Game Comics:

An Analysis of an Emergent Hybrid Form

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Introduction

- Hi, I'm Daniel Merlin Goodbrey.
- I'm a lecturer in Narrative & Interaction Design at the University of Hertfordshire.
- I also work as a freelance comic creator and as a consultant for companies that want to do weird things using comics.
- Today I'm here to talk about one of the new directions in digital comics that I'm currently exploring: Game Comics.
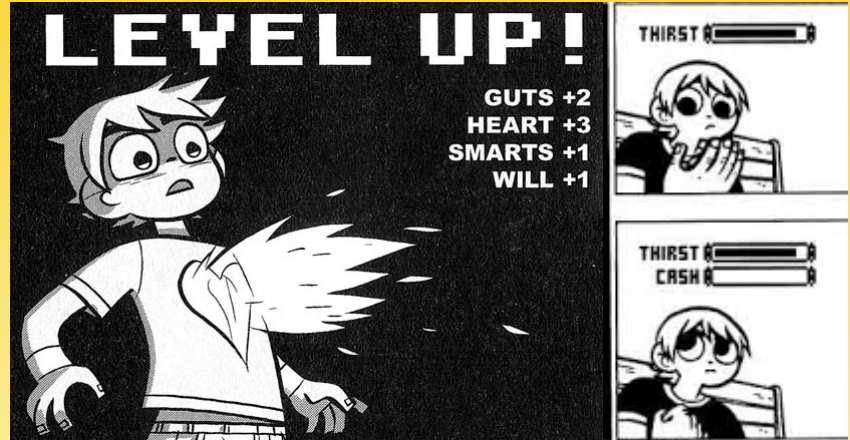
Videogames

- Videogames have their beginnings in the mid part of the 20th Century.

- Their popularity has risen steadily alongside that of the computing and gaming devices we use to play them.

- As videogames have developed as a medium, they have also developed a shared history of visual influence and narrative crossover with the medium of comics.
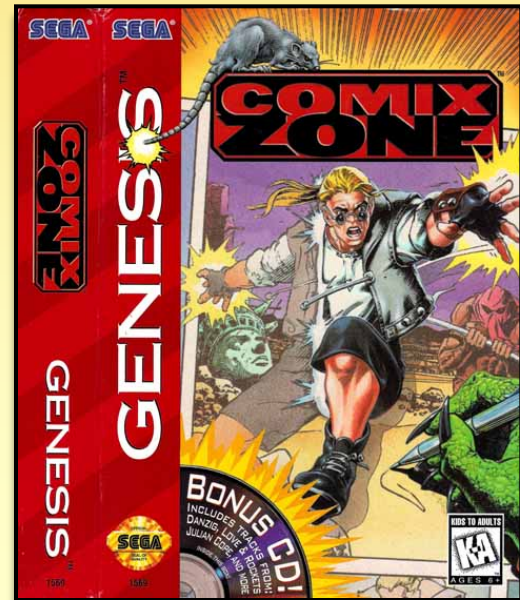
Videogames & Comics
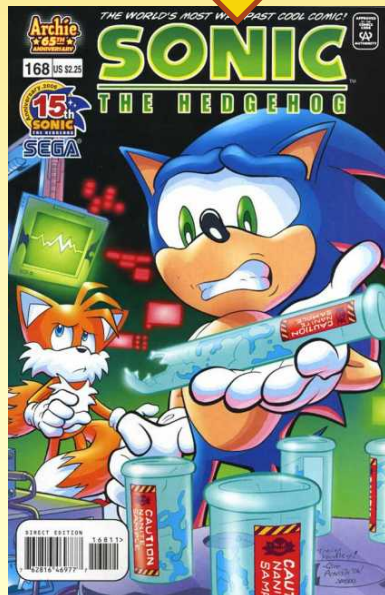
- There have been adaptations of videogames into comic narratives.
- And adaptations of comics into videogames.

