

GAME TIME: REVISITING LUDIC LINGUISTICS FOR VIDEO GAME ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Ludic linguistics, coined by David Crystal, roots from language play for humorous purposes. The concept of patterns and preferences introduced in ludic linguistics is open for a wide variety of language based analysis in ludic contexts. This paper attempts to propose a systematic technique to apply the concept of patterns and preferences for a video game analysis. Three video game franchises reflecting the narrative-gameplay driven game genre namely *Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII*, *Dragon Ball Xenoverse*, and *Sonic and All Stars Racing Transformed* were purposively selected to analyze. Examining the three titles, the researchers revealed that language roles in the patterns and preferences in video games are of significance. In analyzing those roles in video game analysis, first, diegetic and non-diegetic game assets are analyzed. Second, the ideologies of influence of anamorphosis and metamorphosis, introduced by Aarseth, are analyzed. Third, the assets and ideologies are compared to construct the patterns and preferences of the analyzed game. Applying these steps, the structures of the patterns and preferences of the game would become visible. Departing from revealing this structure, researchers are able to apply them for linguistics related interdisciplinary researches, translation studies, for instance. In the perspectives of translation studies, for instance, researches could trace the structure shift of patterns and preferences in video games from source language to target language.

Key words: Ludic Linguistics, Video Games, Patterns, Preferences, Textonomy

A. Linguistics of the Game

Video games, due to their non-trivial traversal function (Aarseth, 1997; Eskelinen, 2012), require non-trivial accessibility to study them and in regard to linguistics that non-trivial way also includes the language use. The way the players comprehend the rules and strategies, the core components of any games (Huizinga, 2014), articulated through the languages employed on the game to achieve the goal indicates the presence of ludic interaction between the players and the games, in the case of video games, through the elements termed as assets. These assets, due to their formulaic construction, signify certain patterns and preferences with linguistic units as one of the constructors of ludic interaction. This ludic interaction signifies that a structural language domain (Crystal, 1996, 1998, 2001, 2008, 2011) exists with a specific function involving the players and the games and that structural language domain is ludic linguistics.

In video games, the structural language domain, revolving around rules and strategies, is substantiated to indicate the presence of game mechanics and narratives. The focus on these two complementing binary results in the emergence of bipolar focal points: ludology, perceiving any game elements including language as mechanical (Frasca, 1999, 2007; Juul, 2001, 2009, 2011) and narratology, viewing any game elements as narrative (Simons, 2007; Sicart, 2011). This bipolar domain contributes to the ideology of influence, a term Aarseth employs to display how the games inflict the way the players respond (1997). This ideology of influence, responded by the players in pressing-button manners, triggers a perspective that games stimulate different experiences due to the bipolarism of ludology and narratology. Those experiences are articulated through games with story (narrative)-driven, gameplay (mechanics)-driven, and the combination of both (Wolf and Perron, 2014; Kapell, 2015). In regard to ludic linguistics, it is

assumed that the language in story-driven games functions narratively to unfold the sequential chapters of the story and it functions mechanically in gameplay-driven games. The problem with this assumption is that narrative might possess mechanical functions and mechanics might have narrative functions. For example in *Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII* with its henshin-esque style, Lightning, the main character, has to wear certain costumes, called ‘garb’ in the game, to power up herself in many battle fashions. 93 different garbs provide Lightning with different power and thus triggering different combat styles. Each costume has a name hinting its power, its link with other costumes, to some garbs its relationship with Lightning’s story and its connection to other *Final Fantasy* stories. The garbs are basically classified into three major themes: adventurer, party-goer, and formal wear. These three themes are story-related since their obtaining methods are connected to the setting of place in the story. Adventurer garbs are mostly obtained in nature-themed places namely Wildlands and Desert Dunes, party goer-garbs in Yuusnaan, a metropolitan-themed, and formal wears in religion-themed city of Luxerion. Besides being story-related, the garbs are also mechanically (power) related. Garbs acquired in Wildlands tend to have elemental attack, saboteur attack in Desert Dunes, magical attributes in Yuusnaan, physical attributes in Luxerion. This condition implies that the names of the garbs, as the representation of narrative, also represent themselves as the mechanics, the gameplay, of *Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy*. Similar phenomena is also found from *Sonic All Stars Racing Transformed* with a different fashion. In this racing game with an implied story from the original Sonic series, the track names are in relation to the track shape and construction, *Samba de Amigo* for example. The name suggests a dance performed in a festival and this implication is perceptible from the colorfulness of the track.

