# Slippery Texts and Evolving Literacies

There is a large and rapidly increasing literature on various elements of new literacies but much of it is specialized, focusing on games or chat or the Internet. Yet, of course, literacies are changing along multiple fronts at once and the *combination* of literate capacities manifested by contemporary media users is something different from a collection of individuated skills. Finding a vocabulary for these combined skills and attitudes is a significant challenge. In this paper, I explore the implications of one such new descriptor.

Kristie Fleckenstein observed her daughter's changing relationship with Pokemon and developed the concept of "slippery texts," which she defines, "loosely," as "artifacts that keep us positioned on the edges that blur, the edges where literacy evolves" (2003, 105). It is an amorphous concept which makes room for acknowledging and accepting mutation (aesthetically or commercially inspired). Yet interpreters of slippery texts must come up with strategies for addressing this amorphousness in ways that allow them to make satisfying progress into whatever fiction on offer. A vagueness, even fuzziness of approach may offer ways of being open to adaptation as needed. As Heidegger observed, ""The humanistic sciences . . . , indeed all the sciences concerned with life, must necessarily be inexact just in order to remain rigorous" (1977, 120).

In this paper, I will investigate the strategies of eight adults who worked with me on a range of texts, and explore their responses to a very slippery text indeed: *American McGee's Alice*, a computer game that offers a dark reworking of *Alice's Adventures in*

*Wonderland*. I have selected this specific example in part because of its links to many other different media, and in part as a response to David Marshall's observation:

> Electronic games have democratized contemporary cultural production in a patterned way: they have allowed the player to move into the action of the screen. This profound shift is a celebration of the activity of the populace to make their culture. The electronic game has been a broad channel for that will-to-produce even as it has been brilliantly made into a successful form as a cultural commodity (2004, 74).

By this argument, a digital game offers a structured route to interaction, and a slippery structure such as this *Alice* may offer perspectives on a new form of paradoxical text.

**The slipperiness of *Alice***

Jonathan Miller, who produced a film version of *Alice in Wonderland*, points out that the internal story world of *Alice* is itself slippery: it is a dream story and "express[es] the peculiarity of action as presented to the dreaming imagination" (1986, 240). Lewis Carroll first told the story to Alice Liddell and her sisters as they rowed up the river in Oxford. "He later wrote up the story which he called *Alice's Adventures Under Ground* and illustrated it himself, presenting it to Alice Liddell in 1864 as a Christmas present" (Watson, 2001, 20). The published version which appeared a year later was revised, expanded and re-illustrated by Tenniel – so its first public appearance in the world already involved a certain slipperiness. And Carroll himself had an eye to the market potential of this shape-shifting story. According to Watson, he devised and commercially

produced "such items as the Wonderland Postage-Stamp Case" (2001, 20) – a quaint and Victorian commodity, to be sure, but equally surely an arbiter of more to come.

Since its first publication, *Alice* has been the source of a veritable industry of adaptations, on stage and film, in music and ballet, through parody and re-working, via dolls, toys and packs of cards. Will Brooker has devoted a whole book to the slippery nature of *Alice* and its broad range of reworkings. Other writers have also drawn on Carroll's work for intertextual or more explicit inspiration; Margaret Weis (1995), for example, has edited a volume of short stories by a variety of authors, all based on the *Alice* stories in one way or another. Fan fiction ranges from "Alice in Nintendoland" (http://forums.nintendo.com/nintendo/board/message?board.id=FanFic&message.id=196978, accessed March 28, 2007) to "Not Lost, but Misplaced" (http://community.livejournal.com/peppermintdarts/6079.html#cutid1, accessed March 28, 2007), a story that crosses *Alice in Wonderland* with *Harry Potter*.

