

Stepping into the Subjunctive World of the Fiction in Game, Film and Novel

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Abstract

The concept of the subjunctive mode provides a useful key in exploring narrative comprehension in different media. This article reports on a study in which twelve undergraduates, working in groups of three, read a novel, watched a movie, and played a digital game. Analysis of transcripts of their responses reveals that the role of the subjunctive in their developing awareness of the story is an element that crosses media boundaries and allows forms of cross-media comparison.

Author Keywords

subjunctive mode, narrative, cross-media comparison, novel, film, game

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The question of how narrative may work in a digital game has been explored from a variety of different perspectives. For some time, there was a strong either/or controversy about whether a game could be a narrative at all, or whether the two forms worked on antithetical principles (see, for example, Juul, 2001; Frasca, 2003; Jenkins, 2004). Compromise on this question now seems possible on the grounds of the hybrid nature of the digital game, which may include narrative as one of its elements (Ryan, 2006, 2007).

I propose to explore this question from a different perspective, drawing for evidence on the behaviours of players and comparing their responses to a digital game with the responses of these same individuals to a film and a novel. In this article, I report on the reactions of these interpreters at a particular moment of engagement with a sample fiction in each format: the point at which, as players, viewers or readers, they step into the world of the make-believe of the text before them in film, novel and game format. No matter how we configure the question of narrative, the gamer, like the viewer or reader, “engages in an act of imagination” (Ryan, 2007, p. 13), and my study explores similarities and differences in how this act of imagination is *performed* with different media. In so doing, I address a question raised by Ryan: “How can the concept of narrative be fruitfully invoked in game studies?” (2006, p. 181) I suggest that exploring overlaps and contradictions in the invoking of make-believe in fictions presented in different media can enhance our understanding of all these media. I will explore these issues in relation to *Monster*, a novel by Walter Dean Myers, *Run Lola Run*, a feature film, and *Shadow of the Colossus*, a PlayStation 2 game. All were explored by twelve undergraduate interpreters, working in groups of three.

The Subjunctive

The best time to cry is at night, when the lights are out and someone is being beaten up and screaming for help. That way even if you sniffle a little they won't hear you. If anybody knows that you are crying, they'll start talking about it and soon it'll be your turn to get beat up when the lights go out.

There is a mirror over the steel sink in my cell. It's six inches high, and scratched with the names of some guys who were here before me. When I look into the small rectangle, I see a face looking back at me but I don't recognize it. It doesn't look like me. I couldn't have changed that much in a few months. I wonder if I will look like myself when the trial is over.

(Myers, 1999, pp. 1-2)

Monster by Walter Dean Myers opens with this offer to readers to step into a story. We are immediately invited into a world where the future is unknown, and persuaded to look into that future by taking on the fears and hopes of a character/narrator that we know to be fictional. We may skip to the ending if we choose, because it *is* a fiction and the ending has already been written, but even if we do so, when we return to page one we return to the situation of Steve's terror about the unknown future. This essential component of make-believe, this step into not-knowing, is usefully explored through the idea of the subjunctive.

It is easy to take for granted how we have learned to shift stance between the world we inhabit and a fictional world. Even as we sort out the limits of the make-believe, we start adjusting to its parameters. We begin to locate what we are experiencing within the framework of the *as-if*.

Grammatically, make-believe is the realm of the subjunctive mood or mode. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the subjunctive as follows:

Designating a mood . . . the forms of which are employed to denote an action or a state as conceived (and not as a fact) and therefore used to express a wish, command, exhortation, or a contingent, hypothetical, or prospective eventⁱ

The *American Heritage*® *Book of English Usage* describes the subjunctive as “used chiefly to express the speaker’s attitude about the likelihood or factuality of a given situation.”ⁱⁱ

Questions about factuality, fictionality, contingency and make-believe entail somebody with an opinion: ‘I hope that’, ‘I expect that’, ‘I believe that’, ‘I wish that’, ‘I fear that’, ‘I doubt that’ (in the case of Steve, the narrator above, ‘I wonder if’). A non-factual possibility or potentiality has no real-life existence, by definition, so there must be a subject to set the subjunctive verb in motion. In the successful development of fictional understanding between a creator and an interpreter, each has the potential to participate as the subject of the subjunctive; the relationship between the implied creator and the implied interpreter may sometimes entail a slide between a subject “I” and a subject “you” as each envisages the stance and intentions of the other. It is an intriguing territory that does not seem to be particularly medium-specific. It is not difficult to imagine an interpreter layering the subjunctive elements at the moment of processing:

“**You** - the creator – **expect** that **I** – the interpreter – will **believe** that . . .” There are two different subjects and two different verbs invoking the subjunctive – and yet this complex exchange is a completely ordinary and taken-for-granted form of the discourse of make-believe.

Bruner (1986) and Langer (1953) both describe the narrative experience in terms of the subjunctive mode, although only Bruner uses that explicit term. “Narrative deals with the vicissitudes of human intention,” says Bruner (1986, p. 16). He expands this idea with his clarification of what he means by the subjunctive: “To be in the subjunctive mode is to be trafficking in human possibilities rather than in settled certainties” (p. 26). Langer is clearly referring to the same region of make-believe in her account of impressions:

The poetically created world is not limited to the impressions of one individual, but it is limited to impressions. All its connections are *lived* connections, i.e., motivations, all causes and effects operate only as the motives for expectation, fulfillment, frustration, surprise.

