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## PEER GYNT: FROM PLAY TO GAME

MAGNUS HENRIK SANDBERG


“What used to be the act of reading is now the act of doing”

Alexander R. Galloway (2006, chap. 1)

Henrik Ibsen’s drama *Peer Gynt* (1867) has been adapted for a video game. While it is meant for educational use and has already been launched on a Norwegian publisher’s school site, its learning mechanics are subtle enough that the game will also be offered in the entertainment market as a narrative adventure game (*The Peer Gynt Game*, n.d.). An adaptation of a written play as a video game implies that new modes of storytelling are being introduced, as well as a degree of agency for the players. The capability for this medium to adapt to and develop more traditional narrative expressions, considering their immense popularity and increased acknowledgement as works of art, makes video games an increasingly important area of study (Ensslin 2014; Kulturdepartementet 2019).

This was part of the reasoning behind the decision to develop a video game version of *Peer Gynt* for students in secondary school. The project was initiated by Peer Gynt AS, the organizer of the annual *Peer Gynt* festival in Gudbrandsdalen district in Norway, where three of the play’s five acts are set. They were searching for new ways to introduce a new generation to the story world of *Peer Gynt*. Peer Gynt AS initiated a dialogue with the Norwegian publishing house Aschehoug, and later with game developers at Sarepta Studio in Hamar. This led to a

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collaboration between Sarepta, Peer Gynt AS and Aschehoug; Sarepta developed the game, aided by literary and theatre experts from Peer Gynt AS' extensive network, while Aschehoug developed teaching material for the game, and eventually published it on their online education site "Aschehoug univers." The project was financed by a mix of public funding and private sponsorship (Imeland 2022).

In Norway, Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* is often referred to as the country's 'national epic' (Christensen and Myren-Svelstad 2020; Rees 2014), and it is a literary classic that Norwegian youths are commonly introduced to in school (Skaug and Blikstad-Balas 2019). As a learning resource, *Peer Gynt the Game* is, however, meant to have a purpose beyond the retelling of the story in the play. In line with the current national curriculum, the teaching plans developed to accompany the game focus on *life skills*, inviting students to discuss Peer's dilemmas and motivations, and thereby challenging the students to reflect upon his as well as their own life choices.

In this study, I explore how new modes and player agency have been added to Ibsen's writing when adapting it into a video game, and how they form *modal ensembles*, i.e. combinations of modes. Applying terminology from social semiotics and sociocultural learning theory, I describe these as resources for the players' meaning-making (Bezemer and Kress 2016; Zittoun and Brinkmann 2012). By focusing on the oldest and newest resources for meaning-making and understanding this medial transpositioning of the story as a form of multimodal *recontextualisation* (Bezemer and Kress 2016, 75), this study will be guided by the following research question: how does *Peer Gynt the Game* make use of verbal text and gamic action when recontextualizing Ibsen's play *Peer Gynt*?

I will approach this question by describing and analyzing the central modes and multimodal ensembles of an excerpt of the game as I experienced it when playing, as well as a playthrough of one dyad of students who discuss and interact as they play. The inclusion of a student playthrough is motivated by an

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understanding of the game's potentials for meaning-making as depending on context. In order to identify meaning potential in the educational setting, I do not see it as sufficient to only play/-read the game myself. By including perspectives from two students who played the game as part of their upper secondary school Norwegian class, I get access to the meaning-making from players within the target group for the game as a learning resource.

I focus the study on the opening scene of *Peer Gynt the Game*, which corresponds to the opening scene of Ibsen's play. This scene is a suitable excerpt because it introduces most of the central narrative and interactive elements, variations of which are reused throughout the game. Another reason for selecting the opening scene for analysis is that this part generated rich explorative and interpretative discussions among many of the students I observed playing the game. Gradually, as they played, they talked less about their perceptions of the game and opinions on what to do. This may have to do with their positionings and pattern of cooperation having been established, and possibly that the excitement of playing a video game in class wore off and gave way to a level of engagement more typical for a school setting. In any case, this made the students' conversation during the early gameplay far richer in ideas and interpretations than later. A possible loss when limiting the analysis to the opening scene, is of course that we don't get access to interpretations of the character development that happens throughout the story. However, due to the gradually less explicit forms of interaction between the students as they played, I chose to focus on the opening.

Despite the strong relation between literature and play (Spariosu 1982) and the contemporary proliferation of digital hybrid forms of games and literature (Ensslin 2014), there are surprisingly few recontextualizations of entire works of classic literary texts into videogames. Media scholar Julian Novitz explains this scarcity by pointing to "the absurdity of representing essentially introspective and reflective literary narratives through the action-focused mechanics of videogame play" (2020, 6).

Consequently, there is no extensive body of research on such adaptations. One exception is Shakespeare's plays and *Hamlet* in particular, which has been subject to several adaptations (see, for example, Chironis and Fallon 2019; Crayne 1983; Johnson 2003; North 2013; Pudlo 2004), which, in turn, have sparked related research activity (Bloom 2015; Harrison and Lutz 2017; Novitz 2020; Timplalexi 2018). This body of research raises issues that are transferable to the present study of an Ibsen video game.

In discussing five *Hamlet*-based games, Matthew Harrison and Michael Lutz express a view similar to that of Novitz in the quote above, stating that "to play *Hamlet* is inevitably to depart from *Hamlet*, to leave behind plot, character, language, and theme and head south into a murkier territory of adaptation, remediation, and transformation" (2017, 24). This, they argue, makes *Hamlet*-based games "a limit case of adaptation" (24). While *Peer Gynt* and *Hamlet* both present contemplative and deeply psychologic themes, the character Peer is far more extroverted and active than *Hamlet*. This might make it easier to recontextualize his story as an action game, although focusing on the action might imperil the more contemplative themes.