*Alice* also belongs to a more select category of slippery texts in that much adaptive energy is invested in exploring the gaps between the "real-life" story of Lewis Carroll and Alice Liddell and the fictional story of *Alice in Wonderland*, so that the concept of a tenuous fact/fiction border features in many versions of this story. Our contemporary understanding of the relationship between Charles Dodgson and the original Alice also makes room for an elision between this classic of children's literature and child pornography (Brooker, 2004, 53-54); the fact that Dodgson himself photographed the historical Alice in what some consider to be suggestive poses adds yet another medium to this set of slippery texts. The Victorian setting of this panoply of originating slipperiness reminds us that not everything about such a concept is new; it

will be interesting to establish whether the gameplay of *American McGee's Alice* sets new conditions on the story.

The name of *Alice* has a variety of further connotations in contemporary culture. The "eat me" motifs of the story and Alice's radical changes in size resonate with drug users. At the other end of the spectrum, the Disney version sanitized many of the more disturbing qualities of the story – at least to extent delimited by that regular paradox of the Disney corporation, which so often produces a complex brew of hygienic darkness. Alice exists as a charming period doll whose "innocence" is a marked quality; at the same time, she represents a pawn in a sinister game of postmodern meaning-making, with Humpty-Dumpty as the arbiter of what makes sense.

The latent content of sex and violence in this children's story is drawn out in particularly articulated form in two new titles. *Lost Girls*, by Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie (2006) is a lavish trilogy of explicitly erotic graphic novels, featuring the orgies of Alice, Dorothy (from *The Wizard of Oz*) and Wendy (from *Peter Pan*). While the sexual adventures of the three heroines wildly exceed the limits of the children's books from which they are drawn, the stories outrageously but intelligently draw on elements clearly present in the original stories. Similarly, the movie *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) makes substantial reference *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Alice through the Looking-Glass* (with the occasional flicker of a reference to *The Wizard of Oz* as well); in this case it presents scenes of brutal violence far in excess of anything Alice encounters but that are not an utterly unreasonable stretch from the context of the original books.

Any one reader may have access to a pool of *Alice* associations that encompasses all of these ingredients or many more that I have failed to mention in this brief list. A

different reader may know little about the story except some vague recollection of the Disney cartoon or a received and schematic notion that playing cards are somehow involved in the story.

### *American McGee's Alice*

Given this rich pool of associations, *American McGee's Alice* certainly qualifies as a slippery text simply as a reworking of an already slippery story. Furthermore, it is itself in the process of adaptation: a movie version of this game is currently in the works and the game's soundtrack is also for sale.[1] This gaming parody exploits plot and character elements of the original story, but operates on a very different set of interpretive conventions from the more linear narrative versions of book, live-action film, and cartoon. This intricate genealogy of *American McGee's Alice* makes it an interesting and productive test-bed for exploring how contemporary readers respond to slipperiness in their texts.

The game offers a nightmare scenario of Alice returning to a much darker Wonderland, equipped with a battle-axe and prepared to slaughter the strange inhabitants. The graphics have been praised for their lushness and ingenuity; the game play is relatively straightforward. Dialogue is spoken and also printed at the bottom of the screen.

I showed this game individually to eight adults (participants in a larger study that is reported in Mackey, in press), and asked them to play the opening stages of this game with me. Some of these adults were quite familiar with the original story, some had only

[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_McGee's_Alice ,
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alice_%282007_film%29 ,
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_McGee's_Alice#Soundtrack , all accessed October 9, 2006

dim recollections of experiencing it in some earlier incarnation, and one did not know it well at all. As we might expect with a book or a film, the participants *responded* in different ways to this surreal horror story. It is noticeable that they also *behaved* differently with it; its slipperiness affected them in different ways.

**The players of *Alice***

Jocelyn, a 31-year-old lover of horror stories, suspense and surprise, was very taken with the unexpectedness of this game world compared to the *Alice* story she already knew. She found it warped and weird and funny, all of which appealed to her, and she liked the voices of the Cat and the Rabbit (in her sessions with me, she demonstrated regularly, regardless of medium, that she valued emotional connection to a text very highly – a clear case of what Sipe calls a "signature response" [1998, 87]). But she also liked the way she could play herself into it and make an immediate connection: "It wasn't as complicated, like, you could just start playing it, you don't have to read instructions, and they guide you along nice and easy. I liked it. It was fun."

