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COMPARING STORIES:
HOW TEXTUAL STRUCTURE SHAPES AFFECTIVE EXPERIENCE IN NEW MEDIA.

By

KEVIN VEALE.

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for a PhD degree in Film, Television and Media Studies, University of Auckland, 2012.
ABSTRACT OF THESIS.
Comparing Stories: How Textual Structure Shapes Affective Experience in New Media.

Stories told through different media forms feel very distinctive from each other, to such an extent that there are stories which can only be told through one media form – at least, if preserving the distinctive affective quality of the experience is a priority. Is this due to something innate to the story which makes it hard to translate outside of its context, or is it the context itself that sets the experience apart?

Phenomenology provides a way of understanding how the media-specific structures of textual storytelling can shape the experience of negotiating that text, through altering the affective processes associated with its navigation.

This project argues that it is possible to distinguish amongst storytelling in multiple media forms by analysing how differences in textual structure (and the processes required to engage with them) shape the phenomenological experience of those texts.

I apply an analytical framework of affective phenomenology to case-study forms of textual storytelling, including videogames, hypertext fiction, webcomics, and Alternate Reality Games. All of these case studies share a new media context, and so their outward similarities will highlight the differences in the experiences they present. I argue that hypertext fictions provide environments for readers to engage with, either as explorers negotiating unfamiliar territory, or detectives seeking connections between disparate material. The webcomic is distinguished from other forms of mediated storytelling by the amount of time spent engaging with characters within the text, which leads to a perception of intimacy as part of the experience. Videogames are set apart by the sense of responsibility felt by the player for events and their consequences within the Heideggerian world-of-concern established with the text and its characters. Alternate Reality Games are texts which function at the level of the community rather than the individual, are experienced as phenomenologically real, and are further distinguished by their textual boundaries functioning at the level of affective investment rather than the specific processes involved in negotiating the text.

I argue that the definition of media texts should include how we engage with their textual structures, rather than focus purely on the textual structures themselves. Affective phenomenology and the process of analytical juxtaposition presented in this project provide the beginnings of a map for negotiating this new conceptual territory, and will become particularly relevant as texts and textual forms migrate across platforms.
To Tonya, who I can’t imagine doing this without.

To Loki, who deserves a better monument than this.
My interest in storytelling is something that underlies this work. It feels confessional to front-load this work with my own interests, but at the same time the entire project has been conceptualised through engagement with (and interest in) fiction, so the context is important. I am an aspiring writer of fiction, predominately in the genres of science-fiction, fantasy and horror – genres which are a regular (although not defining) feature of what I read myself. Film and television have been an abiding interest which informed my undergraduate study. I developed an interest in the comic book and graphic novel as I reached university in the late 1990s, at roughly the same time as I discovered that the webcomic form was becoming a financially plausible and distinctive context for storytelling. I have been playing videogames since I was a child, primarily on the PC platform, which in turn motivated my Master’s thesis, *The Amniotic Sac: Intersubjectivity and Affect in Computer Games* (Veale 2005).

The initial position of my Master’s thesis was that there were narratives being expressed through videogames that ‘could not be expressed in another media form without severe alteration’ (Veale 2005 iii). What I discovered during the course of research was that the very concept that videogames are narrative was critically contested, and not something that could be taken for granted. Despite this, and the fact that engaging with the critical conflict over narrative in games took up a significant part of the resulting thesis, I was convinced that there was something fundamentally different about the experience of videogames in comparison to other kinds of storytelling. If it was not the narrative that set them apart, it must have been their context as videogame experiences – and this was the position the thesis eventually argued for.

The core question of this PhD is a development from that earlier work:

*How and why do different forms of media present distinctive or potentially unique experiences of a fictional text?*

The focus on the ‘experience’ of a text is key to conceptualising both the question and the entire idea of what is under consideration. The ‘experience’ of mediated fiction is distinct from its narrative, its structure, and its mediated context – and yet all of those things inform the experience. They have affective consequences for how the experience is received.

I have a great many people to thank for their contributions to this PhD, and for making it as enjoyable an experience as I have found it. I’d like to thank my family for their ongoing support and interest in my work; your enthusiasm has always been greatly
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The amount of effort you both provided, right up to the time I was ready to print, has been astounding.

Thank you.

This would have been a very much less enjoyable project without you both.

Thanks also to Doctor Tanya Krzywinska of the Brunel University Screen Studies Department in the UK, and Doctor Gareth Schott of the Waikato University Screen and Media Studies Department in New Zealand. Your feedback and support has been excellent, and greatly appreciated.

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What do I mean when I say that the media form in which a story is expressed is going to alter the experience of the story? For one thing, any adaptation which bridges different forms of media is going to alter the presentation of that story as a pragmatic consequence of the new structure, which will in turn have consequences for how the adaptation is experienced in comparison to the original. However, there are examples where comparisons between texts which would otherwise seem very similar highlight much bigger issues than the ones presented by seemingly simple textual adaptations. I argue that the experience of a film text being viewed within the context of a cinema is fundamentally different from experiencing the same film in the context of a DVD watched at home. Leaving aside the basic experiential differences caused by the fundamental change in context (private space versus public, cinema-going connoted as more of a ‘special occasion’, enjoying a text in a social context versus alone or with family, etc), the DVD text presents the film experience through an entirely different structure than is found in the cinema. Vivian Sobchack also follows this logic, although she argues that something valuable is lost in translation from the cinematic context into the home:

Certainly before videotape and DVDs, the spectator could share in and thereby, to a degree, interpretively alter a film’s presentation and representation of embodied and enworlded experience, but the spectator could not control or contain its autonomous and ephemeral flow and rhythm or materially possess its animated experience. Now, of course, with the help of consumer electronics the spectator can both alter the film’s temporality and materially possess its inanimate “body.” However, this new ability to control the autonomy and flow of the film’s experience through fast-forwarding, replaying, and pausing and the ability to possess the film’s “body” so as to animate it at will and at home are not functions of the material and technological ontology of the cinematic; rather, they are functions of the material and technological ontology of the electronic, which has come to increasingly dominate, appropriate, and transform the cinematic and our phenomenological experience of its perceptual and representational modalities. (Sobchack 2004 148-149)

In the context of cinema, the audience has no capacity to engage with the text in a way that would modify how events unfold. This sounds obvious, but consider that someone reading a book can elect to put the book down at any time: they cannot change or alter the unfolding of events, but they can modify how they as an individual choose to engage with that unfolding.
CHAPTER 1: THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF STORYTELLING

Some people read the end of detective novels first; others read multiple books at a time and move between them without completing one story first. However, one of the defining features of cinema\(^1\) is this utter lack of control that members of the audience have over the text. The film is going to unfold within the space of the theatre heedless of the presence of the audience, whether they are paying attention, whether the phone rings, or whether they arrive late. All of the signs about turning off cellphones in theatres boil down to “The ride is not stopping for anyone or anything, so if this happens you will be being disruptive.”

Everyone, particularly anyone with children, will at some point have had a discussion regarding tactical bathroom breaks and the wisdom of getting a large drink at the start of *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Jackson 2001) – precisely because we as the audience are aware that the movie is indifferent to our presence.

Likewise, we as the audience carry an awareness of the fact that we cannot interact with the text into our experience of it. If we anticipate dire events for the protagonists, there is nothing we can do to postpone the inevitable; the most we can do is look away – and we know that. This awareness has specific consequences for the experience the audience has of the text due to the structure of cinema: I argue that our inability to engage with the structure of cinema is part of what informs how we can be held on the ‘edge of our seats,’ by cinematic experience. In comparison, the experience of the same text at home on DVD is very different. We have more agency, in terms of our capacity to act. Janet Murray defines agency as “…the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices” (Murray 1998 126). If the film becomes too tense, the phone rings, we need a drink or to go to the bathroom, then we can engage with the structure of the text and pause it.

The consequences which this ability has for our experience of the text are quite significant. In the same way that we are aware the film will not stop as part of our experience of texts within the cinema, our knowledge that the DVD allows us to negotiate the structure of the film colours our engagement with the text. If a section bores us, we have the ability to skip past it entirely. The DVD takes a film text and opens it significantly to at-home editing, where we can actually modify the order of events as they are encountered. Arguably, this is an even more distinctive shift than the ability to pause and return to the film. Films with embarrassing humour prompt some people to pause the text when anticipation of some comedic disaster becomes too ‘cringeworthy,’ allowing them time to take a moment before

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\(^1\) In the context of a movie theatre.
braving the inevitable. Likewise, others have commented that their experience of *Matrix: Reloaded* (Wachowski Brothers 2003) is significantly improved by the ability to fast-forward and, in some cases, skip scenes.

If the gap between the experiences of the same film text in a cinema or DVD context is that large, then the differences presented by comparing the experiences of texts in entirely different media forms, such as books to videogames, or cinema to webcomics, is going to be commensurately more significant. However, I argue that it is not impossible. The goal of this project is to create a process of analytical comparison for textual experiences in different media forms, in order to consider what sets them apart from each other.

**COMPARING EXPERIENCE**

There is a rich critical history of considering the ways in which textual structure and engagement shape the experience of texts, although in many cases the works in question have not been conceptualised in such a fashion. Arguably, Raymond Williams’ theories surrounding ‘flow’ and the experience of television (Williams 1974) can be seen as an example of an analytical consideration of how structure shapes experience. He argues that a central element of what sets the experience of television apart from other media forms is its relentless march onward through time and its ubiquitous nature, all available at the touch of a button. As Williams notes, the very fact that people describe themselves as ‘watching television’ more often than watching specific elements of television broadcasts is an important component of how it is experienced as a media form (Williams 1974 94). Equally, a significant element of the work presented by Geoff King and Tanja Krzywinska focuses on how structure shapes comparative experience across the forms of videogames and cinema (King and Krzywinska 2002b ; King and Krzywinska 2006). Considering the operating logics and contexts of other work as a way of engaging with experiential comparison provides an opportunity to situate my work within a wider critical network, as well as explore the fundamental assumptions it is grounded on.

Gordon Calleja’s work in *In-Game* presents a detailed and highly focused consideration of the processes of engagement specific to videogame play, and how they shape the experience of texts. However, Calleja argues that the divide between the processes of engagement in ergodic versus non-ergodic media (see Pages 22-24) is so vast that he

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2 This example also holds true for comparing the experience of watching television shows on DVD to watching a live broadcast.
explicitly denies the possibility of productive comparison between the two (Calleja 2011 22-23, 33). Essentially, Calleja argues that considering forms of media in which the person negotiating them has agency (digital media, particularly videogames) together with texts where s/he does not (traditional media forms, such as cinema, prose novels, comics) is a critical and analytical dead end. However, textual structures exist as continua more often than as binary conditions: the media forms under discussion in this project (hypertext fictions, webcomics, videogames, and Alternate Reality Games) are all ergodic to some extent (see Pages 22-24), and all provide a level of agency in negotiating the text, yet their experiential registers show significant variation. The ability to present a comparative analysis between the experience of digital textual forms is critically relevant, and there are elements of experiential cross-over shared with entirely traditional media forms that are worth unpacking.

Although Ian Bogost’s primary focus in *Unit Operations* is also on videogames, he is more open to structural comparisons across media forms, and bridges literary analysis and computational theory in arguing that

> any medium – poetic, literary, cinematic, computational – can be read as a configurative system, an arrangement of discrete, interlocking units of expressive meaning. I call these general instances of procedural expression *unit operations*. (Bogost 2006 ix)

However, although *unit operations* may be productive for considering how processes of engagement can be shared between media forms, Bogost’s focus is primarily directed at comparative structural analysis, or how games present ‘procedural rhetorics’ of persuasion (Bogost 2007), rather than on considering how these processes of engagement affect the experiences of the texts they mediate.

Multimodal discourse analysis (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996; Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001; Lemke 2002; Burn and Schott 2004; Burn 2009) occupies a similar critical position to Bogost’s *unit operations*, in that it is an approach to texts in multiple media forms, but which does not account for affect as part of the experience. This issue is visible in the multimodal analysis of *Final Fantasy 7* (Square Product Development Dept. #1 1997) presented by Andrew Burn and Gareth Schott:

> Cloud as Heavy Hero and Cloud as Digital Dummy offer different sets of semiotic resources from which the player makes her experience of the avatar. The Heavy Hero, in many respects derived from conventional narratives, and

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3 As will be discussed in more detail on Pages 23-24, it can be argued that a level of structural ergodicity and agency also exists in what have been seen as very traditional, linear media forms.
CHAPTER 1: THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF STORYTELLING

constructed through non-interactive modes (visual design, music, animation), is largely read by the player (along with the game guise in general). The Digital Dummy, mostly made up of interactive textual forms, is largely played by the player (along with the game system in general). The sense in which the player is, and is not, the avatar, is central to the experience of the game (...). (Burn and Schott 2004 222)

This is an example of multimodal discourse highlighting a difference between registers of engagement during videogame play, but there is no discussion of how this shift between registers of play is ‘central to the experience of the game.’ Does it affect the experience of the person playing the game, and if so, how? Do different games frame this oscillation between reading and playing games in different ways, and what consequences does this have for the experience of play? Essentially, multimodal discourse is focused – not unreasonably – on the issue of semiotic meaning-making rather than on how the processes of engaging with textual structure shape the experience of a given text. What is needed is a framework which can address issues such as those raised by Charlie Brooker in playing Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 (Infinity Ward 2011): his immediate superior within the game stabbed a guard in the throat and his visceral response was “I don’t want to be friends with the man who did that” (Brooker 2011). This project seeks to extend methods of analytical juxtaposition to interrogate how and why processes of engagement, and the textual structures which shape them, manipulate the experience of negotiating textual storytelling.4 It seeks to account for affect, and to consider how and why it can be influenced, by examining the processes of engagement and agency which forced Charlie Brooker to murder another guard in the game’s world-of-concern5 exactly as his superior had done, leaving him thinking, “I’m no better than moustache man: that was an appalling thing I just did,” (Brooker 2011).

The approach taken in this project is to look for particular differences in experience across media forms. It considers the ways in which textual structures influence the processes required to negotiate a given text, and how those processes in turn shape the affective experience of that text. Different forms of mediated storytelling are considered through a process of analytical juxtaposition that seeks to establish how their individual affordances relate to distinct experiences across media forms. Like Bogost (Bogost 2006 xii), I am less interested in establishing formal categories of distinction between media forms than I am in

4 Another text where multimodality is relevant to analysing the experience of videogame play is Bastion (Supergiant Games 2011), since music and voice-over narration are extremely important to shaping the experience of play – particularly the way in which these elements are framed in the context of decisions made by the player.

5 See Pages 43-44 and 48.
presenting a process of critical, comparative analysis directed at how textual experience is shaped by engaging with underlying textual structures. Although this approach could theoretically be used to create a more formalist understanding of the structural/experiential relationship between media forms, my interest is in creating series of analytical continua across which particular textual experiences can be distributed, in order to consider what sets them apart.

Like N. Katherine Hayles and Andrew Burn, I consider materiality to be deeply relevant to textual experience (Hayles 2001; Burn 2009 80-81). As a result, the process of analytical juxtaposition presented here is multimodal, and considers the range of ways in which the underlying textual structure, or the final context of engagement, might influence the processes required to negotiate the text. This analysis can be as fundamental as the fact that printed books provide contextual information of how far the reader is through the text, and as complex as considering the different roles that decisions can play in hypertexts or electronic cybertexts. Materiality is relevant even in media forms that share digital platforms, because of the ways that the context of engagement shapes the experience of engaging with the text.

The next phase is to consider how those processes of negotiating the text might shape the affective experience of the text. For example, one of the central elements that sets the experience of videogames apart from prose novels is that the person playing the game is directly involved in making decisions in negotiating the text. Readers of horror-novels describe them as ‘page turners’ when immersed in the experience, and sometimes speak of reading deep into the night rather than going to sleep without knowing what happens next; in comparison, players of horror games can experience paralysis rather than momentum precisely because of their responsibility and involvement in negotiating the text (Veale 2005 52). It is important to note that this is a phenomenological analysis that strives to articulate the affective complexion of experience, rather than focusing entirely on textual or structural analysis: the fundamental pleasure of engaging with textual storytelling is relevant, as are frustration, tension, and the entire gamut of experiential tones.6

The particular focus of this project is in engaging with how the structures of new media texts shape the experience of the texts they mediate, and chapters are dedicated to the experience of hypertext fiction, videogames, online comics and Alternate Reality Games (ARGs). Each of these chapters concludes with a series of case studies designed to illustrate

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6 These problematise the universal framing of all experience of playing videogames as ‘fun.’
the principles discussed in the rest of the chapter, including edge-cases which raise points worthy of specific consideration. However, although this work focuses on new media storytelling, the goal is to present a process of analytical juxtaposition – referred to as affective phenomenology – that might expand into a comprehensive model of the relationship between structural elements and affective experience across media forms, including both a traditional and a digital context.

I will unpack some of the ways in which the underlying structure of a text can influence the processes required to negotiate them, before exploring how the analytical comparisons undertaken in this project relate to phenomenology.

**Engaging with the Textual Substrate**

Even texts which share the same structural substrate can present significantly different experiences, a fact which is addressed by Yanfang Tang as part of her comparative literacy study of Chinese and Western forms of poetry. Tang argues that the experiences of engaging with texts are completely different in Western and Chinese literary traditions, and that this difference has lead to an inherent ‘communication gap’ that goes beyond issues of translation. The fundamental point of difference between the two approaches lies in what readers expect to get out of engaging with the text – and thus the expectations of what the writers seek to achieve:

Clearly, the readers of these two poems are engaged in different types of reading. With the [Western] poem, the reader asks a series of cognitive questions and, through textual analysis, aims to resolve some major concern in his mind. With the [Chinese] poem, the reader shows no interest in rational analysis of the textual information, but rather seeks an emotive experience of the feelings evoked by the poem. (Tang 1997 153)

Tang links Western approaches to texts with *efferent reading*, where the focus is on what the reader will ‘carry away’ from a poem: the moral of the story (and even the assumption that the poem has one), information, a solution to a problem, or perhaps an imperative for action. In comparison, Tang argues that Chinese literary traditions are more focused on *aesthetic reading*, where the reader is only interested in what is experienced during the reading event. The reader must still decipher the meanings of words or images, but pays more attention to “the associations, feelings, attitudes and ideas that the words and their referents arouse within him” (Tang 1997 153). The most important distinctions between aesthetic and efferent reading are the differences in the process of engaging with the text: efferent reading is critical
and thus more essentially conscious, whereas aesthetic reading is a less analytical experience of the text. In the situation as described by Tang, despite sharing a textual substrate of words written on paper, the phenomenological experience of the texts is very different, with distinct affective qualities and processes of engagement.

I argue that there is much to be gained by understanding how people experience media texts, and in establishing how the elements of the texts themselves, together with the ways people engage with them, shape this experience. The ability to explicitly establish the points of commonality and difference in the experience of engaging with cinematic texts as compared to the novel, or to something new like a videogame, will help us to understand the techniques that we already have for shaping textual experience: there is more than a century of accumulated knowledge of cinematic techniques designed to shape the experience the audience takes away of a film text, for example. How many of these techniques have been adapted to suit the context of videogame experiences? How have the techniques taken from cinema required adaptation for their new context, and why? Likewise, are there examples where the cross-pollination has moved in the other direction? There have certainly been notable examples where cinematography has moved to include techniques from comics and graphic novels, beyond those films specifically seeking to adapt a particular comic text. Another question would be whether there is a consistency to how and why cinema might feel different than television, or than novelised fiction? Beyond assisting in the comprehension of the techniques we already have, establishing the points of commonality and difference between experiences of fiction in different media formats will provide new opportunities for innovation in textual storytelling. Presently, there is a significant critical divide between digital or ‘new media’ texts and more traditional forms of media, which makes direct comparison of how different texts function difficult. Digital media and traditional forms occasionally fall into a framework of ‘separate but equal’ in terms of the critical frameworks and analysis which are applied to them. The work of Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin presents the extent to which ‘new media’ forms are anchored in the organising principles of traditional media, in terms of how they function and are conceptualised (Bolter and Grusin 1999). However, there has been less work done at the level of comparing the texts encountered through different media forms, the processes of engagement required in order to negotiate them, and how different textual experiences feel different from one another.

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7 The scope of this project is focused on new media storytelling, and so television is not included as a case study, but I argue that the issues being engaged with have broader application.
8 Although not impossible – see Ian Bogost’s work in Unit Operations (Bogost 2006).
There are separate levels to the elements which can shape the experience of a piece of
textual storytelling. There is the substrate that makes up the text, which can be understood as
the structure which defines what a text is. For example, cinema is twenty-four frames per
second, every second, for the length of the film. Novels are printed pages of words bound
together, where the words follow on from one to the next in expressing the narrative content.
Lev Manovich argues in *The Language of New Media* that videogames and other new media
texts qualify as databases, which are structured but unordered collections of information
given a semblance of order through the process of being navigated by the user (Manovich
2000 194).

The second level that can shape the experience of a text is the processes required in
order to negotiate the underlying structure of the text, along with the perceptual frameworks
involved in doing so. Is there a difference in the ways in which people become immersed
within cinematic texts in comparison to videogames? Why? Is there a fundamentally
different relationship with the text perceived when comparing someone engaging with a
videogame and someone reading a book, and if so, why? How do these elements influence
affect, the nebulous zone of potential emotions that contributes to how texts expressed in
different media forms feel different to one another? And, perhaps more importantly still,
what kind of critical framework can be applied to studying the experience of a text? The
discipline of phenomenology provides an analytically productive context for the critical
consideration of experience. Phenomenology was initially grounded as an attempt within the
field of philosophy to bridge the problems presented by Cartesian dualism, where
consciousness is presented as entirely separate from the world: phenomenology studies
experience, because experience is consciousness engaging with the world outside of itself.

This chapter will outline the critical theory behind phenomenology, then discuss the
different elements of the textual substrate together with how they can shape the experience of
a text. Chapter 2 is a companion to this conceptual introduction, exploring the theoretical
background to how affect functions as part of the experience of engaging with texts, and how
affect can be shaped by the processes required to engage with the underlying structure of
texts. Another way of putting it is that we first discuss the different elements that comprise
the underlying substrate of texts, consider how they are of relevance to experiencing a given
text, and then move on to explore the different processes of engaging with that textual
structure.

The remaining chapters each apply the analytical framework discussed in the first two
chapters to different case-study media forms in order to establish what sets them apart. All of
the forms of media to be discussed qualify as ‘new media’ because they share a digital context. The reason that their similarity is relevant is because the most obvious element that distinguishes videogames, webcomics, hypertext-fictions and Alternate Reality Games (or ARGs) from more traditional forms of media is the fact that they are digital, and all qualify to some extent as ‘interactive’ – a term which is itself contested, as will be explored in more detail. The fact that all of these forms of media seem to have significant similarity provides the project with a good starting position: I argue that each form of media presents experiences that are uniquely different from the others, despite their outward similarity, and the fact that they all share a digital context will provide enough common ground to highlight and analyse their differences.

**PHENOMENOLOGY AND THE MEDIA**

Considering this study through the framework of phenomenology provided a conceptual breakthrough, because phenomenology presents a bridge between affect and textual structure in the form of *experience*.\(^9\) Phenomenology is a philosophical discipline which began through attempts to circumvent the problems created by Cartesian dualism, where consciousness and the world are framed as entirely separate. Because of this distinction, accounting for how consciousness relates to the world – or even to the body that houses it – is critically difficult. Cartesian dualism came about as a result of Descartes’ attempt to locate a truth that was provable despite doubting all evidence presented by the world. What Descartes located which he could not doubt the existence of was the fact that he himself was doubting. However, the issue that Descartes could not account for as a result of this was how ‘thinking substance’ related in any way to ‘unthinking substance,’ thus producing a deep philosophical divide between consciousness and the world (Stewart and Mickunas 1990 22). Edmund Husserl put forward an approach designed to bridge this gap by applying the principles of Cartesian doubt – the framework by which Descartes doubted existence – consistently: critics of Cartesian dualism argued that in doubting the existence of particular elements of the world, Descartes in fact confirmed that there was a world to be doubted. The second part of Husserl’s approach lay in expanding the meaning of *experience* as a concept:

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\(^9\) How phenomenology bridges affect and textual structure is discussed in greater depth on Page 16 in the context of Vivian Sobchack’s theories of cinematic engagement.
Instead of limiting its use to those things known by means of sense perception, Husserl applied it to anything of which one is conscious. There are many different things of which one can be aware: natural objects, mathematical entities, values, affective states, volitions, melodies, moods, desires, feelings – all these are things (Sachen) of which one is aware. All of these Husserl calls *phenomena*. Phenomenology, then, became a program for a systematic investigation of the content of consciousness. (Stewart and Mickunas 1990 23)

Husserl’s correction to Descartes’ inconsistency in applying Cartesian doubt to his considerations of the world provided a methodological framework for phenomenology as a discipline: Husserl proposes that we *bracket*, or put aside, the issue of the *existence* of the world and our presuppositions about it, in favour of considering our *experience* of the world, and of elements within it. At that point, the putative existence of the world is irrelevant to the fact we have experienced it, and we can thus turn to considering the structure of our own conscious experience. Husserl argued that one of the structures of consciousness revealed by bracketing the existence of the world is that consciousness has the quality of *intentionality*: consciousness is never empty; it is always conscious of something else, of some part of the world. Intentionality is the explicit solution to Husserl’s criticism of Cartesian dualism; he argues that ‘thinking substance’ is invariably tied up with ‘unthinking substance’ as part of its basic function. Phenomenology therefore is distinguished not simply by studying experience, but in doing so from “a first-person perspective” (Smith, "Phenomenology," 2008). However, Husserl’s framework for the discipline of phenomenology has itself been a site of critical contestation since its inception at the turn of the twentieth century, because of Husserl’s transcendental framework.

Husserl’s phenomenological framework was ‘transcendental’ because it focused on “…thoughts as thoughts, without reference to the objects that these thoughts are about” (Matthews 2006 11), since he argued that the existence of the object is irrelevant in comparison to our experience of it. The point of conflict is that the intentionality which Husserl had made so central to his conceptualisation of the discipline arguably conflicted with the transcendentality of his approach to bracketing. Husserl argued that phenomenology could be used to study “…the ego and its conscious life….” directly and objectively, on the grounds that the ego was ‘residue’ left behind by bracketing the world (Stewart and Mickunas 1990 92), referring to the concept as the *transcendental ego*. Critics of transcendental phenomenology have argued that Husserl was recreating the problems inherent to Cartesian dualism. In doing so, they argued he was undoing his own work on the intentionality of consciousness by invoking *philosophical idealism* – where only thoughts exist and the
nominalley objective world is merely an intellectual construction. The reasoning behind the critique is that if intentionality is true, then consciousness cannot be considered separately from its intentional objects, yet this was precisely what Husserl argued was possible in the transcendental ego.

Martin Heidegger was a student of Husserl’s, and became one of the critics of the idealism associated with the transcendental ego. Heidegger, along with Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, who were also heavily influenced by Husserl, rejected Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology, choosing to put forward existential phenomenology in its place, in which Heidegger argued for the primacy of an experiential connection to the world:

For Heidegger, we and our activities are always “in the world”, our being is being-in-the-world, so we do not study our activities by bracketing the world, rather we interpret our activities and the meaning things have for us by looking to our contextual relations to things in the world…. Heidegger resisted Husserl’s neo-Cartesian emphasis on consciousness and subjectivity, including how perception presents things around us. By contrast, Heidegger held that our more basic ways of relating to things are in practical activities… where the phenomenology reveals our situation in a context of equipment and in being-with-others. (Smith, "Phenomenology," 2008)

Heidegger’s argument is that we are part of the world which we experience, and so our consciousness cannot be separated from it. As such, he defined phenomenology as “…not the analysis of some detached pure consciousness, but… the analysis of how things appear to us in the course of our ordinary human interactions with the world” (Matthews 2006 12).

Maurice Merleau-Ponty extended his own phenomenological work more from Heidegger’s later phenomenology than from Husserl, as he shared Heidegger’s criticism of the transcendental framework. Merleau-Ponty argued that bracketing is a valid and productive concept, but that it should not be understood as a total withdrawal from all engagement with the world into absolute subjectivity:

…I cannot be aware of myself as a subject without also being aware of other subjects…. To accept the existence of other subjects as well as oneself is also to accept that there is a world which all these different subjects experience, each from his or her own perspective, and which provides a common ‘horizon’ for all our experiences. Hence, I cannot withdraw totally into my own subjectivity and sever all ties with the world I am conscious of. I am not, as a subject, outside time and space: I am necessarily ‘incarnate’ or ‘embodied’ in

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10 Heidegger’s contextual world-of-concern is a concept discussed in greater depth within Chapter 2, (See Pages 43-44 and 48) where I argue that it is a significant component of how we engage with textual media in a way that matters to us.
a certain historical situation…. My experiences are experiences of the world, and the world is what gives meaning to the experiences I have. (Matthews 2006 17)

Merleau-Ponty approved of the understanding of *bracketing* put forward by Eugen Fink, Husserl’s assistant: bracketing means having an attitude of ‘wonder’ towards the world (Merleau-Ponty 2003 xv), and there are several points in common between bracketing and *defamiliarising* ourselves with a subject. Defamiliarisation is where we put aside all of the assumptions we hold regarding the subject and consider it as if new: “True philosophy consists in learning to relook at the world” (Merleau-Ponty 2003 xxiii). However, despite sharing Heidegger’s distrust of transcendental phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty argued that grounding experience as ‘being-in-the-world’ did not go far enough to locate what anchors human experience. Merleau-Ponty argues that more than being distinguished by being part of the world, our experience is distinguished by being specifically embodied within the world: “Human beings are embodied *subjects*; however, their subjectivity is not something merely attached to their bodies, but something which is inconceivable without a body of a particular form” (Matthews 2006 52). As Merleau-Ponty phrases it, in the same way as a window imposes a particular frame of reference of a church upon him as he looks through it, his body imposes a frame of reference upon him as he looks through the window (Merleau-Ponty 2003 104). Eric Matthews argues that Merleau-Ponty’s focus on embodiment as the anchor of experience implies that *intentionality* itself need not be solely associated with *consciousness*, because the body imposes its own needs and desires onto the world. Matthews identifies a discussion where Merleau-Ponty considers an insect which approached obstacles differently depending on whether one of its legs was missing or simply tied-down, citing this as an example of bodily intentionality:

The insect simply continues to belong to the same world and moves in it with all its powers. The tied limb is not replaced by the free one, because it continues to count in the insect’s scheme of things, and because the current of activity which flows towards the world still passes through it. (…) When we say an animal *exists*, that it *has* a world, or that it *belongs* to a world, we do not mean that it has a perception or objective consciousness of that world. The situation which unleashes instinctive operations is not entirely articulate and determinate… It presents only a practical significance; it asks only for bodily recognition… (Merleau-Ponty 2003 90)

Matthews argues from the discussion that ‘to have a world’ is to see the objects surrounding you as having meaning and relevance shaped by your embodied experience, rather than the more detached understanding associated with objectivity: “The apple is for me not merely an
object of a certain shape and size a meter away from my eyes, but *something to eat and enjoy*” (Matthews 2006 58). Merleau-Ponty’s framework for embodied experience is very different than the phenomenological approach to experience put forward by Husserl: Husserl’s experience focuses on the eyes and ears, but leaves out noses, skin, taste-buds, hunger and pain.

Thomas Nagel’s article “What Is It Like To Be A Bat?” in *Mortal Questions* is a discussion of phenomenological experience which echoes many of Merleau-Ponty’s ideas regarding the primacy of embodiment. However, Nagel’s argument is focused more on the ways in which our embodiment limits our capacity to empathise with and comprehend points of view the further from our own experience.

There is a sense in which phenomenological facts are perfectly objective: one person can know or say of another what the quality of the other’s experience is. They are subjective, however, in the sense that even this objective ascription of experience is possible only for someone sufficiently similar to the object of ascription to be able to adopt his point of view – to understand the ascription in the first person as well as the third, so to speak. The more different from oneself the other experiencer is, the less success one can expect with this enterprise. (Nagel 1979 172)

I would argue that following the logic presented by Merleau-Ponty and Nagel, our embodiment has such a significant impact on our experience that understanding experience without accounting for embodiment is inherently flawed, and accounting for experiences dissimilar from our own becomes problematic. Nagel is not simply arguing that it is difficult to *know* what it is like to be a bat – or another creature with an inhuman sensorium – but that it is difficult even to *conceptualise* such an experience (Nagel 1979 172). Academic discussion of virtual-reality frequently fails to take embodiment into account (Rheingold 1991 75), and conceptualises the experience as one of floating entirely free through a sea of information. However, there is nothing within the experience of virtual-reality that will sever the innate, deep connection to the fact you will be having the experience while seated or lying down, anchored to your embodied self, and aware of the connection. The relevance of Nagel’s continuum of distance between your embodied experience and that of someone else will be discussed later in this chapter.

Vivian Sobchack is a theorist whose work takes the existential phenomenology of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty and applies it to the context of studying cinema. Sobchack shares her primary criticism of transcendental phenomenology with Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, arguing that Husserl’s “…transformation of subjectivity into an objective modality
comes at too high a price and is in basic contradiction with the original aim of phenomenology to ground itself in the lived-world” (Sobchack 1992 38). Her position is that it is neither desirable nor possible to ‘bracket’ the ‘intentional subject’ outside of existence, and that the concept of the ‘transcendental subject’ is itself flawed because it cannot escape its own inclusion within the intentional structure of the person considering it. Instead, Sobchack argues that any practical application of phenomenology can only come from “…locating the subject of consciousness and experience as existence in the world. And, as existence in the world, the subject of consciousness and experience is embodied, situated and finite” (38). Sobchack’s particular application of existential phenomenology to the study of film is to argue that the film itself is equally the subject of intentional logics as they apply to human spectators:

The relevance of semiotic phenomenology to an investigation of the nature of the film experience is clear. To ask the question, “What is it to see a film?” is to doubly entail the questions: What is it to see? How does seeing exist and mean? Who is seeing being and what is being seen? These questions refer not only to the spectator of the film but also to the film as spectator. Both are correlated in the structure that is the film experience and both are implicated in its meanings. (Sobchack 1992 49)

Sobchack returns to the idea of doubled intentionality throughout The Address of the Eye, arguing that part of what makes cinema distinctive is the fact that the members of the audience must become part of a process of mutual experiential significance together with the film in order for it to constitute itself. Sobchack also frames the film as a separate entity from its ‘body,’ the technology and physical text that comprises what she refers to as film’s ‘enabling mechanisms’:

On the one hand, my hesitation in initiating discussion of cinematic technology too early in the present study has come from a strong desire not to confuse the film with its enabling mechanisms. That is, while they enable the commutation of perception and expression that is the film, neither the camera nor projector (not lenses, editorial equipment, optical printers, sound recording and transfer equipment, screen, et al.) are themselves the film we experience and see, which itself visually signifies vision as visible and significant experience. The film is a dynamic and synoptic gestalt that cannot be reduced to its mechanisms, much as a human perception and intentional conduct cannot be reduced to or explained in terms of its physiological and anatomical source, even as the latter enable or allow that perception and intentional conduct to come into being. The discrete mechanisms of the cinema are necessary but insufficient to account for the film as it appears as a particular and significant phenomenon in our experience. (Sobchack 1992 169)
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Sobchack’s intense focus on separating the experience of film from the underlying substrate that comprises the text is an attempt to avoid the consequences which flow from not making the distinction: phenomenology provides a bridge between what Sobchack refers to as the ‘body’ and ‘enabling mechanisms’ of a text, and the experience of that text. Without the bridge, the early work of my thesis focused on examining how the affective register of a text is modified by engaging with the underlying structure of that text. However, there are several inherent problems with this conceptualisation. The most significant issue is the implication that the structure of a text itself could have particular affects or feel a certain way – without any reference to a human participant. Instead, a far more accurate understanding of the relationship is that the processes of engaging with the structure can modify the experience of the text, and that this will have affective consequences. To argue that the structure itself has an affect is almost analogous to framing the content of a novel as emotive regardless of whether it is being read. In this case, the tree may fall in the forest, but unless someone is there to experience it, nobody is going to care: it is human experience that lends art its power and tone, and without that experience it is essentially inanimate and meaningless.

A core argument of phenomenology is that the text-as-experienced is different than the text-in-itself (see Page 18). Without the distinction, texts have a structure which produces an affective response – which is already a dangerously universalising framework for analysis. Including the greater nuance available in considering the text-as-experienced from the outset avoids the problem entirely, but does raise new questions in terms of the critical depth of experienced-based information. ‘Experience’ is often seen as a conceptually ‘woolly’ term within cultural and media studies, and that methodologically – as the phrase goes – ‘the plural of anecdote is not data.’ However, there is little point in discussing experiences without being able to draw upon experience: throughout this study, I draw upon my own experiences both as subjects for analysis, and to illustrate points. Depending on the context, I have drawn material from my own engagement with fiction, with media, and with the cultures surrounding the discussion, consumption, and creation of texts in many forms. These points of anecdotal information are relevant because they provide an example of the text-as-experienced which someone engaged with, and an entry-point into discussing how the structure of the text-in-itself shaped that experience.

This is not to say that textual analysis itself has nothing to offer a study of this kind. I argue that throwing out textual analysis entirely is extremely damaging to our ability to

11 ‘Affect’ is explored in greater depth as a concept within Chapter 2.
critically consider the ways in which textual form and substrate influence the experience of texts; however, it must also be argued that textual analysis is always contextualised by the experience of the text.

This study expands upon Sobchack’s work in applying existential phenomenology to film, and seeks to consider a wide range of media texts through the lens of how they are experienced by the people who seek to engage with them. She argues for a ‘doubling’ of vision within cinematic engagement, so that you are being watched by the film as much as you are watching it. In arguing for the intentionality of film, Sobchack is seeking to account for how people engage with (and become immersed in) cinematic texts. Critical frameworks for immersion frequently present the audience as entirely passive: the users lose any sense of themselves as separate from the medium or its simulated world once they cannot measure their distance to the ‘surface’ of the image (Lister et al. 2003 387). Sobchack’s framework, where the audience and the film ‘mutually constitute each other,’ is an attempt to produce a conceptualisation where the individual members of the cinema audience are actively involved in, and are a necessary part of, the equation that produces cinematic experience:

What we look at projected on the screen… addresses us as the expressed perception of an anonymous, yet present, “other.” And, as we watch this expressive projection of an “other’s” experience, we, too, express our perceptive experience. Through the address of our own vision, we speak back to the cinematic expression before us, using a visual language that is also tactile, that takes hold of and actively grasps the perceptual expression, the seeing, the direct experience of that anonymously present, sensing and sentient “other.”

…The film experience not only represents and reflects upon the prior direct perceptual experience of the filmmaker by means of the modes and structures of direct and reflective perceptual experience, but also presents the direct and reflective experience of a perceptual and expressive existence as the film. In its presence and activity of perception and expression, the film transcends the filmmaker to constitute and locate its own address, its own perceptual and expressive experience of being and becoming. As well, the film experience includes the perceptive and expressive viewer who must interpret and signify the film as experience, doing so through the very same structures and relations of perception and expression that inform the indirect representational address of the filmmaker and the indirect representational address of the film. (Sobchack 1992 9)

Sobchack characterises this mutual engagement as her titular ‘address of the eye,’ a metaphor which is appropriate for the cinema, but which raises questions if applied to phenomenological engagement with other media. Is it equally true to argue that we are being read by books as we read them? If so, how are we being read differently by comic books
than prose novels, or perhaps poetry? Despite the issues raised by the metaphor at work in *The Address of the Eye*, the core idea that those engaging with texts are active participants – and that the text itself is involved in the process – is a valuable one. When Sobchack refers to the ‘doubled-intentionality’ of cinema, the examples she raises focus on the idea that there is some presence in the cinema that is looking back at you as you watch – something with its own phenomenological experience.\(^\text{12}\) I argue that Sobchack is speaking of a process that applies to wider forms of fictional media: as we negotiate a text, we can fantasize that we are dealing with something possessed of its own intentionality. The reason for perceiving this can be located in the distinction between the *text-in-itself* and the *text-as-experienced*. 

If we apply *bracketing* to our engagement with fiction, with the defamiliarisation and attitude of wonder already suggested, Sobchack’s schema for her ‘address of the eye’ becomes clearer: when we engage with mediated storytelling, we are engaging with something that is not part of our subjectivity, but which uses our imaginations to paint pictures within our subjectivity. The *text-in-itself* is what Sobchack refers to as the ‘enabling mechanisms’ and ‘body’ of the text: it is the medium, the delivery platform and the substrate of the *text-as-experienced*. The *text-in-itself* also comprises the content of the text, so rather than being ‘words arranged in sequence on sequential paper pages,’ a novel is a ‘specific series of words, arranged in a sequence on sequential paper pages.’ Likewise, the *text-in-itself* of a film is a specific series of frames, arranged in sequence at twenty-four frames per second for the duration of the film. The *text-in-itself* includes everything that makes the particular text a unique example of the textual form it represents, and can be conceptualised as being everything involved with the text, barring the person required to negotiate with it. I will refer to the *text-in-itself* as the underlying textual substrate.

One of the reasons for the necessity of contextualising textual analysis through the experience of a text is that we invariably engage with the underlying textual substrate through the text-as-experienced. We cannot analytically engage with the elements and interrelationships which make up a text without accounting for our experience of the text, through which we attempt analysis of what lies beneath. To re-frame the point, the difference between the *text-in-itself* and the *text-as-experienced* is that the former includes every element in the text before anyone engages with it: as soon as we engage with a text, it is no longer the text-in-itself.

\(^\text{12}\) Thomas Crick presents a critique of Sobchack’s schema, and argues that the doubled-intentionality of cinema equally applies to texts such as videogames (Crick 2011).
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However, it is not impossible to approach our engagement with texts-as-experienced in terms of how the processes required to negotiate the text shape the experience – and doing so is in fact vital to understanding our experiences of engaging with mediated storytelling.

I argue that it is possible to establish an analytical framework for textual storytelling based on the experience of fictional texts, regardless of the media form which the text is mediated through. The analytical framework considers how the elements of the underlying textual substrate, and the processes of engaging with that substrate, modify the experience of the text.

Distinguishing the two concepts is vital in order to provide a framework for considering how the text-in-itself has been shaped to influence the text-as-experienced. For example, Agrippa: A Book of the Dead (Gibson, Ashbaugh and Begos Jr. 1992) contains a poem on a floppy computer disc which can only be read once: the disc is programmed to erase the words of the poem as they scroll out of sight. In this way, the underlying textual substrate is designed to preserve a singular and unique text-as-experienced, that being the first one encountered by someone reading the poem. The reader cannot reconsider the text; the links, images and associations conjured by his/her initial engagement with the poem are the only ones there can be. As soon as a human reader enters the frame in this case, the text-in-itself destroys itself to preserve the text-as-experienced.

THE COMPONENTS OF THE TEXTUAL SUBSTRATE

Even elements of textual storytelling forms that are taken for granted influence our experiences of the texts they mediate. When reading a novel, a bound collection of printed prose pages, we are engaging with a physical substrate that carries information about the context of the story: we always have some idea how far through the book we are, and again this knowledge is folded into our experience of the text. If a climactic battle is still ongoing with only a handful of pages remaining, I have found myself curious as to how the author can resolve the story in the space available, even while reading through that section – frequently finding that there is a sequel, or that I had not realised this book was the first in a series. If that physical component of the text is removed by moving into a digital context, then instantly this changes our experience of, and engagement with, the text. The underlying substrate of a text is not neutral, and minor changes can have dramatic consequences to our experience of it.
As I have mentioned earlier, all of the forms of media from which the case studies will be drawn for the rest of the project qualify as new media because they are grounded in a digital context. As such, all of them arguably have some ‘interactive’ component, so this cannot be what sets apart the experiences of the texts they mediate. However, ‘interactivity’ in itself is a concept heavy with critical debate and conceptual baggage, despite the fact that it is rarely specifically defined in itself. Espen J. Aarseth argues that the term operates textually rather than analytically by connoting vague associations of “user freedom, and personalised media while denoting nothing” (Aarseth 1997 48). Aarseth then provides a semiotic definition coined by Peter Bogh Andersen:

An interactive work is a work where the reader can physically change the discourse in a way that is interpretable and produces meaning within the discourse itself. (49)

Aarseth later dismisses interactivity as nearly synonymous with ‘computerised’ (103). In comparison, Martin Lister et al define ‘interactivity’ in New Media: A Critical Introduction as involving ‘user intervention’:

Interactive signifies the users’ (the individual members of the new media ‘audience’) ability to directly intervene in and change the images and texts that they access. (…) There is a sense in which it is necessary for the user actively to intervene as well as viewing or reading in order to produce meaning. (Lister et al. 2003 21-22)

In both of these pragmatic definitions the user of an interactive text is understood to possess the capacity to alter the text in consequential ways. However, this is only possible if the structure of the text itself is open to such a form of engagement, which brings us to some more productive concepts for analysing the substrate of texts.

Tmesis is a term borrowed from Barthes, which Espen Aarseth frames as “the readers’ unconstrained skipping and skimming of passages, a fragmentation of the linear text expression that is totally beyond the author’s control” (Aarseth 1997 78). Different forms of textual media can arguably be placed on a spectrum of structural tmesis based on the extent to which they are open to the ‘fragmentation of the linear text.’ For example, in this chapter we have already discussed the difference between engaging with a film text in a cinema as opposed to on DVD. Film within the context of a cinema presents a distant end of the

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13 This dismissal seems unusual because of the extent to which interactivity is centrally placed within Aarseth’s argument as one of the major elements of extranoematic engagement – a defining element of what he refers to as ergodic literature (discussed in more detail on Pages 22-24)
spectrum which is entirely closed to tmesis: the text of the film is a lengthy series of frames run through the projector in sequence – ranging from approximately 130,000 frames for a ninety-minute feature through to approximately 260,000 frames for a three-hour epic. There is no way for the members of the audience to engage with that structure: the text proceeds in linear order in a way that cannot be altered; frame 30,000 will be reached after the others in sequence. With all of that said, despite the unalterably rigid structure of the film text itself, there is nothing that ensures that the audience are paying attention – and there is nothing in textual structure, even at this extreme end of the spectrum, that can.

The prose novel is comparatively more open to tmesis, and is much closer to the context which the term was intended to describe. There is nothing within the structure of a book which can prevent the end of the mystery being read first, or students from seeking out the chapters of a text they consider most relevant to their essay question without working through the underlying ideas. As described by Aarseth, there is also no way to prevent the reader from missing words as they read, or from connecting two disparate sentences together in a way that parses but does not match the intended meaning. Within my own engagement with fiction, rereading books has shown many examples where I have walked away with key details missed (or otherwise framed differently than intended) the first time that I have read a book. When tired, it is possible to be reading a page and realise partway through that you are not entirely sure what a paragraph is about by the time the end is reached – and despite the fact you may have reread it repeatedly only to reach the same apathetic conclusion.

The attention of the reader in connecting all of the points presented as intended by the author is “beyond the author’s control.” Arguably, the film text offered up on DVD lies on the spectrum of tmesis just beside the novel: the audience can watch the end first, can reorder the text based around the ‘chapters’ they are provided with, and have the ability to pause or fast-forward events. However, I suggest that the DVD is slightly more closed to tmesis than the novel because of the inclusion of material that is unskippable, ranging from advertisements for other products, piracy warnings, or transition sequences showing images or dialogue from the film. There is also the fact that if you are trying to reach a scene in a film equidistant between two ‘chapter’ headings on the DVD, then locating it is a far more involved process than it would be within a book. Films encountered on VHS tape in a VCR have more structural tmesis than in the cinema, but not by a huge amount. Without editing equipment, the frames will proceed in their set order; the possibility presented by the textual format is to allow the person watching to move through them at adjustable speed, and to pre-emptively place the tape at the exact section they wish to return to later. There are also forms
of hypertext which are more closed to tmesis than the conventional novel, using hyperlinks to ensure that in order to reach page ten, pages one through nine must be navigated in order. As always, actually reading those pages is not something that can be controlled.

When we consider the end of the spectrum that is structurally open to tmesis, we cross into useful territory for the discussion of some other terms for analysing the underlying substrate of texts, such as Espen Aarseth’s *ergodic literature*:

During the cybertextual process, the user will have effectuated a semiotic sequence, and this selective movement is a work of physical construction that the various concepts of ‘reading’ do not account for. This phenomenon I call *ergodic*, using a term appropriated from physics that derives from the Greek words *ergon* and *hodos*, meaning ‘work’ and ‘path.’ In ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text. If ergodic literature is to make sense as a concept, there must also be nonergodic literature, where the effort to traverse the text is trivial, with no extranoematic responsibilities placed on the reader except (for example) eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of pages. (Aarseth 1997 1-2)

Several elements of Aarseth’s schema need to be unpacked in greater detail, considering the conceptual implications involved.

The idea of ‘nontrivial effort’ which Aarseth raises is one which requires exploration, as it seems highly dependent on individual context. Marc Prensky argues for the existence of what he terms ‘digital natives,’ individuals who have been raised within an entirely different information context than earlier generations (Prensky 2001a; Prensky 2001b). What qualifies as ‘nontrivial’ for digital natives will be very different than for the people Prensky terms ‘digital immigrants,’ or those who have not grown up engaging with digital technology. He makes the case that the education system within the United States is fundamentally failing to engage with modern students because they are digital natives, since the teaching styles are intended for people of the same technological generation as the teachers, presenting a technocultural gap. Prensky’s argument suggests that negotiating conventional prose textbooks is far less ‘trivial’ for digital natives than exploring a database is. Following this logic, Aarseth’s definition of ergodic literature needs to be re-examined and anchored to the processes of negotiation required to negotiate the text, rather than to how trivial or nontrivial the efforts of negotiating the text is during the experience.

Exploring the *extranoematic responsibilities* that are required of those seeking to engage with textual media first requires an examination of the root terms involved. The *noema* is a phenomenological concept from Edmund Husserl, referring to the intentional objects of consciousness:
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To underscore the phenomenological world of consciousness, Husserl introduced new terminology which would avoid the subject-object dualism of older philosophical views while respecting the polar structure of consciousness. The activity of consciousness he called noesis (from the Greek word meaning “mental perception, intelligence, or thought”), whereas the essence to which this mental activity is correlated he called noema (from the Greek word meaning “that which is perceived, a perception, a thought”). The adjective forms of noesis and noema are noetic and noematic. (Stewart and Mickunas 1990 37)

Aarseth defines extranoematic engagement largely through implication, but the phenomenological context makes the situation clearer: extranoematic engagement goes beyond the intentional framework of being conscious of the text. It is thus the (basic) processes required to move through the textual substrate, including as Aarseth notes, eye movement in tracking prose down a page, and the physical engagement that comprises the turning of pages. Arguably what Aarseth is particularly interested in with his framework is ergodic literature, which thus has much more interesting and detailed forms of extranoematic engagement than eye-movement, such as negotiating the network of a hypertext fiction (see chapter 3, Page 74) – as opposed to the non-ergodic literature he provides to demonstrate the comparison. As a result, there is much less critical consideration brought to bear on the non-ergodic side of the equation. Extranoematic engagement is less critically useful to this study than other concepts provided by Aarseth, in part because there are forms of media for which it is not a useful point of comparative analysis.14

Ergodic literature itself arguably exists within contemporary prose fiction, along with appropriate historical precedents. The Fighting Fantasy and Choose-Your-Own-Adventure books are good examples of prose fiction where engaging with the text and its narrative involves a process of sequential choices (See Page 80). The central trait which Aarseth associates with ‘nontrivial effort’ within his discussions of ergodic literature is the exploration or navigation of a text through processes of choice, discernment and decision-making.15 Defining ergodic literature as texts which require choice and discernment in their navigation also successfully circumvents the problems highlighted earlier with ‘non-trivial effort’ as a concept, since it is tied to the processes required to negotiate the text, rather than

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14 One of the defining features of cinema, as has already been discussed, is an absence of extranoematic engagement beyond the presumed effort required to move the eyes in following the action on screen. Aside from noting that the absence of extranoematic engagement exists within the context of cinema, there is little added to the analysis by doing so – and what productive analysis is possible would likely mirror what has already been discussed under the umbrella of tmesis.

15 Calleja frames ergodic engagement as implying a disposition or readiness to choose/act when the opportunity presents itself, rather than the process/action of choosing in itself (Calleja 2011 41-42)
the level of contextual difficulty the text presents to the person negotiating it. Textual ergodicity also operates on a spectrum, much as tmesis does – the reason that they share conceptual territory is that although not directly connected, an increase in textual ergodicity also tends to describe a text open to a greater degree of tmesis. I will explore the reasons for this by using *House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski as an example.

*House of Leaves* (Danielewski 2000) is a work of printed prose which has been structured so that different sections are more or less ergodic than others, and the book takes the same approach with tmesis: there are sections which allow for greater tmesis than traditional prose work, while others reduce the tmesis available considerably. Danielewski plays with what we expect of the pragmatic substrate of a printed prose novel, all in order to shape the experience of the person engaging with the text. In the ergodic sections, the text is fractured into different intermingled sub-narratives: stamp-sized mirror text that bleeds from page to page, along with inexplicable discussions of historical geography and other elements that must be read upside down. When the text ‘fractures’ in this way, it becomes ergodic because it requires discernment in the basic selection of which element of the page to read first. The structure also actively encourages an expanded level of tmesis as the reader skips across the different parts of the fractured page to ascertain their likely context. Framing the story in this way means it is only hypothetical that a reader will be able to approach the text in precisely the same way upon multiple readings of the same pages, and the phenomenological experience of each passage is going to be influenced by the previous selection that the reader made. As a text opens its structure to processes of choice, discernment and decision-making, the capacity of the reader to ‘fragment the linear text in a way beyond the author’s control’ arguably also tends to increase. These processes are not directly tied, as will be explored through the context of videogames: an increase in ergodicity does not always mean an increase in tmesis; however, an increase in tmesis is likely to imply a greater level of textual ergodicity. *House of Leaves* can also be used to illustrate part of this dynamic.

