards its conclusion – the mystery and investigation leads to the discovery of the culprit. The pathway from which the novel’s opening arrives at the end may be singular or varied but ultimately the conclusion is predetermined. This ending serves as a payoff for having endured the journey. Yet, the “work” is done for the reader by the author – the clues discovered and analyzed, the interrogations conducted, the mystery solved.

¹ Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Johns Hopkins UP, 1997), 181.

² Espen Aarseth, “Aporia and Epiphany in *Doom* and *The Speaking Clock*: The Temporality of Ergodic Art,” in *Cyberspace Textuality: Computer Technology and Literary Theory*, ed. Marie-Laure Ryan (Indiana UP, 1999), 32.

³ Cameron Vaziri, “Videogames as Micro-Resistance,” in *Exploring Videogames: Culture, Design and Identity*, eds. Nike Webber and Daniel Riha (Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2013), 99-100.

⁴ Eric Hayot and Edward Wesp, “Style: Strategy and Mimesis in Ergodic Literature,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 41, no. 3 (2004): 420-1.

The payoff is the sense of finality and the new understandings which the reader gains to retroactively provide clarity the story.

This retroactivity can be both within and outside of the story. Within in the sense of the explanation of elements previously not understood due to the lack of concluding information – the meaning and significance of the foreshadowing, the logic of the plot’s development, and so on. Outside of the text itself, the impact of the story’s development and the evolution of symbolic meaning translates to the reader’s lived experience as described in Paul Ricoeur’s mimetic circle.

The mimetic circle contains three elements. Mimesis One is the prefigurative borrowing of descriptive symbolism from the real world into the story.⁵ Mimesis Two is configurational – the story’s development, influence, and alteration of these symbolic meanings through emplotment.⁶ Mimesis Three is the refiguration of the world through the impact of emplotment on the reader.⁷ The role of the conclusion is paramount in providing meaning both in and outside of the story.

This is distinct from the dichotomy of linear or nonlinear narratives. Parallel or multivariable paths still rely on some concluding element that offers value and explanation for the tumultuous journey. This is what I refer to as the *teleological determinism* that underlies literary structuralism.

Ergodic literature is not in opposition to this structure. Indeed, Aarseth largely maintains it with his focus on win conditions. In doing so, he utilizes two concepts – *aporia* and *epiphany*. Aporia are the obstacles within the game that hinder the read-player’s ability to satisfy the win conditions.⁸ This introduces to the game three time dimensions. First, is the audience time – that which is experienced by the player outside of the story. Second, is ergodic time – the in-game experience of temporal progression. Finally, negotiated time which arises from the interaction between the other two.⁹ As a game challenges a reader-player’s progression through the text, it also offers the unique experience of replayability. In contrast to a novel, the repetitive experience of the video game in negotiated time is marked by difference – a new approach to the aporia is undertaken by the reader-player after each failed attempt until they overcome the obstacle. Once successful, only this completed storyline exists within the ergodic timeline. The failed practice runs which occurred in negotiated time not only revealed failed tactics but also, in audience time, developed the skillset of the reader-player for future gameplay.¹⁰

Epiphany is the experience of accomplishment that comes with successfully navigating and overcoming the aporia. This conclusion offers meaning and value to the play experience – the satisfaction of catching the culprit of the detective game and not merely having their identity revealed to you as in the mystery novel. In this structure, the concluding epiphany is still constructed by the game designer. What Aarseth does not discuss is what happens when these win conditions are set by the player, especially with highly ergodic video games.

Ergodicism is a matter of degrees where some games are more ergodic than others. For example, a game such as *Hogwarts Legacy*¹¹ offers substantially more player influence of the development of symbolic meaning than *Pong*.¹² So too are some games more textual:

⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative Volume 1*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (University of Chicago Press, 1984), 54.

⁶ Ibid., 67-8.

⁷ Ibid., 77.