(Langer, 1953, 265)

In other words, inside the world of the *as-if*, the fiction is *lived*, is *felt* as hopes, fears, assumptions, surprises; it is experienced prismatically through the lenses of human emotions coming to terms with an unknown future. As Gerrig points out, even when we do actually know the end of the story, once we step into its purview we experience it as if we do not know what will happen. “Anomalous suspense,” says Gerrig, allows a reader to “experience suspense with respect to an outcome about which he should not have any uncertainty” (1993, p. 158). He describes this experience as “a compelling aspect of the real-life experience of narratives” (p. 161); it is also relatively common.

According to Richards, that step into the subjunctive mode of wondering, expecting, hoping, fearing, is essential to making the story work: “The persistencies of effects – no matter how well we make them overlap – will not systematize themselves into experience (knowledge that returns as power) unless they are heated by an immediate sustaining interest” (1942, p. 54). The events of the story are “heated” for me by my hoping, expecting, and so forth.

In her description of aesthetic reading, Rosenblatt provides a clear account of how we activate our own experiences to breathe the tentativeness and uncertainty of the subjunctive into the words we read:

In order to shape the work, we draw on our reservoir of past experience with people and the world, our past inner linkage of words and things, our past encounters with spoken or written texts. We listen to the sound of the words in the inner ear; we lend our sensations, our emotions, our sense of being alive, to the new experience which, we feel, corresponds to the text. We participate in the story, we identify with the characters, we share their conflicts and their feelings.

(Rosenblatt, 1982/2005, p. 75)

So far, I am describing the state of being very completely absorbed in a story, the condition that Douglas and Hargadon refer to as “immersion” (2001, p. 156), the capacity of submerging oneself entirely within the schemas established by the fiction. The condition of being totally caught up in something that is known to be not true is certainly complex enough to challenge philosophers and psychologists for a very long time to come. But human interpreters can also take pleasure in moving in and out of this state of absorption. They can simultaneously invest in the subjunctive unknowns of the story and also enjoy the way the story is constructed. Douglas and Hargadon call this second form of imaginative investment “engagement” (p. 156), and refer to this condition as being able to manage a number of schemas at the same time. These schemas include those of the story world, those entailed in how it was made, and those needed for the interpreter to approach the story: “Contradictory schemas or elements that defy conventional schemas tend to disrupt readers’ immersion in the text, obliging them to assume an extra-textual perspective on the text itself” (p. 156).

Stibbs describes the condition of engagement, of contending with multiple schematic frameworks, by means of an elaborate metaphor, offering advice about enhancing the pleasures of an *immersed* reading through a more *engaged* stance:

Whereas good advice to immersed non-swimmers is to relax, competent swimmers can have more fun by thrashing about. They can pop out of the water, sometimes, to remind themselves that the water is not – as fish believe – the only world. Competent readers are amphibious: they can enjoy both the air and the water; they know the difference; from the atmosphere they can enjoy the view of the textual pond, and when they’re in the pond they can recognize its surface as neither a mirror nor a window but an interface to be played with.

(Stibbs, 1993, p. 58)

Before any of this amphibious thrashing about can be truly enjoyable, the moment of first casting oneself onto the water and relaxing into a float is necessary for skilled as well as beginning interpreters. In exploring the responses of the participants as they started each fiction, I was very interested to establish whether the initial juxtaposition of floating and thrashing (to maintain Stibbs’ aquatic terms) occurred in book, film and game in similar ways, or whether the game was, so to speak, more like a waterfall or a rapids; a situation where attention must necessarily be focused simply on not drowning as players learn to manage the controls that make the story happen. Hayles suggests that there may indeed be an overlap between different media:

When literature leaps from one medium to another – from orality to writing, from manuscript codex to printed book, from mechanically generated print to electronic textuality – it does not leave behind the accumulated knowledge embedded in genres, poetic conventions, narrative structures, figurative tropes, and so forth.

(Hayles, 2008, p. 58)

Hayles uses different terms in her discussion of electronic literature but it is not hard to discern the elements of the subjunctive in her phrasing: “For two thousand years or more, literature has explored the nature of consciousness, perception, and emergent complexity” (p. 59). The idea of the emergent is crucial to the experience of fiction. If we are aligning ourselves with the

characters and thinking in the subjunctive mode ('I hope that', 'I wish that', 'I expect that', and so forth), we are looking at the future as it *emerges* within the terms of the story.

Without using the explicit concept, Ryan suggests that the subjunctive works in a game as much as in another form of fiction. She addresses the idea that games are located in the present (the action doesn't begin until the player activates the control) while narrative necessarily entails a past tense (the teller recounting what has already happened), but she suggests that the experiences of different media narrative have more in common than might be expected:

Even when stories are ostentatiously told by looking backward, they are experienced by readers, spectators, and arguably players by looking forward, from the point of view of the characters. There are consequently only superficial differences, in terms of the lived experience of time, between games, movies and novels.

(Ryan, 2006, p. 187)

"Looking forward, from the point of view of the characters" is exactly what the subjunctive is designed to facilitate.

Taking the first steps into a story world entails risks, as Crago warns. He suggests that complete immersion cannot be instantly achieved because emotional threats distract us:

For me, beginning a new novel, watching the curtain go up on a play or a movie, means a threat to the extent that I'm forced, temporarily, to submit myself to somebody else's world; some aspects of that world are bound to be alien to me, and may generate feelings of disquiet, even of anger. That I know I'm *choosing* to undergo this because I also expect to derive pleasure from it doesn't help. I have to pass through this stage every time, until the tale takes hold and absorption becomes more pleasurable than threatening.

