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To Automaticity and Beyond: Narrative Interpretation in Game and Novel

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Abstract

Common wisdom often posits that game-playing is the enemy of reading, that it offers one of a plethora of "distractions" that seduce people away from the power of the printed page. In this article it is proposed that we do not to take on this stereotype, with its barely veiled assumption that reading is always, in all conditions, the superior occupation. Instead, this paper proposes to draw on two studies, conducted twelve years apart, to tease out some of the ways in which we can learn about how we interpret complex narratives through a detailed accounting by both readers *and* gamers of what they are doing as they proceed through the story. Reading and gaming have common elements that can help us understand how we learn to make sense of narrative.

Author Keywords

Narrative; literacy; hermeneutics

Introduction

Even if we allocate equal respect to the skills of competent gamers and competent readers, we may still overlook the complexity of the intellectual achievement that, for both groups, is entailed in the processes of making sense of an elaborate narrative. When readers and gamers speak of the story that currently engages them, they tend to refer to an unproblematic process of making headway through the text, or, at least, of battling the frustrations with a full working toolkit.

When we investigate the temporal processes of both readers and gamers, however, one striking element that comes to light is the amount of time, energy, and attention devoted to simply getting up to the point where the automatic pilot can take over. How do we learn to read *this* novel, to play *this* game? Trial and error is clearly part of the process, but that is a term that tends to mean "trial and acknowledged error." Blundering through a process of trial and *unacknowledged* error may be a feature of each activity, but often it is the later smooth sailing that we remember and associate with the experience of that text. This article will explore the significance of those early error-strewn experiences for the interpretation of the narrative as a whole.

The Studies

The studies that inform this article were conducted to answer a rather open-ended research question: what can we learn about how people process stories if we record their reactions over the time of the encounter, rather than relying on retrospective description?

In the early 1990s, my doctoral research involved monitoring ten teenagers (plus a small pilot group of available adults) as they read the young adult novel *Wolf* by Gillian Cross (1990). These participants read separately and silently, pausing at the end of each of the first four chapters to talk about their interpretation of the story so far. They took the book home to continue reading in more normal surroundings, and returned to read and comment on the first four chapters again, this time in full knowledge of the outcome of the story. Their commentary was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed (See Mackey, 1995).

In the mid-2000s, I set up a project that was in many ways similar. This time I was interested in exploring the interpretive processes of twelve young adults who read a complete novel (*Monster* by Walter Dean Myers), watched a complete movie (*Run Lola Run*), and played a complete PlayStation game (*Shadow of the Colossus*). Instead of working as a solitary interpreter, this time they operated in groups of three. As with the doctoral work, I interrupted both the reading and the viewing to ask for interpretive updates, requesting retrospectives on the most recently read or viewed section. With the game, however, no interruption was necessary. Each group of three shared one controller. They took turns being in charge and those not handling it at any given time were invited to advise freely. The resulting conversation (also recorded, transcribed, and analyzed) offers a "real-time" window into interpretive processes, since the gamers could play and comment simultaneously (See Mackey, 2011).

In this article, I will cross-reference these two studies to explore the under-investigated early stages of reading and playing when the interpreter is dealing with learning how to process *this particular story*, by dint of applying experience from other stories and from life knowledge. Although there are many surface dissimilarities between a game world and a novel world, the efforts after sense actually bear a strong family resemblance.

How the story works

One driving question of many print narratives is "What happens next?" Who dunnit? Does the guy get the girl? The route to the end of the story may be complex and convoluted but it is laid out for the reader to follow. Games do not work in quite the same way. One of the points of a game, put very simply, is to frustrate that forward movement until a player finds a way to get round the obstacles. As Tom Bissell explains it:

> "Stories are about time passing and narrative progression. Games are about challenge, which frustrates the passing of time and impedes narrative progression. The story force wants to go forward and the "friction force" of challenge tries to hold stories back"
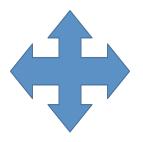
> (Bissell, 2010, p. 93)

Two very simple graphics express the contrast, as it is perceived in conventional terms. Here, at its baldest, is the form of the narrative thrust of a story:

Only the simplest narrative form, such as a very straightforward joke, is actually this simple, but the diagram will stand in for the linearity that marks much story-telling in words. Apart from anything else, it describes the conventional route of the reader through the book, from the first page to the last. Readers are not bound to follow this route, and some do not, but their behaviour is often regarded as aberrant if they short-circuit that process (If you doubt this assessment, try telling people that you always read the ending of a book first to make sure you are going to like it, and notice how many responses are quite scandalized at your effrontery in upsetting the established order).