16 (See Figure 1, overleaf)
In the sections where Danielewski reduces tmesis to a level lower than what is presented by a traditional prose novel, the ergodicity also drops. These sections are where Danielewski provides only a few words to each physical page, and as the dramatic tension within the story increases the number of words drops further. The intent of this approach is...
to shape the experience of the person engaging with the text by making him/her turn the pages of the book faster and faster as s/he reads: the fewer words to a page, the faster the page can be turned. Importantly, the kinaesthetic element of physically turning the pages faster and faster as events proceed will be folded into the experience of negotiating the text, increasing the perception of a rapid, tense pace. Aside from the affective consequences of shaping the experience of engaging with *House of Leaves* in this way, reducing the number of words on a page also reduces tmesis: there is less ability to ‘fragment the linear text’ if there is significantly less text presented. Likewise, the ‘processes of choice and discernment’ in negotiating the text are also limited when, in comparison to the fractured and varied page presented in the earlier example, there are single-digit numbers of words being presented to the reader. As such, *House of Leaves* is a good context in which to explore tmesis and ergodicity, considering that it is one text that presents both concepts at different comparative levels on their individual continua within its structure. It is also a text which underlines that the underlying substrate of a text is not neutral to the experience of those who engage with it.

Espen Aarseth also presents the concept of the *cybertext*, a subcategory of ergodic literature which he describes as “texts that involve calculation in their production of scriptons” (Aarseth 1997 75). Essentially, a cybertext is a text that requires the ‘processes of choice, discernment and decision-making’ required of ergodic texts, except there is another process, outside of the person engaging with the text, which is involved in providing the person engaging with the text with different options to choose from. In other words, there is calculation independent of the user as part of negotiating with the structure of the text. Aarseth suggests that the majority of cybertexts are going to occupy a digital context, but there are exceptions. For example, he argues that the I-Ching qualifies as a cybertext because of the calculations and rules which underlie the process of getting results:

Possibly the best-known example of a cybertext in antiquity is the Chinese text of oracular wisdom, the *I Ching* (Wilhelm, 1989). ... The *I Ching* is made up of sixty-four symbols, or hexagrams, which are the binary combinations of six whole or broken (“changing”) lines (64 = $2^6$). A hexagram... contains a main text and six small ones, one for each line. By manipulating three coins or forty-nine yarrow stalks according to a specific randomising principle, the texts of two hexagrams are combined, producing one out of 4,096 possible texts. This contains the answer to a question the user has written down in advance (e.g., “How much rice should I plant this year?”). (Aarseth 1997 9-10)

In this case, it is the fact that randomising principles of the coins (and the unfortunately undiscussed approach using the yarrow stalks) generates the outcome within the *I-Ching*
which means it qualifies as a cybertext: there is a process outside of the person engaging with the text, which is involved in providing the options the user is presented with.

Cybertextuality is a concept which has been the site of critical debate, and Aarseth refers to questions raised as to how essentially relevant it is to the experience of engaging with a text. Critics of cybertextuality argue that texts with ‘variable expression’ are automatically of ‘ambiguous meaning,’ and also raise the case that since all texts become ‘a linear sequence’ during reading, the variation possible within a cybertext is a structural gimmick. The argument here is that a cybertext is better understood as multiple, independent (but interlinked) narratives rather than a series of branching pathways – and as such can be accounted for by traditional textual analysis. However, Aarseth argues that to frame a cybertext’s varying nature as independent singular narratives is to miss a significant experiential component: the awareness the person engaging with the text has of the options they do not choose.

The problem was that, while they focused on what was being read, I focused on what was being read from. This distinction is inconspicuous in a linear expression text, since when you read from War and Peace, you believe you are reading War and Peace. In drama, the relationship between a play and its (varying) performance is a hierarchical and explicit one; it makes trivial sense to distinguish between the two. In a cybertext, however, the distinction is crucial – and rather different; when you read from a cybertext, you are constantly reminded of inaccessible strategies and paths not taken, voices not heard. Each decision will make some parts of the text more, and others less, accessible, and you may never know the exact results of your choices; that is, exactly what you missed. This is very different from the ambiguities of a linear text. And inaccessibility, it must be noted, does not imply ambiguity but, rather, an absence of possibility – an aporia. (Aarseth 1997:3)

I argue that Aarseth’s point about the paths not travelled is a significant one. The knowledge of the other possible outcomes not selected in navigating the text is going to be part of experiencing that text, presenting a kind of affective residue for the experience left over from considering what might have been, and the other contingencies available. This will have affective consequences for the experience. However, I also argue that Aarseth’s conceptualisation of ‘the paths not taken, the voices not heard’ applies equally to ergodic literature as a whole, rather than purely for cybertexts. After all, the cybertext is not distinguished by choices, but rather by the fact there is a component independent of the person negotiating the text which is involved in generating the options that person gets to choose between. It should be noted that cybertexts are also capable of concealing awareness of the paths not taken as part of the experience: an absence of this awareness can reflect the
depth of engagement held by the person negotiating with the text, and has its own affective quality.

An example of this can be taken from a conversation between Kieron Gillen and John Walker of RockPaperShotgun.com where neither of them realised that events in Deus Ex (Ion Storm 2000) could play out differently than they had individually experienced, until they compared notes:

Kieron and I… were chatting about various moments, sharing thoughts, and then I said, “Wasn’t it awful when your brother died?”
Kieron replied, “My brother didn’t die?” (Walker 2009)

The experiential impact of simply failing to notice the paths not taken is itself significant. After all, if you do not notice the alternatives, then you are instead focusing on your investment in what seems to be an entirely reasonable, organic extension of the choices you have made in negotiating the text: you take an action, and there is a consequence of that action. The consequence makes your connection to the diegetic space of the game world, and the other characters in it, personal. Gillen and Walker elaborate on their own experiences, and the power those experiences held, in some depth:

Of course it turns out whether you save [the brother] or not, you still travel next to Hong Kong. I went there to recover a chip from his body. Kieron went there to meet his brother. I broke the news of [the brother’s] death to his girlfriend. Kieron went to see his girlfriend for other reasons. We both played exactly the same game, playing through exactly the same levels, but our motivations were dramatically different. Neither of us could perceive a game in which we would go to those places for any reason other than those we had at the time, creating the sense of something unique to our decisions and experiences. (Walker 2009)

I return to discussions of the decision-making required by ergodic literature and cybertexts in Chapter 2, and argue that one of the elements that distinguish them from other textual forms is the sense of responsibility the person engaging with the text is left with (see Page 57).

By definition, traditional prose novels cannot be cybertexts regardless of their levels of ergodicity, because there is no calculation independent of the person engaging with them. The same is true of most cinematic texts, certainly within either a theatre or a VCR context, and is also true of almost all DVDs. The only exception that I can conceptualise would be a

17 More on this in Chapter 2 when we engage with affect, and the relationships established within the contextual world-of-concern.
DVD that has a ‘random scene selection’ command, and to my current knowledge such a possibility is both hypothetical and of questionable purpose.

Manovich argues in *The Language of New Media* that the database – which he defines as ‘…any structured collection of data,’” (Manovich 2000 218) – is fundamentally opposed to narrative:

As a cultural form, the database represents the world as a list of items, and it refuses to order this list. In contrast, a narrative creates a cause-and-effect trajectory of seemingly unordered items (events). Therefore, databases and narratives are natural enemies. Competing for the same territory of human culture, each claims an exclusive right to make meaning out of the world. (Manovich 2000 225-226)

Manovich created what he refers to as ‘database cinema,’ designed to explore the relationship between the database and narrative, with the most famous example being called *Soft Cinema* (Manovich and Kratky 2005). The film was digital, comprising clips and soundbites associated together in a database. Each clip, image, or piece of audio was ‘tagged’ with a sequence of key-words selected by Manovich and other people involved in the project. The goal was that a computer program, also created by Manovich et al, would stitch together a cinematic text out of the disparate elements in a way that could not be predicted by any of the people who had constructed it to do so: images might be tagged as melancholic (among other things), yet combined with sounds associated with them by entirely different sets of keywords, creating combinations no one had considered.18

*Soft Cinema,* and the wider class of ‘database cinema’ that it represents, is arguably unique in qualifying as a cybertext which is not ergodic literature. The film is comprised of clips and sound-bites associated in a database and connected together by the computerised selection of keywords, so there is definitely an underlying calculation independent of those who engaged with the film when it was first screened. However, in watching the film, the individuals making up the audience do not apply processes of choice and discernment in negotiating the text, and thus it is not ergodic. In the original context in which *Soft Cinema* was displayed, the audience would encounter a film constructed by these calculations from the database as they watched it – even as the context of the cinema erased structural tmesis and ergodicity. In other words, there is a separate category of textual structure for database cinema: there is the text-in-itself, which is an unordered database of video and audiostreams;

18 This ‘non-narrative’ piece of cinema, in which the audience were intended to respond to the combinations of imagery moment-to-moment, recalls Yanfang Tang’s distinction between ‘efferent’ and ‘aesthetic’ readings of texts, discussed on Page 7.
there is the text-as-generated, which is the text produced by the processes of the database; and finally there is the text-as-experienced, which is the involvement of a human audience with the text-as-generated. The text-as-generated came into existence at the same time as the text-as-experienced, because the processes working to produce the text-as-generated out of the text-in-itself were occurring at the same time as the audience were engaging with the text-as-experienced. Essentially, the dynamic produces an intermediary stage, meaning that there is an even greater remove than normal between the text-as-experienced and the text-in-itself.

Normally, any time we engage with a text, we are dealing with the text-as-experienced, and have to consider the text-in-itself through our experience. In this case, we have to consider the text-as-generated through our experience, and the database comprising the text-in-itself is not something that the audience could usefully comprehend: it would be either a mess, or an interesting programming puzzle to reverse-engineer, depending on the aptitude of those involved. The reason that this matters, however, is that Lev Manovich and the other people who designed Soft Cinema have no prior knowledge of the text-as-generated, and will be engaging with the text-as-experienced fresh – just like the rest of the audience. Database cinema is a context where the people who created the text-in-itself can be as surprised by the result as anyone else, and thus have a limited claim to have responsibility over the outcome. However, the DVD variant of Soft Cinema is not an example of a cybertext, because there is no calculation occurring independent of the user: the DVD is the cybertextual equivalent of a fly frozen in amber – a record of a cybertext that once existed. On DVD, the text-as-generated collapses into the text-in-itself, and becomes no different than any other film text encountered within a DVD context from the perspective of the framework that we have been applying.

Another element of structure which is relevant to the experience of texts is writerly-ness, a concept originally put forward by Roland Barthes as a way of considering texts without fixed meaning, and which was part of the inspiration for hypertext as a textual form (Barthes 1974; Lunenfeld 2000 46). There are two core components of textual writerly-ness, both of which operate on a continuum: there is structural writerly-ness and experiential writerly-ness. From a structural perspective, Barthes’ describes a ‘writerly’ text as ‘plural,’ ‘having a plurality of entry-points,’ and being ‘never whole’ (Barthes 1974 5-6). “The more plural the text, the less it is written before I read it” (Barthes 1974 10). The core of what Barthes is arguing for in S/Z is that the act of reading can also be considered an act of rewriting, and that whenever a text is thus rewritten, it is also disseminated (Barthes 1974 5). Within traditional media forms, it can be argued that prose novels are technically more
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‘writerly’ than cinema\(^{19}\) because there are more entry-points into the text – however, this is a very minor distinction indeed, and not far removed from tmesis. Structural writerly-ness is relevant in as much as it shapes experiential writerly-ness, which is more directly useful for the purposes of this project. Experiential writerly-ness can be most closely associated with Barthes’ claim that the writerly text is ‘ourselves writing,’ (Barthes 1974 5). The writerly text is one which the reader engages with creatively as they read, and reading experientially constructs the text – as opposed to having his/her textual engagement limited to accepting or rejecting the text (Barthes 1974 4). In this chapter we have already discussed the concept that when we engage with fiction, we are engaging with something outside of our subjectivity (see Page 18); experiential writerly-ness can be considered the extent to which we perceive ourselves to be the creators of the text as we experience it.

TEXTUAL STRUCTURE AND EXPERIENCE

The next question becomes how and why do these textual elements which have been identified matter to our experience of a text. Some elements of how they influence our experience have already been discussed in this chapter: film as a form is defined in many ways by our absence of agency in engaging with the text; as such, part of what makes our experience of film distinctive from how other forms of mediated storytelling feel is that we cannot stop events – or even prevent them unfolding in front of us. Film does not care, and in the context of a movie theatre will go on without us. Likewise, we cannot engage with or alter the events within a prose novel; however, due to greater structural tmesis we have greater agency in negotiating with the pragmatic substrate that makes up the text: we can put the book down if it becomes too intense, or if we otherwise want to take a break, and events are frozen until we pick the text up again. We know this as we read the book, which will contribute to a distinctive feeling for the experience when compared to film. Just as the felt experience of film is defined by the impossibility of engaging with (or taking responsibility for) diegetic events, videogame texts are defined by the processes of choice and discernment made in negotiating the text – and by the sense of responsibility that choice and discernment imply for the felt experience of the person playing. Cybertexts present a different experience than ergodic texts because of a deep emphasis on what Sobchack refers to as ‘doubled-intentionality’:

\(^{19}\) Although it should be remembered that writerly-ness is a continuum rather than a binary position.
My experience at the movies is never lived as a monologic one, however easy and even often lazy my participation (or the film’s) seems to be. There are always two embodied acts of vision at work in the theatre, two embodied views constituting the intelligibility and significance of the film experience. The film’s vision and my own do not conflate, but meet in the sharing of a world and constitute an experience that is not only intrasubjectively dialectical, but also intersubjectively dialogical. (Sobchack 1992 25)

As we negotiate a text, we are dealing with something possessed of its own intentionality, because when we engage with mediated storytelling, we are engaging with something that is not part of our subjectivity, but which uses our imaginations to paint pictures within our subjectivity. In the context of the cybertext, this framework becomes more specifically literal. There is something that is not part of our subjectivity engaging with our experience, and it is actively involved in engaging with the text-as-experienced. Cybertexts, if we are dealing with a videogame context, work with us actively as we play the game, to produce our experience. In some ways, the game is playing with us:

Games that tend to have highly articulated characters are seldom successful. The more the author controls the character, the less the player does. The trick is in coming up with the right balance. One of my favourite examples of this is the game Blade Runner by Westwood Studios. When you begin the game, it is not determined whether your character, a Blade Runner whose mission is to capture renegade replicants, is a human or a replicant himself. However, the game watches what you do to determine which you believe yourself to be. At some point, it makes an assessment based on your actions, then sends the story on the appropriate trajectory. This is a great example of optimizing the computer’s capability. It constructs the story around you, creating a totally customized experience. In this way, the narrative is playing with you. (Pearce 2002 118)

The ability of cybertexts to ‘play with’ the player of the text also highlights a difference between ergodic literatures and cybertexts. Ergodic literature presents a stable text-in-itself which the person engaging with it negotiates through a process of choice, discernment and decision-making as they generate the text-as-experienced. In comparison, cybertexts share the same framework as Soft Cinema (Manovich and Kratky 2005) as discussed earlier: the person negotiating the text is constructing a text-as-experienced from engaging with the text-as-generated (see Page 30) which is not a stable framework because it is being produced by the algorithms of the text-in-itself in response to the decisions made by the person negotiating the text.20

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20 Discussed in more detail in Chapter 5 on Pages 145-147.
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However, structural tmesis, ergodicity and cybertextuality also raise critical questions about our experience of texts as much as they distinguish them from each other. In this chapter I have already discussed the argument put forward by Nagel that the accurate ascription of subjective experience is dependent upon being “…sufficiently similar to the object of ascription to be able to adopt his point of view,” (Nagel 1979 172). Nagel is presenting his argument within the context of wider phenomenological philosophy, but I argue that it has specific utility in the context of the experience of engaging with mediated texts. As structural tmesis, ergodicity and cybertextuality increase, so does the likelihood that you have not shared the same experience as other people who have negotiated with the text – or even, arguably, exactly the same text. Consider the discussion between Gillen and Walker: they did not share the same experience of Deus Ex (Ion Storm 2000), and in fact neither realised that a different experience than their own was possible – until they compared notes.

Following Nagel’s logic,22 the critical capacity to speak for the wider phenomenological experience of engaging with a text becomes problematic in the context of texts which follow a structure open to tmesis, ergodicity and cybertextuality – but not impossible. For one thing, the necessity of bridging different experiential frameworks as part of a critical dialogue with a text is itself not without precedent. Arguably, dealing with the difficulties presented by texts which have atypical structure will actually become easier over time, as more people gain familiarity with ergodic literature and cybertexts, even in passing. If someone has experience with engaging with one such text, an ergodic text for example, then that experience can provide keys for how engaging with a cybertext would function, due to their points of similarity.

BUILDING A PROCESS OF ANALYTICAL JUXTAPOSITION

This project argues that it is possible to analyse how differences in textual structure (and the processes required to engage with them) across media forms shape the experience of those texts. The underlying substrate of texts is not neutral to how they are experienced, and this chapter presents one side of the equation. The other side of the equation presents the processes of engagement that are applied by the person negotiating with the text, and the affective consequences of the relationships they establish within a Heideggerian world-of-

21 See Page 28.
22 Albeit within the context of textual engagement rather than philosophical enquiry.
concern. The process of analytical juxtaposition forwarded in this project to consider how the processes of negotiating the underlying textual structure shape affective experience is referred to as affective phenomenology.

The benefit in establishing how and why different forms of media present distinctive or potentially unique experiences of a fictional text is that doing so will increase our understanding of how those forms of mediated storytelling function, and allow for better textual comparisons between different media forms. Despite the fact that the case-study media forms selected for this project all occupy a new media context, I argue that the conceptual framework for analysis can equally be applied to other media forms – as I have been exploring through many of the examples in this chapter.

Chapter 2 engages with the critical theory underlying affect and how the processes of engaging with a text can shape the phenomenological experience of doing so. Another core question that the chapter engages with is whether it is possible to form relationships with fictional entities outside of a delusional context, and if so, how does such a relationship form, function and come to matter?

Chapter 3 applies the analytical framework explored in Chapters 1 and 2 within the context of hypertext fictions, which provide environments for readers to engage with as either explorers negotiating unfamiliar territory, or detectives seeking connections between disparate material. Many hypertexts seek to remediate the experience of websurfing as a way of blurring the lines between the life of the person reading the text and the fictional world-of-concern.

Chapter 4 engages with the webcomic form, and argues that they are distinguished from other forms of mediated storytelling by the amount of time spent engaging with the characters within the text. This leads to an intimacy generated within the shared world-of-concern in-part by the banality of the experience: webcomic texts are not grounded within the traditional structure of narrative, and so rather than ‘rising action’ the webcomic presents the day-to-day interaction of people who know each other. The reader participates with this casual familiarity, and can participate in the daily lives of fictional characters for potentially years of real-time. Some comics set out to blur the line between the diegetic space of the text using social networking and other techniques, in order to reduce the perceptual distance between the fictional characters and the reader’s daily existence.

Chapter 5 argues that videogames are set apart by the sense of responsibility felt by the player for events and their consequences within the diegetic space of the text. This responsibility can be enfolded into shared Heideggerian worlds-of-concern established with
fictional characters, which allow for significant affective consequences for the phenomenological experience of the text.

Chapter 6 discusses ‘Alternate Reality Games’ (ARGs), and argues that they are storytelling texts which are not just distinguished from the experience of other media forms by their affective tenor, but defined at the level of affect itself: it is how the person negotiating the text feels during the process of negotiating the text that distinguishes ARGs, rather than the processes of negotiating the text themselves. ‘Alternate Reality Game’ is itself arguably a misnomer: the player’s experience of negotiating the puzzles and obstacles of ARGs is framed so as to be phenomenologically real. As such, I argue that the ‘Alternate’ component of the ARG acronym takes disproportionate focus, and that ‘Reality Games’ is a better framework for understanding what sets the affective experience of ARGs apart.

Chapter 7 offers topical applications and points of relevance for the analytical framework developed throughout the rest of the project, and presents a synthesis of the overall argument.

All of the chapters dedicated to a particular form of textual storytelling include a section which focuses on particular examples of the type. In some cases, the methodological intent is to focus on more specific cases in order to explore ideas covered in the rest of the chapter in practice, while in others the intent is to examine texts which are in some way unusual, and where the exception might prove the rule. The particular direction of the case-study sections within each chapter will be discussed and signposted as they occur, but the overall framework serves to provide a more concrete discussion for what could otherwise be abstract theorising.

The next chapter is a counterpoint to this one, and considers the different processes and consequences of engaging with the elements of textual structure which have been discussed.
One of the essential problems raised by studying personal engagement with fictional contexts is the question of how people can feel ‘real’ feelings and emotions for characters and contexts which are fictional. R.T. Allen argues that critically identifying truth with reality, and reality with fact, problematises the way we respond to fiction because it implies that to feel for fictional characters is somehow disconnected from reality (Allen 1986 66). The dynamic produces an understanding that our responses to fiction must be somehow qualified as unreal, or otherwise distinctive from the way we respond to reality; failing to do so risks muddying the waters with the possibility of being actively delusional. Grant Tavinor frames the problem through a discussion of the characters in *Ulysses* by James Joyce:

> Above I write “That Bloom’s desire to have his vision fulfilled can only fail makes me sad.” *Makes me sad*; how can it? I do not believe either Bloom or Stephen exist, or have ever existed. Emotions are commonly conceived to be comprised of, among other things, beliefs about the existence of their intentional objects. Surely being sad about Bloom and Stephen’s situation would *at the least demand that I believed in their existence*? What could I have meant when I wrote the passage then? Also, what could I have been *feeling* that I was inspired to tell you I felt sad? Should we conclude that not just I, but all those who write or speak in such a manner – and that, I think, would be most of us – are inconsistent, or worse, irrational? (Tavinor 2003 2)

To require endless rounds of qualification asserting that those engaging with critical analysis of fictional texts, and their experiences of them, are aware the texts are fictional is an unnecessary exercise which is not analytically productive. Allen argues that the entire dynamic is actually detrimental to our understanding of how we relate to fiction:

> The emotional response to fiction is not a ‘problem’ but a daily fact. We feel (not wish, nor anything else) and we feel for Anna [Karenina] (not a real person, nor Anna taken wrongly to be a real person). All that we need to do is to recognize the phenomenon for what it is. …I can be moved by Anna Karenina’s plight because I believe, and relive as and when I read the novel, that something terrible has happened to her. It has; it is there in the book, and what else is required? I… wish to emphasize that the problem is created by the assumption that the beliefs constituting emotional responses must be directed to factual reality, or that what one believes to be true must be factually true. A novel, unless it is historical or autobiographical, is not a presentation of facts. But true statements can be made about what happens in it and beliefs directed towards those events can be true or false. Hence emotional responses to those events can be appropriate
or inappropriate. Once we realize that truth is not confined to what is factual, the problem disappears. (Allen 1986 66)

Allen’s logic is that forming emotional connections and responses to fictional entities is not an example of a delusional framework, and is instead a ‘daily fact’ of engaging with fiction. However, how are we to categorise these emotional connections and the responses we feel for fiction? A core question presented by this study is: how do the relationships we form with fictional entities (outside of a delusional context) form, function and come to matter? I argue that we form relationships with fictional characters in similar ways to how we can establish relationships with other human beings across mediation.

Within the developing technocultures of the world, the ability to have relationships with other non-fictional humans where the relationships are able to exist entirely because of technological mediation is increasingly common (Gergen 1991). There are offices where members spend some or potentially all of their time telecommuting to the workplace, and instances where individuals can collaborate on creative or academic work without meeting ‘face to face.’ More accurately, their physical bodies never share the same space – or potentially, the same hemisphere of the globe. It is possible to have friends and relatives who we interact with solely through mediation, and these connections still matter to us. Importantly, this does not describe a new process, merely one in which interpersonal contact by letters, photographs and analogue telephone signals has been updated through new media technology and the digital age. Our relationships have always been able to exist through mediation; the difference is that it is quite obvious an annual Christmas videoconference qualifies as mediated, whereas the mediation presented by more traditional forms of communication, like Christmas cards, may slip under our radar.

It is possible to become intimate with someone online in ways which are personally powerful (Turkle 1997; Turkle 1984), and where one can take the time to get to know who someone is just as you can through face to face interaction. Likewise, many people speak of feeling personal connections to fictional characters, and have engaged with details of their lives and personalities over an extended period of time. Alec Meer of RockPaperShotgun.com presents an example where he woke up thinking of the name ‘Anatoly Kolotov,’ but could not place where it was from – eventually remembering that it was a randomly-generated name for a character in X-COM: Enemy Unknown (Mythos Games and MicroProse 1994), a game he had played years previously:

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23 As Stelarc would call them, ‘the meat.’
CHAPTER 2: AFFECT AND EXPERIENCE

He’d been with me since the very start of the game…. One day, Anatoly Kolotov died. I don’t remember how, but I remember the shock. I remember feeling absolutely hopeless – how could I possibly save the world without Anatoly’s help? (…) I do know I reloaded a savegame. It was not yet Anatoly Kolotov’s time to die, I reasoned. Nonetheless, the trauma of losing a character that felt so thoroughly mine, one I’d nurtured and developed rather than simply witnessed trot through a game’s scripts, was formative…. This was someone I’d personally invested in, ripped brutally away from me. (Meer 2009)

I have also witnessed conversations unfold online where individuals have chastised themselves for attraction to fictional characters because those characters are under eighteen: those individuals believe in the characters to the extent that they absent-mindedly apply their own social morality and ethics to the concept of such a relationship – to such an extent that they are ‘weirded out’ by the attraction, which makes them a ‘bad person.’ This is despite the fact that the character(s) in question often exist in and are written for a social/historical context where the modern understanding of marriageable age is not relevant, and despite the more important point that they are entirely fictional.

It can be argued that there is little difference between the extent to which fictional relationships matter to us, personally, in comparison to the relationships we can form with people across distance and time through mediation. In both cases, the investment we can form across mediation is equally likely to colour our day-to-day lives, sometimes in ways we do not anticipate. We can find ourselves melancholic at work because of events connected with people we have not physically met, or buoyed and energised by fictional events framed through characters we care for. However, there are distinctions between the relationships we establish with fictional characters and those formed with humans with or without mediation; the distinction lies not in the degree to which the relationships matter to us, but in the context in which they are formed.

This chapter will explore the issues raised by sharing a world-of-concern with fictional texts, including those presented when we are dealing with a new media context: what affective consequences do the processes of engagement required by individual texts have for the phenomenological experience of that text? What is the character of the relationships we form with fiction? How do these relationships function, and in what ways can they be considered ‘real’? Where is the overlap between ‘virtual-I’ and ‘actual-I,’ and how does virtual experience become real experience? What does it mean to be in the position of the subjective ‘I’ and yet entirely aware that you are engaging with a fictional, virtual world?
I argue that the relationships we form with fictional characters are personally powerful because they matter and are of consequence within a Heideggerian world-of-concern: the affect and emotions prompted within the relationship are real, even if the subjects of the relationship themselves are not. The feelings produced by our engagement with fiction are not contained by our awareness that the characters we are attached to are fictional, and can inform our day-to-day awareness as much as any other investment or relationship we have, yet remain distinctive because of the hybridity of the experience. The relationship between the ‘virtual-I’ and the ‘actual-I’ is that they are coterminous: the ‘actual-I’ is your self, whereas the ‘virtual-I’ is a hybrid of your self and the text you are engaging with. The ‘virtual-I’ is distinct because the context of engaging with a world-of-concern modifies both your capacity to act and the feel of the experience, arguably modifying both your agency and your affect. However, nothing erases your awareness that what you are engaging with is fictional: in fact, the way in which the experience feels different because you are aware it is fictional highlights this contextual awareness, rather than eroding it. Both the ‘actual-I’ and the ‘virtual-I’ are capable of having a real affective experience and forming relationships which matter. Along with this, the experiences of the ‘virtual-I’ are not compartmentalised: there is significant affective permeability between the ‘actual-I’ and the ‘virtual-I’ due to their coterminous existence, meaning that the experience does not spontaneously cease to be personally relevant and affectively potent when you stop reading the text, watching the movie, or playing the game.

This chapter will lay the groundwork for discussing these concepts by introducing theoretical approaches to affect.

AFFECT, INTENSITY AND PSYCHIC INVESTMENT

The difficulty in comparing different subjective ‘experiences’ is the extent to which much of experience is non-cognitive and happens, in some ways, where we are not watching. In Parables for the Virtual, Brian Massumi opens by arguing that there is a broad gap between the content of a text, and the effect of engaging with that text. His reasoning is not that there is no logical connection between the two, but that the “indexing to conventional meanings in an intersubjective context, the sociolinguistic qualification” of a text cannot account for, or entirely explain, the strength or duration of the effect engaging with the text will have (2002 24). Massumi argues that because of this gap, there is an element of the

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24 Hybridity and the ‘actual-I’/’virtual-I’ dynamic are discussed in greater depth on Pages 68-72.
experience of engaging with a text that goes beyond ‘semantic or semiotic order’ (2002 24). He refers to this element as intensity – and also as affect. Massumi argues that intensity/affect operates under a system independent of the qualification of form and content, and which is fundamentally non-conscious:

But one of the clearest lessons of this first story is that emotion and affect – if affect is intensity – follow different logics and pertain to different orders. An emotion is a subjective context, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal. Emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is intensity–owned and recognised. It is crucial to theorize the difference between affect and emotion. If some have the impression that affect has waned, it is because affect is unqualified. As such, it is not ownable or recognisable and is thus resistant to critique. (Massumi 2002 27-28)

Massumi’s framing of affect as unqualified intensity that is ‘resistant to critique’ has raised questions as to whether affect can be a productive term for analysis. This concern can be seen in dialogues between Massumi and Lawrence Grossberg, where Massumi argues that Grossberg moves away from positioning affect as unstructured and unformed precisely to avoid accusations that doing so means affect cannot be analysed (Massumi 2002 260). Massumi instead argues that because form and structure are not the only analytical frameworks which can be applied to affect, being unformed and unstructured are not barriers to its study – and that Grossberg is falling into terminological slippage that equates ‘affect’ directly with ‘emotion’ in an attempt to avoid a situation that is not a relevant concern (2002 260).

In comparison to the framework presented by the dialogues between Massumi and Grossberg where affect exists on the same spectrum as emotion, however distinct from emotion it might be, Gilles Deleuze frames affect as existing on the same spectrum as action. However, Deleuze focuses primarily on the felt experience and intensities held in the moments where an individual is considering acting (Colebrook 2006 54). Deleuze’s argument is that without a ‘delay’ in which affect can occur, there is no ‘self’ to respond to external stimuli:

In order for there to be a self that decides or pictures its world there has to be some self-differentiation, and this is established through affect. If the body were to respond immediately to encounters – to eat when hungry, drink when thirsty, retreat when an excess of stimulus intrudes – then it would be pure perception, nothing more than what is caused by an outside. It is only in not acting, in not expending energy but ‘absorbing’ the force of the image, that
something like a site of pooled energy as the reception of affect can be formed. (...) At the simplest level, it is only after the delay of affect, the capacity for what is other than the self to produce a vibration or received movement in the body, that there can be a self who results from this ‘zone’ of feeling, of not acting – the zone of indetermination. (Colebrook 2006 54-55)

In doing so, Deleuze presents a framework for how affect can relate to personal experience while being fundamentally non-conscious: affect occurs while the individual encounters information from outside of him/herself, and in the space before a response is made – assuming that a response is made at all.

Massumi moves on to explore affect in more detail by following the work of Henri Bergson, Baruch Spinoza and Deleuze (Colebrook 2006 67), who individually focus on the ‘double-nature’ or ‘doubling’ of affect, a conceptualisation which underlies Massumi’s distinction between ‘affect’ as unqualified intensity versus ‘emotion’ as qualified intensity:

In Spinoza, it is only when the idea of the affection is doubled by an idea of the idea of the affection that it attains the level of conscious reflection. Conscious reflection is a doubling over of the idea on itself, a self-recursion of the idea that enwraps the affection or impingement at two removes. For it has already been removed once by the body itself.... This is a first-order idea produced spontaneously by the body; the affection is immediately, spontaneously doubled by the repeatable trace of an encounter, the “form” of an encounter, in Spinoza’s terminology.... The trace determines a tendency, the potential, if not yet the appetite, for the autonomic repetition and variation of the impingement. Conscious reflection is the doubling over of this dynamic abstraction on itself. (Massumi 2002 31-32)

Massumi’s use of the qualified/unqualified dynamic is based in a framework which places emotion as a cognitive qualification of an affective response: when someone recognises that they ‘feel sad,’ they are finding a cognitive label for an underlying affective state. The distinction also fuels the argument that affect is fundamentally non-analysable. The capacity to analyse events or experiences involves reflecting upon those experiences, arguably from multiple angles and contexts. Following Massumi’s logic, the process of reflecting upon an experience moves analysis into being a cognitive qualification of affective states, rather than providing insight into affect itself. However, Massumi also presents a further technical distinction between emotion and affect at the level of the processes which inform them: emotion is contextual and discrete, whereas affect is continuous (217). As a result, there is little utility in attempting to distinguish ‘an affect’ from the background flow, and assessing the overall movements and dynamic shifts within the ‘affective state’ is a more productive approach.
CHAPTER 2: AFFECT AND EXPERIENCE

Although Lawrence Grossberg’s application of affect is prone to slippage that places it as ‘feeling,’ ‘mood’ or ‘emotion,’ his conceptualisation of affect as a plane of investments is a useful companion to both Martin Heidegger’s contextual world-of-concern and Misha Kavka’s affective cusp formation. A comparison of these conceptualisations provides a point of entry into how the processes of engaging with a text can shape the experience of that text.

Grossberg develops a practice of discussing affect rather than a specific theory about its operation, and focuses his work on the relationship between ‘popular’ discursive practices and hegemonic social formations. This framework presents affect as functioning within an “economy of cathexis” (Grossberg 1997 158) – cathexis meaning the investment of mental or emotional energy in a person, object, or idea.

Grossberg presents an argument, which Massumi later echoes in his work, that there is a gap between the content of a text and the effect of engaging with it, arguing that there “…seems to be little correlation between semantic readings and uses/pleasures” when dealing with rock and roll (1997 38). In this case, Grossberg argues that the affective ‘gap’ identified by Massumi bridges not only the text and the person engaging with it, but also whole constellations of concepts and ideas associated with that interaction:

Rock and roll, whether live or recorded, is a performance whose “significance” cannot be read off the “text.” It is not that rock and roll does not produce and manipulate meaning but rather that meaning itself functions in rock and roll affectively, that is, to produce and organise desires and pleasures…. If the power of rock and roll, then, depends not upon meaning but upon affective investments, it is related not so much to what one feels as to the boundary drawn by the very existence of different organisations of desire and pleasure…. Rock and roll’s relation to desire and pleasure serves to mark a difference, to inscribe on the surface of social reality a boundary between “them” and “us”. (Grossberg 1997 38-39)

Although Grossberg’s argument is specific in its focus on the context of rock and roll, I argue that this approach is productive when applied to wider forms of textual engagement than music and the culture surrounding it. Grossberg refers to the boundary between “them” and “us” as a topography of desire, functioning through affective formations in the creation of a ‘rock and roll apparatus’ that “…reshapes our affective life by mapping the vectors of its own economy of desire onto our material life” (1997 41-42). In the case of rock and roll, he argues that the ‘rock and roll apparatus’ functions through three points of cathexis: youth as difference, the pleasure of the body, and the postmodern uncertainty of history and meaning. However, other equivalent affective formations can be identified within many other forms of textual engagement, with similarly contextual ‘apparatuses’ at work – and our experiences
are always contextualised by our physical bodies. When engaging with any kind of text, our physical embodiment is going to shape the experience, even as we engage with the social context and relations which have gathered around that media form, and around the text itself.

Grossberg uses the concepts of cathexis and ‘affective apparatuses’ to frame affect as planes of affective investment that are contextual, and are based in how individuals within those contexts attribute merit to hierarchies of ideas and values:

“Affect” here refers to the quality and quantity of energy invested in particular places, things, people, meanings and so forth. It is the plane on which we anchor and orient ourselves into the world, but it is neither individualistic nor unstructured; it is not some pure psychological energy erupting through the social structures of power. Moreover it is complexly articulated and structured, producing configurations not only of pleasure and desire (through economies of repression and satisfaction) and of emotion (through narrative economies), but also of volition (or will), of moods and passions. These latter describe the organization of what matters; they point to the fact that people experience things, live different identities, practices, relations, to different degrees and in different ways. (Grossberg 1997 111)

The planes are multiple because any given person is likely to be simultaneously invested in many different levels of ‘affective apparatus’ at one time. If we take music as an example, a person could be engaging with the music itself at the same time as that music informs his/her personal identity; s/he is also simultaneously aware of the perception of that identity, viewed through the lens of the musical subculture it is framed through. Grossberg himself makes the case that the text itself is merely one component of a far larger economy of cathexis (Grossberg 1997 156). He goes so far as to argue that if the contextual investment within music and ‘the rock formation’ changed sufficiently in terms of the practices and hierarchies of values held by those involved, then the “…discontinuities would be more significant than the continuities,” and what resulted could “…no longer be usefully described as the rock formation” (1997 17) – even if the underlying music were the same. Interestingly, the way in which Grossberg frames affect as a deeply contextual investment in ideas, objects or social constructions is homologous to Heideggerian worlds-of-concern.

In What Happens When I Turn On The TV Set? Lars Nyre discusses an unpublished lecture given by Paddy Scannell, in which Scannell analysed the act of turning on a television set. Scannell argues that part of what informs the ubiquity of television – regardless of whether or not a physical television set is ‘on’ in the vicinity – is the distinction between objective space and the ‘space humans are engaged in’ that he defines as a Heideggerian world-of-concern (Nytre 2007 26). Nyre argues that Scannell does not refute the “existential
importance of objective space,” but that he “shares Heidegger’s concern that it attracts too much attention, and that it begets instrumentalism and colonizes the lifeworld” (Nyre 2007 26). Nyre distinguishes between an objective space and a world-of-concern by framing an objective space as everything present within an environment, such as all of the furniture and fittings within a lecture theatre, whereas a world-of-concern is grounded in contextual relevance: in the context of a seminar, a world-of-concern would involve the lecturer, the students and the subject at hand – and where the majority of the room fittings are irrelevant or uninvolved. However, it should be noted that pragmatic and/or embodied elements of the environment also qualify for ‘contextual relevance’ in the world-of-concern, such as the comfort of the seats in comparison to the duration of the seminar, if we extend the example, or whether the climate-control of the lecture-theatre is set too cold for comfort.

The forces guiding the shared world-of-concern are emotional attractions like trust, interest, relevance or authenticity, while objective space is merely the arena in which they take place. (Nyre 2007 26)

Nyre argues that television is ubiquitous because of human awareness that it is ‘already there,’ held in potential until a television set is actually turned on, and that this understanding informs the perceptual worlds in which human beings operate – as opposed to the objective spaces that human lives play out within. The idea that individual worlds-of-concern are inherently contextual is similar to Grossberg’s positioning of affective planes of investment in operation within contextual subcultures. Importantly, Scannell also references an affective dimension to worlds-of-concern themselves, in terms of how television impinges on and becomes part of individual human life-worlds:

No matter who or where ‘I’ am, ‘I’ get caught up in such everywhere commonplace things as politics, war, murder, disaster (human and natural), sport and ‘human interest’ stories. I do not see and hear all this indifferently, passively. In whatever way and no matter what, I am caught up in it: what concerns them now concerns me. Not just a commonplace worldliness (the noise and chatter of the everyday) but a world in common, a world we share, that we inhabit (for good or ill) with others everywhere…. It gets to me. It touches me. I encounter it – this worldly everyday world-of-concern. Its concerns are my concerns…. Compassion fatigue, as they say, is one way in which this shows… (Scannell 1996 174)

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25 Scannell found no reason to turn on the television set, and no attachment to its ‘ubiquity’ while on a stay within Norway, because he did not speak Norwegian and thus was outside of the relevant context (Nyre 2007 28).
The entire concept of ‘compassion fatigue’ is deeply affective, as is the syndrome of modern ‘media grief-porn’ that informs and produces it: we are aware of the stories that stir affective responses within us, and are simultaneously aware that the ever-increasing affective calls to our attention from news reportage of disasters and other similar events can be extremely tiring – particularly as they extend to being the focus of multiple news-days. In any case, the conceptualisations put forward by Grossberg and by Scannell through Nyre function well in synthesis: the contextuality of affective planes of investment is a reflection of the fact that they operate within worlds-of-concern that are informed by objective reality, but much less than they are informed by the experiences of the individuals who operate within them – and these individual experiences are likewise informed by the (sub)cultural values which are part of the relevant affective apparatus. ‘Compassion fatigue,’ as it relates to the contextuality of affective investment within worlds-of-concern, can be extended to suggest how we come to care for fictional characters. How much more ‘imaginary’ are characters we deal with personally but who exist purely within a fictional context in a world-of-concern, in comparison to those we know intellectually to be people suffering around the world, but who we will never meet or personally see? We care about these abstractions of real people, and get ‘caught up’ in them: what concerns them comes to concern us. The same is true of characters we invest in within contextual worlds-of-concern.

Teresa Brennan is a theorist who argues for the transportability of affect. She makes a case in *The Transmission of Affect* that the affective state of one person can be picked up by another, and that environments themselves can have affective consequences for those who encounter them – even as these encounters will continue to inform that affective environment itself (Brennan 2004 3, 8). In many ways, Brennan’s framework is analogous to the world-of-concern put forward by Scannell and Nyre, in that one person’s affective state is contextual, and informed by elements from his/her surroundings and the people around him/her. However, Brennan’s work is focused on ‘fugs,’ affective environments, and invisible affective connections that are understood as hormonal. As a result, the logic that Brennan puts forward to explain the transportability of affect is essentially biological in nature (2004 9), which flows from her focus on face-to-face affective travel, or in the environmental component of transmission. Because of her focus on affect and the social, the biological framework which Brennan applies makes no attempt to consider affective mediation, since it is not relevant to her schema: any hormonal or pheromonal basis for affective transmission could not possibly function across a book, or a telephone, or a television screen.
Misha Kavka, in response to Brennan’s work, argues that affect can function across mediation through the concept of the *cusp formation*:

…this implies that objects of emotion are materially sensible in our feelings, and also that they are the material in which our feeling inheres, thereby giving them support. Further, because an object is the object of others’ feelings, too, we are always responding not just to a sensate object, but also to others’ feelings lodged in it. This is why affective material matters, is actually affecting, and can be the object of shame, indignation, fear and so on. Indeed, no affect would be possible without the social relation, the relation to others, which inheres in the object…. Rather than the feeling of feeling, I understand affect in terms of the mattering of matter, a doubling which involves the evacuation and refilling of a material object with the ‘material’ of feeling that is and is not my own. The point of emergence of such affect is the cusp, join or interface, a point of indistinction where subject meets object, same meets other, mind meets body.

(Kavka 2008 33-34)

Essentially, for Kavka the cusp formation presents an opportunity for the affective investment of one person to encounter those from other people, along with recognising that the investments of other people exist. This schema reframes Brennan’s biological model of affect so as to function within an awareness of a wider social cathexis, as argued by Grossberg: rather than a pheromone, we can conceptualise affect as a sticky fluid which we leave behind us like a spoor, to mix with the affective ectoplasm of other people. Cusp formations are sites where our own affective glue adheres and mixes with the bubbling cauldron provided by other people – and where we cannot help but be aware of the wider affective presence within our experiences. Kavka goes on to argue that the site of one such cusp where affect takes ‘material form’ is the television screen itself. I argue that ‘cusp formations’ can be found in sites of textual mediation, regardless of the technology involved – functioning equally on the pages of a novel, the preferred sites of consumption/engagement for music, and in the screens of cinema, television and the computer.

Along with offering the concept of the cusp formation, Kavka engages with much of the critical theory that has been discussed thus far in her own work on affect and reality television, elaborating on Massumi’s work to distinguish affect from the emotions by framing it as a zone of “…potential emotions – emotions which have not yet been perceived as such and thus constitute a ‘primordial soup’ of feeling” (Kavka 2008 x). Importantly, affect is also ‘dynamic and transportable,’ in terms of its capacity to shift between people, objects and situations when it “properly belongs elsewhere,” and is possessed of a “loose and ever-transformable relation to both object and cause” (Kavka 2008 30-31). This ‘dynamic
transportability’ is what Kavka argues functions across cusp formations, allowing the affective state of one person to inform that of another – or of the environment itself – within a contextual, if mediated, world-of-concern.

Deleuze presents an argument contextually similar to both the Heideggerian world-of-concern and the cusp-formation as part of discussing how personal affects relate to the wider world. For Deleuze, affect can operate at the level of ‘the virtual’ when there is something an individual invests in outside of his/her body, and does not then act upon. Claire Colebrook argues that this process of personal investment outside of oneself produces nationalisms and other examples of affective ‘collective bodies’:

In not eating but imagining an object of desire a relation is produced to a virtual object, with the self being nothing more than a regularity or cathexis of objects, and with social appendages being nothing more than relations or territories oriented to privileged, invested or affective images. We can even see contemporary nationalism not as the way a body of people consciously defines itself, but as a pool of affects or partial objects – such as the Union Jack, the royal family, Premier League football, the Tate Modern. It is the desiring perception of such invested images that produces relations among perceiving bodies. We can see this quite clearly in cases of collective spectacle, such as the announcement of the staging of the 2012 Olympics. Images of this announcement, and images of jubilant response, were relayed repeatedly throughout the media on 6 July 2005; the next day contrasting images of grief, shock and horror were relayed following the terrorist attacks on the London underground. A collective body is produced through such images, which would have both a direct affect, and then a reflective affect as we see the workings of these images on others. (Colebrook 2006 55-56)

The Deleuzean ‘collective body’ shares elements with the world-of-concern in terms of its contextual relevance to the individuals and circumstances involved: the ‘pool of affects or partial objects’ for the world-of-concern involving the royal family is unlikely to map completely to the world-of-concern for Premier League football. The first element which the ‘collective body’ shares with the cusp formation is the fact that collective bodies can function across sites of mediation – such as the broadcasts of the 2012 Olympic announcement and the bombings in the London Underground. The second element is that collective bodies are sites which allow the affective investment of one person to encounter those from other people, along with recognising that the investments of other people exist.

26 This association between affect and inhibition is picked up by Jean-François Lyotard in Libidinal Economies, where he argues that cathexis creates a reserve of potential power, “force retained from immediate investment” (Lyotard 1993 219).
There are several points where these theories of affect move in parallel; if they are considered together, what is left is a stable platform from which to consider affect and how it is relevant to the experience of a text:

- Affect is the zone of potential emotions, which is dynamic and transportable in terms of its capacity to flow between people, objects, situations, and hierarchies of ideas or values, and which has an unfixed relationship to object and cause. It is a continuous state in which overall shifts and movements can be considered, rather than being discrete and nameable segments of a process.

- Affect functions through an economy of cathexis, whereby an individual becomes invested in something, regardless of what that something may be. The cathexis occurs within a contextual world-of-concern that reflects what is relevant to both the individual involved and the situation in which the investment takes place: the experience of someone engaging with a media form purely because s/he enjoys doing so will have a detectably different affective tone from the experience of that same person engaging with the same material in a context where s/he is studying it.

- Cathexis functions across a cusp formation, a point of interface for the investment of the individual to encounter investments from other people, and the awareness that the investments of other people exist. It is a point of contact which bridges an individual’s engagement and investment in something, and his/her position within wider subcultures of investment. Simultaneously, this bridging makes him/her aware of broader cultures who are either not invested, or not investing in the same way. Kavka argues that affect matters precisely because of its “intermediation between selves and the world of objects/others” (2008 35). The cusp formation can be a form of mediation – such as the surface of the television screen, or the pages of a novel, or the monitor of a videogame – but can also be anything that functions as a communal focal point within the world-of-concern formed and constructed by the individual/s operating inside it.

Examples of cusp formations which are not sites of electronic mediation would be the whiteboards in classroom contexts, where the ideas and suggestions of one group of people can combine together, potentially mixed with offerings from earlier classes in the same space. Alternatively, leaving aside electronic mediation entirely, the kitchens belonging to people
living together who enjoy cooking (or in professional restaurants) are likely to qualify because of their existence as sites where personal investment intermingles with that of others.

A cusp formation which functions both for environmental and mediated affects is discussed in “Deconstructing Ghosts,” by Jonathon Sykes and Richard Wiseman, published in Funology: From Useability to Enjoyment (edited by Mark A. Blythe et al). Sykes and Wiseman refer to a 2001 study they performed in which a sample group experienced being alone in underground vaults in Edinburgh, some of which were reputed to be haunted. “Deconstructing Ghosts” discusses an updated version of this study done in 2002, where rather than exposing a sample group to the vaults themselves, they experienced being alone in a highly-detailed virtual construct modelled after the vaults. The specific goal of the 2001 study was to create a blind sample group unaware of which vaults had a reputation for being haunted, in an attempt to discover whether something in the construction of the rooms themselves created that affect. The 2002 study shifted the context to a digital reconstruction of the vaults in an attempt to discover whether the element that conveyed the ‘haunted’ impression was primarily visual – with the digital modelling of the vault environments analogous to first-person explorations in some videogames. However, the way that second study was framed establishes that it is an example of an affective cusp formation operating despite (or because of!) mediation: each participant in the study group was given a briefing of the previous study, and of the reputed hauntings in the Edinburgh vaults. Doing so placed each participant in the study group within a contextual world-of-concern with the digital models of the vaults, and with his/her own contextual associations of what haunted vaults would be, together with a connection with the participants of the 2001 study: the members of the study group expected to be scared, and were invested in that possibility. The site of their investment in the 2002 study was the cusp formation of the computer screen, as opposed to a television screen as discussed by Kavka and Scannell, respectively.

Sykes & Wiseman specifically note that part of the goal of having such a briefing was to ‘increase anxiety’ at the same time as achieving ‘informed consent,’ and that the briefing itself was framed in the same way as ‘a traditional ghost tour’ (244). The results of the study were that 64% of the individuals within the study group reported ‘unusual experiences’ during the simulations, including “apparitional sightings, a sudden chill on entering a virtual vault, feeling of another presence inside the vault, and the perception of breathing on the back of the neck, to the report of an itch, perceptions of levitation, feelings of discomfort and an increase in anxiety” (Sykes and Wiseman 2003 245). The ‘discomfort’ and ‘anxiety’ certainty fit within an affective framework, and demonstrate that the computer screens did
function as cusp formations for contextual worlds-of-concern that the participants established with the virtual vaults.

AFFECT AND TEXTUAL ENGAGEMENT

A great component of the experience of media texts is simply felt, and is thus affective. They are affectively apprehended, and when we walk away from a mediated experience of a text moved by that experience, but have trouble articulating why it made such an impression on us, we are dealing with affect. The overtones of celebratory sadness one can take away from finishing a text (regardless of media form) because it cannot be encountered again for the first time are an example of this. Anything that can combine ‘celebration’ and ‘sadness’ into one package emphasises the slipperiness identified by Kavka, which means affect can be inappropriate and “properly belonging elsewhere” (30-31) but entirely legitimate at the same time.

The concept of immersion is a regular feature of critical discussion of how we engage with and experience media texts, particularly with relevance to the experiences made available by new media contexts. Immersion is a way of conceptualising the different pathways and roads there are to personal investment within fictional spaces, and which come about through processes of textual engagement as part of the experience of the text. The new media context presents a wide variety of different forms of textual engagement, with a corresponding variety of issues raised on the subject of immersion. However, different critics have had very different understandings of what immersion is, how to conceptualise it, and how it is thought to function.

Andrew Darley specifically links ‘immersion’ to ‘interactivity’ within Visual Digital Culture: Surface Play and Spectacle in New Media Genres (161). However, as has been discussed in Chapter 1 (see Page 20), ‘interactivity’ is theoretically a defining feature of all forms of new media text, despite the fact that they produce qualitatively different experiences. Martin Lister et al – still focusing on new media technology – define immersion as the experience of being inside the world of a constructed image (2003 387), following the logic that if the viewer cannot measure his/her distance to the ‘surface’ of the image, then the image appears to surround the viewer. The subject then loses any sense of him/herself as separate from the medium or its simulated world. However, why would viewers be unable to measure their distance to the surface of the image, and what would the consequence of this be for the affective experience of the text? There is little discussion as to the processes which
would underlie such a form of immersion, and no attempt to account for immersion occurring when one engages with a book, or a film.

Alison McMahan frames immersion as inherently connected to agency rather than the image and its intrinsic quality, and in doing so predicts Stephen Poole’s points regarding *incoherence* (see Pages 55-56):

Three conditions create a sense of immersion in a virtual reality or 3-D computer game: (1) the user’s expectations of the game or environment must match the environment’s conventions fairly closely; (2) the user’s actions must have a non-trivial impact on the environment; and (3) the conventions of the world must be consistent, even if they don’t match those of “meatspace.” (McMahan 2003 67-68)

The benefit of McMahan’s framework is that it includes implications of a process that might foster immersion, rather than Lister et al.’s less specific understanding of immersion. It also frames users as active participants in constructing immersion, both in terms of their actions, and their conceptual engagement with the process.

Ron Burnett extends the dialogue by associating immersion with spatial exploration within new media texts, but importantly Burnett grounds immersion as functioning through ‘metaphors’ for – in this case – seeing, which are designed to encourage the user to feel as though s/he is within the image (192). In order for these ‘metaphors’ to function, the individual must actively engage with them as such and agree to participate. Burnett’s framework moves immersion away from being a process in which the human subjects are passively involved – an approach which has lead to a focus on how digital worlds could be so compelling that the audience was entirely helpless against their seductive digital wiles. Interestingly, Burnett comes close to describing the planes of affective investment within a contextual world-of-concern when he argues that immersion is another level of empathy (Burnett 2004 53, 77), referring to the process as *reverie*:

Reverie is about ‘giving in’ to the viewing experience, being entertained, as well as being able to recognise the extent to which one has to be in the ‘mood’ to confer so much power to images and sounds. Being in the mood, feeling ready, settling down in one’s seat or one’s sofa, are ways in which viewers create and maintain the ground upon which the viewing process develops. (Burnett 2004 48)

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27 This concept of ‘agreeing to participate’ overlaps with discussions of ‘presentational’ and ‘orientational’ modes of truth within multimodal discourse (Lemke 2002 ; Burn and Schott 2004).
Although the link is counter-intuitive, Burnett’s framework of ‘giving in’ to the viewing experience is also grounded in active engagement: in comparison to the immersive frameworks put forward by Darley and Lister et al, immersion is not something which happens to the people engaging with the text; they must be willing participants in the process, and at the very least consent to their involvement. Immersion cannot happen against the will of the individuals engaging with the text.