(Crago, 1982, p. 180)

Immediate immersion is difficult for a number of reasons: for one thing, we need to sort out what schemas are organizing the world of the story, which often entails reference to the outside world. At the same time, we are deciding on the degree to which we want to trust the creator of the story. In Stibbs' terms, there is likely to be much thrashing and splashing at the beginning of a connection with a fiction, as we get deep enough into the story to cast ourselves upon its surface and float away into the conditions of a different world. Experienced consumers of stories explore the surface for clues about the depth. Murray describes this active process:

The pleasurable surrender of the mind to an imaginative world is often described, in Coleridge's phrase, as "the willing suspension of disbelief." But this is too passive a formulation even for traditional media. When we enter a fictional world, we do not merely "suspend" disbelief so much as we actively *create belief*. Because of our desire to experience immersion, we focus our attention on the enveloping world and we use our intelligence to reinforce rather than to question the reality of the experience.

(Murray, 1997, p. 110)

In the following examples, we can see such activities being conducted in all three media. Before we move to the behaviours of the interpreters, I will describe the terms of the study.

The Project

For this project I invited undergraduate volunteers to read a complete novel, watch a complete film and play a digital game to its conclusion. Their reactions were both video- and audio-recorded: one video camera recorded their text and a second recorded the participants' actions and demeanour. The records were transcribed and both transcript and video record were mounted for analysis on Transana software.ⁱⁱⁱ

Working in four groups of three, the participants articulated their responses in ways appropriate to each format. With the novel, they read the first 58 pages in five installments, silently reading a specified few pages before speaking together about what struck them as noteworthy in that segment. They read the remainder of the novel separately at home, after which we conducted an extensive follow-up discussion about the book as a whole. With the movie, the group watched it together, with six breaks for conversation about their interpretation of the story so far and an extended discussion at the end. In both these cases, the conversations involved a kind of simulated, naturalized "think-after" account of their processing activities (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995; Branch, 2000; Afflerbach, 2002).

With the PlayStation game, the three participants took turns with a single controller. They were invited to advise freely when not manning the controls, and did not hesitate to do so. The nature of the game is that it allows conversation during play; the story need not be stopped for discussion as was required by both film and book. The result is a naturalized version of a "think-aloud" (rather than "think-after") protocol; these observations were contemporary with their play, rather than retrospective. We also discussed the game as a whole after they reached the end of the story.

The Texts

Obviously the study was strongly coloured by the selection of texts for consideration. I was interested in providing comparable challenges in each format, which made it important that my choices be considered rather than arbitrary. In the interests of drawing participants' attention to the surface as well as the storyworld of each text, I chose titles that entailed structures with cross-media implications. *Monster*, by Walter Dean Myers (1999), is a novel told in two configurations: in part as a journal written by a young man held in custody and facing trial for murder, and in part as an imaginary screenplay of the court events, developed by this same young man as a means of psychological survival during his ordeal. Thus *Monster* combines conventions from both novel and film. *Run Lola Run* (1998) is a film based on the structure of a digital game. The same short incident is replayed three times with differing outcomes; thus film and game are implicated in its composition. *Shadow of the Colossus* (2005) has been described as a "literary" videogame (Ciccoricco, 2007, n.p.); players, on a quest to locate and kill each of

sixteen different colossi, are invited to empathize with both hunter and prey in a way more common to print fiction than to many “quest” videogames. This game confounds Ryan’s assertion about games that, “if players had to debate the morality of their actions, the pace of the game, not to mention its strategic appeal, would seriously suffer” (2006, p. 196). “Literature seeks the gray area of the ambiguous,” she asserts (p. 196), and, to the extent that this game moves in exactly that gray area, it can perhaps be described as literary.

These three hybrid stories all make use of conventions from other media to draw attention to the surface features of storytelling in ways that might be said to “bounce” readers/viewers/players out of the engrossed moment into paying attention to how the story is being constructed. By choosing these particular titles, I made room for engaged as well as immersed stances towards the story. I did so for several reasons. One was simply to challenge the participants. Another was that I hoped that offering texts whose surface features borrowed from another medium would encourage participants to articulate comparisons between how different media invite interpretation. A third reason was slightly more complex. From earlier work with readers, I know that one risk of a very immersive text is that readers get “lost in the book.” Crago, describing his efforts to annotate reading responses, notes that his ability to surface and make notes fades as he moves further into the story, and experiences “the familiar process of gradually increasing immersion in the world created by the novel, an immersion which enables the reader less and less awareness of anything but that world” (Crago, 1982, p. 173).

I was anxious not to intrude “‘outside’ consciousness” on my interpreters any more artificially than was necessary. Selecting texts that draw attention to the surface by the nature of their composition was one way in which I could make use of the logic of the materials in a relatively organic way to reduce the invasiveness of my requests for commentary. At the same time, such choices offered me a way to explore the degree to which immersion survives, or is even enhanced by multiple entry points. Would my participants “float” on the story even when the storytelling mechanisms themselves are potentially disruptive? Would they behave as Murray describes active meaning-makers, using their “intelligence to reinforce rather than question the reality of the experience” (1997, p. 110)?

The creators of each story set up the invitation into the fiction in particular ways that drastically affect response so, as I describe the ways in which participants answer these invitations, I will begin each section with a description of the text’s opening scenes. All three of the texts used in this study open in highly stylized ways. Interestingly, each of them could be said to have more than one beginning.

The Opening Scenes: Monster

The first page of *Monster* is printed in a font that varies in size and rather resembles hand printing. The opening sentence says, “The best time to cry is at night, when the lights are out and someone is being beaten up and screaming for help” (Myers, 1999, p. 1). In terms of physical size, the word “screaming” is the largest in the sentence. This personal writing continues for 5 pages but, because of the large font, is very quick to read. On the third page, the narrative voice says, “Sometimes I feel like I have walked into the middle of a movie. It is a strange movie with no plot and no beginning. The movie is in black and white and grainy” (p. 3).