The game is much more circular in its approach, an effect that may be summed up in a contrasting image:

In this scenario, the multiple elements of the story work not only with but also against each other. There are many channels of information and aesthetic pleasure: images, movement, a soundtrack of words, sound effects, music. There are multiple points of decision making: actions (go or stay), directions (here or there), dialogue (share or keep secret) and so forth. All these different components that go to make up the experience of the game create a synergy but also have the potential to frustrate forward movement.

There is nothing stopping print stories from offering very similar elements of synergy and frustration, however. Picture books and graphic novels in particular contain (in both senses of the word) the same tension between lingering and moving forward. Words invite us to keep going, to turn the page, to get to the end. Images offer a contrary invitation to check out the details, to stop and explore the contrasts and similarities, to enjoy the effects of line and colour, light and shadow.

Even stories that are told in words alone can play complex and sophisticated games with the simple imperative for forward motion – even in books for very young readers. Groenke and Youngquist (2011), writing about *Monster*, suggest that "such postmodern literary characteristics as the theme of identity, genre eclecticism, ambiguity, and *nonlinearity* are becoming increasingly common in children's and young adult literature" (p. 506, emphasis added). The novel *Wolf* that I used in my earlier study, for example, is at one level a mystery-thriller with a

strong forward impetus, but it also alternates conventional action in the normal daily world with dreams set in a fairy-tale universe. Readers trying to make smooth progress through the story often found this shift of tone and content to be highly disruptive.

It seems clear, however, that many people actually relish the challenges of moving among different semiotic challenges, of developing expertise in complex interpretive situations, of managing numerous challenges of information. Smooth progress from beginning to end is one source of appeal but the friction of different kinds of interference with that progression can also provide pleasure.

In any case, the smooth progress is something to be achieved rather than something given. We may take it for granted that we will arrive at this point of effortless immersion with little stress. Such assumptions are perhaps more clearly established with our expectations about reading and viewing. In encountering a book or a film, we approach a new text with a well-honed repertoire, automated to the point of being almost completely invisible, of "how to read" or "how to watch." With a game, this slick entrance is more likely to be denied; the specifics of manual control must often be learned anew every time. The real-time exchanges of some gamers in the second study offered a variety of interesting insights into the processes by which we learn how to interpret a particular text, and supply new perspectives on the kinds of narrative scaffolding we learn to put in place when we encounter a new story. I will draw on my work with the readers of *Wolf* to argue that this process is significant in any medium; when a research project makes it possible to explore interpretative work in slow motion, hindrances and miscalculations are more evident as readers move into the world of the story in ways that resemble the game player's early stumbles.

Comparing and contrasting

It is clear that skilled gamers derive many of the same kinds of narrative pleasures from their games as readers extract from their novels. The three young men from the more recent study (all 20 years old) who are quoted below are all both committed gamers and also enthusiastic readers. Their observations on some of the subtle distinctions between these media are interesting:

- A book is a lot more passive but on the other hand, emotionally it's a little bit more manipulative. The book can feed you emotions or ideas or ways to look at a situation and a game really can't do that. (Neil)
- I think having to do something in the game kind of almost distances you from, like, feeling. You get into the game but you're more concerned about what you're doing rather than what you're feeling sometimes. (Keith)
- I think there's a deep-set human need to influence your environment. I think that's something you can have in a game and you can't have in a book. It's strange but in a book occasionally you feel *futile*! You can't do anything even though you might want to. Whereas in a game, there's definitely some joy in being able to influence the outcome and have an effect and that's definitely something that's enjoyable about the game. (Dan)
- It's all about control and with a book and with a game, in both situations you're still a victim of the story to some extent, but in a game you definitely have control

over the outcome whereas in a book you're most definitely aware that the outcome is not under your control and all you can do is either hypothesize or let it take you and let the story play out. (Dan)

All three of these men agree that they feel a stronger sense of control with a game, where they can interact with the plot developments and have some impact on the outcome. (Additionally, all three of them agree that they actually enjoy the sense of relinquishing control to an author when they are reading; they are by no means gamers-only.)   That sense of mastering complex input and being able to turn it to good account in developing a sense of control is an important part of the appeal of games for these men.