Novitz looks beyond the alleged incommensurability and, in comparing four digital game adaptations of *Hamlet* and discussing their linearity and faithfulness to the play as well as their interactivity in the form of branching narratives, finds that the games can be subordinate to as well as dispute the primacy of the classic. Despite their considerable differences, he concludes, all four games succeed in translating "the past into the present and the present into the past" (Novitz 2020, 14). In this way, they touch upon what is also a commonly stated legacy of *Peer Gynt* and a rationale for proposing its use in an educational context.

## THEORY

Adaptation scholar Linda Hutcheon describes the act of adaptation as "repetition without replication" and states that the intentions behind making an adaptation can just as well be an "urge

to consume and erase the memory of the adapted text [as] the desire to pay tribute by copying” (Hutcheon and O’Flynn 2013, 7). While the motivation for adapting *Peer Gynt* for a videogame is certainly not to eradicate Ibsen’s text, one may ask to what degree and how the project is about more than copying it. The concept of fidelity in adaptation refers to the degree to which the adaptation remains true to the adapted work, and Hutcheon’s notion of reading adaptations *as adaptations* involves recognizing that adaptations are not simply inferior copies of the original work, but rather creative works in their own right (Hutcheon and O’Flynn 2013, 6). While the question of fidelity, manifested in the constant comparison between Ibsen’s text and the video game, is a central aspect to this investigation, the question of exactly how meaning material is adapted across media will be approached with reference to another theoretical tradition.

This study offers an analysis of *Peer Gynt the Game* as a multi-modal *recontextualization* of Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*. By enquiring into the game’s *modal grammar*, understood as the “regular patterns of use” of *modes* and *modal ensembles* (Mills and Unsworth 2018, 161), I seek to understand how Ibsen’s original written verbal text is used as a resource and how new modes affect the meaning potential of the story as a game. Such an analysis provides a basis for understanding the *sign-making* of the game designers and therefore the game’s meaning potential (Bezemer and Kress 2016). By also examining how a dyad of students play and interact while playing the game, I gain access to a case of the intended users’ meaning-making.

Following multimodality scholar Carey Jewitt, I understand *modes* as a set of socially and culturally shaped resources for making meaning (2013, 254). While some of the modes I identify are established and agreed upon within social semiotic theory, others are less so. In this study, voice and moving images, as well as what learning and communications scholar Jeff Bezemer and social semiotician Gunther Kress consider their “static counterparts” of writing and image (2016, 68), belong to the category of generally accepted modes (Jewitt 2013). Layout and the diverse

interactional resources typical to games, are newer and sometimes contested modes (Bezemer and Kress 2008; Burn 2022). In this study, I draw upon media and games scholar Alexander R. Galloway in referring to the latter as *gamic action*.

As modes are identified and conceptualized in social contexts, they are not universal but rather particular to a community, where there is a shared understanding of their semiotic characteristics (Jewitt 2013). Digital games are characterized by how they instigate material change through action, and therefore each instance of *gamic action* must be thought of as having meaning potential (Galloway 2006). However, the term may be too vague and inclusive to pass as a mode in its own right. Kress has proposed *module* as a “catch-all term to name the units which serve to make up texts and other semiotic entities” (2010, 147). Thus, whereas *gamic action* may not meet the criteria for being considered a mode in a strict social semiotic sense, it is useful as a category to encapsulate the interactivity taking place in the game. Regardless, each type of action that I identify and discuss is certainly a module that serves to make meaning for the player through its *participatory affordances* (Kress 2010) and in combination with poetic and narrative techniques (Ensslin 2014).

A *multimodal ensemble* refers to a representation that combines a set of specific modes and modules to form meaning. Whereas each mode in an ensemble carries one aspect of the meaning material, it is the combination that represents the sign-makers’ intended meaning. Therefore, the presence of “communicationally effective, epistemologically apt, multimodal ensembles” is the result of the designers’ meaning-making (Bezemer and Kress 2016, 64). In the analysis, I describe specific ensembles at play. I analyze the work of modes within them and identify when they switch into new ensembles.

Throughout my analysis, I apply Galloway’s theory of *gamic action* when identifying instances of such action in different situations and ensembles. The action may be either diegetic, that is, occurring within the game’s narrative world, or nondiegetic, meaning that it is external to the game’s narrative yet no less

part of the gameplay. These terms are borrowed from literary and film theory, but their significance and meaning change slightly when migrated to the context of material action in video games (see Bunia 2010; Elam 2002). In *Peer Gynt the Game*, pressing a button that causes Peer to move away from his mother Aase is an example of a diegetic act, whereas pausing the game is a nondiegetic act. Furthermore, the action is seen as performed by one of two actors. Although all gamic actions are, at some level, enabled by the designer, it may be useful to think of the actor of a given act as either the player or the machine. Galloway emphasizes that this division is artificial, as “the machine and the operator [i.e. the player] work together in a cybernetic relationship to effect the various actions of the video game” (Galloway 2006, chap. 1). Still, I find it useful to identify player actions, as this is where the player’s response takes the material form of an input that the player gives to the machine.

In adaptation theory, Hutcheon describes three *modes of engagement*, not to be confused with Jewitt’s *modes* discussed elsewhere in this article, in which people can either be told a story (*via* text), shown a story (*via* images) or interact with a story (Hutcheon and O’Flynn 2013, 22). These three are all immersive and can require some form of interaction from the reader. However, more likely than not, the latter incorporate the former in very concrete ways. In *Peer Gynt the Game*, the three modes of engagement are all present throughout the game, and this study is an analysis of how they relate to each other.

In this analysis of *Peer Gynt the Game* as a recontextualization of Ibsen’s play into a multimodal digital game, I use the “original” verbal textual mode as a vantage point and try to understand what new role it is given in the modal grammar of the game. I describe how some content has been transformed within its original mode of writing, whereas other elements have been transduced into new modes (Bezemer and Kress 2016, 52). Since “not every mode is equally ‘useable’ for a particular task” (Jewitt 2014, 26), it is interesting to ask which modes are foregrounded in the multimodal ensembles of the game as well as



how they relate to each other (Bezemer and Kress 2016, 78). Seeing modes in combination in this way demonstrates the interest and attention of the designers in shaping the virtual environment of the game (Bezemer and Kress 2016, 7).

