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Ludology, Narratology and Philosophical Hermeneutics

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ABSTRACT

In this article we present the hermeneutic method as a tool for analyzing game studies discourses. We use Markku Eskelinen's profusely interpreted "The Gaming Situation" (2001) as a case study. Our premise is that whereas the hermeneutic method is academically well-established, its conscious application is not. It is suggested that with conscious application of the hermeneutic method the persistent and problematic questions in game studies, like those related to narrative, definition, and art, gain potential to be treated with increased sophistication.

Keywords

Hermeneutics, hermeneutic circle, horizon, ludology, narrative, narratology, philosophical hermeneutics, story

INTRODUCTION

Each communicative utterance, the present article included, is destined to unavoidable misunderstanding. This unfortunate state of affairs gave birth to what is today called hermeneutics, that is, the art of understanding:

> "Hermeneutics rests on the fact of the non-understanding of discourse… The goal of hermeneutics is understanding in the highest sense." (Schleiermacher 1838/1998, 227–8)

Because game studies is a nascent field, with no strong consensus of concepts yet, its discourses need to be interpreted with particularly versatile and sensitive methods. The aim of this article is to introduce hermeneutics and philosophical hermeneutics in particular as one such method. The goal is thus not to contribute to our understanding of *games* but to our understanding of *texts that understand games*.

Hermeneutics is a recognized method outside game studies, with a research tradition dating back centuries. It provides cohesion not available through deconstruction, and methodological tools not present in most close-reading techniques. As such, it is useful for interpreting texts that have been proven problematic.

As a case study we review a section from Markku Eskelinen's 'The Gaming Situation' (2001) because of the rich interpretational diversity the essay has produced. In the first part of the review we analyze the interpretive tools that scholars have been using for understanding that essay. In the second part of the review we provide some notes on the essay from the perspective of philosophical hermeneutics. At first, however, the concept of hermeneutics is opened up.

HERMENEUTICS

Hermeneutics is a theory of interpretation. Generally it focuses on written texts, yet modern applications of hermeneutics have broadened the topics it covers to almost anything that can or needs to be interpreted (see Grondin 1994). In modern hermeneutics, 'text' can thus be any object of interpretation, and as such includes all verbal and nonverbal communication; without excluding the possibility of interpreting non-communicative objects. Recently, hermeneutics has been applied, for example, to law, social sciences, psychology and architecture.

Our focus is on what is generally known as *philosophical hermeneutics*. The term is mostly associated with the work of Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur. Since we are presently concerned with written texts, we also draw upon earlier hermeneutics, first and foremost upon the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834). For presentation purposes we simplify the matter and discuss the latter in terms of *classical hermeneutics*. (Cf. Gadamer 2006.)

Classical Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics became a general theory of interpretation already in the 19th century. The credit for this is often given to two major hermeneutic philosophers, Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey (see Schmidt 2006). Because Schleiermacher's work is more centered on written texts, we apply his classical terminology for our analysis.

Departing from the premise that "one only understands partially and incompletely" (Schleiermacher 1838/1998, 231), Schleiermacher went on to pursue a practical interpretive method that would enable one to understand texts "at first just as well as and then better than its author" (23). He divides hermeneutic interpretation into two simultaneously operating types: *grammatical* and *psychological*.

Grammatical interpretation concerns understanding language. This does not refer merely to the decoding of linguistic signs, but also to the understanding of those signs in some closed context. For instance, when Espen Aarseth (2002) states that "*Quake III* is not a game," our interpretation of that statement is not valid if we do not take into consideration the rest of the statement: "it is a technology for spawning countless games with little passages, all alike/different." Yet even with the above complete statement, the interpreter might still be perplexed. A full understanding of the claim entails reading Aarseth's entire essay, which we do not cite here.

Psychological interpretation concerns taking into consideration the author's personal psychology, the time and place of writing and other extra-textual facts. Since the interpreter is normally capable of gathering more extra-textual facts of the text than its author, the interpreter is normally also capable of understanding the text better that its author. The finest understanding by these psychological means is achieved via two interpretive sub-methods: *divinatory* and *comparative*. In the first case the interpreter "transforms oneself into the other person and tries to understand the individual element directly" (Schleiermacher 1838/1998, 92). In the second case the interpreter "finds the individual aspect by comparison with other things included under the same universal" (23).