Videogames & Comics

- There have been comics that make use of the visual tropes of videogames.
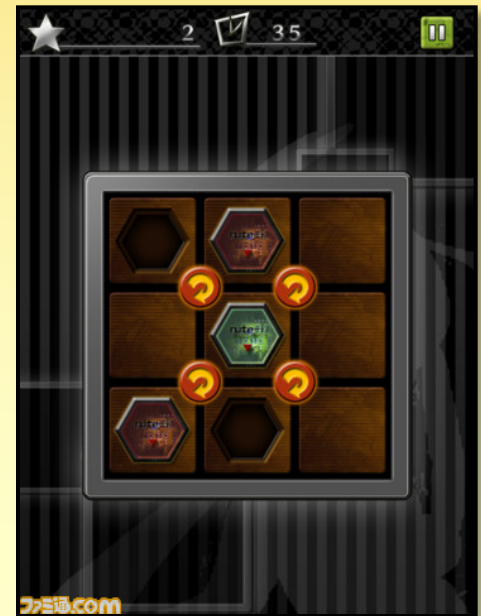- And videogames that make use of the visual tropes of comics.

Videogames & Comics

Max Payne (2001)

Imaginary
Range (2011)

■ There have been videogames that use comics to provide narrative sequences to link between sections of gameplay.

Videogames & Comics

Red Hawk (1986)

- There have even been videogames that are also comics.

Dice Man (1986)

- And comics that are also games.

Videogames & Comics

- It's in this area of direct hybridisation between comics and videogames that I've been focusing my own research.
- I began be trying to build a clearer picture of some of the fundamental concepts underlying the two forms.

Games: What are they?

- Videogame theorist Jesper Juul identifies six key characteristics of games:
  - Rules.
  - Variable, quantifiable outcome.
  - Valorisation of outcome.
  - Player effort.
  - Player attached to outcome.
  - Negotiable consequences.

(Juul 2005)

Games: What are they?

- Juul also usefully divides videogames into two major categories:
- Games Of Emergence

  "Emergence is the primordial game structure where a game is specified as a small number of rules that combine and yield…a large number of game variations." (Juul 2005)
- Games of Progression

  "Progression is the historically newer structure that entered the computer game through the adventure genre…The player must perform a predefined sequence of actions [to progress]." (Juul 2005)
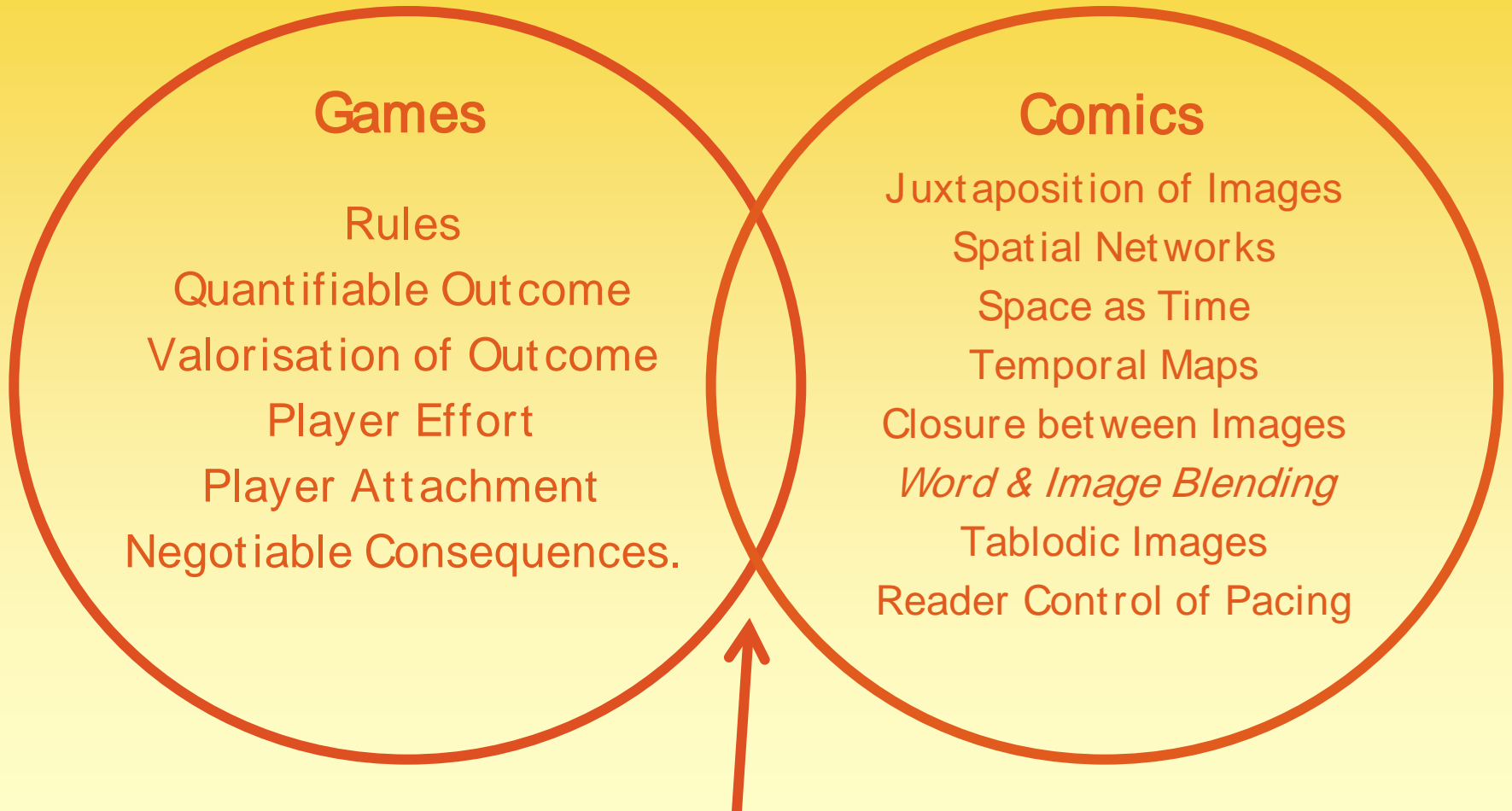
Comics: What are they?