MATTER AND METHOD: AN ELABORATED LIE IN  
MULTIPLE MODES

Ibsen's drama famously reveals a core theme in its first line of dialogue, when Peer's mother, Aase, exclaims, "Lies, Peer, lies!" (Ibsen 2016, 168). The play can be read as the story of how Peer's lying, both to himself as well as to others, bring him earthly success and riches, while, at the same time, cause him to fail in his ultimate goal of finding his "self." In the opening scene of the game, Peer's elaboration of his initial lie to his mother invites the player to engage in the dramatic adventure story he makes up. Peer recounts to Aase how, in a failed attempt to hunt down a reindeer buck, he instead ended up on its back as it galloped up a narrow mountain ridge and eventually sprang out into the air. With Peer still clinging onto its neck, the buck dove into a lake far below. At first, Aase is taken by the story and praises God for having saved her son's life. She then realizes that she has been tricked and scolds him for having lied to her again. The scene ends after Aase tells Peer that a wealthy nearby farmer's daughter is getting married, and Peer decides to go there and marry her first.

My analysis of the scene focuses on how writing and speech relate to still and moving images as well as the game's graphic layout and mechanisms for interactivity, which I call gamic action, or when initiated by the player, a player action. In order to avoid too much complexity, I largely ignore other modes, such as soundscapes and colors. There is no denying that a choice of leaving something out may affect the overall analysis; for instance, there is little doubt that the audio design affects player experience and possibly player actions (Jorgensen 2009). I do, however, take into account the music accompanying the buckride, as it connects closely with the modes that are central

to my reading of the scene. Yet, my choice of focus stems from my observations of students playing. I have seen how they frequently commented upon certain postures as if they were stills, animated sequences as if they watched a movie, as well as the quality and ease of gameplay mechanics as they played. Therefore, I find it interesting to recognize possibilities for meaning-making in these modes, separately and in ensembles.

Inclusion of the playthrough of a dyad of students helps me to illustrate and further explore the meaning-making potential of the game. Having students play *Peer Gynt the Game* in pairs may seem odd as the game seems to be designed as a single player experience. This was a pedagogic decision made by the teacher of the class and based on a recommendation by the developers of the game's teaching material. It is, however, also in accordance with research on game-based learning (Arnseth, Hanghøj, and Silseth 2018; Sandford et al. 2006; Wouters and van Oostendorp 2013). Having the students play together was of course also convenient for the present study, as it provided access to the players' thoughts and reasonings as they played.

The dyad that is included in the study has been selected from a collection of 15 students playing in groups of two or three. All were students in the same Norwegian upper secondary school, and I have filmed them playing the entire game in a classroom context. Apart from a short introduction to Ibsen and *Peer Gynt* before playing the game, the students had not yet read or in other ways learned about the play in school. This said, it is unlikely that they had never heard of the play, considering *Peer Gynt's* stature in Norway. Still, their discussion as they played revealed that they possessed at best superficial and fragmented knowledge of it. Their playing of the game can therefore, despite having some knowledge or at least an awareness of the work's cultural significance, not be described as what Hutcheon calls an "interpretive doubling," i.e. a knowing audience's "conceptual flipping back and forth between the work we know and the work we are experiencing" (Hutcheon and O'Flynn 2013, 139). Furthermore, adaptation was not the focus of the class.

## Peer Gynt: *From Play to Game*

The topic of the class was to approach questions concerning life skills through playing and discussing *Peer Gynt the Game*. The plan made by the teachers referred to a statement in the National curriculum, saying that reading fiction “can both confirm and challenge the pupils’ self-image, thereby contributing to identity development and life skills” (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2020, 3). In this respect it also echoes Novitz’ findings about the relevance of *Hamlet* games to the contemporary lives, as quoted previously. The criterium for choosing the particular dyad in this study, was that both students were active in dialogue, expressing their thoughts and opinions as they played. In comparison, the discussion in other groups was either dominated by one student’s voice or characterized by more dispersed and fragmented comments on what they experienced. This is not to say that most groups were dysfunctional, only that I chose the one that I found to best reflect the meaning-making potential of the activity. The didactic challenge posed by students who did not seem to benefit from playing in class is discussed elsewhere (Sandberg 2023). In this study my interest concerns the game itself and its meaning potential. The dyad’s playthrough is included to display some of that potential.<sup>1</sup> I will also provide screenshots for illustration and analysis throughout this essay.

The five modal ensembles I have identified in the opening scene of *Peer Gynt – The Game* are used in variations throughout the game. I have named them “modal ensemble 1–5,” and they can be described as follows:

- Modal ensemble 1 is used three times in this excerpt of the game. In this ensemble, written verbal text is strongly foregrounded, and the player action involves advancing the text.
- Modal ensemble 2 is used twice. In this ensemble, the player act of moving the character in the virtual space is forwarded, and elements of the verbal textual narrative are contained in virtual objects (*lore*).
- Modal ensemble 3 is used twice, but with a variation in the second instance. Here, the story is told by a

succession of still images aligned with voiced verbal language. Mostly, there is no player action. However, the final part of the second instance makes use of the player act of advancing the text, which we have previously seen in modal ensemble 1.

- Modal ensemble 4 is where moving images and voiced verbal text constitute the main modes of narration, but the story will only advance if the player successfully accomplishes a series of quick time events. The latter is effectively foregrounded.
- Modal ensemble 5 is where written verbal text is strongly foregrounded, and the player action is about making choices in a quasi-branching narrative.