What is invisible to them in these remarks is the degree to which they take it for granted that they will always be able to develop that mastery. The idea of being frustrated at the point of learning how to handle the mechanics of the controls is completely missing from their vision of gaming.

Learning to control, learning to relax

And yet my projects both offered some very clear evidence that learning to handle the controls was not necessarily an automatic and invisible process. The game selected for my later project was *Shadow of the Colossus*, created by Fumito Ueda for the PlayStation 2. A short extract from an extended sequence of dialogue among three undergraduate players (all aged around 20 years old) will give some sense of the complexities of the narrative and manipulative challenges they faced in the early part of the game.

A bit of scene-setting is in order, to make the scale of these challenges clear. The hero has arrived at a magnificent temple located in an empty landscape, searching for a way to bring a dead girl back to life. He is directed by a mysterious voice to locate and slay sixteen colossi (represented in the temple by sixteen stone idols lining the walls). He is told that he can find these great creatures with the help of his sword; he should hold the sword aloft in sunlight and follow the direction in which the beams focus to a point. This manoeuvre can be accomplished by pressing and holding the circle button. The strategy guide says, "Controlling your nimble character on screen is a breeze, and . . . his fluid movements and lifelike animations are sure to amaze you" (Off, 2006, p. 3).

Pressing and holding the circle button is not a very complex action, but it is not the same cognitive task as raising a sword into the sun – at least not until a player is able to make that connection automatically. Michael Polanyi offers a dynamic and instructive metaphor to indicate the nature of the challenge, speaking of a person using a stick to probe the back of a cave that he or she cannot reach with their own hand:

Anyone using a probe for the first time will feel its impact against his fingers and palm. But as we learn to use a probe, or use a stick for feeling our way, our awareness of its impact on our hand is transformed into a sense of its point touching the objects we are exploring. . . We are attending to the meaning of its impact on our hands in terms of its effect on the things to which we are applying it (1983, 12-13).

Once this essential transfer from attending to the stick in the hand to attending to the information at the back of the cave has been effected, the interpreter can start to focus on the information in the story world rather than on the mechanisms for extracting that information from the abstractions of marks on paper or the buttons on a controller.

In the following extract, Martin is holding the controls and Tess and Sumana are advising. It is notable that the two women are operating in the world of the plot and Martin is moving in the world of the buttons. This division of labour makes public a learning effort that usually occurs deep in the private recesses of the mind: the transfer between the abstract cause (in this case, pushing the right button but it could equally well involve the decoding of letters on the page) and the meaningful effect (on this occasion, raising the sword to find the way, while simultaneously managing the horse, Agro, who has a strong tendency to skitter).

> Martin: Pushing this down... all right, horse.
> Tess: Where is the sunlight?
> Martin: Okay, this is hard...extremely difficult! Agro is not hip.
> 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)

> Tess: 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 the 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.

Martin is working hard to remember how to make the horse go slower or faster at the same time as he remembers how to make the hero raise the sword. For the moment, he seems unable to think past the buttons in order to perceive his actions in terms of raising the sword and finding the way.

We can see something of the same level of effort when we watch small children 'bark at print,' laboriously decoding one word at a time. For a while, they work so hard on each individual word that they have no hope of remembering the words long enough to make sense of the whole

sentence. In terms of Polanyi's metaphor, both Martin and these young children are so busy feeling the probe in the palm of their hands that they are unable to devote their attention to processing the information being received from the back of the cave.

Many adults, who have long since mastered the arts of decoding print and assessing the significance of moving images, are not used to being frustrated in their initial interpretive efforts with a new text. They expect that they will need to be tentative in processing the initial information that comes their way until they get further into the story – but they do not expect to have difficulty with the processing activities themselves. They anticipate that decoding skills honed in previous encounter with page or screen will be very adequately transferable to a new story.

Games would seem to offer more of an initial challenge. Many games have controls unique to the particular text, controls that must be learned, if not from scratch, then from a very long way back towards first principles. In order to get to the stage where you feel the back of the cave rather than the stick in your hand, you must develop an ease and expertise in handling the controls that is at least good enough.