⁸ Espen Aarseth, “Aporia and Epiphany in *Doom* and *The Speaking Clock*: The Temporality of Ergodic Art,” in *Cyberspace Textuality: Computer Technology and Literary Theory*, ed. Marie-Laure Ryan (Indiana UP, 1999), 38.

⁹ Ibid., 37.

¹⁰ Ibid., 37-8.

¹¹ Avalanche Software. *Hogwarts Legacy*. Warner Bros. Games. PlayStation 5. 2023.

¹² Atari. *Pong*. Atari. Arcade. 1972.

Compared to a non-textual game such as football, which has only action (i.e., ergodic elements), the computer game has both ergodics (action) and description (graphics, sounds), but not narration, since the event space is not fixed before the time of play. Thus, a computer game is textual (it has description, unlike football) but it is not narrated, since there is no such thing as the unfolding of a predetermined story. The ergodic level usually dominates the descriptive....¹³

The story or narrative is a post hoc construct fitted over the experience by virtue of its conclusion – the codeveloped story by the reader-player and the author-designer that appears when the win conditions are satisfied and the end scene is triggered.¹⁴

This is where I break with Aarseth. There is a direct correlation with a game’s degree of ergodicism and its poststructuralist potential or inversely, and less ironically put, its capacity to break with structural semiotics. I wish to explore video games without the teleological determinism – the retroactive narrativization of the experience of play by virtue of satisfying the game designer’s win conditions. To do so, we will look at some basic models of games and analyze how the player can use their power as ergodic co-author to challenge literary structuralism.

We can imagine ergodic video games as a series of possibilities in various formats. The first, I will refer to as the *Flowchart Model* in which the choices a reader-player makes alters the course of the storyline through which they progress to an ending that is informed by those choices. An example of such a game is *Detroit: Become Human*,¹⁵ in which the player guides three android characters through a complex decision tree that can result in up to 85 different endings with various levels of distinction between them.¹⁶

Another common form is the *Checkpoint Model* in which the game progresses linearly from checkpoint to checkpoint until the game’s ultimate endpoint at the win condition. However, the manner by which the reader-player progresses between checkpoints is up to their determination. A game such as *Halo: Combat Evolved*¹⁷ reflects this model where the player can navigate the means by which they complete each level – for example will they play using stealth or by eradicating all enemies – but ultimately the story progresses level-by-level through the game designer’s narrative development. Many games employ a combination of these two formats, a *Hybrid Model*, where choices determine a narrative flow along a flowchart path and between these choices (which constitute the checkpoints) the player is in more complete control of how the story progresses via their style of play.

These formats all borrow from narrative literature in that they employ a teleological determinism. However, because of ergodicism the reader-player can “break” these narratives. The flowchart model offers an interesting example of such a break. Completionist playstyles break the aporia-epiphany relationship. These reader-players attempt to see all endings rather than to play via embodying the game’s protagonist. This is an example of an alternative win condition to that of the game’s author-designer. Other examples include challenges that focus on completing the game under more rigorous conditions such as solo runs for Pokémon games¹⁸ or the Halo 2 LASO

¹³ Espen Aarseth, “Aporia and Epiphany in *Doom* and *The Speaking Clock*: The Temporality of Ergodic Art,” in *Cyberspace Textuality: Computer Technology and Literary Theory*, ed. Marie-Laure Ryan (Indiana UP, 1999), 35.

¹⁴ Ibid., 35.

¹⁵ Quantic Dream, *Detroit: Become Human*, Quantic Dream, PC, 2019.

¹⁶ Phil Hornshaw, “Detroit: Become Human Endings Guide,” *Digital Trends*, March 25, 2021.

<https://www.digitaltrends.com/gaming/detroit-become-human-endings-guide/#:~:text=Following%20the%20flow%20chart%20in,lot%20of%20overlap%20between%20them.>

¹⁷ Bungie. *Halo: Combat Evolved*. Microsoft. Xbox. 2001.

