Seductive play in Digital Games

(Draft version)

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Introduction

"Hai plz. this game has no instructions. plz go right. plz"

The above sentences constitutes the opening to the game *I don't even game* (Polack, 2012) distributed through various online free game hosting sites. *I don't even game* is a silly game that takes place in a black and white game world inhabited by stickmen, ghosts and talking computers that are all fluent in so-called 'Leetspeak' (Tellería, 2012) and 'Netspeak' (Crystal, 2001).

The title of the game refers to an expression that has frequently been used in memes (figure 1) and in online discussion boards such as Reddit and 4Chan. The expression 'I don't even' – often followed by a triple dot ellipsis – is used to signify an almost apathetic reaction to something that is so absurd, silly or incomprehensible that the utterer – to complete the sentence - do not even know what to say or what to think.
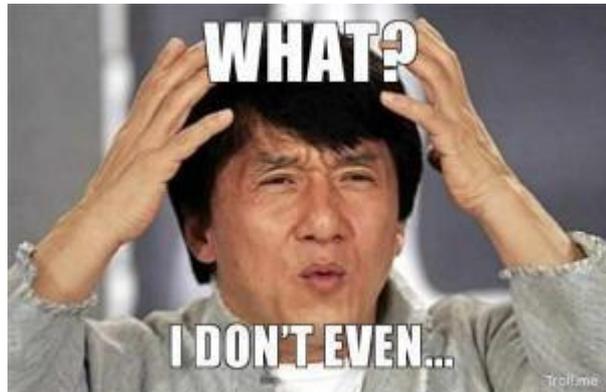

Figure 1: The expression 'I don't even' often followed by a triple dot ellipsis is often used in memes to signify a reaction to something so absurd that the utterer is rendered speechless.

During my own playthrough of *I don't even game*, the game indeed generated the feeling captured by the expression 'I don't even...'. In comparison with most other games that I have played this game made little sense. Over long periods of gameplay, the game proceeded on its own without involving me in any way. The few times the game did indeed require player effort this was in the form of more

or less meaningless riddles that more often than not left me with no choice than to guess or simply repeatedly hit the keyboard with open palms in the hope that I would eventually hit the right keys by chance.

At first playthrough the game thus seemed like nothing more than a relatively meaningless provocation. Nevertheless, I found myself strangely attracted to its silliness and the way this game resisted any of my efforts to interpret it. I was seemingly not alone. On one of the websites that hosted the game it had received 25311 ratings where 85 % was positive[1]. Why could such a meaningless game like this one achieve so positive ratings?

This paper is an attempt to discuss player engagement in *I don't even game*. The paper offers a critical analysis of the game with focus on the ways in which the game resists player interpretation. Baudrillard's notion of seduction is introduced as a conceptual framework to help shed light on the nature of the gameplay that emerge.

The first part of this paper will offer a brief overall description of *I don't even game*. The paper then introduces three characteristics of the materiality of the game that obscures the player's possibility to make sense of what she is supposed to do and the consequences of her actions: a minimal and inconsistent control scheme, a deceitful game world and intertextual thresholds.

Next, the paper discusses these three characteristics of *I don't even game* in relation to Baudrillard's concept of seduction before finally moving into a discussion of the relevance of this analysis in the field of wider game studies.

I don't even game as playable artifact

As a single-player game *I don't even game* can be understood as what Leino (2012) have termed a playable artifact. In the playable artifact, the process of playing and the materiality of the artifact is inseparable. By agreeing to play the player is subjected to a gameplay condition that is enforced by the materiality of the game. In *I don't even game* the condition for the continuation of play is that the player at various stages of the game presses specific keys in order to put in certain information that is needed to be allowed to progress. This condition is in force regardless of the player's acceptance of it as it is enforced by the materiality of the game (Leino, 2012).

I don't even game belongs to a type of artifacts popularly known as side-scrolling puzzles. The game consists of eighty-one levels (some variation depending on how repeated levels and a 'minigame' that is located on a separate site is counted). Each of these levels consists of one screen where the player character enters on the left and disappear out of the right side. The game is thus a continuous move from left to right. *I don't even game* does not state an explicit objective, but merely on the first level requests the player to go right. The player initiates this movement to the right by pressing the right-key a single time. She does not have to hold down the key to retain the movement. Instead, the character automatically continues towards the right of the screen until it encounters an obstacle in the game world or the player chooses to decelerate the character (by holding down the left-key). The

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game comes to an after approximately eighty-one levels when the player character passes a lemonade stall and is instructed to press the 'Q key' to get a tasty brew. If the player complies, the game will end. The game does not have any other terminating condition than this and will run until the player completes it or closes the browser window.