Experienced gamers know to expect this initial lag, and are not fazed by its complexity. They anticipate an initial period of investment, and can fall back on their experience of previous games to remind them of pay-off to follow. Non-gamers may be completely nonplussed and frustrated by the kind of barrier to interpretation they thought they had long left behind them. Irritation is often swift to follow, and a breakdown of communication concerning the self-evident pleasures of gaming may also result. What Dan describes as his sense of "futility" as a reader unable to affect the outcome of the story (which he actually finds pleasurable, as he made clear) may have different connotations for an unsuccessful gamer, who sees no way of ever getting into the story at all.

The kinds of barriers represented by Martin's struggle with the horse may make it almost impossible for some inexperienced gamers to explore the differing demands and pleasures of books versus games; they are fatally handicapped when it comes to settling down to enjoy a game. Experienced gamers have more confidence that their initial floundering will give way to smoother progress with the investment of sufficient effort up-front. They are more relaxed about confronting the initial barriers, perhaps even perceiving them as a form of friction that enhances the overall delight of the game.

Yet the early stages of reading can also be confusing, even when the processing of the print marks is fully automatized. The game, after all, can provide visuals to support the more enigmatic elements of the early plot. Martin struggled to make the horse do as he bid it, but he had an immediate sense of the temple, its atmosphere, its forbidding stone statues, and so forth. In the pilot work with *Wolf*, I talked to Douglas, a very experienced reader indeed. He was a graduate student in his early thirties, a former English teacher. *Wolf* is set in a squat in London. Douglas lived on the Canadian prairies and had never been to London, nor had he ever heard of the concept of a squat (which is in fact an empty house occupied by people who don't own it but need somewhere to live). He struggled with knowing how to *imagine* the information he was so effortlessly processing from the printed words.

"Okay, then, I also didn't understand what a squat meant at the bottom of page 10 cause it said it had been knocked down so to me that seemed like some kind of a makeshift, a makeshift housing thing, and that was confirmed, to me anyway, yeah, top of page 11, where it says they gave her three cups of tea, blah, blah, blah, they told her, and then in parentheses, *She helped Lyall and Robert set it up*. Again I had this picture in my mind of one of these makeshift kinds of cardboard houses which people live in, in refugee camps live in almost, but I somehow knew that wasn't right. But I'm having difficulty getting a picture of what this is like."

Douglas persevered through this misunderstanding, and it is one of the contrasts between a book and a game that he was able to keep reading in the face of what he knew to be inadequate understanding, whereas Martin actually did have to learn to control the horse in order to progress – into the countryside beyond the temple and also into the story. His dilemma casts a new light on Dan's intriguing notion of futility. Douglas could not alter the story, but he was able to continue to make progress. Indeed, a couple of sentences further, he actually gleaned enough information to figure out the meaning:

"It became clearer as we went on. . . so I caught on then what a squat meant. It meant that people, they find an abandoned place and they live there and they claim it as their own to protect it."

Martin as a gamer, in contrast, had to do his learning up front. Once he mastered the art of navigating with the horse, *then* he could start to make decisions that would let him make an impact on the story world.

Readers know they have to be patient in sorting out the terms of the story, as they move through the initial pages. The possibility of failure is real, and Douglas expressed it well:

"You know, the first chapter in a book for me is very difficult because I always think that it might be one more of those I don't get into. Because there are ones like that. I mean I have tried to read *Midnight's Children* three times, and I've gotten fifty pages into it and I give up because there are no connections that are ever made, you know."

Such uncertainty can create apprehension, as Douglas described:

"I know I have, before I start reading a book, some anxiety about being interested in this book. And I always think about that when I start. Okay, when's it going to be that I get it, that I catch on to what's going on? When's it going to be? I know that that affects the reading. You know, I always know two or three pages into it, where I'm more relaxed and all of a sudden I'm really reading for understanding."

Experienced readers know that they must invest in this period of uncertainty as they begin a new book (and one reason series books are so popular is that, after the investment of effort in the first story, those initial feelings of confusion and apprehension are subsequently reduced).

Experienced gamers also know that the early stages of game-playing involve both coming to terms with the intellectual and affective puzzle of the story and also managing how much attention needs to be paid to the controls (and here too we may see one reason for the widespread success of sequels).