By the next page the narrator is thinking aloud: “I think to get used to this I will have to give up what I think is real and take up something else. I wish I could make sense of it. Maybe I could make my own movie. I could write it out and play it in my head. I could block out the scenes like we did in school. The film will be the story of my life. No, not my life, but of this experience” (p. 4). On the next page, this voice says, “I’ll call it what the lady who is the prosecutor called me. MONSTER” (p. 5). The final word is printed in very large letters followed by a half page of white space.

Page 6 is blank, and page 7 establishes a completely different register. With one exception (the date at the top right-hand corner – Monday July 6th – written in the same script as the ‘notebook’ entries on the previous pages), it is typeset in a san serif font and laid out on the page in the form of a screenplay. The title “Monster!” is followed by these instructions:

FADE IN: INTERIOR: Early morning in CELL BLOCK D, MANHATTAN DETENTION CENTER. Camera goes slowly down grim, gray corridor. There are sounds of inmates yelling from cell to cell; much of it is obscene. Most of the voices are clearly Black or Hispanic. Camera stops and slowly turns toward a cell. INTERIOR: CELL. Sixteen-year-old STEVE HARMON is sitting on the edge of a metal cot, head in hands. He is thin, brown skinned. On the cot next to him are the suit and tie he is to wear to court for the start of his trial.

(Myers, 1999, p. 7)

The credits then appear in the *Star Wars* format of retreating words. Here we see the printed page being used to imitate the movement of floating credits on the screen; readers’ knowledge of the famous introduction to *Star Wars* is invoked to help them mentally animate the fixed print. Steve Harmon appears in these credits as author, actor, producer and so forth; reading the credits as we know how to do from the cinema, we learn that this movie is entirely a figment of his imagination.

On page 11 the story begins to move forward, still in screenplay form. For the rest of the book, it alternates between Steve’s introspective reflections in free font, and the screenplay laid out according to the strict conventions of the genre. Occasionally a photograph is added.

Starting Monster

The opening pages of *Monster* contain many surface features to catch the eye, and readers appeared to enjoy sorting through the implications of these design features. Here, for example, is Tess reflecting on the opening pages:

Even the first page of the novel, where the very first thing you see is *Monday July 6th* so that makes it look like a diary, sort of a confessional and then all of a sudden there’s *Monster*. Big font, center of the page, and then you’re sort of into the screenplay form. So it’s a novel within a novel, because then you have the narrative at the very beginning so then you wonder how many layers, how deep

this is going to go. Like one of those Russian dolls where you have them all stacked inside each other.

It is worth noticing here how Tess initially dismisses the first few pages of the journal entry in its script font (even though I watched her read them!) and refers to the first page of typeface (page 7) as the first page of the novel. Only after she establishes this point as the start of the novel does she refer back to “the narrative at the very beginning” – the journal. At this point, she does not know that the journal entries will recur through the book, so it is relatively easy for her to dismiss this section as some kind of lesser-status preamble.

Lewis is explicit about his pleasure:

I like the setup of how it is a movie. It’s different. I’ve never seen a book like, done like that before, so at first, yeah... I want to see what’s going on with this trial, and how he’s done this as a movie. And how that’s going to affect how the book works, I guess, is my first thought.

Sebastian also enjoys the surface features:

I like the first bit. It’s kind of written by hand, how some things are bigger and some are smaller, and I like the directions.

Sumana is positive about the combined appeal of content and design:

It’s very well written, it’s very evocative and you can see those images and it’s really fast paced. So it’s not slow and plodding like a lot of novels you might get. It borrows the things that attract people to films – like the fast pace and you can see the images even when it’s just written... I also love the way there are different fonts and sizes used. It makes it a lot more engaging to read and it’s something really unusual for a novel that makes it stand out and makes you think that this novel might be different from other ones.

This novel signals early on that form is at least as important as content, and it is easy to see these experienced readers assessing the implications of that information. Lewis and Adam, for example, are quick to see the advantages of combining the journal with the screenplay, allowing for a more internal perspective on Steve the hero than might be possible in a conventional movie alone:

Adam: I think the inner stuff is really good because it sort of forces you to almost interact with the character because he’s right there.

Lewis: I think we’ll see more umh – maybe – yeah, like you can relate to the character more if we see that thought actually in – by doing it as a movie. We’ll like, see their thought process and stuff like that and what he’s thinking, because he’s doing it himself so that might help us to maybe sympathize or something later on.

In all these comments, we can see a readers assess the potential of the material before them, both in terms of the surface – fonts, layout, and so forth – and also the depths: anticipated complexity, and psychological insight.

Even in the early stages, as the readers were still sorting out the representational forms, they were beginning to speculate about the story from the perspective of the interior schemas of the fictional world:

Neil: Normally you would pick somebody a little more credible to open up the story, but this witness has obviously got problems. Umh, (chuckles) sort of the fact that we have no idea whether he’s telling the truth and there’s no way to judge that he might be, just because of his past and his own admissions.

Keith: It kind of leaves the image that he might actually get off because of the lack of credibility of the witness.

Tess simultaneously moves between different components of the story and the telling, and reflects on the character’s use of exactly the same strategy:

And so going from the introduction where it’s a first person narrative to, I guess, a screenplay more or less – it’s a bit of an interesting transition and I guess one of the things I was struck with was, I think, this kid really strikes me as being quite intelligent, like he’s fairly eloquent, he’s reverting to things he learned in school, which is interesting in a time of desperation it’s not a survival, it’s a “I’m going to use my brain to try to record this, to write this down.”

