

Poetry in motion

How mechanics, visualisation and player experiences rhyme with each other to reveal **new artistic depths**

Jordan Magnuson takes ten minutes to reach a definition of ‘game poems’. In his defence, he’s written a book on the subject and given lectures about it, so this is concise by comparison. “Exploring the artistic and poetic potential of short-form videogames” is what he eventually settles on, but even then he admits that the definition can “shift around” a little.

One thing Magnuson is certain about the nature of game poems is that brevity is of utmost importance — he likens the creative process to jotting down a haiku on a napkin.

“When you make a game really small and you have this five-minute experience, you start to think about games a little differently,” he says. “Suddenly, every minuscule thing makes a difference.”

Magnuson has been making experimental games since 2010, long before he started to liken them to poetry. From the thoughtful murmuration *Loneliness* to the thunderclap of *The Killer*, much of his work focuses on creating powerful moments through quick, simple mechanics. However, when he started to consider that games could be made and regarded as poems, patterns and parallels began to emerge. Now, he seeks to curate these small moments of resonance in the interactive periodical *Game Poems*.

The works in *Game Poems* Volume 1 range from a playable snapshot of a young person struggling to make social

connections in their day job to a nightmarish reimagining of *Snake*. The breadth of material is matched by the variety of the developers’ backgrounds. “You get these really interesting games being made by people coming in from art backgrounds, writing backgrounds or other arts, people who don’t even necessarily play a lot of games and people who haven’t made games before,” Magnuson says. Applying the lens of poetry to short games not only enables players to think about games differently, but also lets artists practising

in other media consider them as a fresh outlet for self-expression.

“When you make a game really small, you start to think about games a little differently”

Magnuson highlights the final poem in Volume 1, [*começar coisas terminadas*], created by Isaque Sanches, a lead designer at Ubisoft, as a particularly impactful addition to the inaugural magazine. In it you align dots around a circle using your cursor keys. Then, you see an animation of a car driving. Your instincts tell you that you should be able to control this vehicle — this is a game, after all. But you cannot. The cycle continues. Your inputs are futile. You feel impotent. If you read the artist’s statement after playing, you understand why he wants you to feel this way.

Like [*começar coisas terminadas*], most of the games in *Game Poems* Volume 1 do not use words; though some may incorporate a sentence or two, their ‘rhymes’ are not spelled out or enunciated, but instead felt through

EPIC POEMS

While the microgames in *Game Poems* Volume 1 and most of Magnuson’s own games tend to be between five and 15 minutes in length, he believes the same analytical and poetic perspective may be applied to bigger games once players know what to look for. “I’m interested in how the poetry lens can help us think about or understand certain impactful moments in bigger games,” he says. He uses a moment in *Super Metroid*, when you come across a broken save portal in a wrecked ship, as an example: “You have these save portals and they all work the same way. It’s this rhyme that’s set up and then you break the rhyme, which creates this moment that stands out.”



Jordan Magnuson, founding editor of *Game Poems* Vol 1

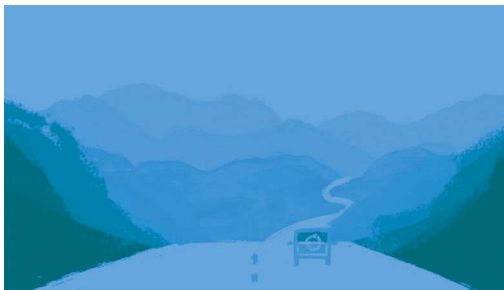
mechanics and repetition. A moment of pause is a stanza break. An input that matches an output is a couplet. Once you realise how each game interprets poetic tradition, it reveals the entire form in a different light.

And that effect works both ways. Late last year, *Game Poems* debuted at Winchester Poetry Festival, offering a new definition for what might constitute a poem. “It was mostly people coming from the poetry side, playing these games, and then being like, ‘Oh, wow, you’ve changed how I think about videogames,’” Magnuson says. “And it’s changing how I think about poetry as well.”

Created by Melanie Wigger, *Vincent* is perhaps the most illustrative example of the game poems concept. You see before you a set of everyday items, but when you reach out to pick them up, they transform into different objects. We’re used to power and agency in games, but here we’re wrongfooted, and left confused — concordantly, the game is about an ageing mechanic, whose confidence and ability to do his work are being eroded by his encroaching dementia. It’s a powerful, effective and hard-hitting metaphor, but still rooted in the uniquely interactive nature of games.

But *Game Poems* Volume 1 is “just the start,” Magnuson says, as submissions for the second edition are now open. The positive reception to the first issue hasn’t surprised its curator, though. “I think game poems particularly stand out because there’s such a strong human connection,” he says, “and such a strong sense of personal expression coming from another human being.” ■

Game Poems debuted at Winchester Poetry Festival, meeting with positive responses from its diverse audience



ABOVE, FROM TOP [*começar coisas terminadas*] pits you as an impotent driver; *Vincent* uses shifting objects to mirror the effects of dementia; *Gambit* explores feeling trapped in a dead-end job



Game Poems take many forms, from organising your thoughts in *Asunder* (above) to figuring out the rules for a fictional board game which resembles the Royal Game Of Ur in *The Ur Game* (below). What all of the Game Poems in Volume 1 have in common is brevity, each lasting no more than 15 minutes