Courtney, a 26-year-old mother with an enthusiasm for online journalling, found the idea of a brutalized Alice with a butcher knife "a little bit hard to swallow," but was struck with the potential for the game to have "interesting concepts in it." In utter contrast to Jocelyn, she also found the training for game play to be completely inadequate. If playing on her own, she would begin by reading the guidebook all the way through "and try to glean at least some information that would be useful; umh – to – how to play the game and how to get out of fixes when I run into a problem." She appreciated

the parody and was intrigued to make connections between the book and Disney versions and the dark story of the game.

Isaac, a substitute teacher aged 36, with a taste for the visual, was hooked by the parodic element before he even began to play; his first response was to the cover art of the box (this reaction to the visual was a regular feature of his response to texts in many different media, another signature response). He liked the idea of a "demented twist" and found his familiarity with the general premises of the story to be helpful; "you have a general idea of what you're supposed to do." He liked the orientation to completing particular tasks but also liked the fact that he had "to read and think to understand some stuff."

Damian, 24 years old, a Reserve in the Canadian armed forces with a significant gaming habit, had not read *Alice in Wonderland* and made no mention of versions other than the book, but he had enough general knowledge to anticipate that the final showdown would be with the queen. I asked him about the importance of prior knowledge of *Alice* and he said, "You don't need it but it adds to it." His approach was to go straight into the game settings, "to know how to play for the most part. There are only one or two consistent set-ups; you get used to one. It saves annoyance later." Like Jocelyn, he appreciated the embedded instructions and was prepared to be "incredibly" patient in working out what to do. He actually liked the violent component: "a psychotic girl in a cute uniform running around killing things – *what's not to love*?" Yet later he said the most important ingredient was character: "the main thing is having a real – well, not real, but a developed character and personality."

If he owned this game, Damian anticipated that he would play through in a single sitting, for the reward of "just keeping the continuity of the flow of the game" and for the purpose of maintaining his mental map. Flow "keeps your mind involved in suspending your disbelief of reality there."

Seth, a nurse aged 28, had some familiarity with the story and was explicit about the importance of watching the cut-scene introduction carefully – just as he likes to do with movies (he mentioned going to the movie theatre early, explicitly in order to watch the trailers, as a comparable experience). He was less struck with the importance of the parallels with the original story. "Does it improve the game to have the references to *Alice in Wonderland*?" I asked him. "Does it make it more interesting, do you think, or just a way of making a game?" "I think it was just a way of making a game," he replied.

Drew, a 27-year-old computer network administrator, also had some familiarity with the original but he responded first to other aspects of the game. "I appreciate the accents. Something – the novelty – it is very atmospheric, which is very important for games to have that." I asked about the parodic element and he described it as "cute." The bloodthirstiness added to the parody, in his view, but it was the atmosphere that really appealed to him. "It's got a certain ambience to it. A lot of games nowadays don't seem to have that, really."

Ben, a community college student aged 21, was familiar with the original story and had also heard of this game's darker version. His way of playing purposefully differed from the approach of either Jocelyn or Courtney; while they, in the early stages of their play, focused on understanding the rules of encounter, Ben focused more intently on the story line. When a character remarked that there was somebody else deeper in the

mines, Ben immediately set out to go deeper in order to find him. The plot-based purpose of his actions was his chief motivation to get going. He was also intrigued by the contrasts between this version and Carroll's story:

Ben: It seems kind of interesting and bizarre and I know the original story behind it and everything that makes it kind of curious as to what happens. Almost everybody knows *Alice in Wonderland*.

Margaret: By the original story you mean Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*?

Ben: Yeah.

Margaret: Right, and how close do you perceive this as relating to that?

Ben: Umh, not really close at all. Like, she's got a skull on the back of her bow. It's just not the normal Alice. It – just – a different look on something everybody already knows as kind of interesting.