Laurie N. Taylor follows Burnett in considering immersion to be an active process, and creates definitions for different subcategories of immersion. She offers diegetic immersion, which occurs across engagement with multiple textual forms, such as printed novels, television, radioplays, cinema and videogames. Diegetic immersion is where one can become ‘lost in a good book,’ and ‘unaware of the creation and relation of the elements within the text’ (Taylor 2002 12). Taylor also offers situated immersion, which is more relevant to a new media context – specifically to videogame environments. Situated immersion has consequences for the affective register of engaging with a new media text, and means that rather than acting upon a digital environment, the player is acting and experiencing within the digital environment while simultaneously embodied and experiencing outside of it:

I will define it here as diegetic immersion, where the player is immersed in the act of playing the video game, and as intra-diegetic or situated immersion, where the player is immersed in playing the game and in the experience of the game space as a spatial and narrated space. Immersion is often taken to be a singular event where the player becomes engrossed in a video game just as a reader would become engrossed in a novel, or a viewer in a film. This immersion is diegetic immersion – the reader, watcher, player becomes lost in the text and becomes unaware of the creation and relation of the elements within the text. Video games also allow intradiegetic immersion, which allows the player to become deeply involved in the game as an experiential space. (Taylor 2002 12)

Taylor’s schema is useful because it emphasizes the experience of the text, and provides two different avenues to explore regarding what immersion is, how it functions, and how it influences the experience of a text. I argue that diegetic immersion reflects the time and processes required to form a contextual world-of-concern with the media text, regardless of what form of media it reflects. The time and processes required to establish a world-of-concern are going to differ across media forms. For example, they could mean getting comfortable with a book and involved within it to the point where the person engaging in the text “…becomes unaware of the creation and relation of the elements within the text” (Taylor
In other words, you can become involved with the story to such an extent that you are not considering it critically, but are investing in its content as a story. There are equivalents for watching films at home, and in all cases the ‘time and processes required to establish a world-of-concern’ are going to appear in individualised ways depending on the preferences of the specific person engaging with the text. For example, the time and processes required to establish a world-of-concern with a film can involve shutting all of the curtains and taking the phone off the hook, so as to reduce interruptions and mediate the space of the cinema. Alternatively, other people are comfortable simply throwing on a DVD and chasing the cat off the couch, and thus have a less involved personal ‘process.’ What is important is that the person engaging with the text is versed in the skills required of him/her by the textual form.

Gordon Calleja engages with the critical history of the terms ‘presence’ and ‘immersion,’ regarding videogame engagement in In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation. He argues that ‘immersion’ is a fundamentally unproductive term, on the grounds that the term has been broadly applied to cover two different and distinctive forms of engagement, with different critical histories:

When Gorfinkel states that one can become immersed in Tetris’ gameplay, she is referring to the more general, pre-virtual environment sense of the word as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary (2003): “Absorption in some condition, action, interest, etc.” In this sense, one can be just as immersed in solving a crossword puzzle as in Half-Life 2 (Valve Software, 2004). We will call this kind of immersion immersion as absorption. The problem here is that the absorption sense of immersion jettisons a history of application in the context of virtual environments within both the humanities (Murray, 1998; Ryan, 2001; Laurel, 1991) and presence theory (Steuer, 1992; Tamborini and Skalski, 2006; Ijsselsteijn, 2003; Waterworth and Waterworth, 2003; Slater, 2003). We will call this second use of immersion, which refers to the idea of being present in another place, immersion as transportation. Thus, a game like Half-Life 2 presents the player not just with an engaging activity, but also with a world to be navigated. A player who assimilates this game world into their gameplay as a metaphorically habitable environment can be thought of as transported to that world. This experience is made possible by the anchoring of the player to a specific location in the game world via their avatar, which the game world and its inhabitants, including other players, react to. (Calleja 2011 26-27)

In separating ‘immersion’ out into absorption and transportation, Calleja in-effect duplicates Laurie N. Taylor’s framework regarding diegetic and situated immersion, respectively, and the concepts are almost exactly analogous. However, Calleja highlights the absorption sense
of ‘immersion’ as undesirable, since it is not isolated to structurally ergodic texts and textual forms:

This sense of immersion as absorption makes the term as readily applicable to gardening or cooking as it does to game environments. While there is nothing wrong this use of the term in itself, it undermines the more specific sense of transportation that is crucial when discussing game environments. (Calleja 2011 28-29)

Calleja eventually excludes immersion-as-absorption from his model of conceptualising player involvement in games, in favour of a detailed and productive examination of what he refers to as incorporation. However, I argue that absorption/diegetic-immersion is still relevant to the experience of game texts: the two registers of immersion are not mutually exclusive, and so how do absorption and transportation relate to each other? Are they shaped by the same processes of engagement, and if so, how? In considering broader issues of disparate media forms, diegetic-immersion/absorption retains relevance: how do the processes of engaging with hypertext fiction foster absorption differently than the processes of engaging with a webcomic, and what are the consequences for the experience of the text?

In Trigger Happy, Stephen Poole argues that videogame interfaces are inherently problematic, presenting an example where the processes of engagement required to negotiate a videogame text became an obstacle to immersion:

…the clumsy apparatus with which the gamer has to wrestle in order merely to look in different directions—moving a mouse or joystick—can never compete in terms of speed or intuitiveness with our natural, almost unwilled eye movements. As the field of view in a Quake-style videogame is artificially restricted vertically as well as horizontally, it takes a conscious decision and a mechanical fiddle just to glance down at the floor directly in front of you, to make sure you are not going to tread in some fatal ooze, break a trip wire or fall down a satirical pit.

While videogames are still played out on flat television screens or monitors, therefore, and while the interface remains so doggedly mechanical, a critical level of realism will never be achieved, and the experience of playing Quake and its siblings will always be more like remote-controlling a robot with tunnel vision rather than being there yourself. (Poole 2000 232-233)

The core of Poole’s point is the role of mechanically mediated embodiment in the experience of videogames (see Pages 160-161), but he also reinforces that the world-of-concern is established through a personal process of engaging with the text, and that this process takes

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28 “Incorporation, then, is our term for immersion as transportation, but, as we have seen, it expands upon this basic metaphor by including the view that the player is not merely transported to a virtual world, but also incorporates that world into her own consciousness as a dual process” (Calleja 2011 172 - Emphasis in original).
time. Additionally, the processes required in order to engage with a text (or master any interface) are frequently counter-intuitive without practice: in many ways, negotiating media interfaces is like learning to drive a car, in that few people would say the process is intuitive, but it can become second nature over time.

Having considered how diegetic immersion relates to the ability to negotiate the textual substrate, the next question becomes how to define a state of *non-immersion*, and what are the elements which can contribute to it. The opposite of immersion is being left cold by a text: you are capable of the processes required to engage with it, but doing so leaves you unmoved, and potentially unmotivated to continue the processes required to engage with the text. When I have attempted to read a language which is not my native one, I am frequently left entirely uncertain whether the story is any good or not; I cannot reach that level of consideration, since I am held away from it by linguistic bemusement. It is important to distinguish at what point in the process of engagement that immersion might fail during an individual experience of a text. The experience of being unable to engage with a text and reach diegetic immersion because of difficulty negotiating the textual substrate due to unfamiliarity is quite different from being able to get into the content of a text, and finding that you do not *care*. In addition, for any form of text, anything which highlights the ‘creation and relation of elements within the text,’ or otherwise emphasises the mediated nature of the exchange is going to damage diegetic immersion: clunky dialog, poor editing, and computer glitches are all obvious examples, but to an extent the elements which will damage diegetic immersion are down to the individual negotiating the text, and his/her particular bugbears.

**Incoherence, Responsibility, and Identification**

Poole uses *incoherence* to describe situations where an action undertaken within the diegetic space of the game environment does not have the consequences expected if the same action were taken in the real world. Incoherency is an impediment to situated immersion. The action can be as simple as your movement knocking a piece of stone into a river; if the stone sinks with a splash, this is a consequence that fits the contextual world-of-concern as a zone of legitimate cause and effect. On the other hand, if the stone sits unmoving on the surface of the ‘water,’ this will emphasise the mediated nature of the world-of-concern and arguably damage the investment the player has in the notion that s/he is occupying a legitimate space. This connects with McMahan’s framework for immersion (see Page 51),
where “the user’s expectations of the game or environment must match the environment’s conventions fairly closely” (McMahan 2003 67-68). Poole unpacks this concept further, however, by identifying specific examples of how incoherence functions to interfere with immersion.

Poole identifies causal, functional and spatial incoherence as specific subcategories of incoherence (Poole 2000 95). Causal incoherence occurs where the consequences of an action are applied unevenly within the diegetic space of the game-world, such as where a rocket-launcher might destroy enemies but leaves a rickety wooden door untouched. Functional incoherence is identified as where an item within the game world has only one purpose, and cannot be applied in contexts outside of that purpose which still make sense (95). An example would be a game that provided a cigarette lighter with the intention of lighting a lamp in the third act, and the lighter cannot be used on anything else flammable outside of that context. Spatial incoherence is where the game forces arbitrary responses from the player within its diegesis, and Poole provides an example of the Resident Evil games where, if the player’s inventory becomes full, s/he is not allowed to simply drop unwanted items on the floor. Spatial incoherence (Poole 2000 98-99) also includes occasions the character within the diegesis of the game is prevented from achieving something because of an arbitrary limitation – such as being unable to fit through a gap because the character can only walk, when in a legitimate world-of-concern the player would be able to crawl through. Tales of Monkey Island (Telltale Games 2009) presents a recent example of spatial incoherence, in that the player needs to constantly walk around waist-high rope fences rather than stepping over the feeble barrier.

I will refer to occasions where the expected outcome of a decision or action within the diegetic space of the game-world is inconsistent from what the player would expect as structural incoherence. Interestingly, this is an element of game design that has been subject to significant refinement and evolution: game designers have learned what an impact structural incoherence has on the player’s experience of the game, and have worked to avoid it. Paying attention to the contextual details of the game’s environment and diegetic space is a way of eliminating significant elements of the problem: confronting the player with a chain link fence is structural incoherence if that fence is an impassable, unscalable barrier because anyone sufficiently motivated and able-bodied can climb a chain link fence given time. However, placing a tall, featureless wooden fence that provides no handholds in the place of the chain link fence is much less structurally incoherent because the player is less likely to
think “I should be able to climb that.”  

\(^{29}\) Half-Life 2 (Valve 2004) presents a wide variety of physics puzzles that largely avoid structural incoherence, including an item called a ‘gravity gun’ that allows you to levitate and throw objects. The gravity-gun itself is not perceived as ‘incoherent’ despite its essential impossibility, because the science-fiction context of Half-Life 2 provides justification for its function, and it is consistent. Players comprehend its function, and then apply lateral-thinking: the gravity-gun can be used as an impromptu weapon precisely because hurling a high-speed radiator, brick or saw-blade at an enemy provides contextually appropriate results.

In texts where you are provided with agency in negotiating the text, situations with structural coherence introduce a sense of responsibility into the experience, which itself reinforces situated immersion: the reason for this is that if you make a choice, then you are responsible for the consequences of that choice. When a decision has a sensible outcome, the player is aware that his/her next decision will have a legitimate consequence, and his/her awareness becomes enfolded into the experience of decision-making. This feedback loop reinforces the contextual world-of-concern, and constructs the diegetic environment of the game world as a lived space where there are consistent rules, resulting in a logic of cause-and-effect. The sense of responsibility that arises is affective because the anticipated consequences impinge on one’s awareness during the process of making a decision, meaning that the felt experience of doing so involves pangs – of loss (for the contingencies which must be discarded, and all of them will be felt as discarded during the process of weighing the decision) or of concern for possible futures that must be considered. A sense of responsibility entails imagined futures with felt effects intruding into the present of decision-making.

Within the contextual world-of-concern, being and feeling responsible for other characters is a significant component of forming relationships with them that matter to you, and this mattering is self-reinforcing. A feedback loop forms because our associations and investment in those characters as other occupants of the world-of-concern underpins more affective elements which we hold in mind when making decisions. Essentially, a sense of responsibility leads to treating the diegetic environment of the textual world-of-concern as a legitimate, lived space, and that investment in a lived space is folded into treating the relationships there as legitimate relationships. The cycle completes when these legitimate

\(^{29}\) Calleja suggests that incoherence in games is best understood through discrepancies between experiential gestalts built up from our own lived experience (Lakoff and Johnson 2003 226) and outcomes within the game-world, on the grounds that: “The metaphor we should use to understand the sensation of inhabiting a virtual environment would best draw upon our knowledge of the experience of inhabiting the everyday world” (Calleja 2011 168).
relationships reinforce the world-of-concern as a lived space, possessed of sensible consequences to actions. Structural incoherence damages immersion by highlighting inconsistencies in the consequences actions have, which in turn has a concrete effect on the extent to which the player perceives his/her own responsibility within the contextual world-of-concern.

*System Shock 2* (Looking Glass Studios and Irrational Games 1999) presents a good example of what a significant impact responsibility (and a lack of incoherence) within the contextual world-of-concern can have for the player’s experience of the text. *System Shock 2* provides a detailed three-dimensional sound-scape for the diegetic environment of the game, in which you can typically hear enemies before seeing them. The key lies in the fact that the reverse is also true, which provides concrete consequences to any actions the player takes in exploring the environment. On one occasion, my movement knocked a pot plant from a desk in passing, causing a clatter. In a direction I had not yet explored, a door opened and I could hear footsteps. Shortly afterward, an enemy creature entered the room and came looking for me. At this point I was bravely hiding behind more pot plants by crouching in the corner, and when the thing did not find me, it wandered back to where it started from – but its mutterings indicated it was warier now. The result of this sound-scape on the experience of the text is that every action is taken in the certain knowledge that you are being hunted.

In turn, this knowledge leads to two generalised responses within the world-of-concern, each informing two different ‘styles of play,’ possessed of their own affective register.⁴⁰ If the player runs through the diegetic environment with his/her guns blazing, the noise will attract enemies from across the level; the dread fuelled by this style of play is based in the question of whether the player will run out of ammunition before s/he runs out of enemies, within a context of constant threat. The alternative is to use stealth, and thus minimise the amount of noise produced in exploring the diegetic environment within the world-of-concern; the tension in this approach is drawn from the ongoing attempts to avoid detection and slip past the opposition, and bursts of frenetic conflict when those attempts fail. Both approaches are entirely appropriate for the horror genre of *System Shock 2*, but the experiences are affectively distinct.

Within the world-of-concern established with texts which provide agency to the person engaging with them, the affective consequences of making specific choices together with being (and feeling) responsible for the outcomes of those choices are very significant to

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⁴⁰ These can be understood as two different *alterbiographies* (see Pages 147-148)
the experience of the text. As has been discussed in Chapter 1, *Planescape: Torment* (Black Isle Studios 1999) qualifies as a *cybertext*: the game constructs an individualised text from the player’s progress through the database by charting each decision that is made – and uses these decisions as markers which can be used by the game to calculate the next set of options to provide the player with. This is another example of a feedback loop that both reinforces the legitimacy of the world-of-concern, and the player’s investment in it as a space of genuine consequences. In this way, the game provides the player with options that would make sense for the individual s/he is constructing through successive choices: all of the options need consideration, as opposed to other game texts which fall into a “Good Person” answer, a “Disinterested Person” answer, and an “Evil Person” or “Insulting” option. The game goes so far, in its later stages, to provide exactly the same options, but have one be the character telling the truth, and the other be lying. For the purposes of that specific interaction, both of those options are identical; for the purposes of learning more about the character being constructed through sequential choices, the distinction is extremely significant. As a result, the game is able to present actual dilemmas, by making the protagonist choose to give up something, and ensuring that all of the available options are highly valuable to the individual that has been constructed through choice. There is no ‘easy way out.’

A particularly striking example comes from the end of the game, where the protagonist reaches a point of no return. The game considers the text constructed from all of the individual decisions made until that point, and presents a sequence over which the player has no control. In one variant I experienced, the game decided that it was appropriate for the protagonist to release his friends and say that he knew the climax was going to be extremely dangerous, so he thanked them for their help and intended to go on alone. At this point, all of these other non-player characters (NPCs) stated the reasons why they intended to come along despite the danger, because they were willing to risk themselves for the sake of the protagonist. This is a significant reinforcement of the contextual world-of-concern as a space of legitimate consequence. It is also a reflection of the choices that had been made in the game up until that point as part of forming relationships with characters sharing the contextual world-of-concern. The affective dimension of this responsibility (almost a reflection of the psychic investment in the individual NPCs) comes in the game’s finale: all of the NPCs are isolated, and the protagonist is alone in a maze. For each section of the maze that the protagonist completes, there is a video-sequence where the antagonist tells one of the NPCs that s/he is of no interest or threat to him, and should thus leave. All of the NPCs defy the antagonist in an attempt to aid you, and he kills them. There is nothing either the
protagonist or the player can do to avoid this outcome, and in my case I was very aware that these characters are dead because of me.

The paradox of feeling responsible for a situation over which I have no control illustrates the affective power of the experience: intellectually I know I cannot alter the outcome of events and so cannot be responsible for them, but from an affective perspective my response is not an absence of responsibility, but helplessness. Within the logic of the contextual world-of-concern, the NPCs would not be in danger if I had not chosen to cross the threshold. My felt sense of responsibility impinges on my awareness of the options available in playing the game, and makes me aware of a desperation to find alternative outcomes, when none exist. Feeling a sense of responsibility is relevant to the experiences of texts because it is an affective register arguably unique to the context of new media storytelling, with a particular relevance to videogames.

In comparison to responsibility, identification is where you come to occupy the space of someone else – in this case, a character within the diegesis of a fictional text, regardless of the media form it is expressed through. There are several methods through which identification can be fostered in different media forms. Although this is a significant generalisation, western novelised fiction provides a protagonist which readers are intended to ‘identify’ with. The reader becomes intimately familiar with both the protagonist and the web of associations constructed around the protagonist within the diegesis of the text. The protagonist (or protagonists) might be framed from one of several different points-of-view, ranging from a tightly-associated first-person through to a third-person eye-of-god, but they are the entry-point into the diegesis of the text: how they are characterised will filter the world that the story encompasses, with consequences for the contextual world-of-concern. In a film text, the arrangement is slightly different: the camera is the entry-point into the diegetic world of the text; the protagonist(s) are at the core of what the camera portrays – and with a few exceptions, this means that film texts are tied to a third-person viewpoint. In comparison, Alternate Reality Games are experienced in a framework of phenomenological reality (see Page 184), and so there is none of the mediation or processes of immersion inherent to experiencing a text through a character to be identified with: everything happens to the player themselves.

For videogame texts, the approaches taken to fostering identification vary depending on the visual style through which the diegetic world is framed. For example, *System Shock 2* is framed from a first-person visual perspective, and the effort of the game to foster identification lies in attempting to provide contextual information and agency that would be
appropriate to the player, assuming s/he was in the same situation as the point of view held within the diegetic environment of the game. In the case of first-person games, there is a great overlap between fostering identification and eliminating structural incoherence. As an example, the player has the capacity to peer around corners in a physical environment as a way of subtly gaining information, and so this ability has been carried across into the diegetic world-of-concern for the protagonist of the game, through whom the player experiences the environment through. The reason behind eliminating structural incoherence and fostering immersion within the contextual world-of-concern is that when successful, the player approaches the diegetic environment with questions of “How do I deal with this situation?” as opposed to “How do I need to adapt my plans to what the game will allow me to do?”

In comparison, Planescape: Torment is presented from a third-person isometric perspective. What this means is that the view of the diegetic environment that the player is presented with is outside of the diegetic ‘body’ of the protagonist s/he is controlling. As such, the player cannot literally occupy the space of the protagonist in the same way as when engaging with first-person perspective, and the perspective specifically sets the protagonist as an entity distinct from him/herself. Planescape: Torment still uses identification as an intrinsic part of how the contextual world-of-concern is reinforced. However, rather than focusing on reducing the perceptual barriers to the diegetic space of the game, Torment instead emphasises that the choices made by the player matter within the diegesis of the game, even if s/he is separate from it. Whereas System Shock 2 fosters identification through a process of removing structural incoherence, Torment does so through emphasising the player’s responsibility within the world-of-concern, and thus allows him/her to construct the personality of whom they come to identify with. The game learns who the player is choosing to be within the context of the contextual world-of-concern through the sequential decisions they make. Over time, the game uses this growing supply of information to provide fewer and fewer options to the player that would be inappropriate for the character they are building, using the cybertextuality of the text to polish away structural incoherence over time. The process is one of mutual ongoing refinement: the game learns about who the player is being at the same time as the player decides who his/her character is. As a result, the player’s experience of the text is increasingly one of making decisions within the contextual world-of-concern and then being defined by these decisions. The visual perspective which frames Torment and games like it entirely eliminates the possibility of perceptual identification – as would be possible through the first-person view. Instead, they come to know or decide who they are within the contextual world-of-concern through sequential choice. How does s/he
relate to strangers, or to friends? How far is s/he willing to go in response to someone asking for inconvenient help? How does the character see him/herself? Planescape: Torment is an example which posits a continuing raft of questions to the player, and asks how s/he wants to define him/herself in response. Over time, the player ceases policing the dividing line of the virtual between him/herself and the contextual world-of-concern, and for all intents and purposes does come to occupy the diegetic environment of the game: s/he does not perceptually inhabit the space in the ways suggested by games framed through a first person perspective; instead there is a character which is representative of the player while visibly distinctive from him/her, and the player conceptually inhabits the diegetic environment by defining him/herself in a process of choice and consequence within the contextual world-of-concern.

**Temporality and the World-of-Concern**

The contextual worlds-of-concern formed within different types of mediated fiction present a variation in perceived temporality that can have affective consequences for the experience of the text. Jesper Juul has argued that it is impossible to have interactivity and narration at the same time (Juul 2001). Juul presents a framework where classical narrative structures consist of three parts: *story-time*, which refers to the time of events told, in chronological order; *discourse-time*, denoting the time of the telling of events, in the order in which they are told; and *reading time*, which is the time when the text is encountered (Juul 2001). According to Juul, this dynamic is ruptured or collapsed by the presence of agency on behalf of the person engaging in the world-of-concern:

It is clear that the events represented cannot be *past or prior*, since we as players can influence them…. In this way, the game constructs the story time as *synchronous* with narrative time and reading/viewing time: the story time is *now*. Now, not just in the sense that the viewer witnesses events now, but in the sense that the events are *happening now*, and that what comes next is not yet determined. In an “interactive story” game where the user watches video clips and occasionally makes choices, story time, narrative time, and reading/viewing time will move apart, but when the user can act, they must necessarily implode: it is impossible to influence something that has already happened. This means that *you cannot have interactivity and narration at the same time*. (Juul 2001)

Agency within the contextual world-of-concern produces an experience that is unfolding *now*, with ongoing consequences for both identification and responsibility (Juul 2004 132,
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134; Juul 2005 143). It means that there is a timeline of choices. The person engaging in the world-of-concern is aware of choices with consequences stretching behind him/her into the past, the choices confronting him/her now, and an awareness of potential choices s/he might need to make in the future. For identification, it means that the entity being hailed within the world-of-concern is you, at that moment. Some game experiences specifically seek to utilise both of these temporal elements of the world-of-concern, because doing so suggests that you personally occupy the contextual world-of-concern literally, rather than another entity which you identify with.

Temporality is also relevant to the experience of the contextual world-of-concern in terms of intimacy. I argue that ‘intimacy’ has a temporal component, in that it is an affective result of the time taken to engage with and invest in the world-of-concern – and the relationships available within it. To have an intimate relationship with another character within the contextual world-of-concern is to be profoundly familiar with him/her, and/or familiar with the web of social relations to which that character is a part. However, the affective richness possible within the context of such a world-of-concern is entirely belied by describing the relationship as one of ‘familiarity.’ In the example listed earlier of choice and consequence in Planescape: Torment, it is possible – through the investment of a significant amount of time, effort and resources within the world-of-concern – to counsel one of the characters through a crisis of faith. It is entirely possible to spend more than an hour of time within the contextual world-of-concern having a single conversation with a single non-player character you are travelling with. It is a very relevant counterpoint to the choice/responsibility/identification dynamic that you get to know them as they get to know you.

Even outside of a context where engagement in the experience of the text involves agency, time is key to perceptions of intimacy. Within the first season of the anime series The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya (Ishihara 2006), there are two different variants of the series depending on what order the episodes of the show are encountered in. The series was written and designed to be seen out of chronological order, in a similar way to Memento (Nolan 2001), except in this case the episodes were shuffled in an apparently random pattern

31 Barry Atkins argues that there is a distinction between the audience of people watching a game be played and the player in that they occupy asynchronous temporal frameworks: the audience watches the screen now, whereas the player is invested in the screen as a nexus of possible decisions and possible outcomes, meaning that they are oriented towards the future (Atkins 2006 134-135, 137).
32 One side effect of this process is that games are much less likely than films to use ellipses to stop the player being exposed to ‘dead time’ where little is happening or the action is repetitive – even if it might be preferable (King and Krzywinska 2002a 144; Juul 2004 138).
rather than reversed. For example, the first episode broadcast is chronologically episode eleven, and there is a two-part episode played in the correct order, but with an unrelated chronologically-earlier episode interposed between the two. However, the DVD release of the series has the episodes presented in chronological order, which has created a situation where different audiences have entirely different experiences of the contextual world-of-concern created through engaging with the series. An element of confusion was an intended part of the experience for the show as it was originally broadcast; however, each episode deliberately did not reference many events that had been ‘missed’ by skipping down the timeline, preferring instead to drop cryptic hints.

The audience response to the shift has been that newcomers watching the show are more likely to engage with the world-of-concern if watching the original broadcast order of episodes, rather than the chronological order. However, individuals who have already watched the show in broadcast order find that the chronological order is an engaging way to re-approach the contextual world-of-concern, and the inter-personal relationships within it. Arguably, one of the core differences between the two experiences of the show is that the change in structure which occurs when the show is played in chronological order breaks up the construction of intimate engagement within the contextual world-of-concern. The chronological order reduces the ratio of time the audience spends with the characters in comparison to the events they take part in, meaning that action is prioritised over the interactions which show the audience who the characters are.

*The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya* as it was originally broadcast is a puzzle, focused around the interpersonal relationships of the five protagonists. Presenting the development of their relationships out of chronological order means that the audience is as focused on engaging with what they learn about these people – in order to fit the information together over time – as much or more than focusing on what they do.33 A common complaint about the chronological order of the series is that the ‘plot’ is finished in episode six, and then there are eight episodes of ‘filler.’ The reason for this is that the sixth episode which audiences encounter in chronological order is the conclusion and emotional climax of the series, and intended to be seen last in the broadcast order.34 The comparison that the two

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33 Arguably, designing *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya* to be approached as a puzzle associates it with the concept of ‘forensic fandom’ put forward by Jason Mittell as a way of understanding the voraciously dedicated audience engagement with *Lost* (Abrams 2004) as a para-text (Mittell 2009a; Mittell 2009b).

34 It can be argued that the broadcast order and chronological order of the series present two different texts-in-themselves, with different relationships between the components (i.e., episodes) which comprise the text. Conceptualised in this way, it is unsurprising at the extent to which the different episode orders lead to qualitatively distinct texts-as-experienced.
versions of the show present is a significant distinction between ‘chronological plot’ versus ‘the time required in getting to know the characters,’ and thus what can be referred to as the *pacing of intimacy*. The broadcast order means that by the time key events occur, the audience has been engaging with the characters for approximately seven hours of screen time. In comparison, the chronological order places all of the major events of the series within the first two or three hours. However, I do not wish to suggest a dynamic purely based on time, as the context is also important. The ‘filler’ episodes which are distributed throughout the series in the broadcast order focus in more detail on the interactions between the characters – precisely because the episode is not focused on the key revelations or events within the ‘plot.’ The chronological version of events presents a ‘plot’ that is extremely condensed, explored through characters that the audience have not spent much time engaging with, and which the audience have not been able to ‘get to know’ in the same way as presented in the broadcast order. *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya* presents a situation where engaging with the characters within a temporal and relational framework designed to encourage intimacy produces an affectively powerful experience; outside of that context, the audience ploughs through the ‘plot’ very quickly and have no particular reason to care, because they lack an invested connection to the interpersonal relationships of the contextual world-of-concern.

It should also be noted, however, that online forums reveal a subset of the show’s audience who do prefer the broadcast version of the series, because the disjointed narrative in the broadcast version reduces their willingness to engage or invest in the experience. In their case, the experimental arrangement of the episodes was unsuccessful in fostering engagement with the world-of-concern presented by the series: the deliberately disjointed nature of the episodes reduced their enjoyment, and thus their willingness to invest in the experience.

**Enworldedness and ‘Diegetic Depth/Permeability’**

Another point of differentiation for the experience of mediated texts is their *diegetic depth*, which is the distance the person engaging with the experience perceives between the world-of-concern established with the text and his/her regular existence. This is a distinction that will be explored in greater depth in later chapters, but is grounded in the concept that different mediated textual worlds-of-concern will be perceived as closer or further away to the existence of the person engaging with the experience – and that this awareness will be

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35 ‘Distance’ in this case does include multiple dimensions, including both proximity and realism. The core of the concept is the question of “How near is my experience of the world to the experience presented by the text?”
folded back into his/her experience of the text. Correspondingly, there is also a function of *diegetic permeability*, which is the perceived likelihood that events within the diegesis of the text will somehow engage with the day-to-day existence of the person engaging with the text. Diegetic depth and permeability are not necessarily connected, although diegetic permeability is likely to be higher in texts which have a low diegetic distance between the world-of-concern presented in the text and the everyday existence of the person engaging with it. There is a continuum at work, where cinema is – for the most part – quite modular and contained. Relationships with characters established within the filmic world-of-concern are entirely possible and affectively potent, but there is little possibility (or perception of a possibility) that events within the film might engage with the day-to-day existence of members of the audience. As such, film tends towards a low degree of diegetic permeability. However, there are exceptions to this which correspond to moments of affective potency. From anecdotal evidence, a significant number of my friends either put towels over their television sets, unplugged them, or turned them to face the wall – particularly where the televisions were in bedrooms – after watching *Ringu* (Nakata 1998). The argument can be made that *Ringu* possesses both a low level of diegetic depth, and a high level of diegetic permeability: it is precisely because the film set itself within everyday spaces and everyday lives, without significant special effects to emphasise the mediated nature of the exchange, that the perceived world-of-concern established with the film’s diegesis became uncomfortably close to the lives of my friends.

Alternatively, audience response to the violence presented in *Pan’s Labyrinth* (del Toro 2006) and *The Proposition* (Hillcoat and Cave 2005) was much more visceral and immediate than the reaction to what is apparently bloodier and more graphic violence in other films, arguably because the films had a low degree of diegetic depth despite the diegetic world-of-concern appearing impermeable. My reasoning in this case is that although the two films presented worlds-of-concern which were perceived as unlikely to spill out into the everyday worlds-of-concern of the audience, the lack of emphatic special-effects brought the violence closer to the non-fictional experiences of the audience. This uncinematic violence then left the audience in a context where they were not simply watching the events on screen, they were feeling what those injuries would be like for them, in line with Sobchack’s argument regarding prereflective bodily responsiveness (Sobchack 2004 63). As a result, the audiences of both films were caught up in a phenomenological doubling not just of vision,

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36 As will be covered in later sections, other forms of mediated storytelling on the continua are much *less* modular and contained, and use this fact to shape the experience of their texts in different ways.
but of sensation, which had them uncomfortable with imagining their own pain (Sobchack 2004 78-79). In comparison, 300 (Snyder 2007) was nominally a much bloodier experience, but comparatively less visceral because the special effects provided some distance to the world-of-concern by making it a visual spectacle – presenting 300 as a text possessed of both high diegetic depth and low diegetic permeability, distant enough from the everyday worlds-of-concern of the audience to be considered less threatening.

Videogames, like cinematic texts, are unlikely to be perceived as being in danger of spilling the worlds-of-concern established with the texts into the daily worlds-of-concern belonging to those people who engage with them. However, due to the presence of player agency in negotiating the text, the conceptual distance between the player and the game’s world-of-concern is arguably reduced in comparison to that of film – because the player is involved there. At the distant end of the spectrum lie Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) which specifically set out to enfold themselves into the daily routines of those who engage with them – presenting that there is no distance at all between the fictional and everyday worlds-of-concern (see Page 185).

TEXTUAL ENGAGEMENT AND THE HYBRID

Within the contextual world-of-concern, the relationships established with other entities can be as wide and as varied as those traditionally considered to be ‘unmediated’ or even ‘nonfictional.’ These relationships are, however, contexts which can be a site of affective investment despite the fact that the ‘people, objects, situations, and hierarchies of ideas or values’ involved do not exist outside the world-of-concern. Kavka refers to affect as “…the stuff of the psyche that does not lie” (2008 32). The relationships we establish within the contextual world-of-concern are real, as are the affects and emotions associated with them, because they matter to us as individuals. They inform and impinge upon our affective state to the same extent as any other investment we possess, and we carry those affects out with us into our world, where they can move with the ‘productive amorphousness’ identified by Kavka, “…creeping or flooding situations with a ‘mood’ or tone that comes from or ‘properly’ belongs elsewhere” ( 31). The situation is also not without precedent, as arguably the context of media celebrity provides many richly detailed examples of individuals forming deeply affecting emotional relationships with people they have never met, will never meet, and arguably will never know, barring their ‘public face’ (Kavka 2008 38).
The relationship between the ‘virtual-I’ and the ‘actual-I’ within the world-of-concern established with a text is that they are coterminous. We are most scared when the distinction between ‘virtual-I’ and ‘actual-I’ becomes the most porous, as we have seen in the earlier discussions of *Ringu* and horror games, and as will be explored in the context of engaging with other new media forms like Alternate Reality Games. To put it simply, there is nothing in the ‘virtual-I’ within the contextual world-of-concern that is not ‘you’; however, the question is whether you are the same ‘you’ as when you are outside the contextual world-of-concern. Bruno Latour argues that individuals change through engaging with tools and other elements which can mediate their actions, using the opposing slogans “Guns kill people,” and the NRA slogan “Guns don’t kill people; people kill people” as core points of discussion.

Latour frames the first position as essentially materialist because the gun propagates events without the social qualities of the gunman being relevant, whereas the NRA position is instead sociological because the gun is presented as a “neutral carrier of human will” disconnected from its material components (Latour 1999 176-177). The consequence of these positions, as Latour presents them, are that the pro-gun lobby holds that the involvement of the gun adds nothing to the exchange, whereas the gun is the only relevant component for the anti-gun stance, who frame it as a transformative corrupting force. Latour admits that he is lampooning the positions held by both camps, and then moves on to argue that there is a middle ground:

Which of them, then, the gun or the citizen, is the actor in this situation? *Someone else* (a citizen-gun, a gun-citizen). … You are a different person with a gun in your hand…. If I define you by what you have (the gun), and by the series of associations that you enter into when you use what you have (when you fire the gun), then you are modified by the gun – more or less so, depending on the weight of the other associations that you carry. This translation is wholly symmetrical. You are different with a gun in your hand; the gun is different with you holding it. You are another subject because you hold the gun; the gun is another object because it has entered into a relationship with you…. The twin mistakes of the materialists and the sociologists is to start with essences, those of subjects and those of objects…. If we study the gun and the citizen as propositions, however, we realize that neither subject nor object (nor their goals) is fixed. When the propositions are articulated, they join into a new proposition. They become “someone, something” new. (Latour 1999 179-180)

Latour frames both participants in the interaction as ‘actants’ so as to place them on an equal footing of responsibility. Burnett expands on this discussion and argues that both actants undergo a mutual modification of *agency*, because of the changes to their capacity to act for
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the duration of the interaction. Burnett specifically seeks to extend the metaphor to human engagement with computerised contexts:

The result is a mediated space occupied by two partners where both partners are dependent upon each other. Their interdependence creates a hybrid that has a number of the properties of the technology and user. The hybridization is evidence for the ways in which the user and technology have found a common ground that often exceeds the design and engineering objectives built into the hardware and software. Of course, the changes in the technology are not material. Hybrid processes are about new levels of materiality that are the product of a series of interactions and transformations that may not have been built into the original technology, nor have anything to do with its initial purpose. (Burnett 2004 172)

There are two reasons why the concept of hybridity as presented by Latour and Burnett is critically relevant. Firstly, hybridity helps to provide a framework for defusing an argument summarised by Poole: since every action possible within a videogame only exists because the programmers allowed for it, the players have no true agency; they are essentially rats running a prearranged maze, and are in denial that their choices matter (Poole 2000 106-107). The problem with this argument is that it is simultaneously a legitimate case to make, and entirely irrelevant. It is legitimate in that the options which game players are provided with are available purely because a programmer or team of programmers decided to write them into the code. However, this is equivalent to arguing that chess players have no agency because the rules by which the game is played are prearranged. Games are experienced as if the agency provided to the players were real, because of their engagement and investment with the contextual world-of-concern:

A computer game, for example, never brings the answers to the puzzles that it poses directly into the foreground for the player, but instead provokes an exploration of a hybridized new environment that also encourages the player to feel as if he or she were in control. In fact, learning the rules of this new environment is part of the challenge as well as one of the sources of the pleasure that games provide. Playing as an activity is about constructing hybrid experiences and overcoming hurdles that can only be circumvented through practice and interaction. Computer games encourage moving into and out of these worlds, which is why they are not only difficult, but require a lengthy apprenticeship in order to be mastered. (Burnett 2004 173-174)

The perception of agency found when engaging in videogame texts within a contextual world-of-concern is not delusional; it is intentional and a significant part of what sets

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37 This conflict is discussed in more detail on Pages 152-155 in Chapter 5.
videogame experiences apart from other media forms. For Latour, there is no ‘as if’ regarding agency during hybrid engagement: it is a fundamental part of how the elements of the hybrid change during the exchange. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman pick up on this point when they argue that game players accept the “limitations prescribed by the rules of the game,” because “the play of the game is an end in itself” (Salen and Zimmerman 2004 98). Calleja goes so far as to include this form of ‘structural limitation’ to agency as a fundamental part of what ludic engagement means in practice:

Even the most free-form activity in a virtual environment is constrained by the code which enables it. Flying around with reckless abandon over Liberty City in Grand Theft Auto IV (Rockstar North, 2008) has a degree of freedom in terms of its kinesthetic qualities, but it is important to note that these qualities are often shaped by the coded rules of the game. Actions in a game environment are therefore influenced by the ordered realm of ludus; the intention of the player is always limited by the conventions of a designed system. (Calleja 2011 148)

I argue that the second reason hybridity is critically relevant to the distinction between the ‘actual-I’ and the ‘virtual-I’ is that a hybrid functions through affect as much as it does through agency: just as a person-holding-a-gun (humangun) has a different capacity to act than either a person or a gun, being a humangun is going to feel differently than being either a person or a gun. The affective dimension of being part of a hybrid interaction holds true for engaging with fictional texts, regardless of what form of textual mediation is involved: the affective complexion of running someone over within Grand Theft Auto 4 (Rockstar North and Rockstar Toronto 2008) is considerably different than actually being involved in a car-versus-pedestrian traffic accident. One of the problems presented by critical consideration and analysis of human engagement with media texts is that the framework of the studies themselves sometimes lead to strange equivalences being made within the results. It is a simple fact that no academic study could ever be countenanced (let alone receive ethics-approval!) which would seek to test the different affective complexions of virtually running someone over as opposed to actually doing so. Jeffrey Goldstein argues that there is a systematic issue in studying the effects of violence in the media where there is little distinction drawn between representational violence and actual violence in the study participants – in part because the studies themselves eliminate the possibility of actual violence in order to function (Goldstein 2005 348). To draw a direct equivalence between shooting someone in a multiplayer game and shooting him/her in reality, or of children

38 In this case, referring to players of all kinds of game, rather than specifically of videogames.
displaying violence towards soft-toys as opposed to what they might do to each other, is to miss the fact that the people engaging with textual fictions are aware that they are doing so.

There is nothing in mediated fiction of any form capable of reaching out and immersing a human being within it against his/her will; immersion requires the active investment and involvement of the people engaging in the experience, and in the contextual world-of-concern.

Likewise, there is nothing in media forms which provide agency to the person engaging with them that can force anyone to make a particular decision. As an example, the Grand Theft Auto series of videogames is frequently discussed in terms of ‘forcing’ the players to engage in violent behaviour, when the game merely provides options. However, Grand Theft Auto 3 (Rockstar North 2001) allowed the player to elect to drive taxis, ambulances or fire-trucks, or to simply explore the diegesis of the city in which the game was set. As to why so many of the people who played the game chose to engage in violent behaviour, we return to the affective nature of the hybrid interaction: players can engage in actions within the contextual world-of-concern safe in the knowledge that there will be no consequences outside of that world-of-concern, and the feeling of those actions is distinctly different within the world-of-concern than outside of it. People can develop abiding affection for fictional characters who display personality traits or behaviour that they could not stand in the real world, just as they can personally display personality traits or behaviour within a contextual world-of-concern that they themselves would not accept in a real social context – and which might make various forces of authority flustered and stern. However, the fundamental difference in feeling between the ‘actual-I’ and the ‘virtual-I’ is not to say that the experiences found within contextual worlds-of-concern are less powerful or moving – simply that there is never a point at which they are not experienced as fictional.

Regardless of whether virtual experience consists of saving the world from Nazis, being moved by a piece of cinema, or listening to music in the rain, those experiences do not cease to be important when you leave their relevant context. They are real because they matter to us, for good or ill, and that cannot happen without willing, active involvement and investment by the individuals who are engaging in the experience. The affect and emotions prompted by the relationships established within a contextual world-of-concern are real, even if the subjects of the relationship themselves are not. The fact that these relationships matter and yet remain outside of a delusional context is important to underline, considering the (persistent) argument that media forms are eroding the grip we hold on reality.
The relationship between the ‘actual-I’ and the ‘virtual-I’ is that they are phenomenologically coterminous, and both are capable of real affective experiences: the difference is that the ‘actual-I’ is your self, whereas the ‘virtual-I’ is a hybrid of your self and the text you are engaging with. Because the ‘virtual-I’ is a hybrid entity formed from engaging with fictional texts and the attendant contextual world-of-concern, it thus provides access to both a modified capacity to act within the diegesis of the text, and a modified affective complexion for the experience. The modified affective complexion of the ‘virtual-I’ highlights the contextual awareness of difference between the two states, meaning that there is no ‘blurring of reality’ when people engage in virtual, fictional experiences. However, to some extent ‘virtual experience’ is ‘real experience’ because the experience – both in terms of personal investment and affective complexion – does not cease to exist when you stop engaging with the contextual world-of-concern. There is definite affective permeability between the ‘actual-I’ and the ‘virtual-I,’ meaning that the experience does not spontaneously cease to be personally relevant and affectively potent when you put the text down – regardless of what the textual form happens to be. The experience of the ‘virtual-I’ remains relevant and personally powerful, and the attendant affects can be carried out of the contextual world-of-concern to where we exist as the ‘actual-I’, and thus to where they can inform the rest of our day-to-day lives. We can go to work or school with our affective complexion coloured by our experiences of engaging with fiction. Sometimes those affective elements can be inappropriate and ‘properly belong elsewhere’ to the extent that we can even have difficulty identifying their source: I recall feeling a particular way without being able to track down a reason for the feeling, and gone in search of films or music that would justify how I already felt.

Additionally, the ‘actual-I’ and ‘virtual-I’ can connect to multiple, concurrent worlds-of-concern. An example of this process can be seen in Pac-Man (Namco 1980), where the ghosts which infest the maze threaten you on multiple levels at the same time. Within the virtual world-of-concern – the experiential environment in which situated immersion functions – those pixellated ghosts represent instant death. Within the social world-of-concern which is occupied by the individual who is playing the game, however, they are coming for your money: a defeat within the context of the game is felt directly in the player’s pocket, depriving him/her of a basic resource outside of the game’s contextual world-of-concern. The affective complexions of these two separate worlds-of-concern are distinct, and yet experienced at the same time – because, after all, one person is sharing both.
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The hybrid formed by engaging with the contextual worlds-of-concern found in textual experiences allows you to be the subjective ‘I’ and yet aware that you are operating within a fictional, virtual world – along with explaining how the experiences found as part of such engagement are so distinctive. Additionally, the distinctive nature of the affect that comes as part of hybrid engagement with fiction explains why it is extremely unlikely that anyone will mistake reality for fiction, or vice versa: an inherent part of the experience is an awareness of the fictional nature of the contextual world-of-concern.

The rest of the project will use the process of analytical juxtaposition involved in affective phenomenology to consider precisely how different forms of new media storytelling present distinctive affective experiences due to their differences in textual structure and forms of engagement. The next four chapters are arranged in rough order of structural complexity, following the logic that there will be elements shared across the specific forms of new media storytelling under discussion, and that these will be easier to highlight if we start from a simple and direct baseline. For example, chapter 3 discusses hypertext fiction before moving to the subject of webcomics in chapter 4. Webcomics use hypertext protocols to arrange their comic pages, and thus present an experience that hybridises the textual experience of traditional printed comics and hypertext fiction. The chapter development from hypertext into webcomics allows for both a flow in argument, and for the webcomic chapter to focus in on the experiential differences they present from the hypertextual baseline. Chapter 5 moves on to consider how and why the structural ergodicity (See Pages 22-24) discussed in the context of hypertext fiction changes when dealing with the significantly more complicated ergodic frameworks provided by videogames. Alternate Reality Games in chapter 6 present more complex ergodic frameworks still, since there are no boundaries to what can be considered the ARG text beyond the potentially-coterminous worlds-of-concern established with the community of players.

The next chapter will explore the worlds-of-concern formed with hypertext fiction, and uses affective phenomenology to argue that they are distinguished from other forms of mediated storytelling by the experiential tone of discovery. In comparison to the personal nature of the experience that distinguishes videogame texts, hypertext fictions place the reader in the position of an explorer or detective: the reader of hypertext has agency in negotiating the text, but no responsibility because they are unable to effect details within the world-of-concern, instead uncovering pathways or connections in the network established by the author.
The concept of ‘hypertext fiction’ seems almost banal within the modern context of the internet and broader digital culture. It is no longer unusual as a storytelling medium. However, how does it work, from an experiential perspective? What sets it apart from other forms of mediated storytelling, and in what ways is it distinctive? Hypertext fiction and videogames both qualify as subsets of ergodic literature: they are texts negotiated by processes of choice, discernment and decision-making (See Pages 22-24). What separates the two forms are their contexts of engagement. Hypertext fictions can provide the person negotiating their structures with a level of agency as part of the experience of the text; however, hypertexts are distinguished from videogames by the fact that their structures cannot adapt and respond to this agency, which shapes the affective qualities of the experiences they mediate.

This chapter introduces the terms topographical hypertext fiction and juxtapositional hypertext fiction to distinguish two different registers of textual experience within hypertext fiction as a form. Topographical hypertext fictions are commonly discussed in critical literature as ‘nonlinear,’ whereas the process of negotiating them is a process where the reader explores the text’s structure, and compares the outcomes lying behind different decisions posed by the story. Topographical hypertext fictions have the most elements in common with videogames in terms of how their structures shape the experience of the text, and an argument can be made that richly detailed topographical hypertexts become videogames (see Pages 145-147). Common examples of topographical hypertext would be the Choose-Your-Own-Adventure books, where the person reading the text is directed to choose between two different options at the end of key pages, and where those pages will themselves present new choices in an unfolding tree of decisions.

In comparison, juxtapositional hypertexts are hypertext fictions which function through juxtaposed elements, where the order in which the reader approaches the textual fragments informs his/her experience of the text. These are a form of ergodic literature which is structurally and experientially distinct from both videogame texts and topographic hypertexts.

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39 Consider the connotative difference in how agency is framed between readers and players, although some hypertexts do arguably blur the line (see Page 91).
40 A recent example of this form of hypertext has been used for marketing within a New Zealand context: Hell Pizza’s Deliver Me to Hell advertising campaign is available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9p1yBlV7Ges (LittleSisterFilms 2010), and can be used to illustrate the general function of topographical hypertexts.
hypertext fictions: rather than an affective quality associated with exploration, hypertexts of juxtaposition feel like puzzles – the reader is engaging with seemingly disparate material and seeking to discover the links between the pieces, and the characters within them. Juxtapositional hypertext is most commonly encountered as the experience of browsing the internet, in that there is a vast collection of websites without order or hierarchy, and it is the decision of the person browsing which provides a structure to how the different sites are experientially encountered.

Hypertext fiction has been argued to represent the quintessential example of the ‘writerly’ textuality discussed by Barthes. However, from an experiential perspective, the ‘writerly-ness’ of a given hypertext fiction is dependent on how its structure influences the textual engagement of the person negotiating them. For example, juxtapositional hypertexts are comparatively more ‘writerly’ than topographical hypertexts, because the processes of discernment involved in the latter diminish the interpretability of the text by providing options which the reader chooses between, rather than leaving the options open and fluid. What also needs to be taken into account is the extent to which an individual piece of hypertext fiction can move between juxtapositional and topographical structures, and use these different forms of engagement to shape the affective qualities of the experience. The general character of engaging with hypertext fiction is of exploring material provided by someone else, either as a conceptual landscape in the case of topographical hypertext fictions, or as puzzle pieces for juxtapositional hypertexts.

An important consideration for both topographical and juxtapositional hypertext fictions is their context of remediation: hypertext is almost always understood as something else, invariably remediating another form of textual expression (Bolter 2001 21; Pope 2006). A particular example of hypertext can be understood as a novel, or a game, or a web-page, or a form of film. These conceptual frameworks will shape the experience of the person engaging with the text. As such, some hypertext fictions depend on a form of mimicry for their affective impact: if the reader accepts them as a web-page or someone’s online-journal, then the events the hypertext fiction portrays come diegetically closer to the day-to-day experience of the reader themselves. Manipulating the apparent diegetic depth and permeability (see Pages 65-66) of the text’s world-of-concern by using remediation to mimic other media forms influences the affective quality of the experience. Additionally, hypertext loosens the chronology of remediation by working in both directions: it is not just that remediation keeps older forms of media alive by moving them onto a new platform, or that the new medium can become the content of older forms and refresh them; rather, new forms
of media can demonstrate the flexibility of older, more traditional ones, since older media are capable of displaying the forms of textual engagement presented by newer media within their own context and textual structure.

In order to provide a comparison, this chapter will consider the core structural features of hypertext, *lexia* and *links*, and how they can be found in printed forms of media; doing so also provides an opportunity to highlight the differences between traditional prose and hypertext fiction. Having established how hypertext relates to print, we will consider the way in which *lexia* and *links* can be arranged in different structures, creating different processes of engagement that produce *topographical* and *juxtapositional* hypertext as two distinct experiential forms. A key theme explored throughout this chapter is that the ‘processes of engagement’ required to negotiate a text do not only describe engaging with a pragmatic textual architecture, but also how differences in the mental processes involved can shape the experience of a text. It is at this level of experience that *topographical* and *juxtapositional* hypertext fictions are distinguished, since they otherwise share the same hypertextual structure. This presents an opportunity to assess Barthes’ theories of ‘writerly-ness,’ and argue that they do not describe the context provided by hypertext fiction. The chapter also explores how the context of engagement shapes the experience of hypertext, precisely because hypertext exists in a state of endlessly remediating other forms of media due to its fundamental structure, providing opportunities for texts to shape the experiences they mediate through mimicry and shaping audience expectations. We then explore a specific case study in terms of how these features shape the experience of the text, and discuss the ways in which it applies or problematises the concepts covered through the rest of the chapter.

**THE ANATOMY OF HYPERTEXT**

A significant amount of the critical work which focuses on hypertext defines it in part as rendering *choice* to the reader, or otherwise presenting multiple paths through a text:

> By hypertext, I mean non-sequential writing – text that branches and allows choices to the reader, best read at an interactive screen. As popularly conceived, this is a series of text chunks connected by links which offer the reader different pathways. (Nelson 1992 0/2)

However, this is not always the case, and focuses too much attention on what the medium is capable of rather than what it is. Hypertext is certainly capable of presenting multiple paths through the texts which it mediates, but the form itself can be broken down to simpler terms:
CHAPTER 3: HYPERTEXT FICTION – REMEDIATION AND DISCOVERY

Whether realised on microfilm or in computer memory, a hypertext consists of topics and their connections, where the topics may be paragraphs, sentences, individual words, or indeed digitized graphics and segments of video. (Bolter 2001 35)

Hypertext is a system for connecting different blocks of information – what Barthes refers to as *lexia* (Barthes 1974 13-14) – which can be from a variety of different media forms, and which are connected via links. These links are what the person engaging with the text uses to move between lexia. Hypertext fiction utilises the hypertext framework to present a distinctive experience of storytelling by framing the text so that the movement between lexia, or choosing among multiple lexia, will have a concrete effect on the affective tenor of the experience. The text-in-itself for hypertext fiction can be conceptualised as a web or network of links connecting the relevant lexia; the text-as-experienced comprises the specific lexia which the person negotiating the text chooses to encounter, in the order in which s/he encounters them (see Page 18). Hypertext links can be used to increase the number of options available to the reader as s/he negotiates his/her way between different lexia, to reduce the number of choices below the level which is available within traditional novels, or anything in between (Lemke 2002 301). As a result, the level of structural ergodicity presented by a given example of hypertext fiction is significant to the experience of the text.

An often repeated element of critical discourse surrounding the experience of negotiating hypertext is that it presents a particularly good example of Barthes’ ‘writerly’ engagement:

Clearly, digital environments complicate questions of authorship.... They also seem to offer a privileged space to explore theorist Roland Barthes’s valorization of “writerly” textuality, wherein the reader does not encounter a work whose meaning is fixed, but rather (re)writes the text through the process of reading. The “writerly” is opposed to the “readerly” qualities of classical fiction, wherein the art object is static and the hierarchy of creator and consumer is rigidly maintained. (Lunenfeld 2000 46)

As has been discussed in Chapter 1 (see Pages 30-31), Barthes’ concept of ‘writerly’ textuality is best understood from two perspectives: the structural and the experiential. From a structural perspective, the elements Barthes associates with writerly texts are the fact that they are ‘plural,’ that there is never a ‘whole’ writerly text (Barthes 1974 5-6), and that “The more plural the text, the less it is written before I read it” (Barthes 1974 10). The extent to which these statements apply to hypertext as a form is dependent on the structure and processes of engagement of an individual hypertext. What can be said is that hypertext often
demonstrates comparatively more structural writerly-ness than the traditional novel, because juxtapositional and topographical hypertexts are more plural, in Barthes’ sense, than traditional novels: there are a greater number of pathways through the text-in-itself which may or may not be encountered due to the decisions of the person engaging with the text. Likewise, it can be argued that the traditional novel is itself more writerly than cinema, in that the structure of the text has more points-of-entry for the reader, as discussed in Chapter 1. However, examples where hypertext is used to limit tmesis (see House of Leaves, Pages 24-26) are arguably less writerly than traditional novels, from a structural perspective, because there are fewer points-of-entry for the reader since each page must be navigated in order.