- I've taken a similar approach to Juul in trying to identify the key characteristics of comics as a medium.

- I came up with eight key characteristics.

- These are primarily characteristics of the act of reading the object, not the object itself.

- It's not as neat a list. There's definite overlap between some characteristics.

- I decided to allow this overlap as each characteristic does work to highlight a specific aspect of the form.

Key Characteristics Of Comics

- Eight key characteristics:
  - Juxtaposition of Images
  - Spatial Networks
  - Space as Time
  - Temporal Maps
  - Closure between Images
  - Tablodic Images
  - *Word & Image Blending*
  - Reader Control of Pacing

Game Comics: What are they?

Games

Rules
Quantifiable Outcome
Valorisation of Outcome
Player Effort
Player Attachment
Negotiable Consequences.

Comics

Juxtaposition of Images
Spatial Networks
Space as Time
Temporal Maps
Closure between Images
Word & Image Blending
Tablodic Images
Reader Control of Pacing

Game Comics exist in the middle ground between comics and games.

Game Comics: What are they?

- In most existing examples of game/comic hybrids, the game play mechanics and the comic form remain separated.

- In *Red Hawk* the game's play is focused on the player's interaction with the game's text parser, while the comic strip is used separately to visualise the result of this interaction.

- In *Diceman*, the choose your-own-adventure structure has been grafted over the top of the comic.

Game Comics: What Are They?

- The structure of play again exists as a separate system from the systems used in the visual language of the comic.

- My aim in creating my own game/comic hybrids is to create works that offer a more direct synthesis between the media of comics and videogames.

- In doing so I'm trying to create games that make specific use of the key characteristics of comics in their gameplay.

Game Comics: What Are They?

- In order to do this, I've been considering how the two media make use of space.

- Comics & videogames are spatial media.

- In comics, space is used to represent time with the comic panels existing as part of a spatial network of juxtaposed and interrelated images.

- In videogames, exploration and manipulation of space can form a fundamental part of gameplay with the unlocking of space serving as a key aspect of a game's reward structure.

A Duck Has An Adventure

- My intent was to create something that comic readers view as a comic and videogame players view as a videogame.
- As an initial attempt, *Duck* sits nearer the comic end of the spectrum.
- It's based on a "choose-your-own-adventure" style of adventure game, where the player must make choices for the central character that influence the direction the narrative will take.
- Here's a quick play of the game.