Foregrounding is a key concept in the description of the ensembles, as it may be assumed that salience is assigned to the elements that are regarded as particularly relevant (Bezemer and Kress 2008). Using the verbal text modes as my point of departure, I will seek to describe the semiotic work done by the ensembles through the affordances of their modes.

Transcription of the scene took place in several work sessions before and alongside the analysis. Preparatory work consisted of mapping the game's narration related to the original lines of the play (see [Supplemental material](#)). It revealed how parts of Ibsen's prose are reproduced as he wrote them, whereas other parts are shortened or simplified, and some are left out entirely. Some of the backstory of Peer's childhood and family history, which was originally revealed in the dialogues, has been shortened and transformed into lore text. Other parts, such as the stage directions and environmental depictions, have been transduced into new modes.

The process of transcription evolved pragmatically as an expression of my own meaning-making in the process. I started by making a transcript of the vocal conduct of the players when playing. Using the digital whiteboarding platform Miro (miro.com), I organized the transcript in a column alongside the script from the game, in order to display a vertical timeline of

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everything uttered both by players and in-game characters. I also noted where the in-game voices were supported by written text. Then, upon discovering how the students sometimes entered into dialogues with the virtual characters or commented specifically about what characters had said, I marked where such interactions occurred. Subsequently, I realized how the students sometimes talked at the same time as the narration of the game and thus missed parts of it. I decided to visualize the extent of this. Finally, I marked where on the timeline player action was called for, and where they finally did act. All of these layers add meaning to my analysis.

### ANALYSIS

In the analysis, I identify two modal ensembles at work in the dialogic parts of the opening scene, two in the monologic parts, and one in the type of scene that I have termed introspection.

#### *Two modal ensembles of dialogue*

In Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* much of the narrative unfolds in the form of dialogues between Peer and other characters. In the game, these dialogues are generally narrated in two alternating modal ensembles. In one, the verbal text is strongly foregrounded, and its foundation in Ibsen's play is displayed, and in the other, much less so. I will now describe these ensembles and analyze their meaning potential, with reference to the dyad's playthrough.

In the first part of the opening dialogue, the camera frames Peer and his mother. Peer is standing while Aase sits. Parts of the image are moving; trees and bushes are swaying in the wind, the mill wheel is turning, and the characters are gesturing as they speak. Nevertheless, the image appears static in that the characters do not reposition themselves and cannot be moved by the player. The gazes of Peer and Aase meet in a vector line that indicates an ongoing transactional process (Figure 1). The scene is tense. Aase's expression is stern, as she is accusing her son of lying.



Figure 1. Modal ensemble A. Aase accuses Peer of lying. Peer denies it.

When the dialogue begins, a massive frame appears in front of the lower part of the image. It looks like a bulletin board made of wood. I will call it the “speech board.” The speech board is similar in functionality to a speech bubble, giving information about who speaks and what they say. Unlike a speech bubble, which would be embedded into the layer of the image, the speech board is placed on top of it, displaying the lines more like the manuscript of a play than the panels of a comic or a graphic novel (Hawreliak 2019, 48). The dialogue is uttered by the characters as well as printed one line at a time on the speech board. After each line is spoken, the player must click the mouse button in order for the next line to be uttered and appear in print. The progression of the dialogue is thus an effect of player action. This arrangement is kept only through the first few lines of dialogue, where the words are taken from Ibsen’s original text.

In other words, this first part of the dialogue is expressed in a modal ensemble of speech, writing, layout and the player action of conducting the unfolding of the dialogue itself. I have categorized it as modal ensemble 1 (Table 1). The reason for communicating the dialogue in such an elaborated ensemble may have been pedagogic. Voice as a mode, while having the capacity to

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Table 1. Overview of the modal ensembles in the first scene: <https://figshare.com/s/e8372c89fdd5e4be6e5a>. Acknowledging that the ensembles consist of more modes, I have listed the two that form the core of my enquiry: verbal text and player action. Using these I can separate the modal ensembles from one another.

Modal ensembles	Time	Time, 2 <sup>nd</sup> instance	Time, 3 <sup>rd</sup> instance	Verbal text	Player action
No. 1	0:17–0:46	6:35–6:54	7:47–8:50	Spoken dialogue Writing on speech board	Clicking with the mouse to advance the dialogue.
No. 2	0:47–1:10	6:55–7:46		Spoken dialogue Lore	Moving Peer using the keyboard. Clicking with the mouse to close a pop-up window.
No. 3	1:11–1:39	4:04–4:39		Spoken monologue 2 <sup>nd</sup> instance: writing on speech board	None in the first instance. 2 <sup>nd</sup> instance: clicking to advance the monologue.
No. 4	1:40–4:03			Spoken monologue	Pressing keys in quick time events.
No. 5	4:40–6:34			Written dilemma	Clicking one answer among three alternatives.

enrich expression and comprehension through its affordances, can also be challenging because it unfolds over time (Van Leeuwen 2009). This may cause students to fall behind in the story if they find the language challenging or if they are simply unfocused. The written text is a good support in that respect, and the fact that the player action in this excerpt is effectively to let the player control the tempo with mouse clicks makes it even easier to follow. In this way, the designers have used the affordances of the different modes to make the dialogue more

comprehensible to players. Despite the tension expressed visually between the characters, the image is effectively backgrounded in the ensemble. Writing, speech, layout and player actions are aligned in foregrounding the verbal text (Jewitt 2014, 27). It is of particular importance that the required player action involves interacting with the writing in the speech box and not the characters in the image. The significance of this was illustrated in the dyad's playthrough, when one of the students cried out with joy when he was eventually allowed to move Peer.