From an experiential perspective, the status of hypertext as being a ‘writerly’ form of text is contextual: Barthes argues that a ‘writerly’ text is felt as “ourselves writing” (Barthes 1974 5), and this is an element I argue is dependent on the form of textual engagement presented by individual hypertext fictions. The writerly text is one which the reader engages with creatively as they read, and reading experientially constructs the text – as opposed to having his/her textual engagement limited to accepting or rejecting the text (Barthes 1974 4). The extent to which topographical hypertext is experienced as ‘writerly’ in comparison to the experience of prose novels depends on point of view. On the one hand, the person negotiating the network of a topographical hypertext can be argued to be ‘experientially constructing’ the text as they read because they are making decisions as to which lexia from the text-in-itself to incorporate into the text-as-experienced, and in what order. Following this logic, topographical hypertexts are experienced as more ‘writerly’ than prose novels. On the other hand, movement between lexia is limited by the decisions of the author as to what links between them are available, and the experience of ‘discernment’ is not necessarily creative: the experience of the reader is likely focused on meta-considerations, such as which option is most likely to involve the kind of story the reader wishes to engage with at that point (i.e., select genre), or to avoid the death of the protagonist (continue the narrative). The experience of topographical hypertext can be understood as ‘second-guessing’ the author, while exploring a territory of possibilities created by someone else. As a result, I argue that the experience of topographical hypertext is in some ways less writerly than that of prose novels.

In comparison, juxtapositional hypertexts require a creative, interpretive engagement from readers as part of negotiating the text: all of the lexia in the text-in-itself are equally accessible, so it is the decisions of the reader which produce the combinations and permutations of lexia which will become his/her text-as-experienced. In this way, the text-as-
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experienced of juxtapositional hypertext is experientially constructed during the process of negotiating the text, producing a puzzle-solving experience as the reader searches for how seemingly disparate lexia might connect. As such, juxtapositional hypertexts are arguably more writerly experiences than either prose novels or topographical hypertexts.

Where the level and tenor of writerly-ness displayed by videogames differs from that of hypertext fiction is the ability of the text-as-experienced to remember the decisions of the person negotiating the text. In videogames, this allows for the process by which a player can become conceptually rather than perceptually embodied within the world-of-concern, as has been discussed with Planescape: Torment in chapter 2 (see Pages 59-60). In comparison, the text-as-experienced for hypertext fictions represents footsteps in the sand, tracking the lexia which the reader selected, in the order in which they were selected. This is less fine-grained than what videogames can present, and the person negotiating hypertext fictions has less capacity to be responsible within the world-of-concern, since s/he fundamentally cannot change the content of a hypertext. The distinctive affective quality comes from changing the relationships amongst aspects of that content, and the order in which it is encountered. The most ‘writerly’ form of media encountered in the context of this study from both a structural and experiential perspective is the Alternate Reality Game, which presents a context where creative player actions and created material can be folded back into the text by the people responsible for managing it, and where the outcome of the text is literally unknown at the outset. ARGs will be discussed in Chapter 6 (see Page 180).

TOPOGRAPHY AND EXPLORATION

Printed novelisations which are experientially similar to hypertext fictions are rare, or certainly specialised, but they do exist. They are a fruitful context to discuss because of their comparative simplicity, and the familiarity of the printed book as a form. They can thus help to establish a point of comparison to printed prose, before considering digital hypertexts. House of Leaves (Danielewski 2000), as discussed in Chapter 1 (See Pages 24-26), is one example that has highly ergodic sections that qualify as juxtapositional hypertexts. The ‘Choose-Your-Own-Adventure’ (CYOA) children’s books are probably the most well-known variant of printed hypertexts, and provide a good context for understanding the structure of topographical hypertext fictions. The ‘Fighting Fantasy’ young-adult books, such as the infamous Deathtrap Dungeon (Livingstone 2002), go further by adding factors which the
reader cannot control, such as dicerolls to generate outcomes, and can thus be argued to qualify as printed *cybertexts* (see Page 26).\(^{41}\)

*Moon Quest* (Montgomery 2008) is a CYOA book where the protagonist, and thus the character who the reader is placed in the position of, is a teenager of unspecified gender native to a lunar colony. The book is presented in a second-person perspective, where ‘you’ are informed of events, and the central ergodic element consists of instructions for whether to proceed to the next printed page, or a choice between moving to two\(^{42}\) different pages. Essentially, this is how all topographical hypertext fictions function: the person negotiating the experience reads through the text until s/he reaches a set of instructions, and must choose which page to turn to. The only core difference between digital hypertext fictions and the CYOA books is that in a digital context the pages are not visible in relation to each other.

The framework of negotiating the text through choice raises the level of the agency the reader has in negotiating the narrative. However, what is interesting is that the decisions the reader makes do not influence details within the diegesis of the story – which would make the reader responsible for how those details change – but instead are involved in shaping the genre of the story that s/he wishes to engage with.

For example, the beginning of *Moon Quest* presents readers with the choice of spending their vacation exploring the far side of the moon, or being a guide to delegates from Earth who are about to begin delicate negotiations – and where the protagonist discovers plans for sabotage and insurrection. The decision involves the genre of experience the reader wishes to engage in – space exploration or political adventure – without nuance or a third alternative. As the narrative proceeds, the decisions do become more finely-grained: the reader is presented with the question of whether to disobey instructions by trying to find his/her supervisor, so as to warn the adult of something strange, or instead to explore the glowing patch on the wall in the alien ruins. However, the reader has less ability to take *responsibility* for the outcome of these decisions, because the options are decidedly limited, and there is a great deal of guesswork behind discovering an approach which does not lead to death or a premature end to the story. In the above example, there is no option to do precisely as one is told, and no information about what the likely outcome of events will be: seeking adult assistance instead leads to fighting an alien robot. These examples tie back into

\(^{41}\) However, it is entirely possible for the reader to ignore the cybertextual component of the ‘Fighting Fantasy’ books, and engage with them in the same way as the ‘Choose-Your-Own-Adventure’ books, in which case the experience instead becomes defined by its ergodicity.

\(^{42}\) In some CYOA books, there are occasions where three or more choices are presented; however, these are the exception.
the discussions of writerly-ness in topographical hypertext: the process of decision-making reflects attempts to ‘second-guess’ the author, or to decide the kind of story which a given decision seems to be leading towards. The decisions the reader is presented with make sense within the context of a young-adult audience: all of them involve being somehow pro-active, and frequently the choices are between two different ways to fail to follow instructions. However, the way the decisions are framed can limit the level of felt responsibility for the way events unfold, although without diminishing the potential for immersion within the experience.

This lack of felt responsibility needs to be contextualised, since it is not a universal response to the experience reading CYOA texts. For myself, I have always had difficulty becoming immersed within Choose-Your-Own-Adventure books. The second-person framework included statements about how ‘I’ felt which were not accurate, and the options which I was presented with did not reflect the problem-solving ‘I’ would apply in the same situation. I did not feel that I was experientially constructing the experience as I negotiated it, because the options I was able to select between were too blunt. To an extent, the way in which agency was presented by the series qualified as structural incoherence (see Pages 55-56) for me, and reduced my immersion with and engagement in the world-of-concern. However, in discussion with other people who have read CYOA books since childhood, it is possible that I lack sufficient familiarity with the interface – in this case, the entire book. As a result, I am not reaching a state of diegetic immersion, where I would be unaware of the creation and relation of elements within the text. The protagonist of CYOA books is intended to be a blank-slate, on to which readers can project themselves. For those readers who enjoy the CYOA books, identification (see Page 60) is but one part of the felt experience, and one which is overshadowed by the feeling of exploration.

**Exploration and (Ir)Responsibility**

Any branching hypertext experience is a context which can be explored, because any choice made by the person negotiating the text highlights the options which are not taken; therefore, one of the questions raised is “What would have happened if I’d gone the other way?” Awareness of the counterfactual is part of the experience of topographical hypertexts: this is a point of crossover with the experience of some videogame texts (see Page 28), but is in some ways stronger in hypertext because they are less presentist than videogames, and do not rely so heavily on situated immersion. In comparison to the experience of videogames,
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topographical hypertext fiction presents less of a consequence to decisions made in negotiating the text, because reversing a decision is as simple as returning to a prior page where the decision was made. In a CYOA book like *Moon Quest*, this can be accomplished by keeping some form of book-mark (or a finger) at specific locations; in a hypertext mediated by a web-browser, the ‘back’ button or a saved digital bookmark achieves the same end. In some ways, this is equivalent to a ‘save point’ within a videogame; however, videogames attempt to keep the player engaged in problem-solving within the world-of-concern, rather than seeking meta-textual alternatives. As a result, making decisions within topographical hypertext fictions like the CYOA books feels like exploring, because the reader is provided with a structure of fictional events and outcomes to decisions which lies outside his/her subjectivity: the activity of the person negotiating the text lies in learning where the different paths lead, rather than constructing an identity within the textual diegesis by his/her decisions, as happens in *Planescape: Torment* (Black Isle Studios 1999) (See Pages 59-60)

Additionally, the felt experience of topographical exploration is not necessarily confined to printed hypertexts: *The Outbreak* (SilkTricky Productions 2008)\(^{43}\) is a network of digital video-clips accessed online through a web-browser about surviving a zombie uprising. The person engaging with the text is provided with the option of an easily accessible tree-format diagram of the decisions s/he has made, and whether a branch lead to failure and death, as well as having the ability to hit the ‘back’ button to reverse a decision made in negotiating the text.

When the person engaging with a branching hypertext feels safe in his/her ability to consider alternate options, the felt experience is associated with exploration, and in engaging with the question ‘what would happen if..?’ Circumstances where s/he is unable to return to his/her decisions in order to explore a different choice – mostly in digital hypertexts with an ability to declare a ‘point of no return’ – mean that the experience changes and becomes more tense, because each decision is ‘higher stakes.’ In such a context, decisions made in navigating the text are framed as ‘choosing this option to the exclusion of all others.’ As a result, the individuals negotiating the text confronted the question of ‘what if I did it wrong?’ before committing themselves. Videogames such as *Planescape: Torment* (Black Isle Studios 1999) present a similar context, since they provide no way to undo a decision made in negotiating the text beyond disengaging with the world-of-concern long enough to restore an earlier save-game.

\(^{43}\) Available at [http://www.survivetheoutbreak.com/](http://www.survivetheoutbreak.com/).
Interestingly, hypertext fictions which offer the reader the opportunity to start the text again feel very different to ones where it is possible to undo decisions: texts where readers start again feel as though there is a greater consequence to decisions; beginning again does not ‘undo’ the decisions made earlier, so much as give the reader an opportunity to experience an ‘alternate universe’ where different decisions are made in response to the same dilemmas. If a reader returns to the beginning of a topographical hypertext after a failure or death, such as that presented by *The Outbreak*, then the felt experience is almost analogous to fiction where a character has to deal with a temporal loop, such as the ones presented in *Run Lola Run* (Tykwer 1998) and *Groundhog Day* (Ramis 1993). The reader must hold in mind how events played out in previous incarnations, including what outcomes flowed from particular decisions, even as s/he engages with the text itself. The more complicated (in terms of number of choices and outcomes available in a decision) or extended (in terms of the ‘length’ of the texts’ topography) a particular topographical hypertext is, the more difficult it will be for the person negotiating the text to hold the details in mind. His/her experience of the text will be shaped by attempts to recall the details, and concern that s/he might be forgetting something fatal or otherwise problematic. *The Outbreak* provides an option for engaging with the text in this manner: together with the diagram of the decisions made by the reader/viewer, there is also the option of beginning afresh, without access to the visual guide.

Essentially, topographical hypertext fictions – just like all hypertext – are texts-as-experienced comprising the lexia selected by the person negotiating the text, in the order in
which they are encountered. What is important about the experience of topographical hypertext is that this text-as-experienced can include occasions where the reader backtracks: if s/he returns to a particular decision in order to explore the outcome of a different decision, this exploration is folded into the text-as-experienced. If the hypertext contains ‘points of no return,’ then this shapes the text-as-experienced by eliminating this possibility of folding alternate forks into the experience. Likewise, the text-as-experienced of hypertext which presents ‘temporal loops’ is a series of cycles through available lexia in potentially different arrangement, during which the reader is holding in mind their attempts to ‘map’ the interlinked lexia of the text-in-itself.

**Juxtaposition and Interpretation**

Juxtapositional hypertexts are texts of creative engagement and interpretation, as the reader is not making decisions within the diegesis of the story – as would happen within videogames – but is instead creating a text-as-experienced through approaching a sea of equally accessible lexia as a puzzle, seeking to find connections between them. As with topographical hypertext, the text-as-experienced presented by juxtapositional hypertext is experientially constructed from the lexia selected by the person negotiating the text, in the order in which they are selected. The difference is that the reader is much less limited in his/her selection of lexia in juxtapositional hypertext, and so the order in which the lexia are encountered is particularly important for the affective quality of the experience.

In the ergodic sections of *House of Leaves* (Danielewski 2000), the pages fracture into multiple textual shards (See Figure #1, Page 25). Some are brief side-notes, others continue across multiple pages and intermingle with the core narrative. However, one of the questions raised by *House of Leaves* when the text does this is, which parts of the fractured page are the ‘core’ narrative, when everything is presented as equal? The lack of obvious hierarchy means that the multiple textual lexia presented on one page are only differentiated by the decisions of the person reading the text in selecting which to approach first. For example, there is a pair of pages across which one of the characters reveals that he has never been to Texas to a woman convinced that the two of them first met there. On these same pages are lexia about dealing with shock that has one character screaming like a wounded animal, a separate section from a mountaineering manual about the medical definition of shock and blood loss, together with academic discussions of architecture and a seemingly endless list of referenced names and literature titles (Danielewski 2000 132-133). As a result, different
readers will take away different perceived relationships between the sections based on what order they are read in, and the meanings the readers understood from their association. *House of Leaves* has multiple coterminal narratives interleaved through this manner, mingled with seemingly extraneous details which will nonetheless colour the experience based on what other lexia the reader associates them within the text-as-experienced. This is no doubt an unconventional use of print, and most juxtopositional hypertexts exist within a digital context.

253 (Ryman 1996) is a hypertext novel detailing the passengers on a train in Britain. There are seven carriages with thirty-six passengers on each, and one driver, for a total of two-hundred and fifty-three people. There is no order or hierarchy to the lexia, so the reader can begin to read at any passenger on any carriage, learning about who s/he is and what his/her concerns are on this morning commute. Many of the passengers relate to each other somehow, such as by working for the same company at different levels, or by being concerned about events which another passenger turns out to have been involved in. The order in which the reader chooses to navigate the combinations and permutations of 253’s lexia will shape the impression of each person involved, based on how each character is juxtoposed to the next – particularly for characters who turn out to have a connection. For example, it makes a difference whether the reader encounters the woman who is concerned about being accused of helping a robbery at her workplace before encountering the account of the young robber, or the woman writing an article in response to the robbery (Ryman 1996 Passengers 2, 48, and 63). However, the reader has no ability to influence the information within the web of the world-of-concern; his/her choices alter the experience of that information, rather than the information itself.

In some ways, the experience of 253 is one of investigation, of figuring out how these people relate to one another in an unfolding urban drama. *Crash* (Haggis 2004) is an example of a similar framework within a cinematic context, in that it is based in the unexpected links and interactions between a broad stable of characters. However, the order of interactions in *Crash* is set – the lexia of coincidental interactions frozen in place – and cannot be altered through the choices the viewer makes as s/he negotiates the text. If the order of interactions within *Crash* could be altered, the affective experience would be detectably different, as would the relationships established with the characters. For example, one of the police officers presented in the film is initially established as a racist who abuses

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his power by groping an African-American woman pulled over at a traffic stop; later, he becomes a hero, risking himself to rescue the same woman from a car accident. If events could be reversed, in terms of the order in which the audience encounters them, it would mean that an officer initially encountered as a hero was discovered to be a racist prone to sexual harassment. As a result, the relationship established with the audience, and the affective tone, would be very different. Correspondingly, the junior police officer within Crash comes across as being the villain of the piece, because his darkest action occurs close to the end of the film. If the film were rearranged so that his least sympathetic deed happened first, and the audience were then presented with his actions earlier in the film, the experience might feel more redemptive – and thus more analogous to the framework for the racist officer presented by the canonical text. The difference between the way the audience perceives the two characters is dependent on the order in which they encounter their respective decisions within the diegesis of the film, and thus their juxtaposition, rather than the content itself. 253 could be made experientially analogous to Crash simply by establishing a set order of lexia in the text-in-itself, and thus ensuring that the reader encountered them in a prearranged sequence of juxtaposition.

REMEDIATION AND EXPERIENCE

The flexibility of hypertext, which is essentially a method of linking different lexia regardless of the media form, means that any given hypertext fiction is likely to remediate another form of mediated storytelling to some extent. Even examples which are close to what could be considered ‘classical’ hypertext fictions like 253 (Ryman 1996) share enough features with a simple and efficient webpage that it can be argued to be remediating a typical website. As has already been discussed, the basic experience of day-to-day websurfing qualifies as engaging with a juxtapositional hypertext, since there is no hierarchy or order to the lexia presented, and the affective quality of how the lexia relate is entirely down to the order in which the reader encounters them. The success and failure of hypertext fiction is often tied to how it adapts to the context in which the audience will be engaging with it, and this includes how appropriate the remediated elements are to the experience. What is meant by the ‘appropriateness’ of a given hypertext in this case is how well the mediational context of a specific hypertext fits the experience, and to an extent, the expectations of the person engaging with it. James Pope argues that the interface of hypertext fiction itself is a significant factor in how hypertext fiction is received, and that this element of hypertextual
engagement is not well covered in wider critical literature (Pope 2006 448-449). In particular, he notes that the function of remediation as part of engaging with the interface is a core issue, because of the expectations of the audience:

...they (study participants) also noted that they do initially come to reading a story at a screen with ‘book’ in mind, and that this preconception influences their reading. Interestingly, they are prepared to spend much longer at the screen when information-seeking on the World Wide Web. It seems that it is not the perceived or actual inconvenience of the screen that interrupts reading, but something to do with the conception of ‘book’ that the reader brings to the experience. (Pope 2006 449)

Pope argues that a central tension within the creation and reception of hypertext fiction exists between ‘familiarity’ and ‘newness,’ and that what counts as ‘familiar’ or ‘new’ to different readers will depend on the forms of media they interpret hypertext fiction as:

My participant readers all came to the hypertext fiction with a preconception of ‘book’, largely because of the label ‘hypertext fiction’, but soon shifted into whichever alternative paradigm they were most familiar with…. For example, on an introductory reading of Joyce’s *afternoon, a story*, a former website developer commented that book-like features were not so much the issue for him as were website conventions for interaction. Thus, he was satisfied, or not, depending on whether the hypertext operated as a website would, with menus, clear links, route maps and so on. Another participant, keen on console and PC games, was looking for game-like elements, such as plentiful hotspots and clear ‘rewards’ for exploring the reading environment, once it became obvious that *afternoon* did not ‘work’ like any book he had seen before. (Pope 2006 451)

As such, the ‘appropriateness’ of the context which a hypertext remediates is weighted by a number of factors. Firstly, how well does the hypertext’s fictions context and interface fit with the expectations it suggests based on readers’ prior experiences of fiction? Secondly, does the texts’ context of remediation *add* anything to the experience?

*House of Leaves* (Danielewski 2000), for example, remediates newspaper collage within its ergodic sections: a disparate mish-mash of prose and fonts of different sizes, with areas of white space (see Figure #1, Page 25). The reader is drawn to them in part to figure out some form of *pattern*: the collage is chaotic, but must have been arranged in this way for a purpose. The reader becomes framed as an investigator, piecing together the strange circumstances presented by the book. Then, over time, the gradual conclusion that there is no purpose, and that the chaos itself is the goal, becomes part of the experience as well. Considering that the story itself is either about an environment which changes and
manipulates reality within its confines, or about the series of authors who are producing the
book ‘House of Leaves’ losing their minds, or potentially both, the sudden collage effects and
manipulation of the traditional prose novel format is entirely appropriate to the experience.
The reader’s path through House of Leaves mirrors those of the characters within, and
writing, the novel – s/he becomes an investigator, and his/her investigations lead him/her to
creepy places.

Moon Quest (Montgomery 2008) remediates traditionally printed children’s books. It
is a small book with simple text interspersed with illustrations – the only divergence from a
traditional prose book is that the reader does not read all of the pages in sequence, and must
decide at points which page to turn to. This remediation is also appropriate to the experience:
it uses a form of media engagement which the intended audience will be familiar with as a
starting point, and does not introduce more than one alteration to how that audience is
expected to engage with the text. As a result of this, the structural differences do not
overshadow the experience of exploring the topographical network of decisions and
outcomes.

It is possible for a printed book to remediate the world-of-concern established when
engaging with videogame texts. In videogames, the rules which underlie the game world are
automated: when the player is damaged within the world-of-concern, the game itself keeps
track of the changes.45 Deathtrap Dungeon (Livingstone 2002) and the other Fighting
Fantasy books present a very similar context, except that the text presumes honesty on behalf
of the person engaging with it, since it is the reader who is responsible for keeping track of
his/her numbers and statistics. This introduces an unusual variant of tmesis, which goes
together with the increased level of instruction found in negotiating a CYOA book: the author
has no ability to ensure that the person engaging with the book does not cheat, or otherwise
refuse to apply negative consequences to him/herself within the contextual world-of-concern.
When a reader46 of Deathtrap Dungeon fails to follow the rules as written, the experience
ceases to have any cybertextual element (see Page 26), and moves closer to a traditional
CYOA book. Interestingly, in comparison to videogame cybertexts, the reader of Fighting
Fantasy is not engaging with the text-as-generated, but with the text-in-itself: what the
external random element changes is the reader’s ability to negotiate the text without cheating,
not how the lexia within the text relate to each other.

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45 Gordon Calleja frames this as a key distinction that structurally separates digital videogames from other
members of the “game family” (Calleja 2011 13).
46 Although ‘player’ almost seems a more appropriate term...
The change to the experiential register that engaging with hypertext fiction in an online context presents is that the fundamental process of negotiating the text changes: there are no physical pages to turn, meaning that both constructing and negotiating the text has to function at the level of links between lexia. Even if the text directly remediates a printed book by presenting a primarily linear experience, the fact that each page ‘links’ to the next rather than being turned physically has an impact to the experience: the ‘next page’ button means that Page 10 of a text can only be accessed from Page 9, which can only be accessed from Page 8, and so on. A result of the change from the print to the online context is that even when remediating traditional printed prose and presenting the smallest change in context possible, hypertext represents a significant reduction of structural tmesis in comparison to traditional printed prose, with resulting experiential changes. More extensive structural deviations from traditional prose works are possible using the more complicated interconnections between lexia available in the digital context, with correspondingly significant alterations to the processes of engagement involved in negotiating the text, and thus deep affective changes.

*John Dies at the End* (Wong 2001) is a text which is often discussed online in the context of hypertext fiction because it is a notorious story which was released for free online as lexia of linear pages connected via hypertext links – and it thus fits a very minimalist definition of the textual form. However, the text is more accurately understood as a prose novel originally published online as a web-serial. It did not shape its experience for the context of hypertext, and remediates a traditional novel: the text consists of pages of text connected in a traditional linear fashion by hypertext links, and which updated gradually over time. It has since been published as a traditional prose novel without changing the underlying text. Instead of shaping the textual experience of *John Dies at the End* into a hypertext fiction, the online context was used to create an experience analogous to engaging with webcomics, which will be discussed in Chapter 4. The serial was released in sections over a number of years – new releases often occurring annually at Halloween. This allowed readers to establish a relationship with an ongoing narrative, characters within the world-of-concern, and with the author himself – not to mention also with other people reading the text online. As a result, the text was experientially appropriate for the online context, and made use of a similar structure of cliff-hangers and updates to those of webcomics to shape the engagement of readers (see Page 123). However, negotiating the text does not require

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47 See Page 103.
discernment in selecting lexia, and so John Dies At The End is better understood as a traditional novel which uses hypertext as a context for publication, and which embraced the online paratext (see Page 24-25) to connect to the audience.

The Outbreak (SilkTricky Productions 2008) uses streaming video to remediate the experience of a zombie-movie, while A Heavy’s 2Fort Adventure (Luke 2010) strings together a comedic hypertext machinema through connecting lexia of different YouTube clips. The main difference between the two texts is one of budget and polish; structurally and experientially they are very similar. Both present the viewer with a video clip which provides context to ensuing events, and the video clips exist in a matrix of success and failure. The Outbreak remediates cinema, as each segment begins as a full-screen video clip, focusing the attention of the person engaging with the text on a cinematic world-of-concern rather than the website. When the viewer is presented with a decision at the end of each clip, the viewer is still engaging with a full-screen presentation of the text, albeit one with stylised images associated with the different options. The transition between the end of one clip, making a decision, and then witnessing the outcome in another video clip all occur within the same window: the viewer remains engaged with a consistent cinematic space. There is a minimum of interface or other online elements which could distract from the experience of engaging with The Outbreak as a cinematic experience, and so the remediation is appropriate for the online context.

A Heavy’s 2Fort Adventure is similar in structure and experience to The Outbreak, although the context of mediation is less fluid because of budgetary constraints presented by its creator operating at a hobbyist level. The lore which the machinema builds on is associated with the comedic multiplayer game Team Fortress 2 (Valve 2007b), and the text is based around making a decision at the end of a series of different video clips. However, the context of remediation is an obstacle to the experience of A Heavy’s 2Fort Adventure, because of its presentation through YouTube. As a machinema project with one creator, using Youtube is contextually unavoidable, but is problematic in that it prevents the presentation of a consistent cinematic space: as the viewer makes a decision and selects a different video clip, that clip will be opened in a new YouTube browser window, and will not be full screen. This emphasises the mediated nature of the exchange, and it is unfortunate

48 Available at http://www.survivetheoutbreak.com/
49 Available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c3zJcMlqWZA
50 A piece of machinema produced by Valve Software themselves to promote the game, and which clearly informs the style of A Heavy’s 2Fort Adventure, can be seen at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-QM1eTAwOYc
that the platform which has made the most economic sense as a means of distribution attracts attention away from the experience of the text itself – although not to a fatally disruptive extent.

In comparison, a more recent project from Silktricky Productions called *Bank Run* (SilkTricky Productions 2010) is a topographical hypertext which remediates videogames rather than cinema. Where *The Outbreak* is a network of branching decisions, *Bank Run* is far more linear: there is one successful path through the experience, and decisions either lead to the same place via brief diversions through different scenery, or to death. The complicating factor in this case is to introduce ludic elements which are similar to ‘Quick-Time Events,’ (QTEs) which will be discussed as part of the videogame chapter (see Page 176). The player is required to engage with QTEs by pressing buttons on his/her keyboard at specific moments. Failing to do so either fast or accurately enough leads to death, failure, and an end to the experience. Although *Bank Run* qualifies as a topographical hypertext due to its framework of lexia videoclips connected via links, the felt-experience of *Bank Run* is not one of exploration – although it does retain the question of whether to make stupid decisions to see what happens. Instead, it is far closer to playing a videogame where hair-trigger timing is the difference between success and failure. However, failure returns the viewer/player to the scenario or decision s/he just failed, so the stakes are not high. The core problem with QTEs is that they diminish situated immersion (see Page 52); the question becomes the extent to which situated immersion is key to the experience of *Bank Run* as a text. Situated immersion is fundamental to the experience of videogame texts, but hypertext fictions – even those presented through connected video clips – are less dependent on the person negotiating the text operating within the diegetic space of the game. As such, the QTEs within *Bank Run* are problematic to the experience of the text, but not necessarily disruptive.

Some examples of hypertext fiction are able to use remediation to such a successful extent that they conceal their natures as fiction. This allows them to shape the experience of those who engage with them by reducing the perception that they exist in a separate diegetic reality from the person engaging with the text.

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51 Available at: [http://www.bankrungame.com/](http://www.bankrungame.com/)

52 Timing is an important component of distinguishing the experience of videogames from that of hypertext, considering their structural similarities: the decisions in hypertext fictions are never time-sensitive, whereas those presented by videogame texts often are. The felt-experiences of both forms of text are shaped accordingly.
CHAPTER 3: HYPERTEXT FICTION – REMEDIATION AND DISCOVERY

DIEGETIC DEPTH, PERMEABILITY, AND REMEDIATION

Several affectively powerful hypertext fictions which have gained some notoriety online share the fact that they are fiction masquerading as reality, and that they move between topographical and juxtapositional hypertext structures of engagement in different sections of the text, in order to manipulate the affective qualities of the experience. All of them use the remediation of normal websites to lower their diegetic depth while raising diegetic permeability, bringing themselves closer to the daily experience of the reader. The goal is to suggest that events within the story could conceivably come to interact with the reader’s own life (see Pages 65-66). By blending in with material which would be appropriate for our individualised casual browsing, these texts lack signposts to the fact that they are fictional experiences. As a result, readers relate to them just as if they were other material encountered online\(^53\) – and apparently written in an autobiographical mode.

The internet is not a site of unquestioning, unvarnished truth, but having questions as to the veracity of a recounted tale is not the same as knowing from the outset that you are reading fiction; the possibility that these are actual events shapes the experience of the text. The way in which these hypertexts are written and presented echoes this possibility: unlike *The Outbreak* or *Bank Run*, they have a simple, potentially amateurish design aesthetic, presenting a low-key context for events. If anything, these hypertext fictions remediate ghost-stories, where events begin in a mundane and everyday context and gradually become surreal and threatening. Another point which these hypertexts share is that they use the commonality of autobiographical webpages on the internet to suggest that readers are encountering records of past events – records placed online by people just like those who are currently reading them.

*Ted’s Caving Page* (2001)\(^54\) is a website with an anonymous author\(^55\), although there are claims online that the story it presents was originally written by a Thomas Lera (Lera 1987).\(^56\) It is a simple website which has moved across a number of free hosting services over a period of years, and which consists of text with some links to photographs. The content is focused upon two experienced cavers who discover a small hole in the wall of a mountain cave. They decide to explore where it leads and document their experience, and

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\(^53\) This is similar to the textual framework presented by Alternate Reality Games (See Pages 183-184)
\(^55\) Beyond the eponymous “Ted.”
\(^56\) Relationship with the work of Thomas Lera discussed at: [http://boards.straightdope.com/sdmb/archive/index.php/t-490085.html](http://boards.straightdope.com/sdmb/archive/index.php/t-490085.html)
encounter increasingly strange, threatening events as time goes on. There are many points in common between the experience of engaging with *Ted’s Caving Page* and *The Abandoned Missile Base VR Tour* (Kelm 1995), which in contrast seems to be a non-fictional and autobiographical account of two people taking photographs to document their explorations of an abandoned nuclear missile base under farmland in the US. Both have very simple, amateurish site designs from a similar era of HTML aesthetic; both are a combination of text and photos intended to document explorations. *Ted’s Caving Page* entirely consists of linear topographical hypertext, meaning that structural tmesis is reduced to the extent that the reader is only able to get to the fifth page after reading pages one through four in order. The text still qualifies as hypertext, and topographical hypertext specifically, because the lexia are not presented as equally accessible – as would occur in juxtapositional hypertext. Moreover, the topographical arrangement of lexia in the text-in-itself is affective territory to be explored: the very linearity of the experience is affectively appropriate to the experience, as the reader is negotiating a series of threatening circumstances, and cannot get out – at least, not without abandoning the world-of-concern. The reader learns more about the efforts of the cavers to expand the tiny hole in their cave, then learns about just how remote the cave itself is, and the distance which needs to be travelled within the cave to even reach the hole; at the same time, there is information about the strange noises the cavers hear on the other side. The result is a felt experience of gradually increasing dread.

For the *Abandoned Missile Base VR Tour*, there are pictures and details of travelling further and further into a decrepit underground facility potentially filled with toxins and which might collapse if the explorers are not careful, together with rooms and passageways flooded with water which could conceivably go down for multiple storeys. The small page size emphasises details such as the total absence of spiders, rodents or insects, and the author’s musings on possible explanations. In both hypertexts, the readers travel further and further with the authors, following in their footsteps. This emphasises how far the authors have gone, and makes the reader anticipate when it will all begin to go wrong, which produces a felt-experience of dread. In particular, the detailed descriptions in *Ted’s Caving Page* of what was required for the author to climb into the tiny hole in the cave emphasise how isolated the party was, and how long it would take to even seek help if he became stuck; this was deeply claustrophobic from my perspective. Interestingly, *The Abandoned Missile Base VR Tour* produces dread in a different direction: the topographical hypertext becomes

57 Available at: [http://triggur.org/silo/](http://triggur.org/silo/)
less linear at key ‘hubs’ which open to multiple pathways, providing the reader with the option of travelling down different corridors within the base. Essentially, the topographical structure of the hypertext duplicates the structure of the base being explored. Giving the reader decisions about where to ‘travel’ emphasises the fact that these people are exploring a dangerous, unfamiliar environment, and raises the thought that you/they could simply become lost. The felt connection to navigation of a ‘physical’ environment is maintained by the fact that if the reader reaches a dead-end in his/her travels, s/he needs to pass through all of the intervening pages/rooms between the dead-end and the junction, rather than leaping directly there through a single link.

Both of the hypertexts share the same framework for relating to the reader: the texts-in-themselves are shaped to present the person negotiating them with the same text-as-experienced encountered by the protagonists of the texts. Readers travel along with the author as they themselves explore. Ted’s Caving Page presents a linear narrative topography in the text-in-itself, which is intended to provide a consistent text-as-experienced where readers experience increasingly claustrophobic dread. In comparison, the Abandoned Missile Base VR Tour is less of a narrative experience, and uses sections of juxtapositional hypertext in the hubs as a neutral way of presenting a more objective – albeit threatening – environment for the reader to explore. When the tunnels branch out into multiple openings underground, the reader is confronted with the choice of what direction to go in, in the same way as the authors were. The topography of the text, and the exploration of that topography, is itself affective in both cases; the distinction lies in how the differences in their topography are experienced.

Another difference between the two texts is how they conclude. The Abandoned Missile Base VR Tour lacks a conclusion as such; instead, the reader eventually finishes ‘exploring’ the underground facility, and runs out of new environments to discover. At that point, the experience just ends – and does so without the disaster which has been anticipated throughout. While anticlimactic in some ways, this does mirror the experience of the authors, who the reader is travelling along with in their explorations of the hypertext’s topography: when the authors run out of areas they are willing to explore, so do readers. The authors do not see the point in documenting their exit from the underground environment, and so it just ends; thus our experience as readers does too. In comparison, Ted’s Caving Page makes use of the reader’s facility with browsing the internet to achieve a particular affective tone – and succeeds despite the fact that the conclusion is logically inconsistent. The last text entry to the hyperfiction finishes with:
For my family and friends who are reading this I say, Be at peace. I will conquer this cave. Then I will return and update this web site immediately. I will include any photo's we take in the cave today, and if you stop by the house I will show you the video I will have. I expect to be home later tonight, or tomorrow at the latest.

See all of you soon, with a lot of answers! Love, Ted (2001 10)

There is a link to the next page, but depending on which incarnation of the site the reader is engaging with, this leads either to a “404 – Page Not Found” message, or loops back to the page which the reader has just finished. In both cases, the implication for readers familiar with browsing the web is that the next page does not exist – and that thus no one returned from that final fateful trip into the mysterious and threatening cave which had so obsessed them. The abrupt, inconclusive ending is the planned finish for the text-as-experienced that the reader has been negotiating towards. The inconsistency is that within the world-of-concern, if no one returned to update the website then why is there a link to the next page, when no such page exists? *The Blair Witch Project* (Myrick and Sánchez 1999) utilises a similar technique to suggest that the cinematic text the audience is engaging with is found-footage, and thus has a documentary quality that places it closer to the audience’s own day-to-day worlds-of-concern. Considering the situation logically, it makes more sense that the final page has glitched somehow, rather than that it never existed to begin with. However, this is not relevant to the experience of the text: the reader is invested in the world-of-concern established by *Ted’s Caving Page* by this point, and invested in the sense of dread the experience has been promoting. From an affective rather than intellectual standpoint, the end of *Ted’s Caving Page* is entirely consistent, and is a clever remediation of its context as an amateur website to achieve a particular tone for the experience.

It is interesting the extent to which *Ted’s Caving Page* and *The Abandoned Missile Base VR Tour* share similar structures of engagement and affective qualities despite the fact that one is fictional and one is not. It suggests that for the purposes of the people engaging with the text, whether or not the story was fictional was not relevant to the experience: the worlds-of-concern which readers invested themselves in were similar, and whether there was an underlying truth behind one or other did not diminish their affective potency. Going by structure alone, the only clue that *The Abandoned Missile Base VR Tour* has more underlying truth to it is the fact that it does not try to conclude; as a result, it comes across as more of a documentary of an event, whereas *Ted’s Caving Page* concludes through affective manipulation of the form of media which readers are engaging with.
CHAPTER 3: HYPERTEXT FICTION – REMEDIATION AND DISCOVERY

The Dionaea House: An Experiential Case Study

The Dionaea House (Heisserer 2004) is another fictional text which masquerades as reality, and which frames the reader as following along with the author through the format of a website that is a record of an unfolding event of exploration. In comparison to Ted’s Caving Page and The Abandoned Missile Base VR Tour, The Dionaea House is more structurally complex, moving between topographical and juxtapositional hypertexts as necessary to shape the affective qualities of the text-as-experienced of readers.

The Dionaea House presents itself as a record of emails and text messages between Eric Heisserer (the author) and a Mark Condry, a record intended as a resource to help family and friends deal with the sudden disappearance of Mark – who himself vanished in a search for answers about what happened to an old friend of theirs. The site becomes used as a resource for those who begin a search for Mark, and then for Eric when he also disappears. In doing so, the readers follow along with a text where everyone seeking the truth vanishes, and where the readers occupy the positions of people hunting the same dangerous information. Where Ted’s Caving Page and The Abandoned Missile Base VR Tour construct worlds-of-concern which could be part of the same diegetic world of the player, The Dionaea House specifically seeks to suggest that events within the world-of-concern might come into threatening contact with the world of the person negotiating the text.

The text begins in a very linear fashion, guiding readers through an archive of emails which describe the background of Mark Condry’s search: a school friend of himself and Eric Heisserer was recently involved in a murder/suicide at a restaurant, and Condry is fixated on finding the truth behind what drove their friend to violence. In a similar approach to Ted’s Caving Page and The Abandoned Missile Base VR Tour, the pace of the experience is initially measured, focusing the reader on small details which grow to be sinister as the text proceeds, and the felt-experience is one of dread: every new piece of information is unsettling, and yet raises more questions to be investigated – suggesting that the final truth is not going to be something either Condry or readers will be pleased to learn.

The text makes use of the audience’s likely familiarity with both technology and technological problems for affective impact: part of the text involves archived text-messages from Condry just before he went missing; a note references the fact that the messages were not received by Heisserer until hours after they were sent. Each text message is placed by

Available at: http://www.dionaea-house.com/
itself on an individual page, together with information about the date and time it was sent. This is analogous to the section in *House of Leaves* where the number of words to a page drops: the pace of the reader’s movement through the text is increased, even as particular emphasis is placed on what information is provided. The context of the messages is also relevant: Mark Condry is attempting to contact Heisserer with new, frightening information, but cannot get through; readers are placed in the same contextual position as Heisserer within the world-of-concern – getting messages one by one, far too late to be able to do any good. This context of new information about prior events makes the experience entirely foreboding, and leaves readers in the position of the audience of ‘slasher’ films yelling at one of the cast not to go upstairs, but unable to actually involve themselves.

The lack of agency on behalf of the reader is manipulated for affect, such as when Condry has encountered an apparently supernatural, threatening house hidden in suburbia and sends a message of:

IM GOING INSIDE (Heisserer 2004, Text 7)

The text presumes that the audience will be familiar with technical problems, and uses them to include details which are tangential to the core experience, yet which will make the dread more powerful if they are noticed. For example, the final message from Mark Condry to Heisserer before his disappearance is “THE DOOR IS OPEN,” which is the same statement their friend made before the murder/suicide that began Condry’s search. It is threatening enough in the original context: however, if the reader notices that the time-stamp is given as “5:77 PM,” then that fact underlines the threateningly supernatural element to events – and the possibility that message was not sent by Condry at all.

This early section uses linear topographical hypertext fiction to carry the reader along in its current, unable to turn the tale aside – just as *Ted’s Caving Page* did. After the linear section of emails and text messages, there is an ‘Updates’ page which contains links to multiple other sites which include information from the ongoing investigation into what happened to Condry. At this point, the text becomes juxtapositional: the reader is now able to move to whichever lexia they decide is most interesting, and the way in which the lexia are ordered by the decisions of the person negotiating them will shape the affective qualities of the text-as-experienced. Having been carried along helplessly as events unfolded, the player is now in the position of a detective or investigator, deciding which options to pursue for new information. These contexts of engagement are both exactly analogous to how the text frames Heisserer himself: in the linear sections he is unable to intervene and can only
encounter the time-delayed communications from Mark Condry with dread; afterwards, he himself is playing detective, and hunting down the juxtapositional links presented on the ‘Updates’ page. Just as with both Ted’s Caving Page and The Abandoned Missile Base VR Tour, the text-as-experienced of readers is framed to be as close to the experience of the protagonists themselves as possible.

The links on the ‘Updates’ page contain the most significant information Heisserer finds, including AIM chatlogs and online journals belonging to characters within the contextual world-of-concern – and all of which purport to be legitimate online journals which the people engaging with the text might have themselves. Characters such as Heisserer himself and Condry’s girlfriend Jenny appear in these journals, and communicate by responding to the original posts in the ‘Replies’ section. This is done to retain a consistent stylistic use of the online journal format, and to suggest that the hunt for new information is playing out where the people engaging with the text can see it unfold over time. However, as consistent and clever a remediation of online journals and social networking as this is, it does also introduce elements which are disruptive to the consistent affective tenor of the experience.

The Dionaea House’s use of the online journal format, particularly the LiveJournal service, introduced several sudden and almost unique variants of tmesis into the experience of the text: together with a sudden shift to presenting information in reverse chronological order, it demonstrated that along with the author having little ability to control how readers engaged with the text, the author also had little ability to control how readers responded to the text. Many online journal services arrange themselves so that the most recent information was displayed at the top of the screen, with the initial posts being placed at the bottom of the page. As a result, readers of The Dionaea House which had been engaging in a textual framework where you began reading at the top of the page and worked down had to invert this process without warning or explanation; those who were more familiar with online journals made the transition faster, but a significant section of the audience were bewildered, particularly considering that much of the impact of some sections depended on having read the rest of the journal first.59 However, a more significant problem was that using online journal services meant that readers were able to use the ‘Reply’ function to speak back to the text when they had completed reading what had been released so far. This would have been manageable, but The Dionaea House was released over an ongoing period of time, meaning that the entire text

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59 Emphasising the extent to which conceptual juxtaposition matters to the experience of a text even in a more traditional framework.
to-date for someone who began reading weeks after the frontrunners would have much more
content than it had for earlier readers – and new readers would thus encounter replies
regarding “What a great story this is!” and the like as part of his/her text-as-experienced.
This was particularly problematic given that characters within the world-of-concern were
advancing the story through dialogues in the ‘Reply’ section of journal posts as well, only to
have this utterly lost amid the flood of responses from other readers.60

The Dionaea House is a hypertext fiction which makes use of many different
elements of structure and contextual remediation to achieve a particular affective experience.
It could not have been produced outside of the digital environment posed online;
unfortunately, some of the very tools it utilised for this affect proved to undermine the
experience which was being sought after. Nonetheless, The Dionaea House remains an
infamous example of hypertext fiction regularly referenced in casual discussions of the
subject online, and often appearing in links transmitted across social networking sites. It was
produced as an experiment into how storytelling techniques could be adapted to an online
context; the fact that elements of its framework proved to pose unexpected difficulties is itself
valuable information from a text with a powerful and distinctive affective experience.

The Dionaea House is a more writerly example of hypertext fiction than Ted’s Caving
Page or The Abandoned Missile Base VR Tour, because of the creative engagement required
of readers negotiating the juxtapositional hypertext of the ‘Updates’ page. Readers are placed
in the same contextual position as Heisserer himself as he seeks to uncover the truth behind
what happened to Condry, and are thus engaging in a search for links across different
material, in order to see how they might relate. Some of the response to The Dionaea House
involved sufficient creative engagement for it to almost qualify as an Alternate Reality Game
– and a subset of the audience actively treated it as if it were one (see Pages 207-208). They
sought material not included in the ‘Updates’ page on the mistaken theory that the website
itself was merely a seed for a wider narrative waiting to be found.

EXPERIENTIAL NETWORKS

This chapter explored how hypertext functions through lexia and links, and
considered the way in which different arrangements of lexia produce different registers of

60 One of the reasons that the audience responses are interesting is that it is possible to ‘lock’ an online journal to
responses from unmoderated people, but the necessity of doing so was – presumably – simply unforeseen: by
the time it was obvious that responses would be problematic, the task of removing them and locking the journals
would have been onerous. The Dionaea House took approaches which introduced problems that were only
visible in hindsight; whatever descendants it inspires are likely to take note.
experience through creating texts with different processes of engagement. *Topographical* hypertext fiction is the term introduced to describe branching texts where the reader explores the text’s structure, and compares the outcomes lying behind different decisions posed by the story. In comparison, *juxtapositional* hypertext fictions function through juxtaposed elements, where the order in which the reader approaches the textual fragments informs his/her experience of the text. These are distinctions that function at the level of processes of mental engagement: the specific processes of moving between lexia using links are common to both types of hypertext fiction, so what distinguishes their experiences is not grounded in textual structure.

What this chapter has shown about the applicability and relevance of affective phenomenology to comparative studies of new media is the extent to which distinct forms of textual storytelling can be distinguished at the level of experience rather than inherent structure. Pope’s work shows that the experience of hypertext is indelibly marked by things that are entirely external to the text itself, or even the textual form of storytelling to which it belongs: the way that the person negotiating a given hypertext conceptualises it, and what they expect, has a significant impact on how they engage with the material, and the experience they take away from negotiating it (Pope 2006 451).

The experience of hypertext fictions is distinguished from other media forms by providing readers with agency and yet no responsibility within the contextual world-of-concern: they cannot alter the content of lexia in negotiating the text, but select which lexia in what order are folded into their text-as-experienced from the underlying network of the hypertextual text-in-itself. The experience common to both subcategories of hypertext fiction is that the reader is engaging with a network of lexia which comes from outside of their subjectivities, and which is thus unfamiliar to them. Topographical hypertext fictions are territories to be explored, and where backtracking through the network to revisit earlier decisions can be folded into the text-as-experienced generated by the reader as they negotiate the text. In comparison, juxtapositional hypertext fictions are less territories than they are puzzles: the entire text is stitched together from a sea of equally accessible lexia by the decisions of the person negotiating the text, and thus establishing how the contents of those lexia relate to each other. There can be *eureka* moments as connections suddenly reveal
themselves like pieces fitting into a puzzle, or dawning realisations that more elements connect than the reader had realised – suggesting the shape of an as-yet-unrealised whole.61

The experience of hypertext fictions is shaped by their contexts of remediation. As Pope has argued, hypertexts are always understood as something else by the people who engage with them. What media form the reader understands hypertext to be will provide a framework through which they engage with the text, that will shape their experience of it. Examples can be seen in the deliberate remediations presented by both Ted’s Caving Page and The Dionaea House as a way of presenting that the reader and the authors share the same world-of-concern, and thus that events within the world-of-concern could conceivably interact with the reader’s daily life.

Although hypertext fiction has been considered an excellent example of Barthes’ theories of textual writerly-ness, I argue that individual hypertext fictions offer differing degrees of writerly-ness as part of how readers engage with the texts. Topographical hypertext fictions offer a pre-established set of options for the reader to move between lexia, and this discernment is arguably less creative and interpretive than negotiating prose novels, which means they are thus a less writerly form of experience. Nonetheless, topographical hypertexts present an affectively distinct quality to the experiences they mediate: readers explore an unfamiliar territory established by someone else, and discover how the different elements relate to each other. The affective topography of these texts can also shape the experience of negotiating them by allowing authors to guide the pace of navigation, or have readers follow along ‘behind the eyes’ of protagonists as they themselves explore. Juxtapositional hypertexts, for comparison, require a creative, interpretive engagement from readers as part of negotiating the text. This produces a character of experience that frames the readers as solving a puzzle as they search for how seemingly disparate lexia might connect. As such, juxtapositional hypertexts are arguably more writerly experiences than either prose novels or topographical hypertexts.

As we shall see in Chapter 4, webcomic texts utilise hypertext frameworks with each comic page as an item within a lexical network. However, although hypertextual engagement is relevant to how they are experienced, webcomics are set apart by the processes of engagement required by the comic form itself. There are two different registers for textual

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61 The experience of what Christy Dena refers to as ‘Eureka Discourse’ (Dena 2008 53) and of personally engaging with puzzles is something juxtapositional hypertexts share with Alternate Reality Games; this is discussed in more detail on Page 192.
writerly-ness in the context of webcomic texts, and the more writerly context presents itself when readers engage with comics as new ones are released one page at a time. This framework of engagement prompts readers to creatively speculate with other fans about where the text and characters might go, as part of the webcomic paratext.
CHAPTER 4: ONLINE COMICS – INFERENCE AND INTIMACY

The online comic or ‘webcomic’ is a form of mediated storytelling which is a very recent development; the first examples appeared in the 1980s, but the surge in their numbers did not begin until the mid to late 1990s (Campbell 2006). At the most, webcomics have a thirty year history, shorter even than the history of the videogame as a form, and have arguably been established for less than fifteen. However, printed comics have existed for far longer. This chapter will engage with the experience of reading comics in general, together with how the online platform specific to webcomics affects that experience.

Comics as a wider form, independent of the medium they are expressed through, are texts which function through a hybridisation of visual and textual elements, where neither the visuals nor the text is capable of carrying the experience in isolation. The affective experience of webcomic texts is distinguished from other media forms because of the lack of predefined limits for the structural length of the text, and because they display what Peter Lunenfeld refers to as ‘unfinish’ (Lunenfeld 1999). The existence of webcomics as digital media provides fewer limitations to textual length: there is no pragmatic requirement for an ‘end point’ to the narrative, beyond what the author chooses to apply. There is no equivalent pressure to ensure that an ‘arc’ of the narrative can be told within a marketable timeframe, as happens with the televisual commercial hour, or what can be printed within a conventional book. There are examples where the author of a webcomic has been telling one ongoing narrative involving a consistent set of characters for more than a decade. The result of this freedom is that the audience of a comic spends more time engaging with the characters than is possible within other media forms; more importantly, because there is an absence of pressure which would focus the story on ‘rising action,’ ‘dramatic’ moments, or scenes important to the plot, the audience spends more time engaging with the characters in casual moments. This leads to a feeling of intimacy generated within the shared world-of-concern, in part because of the banality of the experience. The reader participates in this casual familiarity, and can share in the daily lives of fictional characters for potentially years of real-time. The relevance of ‘unfinish’ is that readers are participating in a developing story, but with the same lack of direct agency or responsibility presented by hypertext fictions, which has consequences for their experience of the text.

62 And from printed comics.
However, these factors do not produce a tenor of affective experience unique to webcomics: long running newspaper serials such as *Doonesbury* (Trudeau 1970) are also capable of presenting storytelling contexts where readers spend a significant duration engaging with the characters, and which arguably also involve ‘unfinish.’ Likewise, webcomic texts do not invariably focus on extended narratives, and can present one frame comics akin to *The Far Side* (Larson 1980-1995). While traditional newspaper comics and webcomics are not intrinsically limited in the styles of experience they can present, however, their contexts of production are shaped by different forces, such as the necessity of reaching as broad an audience as possible for newspapers when compared to the ability of webcomics to focus on niche audiences. A result of this is that newspapers and webcomics tend towards different textual structures, meaning that moving the textual platform for comics online produces experiential differences by changing the way readers engage with the text.

Within webcomics as a group, the structure of individual webcomics remains largely consistent. As a result of this, what sets apart the experience of different webcomic texts is the specific relationships established within the world-of-concern. This experience also includes how the paratextual elements and direct contact presented by online fora and social networks are incorporated into the ways both readers and authors engage with the text.

This chapter discusses the processes of negotiation presented by comics as a broader form and their critical history, defining comics as texts which function through a hybridisation of visual and textual elements where neither the visuals nor the text is capable of carrying the experience in isolation. I introduce the term *inference*, which describes the process of what the audience is doing in bridging sequences of images, or otherwise imagining moments outside what is captured within the frame, as a more critically stable alternative than Scott McCloud’s ‘closure.’ *Inference* is a key theme explored throughout the chapter, particularly since it is a process that demonstrates how differences in the mental processes involved can shape the experience of a text. I argue that the process of inference is fundamentally what separates the processes of engaging with comics from the process of engaging with animation, creating the different registers of experience found in ‘reading’ as versus ‘watching’ a text. The chapter then explores how the seemingly-small change in textual structure presented by moving comics into a digital context both distinguishes the experience of webcomics through its *intimacy*, and creates two different registers of

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63 Newspaper comics tend toward a structure where each comic is disconnected from the rest in the series because there is no expectation that the same reader will return every day, whereas webcomics tend towards a higher degree of internal connection. These are not exclusive categories, however, and examples from both newspapers and webcomics escape the trend. This pattern is discussed in more detail on Pages 133-134.
webcomic experience depending on whether a reader is engaging with the ‘archives’ of a
given text, or the newly released pages. A series of case-studies are then used to explore the
flexibility of the webcomic form, with each example presenting different approaches to both
its embrace of the digital platform, its own internal structure, and the ways in which their
experiences are shaped by other critical concepts explored in the chapter.