A Duck Has An Adventure

- *Duck* went on sale as an *Android* app in 2012. Peeked at No. 6 in the *Google Play* Top 10 for paid comic apps. Short Listed in the *2012 New Media Writing Prize*.

- Uploaded to the free gaming portal *Kongregate* a month ago.

- Has received 300,000 'plays' so far.

- Generated several pages of player feedback and *YouTube* playthroughs.

- My initial impression is that the majority of commenting players accepted the work as a game.

Visual Style

- *Duck* was intended initially as a smartphone app and is designed for a casual gaming audience.
- Tried to build what Juul describes as "juiciness" (2012) - an excess of positive feedback for each action.
- Wanted to create something that called for constant reader interaction, not just an occasional tap to go to the next page.
- This called for a simplification of the comic's tablodic images so each panel could be consumed quickly.

Achievements

NEW HAT: **PIRATE HAT**

CAPTAIN!

ADVENTURE **AHOY!**

HATS: 1 OF 7

- The addition of achievements and collectable hats are tropes that operate as part of the game's reward system.
- "It is often the feeling of discovery that keeps players within the playworld." (Gazzard 2013)
- They also give the player a metric by which to measure their progression through the game.
- Seeking completeness becomes a game in itself, as the player tries to collect all the hats, achievements and endings.

Constructing Temporal Maps

- *Duck* can be considered in relation to my earlier infinite canvas hypercomics.

- In *Never Shoot The Chronopath* (2007) the whole comic is present for the reader to navigate through and read.

- In *Duck*, the player constructs the comics temporal map as they play.

- "Players of a game do not expect to have the full game world open to them; to do so would take away the exploratory and learning aspects of the game that the players need to keep playing." (Gazzard 2013)

Constructing Temporal Maps
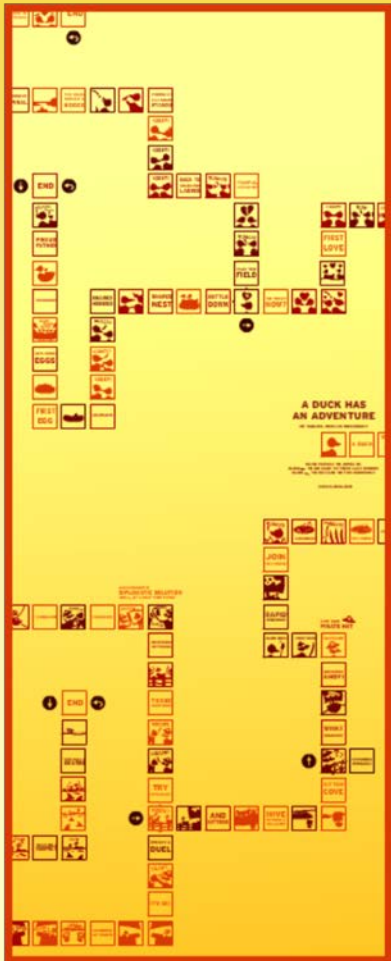
- A zoomed out view of the temporal map was added as a result of play testing.
- This zoomed out map becomes a visual record of where the player has been, the choices they've made and the paths they've yet to explore.
- Some pathways in the game are only unlocked once the player has visited them from two different directions.
- This unlocking of space becomes another aspect of the game's reward system.

Icarus Needs
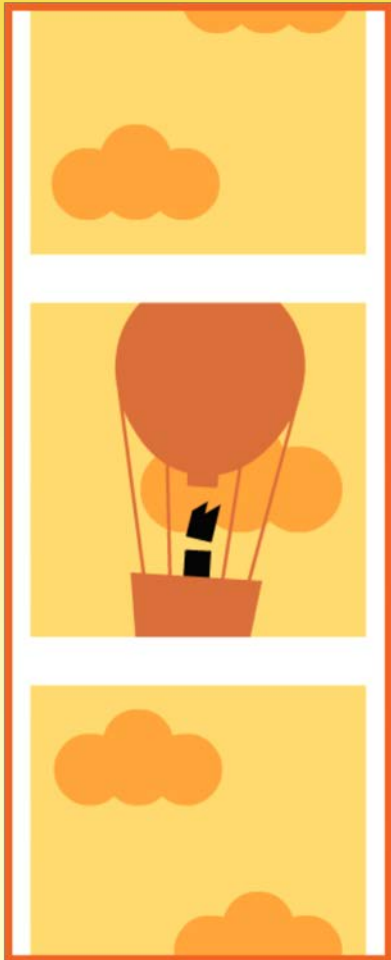
- *Icarus Needs* is an adventure game, taking its lead from both classic text-based games like *Zork* (1979) and also later graphic adventure games like *The Secret of Monkey Island* (1990) and *Day of The Tentacle* (1993).
- With *Icarus* I wanted to push towards something that felt more game-like.
- The game's narrative is a metafiction about a cartoonist who finds himself stuck in a videogame dream.
- Let's take a quick play of the game.