The student's joyful response marks the first spot where one modal ensemble gives way to a new one (Table 1, modal ensemble 2). Here, the written text and the speech board disappear, the camera zooms out and a tutorial for the movement buttons appears in the top left of the screen. It shows how the player can move Peer with the W (forward), A (left), S (back) and D (right) keys on the keyboard, which is a familiar setup in video games. Simultaneously, the camera zooms out slightly and a flame appears a few steps away as an obvious "target" towards which to steer Peer. Aase's scolding of her son continues but is now mediated in voice only. Her words are no longer Ibsen's original but a shortened and simplified version of the corresponding content in the play. As the space for movement is limited and there is nothing else to explore, the "invitation" to go and pick up the object is likely to be accepted by most players. It opens a text frame that covers most of the screen. I regard this as a part of this multimodal ensemble; the floating object acts as a placeholder for more verbal content that can be realized by the player. The frame contains a written text that gives more depth to the story by including information that is not narrated in the simplified "main storyline" of the game. In games containing elaborate virtual worlds, such information is commonly known as *lore* (Anderson 2019). This first piece of lore lets the player in on how Peer molded buttons out of tin as a child.

The students' way of relating to the unfolding story is markedly different in the two ensembles. In the first (Table 1, modal ensemble 1), they focus strongly on the verbal, constantly commenting



on it and even taking part in the dialogue themselves. This first happens after the opening line, where Aase says, “Lies, Peer, lies!,” one of the students replies “No” to Aase before Peer does and then asks his fellow player what they should do now. A moment later, when Aase tells Peer to “Swear then,” and Peer replies “Why swear?,” (literal translation) the same student says, “He is quick with words.” This pattern is constant in the parts where this modal ensemble is used. Nearly every line is either commented upon or replied to by one of the students, who makes use of their agency to delay the dialogue in order to finish their own comments before clicking to get to the next line (Figure S1).

In the second ensemble (Table 1), the strong emphasis on the verbal text ceases while character movement in the virtual space is foregrounded. This affects the meaning potential. With the written text support gone and the player action changed into Peer’s movement, the verbal text narration only remains in voice mode. The changed attribute of Aase’s words, from having been in Ibsen’s archaic and classic original, which even rhymes, to a modernized and simplified version, can be understood as a compensation for the lost multi-modal mediation of the text. However, this measure is not enough to keep our dyad attentive. Throughout this segment, the students seem to ignore or partly talk over Aase, focusing instead on their new ability to move Peer, as well as on the text in the lore that opens when they move the character to the icon. With the lore window open, they are also deprived of the visual narration of the moving image. Had the lore window not been in the way, the players would have seen Peer turn his back to Aase, lift his gaze, and look dreamily into the air as he commenced recounting the buckride. By missing this bridge into Peer’s fantasy, the dyad ended up believing throughout the buckride that he had in fact left his mother to go hunting. Upon returning to the present, one student says, “Ah, he was telling a story!” The other responds by blurting out “aah.”

Toward the end of the opening scene, the same two ensembles reappear, and the players react in similar ways. When the dialogue is only mediated in the mode of voice, the players move toward the lore icon, and then they focus on the writing in the lore

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Figure 2. Players conduct Peer in climbing a slope while Aase speaks.

window. Here, again, they miss one piece of essential information, which we know about because, incidentally, they find out and talk about it: At the very end of the scene, when Peer says “Goodbye, mother,” one of the students exclaims, “She was his mother!” One might think that this was obvious throughout the scene. Yet, it was explicitly stated only once, when the second lore window opened while the students were reading and discussing its textual content.

After having read, discussed, and closed the window, the student who steers Peer moves around the courtyard. Upon discovering that they can make the character climb up a steep slope, both respond with enthusiastic cheers. All the while, Aase’s tirade continues in the background, seemingly without receiving any attention from the two players (Figure 2).

In the first instance of modal ensemble 2 (Table 1), there is little to do aside from collecting the lore item. In the second instance, however, there is more action: the yard is like a playground where, besides climbing the slope, players can make Peer jump over a stream and balance on a log. The developer has created this as a sort of tutorial for all the movements the character can make while exploring within the game. Even so, the dyad went directly for the lore and spent most of the available time

reading and discussing it. They did, however, discover the climbing activity and responded very positively to this asset before being pulled back into the dialogue again.

Summing up the dialogue sequences, we can say that the contrast between the two modal ensembles demonstrates that the aligned modes of the first ensemble are highly efficient in supporting each other and moving the verbal textual narrative forward. In the second modal ensemble, the high density of modes with a weaker alignment and no clear forwarding causes the player to miss out on parts of the story.

*Two modal ensembles of monologue*

When Peer Gynt is not in dialogic exchanges with other characters, he is often recounting daydreams in monologues. In the opening scene, he tells his mother the fantastic story of “the buckride” (Ibsen 2016, 169–172). In the game, the transition into fantasy is expressed visually by Peer turning his back on his mother and looking dreamily out into the air, as if he is primarily talking to himself when telling the story.

The monologue itself is retold in two new modal ensembles, where the first frames the second by appearing at the beginning and end of it. The “framing ensemble” (Table 1, modal ensemble 3) consists of a series of still images that are shown in sequence with Peer’s voice narration. The first part narrates how he ended up on the back of the buck, and the second, after the buckride itself, describes how the beast sprang into the air and dove into a lake far below with Peer still holding onto its antlers. I will not describe the unfolding of this ensemble further, as most of it does not contain writing or player actions (the latter making it a good example of diegetic machine action (Galloway 2006). However, the last image of the series uses a module of player action that we have also seen in the first ensemble discussed.

This image displays Peer’s first-person perspective. We see his hands holding onto the antlers, which form a circle. And, framed by this circle, we can see the reflection in the lake of the buck and Peer just before they hit the water (Figure 3).

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Figure 3. Screenshot depicting the reflection of Peer and the buck in the lake the moment before they crash into it.

On top of this final still image, a speech board soon appears and displays in text the conclusive lines of the monologue (Figure 4). The mode of writing aligns with the narration of the voice and what the image displays: “Buck from the air with phantom buck/all in a fleeting/sprays far flung” (Ibsen 2016, 171). Together, the screenshots of the image before and after the textboard module is added (Figures 3 and 4) demonstrate the foregrounding of the writing in a concrete and almost brutal way, as the circular composition of the image is broken by being partly covered by the unnecessarily large board displaying the words one line at a time.