AN INTRODUCTION TO WEBCOMICS

Webcomics use the web-page format to present comic strips to readers, with hypertext
links to navigate between pages. Typically, each website is arranged so that the detail which
changes from page to page is the comic strip itself, while the rest of the site layout remains
consistent, although there are some exceptions. The author of the text almost invariably has
some form of journal or brief commentary associated with the comic, and it is extremely rare
to encounter a webcomic which lacks a forum in which fans of the work can discuss new
developments. A result of both of these elements is that direct dialogue between fans of a
webcomic text and the person(s) producing it is not just common – it is expected. This
dialogue and other paratextual elements (see Pages 124-125) can influence both how readers
engage with the text, and how the author conceptualises the text itself.

The majority of webcomics do not make use of animation or other multimedia
components, using the internet as a means of distribution for static comic strips which could
have been printed traditionally. Aesthetically, many comic creators do create their comics
using digital processing technologies such as Photoshop, but others scan pencil drawings.
There is no core visual aesthetic for webcomic texts, and the artwork available is extremely
varied.

Webcomic authors tend to release their work as it is produced, with individual
variation regarding whether they are able build up a ‘buffer’ of comic-strips ahead of time.
However, this ‘lead time’ is dramatically less significant than for traditional print comics.
One result is that webcomics can adapt quickly to change – but another is that if the author is
for some reason unable to complete his/her comic on time or runs out of ‘buffer,’ then the
comic begins to update irregularly or goes on hiatus.

There are two core interfaces provided by most webcomic texts, although there are
always exceptions. Four hypertext links, which are frequently designed to be images of
arrows or buttons, allow the reader to negotiate the webcomic database: one takes the reader
to the first page/comic in the text, another takes the reader to the most recent page which has
been released; two others take the reader to the pages immediately before or after the current page which s/he is viewing, akin to turning a page in a printed volume. The second interface takes the form of an archival list, which provides links to all of the comic strips that have been released to date, and which can take a variety of forms. Some comics also provide ‘chapter headings’ to allow readers to reach specific sections of the storyline.

In terms of content, webcomic authors have little or no need to self-censor: people who find the comic will either decide to keep reading it or otherwise move on, and few people producing webcomics do so at more than a hobbyist level. A result is that webcomics arguably mirror some of the context of the underground comic scene through being widely varied and often gleefully profane (Fenty, Houp and Taylor 2004). Webcomic authors are connected through the same networks as the readers are, which contributes to the broader meta-textuality of the form: authors are able to produce ‘guest comics’ within each other’s textual diegeses, or can inherit a character when his/her originating author retires him/her ‘offstage’ from his/her initial context.

Before we can explore webcomics in detail, they need to be contextualised by exploring comics as a form, and the ways comics shape the experience of readers engaging with them.

**WHAT MAKES WEBCOMICS DIFFERENT FROM COMICS?**

Neither the visuals or the text of either traditional comics or webcomics are capable of carrying the experience in isolation. This similarity is useful because it allows for sharper comparisons of how they are different: the core distinctions lie in the ways in which people engage with the texts in the two formats, and how this shapes the experience of the texts, rather than differences at the level of the texts themselves.

The simplest and most obvious difference between traditional printed comics and webcomics is that webcomics exist in an online, digital platform, and function as hypertexts, where each comic is a lexia within the network. Lev Manovich uses the concept of the database to understand the relationship between the user and the text when dealing with non-linear hypertexts:

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64 It should be noted that practically all of the webcomic authors currently producing a webcomic as their job initially began at a hobbyist level, and were surprised by the success that enabled a transition to professional status.
The new media object consists of one or more interfaces to a database of multimedia material.

An interactive narrative (which is also called hypernarrative in an analogy to hypertext) can then be understood as the sum of multiple trajectories through a database. A traditional linear narrative is one among many other possible trajectories, that is, a particular choice made within a hypernarrative.

(Manovich 2000 227-228)

The webcomic format consists of a hypertextual representation of linear narrative. One consequence of moving comics online is that hypertext strips away contextual information otherwise provided to the reader of physical texts: there is no awareness of how much of the text remains to be read.

The comic strips presented within a webcomic format display the same form of tmesis as traditional comic strips: there is the issue of whether to focus upon the visuals before the text, and the different ways in which the two can connect. However, the digital context introduces some significant changes to tmesis at the structural level of how the pages interrelate: in a printed comic or graphic novel, the physical pages of the book provide the framework within which the comic strips are arranged, and the author and artist have no control over “the readers’ unconstrained skipping and skimming of passages, a fragmentation of the linear text expression” (Aarseth 1997 78). *Transmetropolitan: Year of the Bastard* (Ellis 1999) is a particular example of how tmesis can shape the experience of a text, due to a sequence where a key character is assassinated on the right-hand page within the printed book. In my own experience, and that of other fans of the series who I have spoken to, readers have their eyes drawn to the image of violent, shocking death on the right-hand page before they are able to read through the events on the left-hand page leading up to the assassination. The effect of this is disorientation, and the twist is sapped of some of its potency by ruining the surprise: a sequence intended to be deeply shocking and to come from nowhere is instead confusing, because the context in which the shock is supposed to occur is not established by the time readers encounter it. The reader turns a page: as soon as the page lifts, the reader sees a character rendered unrecognisable from having been shot in the head; confused, the reader turns to the left page to find out what is going on; s/he realises which character is likely to be assassinated; finally, the event unfolds in absence of surprise.

One factor which potentially informs this unfortunate tmesis is that *Transmetropolitan: Year of the Bastard* is a graphic novel comprising *Transmetropolitan*

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65 However, this is not universal. *Margot’s Room* by Emily Carroll (Carroll 2011) is an example of a webcomic presented through a non-linear/juxtapositional hypertext (see Pages 84-86), and thus hybridises the two forms in a way that significantly impacts the experience of the text. (Available at: [http://emcarroll.com/comics/margot/](http://emcarroll.com/comics/margot/))
#13-18. I am curious as to how the sequence was arranged as a single edition comic; the possibility exists that the assassination was placed on the left-hand page for the single-edition release to preserve the shock factor, and the layout requirements of the graphic novel made this impossible, with consequences to the experience of the text. The reason that the *Transmetropolitan* scenario is relevant is because the digital, hypertext context of webcomics can be applied to reduce structural tmesis: hypertext links can mean that in order for the reader to reach page ten, pages one through nine must be navigated through in order. In such an arrangement, the only way for the reader to reach the assassination would be through having passed through the page containing the sequence setting it up.66

**DEFINING COMICS**

There has been little critical consensus on the subject of which structural elements set comics apart, and some of the frameworks which have been used to reach a definition by scholars are significantly different. David Kunzle and Scott McCloud argue that comics are, at minimum, a *sequence* of images; David Carrier and Pascal Lefèvre disagree, Carrier performing close analysis on the single panel work of Gary Larson’s *Far Side*, while Lefèvre considers that single comic frames often have a strong narrative component (Kunzle 1973 2-3; McCloud 1994 5; Carrier 2000; Lefèvre 2000). There is also scholarly disagreement about how central the ‘speech bubble’ is to the definition of comics historically, and on the requisite relationship between visuals and the verbal component in order to qualify as a comic as opposed to a captioned illustration. However, this study is instead focused on how the underlying textual substrate of comics, such as the frames around which they are constructed, shapes the affective experience of engaging with the text. It is these elements which will be central to the definition of comics as a form for our purposes.

Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* is one of the most well known books on the subject of comics as a form. However, as Dylan Horrocks has argued, it is more of a polemic arguing for the respectability of comics and which seeks to emphasize the elements of comics McCloud believes to be ‘worthwhile,’ than a scholarly analysis of comics as a form (Horrocks 2001). Horrocks argues that McCloud privileges the image over the text, as a result of an attempt to frame his definition of ‘sequential art’ so that it does not include children’s picture books:

66 As discussed in Chapter 1 (Pages 20-21), although tmesis can be **reduced**, it cannot be eliminated; there is nothing which can ensure the reader **pays attention** to those intervening pages as s/he moves to the assassination – simply that s/he cannot reach it first by accident.
...McCloud... struggles to qualify his definition in such a way that it will exclude ‘mere illustrated texts.’ It is no longer enough that there be spatially juxtaposed pictures, nor that the reader performs closure in reading those images. Now the pictures must tell the whole story, independent of the words - which are only allowed to supplement the pictorial narrative. In effect, McCloud has added an amendment to his definition: comics must not only contain pictorial narrative; they must be dominated by it...

...let’s imagine a spectrum going from word-only texts at one extreme to picture-only texts at the other. Where on that spectrum should we draw the border between comics and illustrated texts? (Horrocks 2001 5)

Many illustrated children’s books require inference on behalf of readers, and a great deal of textual depth is available in the frequently ironic comparisons between the textual elements and what is actually unfolding in the illustrations, such as those found in the Church Mice books (Oakley 1972-2000), or The Far Side and There’s a Hair in My Dirt (Larson 1980-1995 ; Larson 1998). What distinguishes these examples is that neither the visual nor textual element would be sufficient to carry the experience in isolation, and this provides a core for the definition of comics which will be used within this project: texts which function through a hybridisation of visual and textual elements, where neither the visuals nor the text is capable of carrying the experience in isolation. Common comic aesthetics often involve presenting the verbal component in ‘speech-bubbles’ and ‘thought-bubbles,’ to distinguish which character they are associated with.

Nonetheless, there are some elements introduced by McCloud which are useful as critical tools for considering how comics function, and how the structure shapes the experience of the reader. McCloud argues that comics comprise a sequence of images, and are not otherwise limited by the aesthetics of those images. McCloud also raises the technical term of ‘the gutter,’ which he connects to the concept of ‘closure.’ The gutter is the gap between each frame of a comic strip, in which time and motion is presumed to have happened:

All of us perceive the world as a whole through the experience of our senses. Yet our senses can only reveal a world that is fragmented and incomplete. …Our perception of ‘reality’ is an act of faith, based on mere fragments. As infants, we’re incapable of that act of faith. If we can’t see it, hear it, smell it, taste it or touch it, it isn’t there! The game ‘Peek-a-Boo’ plays on this idea. Gradually, we all learn that even though the sight of mommy comes and goes, mommy remains. This phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole has a name. It’s called closure. (McCloud 1994 62-63)
One of the reasons that ‘closure’ is useful from a structural perspective is that it can include single frame comics, despite McCloud’s argument that comics must be a sequence of images. Carrier considers comics to be images involving a ‘narrative sequence’ where the viewer is encouraged to imagine or anticipate either the moment immediately following the image, or the moment which leads to the image (Carrier 2000 12-15), and Lefèvre describes readers mentally adding frames to a given panel (Lefèvre 2000). Essentially, for both Carrier and Lefèvre, comics are defined by images which imply something that the audience needs to infer. Arguably in this case, a single frame comic still involves closure, since the audience is observing the parts (a single moment in narrative time) but perceiving the whole (the result of prior events, or anticipation of a consequence of the current image). Some examples of the distinction between single frame comics based in closure and those which are not can be found in Gary Larson’s work with *The Far Side* (Larson 1980-1995). Figures #3 and #4 on Page 112 (Larson 1984 140; Larson 1995 40) function through closure: the audience imagines the consequence of the next moment implied by the current image unfolding within the image’s diegesis. In comparison, Figures #5 and #6 on Page 113 (Larson 1988 158; Larson 1995 51) do not require closure because the image itself contains everything required for the audience to get the joke, and thus there is no need to anticipate moments outside the conceptual frame of the image.

However, although it is possible to legitimately distinguish single frame comics which use closure from those which do not, the distinction is largely irrelevant to the experience of the text: although closure is only involved in two of the images, readers are unlikely to be aware of the distinction, and it is not relevant to whether the comics are funny. ‘Closure’ is a useful concept for analysing how particular comics function, but it is not core enough to the experience of the text to be centrally placed within a definition of what comics are, and how people engage with them. Another issue is that ‘closure’ is a problematic term because it is has counter intuitive connotations when applied in the comparative analysis of different texts: it is technically possible to describe a comic as having ‘more closure’ when individual strips have a greater ‘distance’ between them, and where the ‘gap’ bridged by the audience is more significant. I offer *inference* as an alternative, less problematic, way of understanding the concept of ‘closure.’ Inference describes the process of what the audience is doing in bridging sequences of images, or otherwise imagining moments outside what is captured within the frame, and is a better description for making sense of how readers engage with and experience comics.
There is also a relationship between structural *tmesis* and inference, because inference is as relevant to the conceptual ‘space’ or distance between comic pages as it is to the distance between frames: the more ‘distance’ there is between comic pages, the smaller the impact of reordering those pages is on the experience of the comic, because its structure does not depend on immediate conceptual proximity of pages. For example, *Questionable Content* (Jacques 2003) provides users with a hypertext link that will take them to a randomly selected comic – for an example, see Figure #7 on Page 114. The reason that such an approach works for *Questionable Content* as a text is that the discourse of the comic is focused within the page, rather than in the links between pages. In comparison, *A Miracle of Science* (Kilgannon and Sachs 2002) requires much less inference between comic pages, meaning that a page taken out of context will not stand cogently on its own, as can be seen in Figure #8 on Page 115. As such, the amount of inference\(^\text{67}\) between comic pages is inversely proportional to the extent to which the text is open to structural *tmesis*, regardless of which method (archives, hyperlink randomizer) the reader uses to engage with the text.

Higher degrees of inference allow readers to ‘pick up’ the story at any point, because each comic page relies less on the pages preceding it to provide context.\(^\text{68}\) An example would be texts which involve consistent characters in a persistent diegesis, but where each page does not always follow on immediately from the last, like the aforementioned *Questionable Content*. In these cases, each comic is akin to having someone you know recount a moment from his/her day. In comparison, texts with lower structural inference, such as *A Miracle of Science*, provide readers with extended engagement with the characters across more involved sequences – which presents the reader as an over-the-shoulder participant in ongoing events.

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\(^{67}\) Which I argue functions as a continuum, similar to the continua of *tmesis*, ergodicity and cybertextuality.

\(^{68}\) Hence the hyperlink to a random comic in texts like *Questionable Content*, intended to facilitate exactly this approach.
"Say... what's a mountain goat doing way up here in a cloud bank?"

Figure 3: From Gary Larson's The Far Side

God at His computer

Figure 4: From Gary Larson's The Far Side
CHAPTER 4: ONLINE COMICS – INFERENCE AND INTIMACY

Figure 5: From Gary Larson’s The Far Side

Figure 6: From Gary Larson’s The Far Side
Figure 7: Questionable Content #773, J. Jacques
The Infinite Canvas

Scott McCloud introduced the concept of the ‘infinite canvas’ available to webcomics, arguing that the online context was an opportunity to escape from the ‘tiny boxes’ forced upon the creators of comics by the physical necessity of printing (McCloud 2001). McCloud posits examples such as an entire comic text presented as one gigantic page,
around which readers would need to zoom in and scroll, or where the next panel is concealed
within the current one, providing readers with the sensation of tunnelling deeper and deeper
into the story (McCloud 2000 224-227). However, Gary Groth argues that the possibilities
presented by the digital context which McCloud posits are either unreasonably ambitious or
would change comics into something fundamentally different:

Yes, one could place panels on a revolving cube or run panels on a virtually
endless scroll and one could even imagine this being done artfully. But isn’t it
more likely that, with increased bandwidth, the medium that the Internet will
be best suited to exploit… is the moving picture with sound, i.e., film? One
could, after all, theoretically "watch" a comic strip in a movie theatre: the
screen could fill up with panels that dissolve into new panels after the
appropriate amount of reading time elapses. But there are good reasons why
this isn’t done and why people prefer to see moving images on a theatre -- or
TV or computer -- screen rather than a series of still images. The greater the
use of technology, the closer we get to film or, at least, something other than
comics. (Groth 2001)

Groth’s argument that comics require either print or its remediation is picked up by Sarah
Boxer. She highlights a winner at the Webby awards in 2005 where the pages dissolved one
into the next when clicked upon, and argued that this was “…a great use of the Web. But it
verges on animation” (Boxer 2005). Pages which dissolve one into the next are a structural
framework which radically reduces inference, placing animation on the same continua of
structural inference which I discussed earlier.

**Reading versus Watching**

The difference in the affective experience of engaging with animation and engaging
with comics is distinctive partly because of the role inference plays in the experience. It is
possible to introduce multimedia content into webcomics in a way which arguably does not
render them classifiable as animation, since doing so does not eliminate inference as a core
process of engaging with the text. Typically, (although there are exceptions) this is done by
retaining a structure based around internal frames. For example, *Dead Winter* (Shabet 2007)
ocasionally produces comics which retain the frames and internal structure of a comic strip,
but with each frame appearing from darkness one after the next.\(^69\) There is some animation
within each frame, but the reader is still involved in inferring the frame after the animation to
link the panels. Additionally, once the animation has run its course, the reader is presented

\(^{69}\) Particular examples are available at [http://www.deadwinter.cc/page/200.htm](http://www.deadwinter.cc/page/200.htm) and
[http://www.deadwinter.cc/page/300.htm](http://www.deadwinter.cc/page/300.htm)
with a normal, non-animated version of the page in its entirety. In this case, animation functions as a supplement to inference, rather than rendering it unnecessary or otherwise replacing it. As a comparison, *Orneryboy* (Lalonde 2002) utilises short Flash loops to provide animation in individual panels within the comic, typically either to set the scene or provide a conclusion. In some cases this is designed as an ‘easter egg’ – the comic functions without the animation due to a standard level of inference, but it is intended as a visual treat for a viewer who catches it. One example would be a strip where the female protagonist has woken from a nightmare about her cat becoming a tentacular monstrosity with too many eyes. The final frame has her having trouble getting back to sleep, with the cat asleep at the foot of the bed. If the reader keeps watching the final frame, or otherwise has his/her attention attracted by movement, s/he gets a reward. *Orneryboy* is a case where particular frames of the comic qualify as animated because they do not involve inference, but their connection to the rest of the comic does, and hence the overall text does not qualify as animation. The nature of the animation as short Flash loops prevents individual frames from conveying much more than a repetitive movement. Michael Lalonde often places these frames at the end of a page, arguably reducing the final inference by showing the readers a small element of what happens next, rather than having them infer all of it themselves. However, in these cases, the movement does not entirely eliminate inference from the final animated frame, or speculation of ‘What happens next?’ Examples can be seen where movement is added to the spectacle of an undead rave, and to the actions of a cat following a ghost.

Michael Lalonde has also made use of the flexibility provided by Flash technology not to animate a comic, but to provide multiple punchlines to a single comic, without telegraphing that multiple options are available. This is a scenario which would not be possible outside of a digital context and yet retains its status as a comic, for although the final frame changes each time the page is loaded or refreshed, its relationship through inference to all of the other frames in the strip remains entirely consistent.

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70 And the difference between ‘reading’ and ‘watching’ is key – see Page 118
75 In this example, the author left a note to readers stating that there was ‘something different’ in the comic. Nonetheless, many readers have come away unaware of the multiple punch-lines presented, and have only realised once they ‘compared notes’ with another reader.
In comparison to the animations designed to supplement inference presented by Shabet and Lalonde, the innovative *Broken Saints* (Burgess, Kirby and West 2001) goes further by eliminating the use of internal frames entirely, and adding sound and music to the experience of the text. Each scene dissolves into the next, with some internal animation. When combined with the lack of internal frames – the images instead taking up the entire screen – this significantly reduces inference as a process of engaging with the text. Although the issue of where the exact placement of the divide between animation and comics lies on the continua of inference is not something I seek to answer, I argue that the structure of *Broken Saints* qualifies the text as a piece of online animation which heavily remediates the comic form, rather than as a webcomic itself: the reader has no control over his/her navigation of individual chapters of *Broken Saints*, instead watching the material as it appears. This distinction is underlined in the DVD release of *Broken Saints*, where voice-overs are added to the speech-bubble dialogue. This means that the audience now has multiple sources of information to split their attention between, and also increases the extent to which they can watch rather than read the text. We read comics, and watch animation, and the key difference is due to frames. Animation is where the frames are invisible: no inference is required to comprehend the text, since the text does the work of chaining together movement and time, filling in the gaps normally implied between frames.

The comic is a media form which is essentially over coded, in that it is a visual form which cannot be understood without written text. I have heard anecdotal tales of people who find reading comics quite tiring or disorienting because they tend to read the textual elements before considering the visual images, which results in an undifferentiated experience of the text: a dialogue between characters is experienced more as a monologue, for example, because of an absence of textual cues as to who is speaking. Subtitled films and anime can present similar confusion because of overcoding between visual and textual elements, because there can be a sufficient volume of information being communicated quickly through text that the audience misses the visual cues of who is speaking.

The work of *reading* is a fundamental part of the experience of both comics and webcomics. Although the digital context raises the possibility of introducing content which reduces reading as a process of negotiating the text, these elements can be assessed in terms of how they affect the experience. For example, *Fans!* (Campbell, Waltrip and others 1999)

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provides several comics which function through multiple image layers and which could only exist in a digital context, but which still qualify as comics because of how readers engage with them. *Fans! #876* features an elderly character lying on his bed within a brig, and is entirely static from a visual perspective. Rather than using multiple frames to convey the story, speech bubbles of unseen guards outside the cell scroll past the still image of the prisoner, together with boxes referring to times – and these text boxes are the only features of the image which change. The effect emphasises the prisoner’s stasis, presenting him as entirely still during a period of time-lapse. In comparison to *Broken Saints*, the only animation displayed in this case is caused by the reader’s scrolling of the image layers, and yet there is no use of internal frames. The reason that the example arguably remains a comic despite the absence of frames is that it is a text which is read. In comparison to *Broken Saints*, *Fans! #876* is a text where the audience is still responsible for considering the relationship between the visual and textual elements. The absence of frames draws attention to itself as an anomaly, and emphasises the passage of time.

Comics require the use of internal frames and gutters between them, across which inference functions: together these elements mean that comics are distinguished from other media forms by being an experience of reading, whether they exist in an online context or not.

**How the Web Affects Content**

There are elements of the webcomic experience which are distinctive, but which are aesthetic rather than structural. Firstly, webcomic texts have few gatekeepers, and remediate the cultural niche and willingness to explore taboos presented by the historical underground comic scene (Fenty, Houp and Taylor 2004). *Something Positive* (Milholland 2001) is an example of a mainstream webcomic which would never be accepted within traditional syndication because of its content, but it flourishes in the freedom of the internet. As an example of a webcomic representing the comedic fringe, *Sexy Losers* (‘Clay’ 1999) includes an ongoing storyline which features explicit details about a necrophile in love, the spirit of the teenage girl whose corpse he is enamoured with, and her attempts to return to the world to rescue her body from him. Other webcomics use the lack of restrictions present online to

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77 Unfortunately, the archived versions of these comics have been saved in a smaller file-size that did not preserve the original graphical layering which the strips were presented in.


79 See Figure #9 overleaf.
present comedic short-form comics where explicit sexuality is part of the comedy, such as *Oglaf* (Cooper and Bayne 2009), and there is also a thriving subculture of pornographic webcomics. The fact that webcomics are focused on a niche audience is also reflected in the experience of the texts: there is a sense of community around enjoying a particular text, and sharing the sense of humour.

![Something Positive](http://www.oglaf.com/snowqueen/) (Note: Contains nudity and sexual content.)

Figure 9: *Something Positive*, December 19th 2001, R. K. Milholland.

Webcomic artists are generally self-taught. This means that website design is often simple, as is the art design of the comic itself. However, both of these improve over time as with any discipline, and the readers get to see the author growing and changing in his/her work, living lives alongside their own. With novelists, readers are able to see new work and

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80 Sample comic available at [http://www.oglaf.com/snowqueen/](http://www.oglaf.com/snowqueen/) (Note: Contains nudity and sexual content.)

81 For more on the experience of community as part of reading webcomics, see Pages 124-125.
how authors have developed professionally on a scale of years; for webcomic artists, readers see new work as often as five times a week – or for a rare few, seven. With the popularisation of uStream, a freely available streaming online video site, many webcomic artists are creating their comics live online, allowing readers to watch the process of creation and chat to the author as s/he works.

Webcomics are a remediation of the newspaper comic, particularly because they arrive at semi-regular intervals on an established schedule, albeit one for each comic. Because webcomics are remediated, their presence online opens up affordances and opportunities which are different from those available in print – such as the paratextual elements discussed on Pages 124-125.

The Impermanence of Texts

As much as the internet provides many interesting benefits and challenges to webcomic texts, it is also an environment in which texts can vanish without trace. A great many webcomics fail, or are otherwise not continued by their authors when they lose interest in the project, or if life intrudes into their ability to create the text. In some cases, the website becomes a monument unto itself – there is no new activity, but it stands as a record of the text which existed at the point the author stopped. In the long run, many comic authors in this situation stop maintaining their sites entirely – not unreasonable in itself, since they represent upkeep and hosting costs – and the entire text disappears. Chuck Rozakis wrote an article discussing this process, including a plea that webcomic creators either avoid closing their sites, or if they must, warn the populace and give them a chance to archive the text themselves – potentially even to buy discs with the archive on them (Rozakis 2008).

From the perspective of readers of the comic, the experience of having a text cease to exist when you hoped it would one day return to being an active site again can be an affective shock: there is a sense of palpable loss. This loss is not just in response to what the reader him/herself had access to, but to the more abstract capacity for them to share their enjoyment with others by directing other readers to the site. There are still forum discussions on the subject of comics that vanished without trace, such Strings of Fate (Tochi 2003) – which won a Web Cartoonist’s Choice Award in 2003 – or Shaw Island (Stroum 2000). Rozakis makes direct mention of Shaw Island in his article, and there are attempts by unnamed fans to

82 There are examples of sites which were presumed dead, but which eventually became active again; see Pages 139-140 for an example.
restore the *Shaw Island* archive themselves by collating comics saved by individual readers and attempting to place them in order.\(^{83}\)

An awareness that webcomics can and do vanish is part of the experience of reading existing texts: the possibility exists that the archive you are currently reading through will be all of the text there is; alternatively, the story, world-of-concern and characters which you are engaging with as the comic is released may never finish. Fans of long novel series speak of the fears they have that the authors will die before the series is completed, as happened with Robert Jordan’s *Wheel of Time* (Jordan 1990-2007). With webcomics, this form of disaster could happen for far more reasons than the literal death of the author and, unlike printed novels, there might not even be any evidence left that the series existed as something to become invested in to begin with.

**Why Webcomics are ‘Morish’**

Webcomics are designed to leave the reader wanting more. Although they lack the challenge and competition I identify as part of videogame engagement (see Page 157), the webcomic as a form shares the (largely) effortless feedback loop of interaction established with casual videogames: webcomic readers advance through the text at the touch of a button, and that simple interaction shows an incremental evolution of a context the reader is invested in.\(^{84}\) Although s/he is not engaged in a problem which challenges him/her, the reader of a webcomic is engaging in a contextual world-of-concern which s/he is invested in, and in which there are characters and situations s/he has formed relationships with. Each change the reader makes in engaging with the text – advancing the text one page at a time, at the touch of a button – changes the context of the world-of-concern, and the situation faced by the characters of the text. As a result, readers can spend a great deal more time than they are conscious of engaging with the experience, because although the specific interactions with the text are bite-sized, the chain of interactions is potentially as large as the entire webcomic database.

In a similar way to the readers of hypertext fiction (see Pages 79-81), webcomic readers are exploring a network of lexia (in this case, comics) while unable to change the contents of that network. A reader of comics is invested in the evolving world-of-concern but

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\(^{83}\) Archive available at: [http://shaw.smackjeeves.com/comics/611463/01/](http://shaw.smackjeeves.com/comics/611463/01/)

\(^{84}\) An argument can be made that the felt mode of interaction is analogous to the players of *Alpha Centauri*, which will be discussed in Chapter 5 on Pages 164-165.
cannot affect the outcome, only speculate as to what is coming next. This produces two very different affective experiences of the webcomic text, which will be explored through the next two sections by considering the multiple temporal contexts provided by webcomics, and the webcomic paratext.

Multiple Temporal Contexts

The webcomic archive is where an individual webcomic text stores its pages as the author builds them up over time. When the reader is working through the archives of a webcomic, one mouse click changes the world-of-concern s/he is invested in. S/he engages with the new developments within the world-of-concern – and has no responsibility for them, or ability to change them. His/her only recourse is to see what happens next – which is available at another click of the mouse, akin to compulsively turning the page of a book. However, each page of a book is part of the whole, while each comic strip is self-contained, and linked to the next strip through structural inference. As a result, each webcomic strip is modular to an extent, and leaves the reader wanting more.

A loss of awareness of external time passing is part of being unaware of the creation and relation of elements within the text, which goes along with diegetic immersion (see Page 52); it is also assisted by the digital context of the webcomic text, where there is no physical cue for how much of the text remains to be read, or how much of the comic you have already read in any given sitting. There is significant anecdotal evidence of individuals who become involved in a new comic reading them for extended periods without noticing the length of time passing, until they are finished reading through the archives. However, an entirely different mode of engagement begins when the reader finishes the archive.

The archive of webcomics frequently simply stops. Any given strip in the archive could potentially be another point where the text just stopped: the number of comics in the archive is entirely dependent on how long the author has been working on it, by the time a given reader reaches the most recent page. As a result of this process, each individual comic strip needs to be able to function as both part of the archive and as a functional text by itself. The simplest way to describe the experience of engaging with a webcomic as it releases is the concept of the ‘perpetual cliffhanger’: each individual comic within the text exists simultaneously as a self-contained segment of narrative time, and a link in an unfolding chain of events. Arguably, a significant element of the art of webcomics is in creating strips which

85 This also connects to how writerly-ness functions in a webcomic context. (see Pages 127-128)
stand alone and yet which contribute to an ongoing text. In the archive, the reader is invested in the world-of-concern and the characters occupying it, and more information about what happens next is available at the click of a button. Once the archive is completed, the reader suddenly goes from engaging in the world-of-concern without an awareness of external time, unaware of the creation and relation of elements within the text, to having but a single text to focus on – often without warning. The best descriptions I can use for the affective experience of this sudden change in textual gear is frustration: when the reader is used to discovering what happens next at the touch of a button, suddenly having to wait a day, or multiple days, is tortuous.

Where negotiating the archive fosters diegetic immersion with the overall webcomic text, reaching the update schedule presents individual comic strips as the only text: they function in isolation, but also appear in isolation. The reader does not have quite the same opportunity to become ‘unaware of the creation and relation of elements within the text’ when the text is such a discrete entity. Instead, the reader applies a temporal version of ‘inference’: rather than using his/her imagination to bridge between the panels within a comic, or to consider the moments immediately prior or following on from a single image comic, the reader connects the current comic with the earlier ones in the sequence – extending the ‘text’ s/he first encountered in the archives. If necessary, s/he can check back to refresh his/her memory about the details of the comics leading to the new release, but often this is not necessary. Peter Lunenfeld refers to such examples as existing in a state of textual ‘unfinish,’ where those who engage with them have the chance to “participate in a process, not reach a goal” (Lunenfeld 1999 18). Additionally, this temporal inference also applies to speculation as to what the next comic in the sequence might be, whenever it is eventually released. It is this speculative impulse which provides fertile ground for the social elements available to the online context.

The Webcomic Paratext

An embrace of online communities is one of the central traits which underlie the creation and maintenance of a successful, long lasting webcomic. Most comics provide online forums where fans of the comic can meet, and most conversation is focused on considering and unpacking the details and relationships within the world-of-concern. In further reference to the way in which each new comic released is considered a standalone text, there are frequently entire discussion threads focused on a close analysis of each strip as
CHAPTER 4: ONLINE COMICS – INFERENCE AND INTIMACY

they are posted online – and speculating on what might be coming next. Other comics provide a section beneath the strip where the author discusses some thoughts on the page, to provide some transparency or explanation for the reader. Non-narrative comics and other short form work are still experienced as social, because the internet makes it so easy for readers to share comic strips which amuse them. Some examples, such as Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal (Weiner 2002), even include automatic buttons for inserting hypertext links to a particular comic strip into different formats of online journal, and onto social networks such as Twitter and Facebook. These are all elements within the webcomic paratext: the discourses and other content which surround a narrative object (Genette 1997). The paratext is also often the primary mode of engagement which readers transition to, once they have completed reading through the archive of a webcomic.

Participation in forum discussion can become a significant component of how a reader engages with the textual world-of-concern, and the relationships established with other fans discussing the same text in the same timeframe can fold into the overall experience of the text. A common tendency is for a reader to engage with the newly released instalment of the comic text, consider it in isolation – engaging with the characters, context, and an element of close analysis – and then use inference to connect it to past comics in the series. When this is done, there is often a race to be the first reader to post his/her responses and begin the discussion. Online communities crystallise around individual webcomics, where readers can form relationships with other fans who have automatically at least one shared interest. Arguably, a core element of what motivates a rush to the appropriate discussion forum is that readers cannot get to the next part of the story. They are still invested in the world-of-concern, and discussing the comic strip with other people who share their investment is a way of dealing with that frustration, extending their engagement into another form.86

A particularly interesting element of the social interactions centred on given webcomic texts is the extent to which the authors themselves participate in the social discussion of the text. This has been argued to be a relationship analogous to the ‘Letter to the Editor’ pages of underground comics, but with an enhanced degree of contact between authors and fans (Fenty, Houp and Taylor 2004). The author and/or artist can join in with the discussions of “What happens next?” and amiably taunt readers with tantalising details, or clarify points of interpretive disagreement. It is also possible for an author to consider the response of the online community when constructing storylines, based on the relationships

86 It can also be because doing so is itself fun, and because of the same reasons anyone returns to an online community.
the fans have established with characters in the world-of-concern. An example can be taken from *College Roomies From Hell* or *CRFH* (Campos 1999), where the author had always planned to kill a particular core character. The outcry when it seemed that he was dead startled her, as she had no idea how popular he was, and reworked the unfolding narrative so that he was rescued. As a result of this change in response to fan feedback, the comic has gone in an entirely different overall direction, which simply would not have been possible with that character dead.

Online networks also come to connect different webcomic authors, which often leads to a co-mingling of contextual worlds-of-concern. The concept of cross-over stories within traditional comics has a long-standing heritage. Where some webcomic crossovers differ is that they are more casual. Rather than occurring in moments of high crisis and tension, a character can simply emigrate from one world-of-concern into another one, with the agreement of both authors involved. This results in an ongoing webcomic cross-pollination which simultaneously suggests that the worlds-of-concern of different webcomics occupy similar conceptual spaces or are otherwise connected, and also makes readers aware of other comic artists who they might like engaging with. Another factor is that the authors can discuss events ‘back-stage,’ and conclude that a particular character might develop in a useful direction after an encounter with someone from another comic. This provides another way in which textual ‘unfinish’ can shape the text-in-the-making. For readers who have invested in relationships within the world-of-concern, seeing the character encountering someone independent of his/her initial context, and developing because of it, feels very human.

One reason for this ‘unfinish’ and ability for webcomics to cross-pollinate is a fundamental difference between the ‘industrial framework’ of webcomics when compared to printed comics: the size of the creative community is proportionally larger, because there are fewer gatekeepers, and producing comics is less of an investment, meaning that more people can choose to be involved. The lack of infrastructure means there is less individual support, but also means that there are no issues with negotiating individual rights, for example: if two webcomic authors want to collaborate, they can. The downside is that webcomic creators are vulnerable to having their work appropriated online, as can be seen in the ongoing fallout surrounding Todd Goldman’s controversial T-shirt designs in 2007 (Amidi 2007; Hicks 2007) and 2010 (Tyrrell 2010), and in repeated conflicts between webcomic artists and the Hot Topic store (Northrup 2010). However, given the close-knit webcomic community of fans and authors, word of infractions and thievery spread very quickly, and fans rapidly involve themselves in demanding that the offending work be removed. Also, in comparison
to the traditional comics industry, webcomic authors have less infrastructure to support them. The social networks go a long way towards offering opportunities for webcomic authors not to work in isolation, but many comics have faltered or died because the author stopped enjoying his/her work and burned out, or ran out of time or money.

Some authors have entirely embraced social networking, some going so far as to create Twitter accounts for all of their comic characters. This provides both extra content dealing with the characters and the ongoing world-of-concern outside of the comic, and allows readers to connect to the characters just as if they were other people they know online – interspersing Twitter dialogues with those of their other friends and acquaintances. This provides a bridge from the world-of-concern into the daily life of readers who are involved in social networking, and thus qualifies as a shift in diegetic depth and permeability (see Pages 65-66). Even beyond shifts within the relevant worlds-of-concern, the online connections provide situations where particular comic authors and artists are commenting in the forum threads of another author’s comic, and speculating as wildly as any other fan. The fact that this blurs the line further between comic authors and fans is relevant to how people relate to comic texts – there is less of an ‘us and them,’ ‘creative people versus the audience’ divide, and readers can participate in enjoying a text alongside someone they know to be part of the industry.

The direct contact between readers and the author of a comic manifests at many levels in the paratext: they are reading the developing work of someone with whom they can communicate; there is an awareness that the wider dialogue between the fans and the creator could be folded into new developments within the world-of-concern; the dialogue means that readers are sharing the world-of-concern with the creator; and as much as the readers can connect to the day-to-day contexts of the characters within the world-of-concern, this is also true for the authors themselves. Their blogs or Twitter-feeds discuss their daily lives, frequently on subjects entirely unrelated to the comics, and readers can come to feel that rather than reading someone’s work, they are sharing space with the authors.

In many ways, the webcomic paratext is the environment in which the ‘writerly-ness’ (see Pages 30-31) of webcomics becomes relevant to the experience of the text. The level of structural writerly-ness varies between webcomic texts: single page comics without a persistent world-of-concern offer a wider plurality of entry-points into the text than ones with a close focus on particular characters within a narrative world-of-concern, precisely because every comic page works in isolation. Two examples of this form of webcomic are Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal (Weiner 2002) and XKCD (Munroe 2005). These modular pages
are easy to share with friends online because they stand alone, which would be an example of disseminating the text even while it is being read. From an experiential perspective, the level of writerly-ness presented by engaging with webcomics is dependent on context, because of differences in affective quality between reading webcomic archives or engaging with comic pages as they update. Negotiating the archives does not involve as much creative engagement, because of the short feedback loop that has been described for webcomic interaction: the reader can advance the context of the world-of-concern at the touch of a button, and so the focus is on exploring the landscape of the comic. However, when the reader finishes reading the archives and moves into waiting for new pages as they update, there is much more time in which to speculate as to what might be coming next. This phase of engagement is more fundamentally creative, as readers recall events and character developments within the world-of-concern, and draw upon them to imagine scenarios which could grow from them.

A point of balance between structural and experiential writerly-ness in webcomics is that the short-form comics where each page stands in isolation promote structural writerly-ness through dissemination of the text. However, these same comics are not as likely to foster experiential writerly-ness, because such texts lack the emphasis on a persistent world-of-concern presented by longer-form comics. The reverse is also true. As a result, it can be said that short-form comics retain a consistent level of writerly engagement across negotiating with both archives and daily updates, from the perspective of structural writerly-ness. In comparison, longer form webcomics present a mainly experiential writerly-ness, and that manifests primarily during the phase where readers are engaging with new pages as they update.

As I have discussed earlier, the ongoing engagement of readers with the world-of-concern connects with this creative speculative engagement, motivating the active webcomic communities which discuss updates to webcomic texts as new material goes live. Part of the experience of being a webcomics reader and engaging with the comics yourself is that the experience itself is social in a way which is different from print comics, and from other media forms. That sociality is three-tiered: intimacy with the creators of the text, intimacy with other readers engaging with the paratext, and intimacy with the characters within the world-of-concern.

87 There is also a point of connection to the experience of engaging with Alternate Reality Game communities (See Page 188).
Intimacy and the Banal

Webcomic texts have an interesting relationship with banality. In some ways one of the most distinctive elements of the worlds-of-concern which webcomics mediate is the length of time that the audience spends with characters engaged in essentially mundane activities. Simultaneously, the same structural freedom which informs the banality is also a motivator for webcomics to develop into richly characterised, ongoing dramas. In both cases, the driving force behind the affective tone is the lack of predefined limits for the structural length of the text.

The pragmatic limitations of marketable texts focus the experience of the world-of-concern which the audience shares onto moments of crisis – comedy, drama, catharsis, etc. For example, the inference of serialised television lies in connecting these moments into a cohesive whole. Dramatic elements compress the levels of characterisation that are possible in serialised television, due to pragmatic time constraints. For example, in the fifth season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Whedon 1997), the title character and her boyfriend, Riley, have relationship issues which are rooted in character developments within the world-of-concern. Because of the compression necessary to carry across the plot developments necessary within an individual episode together with the meta-plot for a season, and do so within a commercial hour, the relationship strain is unnaturally intensified. Although the reasons for the tension within the contextual world-of-concern are entirely reasonable, the audience only sees the highlights. One result is that the two characters take turns being objectively in the wrong. This is done in an attempt to maintain some level of audience sympathy with both Buffy and Riley, so that neither of them can be written off as the ‘bad guy,’ but it feels forced. There is simply not enough time for the audience to witness an organic development of a relationship under strain – and to expect one given the constraints placed on the production would not be reasonable.

Webcomics have fewer textual limitations. The marketable ‘product’ being sold to consumers exists at the level of the comic page, with no intrinsic cap on the number of such pages which can be associated together. However, it should be said that contrary to McCloud’s argument, textual limitations to webcomics do exist:

One of Watterson’s key complaints is that in newspapers, the overall space is limited and the design constraints, such as panel format, shape, and alignment, are further limiting. Webcomics can and do answer this complaint because they remove spatial constraints, theoretically allowing for infinite space.
However, the space in webcomics is not ideal as McCloud would have it, because the space is limited by computer technology, including screen sizes, pixel depth, and download times on the web. (Fenty, Houp and Taylor 2004)

Along with the factors identified by Fenty, Houp and Taylor, I would add the pragmatic cost of bandwidth for the servers hosting the website: the bigger the filesize of the images in your webcomic and the greater your traffic, the higher the cost of running the site.

It should also be noted that webcomics do not have a monopoly on portraying mundane circumstances: syndicated newspaper comics are often focused on banal encounters precisely because there is no expectation that a reader will read such comics every day, meaning that each should be entirely self-contained and easy to understand. What sets webcomics apart is the ability to extend the everyday scenarios and build richly detailed relationships both between the characters within the world-of-concern, and the readers engaging with it over an ongoing period of time, by building intimacy (see Page 63).

The question of whether those who engage with fictional texts develop intimacy with the characters of the worlds-of-concern which mediate them is a complicated one. Prose fiction written from a first-person perspective shows the reader the internal thoughts and monologues of the character, potentially insights which no one else within the diegesis of the novel is permitted. However, this does not guarantee intimacy; it is a process or structure through which intimacy can be generated. What of tales told from an external perspective, such as television or common modes of prose? As we have discussed in Chapter 2, I argue that ‘intimacy’ has a temporal component, in that it is an affective result of the time taken to engage with and invest in the world-of-concern – and the relationships available within it. To have an intimate relationship with another character within the contextual world-of-concern is to be profoundly familiar with him/her, and/or become familiar with the web of social relations in which that character is a part.

A lack of boundaries for the length of the text, or some other framework which allows the audience to spend an extended time with the characters of the text, is a component of producing worlds-of-concern which are distinguished by intimacy. This context is regularly provided by webcomics. One such example is College Roomies From Hell (Campos 1999) which has presented an ongoing storyline, with a consistent set of characters, for eleven years. Readers have spent more than a decade invested in a world-of-concern where the characters have grown and changed over time, even as the readers themselves have changed. The same is true of much rarer cases produced through newspaper syndication, such as

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88 *CRFH* is considered in greater detail among the case-studies at the end of the chapter (see Page 135).
Doonesbury (Trudeau 1970), which has been running since 1970. However, intimacy is not limited to webcomics which have extended for many years: reading is crucial to the experience of webcomics, and the payoff for the effort and time spent reading is intimacy. This is part of the micro-duration of reading the page, and of filling time and space with inference.

Webcomics and extended traditional comics can become a part of the cultural landscape of readers, and the relationships they can form with the characters within the contextual world-of-concerns through long-term association can be affectively potent: we know them, and in some ways our lives are not far from theirs. There are definite parallels to generational soap-operas such as Coronation Street (Warren 1960), except that in the case of webcomics there is less compression of time. In fact, the reverse is true: in the example of CRFH, a total of perhaps two or three years have passed within the contextual world-of-concern. One conversation in a webcomic can unfold over weeks, depending on how long the author wishes to spend on the scene. A result of this temporal extension is that the characters and their relationships remain consistent and familiar to us, which also minimises the number of cast members who would have arrived and then moved on within that timeframe for generational television – in part because drawn characters do not have to age. Even generational soap operas focus on the highs and lows, the melodramatic, and have a broad enough cast that there is always something complicated unfolding within the world-of-concern. For webcomics, readers get to see the characters in everyday circumstances, rather than on only the best and worst days of their lives – the quotidian along with the melodramatic, if not actively skewed toward the every-day in some cases. An example can be taken from Figure #7 on Page 114: the entire action of the comic consists of awkward silence between two women running into each other as they begin their morning routines, the awkwardness broken by the mumbling of another woman asleep on the couch. Far from dramatic, it is comfortably domestic. Readers who are invested in the relationships of the contextual world-of-concern are aware that the reason for the awkwardness is that the woman on the left (Dora) has begun dating the roommate of the woman on the right (Faye); although the two women have been friends for some time, this is the first occasion they have encountered each other in this early morning context; the woman on the couch is a third friend, a woman with debilitating OCD who lives in the upstairs apartment. There is some potential tension grounded in the fact that Faye and Martin, the roommate now dating Dora,

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89 Webcomics can also present texts which do not foster intimacy, and which are akin to traditional newspaper comics. (Discussed in more detail on Pages 133-134.)
were attracted to each other but never acted on it; however, this moment of awkwardness is the most drama the situation invokes. In comparison to soap operas, the experience of webcomics can be positively relaxing, even when engaging in the relationships unfolding within the contextual world-of-concern.

This is not to say that webcomics and extended syndicated comics are essentially undramatic, simply that the mode through which readers are able to experience the characters and their relationships is running at a slower pace than is possible in other media forms, which tend to demonstrate characters in crisis as a default, rather than at rest. The flipside of the extended timeframe through which webcomics operate is that many comics that were originally light on narrative complexity and which focused on cozy character interactions begin to develop dramatic narratives over time, as a natural outgrowth of events and interactions within the world-of-concern. *College Roomies from Hell* (Campos 1999) is focused on the lives and interactions of six university students in America. It began with very short comedic strips dealing with the exaggerated aggravations of living with strangers for the first time, while attempting to stop living in the high-school mode and transition into being an adult. The network of relationships presented within the contextual world-of-concern became more complicated and rich, and readers spent a significant period getting to know the individual characters through their interactions. Partway through 2000, Campos took up some trailing plot-threads from a number of characters and introduced supernatural elements to the story: through small, logical steps, CRFH became a pre-apocalypse narrative in which the characters became aware they are involved, in some way, with the end of the world. Since that shift in context, characters have been killed, some have become killers, and the series has gradually developed its own mythology. What makes the shift in context interesting is that the affective tenor of the experience is different because the readers engaging with the world-of-concern became intimately invested in the characters before there was drama: the characters are individuals whom readers were able to spend years of time getting to know, and only then see theme dealing with bizarre and threatening events. The change in the context of the story from narratively light to complicated does not alter the relationships readers establish within the contextual world-of-concern.

The pattern where webcomics turn from light and comedic storylines to narratively darker fare has become a common trope of webcomic development. The process always seems to grow organically from the characters and the relationships within the contextual world of concern, and the author asking – as much as the readers – “What would change if *this* happened?” The characters and the network of relationships established within the
world-of-concern come to matter through intimacy fostered by a comfortably mundane, banal context which is possible because of the textual structure of webcomics – and this intimacy is not lost, no matter what style of story the author chooses to develop from that starting position.

The extended timeframe can also present its own challenges for authors who wish to work within it. *Elf Life* (Fire 1999) spent more than one year of actual time on one day of diegetic time – the lead up to a wedding ceremony – and eventually went on hiatus for a time as the text collapsed under its own weight. One of the downsides to occasions where relatively simple comics undergo a shift in narrative context and develop ongoing storylines is that these storylines can increase in complexity as time goes on: the same process where small logical steps add more details does not stop when the author realises there is a larger story to tell, which results in an increasingly large ‘world’ for the author to deal with. Other comics manage to exist across more than a decade of storytelling without developing a larger, sweeping narrative. *PvP* (Kurtz 1998) began in 1998 and is focused around the daily lives and office shenanigans of a group of writers for a computer magazine, which is the format it retains today. However, although there has been no revelation about the end of the world, characters have married, others have grown up or won the lottery. Other comics such as *Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal* (Weiner 2002) exist as online equivalents of *The Far Side* (Larson 1980-1995) since no strip bears any relation to the others, and thus do not foster intimacy within the world-of-concern.

The lack of essential boundaries to the duration of webcomic texts fosters a context for worlds-of-concern in which the readers can establish intimate relationships with the characters and their lives. However, this is not unique to webcomics – but to texts where the audience is allowed to engage with characters over an extended timeframe, and where the lack of limitations on textual duration allow us to share casual moments in the lives of the characters. *Doonesbury* (Trudeau 1970) illustrates that this is possible through newspaper syndication, but the pragmatic limitations of the context make such extended texts extremely rare. Correspondingly, there is nothing within webcomics which forces the formation of intimate relationships between readers and characters within the world-of-concern. Newspaper syndication is an environment with limitations which tend to work against fostering intimacy within the world-of-concern, whereas there are fewer obstacles within the context of producing a comic for the online context. Webcomics and traditional comics are two different formats of mediation which tend in different directions in terms of whether they
are likely to offer structures of intimacy; however, they are not hard-wired to what they express.

**WEBCOMICS: A SAMPLER**

There is no entirely ‘typical’ webcomic text, and comparatively small differences in how each text approaches its own structure and paratext have significant consequences for the world-of-concern established with readers. All of the texts presented here represent different approaches to an otherwise identical textual context: they all exist as lexical comic pages connected by links in a linear sequence; they all present archives gradually constructed from regular updates; and they all present a relevant paratext.

*A Miracle of Science*

*A Miracle of Science* (Kilgannon and Sachs 2002) is essentially a traditional comic which has been released online, due to the unique (to my current knowledge) context of its creation: the author and artist discussed not just the overall arc for the narrative, but went so far as to script each individual page of the eventual comic before any of the individual comic strips was created and released. The result is a webcomic text which arguably does not qualify as possessing Lunenfeld’s textual ‘unfinish,’ since it was finalised before readers first engaged with the text, and before anything was released online.

The core impact of the digital context on *A Miracle of Science* is that its creation would not have been possible outside of the internet: the web replaced the investment costs of printing the comic physically and funding distribution networks for it – costs which the creators would not have been able to afford. Instead, the creators were able to maintain their normal jobs while the text was produced, without the financial risk inherent to funding a printing venture. *A Miracle of Science* is an example of the webcomic form being used as a distribution path for a text which has been produced along professional, traditional lines, but funded at a hobbyist level without the intimidating financial environment of professionally printed work. It is also relevant to consider that if the authors were using a traditional publishing model, both the length and aesthetics of the text would have been limited by the financial considerations of printing and distributing it. Correspondingly, the experience of *A Miracle of Science* is analogous to reading a traditional comic book mediated by a computer.

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90 Most obviously, the question to have colour or grayscale images.
interface. However, this experience includes the experiential distinction between reading the archive and engaging with the comic pages as they are released on a weekly schedule, and the relevance of the webcomic paratext. *A Miracle of Science* illustrates that even a text that is structured and conceptualised as a traditional comic will have changes to its experiential register when moved into a digital context and updated page by page.

**College Roomies From Hell**

*CRFH* (Campos 1999) has presented one consistent, ongoing narrative for its entire eleven-year run to-date, focused on the same core characters. It is thus a good representative of webcomic texts which lack a traditional beginning-middle-end structure, in favour of an experience closer to generational soap-operas. What began as a light-hearted and largely consequence-free tale of incompatible room-mates and the girls next door, which often resolved incidents within a single comic strip, began to present a more complex world-of-concern: the characterisation grew deeper, the art improved, and storylines extended across multiple comic strips released across days and weeks. What could have been consequence-free ‘gag’ storylines were treated seriously (in terms of their consequences) within the contextual world-of-concern, such as where the three male protagonists went on a ‘misery journey’ and swam in a toxic-waste polluted lake. They picked up mutations which have remained with them ever since.

The comic developed a core, ongoing ‘meta-plot’ when a hallucinatory adventure fuelled by characters accidentally ingesting magic mushrooms contained not a delusion of Satan, but Satan himself. Satan stole the soul of Dave, one of the main protagonists – and had been intended to kill him. It was revealed that Margaret, one of the female protagonists who was characterised as a paranoid survivalist, had been dreaming of an apocalypse for decades and trying to convince herself it was a delusion. Since then, the characters have been, in one way or another, trying to thwart Margaret’s vision of the future – and in many cases contributing to it unwittingly or through gradual corruption.

The comic has presented one clear example of experiments with textual ergodicity through hypertext, in that Maritza Campos created two different interface structures for the archives of a section of *CRFH*. The reader could engage with the comic strips in the same non-chronological order in which they were released, or elect to go through the same pages in a chronological sequence. This was done to allow readers to re-explore material they had already encountered during the regularly scheduled releases from a different perspective – but
also means that there is a textual structure introduced at the archive stage which did not exist previously. The consequence of the structure for the experience of readers engaging with the text was analogous to the comparison between engaging with *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya* (Ishihara 2006) in broadcast versus chronological orders (see Pages 63-65): firstly, different sets of the fanbase preferred one approach over the other; secondly, the non-chronological order made that section of narrative into a puzzle, where the audience was figuring out how different strips related through applying inference. Arguably, there is also a connection to the experience of juxtapositional hypertext in this example (see Pages 84-86), in that the readers were presented with one initial framework for relating to a series of events – and were then provided with an alternative context for how those events unfolded, with an affective quality highlighted by the comparison.

The endless structure which *CRFH* has been operating in has had a number of consequences for the experience of the text. Pragmatically, small details being added into the world-of-concern over time add up when the process extends over more than a decade: the weight of the text’s mythology is extremely involved now, and although it grew out of small logical steps, it is quite complicated. This is an issue in terms of attracting new readers, who are likely to be out of their depth if they read more recent comic pages before the earlier work which explains which character is a were-coyote, which one has a Bond-villain for a mother, and who is in love with whom.