Game World
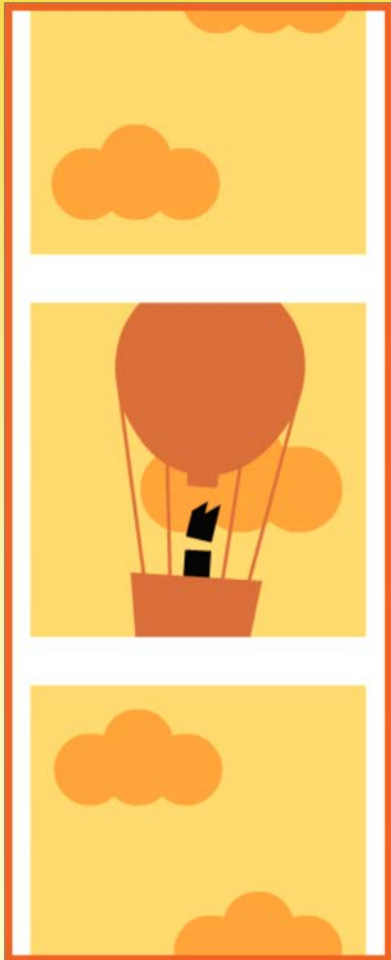
- Games theorist Nick Monfort notes that a typical adventure game "simulates a world that the interactor is supposed to figure out." (Montfort 2003)
- Montfort also notes that much of the fun of playing an adventure game comes from the exploration of the game world.
- My intent with *Icarus* was to create an explorable world mediated through the medium of comics.
- The narrative of *Icarus* is created through exploration and play.

Narrative, Play & Puzzles

- Montfort notes that adventure games are not themselves narratives, but "produce narratives when a person interacts with them." (2003)

- In *Icarus* you move around the world, interacting with the world's inhabitants and picking up objects to solve puzzles.

- "The puzzles in a work of interactive fiction function to control the revelation of the narrative; they are part of an interactive process that generates narrative." (Montfort 2003)

Navigation & Exploration

- The player in *Icarus* is trying to both appreciate the world they're in and solve it in order to successfully traverse the game.

- In the design of the game I tried to lead players in certain directions, but ultimately the player is left to determine their own path through the game.

- "Videogames offer us the empowered experience of navigating our own individual paths." (Gazzard 2013)

Movement & Control
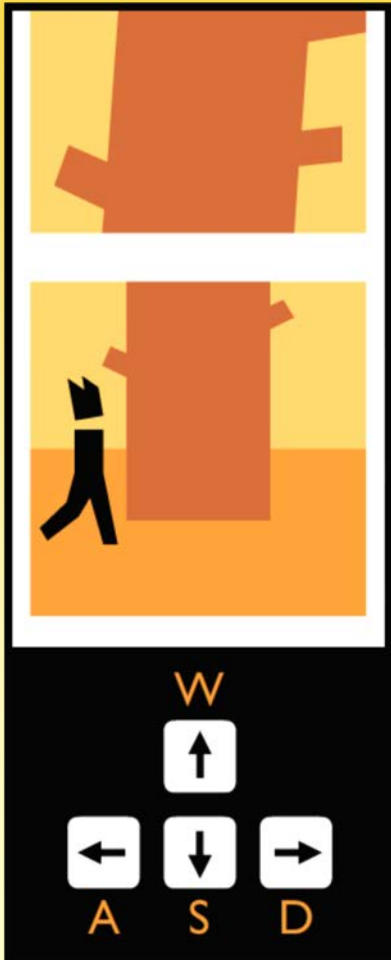
- I was careful to keep the reader in charge of pacing throughout the comic.
- No animation within the panels and we never see the lead character in motion.
- The game, like any comic, relies on the player's use of closure to interpret the changing still images as movement.
- As a browser-based game, *Icarus* allowed me to prioritise arrow key and WASD controls to give the player a greater sense of agency within the game.