Ben's definition of why he found this game appealing included the potential for mastering the controls as well as interpreting the story.

> Well, it does have a difficult, like, control system just like *Oni* and I think it's kind of interesting to work with that because I haven't tried that yet before and to figure out what else is in this game because it seems quite unusual. Because where else would you see Alice going and playing with a dagger and twirling it like a basketball? Just the idea is really bizarre and it makes me kind of curious as to what else is different other than the Cat and the Rabbit obviously, because I've seen those characters. The cards didn't look that much different, but they still wanted to kill Alice so that's kind of normal.

Jeremy, a university undergraduate of 19, had played the game before and was faster than any of the others in achieving a state that held some potential for flow. He was familiar with Alice from film and cartoon versions, and I asked him if that would make a difference to how he played it. "Not to how I play it," he said, "but it's cool to look at how things turned out in the game compared to the original movie."

Jeremy stopped playing to finesse the controls, "so it's easier to turn around if someone is at the back of me." He chose not to opt for maximum sensitivity, however, "cause then it will be, if you turn it up too hard, it's hard to control. Like, if you wanted to turn around you could end up doing a double spin instead." At the same time as he fine-tuned his physical relationship to the game, he focused on building a mental map of the territory, and fooling around with the weapons to figure out their potential.

**Doing it differently**

In offering *American McGee's Alice* to the participants, my intent was to set up both a selection exercise and also a micro-simulation of initial game-playing activities. The participants were united in saying they enjoyed the game and would play further, and I believe their behaviours do provide insight into how they would go about settling into this game if it were a real-world option.

But an observer of their behaviours, demonstrated and reported, would be hard-pressed to come up with a single model for imitation. Take start-up behaviours for example. Jocelyn's preference was to follow the in-story instructions and reach a stage of immersion as quickly as possible. Courtney would read the instruction manual from beginning to end before starting the game. Isaac paid particular attention to the

illustration on the box, and Seth attended carefully to the introductory cut-scenes. Damian went straight to the set-up screen, and Jeremy started by playing but quickly moved to refine the controls to his own satisfaction. Drew responded to atmosphere and ambience, and Ben made an attempt to start by following the plot and its connection to his prior awareness of the *Alice* world, "something everybody already knows as kind of interesting" – while simultaneously attending to the different controls.

Some participants listened to the dialogue and Drew actually mentioned taking pleasure from the accents; others read the dialogue on the bottom of the screen, short-circuiting the spoken words as soon as they were finished.

Galloway, in his 2006 study of gaming, offers an analytical framework that may be loosely applied to these different start-up actions and strategies. He distinguishes four categories of engagement with a game: the diegetic (inside the world of the story) and the nondiegetic (outside the story, though still linked to the overall experience of the game). He also makes a distinction between those elements that are controlled by the operator and those that are controlled by the machine. Galloway presents these distinctions in the form of a grid, but of course any player's game will move around this grid from moment to moment. Nevertheless, I found it helpful to make use of a simplified adaptation of these categories in order to sort the player responses I have just described. While my categorization is undoubtedly on the coarse side, I find it still offers a helpful perspective on just how different the players' actions are. In this table I move from the most diegetically focused responses to those that are less so (more game oriented than story oriented).

| Player | Tactic | Orientation |
|---|---|---|
| Jocelyn | play straight into game | operator-oriented diegetic |
| Drew | respond to atmosphere | operator-oriented diegetic |
| Isaac | anticipate/play/think | operator-oriented diegetic/nondiegetic |
| Seth | watch cut-scene introduction carefully | machine-oriented diegetic |
| Ben | pursue plot/practise new controls | operator-oriented diegetic/machine-oriented nondiegetic |
| Jeremy | finesse controls/create mental map/ practise weapons | machine-oriented nondiegetic/operator-oriented diegetic/operator-oriented nondiegetic |
| Damian | adjust settings | machine-oriented nondiegetic |
| Courtney | read rule book | operator-oriented nondiegetic |