Each of the levels consists of an event (Figure 2).The player character may encounter other characters who will ask for help or make comments or threats to the player character. The player character may also encounter objects in the game world such as spikes and grates.

Figure 2: A level in *I don't even game.* On each level a simple event takes place, in this case it is an encounter with another character.

The events on each level may inform the player of things that lie ahead or they may prompt the player to perform some task. An encounter with a NPC who cries out: "Slow down sir! I found spikeys!", and thus informs the player of a number of spikes that protrudes the ground on the next level, serves as an example of the former. As an example of the latter one can point at an encounter with a NPC asking the player to perform a DUI test, in which case the player character can only proceed after the player have typed in the alphabet from z-a. In most of the instances where the player's progression is blocked the player will need to press certain keys in order to be allowed further passage. To realize which keys to press, the player may look at hints in the game world, look up the answer online or by trial and error. However, on the surface, the game will only handle the correct input and there is thus only two states: that the player have put in the correct information or that the player have not *yet* put in the correct information. The player can thus not fail to perform a task but only not have succeeded yet. If the player does not input the correct information the game will be stuck on the same place until the player solves the puzzle or decides to close the browser window.

Playing on false premises

In his model for embodied interaction, Bayliss (2007) divides the experience of interacting with a game system into three layers. The material layer consists of the input devices such as keyboards and mice. On the software layer the properties of the material layer is transformed into meaningful information e.g. that the player knows, that when she presses the '-> Key' the player character moves to the right. On the last layer – the conceptual layer – the player becomes aware of the action possibilities in the game as well as the rationale between the valuation of different game states (Bayliss, 2007). As a playable artifact *I don't even game* almost entirely determines what it is possible for the player to do and not to do. As mentioned above *I don't even game* allows the player to move the player character to the right, but not to move it to the left or to make it jump etc. The player learns this as a configurative praxis where the she explores the action possibilities afforded by the game. However, this project may prove difficult when interacting with a deceptive game such as *I don't even game*. In the following, I will present two ways in which the game resists the player's project of play by means of what we provisionally may call deception. In relation to Bayliss' model this deception takes place between the material and the software layer and consequently furthermore on the conceptual layer of gameplay.

In *I don't even game* the only consistent control of the player character is the movement from left to right as is requested in the beginning of the game. In order for the player to perform this movement the she either needs to be familiar with conventional control schemes for side scrolling games played with a keyboard (pressing the -> key) , or she needs to use a process of elimination or trial and error. Whatever way the player has familiarized herself with this simple control scheme, she can now rely on it if the player character for whatever reason stops and she must initiate the movement once again.

However, pressing the '-> key' to move the player from left to right and pressing the '<- key' to stop is the only consistent control scheme in the game. The control scheme that allows the player to perform the simple tasks that the game prompts her to do appear inconsistent and elusive, as we shall see in the following example.

In one level, the player learns that in order to drop things she can press the 'Q key'. A handy ability since it seems that the player involuntarily gets hold of various objects on her way through the game world. However, while the player can consistently press the '-> key' to move to the right throughout the game the 'Q key' only works on a very limited number of levels. On other levels, while the player may wish to drop items she is not allowed to. The ability to perform a certain activity is thus not necessarily dependent on the player's experience of the necessity to do this. While one may very well argue that the game authorizes this activity in the instances where it is relevant i.e. where the player can only progress by doing this activity, the player have no way of determining this relevance. Instead, she may experience the control scheme in the game to be dependent on some logic that she cannot grasp. The result of this is that besides moving to the right the player can never internalize the control scheme but must approach them in a trial and error fashion throughout the game.

While the player cannot know when she must perform an activity, the game will guide her and give her hints. However, when the game is particularly deceptive this may only contribute to the experience of a meaningless game, as we shall see in the following example.

At some point in the game the player, after unwillingly having stolen a purse from a woman, is informed that this woman had actually plotted to explode a bomb in the purse. The player character then encounters a metal detector that scans for bombs. Luckily, a TV commercial that is running on a screen in the background advertises for 'The Q button' that drops weapons and even bombs. If the player presses the 'Q key' a text on the bottom of the screen reveals that she has now dropped the purse bomb and when she reaches the metal detector, she is allowed passage. However, if she chooses not to press the 'Q key' and consequently does not drop the purse bomb the player character is still granted passage through the metal detector. Dropping the purse therefore turned out to have no real effect in the game. The game thus in a way lied to the player either by verifying that the item was indeed a purse bomb (remember the text in the bottom that declared that the player dropped the purse bomb) or by informing the player that the metal detector would scan for bombs.