Movement & Control
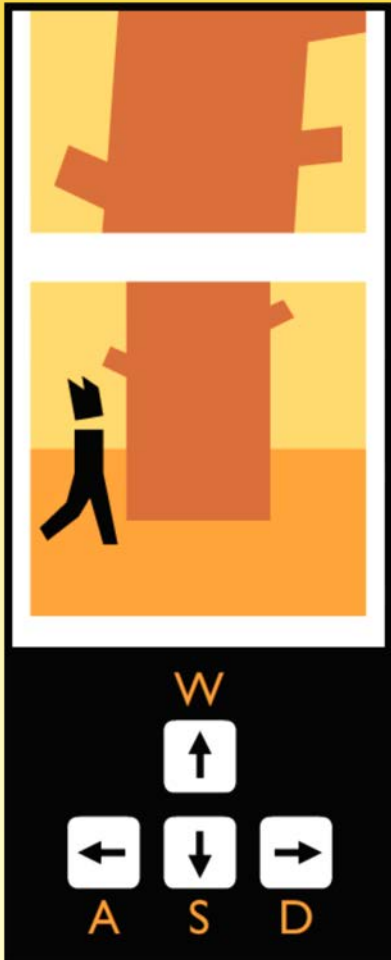
- Agency is "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices." (Murray 1997)

- Agency in *Icarus* is further enhanced by the player having a direct avatar within the game world which they can identify with and control.

- This increased sense of agency is one of the factors that push *Icarus* more towards the game end of the game comic spectrum.

Aporia / Epiphany
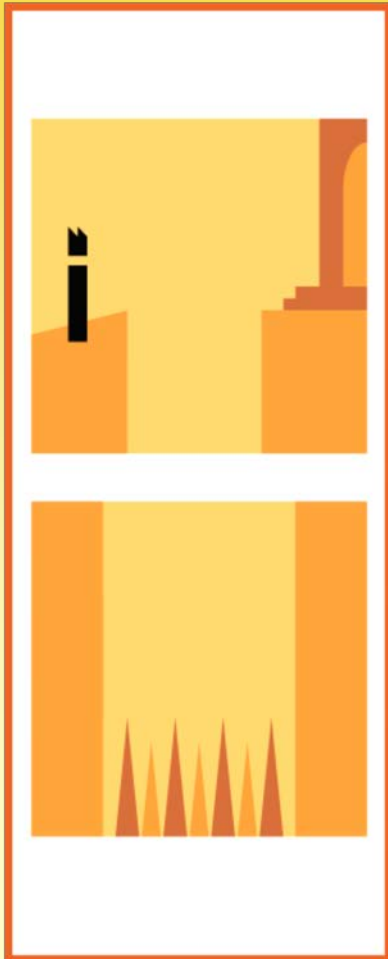
- Another factor is the nature of the "aporia and epiphany" (Aarseth 1999) relationship within the game.

- In gaming terms, aporia can be thought of as either the puzzle or the pause-to-solve period associated with a puzzle. (Gazzard 2013).