**Table 1: Start-up Actions with *American McGee's Alice* (based on Galloway, 2006)**

Even in its simplistic application of Galloway's distinctions, this table does demonstrate, I believe, that the eight players found strikingly different ways to make a successful entry into this game. The actions listed represent different physical and intellectual approaches to this particular exercise, involving differing commitments to immersion in the story world versus a grasp of gaming strategies and skills. Establishing a description of these varied activities that is generally useful is in itself a slippery exercise, and it is important to note that my accounts of specific behaviours tend to omit the very flexibility and openness that marked the responses of these players. At the same time, the participants behaved similarly in how they attended to intertextual connections that deepened and enriched even their earliest contact with this game. For all their differences, they were alike in locating this game in relation to other versions of this story, a procedure that seemed to be relatively effortless to all of them. The slipperiness

of the text was plainly part of the appeal; the bigger world of *Alice* stories contributed to their interpretive pleasure. In grappling with this new version, they effectively engaged with the story of *Alice* in what really is a form of *in medias res* – joining what is in effect an ongoing *Alice* story partway through its decades-long progress. Furthermore, they gave every indication that the first sight of the box was enough to open an intertextual repertoire on which they then expected to draw. The iconic Alice on the cover – the blue dress, the white pinafore – is instantly recognizable but the image is also disrupted at first glance by the addition of butcher knife, bloodstains, and fiendish-looking Cheshire cat. The complexity of this image seems to have spoken immediately to all eight players, and they approached the game already knowing something about the story they were about to join.

McLuhan says that

> 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 (1994/1964, 15).

It is interesting to note in this case that what seems to have been irresistibly triggered, like McLuhan's melody, was a chain of intertextual associations. The strategies for entering the singular instantiation of that story in the game world were much less instantaneous and immersive. It is an interesting question for further exploration whether today's media users, accustomed to texts that cross media boundaries back and forth, are actually more aware of specific media affordances and limitations than their equivalents from forty years ago, whether it is the multimedia mix that now makes the most

seductive, compelling and uncritical claim on their attention. There are insufficient data in this study to answer this question, but the actions and attitudes of the participants suggest that it is a question worth asking.

**Learning to handle the new and slippery**

Recognizing the territory is not the same thing as possessing a detailed map of how to proceed, and we have seen from the examples that the eight players had very different approaches to this game. A description of Bourdieu's idea of *habitus* conveys some of this open-ended complexity in very subtle terms:

> The habitus is sometimes described as a "feel for the game", a "practical sense" (*sens pratique*) that inclines agents to act and react in specific situations in a manner that is not always calculated and that is not simply a question of conscious obedience to rules. Rather, it is a set of dispositions which generates practices and perceptions. The habitus is the result of a long process of inculcation, beginning in early childhood, which becomes a "second sense" or a second nature (Johnson, 1993, 5).

Thus, in Johnson's gloss on Bourdieu's terms, we may see the participants in this study as accreting a "feel" for the orchestration of a complex game story, as developing dispositions to particular forms of behaviour.

Bourdieu is also illuminating in describing the physical nature of the attributes of habitus. His observations on the role of the body as "memory-jogger" are especially helpful:

> There is no better image of the logic of socialization, which treats the body as a "memory-jogger", than those complexes of gestures, postures and words – simple interjections of favourite clichés – which only have to be slipped into, like a theatrical costume, to awaken, by the evocative power of bodily mimesis, a universe of ready-made feelings and experiences (1984/1979, 474).

German has a word for the knowledge of the hands: *Fingerspitzengefuhl*. The word is not really translatable into English; dictionaries provide alternatives such as "flair" or "sure instinct," that do not make any reference to the hands' role in our knowledge of the world. But this idea of "hand knowledge" is a powerful one, and lends itself to some constructive metaphors.

How do "hands" deal with slippery material? What strategies may help to secure the grasp, both physical and mental? A sporting analogy may be useful in considering this question. The Baseball Almanac informs us that a baseball pitcher is permitted to apply rosin to his bare hand or hands before putting the ball into flight, in order to improve his grip.[2] If we think of a slippery text as being "handled," is there an imaginative equivalent to the rosin bag?