Each kind of story offers its own kinds of realized representations and its own gaps. Even as the open and beautiful landscape beyond the temple enticed him, Martin was constrained by the need to master the horse's controls; he was not able to take on the wider world of the story. Douglas worked with a different kind of problem; he had conceptually grasped the nature of the squat but the realization of the visual details was still eluding him. He said:

> "What's funny is, I know in my mind I was picturing that incorrectly but I couldn't change the picture. . . .Intellectually I knew that what I was picturing about the inside of this house wasn't what was. Mine was much too bungalowy, you know, it was too much 1950s bungalow. And I knew that wasn't right but somehow I couldn't replace it. . . .All through the whole book, I know it's not right but I'll never get it out of my mind. . . . Never. . . . And the bizarre part is, I even knew that there was a little camp-type stove on the floor, but not in my mind! When they were cooking, it was on a stove. You know, until I just once in a while would make the shift to, okay, it's not there, it's here."

Often, those with little successful experience with reading or with gaming do not realize at all that even successful interpreters must invest that initial effort when little seems to move smoothly. If a gamer chose to be as patient with a book as with a game, or if a reader acknowledged that the initial stages of a new game are always going to be challenging – if each of them stopped using that initial confusion as a reason to quit outright – then many people would successfully master a broader range of literacies.

Good enough interpretation

The early stages of a story require interpreters to make some decisions on a macro level that will allow them to place the micro decisions in context. Paradoxically, however, the main tools at their disposal are micro-level constructs.

Thirteen-year-old Greg struggled with *Wolf* in different ways. He found the sentence structure "a little bit strange." He did not know how to imagine the activities of an educational presentation called "Moongazer," which is an important part of the plot: "More on this Moongazer thing. I don't really understand exactly what he *does* when he goes to this, like, it just says combines all this stuff and helps people write and think better but it doesn't say how he does it."

Thirteen-year-old Hami set himself up for a major misunderstanding of the squat early on in the book when a character helped to carry a suitcase and Hami took him for a butler. How he folded such a personage into his visualization of the decrepit housing conditions that Cross

describes is not clear; eventually he abandoned this notion without any further mention, and gave every indication that he had the characters' roles correctly worked out.

What is interesting about these gaps, misunderstandings, and errors is that they did not stop the readers making progression through the book in ways that could be aligned with that forward arrow above. As Douglas remarked about his inappropriate visualization of the stove, "It didn't make a difference because this book isn't about that setting." At the micro level, the book is indeed about that setting, but at the macro level, Douglas is correct.

Shadow of the Colossus, at the macro level, is not about controlling the horse; but at the micro level, Martin could not move ahead until he mastered at least the basics. The horse and the hero pranced about on the steps of the temple in ways that literally resembled that criss-cross arrow, unable to move ahead and frustrated in their inability to gather more information to help with that cause until the physical mechanics were sorted out. The closest comparison among the readers above is Greg struggling with the sentence structure.

But confusion over content was also a feature of some players' gaming experience. Later in the project Martin joined Dan and Neil, and the threesome tried to find their way through the countryside to locate a new colossus. Although (or perhaps because) they made heavy use of the strategy guide, they seemed unable to make sense of their surroundings, as the following passage indicates (Dan is at the controls):

Martin: Okay, where are we going?
Dan: Right and then right. Oh, it'll be left because it was on the right. Okay Agro, come on.
Neil: You were supposed to ride into the canyon opening on the left, but then you were supposed to take a right at the canyon intersection.

(Dan pulls down the map)

Dan: Yeah, the canyon intersection is back here.
Neil: What – no, no, not that canyon intersection. There should be one at the end –
Dan: The canyon intersection is right there.
Neil: There's two – look.
Dan: No, look where I am. Look where the arrow is – this is another path where I can turn right just ahead of me here.
Neil: Yeeeah, okay so ride [*reading*] "ride through the canyon and arrive at the lake. Follow the shoreline, keeping it to your right, then ride into the canyon." So maybe –
Martin: There's one place we could have gone.
Dan: Yeah, we'll go there.
Neil: Okay. So now we're clearly lost.
Dan: If you were a child and your parents were in the car with you, they would tell you to enjoy the scenery.

Martin: Keeping the shoreline at your right.