Interpreting Aarseth (2002) from a divinatory perspective would thus mean gathering and studying all possible information on Aarseth in order to enter his ultimate thoughts; whereas a comparative perspective would mean comparing his thoughts (expressed in the text) to as many extra-textual facts as possible. With these processes together we would eventually end up with a rich variety of more and less significant meanings; for instance, knowledge of Aarseth's long gamer history combined with knowledge of the famous 'twisty little passages all alike' labyrinth in *Zork* (Infocom 1980) would refine our understanding of the latter part: "countless games with little passages, all alike/different."

Undoubtedly the most well-known aspect of all of these interpretive processes is their circular nature. This circularity is often referred to as the *hermeneutic circle*: in order to understand a detail of a text, the interpreter must relate the detail to the whole of the text. But in order to understand the whole text, the interpreter must understand the detail. We already proved the validity of this observation as we interpreted Aarseth: if we want to understand what he means by a word, clause, or sentence, we must understand the complete essay – which in turn requires understanding single words, clauses and sentences. Note that the same circularity operates also on a more universal scale: understanding a single essay as parts of its author's all texts, and the author perhaps as part of a larger academic community, and so on.

Philosophical Hermeneutics

The term philosophical hermeneutics is first associated with the works of Martin Heidegger. His ground-breaking but simple insight was to connect textual interpretation to everyday understanding: our daily sensemaking of perceptions, events and activities are all likewise guided by interpretive hermeneutic principles. This extending of hermeneutics from textual to general interpretation became the aspect that Heidegger's follower, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960/2004), later recognized as the factor that made modern hermeneutics 'philosophical.' We choose Gadamer to represent philosophical hermeneutics here, as the best fit for the problems we are addressing.

For Gadamer, hermeneutics becomes not a process of understanding preceding ideas but of refining those ideas, that is, pursuing truth. What makes his theory of interest to those who seek to understand academic texts is that it liberates them from the limits that rule classical theories of interpretation. In classical hermeneutics the interpreter is continuously digging a fixed meaning by means, for instance, of

> "recourse to similar passages, and then in favourable circumstances just as much outside the work as outside the writer, but *always within the same language area* (Schleiermacher 1983/1998, 45; italics added)."

While classical approaches may go beyond texts, authors, and even eras, they are nevertheless always delimited by the premise that the object of interpretation can be exhausted with proper tools. This is where Gadamer's (1960/2004) theory breaks off by asserting that "the discovery of the true meaning of a text or a work of art is never finished" (298). He does not see time as a barrier to be overcome but as a vantage that makes it possible to understand the object of interpretation in a wider context. Consequently, whereas classical hermeneutics conceive of interpretation as *reconstruction*, in philosophical hermeneutics the process is defined by *recreation*.

The recreative interpretive activity is always done from a limited point of view, a *horizon*. With the help of time, horizons slowly broaden as we move away from the object of interpretation and see more of the things that surround it. So while your interpretation of this paragraph is unavoidably affected by your history (what have you read before), motives (why are you reading this) and many other factors, becoming aware of those factors enables you to understand that that particular interpretation is only one of many—ideally the best one that is constructible from your specific horizon. This awareness, as per Gadamer, is a *fusion of horizons*.

INTERPRETING ESKELINEN

In order to see hermeneutics at work, we now proceed to review Eskelinen (2001), starting from its interpretations. To be clear, our present interest is not in the object of interpretation, but in the discovery of the means and methods that game scholars have been using in their interpretations. As a side note, we ask the reader to pay careful attention to how the present article ignores all judgments on the 'correctness' of the interpretations that follow.

Previous Interpretations of Eskelinen

To begin with, we evoke Schleiermacher's (1998) notions of *grammatical* and *psychological* interpretation, the former by which he means the explication of actual linguistic referents, and the latter by which he means the explication of extra-linguistic referents. Eskelinen's (2001) statement that stories are mere "uninteresting ornaments or gift-wrappings to games" is put in focus.

Let us first interpret the phrase with a grammatical approach. An example can be drawn from Aki Järvinen (2008), who employs the citation to explain his working methodology, 'applied ludology:'

> "The form of moderate, applied ludology presented in the thesis at hand means that 'ornaments' are addressed as a set of elements in games, among other elements, with particular consequences for players' experience of the game." (23)

Here we observe how Järvinen interprets Eskelinen's figurative 'ornament' as an instance of applied ludology. In this case the metaphorical units 'ornament' and 'gift-wrapping' are disconnected from their evaluating context; the preceding adjective 'uninteresting' plays no role.