The aforementioned representation, in textonomy, revolves around being structurally hidden or being structurally open, a representation Aarseth termed anamorphosis and metamorphosis (1997, 2003, 2014). The status of being anamorphosis or metamorphosis is intertwined with how the games are narrated and yet how the games are mechanized to which gaming experience is acquired with different games, though sharing similar genres, emanating different experiences. In relation to ludic linguistics, anamorphosis and metamorphosis are delivered by means of language with anamorphosis in the fashion of a hint or a clue and metamorphosis in the form of a guide. These two different means of delivery, hint and guide, require a different structural composition. Departing from these deliveries, it is assumed that assets as a structural construction of games are linguistics-bound, linguistics solely serving as a means of ludification, the rationalization of being a game to evoke a playful identity through a set of structures (Raessens, 2006, 2009, 2010). This role linguistics has toward games signifies the necessity to construct a systematic construction to analyze games to comprehend the special need for linguistic branch in a game world.

B. A Tool of Analysis

The primary aim of this game analysis tool is to reveal the structure types game assets have in regard to their linguistics aspects. These structures play a significant role, as aforementioned, in comprehending the relationship between linguistics and the ludicity of a game. The first step to execute this analysis tool is to indicate the relationship between assets and the uses of language. Examples from *Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII*, *Dragon Ball Xenoverse*, *Sonic and All Stars Racing Transformed* are provided to support the construction of the analysis tool.

Assets are fundamentally classified into diegetic and non-diegetic (Mangiron and O’Hagan, 2013). In diegetic assets, linguistics units are explicitly presented while being implicit in non-diegetic assets. *Dragon Ball Xenoverse*, a fighting game with a rich storyline, for example, has skill assets, signifiers for battle-related games, officially taken from its manga and animation versions with exception for game-only characters like Mira, Towa, and Demigra. The skill names characterize the users and mechanize the visual presentation. Mira’s skill, for instance, going by the name *Infinity Explosion*. The word *infinity* narratively reflects Mira’s status as an android unable to die and mechanically refers to the charging ability players can do

to inflate and enlarge the explosion range. But, not all skills reflect the narrative and mechanics of the users, *Destructo Disc*, for example. This skill by Krillin, a monk, is visually depicted as a disc-like energy wave unleashed primarily to cut anything into half. The words ‘destructo’ and ‘disc’ are unable to represent narratively on any parts of Krillin’s story but the words are able to signify the visual embodiment of the name. This condition indicates that user’s function of diegetic assets, in textonomic perspectives, is of interpretive and explorative function, the foundations in the hierarchy of textonomy being configurative and textonic are constructed over it (Aarseth, 1997; Gunzel, 2010; Eskelinen, 2012; Simanowski, Schäfer, and Gendolla, 2015). In relation to ludic linguistics, the condition of being represented in narrative and mechanic domains through linguistic unit utilization evokes patterns and preferences, the embodiment of rules and strategies in games. The following table might help illustrate this evocation and its relationship with narrative and mechanic representations with the skills from *Xenoverse* as the examples:

Assets

Skills	Patterns		Preferences		Symbiosis
	Narrative	Mechanics	Narrative	Mechanics	
Infinity Explosion	Metamorphosis	Anamorphosis	Interpretive	Explorative	Mnemonic
Destructo Disc	Anamorphosis	Metamorphosis	Interpretive	Configurative	Mnemonic

Patterns, as the embodiment of rules, refer to the asset structures embodying and distinguishing each asset from other assets in intra and inter relationships while preferences refer to the strategies the players might take in regard to, in the case of *Xenoverse*, the skill names. The table shows that both patterns and preferences are narrative-mechanics bound as the two elements are the constructors of the assets. This condition signifies that narrative and mechanics are structurally present in the assets embodied by language use. In patterns, due to its sequential nature with preferences, locate the linguistic units in anamorphosis or metamorphosis manners. In anamorphosis, the linguistics units, as discussed before, function as a hint or a clue. By serving as a hint or a clue, the implied meaning is concealed from the players. In metamorphosis, as opposed from anamorphosis, the meaning is literally exposed and thus easing the players in configuring the preferences in game mechanics. This situation is different from anamorphosis requiring exploration in mechanics preferences. This difference in preference selection is not found from narrative aspects as the engagement of user’s function is always interpretive. In relation to diegetic and non-diegetic assets, the diegetic aspects like names trigger a symbiosis relationship with the non-diegetic aspects namely mnemonic and hegemonic. Mnemonic symbiosis indicates a complementing linearity between what is said and what is seen, the linguistic expression and its visual realization, while hegemonic symbiosis suggests that what is said is not what is seen, indicating that either asset is dominating the other. Understanding this symbiosis, one is able to learn the relationship between the symbiosis and the gaming experience. In *Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII*, the background music (BGM) asset for each setting of place asset shifts based on the time leap; as the visualization of morning, noon, and night is displayed on the places, the background music shifts to adjust itself to the spatial visualization. In *Wildlands*, for example, when noon comes, BGM entitled *Sunset Path* is played. This shift indicates that a symbiosis occurs not only on the asset but also between assets. It further suggests that the games attempt to generate engagement and immersion from the players. In the perspectives of patterns and preferences as ludic linguistics proposes, the engagement and immersion contribute to the strategies the players might select in preparing themselves to battle monsters appearing on specific time and to engage in a specific time-bound mission.