¹⁸ David George Morten, “Pokemon: Best Pokemon for a Solo Run in Each Generation,” *GameRant*, March 25, 2024, <https://gamerant.com/best-pokemon-solo-run-each-generation/>.

challenge.¹⁹ Such challenges remove the narratively constructed epiphanies set by the author-designer in favor of the player's own without a real literary (as in novel) parallel – there is no reading only the vowels in a book for example.

The completionist run of a game such as *Detroit: Become Human*, as was done by throwawaydeviant9 who posted all flowcharts and stats on the game's subreddit,²⁰ breaks down the aporia-epiphany relationship in a different way. With the goal of experiencing all endings, the game's obstacle in the decision-making process of gameplay is functionally nullified. Normally, the challenge of the game is maintaining a chosen character persona while facing conflicting entanglements as the storyline progresses. For example, a reader-player may choose to have the protagonist be a “good guy” by choosing the most ethical option at every decision point in the flowchart. The aporia arises in the ethical dilemmas the story will force the reader-player to confront that may limit these options. The consequences of each choice and the potential of unexplored paths invoke a sense of significance to each decision that makes the game thrilling. Completionism removes this aporia as the struggle or “work” of the gameplay is merely to account for all possibilities over time – no decision has consequence. In other words, there is no real aporia and instead the game experience is pure epiphany.

With the checkpoint model, as there is less ergodicism at play in the narrative development there is also less ability to challenge the game's form. However, Aarseth identifies one such method without realizing its meaningful potential. The experience of aporia and the potential need to replay sections that prove difficult does not always result in the player eventually finding the path to success. Sometimes, players will abandon the game. Aarseth addresses this possibility by recognizing the potential for a solution but never returns to the question of what happens to the story of an abandoned game.²¹ After all, the potential solution or solutions are never realized and thus no retroactive narrative meaning is constructed out of the completion of the level's win condition. However, that does not mean a story did not exist. Instead, it is simply a rejection of the game's teleological structure – a Bartleby-esque preferring not to play.²² The game thus becomes pure aporia and no epiphany. With the limited ergodicism, the “meaning” of such a political rebuttal to the narrative structure may be limited but it is not without consequence – particularly outside of the game. Part of the controversy surrounding the release of *Cuphead*²³ was the result of the criticism of game difficulty and the promotion by game critics of accessibility in a product which reader-player ostensibly own but may not have the ability to fully experience.²⁴

More ergodic games offer an even better example of the potential for these two critiques of a game's narrative structure – the creation of alternative win conditions and the termination of story development. The *Highly Ergodic Model* crudely resembles the checkpoint model in that there are beginning and end points. What distinguishes them is the lack of intermediary points that minimize the effect of any given choice in the storyline development. Additionally, like the flowchart model

¹⁹ Cameron Koch, “‘Impossible’ Halo 2 No-Deaths LASO Challenge Finally has its Winner,” *GameSpot*, August 4, 2022, <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/impossible-halo-2-no-deaths-lasso-challenge-finally-has-its-winner/1100-6506174/>.

²⁰ Throwawaydeviant9, “All 100% Flowcharts with Global Stats Included (Along with Some Interesting Player Statistics),” Reddit, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/DetroitBecomeHuman/comments/99b65j/all_100_flowcharts_with_global_stats_included/.

²¹ Espen Aarseth, “Aporia and Epiphany in *Doom* and *The Speaking Clock*: The Temporality of Ergodic Art,” in *Cyberspace Textuality: Computer Technology and Literary Theory*, ed. Marie-Laure Ryan (Indiana UP, 1999), 38.

²² Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford UP, 1998), 48.

²³ Studio MDHR, *Cuphead*, Studio MDHR, PlayStation 4, 2017.

²⁴ John Sweeney, “Postmortem: The Dark Souls of Game Reviews,” *Super Nerdland Entertainment Magazine*, October 28, 2017, <https://supernerland.com/postmortem-the-darks-souls-of-game-reviews/>.

there may be multiple potential endings for the game. An example of such a game would be Sid Meier's *Civilization VI*,²⁵ in which there are multiple potential win conditions – scientific, cultural, religious, diplomatic, and so on victories – but no other interruption in the development of the story from the start to this finish. Some games lack even this structural element such as with the *McDonald's Video Game*²⁶ which had no win condition or end point but continues ad infinitum until the player abandons the game or fails. For many games with endpoints like *Civ VI*, continued gameplay is often an option even after hitting the turn limit or satisfying the win condition.