In short, while these readers reflect on the way the story is being told to them, they simultaneously make efforts to “move into” the story world, using their intelligence to reinforce the created world in exactly the way that Murray describes. They become invested in imagining the world of the story from the very early stages of reading, observing, predicting, and evaluating.

The Opening Scenes: Run Lola Run

The first screen of *Run Lola Run* contains two quotations about time.^{iv} A giant gold pendulum swings across the screen and wipes out the quotes, to the accompaniment of a rapid ticking sound. The camera zooms up the shaft of the pendulum to a clock face with the hands spinning around. A gargoyle on top of the clock opens its mouth and the camera zooms through into blackness, as fast music begins. We see a number of blurry people moving inconsequentially past each other in quick-time; occasionally the speed of the film retards into slow motion and a single person is highlighted briefly: a woman in a dress, a man in a red shirt, a man in a suit, a woman with a child, a policeman. A male voice-over, speaking in German, asks a number of existential questions translated in subtitles as in the following sample:

Man – probably the most mysterious species on our planet
A mystery of unanswered questions
Who are we?
Where do we come from?
Where are we going? . . .
But, in the end, isn't it always the same question?
And always the same answer? (*Run Lola Run*, 1998)

By this stage in the commentary the camera has focused on the policeman, and he is the first character to speak. Looking directly at the camera, he holds up a soccer ball and says, “The ball is round. The game lasts 90 minutes. That’s a fact. Everything else is pure theory. Here we go.” He drop-kicks the football into the air and the camera follows its upward motion. Below, the walking crowd turns itself into two words: “Lola Rent” (the German title of the movie).

At this point, the music revs up in intensity and we shift to a cartoon of a red-headed girl running through a sequence of abstract shapes that mutate and break. The credits begin to appear. The third change displays a set of mug shots of different faces, accompanied by yet more forceful music. Two names (in two different fonts) appear with each photo: a character name and an actor’s name.

Finally we see an overhead photo of a city landscape. This time the camera zooms down and in on an apartment where a phone is ringing and the action of the story is finally set in motion. Manni is calling Lola, desperate for her to bring him some money. Lola starts to run and begins her encounters with a variety of obstacles.

Starting Run Lola Run

Run Lola Run opens with a flurry of different formats, and participants drew on their film repertoires to connect with the fast-moving set-up. Martin is quick to explore his assessment of the producers’ intentions:

The credits were interesting. It seemed like they were supposed to be disorienting – or, I’m not sure if it was supposed to be disengaging or engaging. It seems like the characters are set up sort of on the fringe of society, like they’re operating outside of it, and so *that* makes the story exceptional.

Sumana also responds to the credits but finds them immersive more than disorienting:

So many changes and the medium... like, they go from the love line with Manni to black and white flashbacks, and they’ve got the cartoons, and she’s running really fast, and a lot of cutting back and forth. So you really get excited about what’s going to happen next. It gets you right into the movie I find.

Dan is also positive:

I think it's like [*inaudible*] the beginning seems a little cartoon movie and I think they're kind of giving the impression of like, time moving by faster to add to the suspense of the movie. Like, the story's pretty [*inaudible*] messed up or whatever, he lost his money, they're just trying to convey a real sense of emergency behind the story line. It's interesting.

Tess is intrigued but puzzled by some components:

It's neat that we're seeing the clock again from the first credits. I'm pretty sure that's the clock anyway, it doesn't look quite the same, but – I have to say the soccer game threw me for a loop. What in heavens' name, where was that coming from? It reminded me a bit of *The Matrix*, the way the crowds were sort of not really corporeal at all, but then it focused on a couple of people. So far, so good – I like the music, really fast paced and again it keeps you really watching the film. I don't think it's giving away too many answers. I'm pretty sure he's not going to stay in that phone booth for too long.

Sebastian also wonders about the soccer game image: "I'm curious what soccer has to do with it – maybe it will be a bet."

Sandra and Adam are not so sure about the stylized introduction:

Sandra: I think it's kind of over dramatic. I think there's like – I don't know, they're trying to make – I mean, the script's okay, there's nothing wrong with it. They're trying to jack it up more by all the filming techniques and everything.

Adam: Yeah, you can totally see where the director is using – he's using little things to try and catch your eye. He's definitely going for the 'art'.

These participants are largely discussing the surface of the film, though several of them mention pacing as raising anticipation about the movie's content. As Lola begins to run, viewers begin to move into the story world. For example, Dan, Keith and Neil rapidly assess plot possibilities:

Dan: I'm guessing that he's going to attempt the robbery and that she'll reach him just before he pulls the gun out or something to that effect. That's my guess.

Keith: Umh, I wouldn't know, but I assume he's going to rob this place.

Neil: Yeah I think he's going to rob this place and she's going to you know, just stand there and watch.

Even in this highly stylized story, there was room for emotional response. Here are Lewis, Sandra and Adam after the second run-through of events, during which Manni has been killed by the ambulance:

Lewis: It sucks.
Interviewer: What's the matter with it?
Lewis: Well I don't know, she had everything going, had the money – a couple of the steps – good – it's done.
Sandra: I thought it was kind of funny.
(Laughter)
Lewis: What, that he got hit?
Sandra: Yeah because you know, of course something had to happen. It's funny though.
Adam: You were sort of expecting something. As soon as he started crossing the street –
Lewis: Yeah.
Adam: I started tensing up.
Sandra: Yeah and it made it even funnier that it's the ambulance that hit him.
Adam: The same poor bastard.
Sandra: Yeah. Not a very good driver.
(Laughter)
Sandra: So then next time, because I think they're going to do it again – maybe – who knows, time that is here. I wonder who's going to die next. **(Laughs)**

So Lewis is upset, Adam has found it tense, and Sandra thinks it is funny. Their responses vary but all emerge from within the world of the story; they are not just paying attention to the surface of the complex way in which it is told.