In approximately sixty-two of the eighty-one levels in *I don't even game* no input is required from the player. Most parts of the game will thus take place without any non-trivial player effort (Aarseth, 1997) and the she can instead sit back and observe the player character run from left to right on screen after screen. Nevertheless, the player is indeed hailed in many of the sixty-two levels where no player effort is required. A character may ask the player to help look for a lost key, or command the player to stop. While the player may choose to stop this will have absolutely no impact on whether the she can progress in the game. However, the player may not know this after several playthroughs. Furthermore, while she can choose to stop, she cannot choose to answer the many requests the NPC's give her, simply because the control scheme will not allow her to do so. On the level where the player apparently steals a purse from a woman, the player cannot choose not to steel the purse. When she passes the woman a text simply appears on the bottom of the screen: "You found a purse!1!!11" while the woman cries out "omgwtfbbqpizza! Dat young man just stole my purse!". When a NPC on level thirty-five asks the player if she "want 2 see mai shiney badges??" the player cannot choose to do so. *I don't even game* thus sets up false possibilities for interaction that only appear on the surface of the game and that the player is not free to pursue.

At another level the player is informed that if she proceeds past a certain character she will lose all her progress (figure 3) . By trial and error the player will soon learn that she is actually left with no choice but to continue moving right, since the game does not react on any other input on the keyboard than the '-> key'. The player then continues to the right, and arrives in a level that is identical with the first level in the game. However, later it turns out that the player has been deceived and this is actually not the first level, and that the player have not lost progress but on the contrary made more progress.

An inconsistent and elusive control scheme coupled with a deceptive game world thus resist player interpretation. Due to this deception, the player cannot know what she is supposed to do and if she learns she will soon realize that what is possible on one level may be impossible in the next.

Figur 3: The game tricks the player into thinking that she will lose progress if she passes. It turns out to be a deception

Intertextual allusions

As the title suggests, *I don't even game* applies certain intertextual strategies in its design of puzzles. Here intertextuality refers to a stylistic device and not an interpretive practice (Ott and Walter, 2000). As stylistic device intertextuality is the presence of one text in another text by means of quotation, plagiarism or allusion. In *I don't even game* the significant use of 'leetspeak' can be understood as an intertextual construct that grants the player who will recognize this allusion with a sense of accomplishment and a feeling of superiority and belonging among a selective community (Ott and Walter, 2000). While this may seem like nothing more than part of the games surface expression, some of the games few puzzles depends on the player's ability to understand 'leetspeak'. These puzzles relies on knowledge on how to replace words or syllables with certain characters on the keyboard (the trial and error approach is an exception to this but proved successful in many instances of my own play-session though). In level fifty-six the player character is halted by a NPC that demands the player to input a '30 lives code'. The '30 lives code' also known as the Konami code is a cheat code that appeared in many NES games and have also been widely used as a means to hide so-called 'easter eggs' on various websites. In comparison with 'leetspeak' as an intertextual construct embedded in the game puzzles the Konami code is easier to solve. The NPC explicitly asks for a '30 lives code' and it is thus relatively easy for a player who is not familiar with the code to look it up online. However, this way the game is actually forcing the player into a praxis that resembles cheating. Looking up the answer to a puzzle can be regarded on line with the use of walkthroughs and cheat codes[2]. This resemblance with cheating is also emphasized by the fact that this code functions as a cheat code in many other games.

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[2] While Woods (2007) argues that cheating is not possible in singe player games since cheating requires an 'other' the use of walkthroughs and cheatcodes may still be experienced as a form of cheating by the player (Consalvo, 2007).

These allusions makes it impossible to solve puzzles independently. In order to solve the puzzle as a configurative practice, the knowledge the player will need to find the solution must typically be hidden in the game world somehow. This is the case in the somewhat comparable puzzle side-scrolling game *Limbo* (Playdead Studios, 2010). When the player encounter an obstacle, she is allowed to explore its properties or try out different configurations of various available objects (figure 4) until she can either by reasoning or by trial-and-error realize a configuration that will allow her to proceed. Of course most games to some extend relies on knowledge we have not obtained directly in the game e.g. that we know basic physical laws such as gravity etc. However if we look at the example with the Konami code in *I don't even game,* the player is absolutely depending on this outside knowledge since there is nothing in the game that hints towards or indicate the solution to the puzzle in any way .