In regard to the structural engagement, the second step taken is to categorize the structure type each asset might have with patterns, preferences, narrative, mechanics, ideology of influence, symbiosis relationship, and user's functions as the consideration. The following structures might occur on any game assets:

Structure Names	Dominant Patterns		Dominant Preferences		Dominant Symbiosis
	Narrative	Mechanics	Narrative	Mechanics	
Explicit	Metamorphosis	Metamorphosis	Interpretive	Explorative	Mnemonic
Referential	Metamorphosis	Anamorphosis	Interpretive	Explorative	Mnemonic
Allusive	Anamorphosis	Anamorphosis	Interpretive	Explorative	Mnemonic
Definitive	Metamorphosis	Metamorphosis	Interpretive	Explorative	Hegemonic
Situational	Metamorphosis	Anamorphosis	Interpretive	Explorative	Hegemonic
Foreshadowing	Anamorphosis	Anamorphosis	Interpretive	Explorative	Hegemonic
Perceptive	Metamorphosis	Metamorphosis	Interpretive	Configurative	Mnemonic
Circumstantial	Metamorphosis	Anamorphosis	Interpretive	Configurative	Mnemonic
Significative	Anamorphosis	Anamorphosis	Interpretive	Configurative	Mnemonic
Lucent	Metamorphosis	Metamorphosis	Interpretive	Configurative	Hegemonic
Inferential	Metamorphosis	Anamorphosis	Interpretive	Configurative	Hegemonic
Implicit	Anamorphosis	Anamorphosis	Interpretive	Configurative	Hegemonic

The twelve possible structures are constructed based on the most dominant asset-constructing structures. Dominant structures indicate the function tendency of each asset as a guide or as a hint referred from the names based on the level of implicit and explicit gradation with explicit structure as the clearest of structure allowing the assets to act as a guide and implicit structure as the most concealed fashioning the assets to function as a hint for the players. In *Sonic and All Stars Racing Transformed*, when the players snatch an item, the narrator will say its name and at the same time, the item icon will appear on the top right screen permanently until the players use it. This case indicates that the asset structure is definitive. The narrator clearly exposes the narrative and mechanics of the patterns; the item name, its function, and its relation with what Sonic can do in the progress of the game are vividly uttered. Through this vivid revelation, preferences by the players are explored with visualization depicting a domination over voices. This metamorphosis narrative and mechanics in patterns with interpretive and explorative preferences and hegemonic symbiosis construct definitive asset structure. This definitive structure is revealed from any items snatched during the race and thereby it signifies the status of the game for being gameplay oriented with an implied narrative. In a game focusing heavily in the gameplay, clear information toward item names and functions are required due to the necessity for the players to focus on the race. Hegemonic symbiosis commonly occurs on a racing game due to the function of narrator as an alternate addition to situate the racing as a real life racing. Comprehending how each asset is structured, the relationship between the assets and other game elements as genres, as shown on the above example, will be perceptible and by being perceptible, game designers, scholars, or localizers might use them, in the end, to discuss any game related topics especially in the field of game and gamer relationship.

In game design and analysis, the designers might analyze the structures of other games sharing similar genres and features as the designed game to reveal the market trend and its level acceptability. In *Flappy Bird* and *Crossy Road*, for instance, the asset structure is explicit and this explicit structure, including the graphics, is shared by other games similar to the two games like *Alone*, *Badland*, *Jetpack Joyride*, *Banana Kong*, *Bike Race Free*, and *Pixel Gun 3D* after recognizing the financial success of the games. game localization, the asset structures as formulated above are applicable in the analysis of asset structure shift from source game to target game. The shift, then, will project a concordance with the target culture or not to indicate

the presence or absence of domestication as the essence of localization. In *Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII*, for example, the asset structures constructing the grab assets experience a structure shift when translated to English from Japanese (Purnomo, 2015). This shift requires an analysis in the scope of GILT (*Globalization, Internationalization, Localization, and Translation*) to perceive the game localization quality and thereby opening a new perspective on how to construct a game localization quality assessment

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