With the return of the speech board comes the player action of controlling the dialogue’s progression by mouse clicks. The designer’s reason for bringing in the speech board here is not clear. It may be that the lines are considered classic and worthy of emphasizing to the player. However, this also has the effect of allowing the player to contemplate the last image a bit longer, which, despite being partly covered, is still a striking visual representation of the central theme of self-image.

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Figure 4. Screenshot depicting Peer and the buck the moment before they hit the water and the speech board.

The contrast is sharp between the framing ensemble, which consists almost exclusively of diegetic machine acts, and the ensemble of the buckride itself (Table 1, modal ensemble 4). After a loading screen showing a dramatic mountain ridge, we see Peer on top of the buck from a bird's eye view, entering the screen from the bottom left corner. The narrow mountain ridge stretches across the entire screen, forming a vector in the image toward the sun. From this high altitude, we are shown where Peer is heading before the camera zooms in, positioning us behind and slightly above him. Later, in short passages, the camera switches to a third person side-view and back again. Soon, it is revealed to the player that the initial overview of the ridge was also a kind of "mission brief," as the player is now given the task of keeping Peer safely on the beast as it gallops along it. This happens by way of a classic game mechanic known as quick time events, where the machine displays to the player which button to press, and the player must respond quickly. Meanwhile,

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Peer's voice narrates the buckride with a slightly shortened version of the original monologue (Figure 5).

If we set aside the gamic challenge for a moment, the scene itself is cinematic and bears similarities to a movie. It pays homage to Ibsen's writing and creates an alignment between text and image, illustrating the voiced monologue with images like the sparkling sun and how we can "look down on eagles high above the tarn" (Ibsen 2016, 171). However, it also provides foreshadowing, which is not obvious in the verbal text alone: riding on the narrow ridge toward the sun, it is hard not to think about Peer's lifelong journey toward Solveig. The allegoric relation between Solveig and the sun ("sol" means "sun" in Norwegian) is well known but appears here as the fruit of a successful transmediation of the written text into the visual medium.

The ride ends when a flock of rock ptarmigans (the voiced narration, following Ibsen's text, only talks of a single bird) scare the buck into leaping off the ridge into the air. The screen then switches to the framing ensemble of comic strip-like panels (Table 1, modal ensemble 3).



Figure 5. A quick time event during the buckride. An image of a button appears just below center of the screen with a white shrinking circle around, signaling that the player must press the button before the circle evaporates in its origo.

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As with the dialogic ensembles, the dyad's response gives clear indications as to what modes are foregrounded. During the sequences of still images and narration (Table 1, modal ensemble 3), the students' discussion concerns both the visual and verbal modes. They listen, and although in their eagerness to voice their thoughts along the way they miss out on some parts, the narrative told by Peer's voice is clearly a resource in their meaning-making. When the speech board is reintroduced, they also delay their mouse clicks slightly in order to finish their conversation about the displayed excerpt.

In contrast to this, the voiced narration that accompanies the actual buckride (Table 1, modal ensemble 4) seems completely lost on the dyad. The students also confirm this explicitly, and they blame the quick time events. The student with the task of pressing the buttons on the keyboard exclaims, "I cannot listen more to the text because I am so focused on these things." The other student answers, "Yes, I know." This begs the question as to what the voiced narration on top of the quick time events contributes. How does the high modal density aid the players in making meaning? The scene itself is clearly spectacular and enjoyable to the students, but their remarks about it being "majestic" and "nice" are not inspired by the voiced depiction. One may argue that the ensemble of graphics, music—which they hum along with for a while—and player actions in the form of quick time events creates a memorable moment that consolidates the impression of Peer as a fantastic storyteller and a transcendent character. If so, the verbal text may be superfluous in this ensemble and could be left out, however painful such a thought might be to a lover of Ibsen's poetry.

### *One modal ensemble of introspection*

Dilemmas are situations in which the player is challenged to investigate Peer's motivation to further understand the reasons for his actions. While narratively we may choose to see them as moments of introspection on the part of Peer, the players are in





Figure 6. The dilemma mechanic. The question above asks what Peer’s motivation was for lying. The alternative answers are: (1) “She is too stressed. There is nothing wrong in dreaming a little;” (2) “This is what she gets for burdening me with boring chore,” and; (3) “I had planned to bring home prey, but time got lost on me.”.

fact taking on the role as his “inner voice.” Thus, introspection in *Peer Gynt the Game* is, strangely, a form of dialogue.

Visually, the dilemmas are presented on a modified speech board (Table 1, modal ensemble 5). The dilemma itself is presented as a question on a separate framed section, and the main board is split into three sections, each presenting one alternative answer. Players must choose from one of these answers to proceed (Figure 6). The dilemma probing Peer’s motivation for lying is the first of many dilemma situations in the game. The three alternative answers are meant to express three different readings of Peer as a character. Players may see him as carefree and easy-going, as egoistic, or as a coward who avoids making decisions and backs out of situations and responsibility. When played in class, the students’ choices are shared with the teacher, who may use them as a basis for classroom discussion.

Without digging into the different alternatives here, we can note that none of the options express any regret about lying, and none imply that Peer will act any differently from here on. Making Peer



regret his lie would break with the core condition of staying true to the original work. Thus, we can observe a consideration for fidelity with the adapted work on the level of character development and concerning the main plot. What would be left of the drama if Peer became truthful and virtuous in the first act? In this respect, however, one may argue that the image conveys some of the doubt that the written alternatives lack. Peer is standing with a slight stoop, holding his hand on his neck, a body posture that seems to express doubt or regret, while he is waiting for the player to decide what he feels. As none of the other alternative answers fit this visual depiction of Peer, tension is created within the image.