It is important to recall that grammatical interpretation does not operate alone. We understand that the grammatical interpretation of 'ornament' and other words are only one part in Järvinen's overall hermeneutic interpretation of the essay. Because of his wish to explicate applied ludology, this small part becomes of use, nonetheless. We cannot

know of the origins of his hermeneutic circle—was Järvinen looking for a metaphor for applied ludology as he was reading, or did he come up with the idea of the metaphor as he read?—and that is not important. What is important is that Järvinen did have some preconceptions and motives for reading, which together made him apply this specific part to his own work.

Our second take on the statement comes from Patrick Crogan (2003), who refers to the same metaphors in his discussion of game manual functions:

> "Consideration of the 'packaging' of a computer game (in such elements as the manual, the literal packaging of the software, or the accompanying media marketing) is irrelevant in the view of Markku Eskelinen, who argues … that computer game studies must concentrate on theorizing the gaming experience in order to delineate what makes games a unique form of practice." (298)

Here we see ornaments and wrappings interpreted not only as separate metaphorical units but also in relation to literal ornaments and wrappings that come with games. Unlike in our previous case, this interpretation also takes into consideration the metaphors' value charge. For Crogan to whom the manual is an important component of the game at his hand, *Microsoft Flight Simulator 2* (Microsoft 1984), the reference functions as a rival statement. In this context Eskelinen's essay is interpreted primarily as an anti-paratextual account. We notice how motives have significant effects even on grammatical interpretations.

Let us move on to a third interpretation. This time the interpreter, Marie-Laure Ryan (2006), is interested first and foremost in the statement's negative position towards videogame narrativity. That premise leads her to interpret the statement as follows:

> "Games are games, they are not narratives … [the two] cannot truly hybridize." (183)

Ryan employs her interpretation to bring out ludology as a game theoretical school with an agenda that ignores narratological concerns. What is of particular interests to us is Ryan's strong bias on *comparative* psychological interpretation. For her the word 'ornament' is secondary as she pursues to understand the claim not so much as a grammatical proposition but as a general view in relation to the tradition of narratology, a field to which she has contributed from the 1970s.

For the sake of comprehensiveness, we also provide an example of *divinatory* psychological interpretation. One scholar with this emphasis is Gonzalo Frasca (2003), a sworn ludologist, who believes that Eskelinen

> "was referring to what the focus of game scholarship should be. The author personally confirmed this to me when I asked him to clarify what he had meant." (5)

We immediately notice the exceptional means by which Frasca has gathered supporting extra-textual information: he performs an actual correspondence with the author. This functions as a supporting tool for his particular interest in understanding the essay not better than its author understands himself nor in relation to other phenomena but 'directly,' in Schleiermacher's terms.

We finish this section with a fifth interpretation, by Eskelinen himself. The motive of this interpretation is obviously a dialectical one, that is, to understand the text in the light of its other interpretations. Eskelinen (2006) writes:

> "I don't say there can't (or shouldn't) be narrative elements in games, I just say they are not central or interesting in any scholarly sense, and I also give a list of key things that are not explained or even taken up by any sophisticated narrative theory."

This contributes to the present discussion by illustrating how contextual changes affect interpretations. No two interpretations ever share the same context. What has obviously shaped Eskelinen's above interpretation of his own text is the flood of other interpretations. In another context, say, right after the text's publication in 2001, this kind of interpretation would have been rather unimaginable.

Philosophically Hermeneutic Notes on Eskelinen

In the present subsection we make some notes on Eskelinen (2001) from the perspective of philosophical hermeneutics. This means two things: surveying the variables that affect the essay's interpretation, and constructing an interpretation of the essay's controversial phrase "stories are just uninteresting ornaments or gift-wrappings to games." With reference to Gadamer, the variables that we consider most influential in the present case include, but are hardly limited to,

i.   temporal distance;
ii.   contextual factors; and
iii. reading motivations.

All of the factors relate to our horizon of interpretation, as elaborated previously. The horizon is necessarily limited by these factors, but it also enables us to make interpretations that meaningful for our particular purposes.

From the position of (i) temporal distance we are able to survey the discussion and grasp a wider context than earlier interpreters. We recognize that our interpretation takes place at a time when the question has been declared dead by many of our colleagues, which must have a great effect on us. We also recognize our (ii) personal academic positions: we are game scholars with previous education in philosophy and also currently involved with narratology. Based on this, we are aware that for those scholars working, for instance, on the field of game design the word 'story' may have a somewhat different meaning.

Lastly, we are not interested in the phrase as a communicator of meaning but as a source of meaning. We try to make it speak to us so that it would provide "something new to our curiosity" (Gadamer 1976, 9). Hence we consciously ignore the words "In this scenario" that precede the phrase "stories are just uninteresting ornaments or gift-wrappings to games"—because we do not try to understand what Eskelinen originally meant with the phrase, but instead (iii) interpret it from the present horizon and try to see what it has to give us here.