It is worth noting that Tess's reaction above also offers an insight into a signifier that is available to the movie and the game but not to the novel: music. While these viewers are moving cautiously into the world of the film, with plenty of reference to its existence as a construction rather than as a felt story, the music of the soundtrack is providing an imperative forward momentum. McLuhan expresses the contradiction between control and submission in these terms:

Any medium has the power of imposing its own assumption on the unwary. Prediction and control consist in avoiding this subliminal state of Narcissus trance. But the greatest aid to this end is simply in knowing that the spell can occur immediately upon contact, as in the first bars of a melody.

(McLuhan, 1964/1994, p. 15)

The music of *Run Lola Run* does indeed hold the potential to cast a spell. Rhythmic, driving, catchy, it moves listeners into a world where breath and pulse may coordinate with the tempo of the song. It is interesting to see McLuhan highlight the importance of *resisting* the spell of the

music. He dismisses the fully immersed interpretation as a “Narcissus trance.” The participants are rather less averse than McLuhan to being swept away into a fully absorbed state, though it is clear they also enjoy inspecting the surface of the text. Critical attention seems to be part of the pleasure of engaging with this complex fiction.

Sumana makes an implicit statement about the subjunctive mode: “It gets you right into the movie I find.” “You” are there as the subject of the subjunctive, expecting, hoping, fearing and all the rest. This common phrase says more than we customarily glean from its surface meaning.

The Opening Scenes: Shadow of the Colossus

The game opens with an elaborate and lengthy cut-scene (a pre-set animation that cannot be altered by means of player intervention). An androgynous figure on a horse brings a body to an altar in a deserted temple and asks for the return of life. He is told by a voice from above that the only way to achieve this end is to destroy the sixteen idols whose statues adorn the temple walls. “Hold your sword to the light and follow the path where the beams focus to find and kill the sixteen colossi who represent these idols,” says the voice. The colossi are asleep in the landscape and the hero must locate, waken and slaughter them all.

At this point, the story shifts out of the cut-scene and the player must take charge of the action. Calling and mounting the horse, finding a sunny spot to raise the sword for direction and riding down the stone steps into the barren landscape are all actions governed by the player, and mark the beginning of the active game component of the story. Quickly the hero finds a cliff and learns how to shimmy up and around its grassy crags and how to lean backwards and leap across a small chasm. Skill development becomes part of the texture of the story.

Starting Shadow of the Colossus

In the quotes about the book and the film above, we can see the participants gathering surface clues and beginning the most preliminary attempt to assemble these hints into the set-up of a story. The responses to the opening cut-scenes of *Shadow of the Colossus* are similar. For example, here are sample comments from Tess, Sumana and Martin as they watch the opening scenes; it is easy to see them applying more than one schema to the interpretation of the material presented to them. Their remarks begin at the start of the cut-scene. Martin is holding the controls but at this stage of the game he is not using them. The three have had a quick look at the instructions that come inserted in the jewel box, but otherwise know almost nothing about the story.

One immediate difference between this conversation and all preceding examples is that the participants are able to speak as they watch the scene. With the book and the movie, they have to stop attending to the story in order to speak about it and their discussions have a summative quality. Here their observations are more formative as they converse while watching and playing. The passage below conveys their initial reactions as the hero enters the temple:

Martin: Holiness.

Sumana: It's a beautiful game.
 Martin: Purity.
 Tess: There's our hero.
 Martin: The first person that we see.
 Tess: Mm mm. The music reminds me of *Zelda* games actually. At the temples. I grew up playing those.
 Martin: It reminds me of *Indiana Jones*.
 Tess: Oh, maybe a little. Where is he?
 Sumana: A generic forest.
 Tess: (Chuckles) fair enough. It's a very dead forest, there's nothing else in it. No sounds... no birds, no squirrels...

The three players comment immediately on the atmosphere, and draw on their awareness of other games to help them decide what is salient. Is the forest simply generic, something that appears in numerous other games? Or is it a *dead* forest with quite different connotations? Martin replies to Tess's observation with a technical comment: "It's just a visual of him right now, though; none of the sounds from his tracks are being played."

Commenting on the beautiful temple leads the trio back to more technical comments, which in turn give way to generic parsing of the introductory emptiness:

Martin: This is, like, the graphics are really good for a video. Not great for a computer, but...
 Tess: They're pretty amazing for a video game.
 Martin: And nothing is happening. Usually in the intro there will be some sort of...
 Tess: A fight sequence...
 Sumana: Like action.
 Martin: There'll be a fight scene.
 Tess: There'll be numerous characters, but he's just walking and I think it gives you a sense of how *huge* this world is like, yet how empty.
 Sumana: Yeah, it's totally empty. That's true.
 Tess: Who built this? Where are they? Is this like...?
 Martin: Nice place.
 Tess: It's beautiful.
 Sumana: Yeah it's evoking like, a mystery you have to figure out.
 Tess: It's too cold for me.