The sheer quantity of story development determined by the reader-player enables two exemplary examples of poststructuralist gameplay forms. First, is the creation of alternative win conditions in place of (or supplementary to) the author-designer's. An example in *Civ VI* is the attempt to build all the game's "Wonders." Second, is how much storyline exists with an abandoned game.

These both allow achievements of Hayot and Wesp's rejection of mimetically reflected stereotypes in "strategy" without needing to satisfy win-conditions with a contrarian "style." As such, style does not need to "succeed" to offer its poststructuralist critique of content. After all, the creation of alternative win conditions allows for the "style" to succeed potentially independent of the harms of combating against the game's implicit "strategy." Regarding the abandonment of the game, here the distinction between ergodic literature and the classic novel reveals its import. An abandoned book has no impact on the progression of the story to its ultimate narrative conclusion. The "whodunnit" remains independent of the reader. However, in the game that is not necessarily the case. The abandoned storyline does not necessarily, and particularly so in this model, indicate a failed attempt. The potential for success remains open and the lack of failure indicates at the least a success to that point. As a result, the possibility for the alternative of "style" to "strategy" indicates the lack of necessity to follow the game's mimetic prefiguration and configuration.

The lack of progression also breaks the narrative structure in that the teleological determinism remains unfulfilled but, with this critique of content, the gameplay is not meaningless. In contrast to the saved gameplay that Aarseth discusses that can be shared once a game is completed, partially completed games can not only be shared as video but as a save file to enable a myriad of reader-player experiences from one reader-player's pause point. This not only breaks up potential aporias by allowing for others with superior skillsets to overcome insurmountable challenges (provided the abandoned storyline was done so for this reason) it also removes the contingency of epiphany upon a reader-player's individual success. Not only can they witness alternative successes from the pause point they created, but the epiphany can be relocated to the point of abandonment in the sense of the revelation of the potential of "style" to serve as an alternative to "strategy" up to that point of the game. With the indeterminacy of the satisfaction of the game's conventional win conditions, the mere completion up to the point of abandonment marks a success.

These alternative engagement modes challenge Aarseth's aporia-epiphany dualism not by abandoning or contradicting the ergodic model but through its exemplification. In doing so, they remove the retroactive element that creates the narrative structure instead offering a challenge to the teleological determinism that establishes the literary structure. To be clear, this is not intended to be a holistic accounting either in the sense that the identified structuralism is universal to all literature nor that the game models described or the forms of poststructuralism engagement with them is limited to what has been discussed here. Rather, the focus is the attempt to discern how examples of

²⁵ Firaxis Games, *Civilization VI*, 2K, PC, 2016.

²⁶ Molleindustria, *McDonald's Video Game*, Molleindustria, Flash, 2006.

poststructuralist engagement is not limited to a criticism of content but also of form in addition to being an exemplar of ergodicism.

Given these caveats, my attempt was to demonstrate that ergodicism enables the reader-player to break from the conventional literary structure which offers a compulsion upon the player to satisfy externally determined conditions to mark the “success” of their story. The significance of this is twofold. First, as mentioned is the potential for a poststructuralist form of the game. Second, however, is as a response to the criticism that may be leveraged against Hayot and Wesp regarding the political challenge to content. Specifically, that when “style” runs in opposition to “strategy” the added difficulty may render the game impossible (at least for the given player) and thus instead of serving as a challenge to mimetically reflected stereotypes, the game would most likely serve to reify these problematic structures. Through the adoption of alternative win conditions, the ability to share pause points, and the recognition of the value of abandoned games as indeterminate successes rather than abject failures, a myriad of solutions to the “strategy” problem exist precisely through the challenge to form rather than a pure focus on content.