This tension can be understood as an experience of the uncanny, both for the player and for Peer (Aalen and Zachrisson 2018). Situated in Peer's home, having made a detour through one of his playful fantasies, the player is suddenly asked to aid Peer in justifying his lie to his mother. By his body language Peer confirms the discomfort the players may feel. The option to be truthful, is, however, not available to them. All Peer has is a repertoire of excuses and self-pity. Peer's body language can thus be seen as the expression of a feeling that he does not quite allow himself to contemplate.

In the game, dilemmas such as this one stand out in that they present possible interpretations of the situation. All other segments of text represent transduced versions of Ibsen's drama, wherein players are asked what they think. A previous study has shown that players interpret this gamic challenge differently, understanding their task as either interpreting, identifying with or fully creating Peer (Sandberg and Silseth 2021). Our dyad responds very enthusiastically to the challenge itself, one of them exclaiming, "Whoa, now we are actually going to respond. Oh my god!" Then, they have a short discussion to align their understanding of the task, agreeing that they are not to find a "correct answer" but rather to choose what they want "their" Peer to be like. After having made their choice, however, they both seem to think that they chose unwisely and thereby offended Aase.

## DISCUSSION

Bezemer and Kress observe that meaning material that is moved from one medium to another is usually characterized by “requiring social semiotic re-making and usually entailing epistemological change” (2016, 75). While Ibsen, according to scholar Inga-Stina Ewbank, “prepared his texts for readers *and* [theatre] audiences” (2004, 12), and even thought of his readers as “participants in the creative act” (2004, 14), he certainly did not envisage video-gamers. Still, whereas Ibsen’s written drama has certainly undergone a social semiotic remake when converted into a multimodal game, one may ask to what degree an epistemological change has occurred. One way to explore this question is to explain the different ways in which the written play has been recontextualized into new modal ensembles. The mode of writing is still strongly present, even if it is no longer laid out as words on paper in a book. We have seen how in one modal ensemble Ibsen’s words are presented line by line in writing, strengthened by aligned modes, such as voice, images depicting the context and the player action of controlling the tempo in the unfolding of dialogue. While it is multimodal in its expression, the verbal text is clearly foregrounded in such an ensemble. The player does not even play as Peer but instead performs the non-diegetic act of controlling the appearance of words on the speech board. Considering Jewitt’s observation that modes are particular to communities where there is a shared understanding of their semiotic characteristics, one may argue that conveying the text on a speech board rather than, for example, in speech bubbles, connects it closer to the classic form of a written play than to that of comics (Hawreliak 2019, 48). As argued in the analysis, the speech board itself, situated on a layer in front of the graphic depiction of the scene, also foregrounds the written verbal text more forcefully.

However, the break with diegesis is not caused by the use of writing per se. A second example of the use of writing can be found in the parts of the narrative that have been converted into game lore. These are first presented to the player as objects in

the game world that the player-as-Peer may investigate. When collecting a lore object, a window pops up containing written text about its significance. The information the player receives has been transformed from Ibsen's play, where it was usually intertwined into the drama's dialogue.

Thus, the lore can be seen as either a part of the game narrative, or as an implicit intertextual connection between the game and the parts of Ibsen's play that have been left out of the game's main story (Kalir and Garcia 2021, 22). The latter understanding has an interesting parallel to the annotations one finds in annotated editions of the play. Both give additional information that expands the meaning of the narrative. However, while annotations exist outside of the narrative in a position unquestionably non-diegetic to the play, the lore is not really a metatext as it rests within the diegesis where it adds detail and profundity to the immediate action of the game. It is also connected to an object in the game's virtual space, where it represents the understandings and insights Peer gains by finding the object. Therefore, contrary to the previous example of the use of writing in the game, the transformation of written "meaning material" from the character dialogue itself to an object that can be collected does not break with diegesis. The concept of lore is also familiar to players of roleplaying games as a means of deepening a game's story. Of course, having a window pop up in front of the graphic layer may seem like a break with diegesis. But character representation is just as legitimate when mediated in writing as in a moving image.

It is a more questionable and strange design choice, however, that opening the lore window does not cause the diegetic machine acts, which occur in the layer now hidden underneath, to pause. Focusing on the written text, then, led to the auditive and visual narration that happened at the same time being lost on the playing students. We may ask what they miss out on when modes compete for the players' attention in this way. In the case of the lore texts, the dyad seems to have missed essential information while focusing on them. In the short excerpt

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studied this happens at least twice—which we know about because they eventually find out about it and say so. While this does not seem to have much of an effect on this particular dyad, it may cause the game to be less appealing to some students. Thus, there is a cost when the lore window overlaps and is foregrounded, with the diegesis continuing in the background.

The third and final example of the use of writing in this game excerpt is the dilemma situation where the game asks the player to decide on behalf of Peer. Here, for the first time, the mode of writing has the function of giving the player agency in the diegetic realm of the game. That is, players are not only asked to decide when writing should appear in a window or to read and reflect upon written information but also to decide and respond to what Peer thinks or feels and thereby to explicitly make meaning of the story.

Whereas all these three uses of writing in the game seem to “exist in an informatic layer once removed from the pretend play scenario of representational character and story” (Galloway 2006, chap. 1), the use of writing as a mode is not in itself diegetic or nondiegetic. After all, in Ibsen’s play everything is communicated in writing. In fact, despite the fear that the foregrounding of written text in panels may entail giving up on “the richness, dynamic motion, or narrative illusion of the first layer” (Galloway 2006, chap. 1), to the playing dyad these ensembles are appealing and thought provoking. The students spent the most time and effort discussing the narrative ensembles in which the writing was foregrounded.

In contrast, in the case of the buckride, the hectic player actions in the visually rich and dynamic “first layer” caused the students to explicitly give up on listening to the words. Instead, they were commenting on the visuals and singing along with the music that accompanied the narration and the ride. This leads me to assume that the ride on the mountain ridge could have been even more spectacular if it had only been accompanied by music.