This discussion operates in the same spectator mode as those conversations interpreting the book and the movie. There are numerous comments on the atmosphere of the beautiful, deserted landscape and temple, and some preliminary moves into the subjunctive mode of prediction. The players seem to be enjoying the opportunity to comment in leisurely ways on the developing story. But immediately after this stage, participants find themselves having to master the controls to get the story moving in both literal and metaphorical senses of that term. It is striking how the relatively contemplative language of this trio shifts at once; as we pick up their conversation,

Martin is trying to climb on the back of Agro the horse so he can leave the temple, and Tess is assessing where best to hold the sword up to the light in order to find the right way:

Martin: Pushing this down... all right, horse.
Tess: Where is the sunlight?
Martin: Okay, this is hard...extremely difficult! Agro is not hip. **(Chuckles)**
Sumana: How easy is it to like, point it in certain directions?
Tess: This horse is very stubborn...ooh.
(Hero struggles with the horse and eventually re-enters the temple)
Do you remember how to do the sword... raising thing? You might want to do that then. He's running.
Martin: Here comes [*inaudible*]
Tess: It feels almost like a church altar. Like an African god.
(Martin pulls down map)
Sumana: What did you press?
Martin: Functions. *Zoom in; zoom out, turn back, map, move, left analog stick.* All right, so they don't have...
Tess: I still say you go to the sun and do the sword thing. It seems like that was the last instruction he really gave short of kill those gigantic idols on the wall.
Martin: So you... left analog stick is movement. You press "X" to make him go and make him stop or actually, not to make him stop. You press "X" and you can go faster and then hard back on the left analog stick.

The sequence continues in this vein. Martin, who is activating the story, is highly focused on the need to sort out the controls. Tess and, to a lesser extent, Sumana, concentrate on the strategic need to locate a light source for guidance on the direction to follow. Of the first 37 remarks after the cut-scene ends and the action begins, 17 refer to the controls and 14 to way finding. A few of these contributions also discuss the wayward character of the horse. The horse's personality at this stage is largely a response to Martin's ham-fisted early efforts with the controls, so these remarks toggle between surface and depth in interesting ways; a technical problem soon turns into a subjunctive assessment of the horse's potential as an ally – and back to the technical again.

Martin: As soon as we get these controls underway it will go a lot smoother. Umh, and this horse is ridiculous!
Sumana: He's got a mind of his own.
Tess: Pretty much!

* * * * *

Tess: Yeah. I'm still convinced that the middle of that room...you need to do something with it. Maybe the horse refuses to go back up? Maybe you're stuck.

(Hero and Agro seem to be stuck in a corner and are not moving)

Martin: The controls are really sensitive.

The shift from “What is happening? What might happen?” to “What do we have to *do*?” is extremely pronounced. Atkins describes this kind of shift as the difference between the “What happens next?” question of the spectator stance and the related gamer question: “What happens next *if I... ?*” (2006, p. 137). But in this passage we see the players moving between these two questions, at least to a limited extent. Such oscillation increased as their manual control became more fluent. Tess raised an issue she had previously mentioned in *Run Lola Run*: “Left is movement – oh, I like the music!” This comment includes an involuntary component that often marks the beginning of “floating,” though in this case she is struck by the aesthetics of the music rather than absorbed into the plot.

A more clear-cut example of “flotation” into the fiction – of the button-pressers suddenly switching into story mode – can be observed in this conversation featuring Dan, Neil and Keith (Neil is in charge of the controls):

Dan: Hold the control in the direction on the other wall behind you and let go of triangle. Hold triangle, pull back and hold triangle.

(Makes it!)

Keith: Nice work!

Neil: That’s nice. It’s going to be like this learning curve for *Splinter Cell*.

Dan: *Splinter Cell* is a lot worse than this. With *Splinter Cell*, I couldn’t figure how to get a weapon out for like twenty minutes.

Neil: Slow walk there.

(Finds the Colossus)

Dan: Oh it’s a Colossus!

Neil: Holy crap, that thing is big! They weren’t kidding. Do you think he’s got some sort of poison?

Neil’s last question is clearly expressed in the subjunctive mode of expectation and prediction. In this short exchange we can see the beginnings of the oscillation between Atkins’ two questions: the spectator’s “What happens next?” and the player’s “What happens next *if I...?*” (2006, p. 137). Both questions are important to the experience of the subjunctive world of the game story. But it is also worth noting that Neil’s final question comes as the game shifts into the cut-scene of the colossus’ awakening. In the early stages, the cut-scene offers relief from the learning curve of the buttons and allows a small space for reflection and anticipation.

Discussion: Articulating the Subjunctive Role

Benton and Fox quote Claire, a 14-year-old reader, on how she perceives herself *within* the fiction of her print story: “It’s as if I’m a sort of dark watcher, who is there at the scene, but none of the characters pays any attention to me. I’m like a power, as if everything is happening because I’m there” (Benton & Fox, 1985, p. 9).

Claire's stance can be read as the power that activates the subjunctive. Everything happens because there is a reader 'to hope that...', 'to expect that...', 'to fear that...'. But the "dark watcher," though described by a reader, is a strikingly non-media-specific concept. My undergraduate participants, with the DVD of *Run Lola Run* projected on the screen of a darkened room, personified the dark watcher in very literal terms, but they also activated the story in their own minds through their concern over the different outcomes for Lola and Manni. In their readings of *Monster*, they were invisible observers of the actions in court and in the jailhouse and they drew the links between the two formats of storytelling through their own involvement in the possible guilt or innocence of Steve. In *Shadow of the Colossus*, the player's place behind the shoulder of the protagonist is manifest through the camera placement. The player's "dark" invisibility is plain as the character moves through the landscape without ever attending to the one who makes him go. And the power of caring about what happens to the avatar and to the colossi is expressed in the investment of subjunctive wondering and suspecting and wishing on the part of the player.