- Epiphany is the realisation of the solution that allows the player to progress onwards to the next area/puzzle within the game.
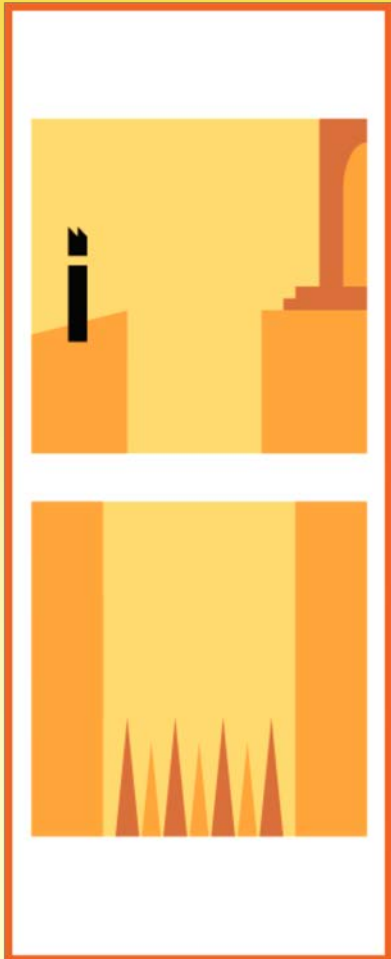
Aporia / Epiphany
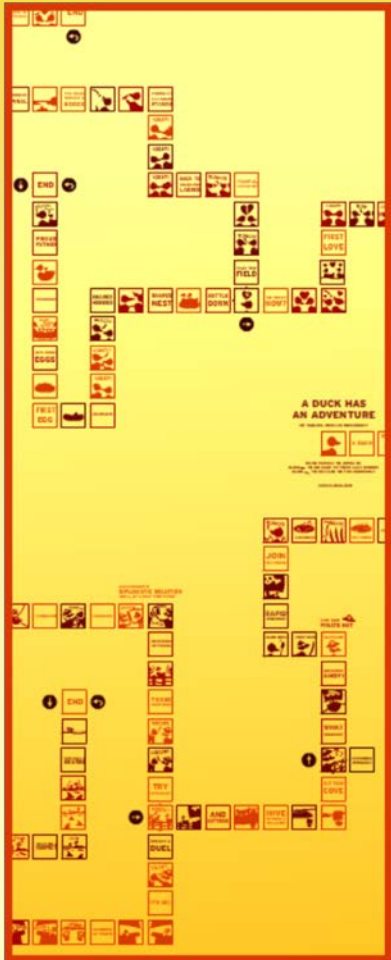
- In *Duck*, the majority of the game's aporia/epiphany loops come towards the end of the game as the player searches for the final hats/endings/ achievements in order to achieve a complete playthrough of the game.

- Here the zoomed out map becomes of strategic use as the player tries to spot unexplored pathways or find new routes to unlock.
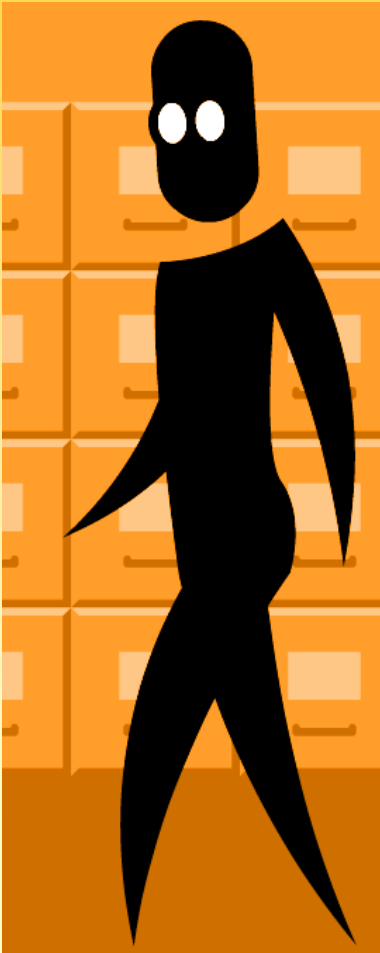
Aporia / Epiphany

- In contrast, *Icarus* spreads the player's experience of aporia/epiphany more evenly throughout the game.
- The player is presented regular gates to progress that most be overcome through further exploration and application of found items.
- Each epiphany is accompanied with the reward of new areas of space to explore and new puzzles to solve.
- In this way *Icarus* delivers a much better paced gaming experience than Duck.

Games Comics: What Next?

- So far I've been focussed towards games of progression that rely on exploration as part of their gameplay.

- Next I hope to develop a puzzle game that keeps aporia/epiphany at its heart but jettisons the explorative aspects of play.

- This will allow me to broaden my investigate to consider how more rule-based games of emergence can be successfully hybridised with the comics form.

Games Comics: Game Over

- Insert Questions To Continue
  - **A Duck Has An Adventure**
    http://e-merl.com/stuff/duckadv.html
  - **Icarus Needs**
    http://e-merl.com/stuff/icarus.html

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