The environmental depiction in “the buckride,” besides being narrated in the mode of voice, was also mediated visually in a display that seems to have come across to the players. The “eagles

high above the tarn,” (Ibsen 2016, 170) for example, can be seen flying to the left of the ridge (Figure 5). We cannot say if the students take note of the actual eagles. However, given that this detail constitutes one of several elements in the depiction of a grandiose ride, perhaps we should think of the transduction as successful when the players clearly acknowledge the greatness of the scene.

Somewhat similarly, in displaying the reflection in the lake of the free-falling buck and Peer as a still image, *Peer Gynt the Game* shows in the referred-to mode what was only described with words in the original work. Moreover, the first-person perspective has, as Kress and van Leeuwen point out, become much more common in the age of video games (2020, 60). This hints at a reason why *Peer Gynt* in some respects feels contemporary to us in his quest for identity. In a time obsessed with self-fulfillment and self-representation, the claim has been made that “all present-day troubles are, prophetically, foreseen and explored” in *Peer Gynt* (Bauman 2004, 90). These aspects are already latent in Ibsen’s text (Christensen and Myren-Svelstad 2020), but they are masterfully depicted in this final panel of the buckride, where the reflection of the self is, hopefully, as profound as the lake Peer and the buck dive into.

Moreover, it is in the visuals and gameplay that we can identify a certain degree of reinterpretation, however limited and arbitrary, of Ibsen’s text. This emerges, for instance, in how Peer’s recounting of the buckride is displayed visually more as a daydream into which he sinks, rather than as an attempt to convince Aase, who, unlike in the original, cannot be heard responding during Peer’s narration of the ride. Another example is how Peer’s ride toward the sun can be visually read as a foreshadowing of the meaning Solveig will come to represent in his life, while the tactile player actions involved in the ride suggest a struggle to not fall off, which Peer does not mention in the monologue. Thus, it seems that the parts of *Peer Gynt the Game* that have been transduced into new modes include some new elements of interpretation, whereas the parts that have undergone transformations within the mode of verbal text pay more

static homage to the original while doing little to renew it. This is a returning dynamic throughout the game, through scattered but striking examples. It culminates in the very last scene where the player-as-Peer forcefully blasts his way through several membrane-like walls representing the Bøyg, to finally unite with Solveig.

Comparing my findings to studies of *Hamlet*-based games, it is striking how much more *Hamlet* is being modified by enabling alternative narratives, making characters other than the main character playable, or avoiding the original plot altogether (Bloom 2015; Harrison and Lutz 2017; Novitz 2020; Timplalex 2018). Unlike some of the *Hamlet*-based games, which use ludic narrative structures to eschew or playfully dispute the primacy of the classic play, *Peer Gynt the Game* is a faithful adaptation that uses its interactive elements to give the player some control over how to experience and interpret the story rather than to create alternative narratives. The closest *Peer Gynt the Game* gets to offering the player a real choice is in what I have described as dilemma situations. However, even here, the choices are only about how to understand Peer, as a formalization of the meaning-making of any reader of the play, not about creating new narratives. Considering that the game has been designed for use in a classroom context, the explicit challenge of making up one's mind about what Peer thinks and discussing it in class seems useful and may have real-life consequences (Sandberg 2023).

This touches upon a more general discussion of video games as *designed spaces*, and whether scripted branching narratives can be said to represent a degree of freedom of choice. Both Antranig Arek Sarian and Sarah Stang, having studied games with far bigger budgets and reach than *Peer Gynt the Game*, claim that true player agency lies within the players' own interpretation of the game texts (2018; 2019). Perhaps counterintuitively, the lack of alternative narratives in *Peer Gynt the Game* may come across as more sophisticated than had the consequences of the choices all been pre-programmed into the game. Paradoxically, while the

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introspective nature of *Hamlet* seems to represent the main obstacle when converting the play into a game, in *Peer Gynt the Game* the introspective player actions represent the only module of participation in which the player has some freedom of choice.

### CONCLUSION

This inquiry into the modal grammar of *Peer Gynt the Game* has revealed a pattern in how the monologues of Peer Gynt seem to be associated with a moving and acting main character in the game, whereas dialogues render the character passive and convert the gameplay into a play with words and writing. When comparing how the verbal narration was perceived by the playing dyad of students, it is striking how clearly the modal ensembles where the gamic action was at its most dynamic and tactile failed in conveying the verbal text. Conversely, when player action was limited to tedious clicking to advance the written dialogues, the students seemed to be immersed in the verbal-textual story, exchanging opinions with each other and even at times entering into a sort of dialogue with the game characters themselves. The question, then, is what players (or their teachers) want to achieve by playing the game. If the goal is to develop a closer relationship with Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, it is no surprise that interacting with the verbal text itself is a good approach. This study, then, indicates that seemingly banal player actions, such as clicking to advance a dialogue line by line, can contribute to such a goal. If, however, the goal is to develop understandings of *Peer Gynt* that go beyond the classic and canonical, there is a greater potential for realizing new meaning in the visual, auditory and participatory affordances of new modes.

### DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTERESTS

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

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### NOTE

1. I have edited the recording of the dyad's playthrough of the scene to serve as a reference throughout this article (<https://figshare.com/s/e8372c89fdd5e4be6e5a>). To ensure the privacy of the participants, I used Adobe Premiere to crop the recording to show only the computer screen. I also replaced the audio track with the game audio from my own playthrough to avoid exposing the voices of the players (hence the passages of silence, which occur where they spent more time than me discussing before acting). This affects the quality of the recording but not its usefulness for this purpose. The playthrough lasts approximately nine minutes. In [Table 1](#), it has been divided into shorter segments based on the succession of modal ensembles. I have identified and described five modal ensembles, which appear from one to three times in the excerpt.

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### NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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