We initiate our actual interpretive process by transforming the phrase into a question: *Can story components be important in understanding games?* This question realizes our desire to understand the phrase so that it coheres with and contributes to our previous

understanding of games. Since it is rather obvious for us that story components can play important roles in games and videogames in particular, what interests us is rather whether story components are important in understanding the concept of 'game' in general. We proceed by testing our question against some canonized games that have story or story-related components: *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo 1985), *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) and chess.

It soon becomes clear to us that understanding *Mario as a game* has very little to do with its story components. Whereas *Mario* does have story components that can be assembled into a coherent save-the-princess story, we both consider that story potential insignificant for understanding the artifact *as a game*. For us, the gameness of *Mario* is found in its mechanics, first and foremost in its kinesthetic patterns that the player must exert if she or he wishes to keep on playing. At this point we remind ourselves that the game's ludically insignificant story components may not be insignificant from other horizons, e.g. when analyzing *Mario* as a cultural product (see Kinder 1991; Sheff 1993).

In *World of Warcraft* story components appear to play a more substantial role. The game has plenty of cut-scenes, characters, written dialogue and other components that all encourage the player to show story-constructing interest to it. Notwithstanding the presence of these components, which we call story components for lack of a better term, it appears to us that understanding *World of Warcraft as a game* does not entail recognizing those components as parts of actual stories. While story components are undeniably present and they may and do have major importance in the ludic experience of the game, the gameness of *World of Warcraft*—in this case, that what separates it from *Second Life* and other virtual simulations—is not in those components but in the overcoming of enemies and developing the avatar, to mention the most manifest points. Understanding *World of Warcraft* as a general phenomenon requires an understanding of its story components; understanding *World of Warcraft as a game* does not.

We also discuss the pieces of chess as story components. This enables us to recognize the fact that when game scholars talk about 'narratives,' 'stories,' and 'fiction' they actually refer to game components that have some representative features. The foregone conclusion that the representative features of chess do not matter for its players is thus irrelevant for us; what is relevant for us is the observation that representative features do often seem to facilitate comprehending more and less complex game rules and interacting with more and less virtualized game entities. In practice this could refer to the distinguishing between different pieces in chess, or between the differing behavioral functions of enemies and friends in *Mario* and *World of Warcraft*. In this sense we consider 'story components as ornaments' a fruitful notion: they often seem to appear as features that do not play major roles in the 'gameness' of games.

We conclude the line of thought by reminding ourselves of the fact that the above is not true of all games. Story component may be crucial in understanding the gameness of games too. Such cases would include text adventures like Adam Cadre's *Varicella* (1999) in which the ludics of solving fiction puzzles entail serious interpretation of personalities (Montfort & Moulthrop 2003); role-playing games like *The Witcher* (CD Project RED 2007) in which story-related choices have serious effects on game states (Iversen 2010); or storygames like *L.A. Noire* (Team Bondi 2011) in which successful interrogations of suspects require constructing coherent sequences of events (Karhulahti 2013).

Asking what kind of story components, what they are used for and how seem like meaningful questions. Acknowledging that some games have meaningful story components and some do not allows us to ask what the difference between these two types of games ultimately is.

CONCLUSION

We began by showing how Schleiermacher's notions of different types of interpretations are useful in understanding game studies discourses. Departing from a phrase in Eskelinen (2001), we ended up reinterpreting the question of story functionality in 'gameness.' Our interpretation indicated that the function of story components is protean, and the most interesting questions concerning them lie on exploring these protean functionalities. This procedure was not, nevertheless, executed for the purpose of contributing to the analytical discussion of storygames, but to demonstrate hermeneutical reinterpretation in practice.

The most important contribution of this article has been to show how an interpretation of a 'text that understands games' need not always be a reconstruction of the author's intended meaning, but it can also be a recreation of meaning that may be useful solely for the purposes of a particular horizon. Regardless, all interpretations live in time, being subject to revisions in later contexts—to be reinterpreted.

With few exceptions, abandoning prominent academic questions is merely a result of deficient interpretation. What every academic discipline requires in front of its vicious dilemmas is not turning its back on them but reinterpreting them. In addition to our case study, it is possible to find equally complex issues in game studies under topics like *What is a game?* or *Are games art?* Dismissing these questions as irrelevant means that the interpreter is only incapable of interpreting them productively. Instead of abandoning questions that have proved themselves problematic, it is more fruitful to *reinterpret* them.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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