Figure 4: *Limbo* allows the player to try out different
configurations until the player realize the correct one.

The player who is unfamiliar with the intertextual allusions is not only deprived the feeling of membership in a selected community. Forcing her to simply look up the answer may also deprive the player from the moment of epiphany when she realizes the logic behind the puzzle (Aarseth, 1997; Consalvo, 2007).

So far, I have discussed the different ways *I don't even game* resists player interpretation and meaning making. Inconsistent controls and a deceitful game world that will try to trick the player obstructs the opportunities for the player to couple the information the game gives her and her action possibilities into a meaningful purpose of play. While the information inherent to the game may be sparse or even misleading, the use of intertextual devices such as allusions further contribute to the nonsense for the player who is not familiar with the references is thus forced to look beyond the game for answers.

Seductive play

To discuss the different ways in which *I don't even game* tries to resist player interpretation this paper introduces Baudrillard's (1999 [1979]) concept of seduction. The concept of seduction draws on the Marxist idea of a chasm between use value and exchange value and the idea of commodity fetishism (Baudrillard, 2001). Baudrillard articulates this in semiotic terms as a void between a sign

and its referent. In a process that Baudrillard calls the 'precession of simulacra' sign and reference continuously moves apart until the sign at last stand alone and only absence is left in place of the reference (Baudrillard, 2001) .

With his notion of seduction, Baudrillard also directs a critique towards psychoanalysis. In psychoanalysis Baudrillard finds an "obsession with latent discourses" (Baudrillard, 1990 [1979] p. 54) operated with a "machinery of interpretation" (Baudrillard, 1990 [1979] p. 57). To Baudrillard this idea of hidden meaning relies on a misconception. Instead of focusing on latent discourses that strives to break through the surface expression, Baudrillard turns his attention towards this very surface that he argues consists of rivalry signs that conspire to combat and root out meaning and turn it all into nonsense games (Baudrillard, 1990 [1979] p. 54).

As an example of this Baudrillard points at the trompe l'oeil. With its optical illusions the tromp l'oeil tries not to deceive the spectator by mimicking reality as one might have thought. Instead the trompe l'oeil functions as a parody of this reality that reveal to the spectator that the 'real' is only a principle.

With the concept of seduction in mind we can construe *I don't even game* as an equivalent to the trompe l'oeil. This will be elaborated after a brief digression: In his analysis of seduction Baudrilllard argues that the trompe l'oeil "by mimicking and exceeding the effects of the real, (…) radically questions the reality principle." This leads us to the question of which are the principles that *I don't even game* – if we agree to treat the game as seductive – questions. To discuss this, consider how the seductive work points towards its own appearance and let us then turn to the nature of the playable artifact.

As several scholars have pointed out labeling single-player games as games poses some problems. Mosca (2011) advocates for the separation of rules that prescribes the player a behavior and rules that merely descriptive how something work. He further argues that only prescriptive rules can be obeyed. In single-player games any rule that is enforced by the materiality of the game is thus a descriptive rule that exists regardless of whether the player accept or deny it. Leino (2012) therefore advocates for the use of the term 'playable artifact' when it comes to single player games. Woods (2007) points out that it does not make sense to talk about winning or losing in single-player games since it is impossible for the computer to engage in play. However, on a representational layer different strategies, such as the use of plot and of anthropomorphic characters, may be applied as a means to let the player suspense disbelief and allow herself to engage in play as if the game was offering active resistance (Woods, 2007).

I don't even game points towards this very nature of single player games by means of exaggeration and ridicule. When *I don't even game* kindly advices the player to go right in the beginning of the game it is masquerading an affordance in the game as a prescriptive rule. This is emphasized by the extent of limitation to the player's possibilities in the game. While the player may in theory be free, the gameplay condition in *I don't even game* limits this freedom to practically nothing. The prescription to go right thus appears insincere and mockingly. Instead of creating the illusion of player agency the game exhibits the same lack of freedom on its sleeve so to speak. The cartoonish

uniform NPC's and the utter lack of coherence in the events of the game further obstructs player engagement and can be regarded as part of the seduction, on line with the use of intertextual devices that point away from the game as some sort of distancing effect pointing towards its own nature as designed artifact.