*CRFH*’s experience can also be intimidating to new readers in itself, simply because of the volume of textual information they are confronted with at the outset. The analogy would be the difference between knowing you are reading the first book in a series of twelve or more volumes, as opposed to reading a book in a series which eventually grows to twelve or more volumes: one is a more obvious – and potentially intimidating – investment of time. Also, new readers who develop an interest in recent material can be put off by the necessity of returning to the comic archive from eleven years ago, which has a very different style of art and characterisation and thus presents a different affective register to what attracted their initial interest.91

The ‘unfinished’ nature of the text has even been folded into its own textual development: a number of personal catastrophes struck the author several years ago, which lead to the comic updating very sporadically for a time, breaking the flow of new textual development:

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91 Interestingly, the problems introduced by *CRFH*’s ongoing structure are something that Maritza Campos has been aware of herself, and she announced an intention to ‘reboot’ the comic in December of 2011 after thirteen years of continuity.
material. More importantly, the tone of the story changed within this period, becoming
darker, less humorous, and less hopeful. The extent to which this tonal shift was motivated
by the author’s own outlook changing, as opposed to being a requirement of the story at that
point, is up for debate – but the possibility that an unpleasant period in the author’s life can
be so quickly reflected in the experience of a text is itself interesting.

It is also a point of interest that I do not feel comfortable discussing the details of the
events in question within the context of this project. For one thing, I do not believe that
doing so is relevant, but the reluctance and uneasiness I feel towards the idea is itself notable:
I apparently feel I have enough of a direct, personal connection with Maritza Campos that I
would be somehow betraying her trust by disclosing that information in this forum. The only
reason that I have any information about Campos’ life at all is through contact with her
through journals on the comic site itself, and through her web forum, over a number of years:
environments which she had control over, and within which there was some level of shared
interest or other connection between her and those reading. As such, my felt understanding is
that she felt *comfortable* releasing details of her life to readers of her comic in an
environment where dialogue was possible, when she might not be comfortable with these
same details being discussed outside of that context. My own discomfort can serve as an
example of the feeling of intimacy which the webcomic paratext can foster between readers
and authors, as much as with characters within the comic.

*CRFH* demonstrates how extended webcomic narratives become more complicated
over time, and how their textual ‘unfinish’ means they can rapidly reflect changes within the
author’s life. It also provides an example of the way in which relatively minor contact
through journals and forums can nonetheless build the perception of a direct relationship with
the author of a text.

*Roomies!/It’s Walky!/Shortpacked*

The work of David Willis serves as a useful contrast to *CRFH*: both Campos and
Willis began working in online comics at roughly the same time, and have paratexts which
have been growing for roughly thirteen years; however, Willis has taken an entirely different
approach to textual structure. Where Campos has been producing a single, ongoing world-of-
concern for eleven years, Willis has structured his comics so as to be more modular and self-
contained, and arguably slightly more traditional as a result.
He has produced (to date) three independent narrative arcs within the same diegetic universe and world-of-concern. The first, *Roomies!* (Willis 1997), was produced while Willis was at university himself, and focused on the lives of new university students trying to cope with the world, and their interrelationships. Once he had completed the overall narrative arc of those characters, Willis resolved the comic and began another one. *It's Walky!* (Willis 1999) picked up where *Roomies!* finished, taking a few of the characters from *Roomies!* and moving them into a new context where they were part of a secret government agency saving the world from aliens. When *It's Walky!* reached its planned conclusion, Willis again lifted a few of its characters and recontextualised them again for *Shortpacked!* – where this time the characters find themselves working for a toy-store managed by a deluded egomaniac who considers the store to be a step toward world-domination (Willis 2005). A fourth comic, *Dumbing of Age* (Willis 2010) exists as an ‘alternate universe’ where characters from all three previous works were ‘rebooted’ so that they became characters somehow interconnected at an American university in 2010; many of the characters have become the same age as a peer-group of undergraduates, while others are teachers.

The more compartmentalised approach has allowed Willis to produce story-arcs which fit a more typical narrative ‘beginning-middle-end’ structure while still being released online, and has helped contain the growth of mythology which CRFH needs to deal with. A result of his approach is to suggest that *Roomies!, It's Walky!, and Shortpacked* are three stories all unfolding within the same overall contextual world-of-concern. In comparison, *Dumbing of Age* is explicitly not part of the same world-of-concern, illustrating the flexibility of the format. Even though two of the stories are ‘completed,’ they still qualify as ‘unfinished,’ by Lunenfeld’s definition: characters last seen in *It’s Walky!* or *Roomies!* can return to cameo appearances within either example of Willis’ current work, and we cannot rule out the possibility that they could return to centre-stage. One consequence of this unfinish regarding *Dumbing of Age* is that although it exists in a separate world-of-concern, readers retain their prior investment with the characters who have been ‘rebooted,’ meaning that paratextual engagement is frequently focused on comparing the two incarnations. Speculation is also rife regarding which characters might be encountered next from one of the other comics, and in what context.

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92 Although entirely different characters than those recontextualised from *Roomies!*

93 Both *Shortpacked* and *Dumbing of Age* are active as of January 2012, and new comics are released at the same time for both.
Despite their modular structure when compared to CRFH, all of Willis’ work still follows the pattern of beginning as light and entertaining, only to develop more narrative complexity and character-depth over time. Roomies! was initially very similar to the starting point of CRFH in its focus on new university students trying to survive the world, but grew into a story of characters dealing with death and self-destructive impulses. It’s Walky! began about an incompetent government agency fighting equally incompetent aliens, but eventually dealt with characters coping with extreme post-traumatic-stress disorders in the face of personal and global apocalypses. So far, Shortpacked and Dumbing of Age have avoided the world-shaking events which It’s Walky! dealt with, but Shortpacked! has still moved from the shenanigans of a disorganised toy-store run by a maniac into dealing with characters coming to terms with their sexuality, or a history of parental abuse. Dumbing of Age, for its part, has evolved from a context where some of the ‘gag’ was grounded in the reboot itself, to storylines where one of the central characters was drugged and nearly date-raped.94

David Willis demonstrates that it is possible to create a more typical narrative structure within a webcomic context, and that doing so can restrain the level of internal mythology generated within the world-of-concern – but without preventing the trend where long-term narratives increase their complexity over time. Willis’ work is less intimidating to new readers than CRFH, because modular narratives provide multiple points of entry into the world-of-concern.

Fans!

Fans! (Campbell, Waltrip and others 1999) also began in the same late-nineties timeframe as Campos and Willis, but took a third, different approach: one consistent author (T. Campbell) with comic strips provided by a number of different artists – although Jason Waltrip is the most frequent and consistent artist. One result for the experience of the text was that different artists presented different enough designs for the core characters within the world-of-concern that some readers found those sections hard to engage with, because the characters were hard to recognise. This suggests that consistent aesthetics are important to invested intimacy established within the world-of-concern.

Fans! reached a planned conclusion in 2005, and seemingly finished. The website remained as an archive of the entire text, and the author(s) moved on to other projects.

94 This is also an example where readers’ investment in the character within the world-of-concern shared by Roomies!/It’s Walky/Shortpacked! made events particularly powerful, due to the degree of intimacy and prior knowledge they have of who the character is.
However, in 2008, T. Campbell had more ideas for a story involving the world-of-concern. What was planned initially as a donation-incentive for a different webcomic project became the motivation to revive the comic in its entirety, when the author realised the story was too big for a short piece. Despite the fact that nobody, not even the author, considered *Fans!* to be ‘on hiatus’ rather than ‘concluded,’ the ‘unfinished’ nature of the online context revived it, and it continues as of the time of writing.

As well as the comic strips which made use of multiple visual layers (see Page 119) the *Fans!* paratext was extremely active: readers of the comic became involved in offering the authors multimedia content, such as audio-recordings of songs sung by characters within the world-of-concern. These audio and video files produced in response to the core comic text were integrated into the website as hyperlinks beside the original comic strips in which the inspiration material appeared, essentially functioning as fan dramatisations of events within the comic. Along with this, T. Campbell is himself very active in online discussion regarding the webcomics he is involved in, and releases regular “director’s commentary” and extra material as part of an incentive for contributing financially to his different projects.

*Fans!* shows that the world-of-concern established with webcomics is shaped by the aesthetics of its visuals, along with being a singular example of how significant the role of textual unfinish and the webcomic paratext can be to the experience of a text.

**THE EXPERIENCE OF WEBCOMICS**

This chapter considered how comics as a form function through a process of *inference* on behalf of the reader, and how the change to a digital context has introduced two different registers of webcomic experience, one for reading the archives, and the other in waiting for daily updates, together with the impact of the webcomic paratext. These different experiential registers demonstrate the relevance of affective phenomenology for comparative studies of new media, since they only exist at the level of experience: analysis at a purely textual level would only highlight the role of Peter Lunenfeld’s ‘unfinish’ rather than the experiential distinctions. Likewise, structural/textual analysis might identify that the digital context presents an environment where texts have fewer pragmatic limitations on their length, but would not consider the role of intimacy within the worlds-of-concern established with readers, or with the webcomic paratext.

The essential processes of engaging with printed comics and webcomics are essentially the same. Where the two become distinguished is at the level of the affective
qualities associated with their processes of textual engagement. Reading printed comics is, from the perspective of textual engagement, not incomparable to reading a printed novel: the engagement at the level of comic frames and inference is different than negotiating prose, but at the same time, those comic frames are held within a physical structure of turning pages.

The physical engagement of negotiating webcomics when reading the archives is often limited to a single click of the mouse to move the text forward by one page, possibly including a scroll of the mouse to take in pages which do not fit on to the monitor, or if the reader wants to read supplementary comments from the author. The textual engagement of webcomics lacks any hint of how long the reader has spent reading, or how much of the comic remains to be read. As a result, it is possible to get comfortably lost exploring a new webcomic for many hours. However, the same elements which make webcomics relaxing can also make them compelling: rather than whiling away the hours, some comics hook readers and they read deep into the night without being entirely aware of how much time is passing.

Long-form webcomics foster reading which feels social. The reader connects with characters within the comic’s world-of-concern and share their days alongside his/her own, in ways which are less possible within the forms of textual engagement promoted by traditional printed comics. The characters can become like friends and acquaintances to us: people we are comfortable relaxing around, and whom we catch up with frequently. Together with this felt social connection, webcomics are sites around which other social elements build: they can be our soap operas and entertainment, and we get to know other fans who share the same senses of humour and interest as ourselves – particularly during the phase of engaging with new comic pages as they are released. After all, we share a set of at least one group of friends in the characters of the comic themselves, and sometimes we discover that different social contexts share members. The authors of the comics are people we can get to know through their own experiences, when they share them with us or if we are provided with opportunities to talk to them ourselves.

Alternatively, short-form webcomics offer bite-sized and easily accessible slices of comedic work, often in a style unlikely to be available outside of the internet due to concerns about content and taboo. These comics are themselves experienced as social, but in a

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95 In a recent update on the Twitter-feed of Jeph Jacques, the author of Questionable Content, he noted that someone had told him that s/he’d been upset at work over events within the comic; a concerned boss had asked if the person was okay, and all s/he could think to describe the situation was that “two friends of mine broke up.” [http://twitter.com/jephjacques/status/5397351535480832](http://twitter.com/jephjacques/status/5397351535480832) November 19th 2010, 12:10 PM (Jacques 2010)
different way: rather than being sites around which communities grow, they are texts to share amongst your friends – and often include online tools designed to facilitate exactly this.

Although both hypertext fictions and webcomics both provide a level of agency to the person negotiating their texts, this agency is qualified: hypertext fictions are felt-experiences of topographical exploration or puzzles precisely because the reader cannot change the content of lexia, instead experiencing how the lexia interrelate; webcomics display most of their agency as part of engaging with the webcomic paratext, rather than allowing readers to intervene in the text directly. The level of agency and structural ergodicity presented by videogames as a form is much higher, providing an experiential context which is defined by the sense of responsibility felt by the player for events and their consequences within the diegetic space of the text.

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96 Although, as has been discussed, there are exceptions where the paratext *did* influence the text itself.
The question of how to characterise what sets the experience of videogame texts apart from the experience of other forms of media has been a defining issue for the critical study of games. For a time, games criticism was framed around what was seen as a critical division between two camps. Narratologists argued that games should be studied in terms of traditional narrative theory and that they could be directly compared to novels, films, and other narrative forms, because narrative was a trait that all forms shared. In comparison, ludologists were critical of what they claimed to be narratology’s inappropriately literary approach to the videogame form (Eskelinen 2001), and argued that videogames should be studied in terms of their own rules, interfaces, and the concept of play. However, Gonzalo Frasca argued in 2003 that the perception of a legitimate schism between scholars of ludology and narratology was based in a misunderstanding, and motivated in part by concerns about critical imperialism within the field (Frasca 2003). Despite Frasca’s clarification, the perception of an active, conceptual ludology/narratology divide has done much to inform the discourse of game studies (Apperley 2006; Simons 2007). Now, critical videogame discourse is moving out from the shadow left by the perceived debate, and has a greater freedom to find its feet without the assumption that work will necessarily involve taking a position on the contentious issue of narrative. Ludology and narratology are thus no longer directly relevant to the questions informing modern videogames research. Even articles which would seem to be heavily narratological, such as Barry Ip’s examinations of narrative structures in games (Ip 2010; Ip 2011), are framed in terms of considering how games implement structures common to traditional narrative in a context of personal engagement with texts, rather than arguing that elements of traditional narrative are central features to the experience of games.97

This project and the process of analytical juxtaposition presented within it qualifies as a multidisciplinary study within the context of videogame discourse because of its grounding in phenomenology, together with theories of affect and the textual-analysis of multiple media types. However, it is not alone: several authors are contributing to an increasing body of work which seeks to account for affect and how the experience of games relates to textual

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97 The position attributed to narratology, that games represent an absence or paucity of narrative and that they are of little value as a result, does occasionally surface in the present day – as can be seen in an interview with Baroness Susan Greenfield regarding her broader campaign against the corrupting influence of games (Denby 2011). However, these statements are given little weight by the scholarly community.
structure, although there is significant variation in both critical definitions and how the studies are conceptualised. Some articles frame affect as ‘arousal’ and consider how the addition of biofeedback technology into games might alter the experience of play (Gilleade and Allanson 2003; Gilleade, Dix and Allanson 2005); others focus on establishing an analytical framework intended to ‘tune’ games based on finding undesired experiential offshoots caused by game mechanics (Hunicke, LeBlanc and Zubeck 2004), or categorise games based on particular features of play (Zagal et al. 2005); others still consider how to best study the experience of games via different qualitative methods (Ribbens and Poels 2009). The power of videogame worlds-of-concern and the experience of engaging with them is the subject of studies considering how processes of game play shape racial power dynamics (Fron et al. 2007). This includes studies investigating scenarios where different contextual uses of space in MMOs can produce racial pogroms in which organised groups of players hunt down and murder female dwarves (Steinhuehler 2006); investigations of the institutional ‘whiteness’ of games, where ‘human’ is connoted directly as ‘white European,’ while features associated with non-white culture are connected to orcs and trolls (Higgin 2008); and explorations of how game mechanics and the processes of engaging with them in Resident Evil 5 (Capcom 2009) underscore a racially problematic experience of the text (Brock 2011).

For its part, this chapter discusses how the experience of videogame texts is distinguished from other media forms by being and feeling personal, due to processes of engagement that makes the person playing them feel responsible for decisions made within the world-of-concern. This responsibility is folded into Heideggerian worlds-of-concern shared with fictional characters, which allow for significant affective consequences for the phenomenological experience of the text. I argue that affective permeability between the ‘actual-I’ and ‘virtual-I’ (see Page 70-72) allows players to engage with a context that they know to be fictional, and yet which is capable of threatening or engaging them directly. A trio of case-studies are then used to explore the flexibility of the videogame form. Two of these explore critical concepts which have been discussed in the chapter, while a third presents a process of engagement which problematises immersion and means it qualifies as structurally cybertextual, but in such a way that the player cannot be or feel responsible for actions within the world-of-concern.
THE EXPERIENCE OF PLAY

The essential problem in discussing the ‘general character’ of game-play is the vast structural variation found within the videogame form, which can encompass anything from the high-speed simplicity of *Pac-Man* (Namco 1980) to the detailed open-world environment and conflict of *STALKER: Shadow of Chernobyl* (GSC Game World 2007), and the visual abstraction which turns music into competitive tests of timing and skill in *Guitar Hero* (Harmonix 2005). However, there are some elements which are consistent across the experience of games, regardless of its incredible variety of forms and structures.

**Cybertextuality and Ergodicity in Videogames**

All videogame texts present experiences which qualify as both ergodic and cybertextual. They are ergodic texts because they require processes of choice and discernment in negotiating the text. At the same time, cybertextuality is relevant to videogame experiences because calculations independent of the person negotiating them are to be found in the artificial-intelligence of the game, which it uses to field enemies and obstacles within the game’s space.

However, videogames also display a wide continuum of textual cybertextuality, starting at this baseline level and then moving into territory where the algorithms which are independent of the player have increasing consequences for the experience of the text. For example, *DOOM* and *Quake* (id Software 1993; id Software 1996) both display the level of cybertextuality common to the videogame baseline: artificial intelligence controls the enemies which the player must defeat or circumvent in negotiating the text, and engaging with this element which is outside of the player’s hands will shape the experience of the text. In comparison, *Half-Life* (Valve 1998) shares this baseline level of cybertextuality, but goes one step further: the player is presented with one choice during the game which can influence the outcome of events. The choice comes at the very end of the text, where players are given the options of joining the mysterious G-Man who has shadowed him/her through the alien-infested facility, or to die, producing two different endings to the game experience.

There are videogame texts which display slightly more cybertextuality than *Half-Life*, because the cybertextual element involves keeping track of multiple binary decisions across

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98 The extent that the intrinsic cybertextuality shapes the experience of playing a game without introducing multiple outcomes is discussed on Pages 147-148 as part of considering the *alterbiography* of play.
the course of negotiating the text, as opposed to just one choice. This series of choices is
used in order to select one of several different ending sequences when the game is completed.
*Bioshock* (2K Boston 2007) is one such example, as the core meaningful choice the player is
presented with is to either rescue or kill and harvest a series of ‘Little Sisters,’ and the
number slain produces one of three different endings. In comparison, other videogame texts
have a far more involved level of structural cybertextuality, and essentially any decision
made in the course of engaging with the text will be relevant to the outcome of the experience
(see Pages 59-60).

A way of conceptualising how the experience of videogames changes as their levels
of ergodicity and cybertextuality increase from the baseline, and how increases in either
cybertextuality or ergodicity can be distinguished, is to return to the text-as-experienced and
the text-in-itself. As has been noted, all videogames present experiences of discernment and
decision-making, and use at least some algorithms independent of the player to generate
challenges in the world-of-concern. However, from an experiential perspective, games such
as *DOOM*, *Quake* and even *Half-Life* are primarily shaped by ergodicity, rather than
cybertextuality. The text-as-experienced is repeatable; the algorithms mean that event details
change within the experience, but not the experience itself. For example, a given room
within the game will pose the same challenges, and have the same enemies – the specific way
in which the actions of those enemies combine are not predictable, but the player is still
approaching them in a context of choice and decision-making. When structural ergodicity
increases – in other words, that the stable network of decisions grows more complicated in
terms of how one decision might impact others – the experience of playing the game has
similarities to that of engaging with a topographical hypertext fiction (see Pages 79-81). In
games such as *Fallout* (Black Isle Studios 1997), the branching tree of decisions which
comprises the text-in-itself does not change during play. As such, the player can use
knowledge of the text-in-itself’s network from earlier attempts to negotiate the text-as-
experienced as they play; doing so requires that they hold details of how different decisions
and outcomes relate in mind, just as people negotiating topographical hypertexts do (see
Pages 83-84). In comparison, texts like *Planescape: Torment* (Black Isle Studios 1999)
which are marked by a deeper level of cybertextuality feel fundamentally different, because

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99 The approach taken by *Metro 2033* (4A Games 2010) is to keep track of all the tiny decisions made in
negotiating the game, rather than focusing on ‘pivotal’ moments of character development. This avoids a
situation that qualifies as a form of structural incoherence (see Pages 55-56) where a player might behave as a
paragon of virtue for pivotal moments, while the rest of the game is spent sneaking into houses within the
world-of-concern and robbing citizens blind (Thursten 2010).

100 These dynamic ‘event details’ within a repeatable experience are discussed in greater length on Page 147.
the player is not engaging with a stable relationship between the text-in-itself and the text-as-experienced, but with the text-as-experienced rooted in the text-as-generated. In this situation, the player cannot hold in mind a stable network comprising the text-in-itself, because just as with *Soft Cinema* (Manovich and Kratky 2005) (see Page 29) the game is constructed as the player negotiates the text. It is not a stable network, and negotiating the text is experienced as a process is one of mutual ongoing refinement: the game learns about who the player is choosing to be within the world-of-concern in response to questions it poses him/her at the same time as the player decides who his/her character is (see Pages 59-60).

‘Alterbiography’ as Analytical Tool

As much as the comparative levels of ergodicity and cybertextuality are relevant to the experience of play, videogames present variation which is independent of the number of variables and decisions that a text keeps track of as the player negotiates the text. Gordon Calleja introduces the concept of the *alterbiography* to distinguish between different levels of storytelling in games:

The problem with this argument [that you cannot have interactivity and narration at the same time] is that Juul switches between two dimensions of narrative in game environments: the story generated by the moment-to-moment actions within the game environment and the story that has been pre-scripted. In *Max Payne* (Rockstar Toronto, 2001), for example, flashbacks and flash-forwards are important parts of the scripted game experience. In *Call of Duty IV* (Infinity Ward, 2007), there is a single chapter which takes place a few years prior to the rest of the events in the game. On the other hand, the generation of events through the player’s interaction is not predetermined. If this were the case, then games would lose their ergodicity. Although these two aspects of narrative in games are related, it is critical to distinguish which one we are referring to when discussing the subject. To this end, I will here make a distinction between the *alterbiography*, referring to the story generated by the individual player as she takes action in the game, and the *scripted narrative*, referring to the pre-scripted story events written into the game. On the moment-by-moment level of engagement, a player’s interpretation of events occurring within the game environment and his interactions with the game’s rules, human and AI entities, and objects result in a performance which gives game environments their narrative affordances. Interaction generates, rather than excludes, story. (Calleja 2011 115)

As such, the *alterbiography* is something we can consider to be a subset of the text-as-experienced: the elements of the textual experience which occur as an unscripted outgrowth of the player’s negotiation with the rules making up the world-of-concern. I would argue that
the alterbiography is another feature of textual structure in the context of games which exists on a continuum rather than a binary state, and that it is useful to apply the concept to the experience of playing games. The alterbiography explains scenarios that have already been discussed where the experience of games like *DOOM* (id Software 1993) are primarily defined by ergodic rather than cybertextual engagement, despite the fact that they are cybertexts. The cybertextual element of *DOOM* changes the story generated by the individual player as s/he takes action in the game. As a result, the text-in-itself is repeatable, despite ergodic and/or cybertextual variation: the details of each level of the game will remain the same, down to the number and type of AI agents and their placement, even as the alterbiography shifts in response to variations produced as those AI agents interact differently on different iterations. An example can be found where there are AI agents in the game that will attack each other if given the chance: the AI encounter each other before the player and start fighting, meaning that their location and status within the environment becomes uncertain as the scenario plays out. The text-in-itself is designed so that the text-as-experienced encountered by a given player includes this uncertainty, because the alterbiography remains contingent on cybertextual elements that the player can only speculate on before encountering it.

The alterbiography is helpful because games present differences in the extent to which the experience of play can be focused on alterbiography to the exclusion of scripted narrative (Rossignol 2011). As Calleja has noted in targeting a specific subset of videogame texts which he refers to as ‘virtual environments,’ (Calleja 2011 15) the more complicated the environment presented by the diegetic world-of-concern of a game text, the more likely it is to be capable of producing complex alterbiographies. For example, *Half-Life* (Valve 1998) was lauded upon release for the rich and varied alterbiographies players experienced because the AI of enemy soldiers were capable of working in packs to flank the player, throw grenades when s/he used cover, or sneak up on them from behind. At the time, this was groundbreaking – and affectively potent, considering that the players found themselves hunted by more competent soldiers than s/he was. *Half-Life 2* (Valve 2004) is a more complex virtual environment again, which produces more variable alterbiography: I recall an occasion where I was crawling under a bridge above the sea, and a headcrab101 jumped at me. I hit it with a ‘shoving’ bolt of the gravity-gun, a gadget normally used to pick-up and throw heavy objects, and knocked it back. The headcrab skidded away from me, turned to make

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101 One of the iconic monsters of the series, a crab-like beast prone to jumping at the player’s face and screaming.
another attack, and its momentum carried it off the platform. It fell to its death in the sea, and I was able to watch it gently carried away by shifts in the water. Other games might have glitched at the point that the headcrab ‘fell,’ by having it skate out, Wile-E-Coyote style, over nothing,102 or have the creature die and/or vanish. The coherence of rules in Half-Life 2’s world-of-concern supported what became a striking personal alterbiography where I managed to save myself by accident.

If we take the alterbiography to be the distinctive experiential quality of the player’s unscripted negotiation with the rules making up the world-of-concern, then alterbiography correlates with the innate ergodicity and cybertextuality that distinguishes the videogame form. However, if alterbiography exists on a continuum,103 then what traits modify the extent to which alterbiography is relevant to the experience of games? Jim Rossignol compares a series of games in terms of their ‘exploration rating,’ in Is 2011 The Year Of Game World Exploration? (Rossignol 2011). The core points Rossignol uses for the comparison is to consider the size of their world, the extent to which players are encouraged to explore that world independently of the scripted narrative, and their ‘liveness’ in terms of how much of the world is actively unfolding in absence of player activity:

I think the important lesson here is that more and more games are benefiting from allowing us some freedom. The trick, I think, is that these kinds of games give themselves an immediate advantage over linear games being motivated by the player. Linear games only really work as long as the forward momentum is kept up, but when the world is open, the pace and direction can change, and the player knows that’s their responsibility. If the story isn’t going forward it’s because you spent the past three hours looking at mushrooms. And you did that. Agency!

In fact it almost doesn’t matter how superficial the “life” or general detailing of the open world is, so long as we have some reasons to mess about in it. The games which provide us with great toys to use in the world, while also making that open world interesting to explore, are the games which I think contain a taste of the most interesting possible future of game design. Linearity might continue to dominate, but I think its grip is weakening. (Rossignol 2011)

The size of a game world104 is going to affect the extent to which it can be explored outside the context of the scripted narrative, although as Rossignol identifies, having a vast world is irrelevant if players have no reason to decide to explore it. Along with that, the greater the

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102 An example of structural incoherence (see Pages 55-56)
103 Consistent with ergodicity, cybertextuality, and many other structural traits considered in affective phenomenology.
complexity that AI interactions can grow into within the diegetic world-of-concern, the more possibilities there are for the alterbiography to surprise.  

Interestingly, if we consider these traits on the continuum, they demonstrate that the open-ness of a given text to the production of alterbiography is completely disconnected from structural ergodicity and cybertextuality. For example, we have discussed the experience of *Fallout* (Black Isle Studios 1997) as grounded in a structurally ergodic framework of responsibility and decision-making, and it does provide an open world to explore. However, within that open world, there is little scope for an alterbiography which is unrelated to the scripted story, since every action undertaken by the player is somehow related to forwarding the core goals of repairing the ‘water chip’ of one’s Vault city, or in defeating a mutant army rising in the desert. There are, however, many different ways that the player can contribute to those goals. Likewise, *Planescape: Torment* (Black Isle Studios 1999) is a cybertextual experience where the decisions available to the player are produced by the text in response to earlier decisions made in negotiating its structure. However, despite this structural flexibility, the alterbiography is grounded in the player’s explorations of many varied approaches to engaging with the scripted story, rather than independent of it. As a comparison, *System Shock 2* (Looking Glass Studios and Irrational Games 1999) is not structurally ergodic or cybertextual in the same way as *Fallout* or *Planescape: Torment* since the game does not keep track of decisions made in negotiating the text; however, it is an environment which produces rich and affective alterbiographies.

The experience of games such as *STALKER: Shadow of Chernobyl* (GSC Game World 2007) and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011) are qualitatively different than those of *Fallout, Planescape: Torment*, or *System Shock 2*. *Skyrim* and *STALKER* are contexts where the experience of play presents the player with a world in which to roam at-will, where the world is itself active and undergoing change unrelated to the player, and in which there happens to be a core story to pursue if s/he wishes. What sets the experience of these games apart is that they present a contextually ‘deeper’ alterbiography

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105 Examples can be seen from *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011) where I witnessed casual Twitter discussion about a dragon attacking a stable, only to be kicked to death by the enraged horses from inside.
106 That is, from textual ergodicity and cybertextuality beyond the minimum level required to have an alterbiography at all.
107 As has been discussed on Pages 59-60.
108 The extent to which the individual experience of the game can change based on how much noise the player makes in exploring the diegetic environment has already been discussed (see Page 58).
than other game texts, following Rossignol’s logic regarding their combinations of a large world to explore, reasons to explore it, and the complexity of the interactions that can grow out of the AI populating the world. Alterbiography as a concept is a useful lens for comparative analysis in ways not originally applied by Gordon Calleja, and allows me to argue that the experience of ‘open-world’ games can be defined by the extent to which they are open to alterbiographical engagement (Blessener 2011).

Another axis of critical relevance for the alterbiography as a concept is in examining games framed around the procedural-generation of content, such as Dwarf Fortress (Adams and Adams 2006), Minecraft (Persson 2009) and The Binding of Isaac (McMillen and Himsl 2011). I argue that these games exist as engines for the generation of environments which alterbiographies can unfold within. Both Dwarf Fortress and Minecraft are explicitly focused on creating environments that players can adapt and explore; Minecraft lacks any semblance of a core scripted story, while Dwarf Fortress is framed around the attempts of a dwarf-colony to build a home in an inhospitable environment and survive as long as possible. In comparison, The Binding of Isaac is designed to use procedural generation in creating a limited environment for arcade-style combat, and the player cannot save their game: when they die, that alterbiography ends. As a result, the experience of play is a blackly humorous and desperate attempt to do as much as possible with the randomised resources found while exploring the basement-dungeon setting before expiring. The relevance of alterbiography to games framed around procedural-generation is that because alterbiography is their focus, their levels of ‘replayability’ are vast, precisely because each experience of engaging with each game can be different.

The alterbiography is also relevant to topical debates within game criticism. For example, the conflict between John Walker and Brendan Keogh in November 2011 about whether Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 (Infinity Ward 2011) qualifies as an ‘un-game’ (Walker 2011c ; Keogh 2011 ; Walker 2011b) is entirely grounded in different personal investments with contextual worlds-of-concern and how they relate to structure, rather than anything concrete in the game text itself. It can certainly be argued that CoD: MW3 presents an experiential alterbiography that is less ergodic than some other games in the same genre: negotiating the text requires less of a process of choice and discernment in order to proceed.

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110 The infamous tale of “Boatmurdered” (Various Authors 2006-2007) is a transcript of a ‘legacy’ game of Dwarf Fortress where different players took turns running the game for a year of in-game time, imagining themselves as sequential rulers. Likewise, “Oilfurnace” and “Bronze Murder” are two separate alterbiographies of Dwarf Fortress which have been illustrated by Timothy Denee for PC Powerplay Magazine (Denee 2010a ; Denee 2010b), available at http://www.timdenee.com/oilfurnace.html and http://www.timdenee.com/bronzemurder.html.
CHAPTER 5: VIDEOGAMES – RESPONSIBILITY AND IMMERSION

For John Walker, this reduction in agency takes away from features that he invests in as part of his contextual world-of-concern, and for him the low level of choice and discernment involved in *CoD: MW3*’s alterbiography was low enough that he does not consider it to be a game-like experience (Walker 2011c; Walker 2011b). In comparison, Brendan Keogh was invested in a contextual world-of-concern where his agency might be limited by the circumstances the game presented during the course of play. As a result, his experience of the text’s alterbiography was entirely positive – leading him to conclude that Walker’s complaints about a lack of agency in negotiating the text meant that he was playing the game wrong (Keogh 2011).

What is striking about this debate is that it is not about the game’s *structure*, but both critics are approaching the discussion *as if it were*: the arguments presented by both Keogh and Walker are framed around the idea that there is something innate in the design of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* that produces particular experiences, and that this experience is objective enough to judge on its merits. However, the two critics are not on the same page, or sharing the same definitions, because they had fundamentally different experiences of the same text. Instead, the argument is better understood as being about how the levels of agency and responsibility provided by *CoD: MW3* relate to what Walker and Keogh are invested in as individual players, with individual worlds-of-concern. At that point, we can discuss how and why the processes of structural engagement worked for Keogh’s experience of his contextual world-of-concern, and how the same processes of structural engagement were antithetical to Walker. Videogames, as with any form of storytelling media, are *subjective experiences*; the process of critical juxtaposition through affective phenomenology presented by this project is a step towards providing an analytically productive framework for studying subjective experiences of textual storytelling.111

**Videogame 'Writerly-ness'*

The extent to which the players of videogames possess legitimate *agency* has been critically debated for decades. A common position on the subject is that, since all of the options made available for a player to choose from only exist because programmers decided to *let* the player choose them, agency is illusory (Poole 2000 106-107). Christine Ward

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111 As with other elements under consideration in this project, textual alterbiography is a continuum which extends beyond videogames as a textual form: Alternate Reality Games display a form of alterbiography which is an outgrowth of unscripted negotiation with the ARG’s world-of-concern, except the alterbiography of ARGs involves a higher degree of subjective experience – see Page 184.
Gailey writes, “The interactive quality of video games gives the player the impression of limitless choice. What the player does affects the outcome. But the perception of choice is largely illusory, since the framework…is predetermined” (Gailey 1993 84). Likewise, Peter Bell attempts to account for the player’s perception of agency using the Althusserean theories of subjectivity and the concept of the ‘suture’ from cinema, ultimately concluding that the perception of agency is wholly a construction of the text:

Making the subjected (one who is ruled over) feel like a subject (center of initiative) is naturalized as “realism” because to acknowledge that interactivity is a production-side phenomenon would remove any notion that the individual is choosing it, which is essential to Althusser’s theory and the claims of interactivity. (...) DOOM and Quake II cast players as spoken subjects, who do not themselves “speak” but are given the impression that they do. Interactive game play is not a dialogue between player and game but a script to be read and followed by the player. (Bell 2003 12-13)

Johan Huizinga presents a different understanding of games and subjectivity as part of his study of fundamental play: from an experiential perspective, Huizinga proposes that “First and foremost, then, all play is a voluntary activity” (Huizinga 1950 7), which requires an ongoing engagement on behalf of the player. As Jane McGonigal points out,

For Huizinga, it is important to note, the decision to play is not a momentary choosing, a kind of gate through which the player passes. Rather, the feeling of autonomy that comes from voluntarily choosing to play permeates the entire play experience; the player keeps playing as a matter of continuous and active choice. “Here, then,” Huizinga writes, “we have the first main characteristic of play: it is free, is in fact freedom” (8). The state of play is the very state of self-determination; it is an overt act and sustained expression of the individual will. (McGonigal 2010 255)

Roger Caillois builds on Huizinga’s work and directly engages with the apparent contradiction that players submit to external rules while retaining individual freedom to act. He argues that the predefined nature of the rules of any game does not diminish play’s association with freedom, because of the creativity the player displays in responding to the limitations those rules represent, and the ongoing investment required of him/her to maintain play:

The player devotes himself spontaneously to the game, of his free will and for his pleasure, each time completely free to choose… above all, it is necessary that they be free to leave whenever they please.... (...) The game consists of the
need to find or continue at once a response which is free within the limits set by the rules (Caillois 1962 6-8)

Play is a creation of which the player is master (Caillois 1962 163)

Both Greg Costikyan and the team of Salen and Zimmerman build on the work of Caillois and Huizinga, arguing individually that the heart of play is found in the player’s ability to choose.

At some point, you are faced with a choice: You may choose to do A, or to do B. But what makes A better than B? Or is B better than A at some times but not at others? What factors go into the decision? What resources are to be managed? What’s the eventual goal? Aha! … Now we’re talking about decision making (Costikyan 2002 11)

Salen and Zimmerman go further than Costikyan, and specifically associate the player’s ability to choose with having a sense of responsibility for the outcome of his/her decisions (Salen and Zimmerman 2004): “For Salen and Zimmerman, the unique satisfaction about gameplay emerges from the players’ ability to claim direct responsibility for an outcome by controlling the decision making process. Game players have full ownership of the actions they take” (McGonigal 2010 256).

As has been discussed in Chapter 1 (see Pages 30-31), experiential writerly-ness can be most closely associated with Barthes’ claim that the text is ‘ourselves writing’ (Barthes 1974 5). Videogames provide a context of engagement which qualifies as more ‘writerly’ than traditional forms of mediated storytelling because the players of videogames are creatively engaging with the text as they negotiate it, and perceiving themselves to be the creators of the text as they experience it (see Pages 69-71). An example of this process can be seen in the quote from Costikyan, where the player is choosing between two options: despite the fact that the game is providing a limiting framework for what the player is able to choose between, the evaluative thought-process involved in making the decision is his/her own, and allows latitude for creative decision-making. This is a process central to Thomas Malaby’s definition of games: “A game is a semibounded and socially legitimate domain of contrived contingency that generates interpretable outcomes,” (Malaby 2007). Additionally, the affective quality of the choice will be shaped by the player’s sense of responsibility for whatever the outcome of the decision might be, and even the fact that s/he personally needs to make a decision. Videogame ‘writerly-ness’ is part of what makes the experience of

112 This is a sentiment echoed by Gordon Calleja, who argues that ‘structural limitations’ to agency are a fundamental part of ludic engagement (Calleja 2011 148).
games feel personal: the game played, i.e. the text-as-experienced, is the tale of the player’s creative negotiation through and with the text. From an experiential perspective, videogame texts map relatively closely onto elements of how Barthes defined more ‘writerly’ texts, in that the player can be argued to be a “producer of the text” (Barthes 1974 4) and that from the perspective of the person playing the game, the ending of the text is not yet ‘written’ (Barthes 1974 10).

Because videogames present players with a set of predetermined rules which arguably limit their agency, the hybridity (see Pages 68-69) produced by engaging with the text establishes a context of creative problem-solving and personal engagement: part of what sets the experience of videogames apart is that the decisions of the player matter, and that s/he feels a sense of responsibility for the outcome.

Tmesis, Responsibility and Challenge

Videogames generally have less structural tmesis than novels, and an equally low-level to that displayed by films within the context of a cinema (see Pages 1-3). Videogames generally do not allow you to skip to the end without traversing the intervening structure; you can only reach level nine after rising victoriously through levels one through eight. An argument can be made that within this context, there is even less structural tmesis than films within the context of the cinema: in the cinema, there is nothing which can force the audience to pay attention, and their interest in engaging with the text is irrelevant to the film’s progress; with videogames, if the player is not paying attention s/he is unlikely to make progress through the text. Essentially, in books and films, it is possible for the audience to phase in and out of their focus on the text while still negotiating its structure; in videogames this is not as possible. The effect of this lack of structural tmesis on the general experience of games is that it emphasises the agency of the player, and his/her sense of responsibility: if s/he does not achieve the requirements of each stage of the game, there is no advancement within the structure of the text. Within books or films, there are texts where members of the audience may not be able to negotiate the whole structure, potentially because they get bored, disinterested, or simply did not comprehend it. Within the context of videogames, there are texts which players never complete because they cannot work past a section of the game. The equivalent would be someone unable to finish a book because they reached a chapter which was startlingly beyond his/her ability to read and comprehend. However, there are
exceptions to the level of structural tmesis within the general character of videogame experience, and these are cheat codes.

Cheat codes provide a way to circumvent the underlying lack of structural tmesis found within the general experience of videogames: they alter elements of the contextual world-of-concern, such as by providing invulnerability or additional resources; alternatively, they can focus on increasing structural tmesis, by opening up possibilities for skipping at-will through the structure of the text. Cheat codes modify the experience of game-play: generally, they are a resort for players who wish a different character of experience, with a different affective tenor – replacing the tension produced by the threats and limited resources found within the world-of-concern with frenetic gunplay, for example. On occasions where a player has run into a section of a game which is beyond his/her skills, cheat codes can provide a way to jump over or circumvent the obstacle to his/her progress, and get into the rest of the text. However, using the cheat codes does diminish investment with the contextual world-of-concern, because they require that the player acknowledge the mediated nature of the game experience. As a consequence of this acknowledgement of mediation, cheat codes can reduce investment and, to an extent, immersion – because they reduce the responsibility the player feels for his/her progress within the contextual world-of-concern: it is not really you overcoming the challenges anymore because you have changed the context of those challenges so that less skill is required, and thus what you achieve while cheating has less affective weight. To surpass a particular monster when you have infinite ammunition and/or invulnerability is distinctly different achievement than to do so ‘naturally.’ In many ways, cheat codes qualify as a form of structural incoherence (see Pages 55-56), because they mean that an action can suddenly have a different consequence, fundamentally altering the contextual world-of-concern.

Although there is a wide continuum of ergodicity within videogames, games on the whole display more ergodicity than novels or film: negotiating the structure of games requires processes of choice, discernment and decision-making. Even within something as apparently simple as Pac-Man (Namco 1980), choice is the most basic requirement of attempting to engage with the text. Without choice, the player is not going anywhere, and this connects with structural tmesis to emphasise that in many ways, the experience of games

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113 Mia Consalvo has written about how complex the subject of cheating in videogames is, considering that what qualifies as ‘cheating’ for a given player is heavily dependent on what they are invested in within the world-of-concern (Consalvo 2007). One example would be players who don’t consider using external programs to automate repetitive actions in World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) to be cheating: they are invested in experiencing the world, but not the process of ‘grinding’ required to become powerful enough to do so (Consalvo 2009 412-413).
has you at centre-stage. Without choice, you as a player cannot engage with the text at all, and the text itself is structured to ensure that progress is tied to achievement: however small an element it might be, progress through the experience of games is something which is earned – and this is true whether we are discussing reaching the tenth level of Space Invaders (Taito 1978) or your progress through the unfolding experience of Planescape: Torment’s narrative. The concept of earning progress through the experience of a videogame text can be applied to another element relevant to the general character of videogame play: challenge.

Videogames combine personal investment with challenge, repeatability, and competition. The simplest of games such as Pac-Man and modern games such as Bejeweled (PopCap Games 2001) or even Windows Solitaire (Microsoft 1990) are refined down to focus only on these elements. The character of the experience for these simplest of games can be linked to non-computerised puzzle challenges such as Sudoku (Nikoli Magazine 1984) and crosswords: the player is engaged in solving a problem which challenges him/her; each change s/he makes within the diegesis of the text – such as moving cards in Solitaire or filling squares within Sudoku – alters the context of the playing-field, and thus the factors which the player needs to bear in mind; when either success and failure are reached, a new game with new conditions can be created at the touch of a button to begin the challenges again. There is a rapid feedback-loop of action and consequence: anecdotally, I have encountered very few people who were prepared to stop playing after having lost (or, more accurately, failing to complete) a round of Solitaire or Sudoku; instead they begin another game and finish that. Additionally, even when playing Solitaire with a physical deck of cards, a challenge of this nature is something which we are capable of taking entirely personally. More complex games repeat this element of challenge, with a feedback-loop of action and consequence. The details of the challenges can become more complicated, but the underlying process remains consistent across the format: games are a challenge which the player is personally invested in, and they are thus responsible for both the outcome and any progress through the text. The experience of the text is something which is earned – or at the very least, is felt as earned.

**Embodiment**

Every game shares the fact that we engage with them physically, requiring some form of interface; these interfaces have consequences for our experiences of the texts they mediate. A pragmatic consequence of an interface to any media form is that our engagement with it is
embodied: in the case of videogames, we have to match our bodies to technological controls which input commands into the digital environment of the game. This technological mediation, together with the mediation presented by our bodies, is not neutral to our experience of the text. The core issue of physical mediation with digital interfaces is something which is increasingly discussed within wider social discourse; there are even medical conditions which I consider ‘interface syndromes,’ entirely based in our bodies being stressed by what is required in order to engage with digital contexts. There are desk arrangements endorsed by government departments (OSH 1996 24-41) designed to limit the damage we can do to ourselves while interfacing with computers, and this has nothing to do with the neural-implants of tomorrow imagined by William Gibson (Gibson 1984). We can damage the nerves or tendons in our forearms through endless typing and hours using the mouse, just as we can injure our backs and necks hunched at a computer screen. Software exists which is entirely designed to lock the user out of his/her computer at set intervals and remind him/her to take both ‘micro-breaks’ and longer rests in which stretching exercises – complete with instructions – are prescribed.\(^{114}\) As can be imagined, our physical embodiment is very relevant to the experience of playing games. Martin Amis describes arcade consoles displaying bloodstains from broken blisters, together with a syndrome referred to as ‘Pac-Man Hand’ which made a friend’s index-finger resemble “a section of blood-pudding” (Amis 1982 57). However, our bodily interfaces with technology are relevant to far more than the interesting injuries they can receive.

The considerations and requirements of how the interface of a given game will work shapes the entire development of the game from conceptualisation to release, with corresponding importance for how it will eventually be experienced. As an example, it is a pragmatic fact that the controller for a PlayStation 2 or 3 provides fewer buttons to which commands can be tied than the plethora of options provided by the combination of a home computer mouse and keyboard. Because of this limitation, there is an effective ceiling to the number of commands a player can make, and thus for actions s/he can undertake within the world-of-concern. In some cases, the original context of inception and conceptualisation can shape a game experience even when removed from that context: games known colloquially as ‘console ports,’\(^{115}\) tend to reflect their origin as games designed to be experienced in the context of a particular console; their control-set is more limited than for games originally conceptualised for the PC platform. As an example, *Mass Effect* (Bioware and Demiurge

\(^{114}\) An example can be found at [http://www.workrave.org/](http://www.workrave.org/) (Caelers and Penners 2007)

\(^{115}\) Colloquial derivation of ‘imports.’
Studios 2007) was originally developed for the Xbox 360 before being ‘ported’ to the PC. As a result of this, players can find themselves stuck on tiny ledges since the protagonist lacks any ability to jump. Clearly, this ability was prioritised below all of the other options which are available to the protagonist, and the design of the game’s levels was modified to reflect this limitation – albeit imperfectly. An example with a greater and more problematic inheritance from its console heritage is Dead Space (Visceral Games 2008): games created for the PC platform traditionally include the ability to ‘re-map’ the keyboard controls, allowing the player to adjust the interface to his/her own taste. Dead Space lacks this ability, placing the controls on the left of the keyboard, and assuming the right-hand would use the mouse. This control-scheme was entirely inconvenient for players with the temerity to be left-handed, many of whom normally rearrange the game controls: using the mouse with their left hand, reversing the mouse buttons so that the ‘left’ mouse button becomes the ‘right’ in terms of function, and then using the arrow-keys to control movement. As can be imagined, for these members of the audience the problems with the interface proved a significant barrier to immersion within the world-of-concern, and thus the experience of the text.  

The general character of videogame embodiment decrees that regardless of the game and format, our flesh intersects with machinery designed to transmit our responses into the digital space we are engaging in. As such, the mediation presented by the interface has significant consequences for our experience of the text, and little can make a player more frustrated with a particular game than a difficult or glitchy interface. The reason for this is that the player is attempting to engage with the world-of-concern as a legitimate, lived space with its own chain of cause and effect consequences. If his/her attempts to respond naturally within that environment are met with inexplicable, involuntary spasms or unresponsiveness, then this emphasises the mediated nature of the exchange and damages his/her investment with the world-of-concern. It is one thing to fail to successfully jump for a platform hanging in space; it is another thing entirely to fail because the game contextually interpreted your commands to mean that you hurled yourself off in the wrong direction, or that the character failed to ‘automatically’ grab onto the edge of the platform for uncertain reasons. Legitimate failure rooted in carelessness or a lack of applied skills can reinforce the world-of-concern through consistent consequences, whereas a glitch or otherwise problematic interface ties failure to the game doing something beyond your control. If the player is not responsible for

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116 The plight of colour-blind players is often also ignored by the game industry, leaving them rendered unable to progress in games due to puzzles or game mechanics framed around colour, though there are some notable exceptions (Griliopoulos 2010).
his/her own failure, s/he cannot expect to avoid it in future. Anything which interferes with the player’s ability to respond to events in the world-of-concern is fundamentally antagonistic to his/her agency, and to immersion.

The importance of the interface – the point at which all of the decisions made by the player meet the world-of-concern – to the experience of games is particularly unique when compared to what is required to engage with films and novels. In the context of a cinema, there is no interface whatsoever – or, more accurately, no physical, embodied interface. Sobchack has argued that the cinema screen is an interface between a film text and a film viewer mutually regarding each other, but such an interface does not allow access to (or modification of) textual structure. For novels, the interface is the physical substrate of the printed pages bound together into the artefact of the book. In this case, the interface is the text itself. Additionally, the form of the novel underscores how central the bodily interface is to what sets videogames apart. Turning the pages of a book can be automated, opening the contents to those who cannot engage with the interface themselves: this is not possible for videogames, because of both the complexity of the interfaces and the simple fact of the textual form’s ergodicity. It is not possible to automate the decision-making inherent to gameplay without displaying the results of decisions coming from outside of yourself. As a result of this element of game structure, the experience of watching someone else play a videogame, or a pre-recorded video sequence of a game being played, are almost indistinguishable from television or cinema: the audience has no ability to engage with the text beyond convincing the person playing the game to do something. Much in the same way as a particular film-text has a different structure when it is encountered in the context of a theatre in comparison to at home on DVD, you are the pivotal element of what sets the experience of games apart from other media forms. The player is at the coal-face of engaging personally, bodily, with the text and the physical interface which mediates it. However, it is important to note that film and novels are not less bodily experiences than videogames are: the role of the body informs cinematic engagement through how aware the audience members are of their comfort levels and of nagging physical distractions; likewise, people have their own comfortable frameworks in which to engage with books. What distinguishes videogames from other media forms is not that they are more bodily experiences, but that they involve more bodily interfaces to textual experiences.

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117 See Pages 1-3.
The bodily interface required by videogame texts can influence the affective experience of the text in many ways which cannot be duplicated in other media forms, because our perception of our embodiment is also part of that experience. To put it simply, if a genuinely tense and threatening moment in a film or a novel makes your palms sweaty, this does not make it more difficult to engage with the text. The physical matters to the experience of videogames. Realising that sweat is making the interface slippery while playing the game does not enhance the calm of already-tense circumstances and becomes folded into the experience of the text, together with panicky moments of trying to wipe your hands down on your clothes before the next assault. The burn in the player’s neck muscles from hunching like a Cro-Magnon before a computer for extended hours of play can merge with and underscore his/her gruelling fight for survival within the contextual world-of-concern. Some elements of how the bodily interface influences experience may not even register consciously: people playing games tend to lean forward intently, as opposed to the more relaxed backwards slouch of watching television or films. Players of console games sometimes have a tendency to ‘hop’ the controller in their hands at the same time as hitting the ‘jump’ button, particularly in tense moments. As another example, some players turn the controller as if it were a steering-wheel when attempting to turn at speed – despite the fact that it effects nothing within the world-of-concern, and their behaviour is something which they would be unaware of if it were not pointed out by onlookers.

Increasingly, console game-systems are including interfaces that emphasise the bodily side of the equation, which changes the way in which players experience texts: engagement with game controllers in these cases does extend to engagement with the world-of-concern. As has been discussed earlier, problems with the interface can be a death-knell for investment within the contextual world-of-concern provided by a game, so what happens when the interface – and arguably the subject of the game – is the body? Interfaces which emphasise bodily engagement level the playing field by making engaging with the world-of-concern less reliant on the specialist knowledge taught by experiencing other games: in other words, you need not be an experienced gamer to do well, and on the flipside, being an experienced gamer

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118 The Godfather – The Game (Visceral Games 2006) is an example where a great deal of thought was applied to how interface mediation might be used to shape the experience of the text: it presents a control-scheme in the XBox 360 version where the button combinations to garrotte someone in the world-of-concern means that the player is strangling their controller – a visceral emphasis of personal involvement and responsibility.

119 Something Tanja Krzywinska argues is testament to “...the powerful pleasures of digital games” (Krzywinska 2006 119).

120 The corporeal nature of interfacing with computers can be quite repulsive: mice and keyboards encrusted with sweat and grime, with game controllers left tacky for the next player. This is not confined to games, however: close consideration of office keyboards and mice can be an unsettling experience in itself.
is not necessarily an advantage. All games for the Nintendo Wii emphasise the fact that the body is the instrument for the motion-tracking Wii-mote controls. One pragmatic change is that extended gameplay becomes tiring, even for games which do not have fitness as a focus. As an example, my behaviour patterns in playing the Metroid Prime series for the Nintendo GameCube (Retro Studios 2002; Retro Studios 2004) frequently involved playing the game for several hours at a stretch from the position of a beanbag. Attempting to take this approach to Metroid Prime 3: Corruption (Retro Studios 2007) on the Wii foundered because sustaining the activity and precision-in-movement required of the player for several hours at a stretch was beyond my capabilities. Beyond a certain point, the felt experience of the game was that it was increasingly frustrating to be unable to make my body function to the required standard, particularly because I was not particularly conscious of why I was tired. I was, after all, playing a game – something which had not previously been so taxing. I also found that my ability to problem-solve in such a context decreased dramatically, as after an hour or so of standing in front of the television waving my arms it became difficult to think.

The felt experience of games which emphasise bodily interfaces depends greatly on the context from which the players originate. On the one hand, people unfamiliar with games and lacking practiced experience with normal game interfaces find that these skills are not necessary – they can engage with the game experience with as much difficulty as learning anything with a physical component. The Wii has provided a context for non-gamers (or new gamers) where the expectation of specialist knowledge which might be intimidating to them was not a focus of the experience. On the other hand, gamers who do possess a practiced experience of games can find the new context frustrating for them. They have more experience in working fluidly through a traditional interface than the new unfamiliar one, particularly when utilising their entire bodies as the interface, and this conflicts with an expectation of competence which is based on their specialist knowledge. Essentially, they have spent enough time playing games that they are familiar with a wide range of interfaces for many different styles of game, and expect to be able to ‘pick up and play.’ Finding themselves instead taken back to engaging with a world-of-concern through an unfamiliar interface can add frustration to their experience of the text, and becoming a ‘newbie’ again is generally unwelcome.\(^{121}\) As a result of this, many experienced gamers have written off the Wii as a frustrating gimmick containing little which speaks to them as players.

