

Aesthetic Investigations^{Review}

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Review of Jon Stone, *Dual Wield: The Interplay of Poetry and Video Games* (2022), Berlin: De Gruyter

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For over two decades, since the first issue of *Game Studies* (a date often seen as the symbolic beginning of the discipline), game studies has evolved into a formidable field with its own frameworks and methodologies. Despite this self-reliance, it frequently looks to literary and film studies for tools to analyse video game narratives and aesthetics. This is unsurprising, given the unique nature of video games as a medium that combines the narrative strategies of literature with the audiovisual aesthetics of film.

Efforts to validate video games as artistic media capable of creating meaningful narratives have often led to comparisons with novels,¹ prose fiction, and even ‘minor literature’.² However, this focus has inadvertently privileged prose analysis while underexploiting the intersections between video games and poetry.

For this reason, Jon Stone’s *Dual Wield: The Interplay of Poetry and Video Games* is quite an exciting publication. It holds a special position as only the second monograph that is fully devoted to the intersections between games and poetry, and also published in a video game series rather than one focused more

broadly on interactive fiction. The fact that the first of the two, Jordan Magnuson's *Game Poems: Videogame Design as Lyric Practice*, preceded Stone's book by only one year shows perhaps an interesting turn in game studies and a recognition of a gap in research.

Stone, whose solid background in poetic theory and poetry is obvious throughout this theory-heavy monograph, recognizes this by commenting that in game studies, 'there has been a tendency to fixate on narrativity to the exclusion or sidelining of poetry'.³ He attributes this partly to the limited interest in video games among poetry scholars, echoing Piotr Kubiński's earlier critique of the seemingly 'outrageous' juxtaposition of poetry and games, which some might view as an affront to decorum.⁴

Stone, of course, rejects such notions. And yet, the seeming incompatibility of video games and poetry is reflected in popular discourses around them, where the former is notoriously blamed for the violent behaviours in children and denied the ability to be anything but 'just a form of entertainment', while the latter cannot escape the label of difficulty that is off-putting to the average consumer.⁵ That, of course, does not mean that the interplays between poetry and the broadly understood interactivity have not been investigated so far—albeit, they have mostly been done from the interactive fiction angle, with perhaps Astrid Ensslin's *Literary Gaming*, which categorizes various types of interactive fiction according to their potential for reading or playing, being perhaps the most staple example with influence on Stone's own typology developed in chapter five.

As one of the only two book-length monographs that examine this subject in detail, *Dual Wield* is an essential and exciting addition to De Gruyter's Video Game Humanities series. In it, Stone investigates the reciprocal interaction between games and poems, especially when it causes poem-game hybridity, such as resulting in 'poems published in non-digital formats that have an intertextual interest in video games, as well as commercial video games that adapt or incorporate poetic techniques'.⁶ Immediately, he also admits that his perspective is 'that of a poet with a strong conviction that video games are a useful point of engagement for poems [...] but also that the form of the contemporary poem can be adapted to embrace ludic conventions, that a poem can be designed to be played'.⁷ This reveals early on what becomes apparent as one reads through the book: that the primary focus is on poems that add ludic elements to them rather than games enriched by poetry. This is visible in examples that lean more heavily into poems rather than what is commercially marketed as video games.

The book is divided into six chapters, each contributing to a nuanced exploration of the interplay between poetry and video games. Chapter one complements the introduction by surveying existing literature and delving into the theoretical foundations of poem-game interactions. It tackles the ambitious task of defining both poetry and video games, ultimately concluding that 'whether we think in terms of segment or components, poems, and video games are networked; pieces connect multidirectionally, rather than in a single successive chain'.⁸ The author further suggests that, like books and mazes, which are 'one and the same',⁹ both

poems and video games derive their richness not from a single engagement but through replaying, where multiple pathways, hidden details, and overlooked possibilities are revealed. This metaphor extends to the book itself, framing it not as a source of definitive answers but as a prompt for deeper questions about the interactions between poems and games.

The second chapter, ‘parallels and proximities between the mechanical principles that animate certain types of game and poem - how the text itself moves or responds to movement and pressure, what it produces’¹⁰ It discusses how certain elements that we tend to associate with games have been informing the structuring of poems and poem-like pre-digital games in how they play with a spatial fragmentation through negotiation between tension and release (the tension between the words and the blank spaces is surprisingly paralleled with the distribution of movement across platforms scattered around the level in platformer games such as *Hollow Knight*), how they apply gamification of the elements of chance in poems and such pre-digital card games (with particular attention placed on card games tarot and Mexican *lotería*). Finally, it looks into how certain specific poems (like Tristan Tzara’s and Pablo Picasso’s *La Rose et le chien: poème perpétuel*) and video games (like Dejobaan Games’ *Elegy for a Dead World*) actualize player/reader/writer self-expression through blurring of the lines between the creator and the reader.

The third chapter goes one step further into ways of mutual inspiration, being interested in how poems can become echoes of video games; or, rather, their *phantasias*, as Stone would have it. There, the author considers poems that take video games as their inspiration, such as Matthew Haigh’s *The Thirteenth Colossus*, a poem describing the experience of playing the *Shadow of the Colossus* game (Team Ico 2005). That certainly makes for an interesting and underresearched area of connection: where the game is the inspiration for the experience it provides rather than for the mechanics it utilizes.

For scholars looking to continue research into video game/poem interplays, the fifth chapter will be the most interesting, as it includes Stone’s typology of such hybrids. Drawing, naturally, from Ensslin’s typology, Stone proposes the following distinction into four types: game/poem hybrids, ludo-poetic interplay mutation (where the game and poem are altered by being placed in proximity to one another), ludokinetic poetry (which he roughly defines as ‘poetry that behaves like video game’),¹¹ poetic games (which, to the contrary, can be described as ‘video games that take on the character of poetry’),¹² and poetry games (describing video games that integrate spoken or written poetry into their narrative or gameplay). Stone remains aware of how difficult such definitions might be to implement, considering the blurriness between the lines dividing its components. Hence, he seems to treat them, like the entire book, as a starting point for discussions and research rather than a definitive proposition.

In the final chapter, ‘Letters from a Wilderness’, Stone presents his own tentative experimentations in creating ludokinetic poems, showing how he drew from game mechanics to bring interactivity to his works.

In his conclusions, Stone aptly remarks that there is still ‘resistance to the evolution of the poetic video game, both from a purist and an idealist perspective’ while, at the same time, suggesting that the difficulties in imagining the intersections between poems and videogames will surely be remedied when more and more artists seek to combine the two.¹³ At the same time, he shows that the potential for game/poem intersections is broad and fluid, going far beyond what one typically thinks of.

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NOTES

1. Majkowski, *Języki Gropowieści*.
2. Mukherjee, ‘Videogames as ‘Minor Literature’: Reading Videogame Stories through Paratexts’.
3. Stone, *Dual Wield*, 3.
4. Kubínski, ‘Micropoetics and Video Games’.
5. Dowsett and Jackson, ‘The Effect of

Violence and Competition within Video Games on Aggression’.

6. Stone, *Dual Wield*, 4.
7. Stone, *Dual Wield*, 3.
8. Stone, *Dual Wield*, 37.
9. Stone, *Dual Wield*, 37.
10. Stone, *Dual Wield*, 39.
11. Stone, *Dual Wield*, 111.
12. Stone, *Dual Wield*, 117.
13. Stone, *Dual Wield*, 147.

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