It is instructive to remember that the rosin bag is not the full answer. The pitcher has to make many decisions about how he will hold and project the ball. The rosin simply enables him to forget about some aspects of the physics of grip so that he can focus on the aspects of pitching that are more within his control.

Baseball is a game of strict rules and usage of the rosin bag is very specifically governed ("All umpires shall carry with them one official rosin bag. The umpire in chief is responsible for placing the rosin bag on the ground back of the pitcher's plate.") But

[2] http://www.baseball-almanac.com/rule8.shtml, accessed September 27, 2006

even baseball makes some room for contingency ("In the case of rain or wet field, the umpire may instruct the pitcher to carry the rosin bag in his hip pocket.") What is important is enough improvement of grip to make the game playable. The rosin bag allows the pitcher to *forget* about certain components of the physics of grasping the ball – just as readers use mastery of decoding to enable them to read past or through the marks on the page.

The gamers drew on the "rosin bag" of their physical comfort with the game controls, their physical and intellectual "memory-joggers" of playing postures and technical alertness. They drew on intertextual knowledge of *Alice* much as a pitcher matches what he knows about the batter at the plate with what he knows about how to hold the ball to make it fly in a particular way. Both pitcher and gamer make the best conscious decisions they can and then have to *feel* their way into the moment when the ball or the game "takes flight." As David Brooks, also writing about baseball, expresses it, "[T]here is a certain kind of practical wisdom that is not taught but is imparted through experience. It consists of a sensitivity to the contours of how a situation may evolve, which cannot be put into words" (2007, A19).

The comfort of sliding into familiar bodily knowledge and psychological perspective can often provide an important element of enjoyment. Bourdieu himself uses the helpful phrase, "reading routines" (1996/1992, 327) to describe some of the implicit "certainties" of body and mind which we often apply without much attention.

Clearly, competence, routine and their associated forms of automaticity contribute to the ease of understanding that fosters connection and enjoyment. For the most part, the adults in this study had already put in the hours of previous practice necessary to

automatize their gestures and responses in response to computer games. But their varying approaches to *American McGee's Alice* show them making strong efforts to slide into the game and not to be *distracted into effortfulness*; and we can see them using a variety of scaffolds to enable this imaginative transfer to begin. The imaginative "rosin bag" of approaches, the element that would allow players to pay *less* attention to aspects of control, covered a range of possibilities such as:

- mastering the printed rule book before beginning to play;
- engineering digital reactions to input from the controls;
- following the story intently and expecting strategic considerations to "fall in behind" and become immediately subordinate to the pursuit of the plot.

It seems very clear that the *function* of these different approaches was much more similar than the specific *actions*: players wanted to eliminate some components that distract from swift engagement and interaction with the game fiction.

Multimodal interpreters develop dispositions and skills of mind and hand and body, often as a byproduct of extensive contact with forms of text. They absorb attitudes (social and physical) through contact with their multimodal friends and siblings. They master the art of what Galloway calls the "polyvalent doing" (2006, 105) of game-playing, of making one action but *seeing* a different one. Galloway applies this phrase to computer games specifically, but in fact all encounters with text involve some form of polyvalent doing. I look at marks on a page and envisage characters and actions. I watch the disposition of light in a sequence of still representations and see moving action.

As Bourdieu reminds us, I have developed habitual attitudes of body and mind to enable me to process the polyvalence of my actions in apparently transparent ways. With

the gamers in this study, we may see some of those habitual approaches being applied to a new text. But the slipperiness of the text in question also gives us some small insight into the ease and apparent transparency of gestures and comments that relate this version of an ongoing story to other versions, that place this telling of *Alice* on a grid of other *Alice*s that is both dynamic and ever-expanding. In their observations and their actions, the participants in this study make room for a slippery addition to an already known canon; at the same time as demonstrating openness to this changing fiction, these participants called on familiar ways to pin down the new version long enough to get, as we say, a "handle" on it.