It can be argued that I have loaded the decks, choosing texts from three media with a virtual space for the dark watcher so that my selected texts may have more in common with each other than with other examples from the same medium. In each case, for example, I chose a 'one-off' rather than an entry in a series, so that readers had to create the subjunctive space from the ground up rather than importing prior knowledge. In each case, I chose a narrative with a conclusion, however indeterminate, rather than a soap opera, a cliff-hanger, or the ongoing universe of an online multiplayer game. In the case of *Shadow of the Colossus*, I selected a game that supplies a metaphorical location for the consciousness of the player, a corner of the scene lacking only a labeled arrow saying "dark watcher stand here." Many games alternatively place the player as the agent of the action, whether as the first-person who does the shooting or as a creator of the plot in a multiplayer online role-playing game, but I chose a finite game with only camera control as a factor in point of view.

So any conclusions drawn from this study would not stand as generalizations about the entire universe of print, moving image or interactive fiction. Nevertheless, it seems important to point out commonalities in orientation efforts and in the mental shift that launches the fictional stance cross media boundaries in these three examples. Participants in this project could not import specific knowledge from previous texts in the same series; what they clearly did import were manifestations of fictional understanding that could be derived from several different media.

Conclusions

Children learn tacit lessons about the subjunctive as soon as they start to listen to stories and to pretend. The bedtime story introduces the significance of "What happens next?" Their make-believe games offer them ways of exploring possible answers to the question "What happens next *if I...*?" The undergraduates who encountered these three sophisticated texts brought a well-honed repertoire for the interpretation of fiction in various media.

In all the examples above, we see participants raising preliminary questions of interpretation: What do I need to know? How can I know it? What cues do I perceive and what

significance should I allot to each cue? What understanding of previously encountered stories can I import to help me start up the fictional engines? What life knowledge can I use and what should I abandon in order to meet the terms of the fiction as I perceive them in this preliminary state? What happens next? What happens next *if I* pay a particular kind of attention/take a particular action? What can I expect, hope, wish, or fear?

The role of the subjunctive mode is apparent in the processing of all three formats. While the details of engagement differ, the need to step into the fiction is an important component of commitment. Although in this article I am reporting largely on the early stages of engagement, it is already possible to see interest “heating up” (Richards, 1942, p. 54) under the pressure of looking ahead through the subjunctive lens. Even in the early moments, we see the beginnings of “*lived connections*” (Langer, 1953, p. 265) in all three media.

The subjunctive is not a mode confined to language, although we understand it through words. In its multimodal incarnations, it offers a relatively precise tool for understanding what makes fictions come alive for their interpreters in multimodal ways. In all formats, the subjunctive mode is sufficiently robust to survive oscillation between depth and surface, between immersion and engagement. In all formats, the subjunctive is the engine that fuels the creation of a suspension of disbelief that enables a dozen young men and women sitting in a university meeting-room, talking to my cameras, to describe a state of anticipating, reacting to, and caring about three sets of people and events that have never actually existed. The subjunctive enables them to sustain *lived connections*, even as they simultaneously explore how the stories that embody such connections have been constructed to draw them in. It is clear that they all understand the subjunctive, not only as they experience it themselves but also as they hear it expressed with differing nuances by their interpretive partners.

“Trafficking in human possibilities” (Bruner, 1986, p. 26) is one of the major pleasures of fiction. This little study indicates that such pleasures are not medium-specific. It is also clear from these particular examples that the both immersion and engagement feed into the subjunctive mode; that, as Murray suggests (1997, p. 110), we vivify a fiction through our intelligent creation of belief, using the tools of whatever format is in front of us to a common end. Strikingly, we not only do this for ourselves, but we also understand the process as experienced and articulated by others with different emphases.

Such a finding is not a definitive answer to the questions raised by ongoing culture wars that claim particular value for writing or for films or for interactive games, but it does suggest that one common component of all three forms is actually a very powerful activator of fictional experience. Clarifying our understanding of this common feature offers a route to clearer understanding of the many story-telling options now at our disposal. This study of the *performed* subjunctive does not provide a complete answer to Ryan’s question: “How can the concept of narrative be fruitfully invoked in game studies?” (2006, p. 181). What it does offer is another tool for exploring how the concept of narrative is activated in games as well as in fictions of other media.

To return to the metaphor of swimming, there are many examples in the transcripts of the participants pushing themselves away from the edge of the pool, away from the handholds of

exploring the surface controls of the text (in whatever medium). The subjunctive draws them in – to wonder *with* Steve, to fear *with* Manni, to yearn *with* the hero in *Shadow of the Colossus*. In the sense that their own subjunctive understanding actually brings the fictions to life, maybe it would be more accurate to say also that they wonder *for* and *on behalf of* Steve, they fear *for* and *on behalf of* Manni, they yearn *for* and *on behalf of* the hero of the game. Their feelings are loaned to the fictional characters as a way of understanding them and of breathing life into the different kinds of flat surface on which each story is presented. It is an impressive cognitive achievement in each medium, and it is one that we do not truly understand. The concept of the subjunctive gives us one tool for approaching this black box of imaginative engagement and comprehension.

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ⁱ http://dictionary.oed.com.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/cgi/entry/50240757?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=subjunctive&first=1&max_to_show=10,

ⁱⁱ <http://www.bartleby.com/64/C001/061.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.transana.org/>

^{iv} One quote is from T.S. Eliot's *Little Gidding*:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

The second is from S. Herberger: "After the game is before the game."