If we return to Bayliss' model and perceive it as a hierarchy of levels, the inconsistent mapping between the keys on the keyboard and their translation in the game makes it difficult for the player to penetrate the material- and software layer and reach the conceptual layer. While the NPC's are constantly hailing the player and are passing on false information about the game the player cannot respond to this but are left with a seemingly endless movement towards the right. The player can thus neither trust the control scheme of the game nor the game world and the character who inhabits it. It seems that the game is deliberately resisting any projects the player may have had of finding 'hidden truths' behind the immediate surface of the game.

So far, I have referred to the tricks the game plays on the player as a deception. However, now it seems a good time to take this up to revision. Baudrillard argues that the seductive, by appearing "more false than false" (Baudrillard, 1990 [1979] p. 15), is better described as seductive than deceptive. The seductive does not seek to trick us, it is not pretending. While I have pointed towards various characteristics of *I don't even game* in the above analysis, this does not mean, that seduction can be designed. While deception is a strategy, Baudrillard argues that seduction is a pact between seducer and seduced where it is impossible to distinguish between subject and object or active or passive (Baudrillard, 1990 [1979], p 81). Seduction therefore appears not as a strategy but as an effect of letting oneself be seduced by the game. Baudrillard describes the effect of seduction as a feeling of giddiness and vertiginous indetermination (Baudrillard, 1990 [1979]) that is maybe better understood as paidia than ludus on Caillois' dichotomoy of play. The player does thus not play to be challenged but to be seduced. Maybe it is not despite the game's meaninglessness that the player is attracted to it but because of it. In this sense, it is not only the game that, as argued above, resists interpretation it is also the player who resists being assigned a role, a project or an objective.

If we return to Leino's definition of the playable artifact, it becomes clear, that *I don't even game* may not fall into this category very easily after all. How the player interacts with *I don't even game* does not matter at all, because the player can only progress in the game never fail. However *I don't even game* is not an interactive artwork either. Where the interactive artwork allows the spectator to affect the state of the work it does not valuate the interactions (Leino, 2013). In comparison the indifference towards the actions of the player in *I don't even game* is not expressed through the absence of valuation but by ignoring of the player's input and neglecting to communicate coherent game output.

This is not a game

This paper has been an attempt to understand the strange attraction I experienced towards a game that at first sight appeared silly and quite simply stupid. With reference to Baudrillard's concept of seduction I have argued that the play emerging from my interaction with this game can be regarded as a kind of seduction that turns the gameplay into parody.

Seduction is not a design strategy and while a designer may anticipate a reaction from the player when constantly changing the mapping between control interface and software, or when populating the game with silly deceiving NPC's, seduction should not be thought of as an property of the game but more as an attribute to play.

My own reflections of digital play as seduction is of course not limited to *I don't even game*. I see seduction in relation to other games too. Playing *This is the only level* (JMTB02 /Armor Games, 2007) can be understood in much the say way as *I don't even game*. In *This is the only level* the player must control a small elephant from one side of the screen to a portal in the opposite side. The spatial configuration is the same on all levels, but the control scheme changes and various non spatial obstacles are introduced throughout the game. Like *I don't even game, This is the only level* relies on an inconsistent control scheme that only allows the player to recognize the logic behind the mapping of control interface and game in short glimpses before they change.

Seduction in relation to digital play is not meant to be introduced as a way to understand gameplay as such and the purpose of this paper have not been to account for how the players of I don't even game must have experienced it. However, the concept of seduction might help us articulate the kind of amusement we find in the interaction with games that in various ways, e.g. the ones described in this paper, resists meaningful gameplay.

What the idea of seduction contributes with in the analysis of games is that it may be fruitful to look at instances of nonsense in games that may attract players in its own way. I believe we can find many such instances also in more conventional games. This nonsense may be more or less prominent than in the examples described above. As an illustration of this let me lastly point at the game *This is not a game* (Kamizoto, 2015) which is published on Newgrounds and have received 1.187.924[3] views as well as high ratings (4, 5 out of 5 starts). In *This is not a game* the player only performs one task. In the beginning, she will choose language (English or French). After having made her choice the game title appears on the screen while a male voice informs the player that this is indeed not a game, that it is only a massive package of boredom. The only element in the game world that seems to recognize player input is the letter 'O' in the title written on the screen. If the player clicks on this letter several times it will fall to the bottom of the screen. Of course without affecting the game in any other way.

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