**Discussion: good-enough playing**

Years ago, I wrote about the idea of "good-enough reading" (Mackey, 1997, 1995). Good-enough reading involves a trade-off, acceptable to the individual reader, between forward momentum and accountability to the text (Bussis *et al*., 1985, 113). The readers I worked with varied considerably in their predilection for momentum or for accuracy, although, in looking at reading rather than gaming, I perceived nothing like the range of actual *actions* that I noted in the game players' approach to *American McGee's Alice*.

The idea of "good-enough playing" may be useful in a consideration of what these players were hoping to achieve as they began to play their way into the game. Momentum is clearly significant in game-playing, but the idea of accuracy takes on a different role when the interpreter is not dealing with a fixed text. When the actions before you are affected by your own responses, does fluidity need to encompass more

awareness of the controls than in the reading of a set of words that will not alter? It may be that the most successful playing involves a balance between momentum through the actions of the games and an awareness of the controls that augments pleasure rather than distracting from it. On this basis, good-enough game playing might entail a working compromise between attention to game events and attention to the machinery of making things happen. At the start of a game, attention to the controls necessarily impinges more on a player's consciousness, which may explain the different approaches to *reducing* that attention relative to the need to get the story started.

Getting "into" the game is clearly important, and in this respect a game resembles other fictions. A pilot participant in my earlier reading research (a PhD student and highly experienced reader) summed up the importance of this step when talking to me about reading:

> You know, the first chapter in a book for me is very difficult because I always think that it might be one of those that I don't get into. . . .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 (Mackey, 1995, 216).

Of course readers, just like gamers, also have to figure out the rules of engagement, develop a grasp of how an author has composed the story, in order simply to make headway. But a much larger component of the sense-making procedures is transparent to

a competent reader. With the game player, there are two elements at work at the same time in that crucial question, "When's it going to be that I get it?" The answer to that question in relation to a game involves, as it were, two "it"s – the movement of the story and the management of the controls. Finding a good-enough way to begin making progress is the first challenge facing the gamer with a new game, and part of succeeding is establishing which components can be temporarily or permanently consigned to automatic pilot. As we see in the small example of *American McGee's Alice*, players may adopt a wide range of strategies in this essential start-up phase. What is good-enough for one is a distraction or an interference for another – but all of them are involved in finding ways to establish a balance between momentum in the story and pleasurable attention to the controls that make the game go forward.

**Conclusions**

Faced with a text that could act as a model for slipperiness, it is striking what these players did *not* do. Nobody said, "What is this, some kind of parody? How could they interfere with such a wonderful story in this way? Who does American McGee think he is anyway?" The idea that messing around with somebody else's story is not only acceptable but actually enjoyable seems to have been taken for granted by all of them. When they commented on the relationship of this game to other versions of *Alice*, it was in terms of such connections being pleasing – even in the case of Courtney who was the only one to blanch at the bloodthirsty reworking of *Alice*.

Having established at a glance that they had to find ways of dealing with slipperiness, the players adopted a broad range of strategies for making their first, all-

important steps into the territory of this new but familiar fiction. Despite the variation in their individual approaches, they were united in attempting to establish what elements of playing their way into the story they could quickly master (and thus ignore), in order to devote attention to making the story move ahead.

This paper describes one small snapshot, one brief account of a small set of people taking only the earliest interpretive steps into a complex (and very slippery) fiction. Yet heterogeneity is at the heart of even this very small description, as the players looked for ways to focus their attention on what they perceived as the significant aspects of the game. What they take for granted, what they try to control, and what they assess as important in this little exercise raise important questions about textual interpretation in a slippery world that need to be explored on a wider basis.

Establishing the role of good-enough playing as part of the fictional encounter is a challenge with significant pedagogical implications. Like Heidegger, the players experimented with ways of being "inexact" in the face of slipperiness. The question, in this context of a pleasurable fiction, of what qualifies as correspondingly and appropriately "rigorous" is a resonant issue for educators.

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