\(^{121}\) In some ways this can qualify as part of the contextual world-of-concern: such players are invested in a practiced competence in engaging games through their interfaces. Losing that practiced competence through an entirely novel form of interface is challenging to a part of the experience they have invested in.
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There are several different methods of promoting a more bodily interface to videogames, which have their own consequences for the experience of the texts they mediate, and for immersion. *EyeToy: Kinetic* (SCE London Studio and Nike Motionworks 2005) uses a variant of the EyeToy camera technology to create a virtual reflection of the player’s home – or at least the area in front of his/her television set. The user is visibly embodied within the contextual world-of-concern, and his/her physical movements are reflected within it – meaning that the player can interact with or avoid virtual objects almost as if they were physical. *EyeToy: Kinetic* partially collapses the distinction between the ‘actual-I’ and the ‘virtual-I’ (see Pages 70-72), but does not entirely erase it. The ‘actual-I’ is your self, whereas the ‘virtual-I’ is a hybrid of your self and the text you are engaging with: in the case of *Eyeytoy: Kinetic*, the ‘virtual-I’ is the reflection of the player’s physical body displayed upon the screen. The focus of *Eyeytoy: Kinetic* is not moving the body directly; instead, the game promotes an unusual double-think where what is important is moving the reflection. Some games are entirely dependent on the distinction between the player’s reflection and his/her actual body – or the distinction between the ‘actual-I’ and ‘virtual-I’. One example would be where the mirror provided by the world-of-concern distorts as part of the challenge, like in a funhouse: the player must move his/her right-leg to strike a target visually on the left of the screen. Because the game focuses on the reflection of the player rather than the player him/herself, the technology through which the reflection is generated produces its own form of interface problems: the room in which the player is framed needs to be lit to a ‘correct,’ arbitrary and not-well-explained extent or the camera does not register the body’s movements; there are also issues where anything within the camera’s field-of-view also exists within the contextual world-of-concern, and can interfere with events in the game. For example, there are games in which the player is tasked with dodging an object within the contextual world-of-concern, and the game registers a couch in the background as if it were the player’s body – essentially punishing the player because the couch does not dodge. As with any example where the interface problematises the ability of the player to engage with the world-of-concern, these problems are deeply frustrating and limit the player’s ability or even willingness to engage with the text.

For comparison, *Wii Fit* (Nintendo EAD 2008) makes the body itself the interface to the world-of-concern, and maintains more of the distinction between the ‘actual-I’ and the ‘virtual-I’ through making the body the subject of the game – as opposed to *EyeToy: Kinetic*’s focus on the reflection. The *Wii Fit* focuses on your body itself, and this combined with the fact that its games allow for a much greater range of abstraction leads to a more
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traditional distance between the ‘actual-I’ and the ‘virtual-I’. In this case, the ‘virtual-I’ can be anything from a bubble being guided between obstacles, to an iceberg being rocked back and forth as the player shifts his/her weight on the balance-board in order to guide a penguin towards fish.

Where the Eyetoy specifically and visually embodies the player within the world-of-concern, the Wii Fit instead measures how the player stands and moves, utilising that as a rapid feedback-loop of action and consequence. For example, there are yoga games where what the player is supposed to do is follow the verbal instructions of the game; what is being measured, and thus scored, during this period is the balance the player achieves while following the instructions. Likewise, there are other games focused around moving balls around a maze and into a hole; the map is conceptualised as the Wii Fit balance board, so that leaning to the left will tip the maze in that direction. The rapid feedback-loop of action and consequence means that the player is not paying attention to his/her own body; s/he is physically invested in the contextual world-of-concern of the game, and moving his/her body is how to engage with that world-of-concern. In this way, the body exists within Wii Fit in several roles: it is the subject of the game, the interface, and the challenge of the experience – since the game does not provide obstacles so much as measure the player’s ability to control his/her corporeal form.

**Immersion**

Videogames are the primary context which the majority of critical discourse surrounding the concept of immersion was designed to account for: there is something about the experience of engaging with videogame texts which is qualitatively different to other media forms, and ‘immersion’ has been identified as a significant component of that difference. As has been discussed in Chapter 2, there are two separate forms of immersion which have been identified by Taylor, the first of which is *diegetic immersion* (see Page 52). Diegetic immersion is where one can become ‘lost in a good book,’ and be “unaware of the creation and relation of the elements within the text” (Taylor 2002 12). However, what does diegetic immersion mean for the context of videogames? Essentially, when someone is diegetically immersed within a particular text and ‘unaware of the creation and relation of elements within the text,’ s/he is no longer considering it critically, and this is as relevant to videogame texts as to any other form of media. Games such as *Alpha Centauri* (Firaxis

122 Or ‘absorption’ from Calleja (Calleja 2011 26-27).
Games 1999) exemplify the short feedback-loop of action and consequence – of agency – and are thus contexts where players can spend a great deal more time than they are conscious of engaging with the experience. In *Alpha Centauri*, the action of the game focuses on setting new instructions for units and buildings, and then ending the ‘turn,’ where each ‘turn’ corresponds to one in-game year. Most actions require multiple turns to complete, and every turn there is new information for the player to consider – but the specific interactions are bite-sized. However, the chain of interactions is potentially infinite – as anyone who intended to play a turn-based game of this nature for fifteen minutes or so will attest, when they surface two hours later. Each change which *Alpha Centauri*’s world-of-concern undergoes is simple: the movement and development of units and cities, and the progress of research, one turn at a time. Because of this, it is very simple for the player to switch his/her attention to the new challenge the new turn represents. The player becomes unaware of the creation and relation of elements within the text, and unaware of the amount of time spent overall in playing the game, precisely because each individual segment of the game is so small. This also connects with the challenge discussed earlier in the chapter, where there is a rapid feedback-loop of action and consequence for the player to engage with – meaning that the felt experience of *Alpha Centauri* is similar to the players of Sudoku who can find they played far more games, and spent far more time than they expected, in engaging with the game.

In comparison, *situated immersion* is where the player is no longer acting upon a digital space, but instead within it: they cease to police the dividing line of the virtual, and treat the digital environment – in this case, the contextual world-of-concern – as a legitimate experiential space. As discussed in Chapter 2, situated immersion is fostered through two primary factors: firstly, a freedom from structural incoherence, where the rules of the world-of-concern are discovered to either be inconsistent or otherwise fail to match the expectations of the person playing the game; secondly, through a feedback loop of action and consequence which also fosters a perception of responsibility (see Page 57). Although each interaction is generally more complicated than the ones discussed for diegetic immersion, the principle is the same: if you make a choice, then you are responsible for the consequences of that choice. When a decision has a sensible outcome, the player is aware that his/her next decision will have a legitimate consequence, and his/her awareness becomes enfolded into the experience of decision-making. This feedback loop reinforces the contextual world-of-concern, and

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123 Three-dimensional space provides opportunities for both situated and diegetic immersion; two-dimensional spaces are limited to diegetic immersion, although this can still be deeply compelling. As such, two-dimensional and three-dimensional spaces offer different registers of experience.

124 Hence why Calleja frames his analogous concept as ‘transportation’ (Calleja 2011 26-27)
constructs the diegetic environment of the game world as a legitimate lived space. The reason that responsibility is affective is because within the contextual world-of-concern, being and feeling responsible for other characters is a significant component of forming relationships with them that matter to you.

An overly complicated or unfamiliar interface can cause similar problems for situated immersion as structural incoherence does: the player makes a decision and undertakes an action within the contextual world-of-concern, and the outcome of the action is different than anticipated. An example of this can be seen in some platform games where precision jumping is a core part of the experience. For some of these games, movement is contextual and relative to the position of the ‘camera’ which frames the diegesis of the world-of-concern. If the camera shifts unexpectedly while the protagonist is in mid-air, the context of the player’s instructions using the interface can change, meaning that a command which had carried him/her toward safety can be fatally redefined – frequently leading to death, another attempt at the jumping sequence, and overtones of growing frustration. However, when the game is free of structural incoherence and possesses a familiar interface, situated immersion allows the player to respond to sudden events within the contextual world-of-concern without consciously choosing to do so. For example, in action or horror games there are circumstances in which the player might be surprised by a monster leaping at him/her, or a fireball being thrown from nowhere. In a context of situated immersion, the player can evade the attacks as a reflex – s/he does not have time to consciously decide “I need to move sideways quickly, which is achieved by pressing this particular control”; s/he just responds. It is quite like catching a ball without thinking about it, except that the reflexive action occurs within the contextual world-of-concern. Importantly, this interaction itself is a feedback loop which reinforces situated immersion: the player folds his/her awareness of the fact that s/he responded instinctively to a threat into the world-of-concern, providing evidence for the legitimacy of the world-of-concern as a legitimate experiential space. Essentially, the interaction made the event/action/consequence chain of events seem unmediated – precisely the reverse of the problems presented by structural incoherence, which emphasise the artificial, mediated nature of the world-of-concern. When we consider the fact of the bodily interface, this becomes even more astonishing: the player was able to unconsciously apply his/her body to the interface in an entirely counter-intuitive way to avoid the threat. If someone throws a ball at you in day to day life, dodging sideways or otherwise getting out of its path is an intuitive bodily reaction; automatically going for a mouse-and-keyboard or game-controller combination of instructions designed to achieve the same movement within
Diegetic immersion and situated immersion operate on separate levels of engagement: situated immersion is a form of immersion which is more specialised to the context of videogame worlds-of-concern; in comparison, diegetic immersion can form and function with many other kinds of textual storytelling, as discussed in Chapter 2. However, it is entirely possible to have both forms of immersion functioning in synchrony. I argue that the two forms of immersion – while describing two functionally different levels of engagement – can cross-pollinate and reinforce each other. When a player is operating within a digital environment rather than upon it, there is a threshold of engagement where s/he is also unaware of the creation and relation of elements within the text, and thus not considering it critically. Despite the fact that they can mutually reinforce each other, I argue that the two forms of immersion are distinct: one does not necessarily lead into the other. It is possible to be operating within a digital environment rather than upon it, and yet aware of the creation and relation of elements within the text. Structural incoherence (see Pages 55-56) in games provides examples where the player is still invested within the virtual environment rather than upon it, but the rules of the world-of-concern are discovered to either be inconsistent or otherwise fail to match the expectations of the person playing the game – thus drawing attention to the creation or relation of textual elements.

Immersion sets the videogame form apart from other forms of mediated storytelling because of the many points where it intersects with tmesis, responsibility and challenge, together with embodiment and identification. Games are personal because they are immersive in ways that other forms of media are not. When the player of a game achieves something, s/he achieves it rather than reading or watching someone s/he is intended to sympathise with achieve it; when something leaps out from ambush and the player responds unconsciously, the monster has leaped out and ambushed the player him/herself. There is less affective mediation inherent to the experience of videogame texts than would otherwise be provided by a protagonist within textual prose or a filmic diegesis. Videogames present an affective context unlike other media forms because the person engaging with the threat can be threatened directly within the world-of-concern, can triumph personally, and is directly involved with the experience of the text.

Statements like this seem dangerous without some level of qualification, exactly as Tavinor and Allen describe in Chapter 2 (see Pages 36-37). However, I argue that it is a legitimate statement to make: we are most scared when the distinction between the ‘virtual-I’
and the ‘actual-I’ becomes the most porous, and in the world-of-concern we are investing within a diegetic environment containing dangers to be overcome or escaped. Essentially, we are making an effort of engagement to place ourselves in the affective line of fire, and the coterminous relationship between the ‘virtual-I’ and the ‘actual-I’ means that our responses can spill out from the world-of-concern into contexts where the idea of being frightened by fictional threats is nonsensical. However, being frightened only seems nonsensical in the objective world-of-concern where these characters’ fictionality outweighs their affective weight within the world of the game.

Hybrid Affect and Affective Permeability

Nagel argues that the accurate ascription of subjective experience is dependent upon being “…sufficiently similar to the object of ascription to be able to adopt his point of view” (Nagel 1979 172). The phenomenological context which Nagel was writing in is focused on experience, so that the more similar someone is to the object of his/her ascription, the more likely s/he is to comprehend what it is to experience in the same way as the object of his/her ascription. However, I argue that Nagel’s framework holds true for the affective component of experience: to be something is not simply to experience in a particular way, but also to feel in a particular way. To inhabit a particular position is to possess a particular affective tone, which itself will be carried over into the experience. As discussed in Chapter 2, just as a person-holding-a-gun (humangun) has a different capacity to act than either a person or a gun, being a humangun is going to feel different than being either a person or a gun, as well (see Page 70). The affective dimension of being part of a hybrid interaction holds true for engaging with fictional texts, regardless of what form of textual mediation is involved, and the coterminous nature of the ‘actual-I’ and ‘virtual-I’ mean that affective experience can ‘spill-over’ from experience we know to be fictional into our day-to-day experiences.

When I am playing a particular horror game, the ‘actual-I’ is my self, while the ‘virtual-I’ is the hybrid of my self and the text I am engaging with: the ‘actual-I’ and the ‘virtual-I’ are coterminous, and although there is nothing within the experience of the text which can make me forget that the experience I am engaging with is fictional, there is significant affective permeability between the two. As a result of this dynamic, I am simultaneously aware that I am engaging with a fictional context, in which the ‘actual-I’ cannot be threatened by anything within the world-of-concern. Yet my felt experience of the game is such that when something nasty leaps at me from the shadows with a length of pipe,
the ‘actual-I’ is as startled and frightened as the ‘virtual-I’: the affective response spills from one world-of-concern to the other. The monster is going for my own, personal face, and the ‘actual-I’ outside of the world-of-concern finds itself rather adrenalized, and decides to take a break.

How this relates to the experiences of other media forms comes down to diegetic depth and permeability (see Pages 65-66). The continuum of difference presented by videogames in comparison to the threat presented by Daleks in Doctor Who is that our personal investment in videogame spaces and worlds-of-concern means that, by default, we are occupying the same environment as other entities within that world-of-concern. It can be argued that processes of immersion (see Pages 50-51) are labours intended to reduce the diegetic depth of the world-of-concern, and increase diegetic permeability: the logic being that if the player can effect consequences on entities within the world-of-concern, then the reverse is also true. In Doctor Who, enemies threaten the audience through the protagonists; in videogames, they threaten us without that mediation. Games such as System Shock 2 even include specific direct address, which further reinforces the idea that the player occupies the same space as the threats communicating with him/her. It should be noted that while the contextual reduction of diegetic depth and permeability found in horror games provides good specific examples of the process, it applies to games as a wider class: the triumphs, connections, friendships and concern for other entities within the world-of-concern are just as affectively permeable and close to the surface as fear and dread.

**EXTREME CASES**

As has been discussed, it is impossible to present textual examples intended to stand for games as a class, because of the sheer level of structural and experiential variation that they present. Instead, these examples are each a context which illustrates a particular element of how the processes of engaging with the underlying structures of videogames shapes the affective qualities and experience of the text.
Animal Crossing (Nintendo 2002) is an open environment designed to foster an alterbiography and be explored: it is a village filled with anthropomorphic animals with their own social interactions and needs, surrounded by woodland to be explored and beautified. Animal Crossing is interesting because of its temporal context, and the way in which it generates a persistent world-of-concern which the player remains invested within even when the game is no longer being played.

The core of Animal Crossing is that it procedurally-generates a unique ‘sandbox’ environment each time that a new game is begun, and this environment is made available for the player to explore at will, presenting a wide variety of simple activities for his/her alterbiography. The player is new to the village, which is in need of pastoral care, and populated with anthropomorphic animals, all of whom need help with errands and other issues. Each individual task is structurally and affectively similar to the compelling structure of casual games (see Page 157) in that they are simple, but can be chained into long sequences which can take up an unexpectedly long period of time. There are some occasions where options ‘unlock’ after the player does something else, but for the most part all of the activities available to the player are visible from the beginning. The town is a canvas or an activity centre, with a wide variety of possible contexts for the player to invest him/herself in — everything from digging up fossils for the local museum, planting fruit trees and gathering his/her harvest, weeding, or participating in themed activities at particular times of year.

The specialised temporal context of Animal Crossing and the persistent world-of-concern are fundamentally connected. The game is designed to unfold in real-time, and so night will fall in the game-world at the same time as it does for the player. The game’s world-of-concern changes based on what time of day it is, what season it is, and what day of the month it is: whenever the game is started, something different is likely to be happening. The game also encourages the player to come in at different times — different fish and insects are available at different times of day or night, and in different seasons; the animals who populate the village have different patterns and habits for when they wake up, some being most happy and cooperative at particular times. The result of this temporal framework is that the player becomes aware that at any time, the world-of-concern within Animal Crossing is

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125 See Pages 147-148.
126 Mainly buying relevant equipment, such as a bug-net to catch insects with, or a fishing-rod for fishing.
The felt experience of *Animal Crossing* is that the game is as consuming as it is soothing. Players can become absorbed in a context where there is always something to do, and where there is nothing more threatening weighing overhead than the issue of what fruit-trees to plant, and optimising the feng-shui of your house. With that said, although the world-of-concern lacks threats, it does not lack *tension*: the player owes money on their house, and there are events which the player can only participate in at certain times. Some of these events are so rare and specific as to only happen at dawn on particular days of the year in autumn and spring when it is raining within the game’s world-of-concern. Some characters are only in-town on some days of the week; others at certain times of day. If the player does not engage with them during those timeframes, s/he has to wait for them to return. The player is aware that the world-of-concern is rolling on, opening some doorways and closing others, regardless of whether or not s/he is actively playing the game.

Part of the fuel for the tension is the sense of affective responsibility: every interaction changes the village and the lands surrounding it. As the player improves the world-of-concern, more animals immigrate into the region, bringing more activities to be involved in. I have heard people speak of *Animal Crossing*’s contextual world-of-concern with entirely legitimate *pride*. The flipside of this is an awareness that you can fail in your self-appointed duty. Weeds spring up each day, for example, so if you do not ’log in’ to the game regularly, the village becomes over-run; the villagers will comment and gossip about your extended absences. Eventually, the other villagers will leave without regular contact from the player, or if the player does not sufficiently care for the village environment. The player is in the lynchpin of the entire social context of the world-of-concern, and the game provides many small elements designed to make the player feel guilty for not pulling his/her weight.

What sets *Animal Crossing* apart is that the player’s ongoing awareness of the persistent world-of-concern is folded into his/her ongoing experience of the world. The ‘actual-I’ is equally as invested in and aware of the game’s temporality as the ‘virtual-I’ is. It is possible to go on holiday and suddenly realise that *Animal Crossing*’s village back home will be in bad need of weeding, let alone how bad it will be in several days. When a player becomes invested in *Animal Crossing*’s world-of-concern, it stays with him/her no matter what else s/he might be doing.

*Animal Crossing* demonstrates how ’morish’ games can be, purely as a result of a sense of responsibility and a rapid feedback loop of agency. It provides a context without
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any threats and presents a landscape as canvas for the player to engage with. The ongoing temporality of the world-of-concern also places *Animal Crossing* as an affectively similar context to Alternate Reality Games (see Page 185): both forms of textual engagement can extend into everyday worlds-of-concern to remind the player that they are being ‘left behind,’ because time is passing within the context of the game without them.

*Call of Cthulhu: Dark Places of the Earth*

*Call of Cthulhu: Dark Places of the Earth* or “*CoC:DPotE*” (Headfirst Productions 2006) is a horror game which is simultaneously an excellent homage to *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* (Lovecraft 1936) and remediation of its source material. It produces affective responses which could not be produced by another media form as part of its textual experience, and is not *fun* precisely because of how successful it is.

The game is framed from a first-person perspective which is intended to stand for the visual field of the game’s protagonist – and be the player’s window into the diegesis of the world-of-concern. As has been discussed, one of the implications of this visual framework is to reduce diegetic depth and enhance diegetic permeability, suggesting that the player is thus vulnerable to threats within the environment of the world-of-concern. There are sequences within *CoC:DPotE* which place the player in the contextual position of incredibly stressful events, and the result is both frustrating and extremely intense – even while it has to be admitted that the game is accurate to the source material. What becomes obvious is that the affective tenor of fighting for one’s life is not an enjoyable experience. One of the elements which makes the game an interesting subject for analysis is that it is structural coherence and other elements which successfully increase immersion that contribute to making the game not *fun* for the player.

One sequence of the game places the player in the contextual position of the protagonist in *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* (Lovecraft 1936), where s/he is forced to stay in a hotel within a threatening town populated by monstrous half-breeds. The sequence opens as someone begins trying to break through your door – handily barricaded with furniture in the night. The player has seconds in which to find another way out of the room before the enemies will break through and kill him/her – and then when you find another way out, you have to close and barricade it against the threats following you. What follows is an incredibly vivid and threatening sequence of panic and desperation, in which a single misstep ends in violent death. If the player does not race fast enough through the corridors and
rooms of the hotel, or if the monsters open a door before s/he can get furniture in front of it\textsuperscript{127} – or worse, break into a room before s/he can reach it – s/he is fatally trapped. Certainly, it is an experience which could not be duplicated in another media form without massive alteration, and doing so would likely lose the direct threat the game’s context provides: the monsters are coming for you, not a character you are intended to sympathise with. The element which makes the sequence truly frustrating, however, is a successful and structurally coherent attempt to place the player in the same experiential context as the game’s protagonist.

The game uses visual hallucinations and vertigo to emphasise moments where the protagonist is in danger of losing his/her mind, or otherwise traumatised by stressful or otherworldly events. Taken by themselves, these are clever and consistent ways of placing the player in the position of the game’s protagonist – his field of vision blurs and swims uncontrollably while he pants and groans in horror and fear. This is affectively disorienting and spooky, but in context it is also a disastrous impediment to game play, since the player has to engage with the world-of-concern through these distortions. At the end of the sequence where the player is attempting to escape from the hotel, the path to safety involves climbing across narrow planks leading under a water-tower, around some of the scaffolding, and then across more planks to a different building. A level of vision-swimming vertigo in these circumstances is entirely consistent, but given that the player is being shot at during his/her escape, s/he cannot take the time to move safely. These factors combine into what is undoubtedly a very realistic exploration of the experience to be found in running across narrow catwalks, while being shot at, and barely able to see from vertigo. Unsurprisingly, it involves dying a great deal.

What makes CoC:DPotE interesting is that it is the game’s successes rather than its failures which lie behind an experience which is not, at heart, enjoyable. The affective mediation presented by textual engagement with fiction normally allows the people negotiating horror texts to experience life-threatening circumstances behind a certain level of insulation. However, the lack of diegetic depth and heightened diegetic permeability presented by videogame engagement in this context makes the experience too intense and directly-felt to be fun for some players:

\textsuperscript{127}The slowness of dragging the furniture is itself fascinating: it exponentially raises the tension by making the player commit to an action which will take several long moments to be successful, while all the while the furniture you are dragging thuds and bangs as the enemies try to kick the door behind it open, or smash it apart.
After 15 tries and still quite calm, I am thinking this is all very Cthulhean because of the repetition, inability to act, and the very tangible sense that powers far greater than me affect my sphere of action (aka the fiendish game designers). After 30 tries, my thoughts affected very deeply by my growing frustration, I conclude that this is terrible game design!! My suspicion of disbelief broken, and what was a world, a mythos, becomes all too apparently a set of mechanical actions demanded by a game machine, and a broken one at that. Panic and frustration now subsided; it occurs to me that this is an extraordinary game. With no cheats easily available on the web, Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth seems very assured that its players will be “old school” gamers – prepared to work at getting at the content. That is therefore a brave approach to adaptation, and in some sense illustrates a remarkable faith in the pull of the brand. (Krzywinska 2009 284)

When Tanya Krzywinska autobiographises (or alterbiographises) her experience of the game, she does so in fundamentally affective terms, emphasising the permeability between the game’s contextual world-of-concern and her own experience. Alterbiography is narrated as affective experience; in this case that experience included Kryzwinska’s meta-awareness of the game as a designed text complete with ‘fiendish’ game designers, together with its status as a game.

*Fahrenheit*^{128}

*Fahrenheit* (Quantic Dream 2005) presents a textual structure that is unique to its game development studio, and which presents the player with extremely specialised processes through which to engage with the world-of-concern. It is also arguably an example of a cybertext featuring very limited agency, yet which is non-ergodic because of how decisions within the game are framed. However, the elements which set Fahrenheit apart from the general character of videogames are also problematic for the experience of the text. The interface system for the game and the way in which options are presented to the player entirely abstracts him/her from the world-of-concern and thus reduces player agency; this in turn reduces the player’s perception of responsibility for his/her actions within the text. The game is a supernatural mystery featuring several different protagonists: it begins when a man named Lucas murders a stranger in a restaurant bathroom after having been possessed. The game then alternates between Lucas’ attempts to stay ahead of the police, and the efforts of two police detectives to solve the mystery while dealing with their own personal lives. A particularly striking example of what sets Fahrenheit’s structure apart is the game’s opening

^{128} Also known as *Indigo Prophecy*. 174
scene, just after the murder. There is a limited amount of time before a policeman in the
diner goes to the bathroom and discovers the body – which the player is aware of because a
split-screen effect borrowed from cinema focuses on the policeman while the player acts.
The player has several options available, but I argue the way in which the options are framed
challenges their status as ergodic engagement. Ergodicity requires a process of choice and
discernment: the player’s capacity to act, his/her agency, is represented by abstract symbols
at the top of the screen; however, there is no information as to what each symbol will
accomplish, or what the consequences of triggering one might be. The result is that the
player attempts to accomplish as many of these tasks as possible within the timeframe,
without a clear idea of what their purpose is: there can be no real discernment when the
outcome of all of the available options is unclear. Additionally, the options only present
themselves in very specific contexts, such as standing in a particular position within the room
while facing a certain way. It is likely that many potential options simply will not appear to
the player, who has no idea whether an option has been missed – merely stumbling onto some
possibilities in the course of play.

The scene has a time-limit, in the form of an ever-decreasing bar, which is reinforced
by contextual clues such as tension music and a ticking clock. The player lacks time to
consider his/her options, any real information about what the options s/he does discover will
accomplish, and is forced to act in haste: if they are caught in the bathroom or too close to the
bathroom, the game ends. The felt experience is tense because of the ever-present time-limit,
and deeply disorienting because the player does not know what they are expected to do. For
example, once the player exits the bathroom, s/he attracts attention if they do not pay for
his/her meal – but has no way of knowing that a particular empty table is his/hers. The only
way to learn about such facts is by failing as a result of not knowing them, and then trying the
sequence again.\footnote{This produces a similar experience to repeated attempts to negotiate topographical hypertexts while holding what you have learned of its network in-mind – see Pages 83-84. Except in this case, the player suffers from significant time-pressure and probably has a partial comprehension, at best, of the available options in the network} When the player does develop a plan of action, it is not obvious how to
achieve that plan, because of the abstraction of the interface, and the fact that interface
options only appear in key places which are not signposted. The player does not have time to
think. Instead, s/he tries a combination of different options in a frantic attempt to escape,
without having a clear idea of the consequences. The opening sequence of Fahrenheit is
simultaneously a simulation of the affective panic of a disoriented and desperate man trying
to conceal a homicide, and much as with *Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth*, not a fun experience.

Structurally, the acts performed by the player are cybertextual, in that they are incorporated into the text and reflected upon in later situations – such as where the investigating officers are searching for clues about the identity of the initial protagonist: if Lucas hid a knife in a rubbish bin during the first scene, then that is where the knife can be found once the player is in control of the police. However, the way the interface is framed reduces the player’s felt responsibility: ergodicity is undercut because there is no time for informed ‘choice, discernment or decision-making,’ so the player performs whatever actions they can figure out how to make the interface accept. The experience is not one of discernment so much as desperation.

Most interactions within *Fahrenheit* have even less agency than is available in the opening scene. Rather than being able to make decisions and take responsibility for the outcome, choices within the game are decided by the game based on the outcome of what are called Quick-Time Events, or QTEs. These are tasks entirely abstracted from the contextual world-of-concern, such as ‘Simon Says’ style puzzles flashed onto the screen, which the player needs to follow with the joysticks of the PS2 controller: perform above an unknown, invisible threshold, and the best outcome occurs; perform passably, and you survive; perform below another invisible threshold and the game simply ends in failure. The player has no information about how many different thresholds there are, and thus how many different options a given interaction might have; s/he is only able to do as well as s/he can and then witness the outcome, or repeat the task if s/he failed to perform satisfactorily. The capacity to feel responsibility for actions undertaken within the world-of-concern is again undercut: it is frequently unclear what precisely is at-stake when an abstracted rhythm game appears on the screen. As a result, the player lacks fundamental information about the context of the decision that the abstract mini-game represents. One example is where the player is trying to simply act normal in dealing with an ex-girlfriend, only to discover partway through the sequence that an additional element at stake is whether s/he can get back together with the girlfriend – while lacking any information about whether this is a good idea for either character!

Lastly, Quick-Time Events are antithetical to situated immersion: they force the player’s attention onto the surface of the screen, rather than within the environment of the

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130 Or the relevant interface for the platform the game is being played on.
CHAPTER 5: VIDEOGAMES – RESPONSIBILITY AND IMMERSION

game. QTEs are even damaging to diegetic immersion, because the player cannot be immersed in the text so that they are unaware of the ‘creation and relation of elements within the text’ when those specific elements leap onto the screen to attract attention – and where the price of failing to pay sufficient attention is death.

*Fahrenheit* does not feel personal. It is a stressful, frustrating and disorienting experience over which the player has little ability to feel responsibility, or to identify with the characters. From discussion with other people who have played the game, and people who witnessed me play it, *Fahrenheit* is a more successful text for those watching the game being played than for the person playing it him/herself: the uninvolved audience have some affective distance from the stress of constant time-limits and risk of disoriented death, and are able to engage with the narrative beyond the QTEs because, again, they are not a matter of life and death. Additionally, because survival is not predicated on paying attention to the surface of the screen for the uninvolved audience, situated immersion is more possible for the audience than the player.  

In playing the game myself, I found a number of occasions where I was so focused on negotiating the text through the abstract, often timed challenges which I was presented with that I lost any real connection to the game’s storyline. The specific interactions, movements and goals of the characters fell into a confusing jumble: it was simpler for me to get a précis of events by asking people who had been watching the game played, since they had the distance to put the pieces together for me. The tension is also physical: the player’s ability to perform the precisely timed actions required by the ‘Simon Says’ sections, or the intricate movements associated with other options presented within the world-of-concern, become increasingly difficult as the controller becomes sweaty or his/her hands become tired. Sections which require rapid tapping of buttons either as quickly as possible, or alternating between two buttons in order to maintain balance, are something that the player can fail simply through fingers cramping from fatigue rather than any lack of essential skill. As so often happens in these situations, our awareness of our physical engagement with the game becomes folded into our experience of the text.

It should be said that *Fahrenheit* is certainly capable of having very affective experiences emerge from the encounter, despite the overtones of frustration and confusion. There is a sequence in a mental hospital where the power has failed in a winter storm. The player needs to keep the character calm by maintaining an abstracted cursor within the middle

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131 Barry Atkins argues that one of the differences between players and audiences watching them play games is that the audience focuses on the screen as it is happening ‘now,’ while the player is invested in the screen as a matrix of possibilities for the future (Atkins 2006 134-135, 137). *Fahrenheit* collapses this distinction so that both the player and the audience is unable to consider future possibilities.
of a horizontal zone by pressing two buttons on the front of the PS2 controller at an even pace. What the exercise represents is that character breathing evenly while keeping quiet and still as she sneaks out through the darkness without attracting attention to herself, while criminally insane patients wander through the halls. The player’s agency is limited, focused entirely on his/her ability to keep still. However, in this case the consequence for failure is made obvious, and what s/he is required to do in order to succeed is also specified. The felt experience of this sequence is extremely tense, and this tension becomes folded into the experience of negotiating the game: the player needs to maintain a steady, measured pace in pressing the buttons; if s/he begins to panic, so does the character in the game. In this case, reducing the player’s agency to focus on a specific element of what is unfolding within the world-of-concern is appropriate, and fosters a distinctive affective quality for the experience.

Arguably, Fahrenheit qualifies more as an experimental attempt to create a legitimate example of ‘interactive cinema’ than a videogame, particularly in the dramatic reduction in agency from what is typically found in games. There is nothing in the processes through which the player engages with the world-of-concern to say that an entire theatre full of people could not participate at-once: the game would average out the quality of their responses and make a decision based on that information. Admittedly this is an extreme example, and death or game-ending failure within the world-of-concern would be a very regular feature of such an experiment due to disorganisation among the audience, but the fact it is even theoretically possible is itself critically interesting.

**SETTING GAMES APART**

This chapter discussed how the experience of videogame texts is distinguished from other media forms by being and feeling personal, due to processes of engagement that makes the person playing them feel responsible for decisions made within the world-of-concern. This responsibility is enfolded into Heideggerian worlds-of-concern shared with fictional characters, which allow for significant affective consequences for the phenomenological experience of the text. Affective permeability between the ‘actual-I’ and ‘virtual-I’ allows players to engage with a context that they know to be fictional, and yet which is capable of threatening or engaging with them directly. This affective permeability illustrates the relevance of affective phenomenology for comparative studies of new media, since it demonstrates a distinctive register to the experience of play that exists as an outgrowth of the
process of engaging with the textual structure of videogames, while being invisible to purely structural analysis.

What sets the experience of games apart from the experience of other forms of textual storytelling is that they are *personal*. Structural tmesis emphasises achievement in negotiating the text; the perception of responsibility makes the consequences of the decisions made by the player deeply affective, reinforces immersion and supports his/her investment in the contextual world-of-concern as a legitimate, experiential space. The challenge inherent to games occurs within a context that the player is already invested in, and so provides a genuine sense of achievement when challenges are surpassed. At the same time, the repeatability of the context means that, if defeated, the player is both motivated and able to try again. Exceptions to this come in the form of failure caused by either a problematic or unfamiliar interface, or due to structural incoherence. These issues damage immersion and investment within the contextual world-of-concern, and raise the possibility that the player may reach the point where s/he loses interest in negotiating the text.

Videogames are embodied experiences in ways which other media forms are unable to duplicate, due to the personal nature of the experience: the embodied experience of videogames is important enough that watching someone play a videogame presents an entirely different structure and affective tenor than playing yourself. The nature of games as fundamentally ergodic texts means that negotiating a game involves processes of choice and decision-making. Together with the physical implementation of those decisions through the mediating factor of the game’s interface, this highlight the player’s personal involvement and his/her stake in the way in which events play out. Immersion reflects the player’s investment within the contextual world-of-concern as a legitimate experiential space, and is tied into the perception of both responsibility and identification. The coterminous worlds-of-concern underway while the player engages with a hybrid videogame experience, and the affective permeability between them mean that the player is directly involved – as opposed to having a mediating character who the player is intended to sympathise with.

Videogames are affectively powerful because they happen to *you*.

In comparison, Alternate Reality Games are texts which have to be explored as part of a community, and players do so as themselves in a context of phenomenological reality, meaning that they have even less affective mediation than videogames.

In a Reality Game, there is no representative character within the world-of-concern, so the only skills you can apply in engaging with the text are *yours*.
Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) are both the youngest and in some ways strangest of the textual forms of storytelling under discussion within this project, with a few antecedents occurring in the 1990s, and the earliest example commonly agreed to qualify as an ARG unfolding in 2001 (McGonigal 2003b 4). What makes ARGs structurally unique is that they do not technically have a cohesive structure: they are transmedia texts spread across multiple media platforms, multiple websites and sub-texts within media platforms, which insinuate themselves far and wide in order to connect disparate audience subcategories into one whole.

Critical discussion about how to define Alternate Reality Games and distinguish them from other storytelling media forms has focused on three core factors: their transmedia nature; the fact that they are designed to function at the level of the community rather than the individual; and the immersive relationships players establish with them. I will argue that these latter points are particularly relevant to what sets apart the affective experience of Alternate Reality Games: ARGs are texts which present extremely high levels of diegetic permeability and low levels of diegetic depth (see Pages 65-66), since one of their central foci is to integrate themselves into the existing life of the people who play them. ARGs are also distinguished by being writerly texts (see Pages 30-31) which closely match Roland Barthes’ theorising about how such texts would be structured and how they would function, since it can be argued that the end-point of an ARG is not known – even to the creators – when the text begins to unfold (Kim et al. 2009 4; Barthes 1974 5-6, 10). Additionally, in comparison to other media forms discussed in this project, ARGs do not present a singular overall type of affective experience, since individuals who engage with Alternate Reality Games can do so at a number of different experiential registers or tiers (Dena 2008), several of which rely on the efforts of others. This component of their unique experience is tied to their existence as communities, as much as discrete – albeit distributed – texts.

132 However, Kit Williams’ Masquerade (Williams 1979) and the group of ‘arm-chair treasure-hunts’ it inspired is relevant to modern ARGs. Masquerade is a children’s book which contained clues to a treasure in the form of a golden hare that was buried in England, and which prompted tens of thousands of people to search for it for nearly a decade. Although Masquerade is a discrete text rather than a distributed one, the clues concealed within an otherwise mundane text and what arguably qualifies as tiering displayed by the community connects to ARGs, and also to the modern sport of geocaching (see Page 219).

133 Discussed in more detail on Page 189.
The boundary-line demarcating where one Alternate Reality Game ends and another begins, between an ARG and the day-to-day experience of web surfing, or even between an ARG and the world at large, only exists at the level of the world-of-concern. What makes up this boundary-line is the affective complexion of engaging with ARG texts far more than the specific (and potentially mundane) processes applied by the individuals comprising the game community: to be part of an ARG is to have a purpose, and to share that purpose with a collection of other individuals working together from around the world. Alternate Reality Games are storytelling texts which are not just distinguished from the experience of other media forms by their affective tenor, but defined at the level of affect itself: it is how the person negotiating the text feels during the process of negotiating the text that distinguishes ARGs, rather than the processes themselves. ‘Alternate Reality Game’ is itself arguably a misnomer: the player’s experience of negotiating the puzzles and obstacles of ARGs is framed so as to be phenomenologically real. I argue that the ‘Alternate’ component of the ARG acronym takes disproportionate focus, and that ‘Reality Games’ is a better framework for understanding what sets the affective experience of ARGs apart.

Engaging with specific ARG case-studies in the same way as videogames, comics and hypertext fictions is not possible because of their temporally specific nature: encountering an ARG once it has finished is very different from doing so when it is ‘live,’ and guided in response to actions undertaken by the player community. For this reason, discussing the affective tones of ARG experiences after the fact is itself also problematic; however, the work of Jane McGonigal – who has herself been involved in creating what we recognise today as the ARG format – has been a particularly useful resource for this chapter, because she engages with the phenomenological experiences that players reported during active Reality Games.

This chapter discusses how Alternate Reality Games function as distributed texts without discrete boundaries, and defines the form as more of a community-level process than as a particular textual structure. I introduce the concept of phenomenological reality to describe the mode in which ARGs are experienced, where there is nothing to draw attention to the fact that players are not engaging with reality, and thus no abstraction to the challenges they are faced with: if an email address needs to be hacked into, only players capable of actually hacking into an email address will be able to solve it. Phenomenological reality is a key theme explored throughout the chapter, particularly since it illustrates the extent to which ARGs are defined and bounded at the level of affect and the world-of-concern. A series of case-studies, all of which present different elements of the experiential distinctiveness.
common to ARGs while not being classical ARGs themselves, are used to explore how the form functions. None of the case-studies are ‘true’ ARGs because ‘true’ ARGs exist as an ongoing process, and attempts to archive them are limited at-best in providing examples as to their function and affective feel. The very ability to discuss how and why each example presents elements common to ARG experience, while being able to make an argument for how and why they are not perfect examples, is more analytically productive than engaging with such archives would be.

**DEFINING AN ABSTRACTED TEXT**

A significant component of the scholarly work written on the subject of Reality Games has been authored by individuals who were involved in pioneering ARGs as a form. A result of this insight is that ARG criticism includes discussions of what the designers of the original ARG experiments planned, with comparisons to what resulted. However, a side-effect of the fact that ARG criticism is closely associated with the individuals responsible for the initial experiments is that much of the scholarly work shares an assumption that readers are already at least partially informed on the subject. Additionally, some authors have arguably overhyped the impact of ARGs. As such, establishing a simple definition of Reality Game texts is a good place to start. However, it will soon become obvious that any textual definition of ARGs is as much procedural as it is structural: Reality Games are fragmented across multiple information dissemination platforms, and part of the ‘job’ or ‘puzzle’ of the game is locating and linking the disparate elements of the text together. As such, they operate at the level of the community rather than the individual, due to the workloads involved (Fujimoto 2009 5). Sean Stewart, who is also one of the people responsible for initially experimenting with ARGs, lists the ‘hallmarks’ of an ARG as follows:

- [It involves a] story which is broken into pieces which the audience must find and assemble;
- The story is not bound by medium or platform: we use text, video, audio, flash, print ads, billboards, phone calls, and e-mail to deliver parts of the plot;
- This audience is massive and COLLECTIVE: it takes advantage of communication tech to work together;
- and, The audience is not only brought into the world because THEY are the ones responsible for exploring it, the audience also meaningfully affects how the story progresses. It is built in a way that allows players to have a key role in creating the fiction. (Stewart 2008 1)

Such archives, such as *I Love Bees*, are discussed elsewhere in the chapter. (see Page 183)
What should also be noted is the larger commercial purpose of ARGs as a form: they require a significant investment of time, personnel and money to function, and almost all Reality Games to date have had either the goal of promoting a particular product – albeit obliquely – or have been commercial products themselves.

The definition offered by Stewart is procedural because it describes the process of both creating and engaging with Reality Games rather than what the resulting text is: ARGs are a way of presenting information using other textual forms, analogous to a scavenger-hunt story told through assembling coded newspaper headlines across multiple papers in successive days. As such, any definition needs to focus on the encoding and decoding which comprises the text as a higher priority than the textual forms used, particularly since anything which can be presented online is a potential element of an ARG text.

In many ways, there is significant crossover between the function of Reality Games and various techniques of espionage, at least as conceived by popular media. An ARG can be understood as a series of coded messages concealed in otherwise everyday media material, which will be comprehended by a select community of individuals who are ‘in the know.’ The awareness of being part of an exclusive group who are aware of covert material concealed from most internet users is part of the affective experience of engaging with the text. In this case, the technique is applied to telling a story rather than transmitting secret communications, but it is not the processes involved which enforce that distinction. As an example of the extent to which Reality Games are open to interpretation, Jane McGonigal cites a sample of the community response to discovering what appeared to be a GPS data-set within the structure of the I Love Bees ARG (Stewart, Lee and McGonigal 2004):

There was no early consensus about what ILB’s designers wanted the players to do with these coordinates, times and date. An explosion of creative experimentation with the data ensued. Some players plotted the GPS points on a United States map in the hopes of revealing a connect-the-dot message. Others projected the earthbound coordinates onto sky maps to see if they matched any known constellations. A particularly large group collected the names of the cities to which the 210 points mapped and then tried to create massive anagrams and acrostics from them. A smaller group decided to average the two numbers in each pair of coordinates and look for an underlying statistical pattern across the set... (McGonigal 2010 251)

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135 And from Stewart’s summary, elements of offline media can also easily be used to release elements of an ARG text.

136 Available at [http://www.ilovebees.com](http://www.ilovebees.com), although the site is a static archive of the state of the ARG when it concluded. However, although the experience will not be the same as being part of the ARG, it is one of the most functional examples of the focal point of an ARG text currently available.
Essentially, the players of the *I Love Bees* ARG engaged in enthusiastic amateur cryptography which would have taken a significant investment of time, effort, intelligence and dialogue combined with affects of *excitement, suspense* and *frustration* before bearing any fruit. More importantly still for the affective distinctiveness of Reality Games, the people engaging in this cryptographic puzzle-solving were doing so as themselves.

**SUBJECTIVE FICTIONS**

As part of presenting experiences for players to engage with as themselves, Reality Games embrace a design aesthetic which specifically seeks to conceal the text’s status as a game (see Page 194). One consequence of this aesthetic is that the challenges which the game presents are *phenomenologically real*:

Aesthetically, technologically and phenomenologically speaking, there was no difference at all between the look, function or accessibility of the in-game sites and non-game sites. In this sense, it is reasonable to argue that nothing about this virtual play was simulated. The computer-driven alternate reality *The Beast* created was make-believe, but every aspect of the player's experience was, phenomenologically speaking, real. Hacking into the in-game coroner's office's fictional Web report, for example, was identical in practice to the process of hacking into a non-game coroner's office's Web site. This stands in stark contrast with other kinds of massively multi-user roleplaying games such as *The Sims Online* and *Everquest*, in which the digital display of virtual worlds is clearly simulated and, although absorbing, a totally different mental and physical experience of being and acting than everyday life. (McGonigal 2003b 3)

There is a continuum of subjectivity at work in the forms of mediated storytelling under discussion in this project. Part of the dynamic can be seen in the discussion between Keogh and Walker in Chapter 5 (see Pages 151-152), where each understood their individual experiences of the game’s alterbiography to be objective, and made arguments based on that understanding. However, there is a higher degree of subjectivity to Reality Games, since they are experienced as subject *qua* subject, rather than the subject *qua* agent-of-game framework of videogame play. This degree of phenomenal reality produces a number of consequences for the affective experience of engaging with ARG texts. Firstly, framing the challenges and obstacles in this way is one of the components that mean Reality Games are puzzles to be solved at the level of the community rather than the individual, and why engagement with that community has its own affective consequences (see Page 188);
secondly, the phenomenological reality of the challenges ARGs pose is an underlying factor as to why the boundaries of the text exist in affective rather than structural terms.

When Reality Game texts can comprise any form of textual engagement common to the internet at large, the only thing that distinguishes ARG players answering emails for work, or researching material for an office brief, from solving puzzles for the game is the affective quality involved. In comparison to the everyday interchanges common to office work environments, receiving (or anticipating receiving) an update to a wider adventure that the player is part of is going to be exciting – or certainly a sharp contrast to normal work-based affects. There is, however, nothing intrinsic to the textual form which causes the distinction: it is all rooted in how the player relates to that point of contact, and thus defined by affect functioning within the world-of-concern.

The affective tenor of acting on new information in moments of stolen down-time is going to be purposeful, or potentially even furtive. For example, if the player elects to wait until after work or class finishes before acting on the new information, his/her time at work or in class will be spent in anticipation, and working over the new data in-mind until the chance comes. Alternatively, a player might decide that s/he does not have time to act on the information him/herself – particularly when s/he locates a clue which suggests a time-consuming response – but can instead forward that information to other individuals within the game community. The hope in such situations is that his/her contact or friend will be able to act as a proxy, posting the player’s suggestion, discovery or intuition so that it does not come too late to be relevant, or to gain credit. Part of what makes the affective quality which describes the edges of an ARG text interesting is that it is not tied to a particular form of engagement – as might be found in the preparations people go through when sitting down to watch a film, or find quiet time to read a book. Instead, ARGs are temporally extended experiences which attempt to extend technological filaments into the lives of those who engage with them.

Texts of Infiltration

Reality Games never sleep. The community of players engaging with a given text is likely to transcend time-zones due to geographical distribution, and thus progress is happening the entire time – including while the player sleeps or works. The very fact that players are aware that an Reality Game will continue to unfold twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and that they cannot participate at all times, is part of the experience of
the text: players of ARGs are left hungry for new information and feeling a need to accomplish as much as possible in the time that they have available, precisely because of their awareness that the game moves on without them. Studies have suggested that for many people, the first thing they do in the morning is to check Facebook in order to catch-up on developments that happened while they were sleeping (Kaplan 2010). Reality Games can exhibit exactly the same drive, since they function at the level of social interconnections and emphasise that the player will be ‘left behind’ when s/he is not actively engaging with the community of players. The connection with the Facebook example is particularly relevant because many ARGs utilise social-networking, email and other forms of ubiquitous electronic communication to integrate themselves into the daily lives and information-scapes of the people who play them:

Rather than creating virtual environments that were (hopefully) realistic and engaging, the Beast’s producers co-opted real environments to enable a virtual engagement with reality. For them, “immersion” meant integrating the virtual play fully into the online and offline lives of its players. (...) The game called players at home, faxed them at work, interrupted their favorite television shows with cryptic messages, and eventually even mailed them packages full of game-world props and artifacts via the United States Postal System. The Beast recognized no game boundaries; the players were always playing, so long as they were connected to one of their many everyday networks.

This kind of immersion made the game world less of a "virtual" (simulated) reality or an "augmented" (enhanced) reality, and more of an "alternate" (layered) reality. For four months, players had to adapt to interfacing with the 2001 real world and the 2142 game world at the same time. Success in the Beast therefore required developing a kind of stereoscopic vision, one that simultaneously perceived the everyday reality and the game structure in order to generate a single, but layered and dynamic world view. (McGonigal 2003b 3)

This feature of Reality Games has even been included within how several critics define ARGs as a textual form – which is particularly relevant considering many of these critics have been involved in the initial conceptualisation and experimentation with ARG texts. Dave Szulborski argues that “the goal is not to immerse the player in the artificial world of the game; instead, a successful game immerses the world of the game into the everyday existence and life of the player” (Szulborski 2005a 31). This sentiment is echoed by Christy Dena, who argues that a “design goal” of ARGs is to “reduce the signs of the game’s fictional status while enhancing elements that trigger gamers to treat it as they would real life” (Dena 2007 238), and also by Kim et al. who argue that “the goal of these games is not to create an
alternate reality, but to create a storyline that infiltrates real life” (Kim et al. 2009 4). Rather than a player electing to involve him/herself in a story which is separate from his/her world, the story can reach out to him/her at any time of any day with new information, as soon as the player makes him/herself open to electronic communication by checking email or checking his/her phone for text messages. The player is constantly aware of this possibility as part of his/her experience of engaging with the ARG text.

The technological extension of the ARG into the daily life of players has a number of affective consequences, one being a significant reinforcement of the status of the experience as phenomenologically real. Part of the way in which ARGs use their technological filaments to “reduce the game’s fictional status” is that they fit the context suggested by the Reality Game world-of-concern: if the players are part of a motley conspiracy seeking to solve problems that wider society has not heard of, it makes perfect sense that they can communicate with each other – and that each player’s ‘secret identity’ could reach out to him/her while s/he is concealed as his/her mild-mannered everyday self. To be called on in this way would be exciting: your co-workers, class-mates or family might think that you are working on something official, but the secret is that you are assisting in secret code-cracking or investigative research. The connections to the experience of espionage, of having a fundamentally hidden purpose concealed within everyday activity, is going to have a distinctive affective quality.

Additionally, in many ways the technological filaments which ARGs extend into the everyday worlds-of-concern belonging to the people who engage with them are still within the players’ power: they know that a text message, call, or email could arrive from one of their other lives at any moment. On the one hand, they are invested in this possibility, which will colour their affective engagement with otherwise mundane activities. The flipside is that should they not be in the mood, players can elect to turn off their phone, and either not check their email or provide optional mail filters as a way of moderating their own engagement. Players of Reality Games may be secret agents, but they are only secret agents when they are in a movie theatre or eating dinner with family if they choose to be. They are secret agents at their own convenience. However, within that convenience, the technological filaments presented by ARG texts are the means by which many affective components of the experience are communicated: if players see that the mail filter they have established for ARG messages, or their phone, is collecting unread messages, then this emphasises that they are being left behind by new developments. Beyond that, such points of contact emphasise that the Reality Game is waiting for them.

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In some ways, there is overlap between this element of ARG experience and that of engaging with webcomic communities online, where there is a drive to respond to new comic updates first when the discussion and speculation is still ‘fresh’ (see Page 125). The difference is that community engagement is not necessary for negotiating webcomics, whereas it is for Reality Games, and that webcomics do not reach tentacles into the real world in the same way.\footnote{As has been discussed (see Page 127), some webcomics do make use of online social networks as a way of providing a bridge from the world-of-concern into the daily life of readers; however, webcomics are not as aggressive in reaching out to enfold the people who engage with them as ARGs are, and engaging with the social network component is also not a requirement of negotiating the webcomic text. The use of social networks for webcomic characters does present a shift in the diegetic depth and permeability of the world-of-concern, but is not something which can reach out and touch someone while s/he is at work or in class the way that emails or text messages can.}

**The Experience of Community**

Community is a feeling, not just a process (Rheingold 1993 xx): knowing that you are participating in a wider collective which shares at least some of the same interests and purposes is itself affective. Beyond the essential affective tenor that being part of a community provides, there are the other affective elements produced by particular interactions: the community of players invested in a given ARG are going to provide rivalries, friendships, and mutual support. They are an environment where a player can gain public acknowledgement for his/her contributions, and thus respect. As with the experience of videogames, engaging with Reality Games will involve challenge and achievement (see Page 157); these have their own affective contributions to the experience of the ARG text, but in a social context of ongoing community interactions they will be magnified. In the example considered earlier where McGonigal cites the many different ways the *I Love Bees* community elected to engage with the GPS data-set discovered in the core website, all of those different options were in contest. There will have been online discussions and speeches as different individuals involved in the community tried to convince others of their conclusions, drawing evidence from the paratext of the wider ARG. Within what we can consider factions, each taking a different core approach to the data, there will have been individuals competing to contribute most significantly, together with debate as to the approach which would best accomplish the faction’s goals. Some individuals will have contributed to multiple factions, spitballing ideas on multiple fronts. To be part of an ARG is to be active within a vibrant community applying creative problem-solving to shared issues.
However, this raises the question of whether everyone involved in the community is equally active, and how individual activity will shape the affective experience of engaging with the Reality Game text.

One of the core contributions provided by Christy Dena for Reality Game scholarship is the concept of *tiering* within the communities of players attracted to them (Dena 2008 42-43): Dena’s argument is that the essential experience of ARGs is changed by how one elects to engage with them, and that the resulting stratification within what I will refer to as the overall audience pool means that groups of people encounter different content in different ways within the same ARG text. Some people display active participation in uncovering new elements of the distributed text through puzzle-solving and research, and can be considered to be working at the coalface of the ARG; there is also a much larger and more passive audience which follows the activities of the players as much as they do the text itself, and which will likewise display stratification in the levels of activity applied by those involved. For example, a middle tier of ARG players will not have the time or patience to directly involve themselves in hunting down clues and new elements within the ARG. They will enthusiastically begin working over the material discovered by the workers at the coalface, seeking to find clues within that material that could lead to new directions for the coalface workers to move towards. A third group will participate less in contributing ideas directly to the wider collective labour of the ARG, and instead engage with discussions at the level of enjoying the process of witnessing the puzzle being solved.