This trio spent longer playing the game than any other team, and the main reason lies in reiterated scenes like the one above. They have learned to control the buttons but they have not moved into a fluid and automatic engagement with the story, as they squabble over the visual cues on the screen. It may be that their choice of relying on the guidebook reduced their capacity to interpret the landscape themselves. In any case, this is manifestly not the kind of game friction that enables a player to "enjoy the scenery," and it is not the kind of "futility" Dan had in mind when he talked about relaxing and letting the author control the flow of the story. These players were barely making headway with the story at all, and their frustration mounted as they continued to make wrong judgments about the way to progress. Douglas, reinforcing his incorrect image of the little camp-stove time after time, was also dealing with a reiterated error, but the linear nature of the book offered him a way to progress through the story even though he knew he was doing some things wrongly. In the case of the game, the need for the players to create a way forward out of the crisscrossing options on the screen led them into many cul-de-sacs where the story stagnated for long periods of time.

Such examples serve as reminders that the process of "effortless" immersion is a mirage, that manifest or invisible effort is involved in creating ways of moving into the story world. But successfully achieving such an invested and automatic connection with the story does not represent the full spectrum of how we engage with narratives. Once we are moving fluently through the story, we need to develop other forms of interpretive expertise. It is important to be able to relish the story on its own terms and desirable not to be distracted from this process by laboured decoding, but the ability to stand back and consider the whole is also important.

Critical Literacies

There is more to the experience of narrative, in either print or game form, than simply getting successfully started and relaxing into immersion in the story world. Media studies, which often deals more with film and television than either print or game, fosters an approach that encompasses a broader spectrum of response.

For example, Aaron Delwiche (2009) suggests that we must be cognizant of the need to develop a critical games literacy that goes beyond the simple capacity to make the horse go where you want him to go while you concentrate on drawing the sword, or to learn to read *as if* you understand what a squat is until you are able to figure it out. These accomplishments are essential starting points, and it is important to be alert to their importance. Critical literacies involve these stages but also entail a capacity to think more abstractly about what is being achieved in a particular narrative.

Delwiche supplies a list of five important components of a critical games literacy, basing his elements on key concepts developed by the Association for Media Literacy in Canada. According to this list, a literate gamer should:

- understand that video game messages are constructed and that these messages construct their own immersive realities;
- realize that different players negotiate the meaning of game content in different ways;
- understand the commercial dimension of video games;
- identify ideological and political implications of video game content;
- recognize the ways that unique characteristics of the medium shape video game content (2009, p. 179).

These themes are familiar to media studies students but it is more unusual to see them constructed to reflect the games universe. What is striking, also, is that they would also look relatively unfamiliar if we reworded them as criteria for reading novels. Much work with printed fiction in schools pays little or no attention to the commercial dimensions of publishing, or the ideological and political implications of book content. In many classrooms, the pleasures of immersion, heightened perhaps by some close reading with special attention to the language used and/or an emphasis on readers' own personal responses, remain the main aim of the teaching.

The distance between the gamer or reader struggling with the early stages of the story and the critically literate interpreter who brings sophisticated skills to bear on the game or book as textual artifact is considerable. It is important to bear in mind that the same person may occupy both ends of the spectrum at different points in time. At the early stages, making it to the point of being able to be immersed in the story is a real achievement, as Martin and Douglas both testify. We need to do some sharp, clear thinking about the degree to which – and the circumstances in which – the pleasures of immersion may be enough. We also need to explore how a critical perspective can be developed without necessarily destroying that pleasure. The critical player or reader or viewer who knows the limits of everything and the pleasures of nothing does not have the answer to this conundrum.

Gamers and readers of contemporary picture books, graphic novels, and complex fiction all know that the stampede to the ending is not the only form of narrative pleasure; some forms of friction that impede progress may actually enrich our engagement with a story. An enhanced framework that allows us to consider the critical, commercial, and ideological implications may be perceived as a different kind of friction, slowing us down to enable us to explore further aspects of our fictions.

At the same time, it is useful to remember that ease of engagement with any form of fiction is not something to be undervalued or taken for granted. Getting to automaticity is itself an achievement, and the implications of not managing to slip into that fluid relationship with the text are considerable, for pleasure as well as for developing a critical understanding.

Interpreters of game and print fiction have much to learn from each other. Those who know how to enjoy the pleasures of both formats are the most advantaged 21st century literates. At a minimum, it is time to reduce the other kind of friction, the adversarial stance that sees games and novels as each somehow hostile to the delights of the other. "Either/or" is a dead end; an inclusive "both/and" stance will enhance both our pleasures and our insights into the complexities of how we understand narrative.

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