Dena cites sample data taken from the *I Love Bees* ARG (Stewart, Lee and McGonigal 2004) where there was a core group listed in the tens of thousands who engaged in missions taking place offline, three-quarters of a million people actively working online to solve the puzzles presented by the game, and an overall audience of 2.5 million ‘casual’ participants who were following the experience of the more active groups (Dena 2008 42). Dena argues that only the first group as a whole qualifies as having engaged ‘with the primary producer content,’ whereas I argue that both of the first two groups should be considered the *players* of the ARG, since they were actively engaged in solving puzzles presented by the world-of-concern. One of the reasons that tiering is a productive conceptual tool for examining the phenomenology of ARGs is that it is itself *experiential*: “Tiers provide
separate content to different audiences and in doing so facilitate a different experience of a work or world” (Dena 2008 43).

The multiple tiers of engagement which are presented by Reality Games mean that there are different affective experiences being encountered simultaneously by discrete elements of the wider pool of people engaging with the text – although it should also be noted that the barriers between tiers are malleable, and individual players are likely to migrate between bands as their levels and types of engagement change over time, a migration which will have an affective complexion in itself.

The experience of the primary tier of workers at the coalface is primarily shaped by affects associated with challenge and achievement (see Page 157). These players are those who are tackling the puzzles and hidden elements of the ARG directly, and who have the most impact as individuals on the direction the text develops. At this level, an individual’s specific contribution is detectable amid the greater labour being applied to solving and negotiating the Reality Game as a whole, and as such individual achievements and contributions – together with the conflicts and frustrations of seeking them – will heavily shape the affective experience of the text. Individual players at this level might be recognised names whose work and opinions are discussed by those in the more detached tiers. At this level, it is arguable that the ongoing temporal flow is in some ways less relevant than at lower tiers: the achievement of individual players will be something that cannot move on without them; they are the trailblazers, and so are in less danger of being left behind. The point of tension would be better described as competition: is someone else going to find a solution or answer to something I am pursuing before I do? Has new information come to light which suggests I have been going down the wrong track? The players at the primary tier cannot be obsolete, so much as they can be mistaken, or slower to solve the puzzle than someone else. Rather than tension over an awareness of passing time spilling over into the player’s other worlds-of-concern, I argue that anticipation for the next moment s/he can return to the hunt will be the affective tenor spilling outside of active engagement with the game.

The experiential differences presented by tiering in ARG communities can be understood as distinctions to the alterbiography (see Pages 147-148) of engaging with the text. As with videogames, the alterbiography is the elements of the textual experience which occur as an unscripted outgrowth of the player’s negotiation with the rules making up the world-of-concern. However, in the case of Reality Games, the ‘rules’ are not hard-coded constraints on behaviour, but self-directed limitations that are frequently social (see Pages 196-197), and which are often beyond the control of the people theoretically responsible for the direction of the Reality Game being played (see Pages 200-202).

Aside from the Puppet Masters (see Pages 195-196). The issue of the extent to which players are shaping the direction an ARG text develops in raises questions about how predetermined the end of the ARG is, which is discussed in more detail on Pages 201-202.
The secondary tier is experientially distinguished more by the affective experience of community itself: there is achievement and challenge, but it is contextualised by the fact that rather than dealing directly with seeking new information and clues, players are engaging with the material located by the primary tier, and then working on it as a collective. As a result, the perception of the uncontrollable passing of time will be very significant to the experience of the text, and this will likely colour the day-to-day experience of the players, spilling out into the worlds-of-concern normally associated with work and home-life. This tier will also share the frustration of the primary tier, but in a different context: rather than trying to locate new material and clues, this tier is devoted to figuring out the points of interconnection between the material discovered by the primary tier, and in locating answers. It is this tier which will be heavily affectively shaped by the rivalries, friendships, debates and ability to gain personal respect intrinsic to such communities.

This secondary tier is also the site of production for what Christy Dena refers to as a 'participatory culture practice': “the content created by a small audience in reaction to primary-producer content has actually become the main product of consumption for mass audiences” (Dena 2008 42). The core way for new players to get ‘up to speed’ with an active ARG is to read through ‘Guides’ online, and what makes this phenomenon fascinating is that the Guides are all constructed by other players of the game: without the active engagement of a subset of the audience, the wider pool of people either catching up on earlier material or watching from the sidelines would not be able to do so. From a certain perspective, ARGs are community texts not simply because they can only be solved at the level of the community or because of the felt affect of community itself, but because they are themselves generated by and for a community from seeds produced by those guiding the development of the text. There is no ‘Reality Game text’ until it is created by the people playing it. The first ‘Guide’ produced for an ARG140 was written by Adrian Hon for The Beast (Stewart, Lee and Weisman 2001) as an attempt to provide a resource for new players, and was seen as analogous to a ‘walkthrough’ for a videogame text.141 However, it has been noted that Hon’s Guide is much more than a map to making progress through a particular ARG:

140 Or at least, the first recorded example of such a guide...
141 Videogame ‘walkthroughs’ have become more complicated as videogames have themselves grown in complexity; at heart, they combine hints and revealing hidden information with suggestions for how to play the game better, as an aid to people having trouble negotiating the text. However, it is possible to gain notoriety, respect and fame for having a particularly singular contribution to videogame walkthroughs, as happened for Kao Megura and his guides for Final Fantasy 7 (Square Product Development Dept. #1 1997 ; Burn and Schott 2004).
In this regard, it is evident how a Guide can provide narrative coherence: by providing a cause-and-effect path through the components. It is the act of narrating that renders this player-created content more than a mere ‘walkthrough’ or gameplay resource, it is a form of artistic production, a story in itself. Of particular importance too, is the fact that this narrative is experiential, an authentic sharing of a personal journey through the work. (Dena 2008 51)

Guides like the one written by Hon are able to function as the site of primary engagement for the broadest section of Reality Game audiences because they are framed as ‘personal journeys’ of negotiating with ARGs.

The tertiary tier or audience of ARGs is less connected with the fundamental labour being applied to engaging with the text, and as such the affective complexion is significantly different: their experience lacks the achievement, challenge, and frustration of the primary tier. The stakes are also lower than for the secondary tier, meaning that although the experience is still inherently based in the affect of community, it requires less personal investment. As a result, it is less associated with a context of building personal respect, and the rivalries and friendships associated with it. Much of this is due to engaging at the level of the Guides produced by the secondary tier, since Guides present another level of mediation between the players of the tertiary tier and the direct, subjective experience of engaging with the Reality Game text. Guides boil down the experience of ARGs, cutting down extraneous time spent exploring what turned out to be dead-ends. However, although they reduce the affects of frustration and community felt at the primary and secondary tiers, they do allow readers to experience some of what sets the experience of Reality Games apart:

ARG player conversations narrate the aporia (the obstacles) and epiphanies (the solutions) they experienced in an ARG.... The aporia and epiphanies experienced in games provoke narratives but also through reading the players’ posts and Guides, audiences are able to vicariously experience (derive pleasure from) the aporias and epiphanies of the players. I describe this type of writing as eureka discourse: the language of discovery. (Dena 2008 53)

All of the tiers involved in engaging with ARG texts involve eureka discourse; the question is to what extent and in what context the players are personally responsible for providing moments of discovery, as opposed to engaging with reports which transcribe and mediate those moments of discovery. Essentially, the primary and secondary tiers of Reality Games

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142 ‘Eureka discourse’ connects with the experience of juxtapositional hypertexts in Chapter 3 (see Pages 84-86). Both ARGs and juxtapositional hypertexts are experienced like puzzles, and are distinguished by their own affective qualities involving personal discovery. The difference is that juxtapositional hypertexts are not solved.
Games are directly, actively engaging with the content of the game to produce moments of discovery, and yet the form of their engagement is different, which shapes the affective tenors of the two experiences. In comparison, the tertiary tier is engaging far more with the players of the primary and secondary tier and the work they produce than they are with the game itself. They are fans rather than players, considering and debating the implications of what has been discovered rather than discovering themselves—although it is not inconceivable that these discussions could inform the more active problem-solvers of the secondary tier.

However, it should be noted that the boundaries between different tiers of ARG engagement are permeable and fluid: individual players can migrate between different positions within the community across the course of their engagement with the Reality Game world-of-concern. Participants of the primary tier might also engage at the secondary level, discussing the points of potential interconnection between the material that has been discovered—even material the player discovered him/herself. In some cases, the tier from which a given player engages with the ARG community is going to be entirely dependent on the time s/he has available, rather than the strength or form of his/her investment. A result of this migration is that many players will experience the same Reality Game text in multiple affective, experiential registers.

There is also a fourth tier which exists in parallel to the other three: the ability to engage with components of the game which occur offline. Considering the global span of ARG audiences, and the fact that these offline components will be anchored to specific geography, there are going to be players engaging in the primary tier of the game who will find it impossible to attend; likewise there will be players in the tertiary tier who are able to attend because they live nearby and are curious to meet the people whose exploits they have been following, together with other people interested in the subject of the ARG text. Many of the people who were able to physically attend offline meetings for I Love Bees carried webcams and other technology designed to allow interested players at all tiers who were unable to share the experience directly to do so vicariously. Physical attendance will absolutely shape the affective experience of engaging with ARG communities, but is not directly associated with the same forms of engagement presented by Dena’s tiers.

What all of the tiers are invested in, to greater and lesser extents, is how they relate to the concept of the Reality Game as fiction—in that they take great pains to assist in
concealing this fact from themselves and each other, as part of their investment with the world-of-concern.

**This is Not A Game**

*Majestic* (EA Games 2001) provides an example of the way in which Reality Games frame themselves in order to, as Dena argues, “reduce the signs of the game’s fictional status while enhancing elements that trigger gamers to treat it as they would real life” (Dena 2007 238). *Majestic* was a commercial product funded via a subscription model, to which players signed up and provided a variety of contact details so that the technological filaments could be targeted to the subscribers. However, in the days leading up to the listed start of the game, the players who had signed up to *Majestic* received emails announcing that the game was indefinitely postponed due to data-loss caused by a fire. Shortly afterward, the player community received emails and phone calls from an anonymous source claiming that the fire at *Majestic* headquarters was arson, as part of a broader plot and cover-up (McGonigal 2003b 4). Doing so eliminated the game as a game, instead introducing a wide swathe of intriguing questions to the player-base in a way which suggested they were unfolding in the ‘real’ world. This process, and the wider aesthetic approach to which it is a part, is referred to as “This Is Not a Game.”

To "TING" a game now means to explicitly deny and purposefully obscure its nature as a game, a task that has become increasingly difficult as immersive players grow more savvy about TING techniques. (McGonigal 2003b 4)

“This Is Not a Game” is the concept underlying the phenomenological reality (see Page 184) of ARG engagement: every puzzle or obstacle the player community is presented with is framed as realistically as possible in order to suggest that they are unfolding within the daily worlds-of-concern inhabited by the players as individuals.

As a result of TING philosophy, Reality Games do not advertise themselves to any audiences, and are framed so that people stumble onto them in moments of serendipity; within marketing circles, the term ARG is almost synonymous with ‘viral marketing’ (Schwarz 2006). The entry-points to Reality Games, also known as ‘rabbit holes’ (Szulborski

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143 A relevant question to ask here is whether people actually believed the scenario they were presented with, but for the purposes of the ARG it simply did not matter. Some of the audience might have investigated within a framework of a startled “What, really?!” while others did realise it was a ploy, and yet became involved because they thought the approach was knowing and clever. It did, after all, fit the world-of-concern which players had already signed up to participate in. For more on Jane McGonigal’s discussions of ‘performative belief’ in ARGs, see Pages 198-199.
2005b), can be very varied – the core feature rabbit holes share is that they raise questions which some people elect to investigate. For example, one entry-point into *The Beast* (Stewart, Lee and Weisman 2001) was that an individual named Jeanine Salla was given a credit as ‘Sentient Machine Therapist’ among the listings on the poster for the film *A.I.* (Spielberg 2001). This was an otherwise minor, small detail that would simply go unnoticed by most people; however, out of those who did notice, some were inspired to do more research. They discovered material online purporting to be from the year 2142 which linked Janine Salla to the apparent suicide of a man named Evan Chan, with hints that he was actually murdered. In comparison, *I Love Bees* (Stewart, Lee and McGonigal 2004) had different entry-points for different groups of people sought for the ARG: players who were veterans of *The Beast* were sent jars of honey mixed in with plastic letters which could be arranged to spell ILOVEBEES and no other explanation; a near-subliminal message of ILOVEBEES.COM was flashed up during trailers at the premiere for *I, Robot* (Proyas 2004); and after an ad for *Halo 2* (Bungie Studios 2004) – which was the product the ARG was designed to eventually promote. A third group were involved when a woman asked for help on a technical forum because of unusual glitches on her amateur-beekeeping website – and which became threatening when she attempted to repair them. These varied approaches introduced potential avenues for investigation to veterans of a prior Reality Game, science-fiction fans who might be intrigued by the context, fans of the *Halo* setting, and people with technical experience and skills. These groups were a substrate which it was hoped could make enough progress and gain enough visible momentum that they could interest other individuals who had not been exposed to one of the initial ‘rabbit holes.’ As a result of the scatter-shot approach whereby entry-points into the Reality Game text were themselves concealed, the experience of ARGs for every individual player within the wider community begins with a moment of discovery.

However, even when ARGs have active communities, there is an ongoing resistance any acknowledgement that the text is an Reality Game, or fictional to any extent (McGonigal 2003b 4). There is a flat refusal to connect the text to those people who are guiding it, a group who have picked up the title of *Puppet Masters* or PMs. Jane McGonigal has stressed that the community of players comprising *The Beast* (Stewart, Lee and Weisman 2001) created the title of ‘Puppet Masters’ as a way of conceptualising what made the relationship
between the ARG community and those responsible for guiding it distinctive;\textsuperscript{144} it was not something the PMs selected themselves (McGonigal 2010 253). The community of players engaging with an ARG text will have no confirmation of who the Puppet Masters are, simply an awareness that the game is evolving in response to the actions of the wider community;\textsuperscript{145} there is always the possibility that any given interaction with another player could actually have been with a PM in disguise. However, one of the interesting features of affective investment with ARG worlds-of-concern is that there is a social contract not to seek out or reveal the Puppet Masters ‘behind the curtain,’ since to do so would damage investment in the experience of the game as phenomenologically real:\textsuperscript{146}

When it comes to (ARGs), however, it’s not just algorithms behind the curtain—it’s a team of live game designers. And what keeps them invisible to the gamers is not a stable interface, but rather an active practice: the PM practice of withholding information from, and refusing direct interaction with, the players during the game. (...) This curtain, of course, is metaphorical—a kind of social norm, an agreement that the two sides will keep a functional distance from each other throughout the live play. The designers agree not to interfere with live play as overt authority figures once they have handed over the instructions for the live missions. And for their part, players agree not to try to “out” the secret designers, or to contact the designers directly for any “out-of-game” advice or discussion, that is to say, with meta concerns about the gameplay. (McGonigal 2010 254)

Players of Reality Games have actually gone further than simply keeping a ‘gentleman’s agreement’ to not seek out Puppet Masters. Their investment in the world-of-concern is significant enough that the wider community of players has taken steps on several occasions to repair ‘ruptures’ where material escaped from ‘behind the curtain.’ These community actions were undertaken in order to prevent other players from encountering material that threatened the ARG’s status as phenomenologically real:

Instead, players embraced the game’s “This is not a game” bravado and buttressed it with their own performed belief. When often-sizeable gaps appeared between the game’s “big talk” and the realized immersive effects, the audience collaborated in suturing the game world ruptures. In other words, the players actively supported and protected the game’s belief in itself. (McGonigal 2003a 10)

\textsuperscript{144} A deeper exploration of the relationship between PMs and ARG players, together with the affective consequences for the dynamic, can be found on Pages 200-202.

\textsuperscript{145} See how ARGs relate to textual ‘writerly-ness’ on Pages 202-204.

\textsuperscript{146} This secrecy, the uncertainty surrounding who is actually an authority figure, and focus on ‘protecting’ key information from being released in the ‘wrong way’ has a certain cult-like tenor to it. However, for more on how threatening ARGs seem from outside of their context, see Pages 198-199.
For example, on the occasion where a player of *The Beast* (Stewart, Lee and Weisman 2001) used a WHOIS-lookup to locate information about who had registered key domain names, and thus leap the story ahead via those new sources of information, the wider community reacted with anger. The approach was considered to be poor form, since the research was focused on the people behind the ARG rather than the content of the ARG, and it was described as being like telling people the end of a new novel (McGonigal 2003a 11). What is important to note is that this was not due to intervention by the Puppet Masters, or any textual reduction of agency on behalf of those engaging with *The Beast* as an ARG: the community of players elected to put their investment in *The Beast* as a ‘real’ story ahead of opportunities to advance that story. What this indicates is that the affective experience of purposefulness is more important to the community’s engagement with the text than the purpose itself; the process of being part of the community is more affectively important than the focus of that community.

Another example can be found in an occasion where the Puppet Masters released clues about the email address of a Microsoft employee, after a link had been found between Microsoft and *The Beast*. The intent of the Puppet Masters was to hide information within the fake email account, which would leak when ARG players managed to hack into it. Instead, despite proof that several players did hack into the account, the information was never distributed.

Their failure to pursue the Zartman course of action reveals that players were, in fact, respecting a game-reality boundary, even as they played along with the idea: “This is not a game.” (...) Furthermore, the successful email hackers apparently wanted to keep the curtain firmly in place for other players, and after they felt they had gone too far, they protected their co-players from the non-immersive information they had gleaned. In this way, they took up the work of the puppetmasters, helping to hide the protective frame even as they knew it remained firmly in place. (McGonigal 2003a 12)

Players of *The Beast* took on the responsibility for defending the game’s “This Is Not a Game” world-of-concern for themselves, in this case without discussion or prompting. One of the more inventive and labour-intensive examples of players seeking to protect a world-of-concern occurred after a mistake at a live event for *The Beast*: a key prop containing part of a password was mistakenly taken home by an actor, so the player-base programmed and distributed a client-server password cracker to fill in the gaps. This was done to solve the problem without involving the Puppet Masters or bringing the rupture to their attention – and
was successfully solved before the PMs noticed that the problem had occurred (McGonigal 2003a 12-13). Essentially, the community of people engaging with The Beast employed a significant level of labour to manipulate themselves as subjects, in order to maintain and reinforce their ability to subjectively engage with the ARG as game players. All of which indicates a high degree of affective investment in the world-of-concern and its status as phenomenologically real.

The investment in the phenomenological reality of Reality Games from the player community has been so significant that Jane McGonigal references occasions at several conference presentations where unnamed scholars (McGonigal 2003a 2-3) have been deeply concerned by the possibility that ARGs represent ‘schizophrenia machines.’ The argument behind the concern is that the ARG framework of adding an ongoing fictional world-of-concern to daily activities might destabilise players, particularly those who are already somehow unstable. Another possibility which has been raised is that players could be drawn into a scenario like the one postulated by the science-fiction book Ender’s Game (Card 1991) where a malevolent Puppet Master is exploiting or endangering players who do not realise that the ‘game’ has consequences to the real-world (McGonigal 2003a 2-3). The concept even features heavily in the science-fiction book Halting State (Stross 2007), where people who believe themselves to be players in a series of ARGs are actually frontline spies and soldiers for governmental and corporate espionage.

Jane McGonigal’s A Real Little Game: The Performance of Belief in Pervasive Play has been written to specifically deal with what she argues is a significant misconception. For one thing, McGonigal argues that the fact players of Reality Games have invested significant time and effort to repair occasions where the fictional-status of a game became visible is proof that they are entirely aware of the difference between fact and fiction: the players are preserving and reinforcing the pretence that the game is real, because the apparent reality is something they are invested in as part of the world-of-concern. McGonigal seeks to contest the assumption on behalf of critics that the players of any immersive media believe what they are doing – either due to inherent credulity, mental instability, or the dangerously manipulative context of the ARG. Instead, she argues that players are engaged in an active performance of belief (McGonigal 2003a 22). She cites the example of an interview with Sven Halling, the CEO of the company behind BotFighters – a game played using cellphones.

147 Chris Dahlen suggests that if the people engaging in ARGs and transmedial texts are not given some kind of acknowledgement that a character is fictional – in order to establish such a performance of belief – that they feel betrayed when the truth is revealed (Dahlen 2011).
where players control duelling robots mapped onto their physical location. Halling has regularly had to deal with concern that players will not be able to tell the difference between fiction and reality, including an occasion he was told of players in both Sweden and Japan ducking out of business-meetings in order to deal with the game. Halling noted that, “More likely than players losing their ability to distinguish between game and life,” is that the game “is far more important [to them] than boring stuff that’s being discussed in the meeting” (McGonigal 2003a 19).

Sean Stewart summarises the relationship between players and Reality Games thusly:

...we ask you, the player, to allow a soap-film thin bubble of suspension of disbelief to follow you around during your daily routine. Players and creators invest a lot of trust and energy in not popping that bubble. One player summed up the typical player mode brilliantly by saying, “It’s like a role-playing game where you play a character who’s exactly like you, only she believes it’s real.” (Stewart 2008 2)

The quote given to Stewart is a key component of both how the players of Reality Games engage with their worlds-of-concern, and also how they relate to the phenomenological reality which frames ARG texts. The people who engage with Reality Games do so as themselves, with the same capacities to act as individuals that they possess whenever engaging with a modern technological context: a significant minority of those involved in ARGs will be capable of hacking into an email account to search for clues, and a minority of those capable of doing so will try ‘just in case’ within an ARG. This is part of what connects to the felt achievement of Reality Games, particularly for the primary and secondary tiers of engagement: the player succeeds or fails when applying his/her own skills in a context of phenomenological reality, rather than in succeeding at a task intended to represent the skill-set his/her character possesses within a videogame world-of-concern. Your triumphs in an Reality Game are directly yours, a fact which has a distinctive affective quality that is itself reinforced by the community context of ARGs, in that your contributions will be remembered and recognised. However, although your triumphs and the resulting community recognition and respect are contextualised by an awareness that the stakes are not real, the players are invested together in a communal world-of-concern that acts as though they are.

McGonigal’s framework of understanding investment in ARGs as a ‘performance of belief’ is a productive concept, but one which cannot be applied solely to the analysis of what

148 This is also an example of players electing not to turn off the technological filaments of an ARG, and thus being consciously open to the possibility that it might reach out to them even in the middle of an office meeting.
sets the experience of Reality Games apart from those of other media forms. I argue that the ‘performance of belief’ can be a framework for understanding affective investment in fictional worlds-of-concern across forms of storytelling media: in all cases part of the experience is an awareness of the unreality of fictional engagement, which the person engaging with the text sets aside during the experience. As such, the experience of engaging with Reality Game texts is better distinguished by Stewart’s framework where there are no fantasy roles adopted by those engaging with the text because they are playing as themselves within a context of phenomenological reality.

A Mutiny of Puppets

A striking example of the affective dynamic between the players of ARGs and their Puppet Masters was witnessed by Jane McGonigal as part of her involvement in *The Go Game*, an offline ARG where people who have signed up receive instructions via cellphone for adventures in an urban environment. The first message a group of players was given included a colourful phrase which was misinterpreted as an instruction, leading them to drop their pants in public, dance around, and take pictures of their actions so as to ‘prove’ they were obeying orders:

> We didn’t get a rush of power when the players misinterpreted our simple welcome message. We actually felt completely out of control. We had worked so carefully to craft just the right text for our mission scripts, and yet from the very first moment of gameplay, our actual, effective authority was stripped away. Yes, we could give the players a set of instructions—but clearly we could not predict or dictate how they would read and embody those instructions. We were absolutely not in control of our players’ creative instincts. (...) No matter what it looked like to outsiders, we were not pulling these players’ strings. Yes, the players were following our commands, but their interpretation of the commands left them fully in charge of their own experience. The scripts had been delivered; the actors were putting on the show. In that moment I realized that the players in a puppet mastered game are not performing objects; they are performing subjects. And that performing subjectivity is never ceded, even in submission to a puppet master’s orders. (McGonigal 2010 260)

The players of Reality Games are entirely in control of what they do in negotiating the text, and there are many other examples where a community of players has undertaken actions which the Puppet Masters either did not anticipate, or could not stop once the players began to pursue them. In 2002, an ARG designed to promote the film *Push* (McGuigan 2009)
finished in a fashion that the player-base considered unsatisfactory; the conclusion the community reached was that the ARG was not actually over, and the apparent finale was a red-herring designed to throw them off the scent of the ‘real game’ (McGonigal 2003b 6). Despite the fact that the Puppet Masters were no longer involved in shaping the game in response to player actions, and despite the fact that no more content for the ARG existed, the players persisted – even finding unrelated material which they concluded was part of the ongoing ARG. Another example, also from 2002, is that ARG veterans of *The Beast* discovered a website called ‘8March2003.com’ and concluded that the ominous use of a future date suggested involvement in a Reality Game. They flooded the site with visitor traffic, emailed enquiries, and began researching the background to the site – including into the life and times of whoever registered the domain. The site was edited to include an official disavowal of any involvement in ARGs in an attempt to correct the misconception and be left alone, but this failed to gain any traction. Given the level of community investment in the concept of “This Is Not A Game,” it is unsurprising that informing the community trying to turn 8March2003.com into an ARG that it was ‘not a game’ did nothing to discourage their interest (McGonigal 2003b 6).

The ‘live’ involvement of Puppet Masters means that player actions and involvement can become enfolded into the ongoing text:

> Although game designers hold most of the story in hand, players have much influence on how the story unfolds. Because players discuss the game in public forums, game designers adjust the story and clues based on player feedback. As a result, the story co–evolves between the groups (Kim et al. 2009 14).

An example can be found in *I Love Bees*, where the Puppet Masters believed that the players would sympathise with one of the artificial-intelligence characters in the game’s diegesis, dubbed ‘The Sleeping Princess.’ However, a group of players concluded that sympathy for The Sleeping Princess was what the game’s antagonist wanted them to feel, and set out to tell the ‘bad’ artificial intelligence where The Sleeping Princess was located (Kim, Allen and Lee 2008 41). As a result, the Puppet Masters had to include this new element into the unfolding game. Essentially, the affective dynamic between players and Puppet Masters is analogous to the framework for decision-making presented in *The Dice Man* (Rhinehart 1971), where people ‘give their lives over’ to rolls of the dice:
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Mrs. Ecstein hesitated and then a slow smile began to brighten her face. ‘We must always let the dice decide, huh?’ she asked.
‘That’s right.’
‘But we control the options.’
‘Very good.’
She was smiling happily as if she were a child who has just learned how to read.
‘If the die is a four or a five or a six it means we have to try to make a baby.’
‘Ahh,’ said Dr. Rhinehart. (Rhinehart 1971 180-181)

On the one hand, the players ‘must’ follow where the Puppet Masters lead; on the other hand, the players are entirely in control of what they are willing to do, often go further than the Puppet Masters expect, and the Puppet Masters have no capacity to stop them from doing so. The ‘Sleeping Princess’ scenario is interesting precisely because it represents an affective battle within the ARG community. Some players were resistant to the feeling the ‘correct’ affect for the Sleeping Princess, and found reasons within the world-of-concern to justify feeling affects which – from the perspective of the Puppet Masters – were wrong: distrust and antagonism. The Puppet Masters were incapable of correcting the affective relationship which these players established within the world-of-concern, and attempts to do so would presumably reinforce the existing antagonism by proving that attempts at manipulation were in play.

The ‘liveness’ of the involvement of the Puppet Masters in the experience of Reality Game texts is not something that can be duplicated in other forms of mediated storytelling, and presents an affective dynamic which sets ARGs apart.

Detectives and Archaeologists

One of the consequences of the ‘live’ dialogue between Puppet Masters ‘behind the curtain’ and the player community of ARGs is that Reality Game texts qualify as the most writerly (see Pages 30-31) form of textual storytelling encountered within this project because “In a very real sense, the story of the game is undetermined at its outset” (Kim et al. 2009 4). The ideas Roland Barthes put forward in S/Z regarding the shift from ‘readerly’ to ‘writerly’ texts was part of the inspiration for hypertext as a textual form (Barthes 1974; Lunenfeld 2000 46). However, I argue that Reality Games are the most accurate structural and experiential match to Barthes’ theorising of how ‘writerly’ texts would be structured and experienced which has been produced to date.
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The core of what Barthes is arguing for in *S/Z* is that the act of reading can also be considered an act of rewriting, and that whenever a text is thus rewritten, it is also disseminated (Barthes 1974 5). Reality Games are not obviously reading experiences; text can comprise a significant part of the material they contain, but they are too transmedial to be primarily identified as texts to be read. However, ARGs are texts of hyper-interpretation, and have entire communities of individuals operating in multiple tiers of creative engagement *competing* in the act of interpretation in an attempt to further the development and growth of the text. Every act of interpretation within that community comes in the form of internal communications where players suggest links between material, some of which may not have been previously considered to be part of the ARG text. Every single act of interpretation within the community is simultaneously an act of dispersal and dissemination within the community, and can pollinate to individuals outside of the community who become interested in their encounter with the disseminated text. As has already been covered (see Page 191), the ‘rewritten’ ARG in the form of Guides has arguably been the primary content that the majority of people seeking to learn more about Reality Games have engaged with (Dena 2008 41-42).

Reality Games are texts which are constantly being rewritten, including explicitly by the Puppet Masters themselves in a ‘live’ context, which means the Puppet Masters can include and respond to actions taken by the community. The community is engaged in interpreting the existing textual fragments and in seeking new elements through interpretation and dissemination, while the Puppet Masters interpret their own text in light of the directions taken by the player community. The affective dynamic of Reality Games is heavily shaped by the experience of co-creative engagement, both within the community and in the relationship between the wider community and the Puppet Masters themselves.

The writerly dispersal and dissemination of Reality Games works through affective links, and also presents affective consequences for the experience of the text. Reality Games are texts deliberately scattered and concealed across online and offline realms, meaning that even locating the disparate fragments is a significant element of engaging with the text for the player community. As such, each individual fragment can be an entry-point into the text; alternatively, even if we define ‘entry-point’ as the ‘rabbit holes’ which attempt to become loci of curiosity – for different player demographics – then there are fewer of them, but they still offer multiple structural and affective ways into the text. As has been discussed in the context of juxtapositional hypertext fiction (see Pages 84-86), the order in which textual shards are encountered will shape the experience of engaging with them. The same is true of
ARGs, in that the connections players establish to the text will be shaped by which ‘rabbit hole’ they encounter: the personally cryptic arrival of the jars of honey with jumbled letters, for example, in comparison to the quick flash of “I LOVE BEES” in a movie theatre, or the unusual appeal for aid on a technical blog.

From an experiential perspective, beyond the fact that ARGs are ‘undetermined at their outset,’ the player community of Reality Games is engaged in a fundamentally creative, interpretive fashion with the text. Christy Dena argues that ARGs present evidence for Henry Jenkins’ theories of participatory culture (Jenkins 2006), and that they actually extend Jenkins’ position on the subject: the players of Reality Games do not just modify and then recirculate texts; they are fundamentally “filling in gaps left intentionally and unintentionally by the primary producer” (Dena 2008 41). This process can be in the form of speculation as to what ‘official’ material that bridges existing textual elements might look like, in order to facilitate searching for as-yet unfound components of the ARG, or content-creation at the level of the players themselves. As such, it is a form of co-creative interpretation and dispersal which represents a distinctive part of the process of negotiating the distributed text of Reality Games:

(the) idea was that we would tell a story that was not bound by communication platform: it would come at you over the web, by email, via fax and phone and billboard and TV and newspaper, SMS and skywriting and smoke signals too if we could figure out how. The story would be fundamentally interactive, made of little bits that players, like detectives or archaeologists, would discover and fit together. We would use political pamphlets, business brochures, answering phone messages, surveillance camera video, stolen diary pages...
...in short, instead of telling a story, we would present the evidence of that story, and let the players tell it to themselves. (Stewart 2008 1)

The ‘writerly-ness’ of ARG texts connects to many contributing elements of the affective experience of engaging with them, such as the ‘eureka discourse’ posited by Christy Dena (see Page 192) and the language of discovery inherent to the primary and secondary tiers of experience within the wider player community; the labour of negotiating ARGs is a personal accomplishment within a context of phenomenological reality and co-creative community engagement, and this is itself affectively powerful for the experience of the text.
CHAPTER 6: (ALTERNATE) REALITY GAMES – SUBJECTIVITY IN FICTION

IMPLICATIONS FOR SUBJECTIVITY

The core element underlying how the affective experience of Reality Games are distinct from the experiences of other media forms is that they are experienced from a subjective perspective, in comparison to the hybridity (see Pages 68-69) more appropriate for the other textual forms of storytelling under discussion. Reality Games present a fundamentally different relationship between the text and the individuals who are negotiating with them, in that there is minimal mediation between who the player is, and who the player is within the world-of-concern established with the game: as Sean Stewart has said, the only difference between the two is that within the world-of-concern, the player believes the game to be real (Stewart 2008 2). What this difference represents is a difference in the identity the player is investing in as part of engaging with the world-of-concern.

The relationship between the ‘actual-I’ and the ‘virtual-I’ is that they are phenomenologically coterminous, and both are capable of real affective experiences: the difference is that the ‘actual-I’ is your self, whereas the ‘virtual-I’ is a hybrid of your self and the text you are engaging with (see Pages 70-72). As has also been discussed in Chapter 2, the hybrid is not simply defined as functioning at the level of agency – capacity to act – but also at the level of affect. The modified affective complexion of the ‘virtual-I’ highlights the contextual awareness of difference between the two states, meaning that there is no ‘blurring of reality’ when people engage in virtual, fictional experiences. The distinction highlights the point made by McGonigal and Stewart in critiquing the possibility of ARGs functioning as ‘schizophrenia machines.’ However, it is also true to say that experiences are most affectively potent when the distinction between the ‘virtual-I’ and the ‘actual-I’ is most porous, and Reality Games provide a textual framework for engagement where the two states exist in very close affective proximity. One of the reasons behind the conceptualisation of hybridity for understanding how individuals are able to engage with fictional worlds-of-concern is to critically account for the perception of agency (see Page 2) within a context where the ‘capacity to act’ exists because it has been designed for by external forces. However, in the context of Reality Games, the players possess the same capacity to act as they do in their everyday worlds-of-concern – the only difference between the ‘actual-I’ and the ‘virtual-I’ is that the ‘virtual-I’ believes the game is real, with appropriate affective consequences which prevent the two states from becoming confused. I argue that just as

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149 This connects to the continuum of subjectivity at work in the forms of media explored in this project, as discussed on Page 184.
there is a particular affective quality native to hybrid experiences, so there is affective potency in engaging with fictional worlds-of-concern as yourself: the achievements of players engaging with Reality Games truly belong to them; they have applied their own native skills, imagination and capacity to act in solving problems, and this has yielded fruit in a way that could well be unique. This awareness is folded into their experience of the text, and the perception of responsibility and pride they feel towards their involvement.

What is suggested by Reality Game texts is that although the conceptualisation of the world-of-concern and distinction between the ‘actual-I’ and ‘virtual-I’ remain productive, the relevance of hybridity as a concept begins to fall away in the context of textual forms of storytelling without limitations on the actions players can undertake. In comparison, the role of subjectivity comes to replace it as a productive critical concept for considering how the experience of ARGs is shaped by the processes of engagement with the self and others required of the individuals negotiating with the text. While they remain productive concepts, this shift does mean that the distinction between the ‘actual-I’ and the ‘virtual-I,’ and how textual worlds-of-concern function within the new context needs to be reconsidered.

Another factor with wider implications is the presence of the Puppet Masters, which suggest that ARGs represent the far end of the spectrum implied by textual ergodicity and cybertextuality. Ergodic texts create a context of responsibility because your choices matter; cybertexts provide an element outside the player’s subjectivity which plays back by deciding which options the player has to choose from, in response to earlier decisions made in negotiating the text. ARGs go further because they explicitly have people – possessed of their own subjectivities, who are outside the player’s subjectivity – who are adapting the text in response to your actions in what is essentially real-time, in order to paint pictures within your subjectivity (see Pages 18 and 32). 

Because ARGs are by their very nature a niche textual form, caution needs to be applied in extrapolating developments in new media culture from them. With that said, some forms of experience with definite links to ARGs are entering wider culture, such as geocaching (see Page 219).

Another point of data on this new continuum is Sleep is Death (Rohrer 2010) which is a videogame that provides a framework for a Game Master (or GM, although perhaps Puppet Master is appropriate?) to tell a story as a dialogue with the person playing the game. Sleep is Death is less of an outlier on this continuum than Reality Game texts because the videogame structure creates a context of hybridity for both the Puppet Master and the player by restricting their capacities to act; the game qualifies as both ergodic and cybertextual (see Pages 22-24 and 26), but I argue that the fact the ‘component independent of the player’ which is involved in presenting the options s/he is able to choose from is another person will have consequences for the affective experience of the text in different ways than those inherent to either ergodicity or cybertextuality.
EDGE CASES

As has been discussed, it is not possible to engage with case studies of Reality Games in the same way as has been done in earlier chapters: the experience of a ‘live’ ARG where the Puppet Masters are adapting the text in response to community action and where the player is engaging with that community itself is very different to experiencing archives of such experiences. I will explore several cases which are in some way exceptions to the frameworks of textual engagement normally established by Reality Games, and consider how the affective experience of engaging with these exceptional texts functions.

The Dionaea House

_The Dionaea House_ (Heisserer 2004) is a text which has already been discussed as an example of hypertext fiction (see Page 96), but one of the elements which makes it an interesting point for discussion is how close it comes to qualifying as a Reality Game. The elements which distinguish it from an ARG are themselves instructive: essentially, the experience of _The Dionaea House_ places the people who are negotiating with it in the affective position of members of the tertiary tier of a Reality Game who are reading a Guide produced by the most active tiers; in this case, the most active tier who are collating the information that the community is engaging with consists of the author himself. Reading _The Dionaea House_ and negotiating the text occurs without the affective qualities of frustration or achievement which would be associated with the experience of higher-tier engagement; however, it is a functional experiential match for the tertiary tier because the audience becomes invested in the author’s hunt for, and reporting of, new material. The audience experiences moments of discovery and ‘eureka discourse’ by proxy, just in the same way as is produced by the experience of engaging with Guides.

Interestingly, some players attempted to migrate into higher-tiers of engagement which _The Dionaea House_ as a text did not support: primary tier communities attempted to form around seeking out new, as yet ‘undiscovered’ material which could be added to the meta-text, and secondary tier communities combed the existing material for clues. However, since the author was creating new material and adding it into the site/Guide as it was located, new material did not exist to be found, and so these tiered communities were short-lived – presumably because negative affects such as frustration at a fruitless hunt were ultimately demotivational.
All that would be needed in order to turn *The Dionaea House* into an ARG would be to alter the approach taken in releasing the elements of the text. Rather than providing a central hub to which material is linked, the initial mystery presented on the website could function as a place to start, together with cryptic material released in other online contexts. As a community gathered, the elements of the story contained in blog-posts could be released into the wilds of the internet, complete with enough cryptic references that they could potentially be found, and their interrelations pieced together by the individuals in the community.

Questions regarding the political economy of Reality Game production are also raised by this case: the vast majority of Reality Games released to date have had very significant corporate backing and sponsorship, considering the time and effort involved to produce them. As a result, they have all focused on particular products, or have been products themselves. *The Dionaea House* raises the possibility that, if the context had been changed, it could have functioned as one of the first ARGs to exist outside of a corporate context. Its use of the ARG framework could have been motivated by telling a story with a distinctive affective context, rather than to promote a commercial product – or to be a commercial product itself.

**Missing: Since January**

*Missing: Since January* (Lexis Numérique 2004) is a commercial videogame which duplicates some of the same affective experience of engaging with ARGs. The game presents itself through the framework of an encrypted disc which police are outsourcing to specialists in an attempt to find a kidnapped couple. The player creates an account on what is apparently a police website, and the game sends information and clues to the player’s email address. Clues to the puzzles of the game are concealed online in a variety of internet pages, which the player must seek out.

The experience of *Missing* is roughly analogous to the primary or secondary tier of Alternative Reality Game player communities: the player is engaged in seeking out new information and clues to solving particular problems; however, the experience is arguably closer to that of the secondary tier, due to the framework the game provides which means the player is always looking for something specific.

Seeking clues online does contain moments of discovery and eureka discourse, together with being heavily flavoured by the frustration of dealing with cryptic clues and the fact that the player is working alone, rather than with the assistance of a collective-
intelligence of other players. *Missing* tries to create the perception of other players by using email contacts, but the experience lacks the social component common to ARGs, just as the fact it is a commercial product means that it is purchased rather than stumbled onto through a ‘rabbit hole.’ Another distinction is that the game does not provide a context of *phenomenological reality*: activities such as hacking into a computer within the world-of-concern function through more representational logics, such as what is essentially a level of *Pac-Man* (Namco 1980) recontextualised so that the player and enemies are represented by alchemical symbols.

The most significant point that *Missing* has in common with ARG experience is that it is a text of infiltration because it extends some technological filaments into the daily life of the player. Although it lacks the genuinely social component, the game does create a world-of-concern that the player knows s/he *might* encounter whenever s/he checks his/her email, no matter the context s/he checks email in. This is particularly relevant when the game’s serial-killer antagonist makes contact with the player directly, and challenges the player to catch him. This face fact is emphasised when the missing couple are explicitly noted to be the last people who tried to catch him, and the fact the killer is able to contact the player via email suggests he has access to elements of his/her life.

*Missing: Since January* definitely qualifies as a videogame experience because of the processes of engagement required of individuals engaging with the text. However, it is also heavily remediating some of the elements that provide distinctive affective qualities for the experience of Reality Games.

**The *Portal* Incident**

*Portal* (Valve 2007a) is a science-fiction videogame focused on physics puzzles – the player can create portals which instantly join two different points in space, and these are used to negotiate dangerous environments. Over the course of the game, there are hints that *Portal* occupies the same narrative setting as *Half-Life 2* (Valve 2004) – a dystopian future where humanity is suffering under an incursion from another dimension. Despite being a discrete text and an entirely unusual context for an Reality Game, *Portal* became the site for an ARG community focused on solving a mystery which was presented through software updates for the text.

In a patch released in March 2010, new content was added to the game: if players carried clock-radios, which previously only played a tinny rendition of in-game music,
throughout the maze-like levels of the single-player game, they would play distorted sounds in key locations (Meer 2010b). Rapidly, communities formed online dedicated to uncovering the secrets underlying these cryptic additions to an otherwise single-player text. Some people downloaded the patch which had added the content to the game and proceeded to investigate the code line-by-line; others processed the sound-files triggered on the clock-radios with digital editing software in an attempt to clean out the noise and discover clues. Eventually it was discovered that when viewed in various forms of text and hex-editors, there were badly distorted ASCII images concealed in the update-code (Meer 2010a). These images were of the diegetic environment of Portal, except displaying changes which suggested they were taken in the aftermath of the game’s events. Another in-game change was an extended sequence at the very end of the game, hinting at a continuation of the story (Meer 2010c). The conclusion was that this ARG was a way of promoting an eventual sequel to Portal – a theory borne out in the announcement of Portal 2 (Valve 2011) in 2010, with trailers that contained images very similar to the ASCII visuals concealed in the code.

There was definite tiering displayed by the wider community of players engaging with the text: the primary tier of players were those specifically engaging with the material and locating new clues either by searching the diegetic environment of the game space, or by examining the underlying code of the patch; the secondary tier engaged with the material discovered by the most active band; a vastly larger audience at the tertiary tier excitedly discussed what had been found by the first groups and entered into energetic debate about what it all might mean.

Despite the fact that the material was not spread out across the internet, a fragmented text was hidden inside an update for a commercial, single-player product. The fact it is a commercial product is interesting since it dramatically limits the field of potential players by only including people who owned Portal: the ‘rabbit hole’ was the otherwise-mundane patch to an existing commercial product, and was confined to individuals who had already purchased the game. On the other hand, marketing ARGs to specific target demographics has already been visible in the promotion of I Love Bees, and since the point was to release information leading to the announcement of a sequel to the entry-point game, doing so ensured that the audience might be interested. This form of release was, however, itself new:

You can assert until the cows come home that you don’t find PR gimmicks or ARGs interesting, but this is something new – updating the game itself to lay its treasure trail, rather than relying on external websites or hype. Big budget
games are generally considered static, fixed – this is making full advantage of what the internet can do when made intrinsic to a game. (Meer 2010c)

Precisely because it came from an unexpected source and format – clues hidden at the level of code for one game rather than spread across multiple websites and media platforms – it is entirely probable that a significant proportion of the wider community engaging with the Portal ARG had no direct experience of Reality Games. It is entirely possible that many people did not realise that the experience of what they were doing would even qualify as an ARG, merely that it was fascinating, and that they were directly involved.

Another experiential difference from classical ARGs which occurred in this example was a lack of Puppet Masters: it seems accurate to say that all of the information was at the level of the code-release, rather than being guided over time. As such, players did not have the opportunity to have their specific contributions folded into the text, or the resulting experience of affective co-creation; however, they did have the ability to gain personal achievements through engaging with the puzzles of the text, and respect within the community of their peers.

4Chan

4Chan (2003) is a website focused on a variety of sub-forums dedicated to different elements of popular culture, and is the centre of an online culture referred to as ‘Anonymous’: since everyone who posts to the message-board is entitled ‘Anonymous’ by default, the term has come to describe the gestalt of the community.152

On many occasions, individuals involved in ‘Anonymous’ have elected to undertake actions which have had consequences offline, or otherwise outside the core 4Chan website itself. One of the more public examples of these was ‘Project Chanology,’ where a subsection of ‘Anonymous’ chose to draw attention to the Church of Scientology and its apparent abuses of its members through large offline protests. Websites and other Church resources were also attacked over the internet through approaches which varied widely in their legality (‘Anonymous' 2008). Other incidents involve active hunts for those involved in posting videos of animal cruelty online, where members of ‘Anonymous’ sought to find the locations the videos were posted from and then to publicly name the individuals involved. Typically, these individuals are reported to the authorities and local news sources by some

152 Locating academic material which includes discussion of ‘Anonymous’ and 4Chan is difficult because of its very nature. Also, it should be noted that the 4Chan site includes material that is not safe for work environments, and which will be offensive to some/many.
participants in ‘Anonymous,’ while others embark upon more direct attempts to punish them. There are also other occasions where members of ‘Anonymous’ have persecuted individual people on the grounds that doing so was simply amusing.

What makes ‘Anonymous’ and the 4Chan hub relevant to the experience of Reality Games is the experience of community displayed by its members, and the fact that all actions are taken in the context of phenomenological reality. Tiering is displayed by the community, separating the most active members of any given action from the secondary supporting tier, and the much wider audience discussing the actions of the most active individuals. A point of distinction from the experience of classical ARGs is that it is not possible to gain personal respect and renown within a community where all members are, by definition, anonymous; however, this is explained by the contextual world-of-concern, where the individuals in the community are invested in resources being shared under a principle of near-altruism in the completion of a given goal.

The largest distinction, however, between the experience of participating in ‘Anonymous’ and the experience of Reality Game texts is that there are no Puppet Masters. There is no game as such, and certainly no fictional story to uncover; instead, ‘Anonymous’ is self-directing. 4Chan is an example of an unending community of Reality Game players, and the goals and challenges they set for themselves. The affective experience and processes of being involved in that community are, I argue, practically indistinguishable from that of engaging with an Reality Game; with that said, the fact that the only guide or limiter to the community is the community itself will absolutely shape the affective experience of participating within that community.  

What the ‘edge cases’ discussed in this chapter share is that they are not classical examples of the Reality Game form, and yet they individually share some of the affective qualities of the ARG. The Dionaea House provided a context where the audience engaged with the text via creative interpretation and dissemination through a similar affective

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153 A more recent high-profile Anonymous action unfolded in October and November of 2011 (Schiller 2011; Estes 2011; Norton 2011; Hernandez 2011), where members of Anonymous posted videos threatening to reveal the identities of members of the Zetas drug cartel in Mexico and South America if one of their number was not released unharmed – the kidnapping seemingly in response to Anonymous actions against the cartel. Despite doubts and confusion as to what exactly occurred, even within Anonymous itself (Arthur 2011; Norton 2011), what is fascinating is the extent to which these were plausible claims, particularly considering that they were in-line with other recent actions undertaken by the group (Fletcher 2011). The incident also raised the issue of how problematic it is for traditional news to corroborate events when so many involved are ‘anonymous,’ particularly considering that members of the group may not recognise each other, or not recognise the actions they are taking part in as legitimate.
framework to what would be provided by the secondary and tertiary tiers of ARG communities. The fact that the experience was not truly co-creative is a relevant factor for consideration, but would not have been relevant to the players most actively engaged in trying to find new material: the process of being part of a community, and the creative interpretation they were involved in, was more important than the focus of that community, despite the fact that the community was ultimately unsupported by the text. *Missing: Since January* does not operate in a context of phenomenological reality in terms of its puzzles, but the act of being a ‘detective’ or ‘archaeologist’ is phenomenologically real, since players are released online to find information concealed among everyday websites. The game also uses email to infiltrate the daily lives of players and remediate an affective quality more commonly associated with Reality Games. The *Portal* incident lacks Puppet Masters guiding the development of the text, but introduced co-creative interpretation and the experience of an actively tiered community that was united in common purpose to an audience who may not have experienced ARGs previously. 4Chan, for its part, illustrates that the affective quality of ARGs provided by co-creative community engagement can exist independently of Puppet Masters, in that the community itself sets its own goals and parameters: once again, the experience of community is more important than the focus of that community.

**THE EXPERIENCE OF REALITY GAMES**

This chapter argued that Reality Games are phenomenologically real and experienced through a subjective framework where a given player is playing as him/herself, retaining access to his/her capacity to act, and where the interior of the game experience spills into the outside world by using infiltration to follow the players out into their lives.

All the boundaries of Reality Game texts are affective, because they are not distinguished at the level of the processes of engagement required to negotiate with the text, but instead by the affective complexion associated with those processes. Their absence of a common structure, while displaying identifiable processes of engagement and experiential qualities, highlights the relevance of affective phenomenology for the comparative study of new media texts: the approach is analytically productive when applied to otherwise entirely abstracted texts, and where no individual ever sees or experiences the same parts of the greater whole.
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

The central point which this project makes clear is that the definition of media texts should include how we engage with their textual structures, rather than focus purely on the textual structures themselves. A particular point of relevance is that, in many ways, the unique tenor associated with engaging with particular textual forms is already part of how we distinguish them as media, but not yet how we conceptualise that distinction. Affective phenomenology and the analytical framework presented in this doctorate provide the beginnings of a map for negotiating this new conceptual territory, and will become particularly relevant as texts and textual forms migrate across platforms.

One of the elements that this project is advancing is a toolset for media specificity theory (Hayles 2001). Marshall McLuhan infamously stated that “The medium is the message,” (McLuhan 1967) and I argue that affective phenomenology provides new ways of updating McLuhan’s ideas which allow us to figure out what it is about a given medium that shapes the messages it can express. Part of that process involves taking aspects into consideration that are contiguous with the medium itself, such as the modes of engagement and contextual worlds-of-concern to which they lend themselves. At present, the media landscape is shifting dramatically, to the point where we can legitimately ask questions about how to define media forms that are becoming increasingly unstable. For example, how do we define ‘television,’ and ‘televisual engagement,’ in a context where television shows can exist – and be solely encountered through – DVD technology, digital-video recorders, online streaming or traditional broadcast. Shows such as Lost (Abrams 2004) include a significant amount of content designed for audiences who will not be able to explore it completely during the traditional broadcast, and which explicitly tries to lead them into an online extension of the show (Mittell 2009a; Mittell 2009b). At what point are such audiences no longer ‘watching television’?

Affect and affective phenomenology provide a framework through which we can examine distinctive modes of engagement both across and within media forms. This has allowed me to make claims about what sets them apart, even down to the way in which differences in engaging with their textual structures produce experiential distinctions between ‘reading’ comics and ‘watching’ animation (see Pages 116-118), or to distinguish between the experiences of hypertext fiction and videogame play using time-sensitivity (see Page 91).
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

Hypertext fictions involves clues or cues coming from outside the subjectivity of the person engaging with them, and this distinction triggers particular processes of mental engagement in negotiating the text in response to how their structures are arranged.

Webcomic texts present different registers of experience, one for reading the archives and the other in waiting for daily updates, together with the impact of the webcomic paratext. These distinctions in experiential tone do not exist at the level of textual structure, and would be missed by analysis which did not consider affective phenomenology.

The experience of videogame play involves distinctive affective permeability as a result of the processes of negotiating the text. As this feature of the experience exists between the text and the player, its significance would be missed by a purely structural analysis.

Reality Games are phenomenologically real and experienced through a subjective framework where a given player is playing as him/herself, retaining access to his/her capacity to act. All the boundaries of Reality Game texts are affective, because they are distinguished not at the level of the processes of engagement required to negotiate the text, but instead by the affective complexion associated with those processes. Their absence of a common structure, while displaying identifiable processes of engagement and experiential qualities, highlights the relevance of affective phenomenology for the comparative study of new media texts, since the approach can be analytically productive even when applied to otherwise entirely abstracted texts, such as ARGs, where no individual ever sees or experiences the same parts of the greater whole.

As I have stated, I am not interested in using this process of analytical juxtaposition, or the comparative framework which might grow out of it, to establish formal categories of texts and textual experience, since experience is too broad and malleable for categorisation to be useful. For instance, in structural terms, sufficiently complicated hypertext fictions can be argued to become videogames, and those that are more complicated still might become Alternate Reality Games. Rather, as I have attempted to show, it is more productive to consider the significant experiential distinctions that set those forms of storytelling – and the media through which they are mobilised – apart from one another, with an acknowledged awareness that textual structure will influence that experience.

Affective phenomenology thus also provides a toolset for considering how the distinctive modes of engagement associated with particular media forms might evolve and change.

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154 Though the text’s structure can certainly shape the mode of engagement for the experience.
155 Subject qua subject, as opposed to subject qua agent-of-game (see Page 184).
change as they shift platforms. Printed prose in the context of a novel presents a particular form of engagement that shapes the affective qualities of negotiating the text. If the context of the novel is moved to an eBook reader of some stripe, elements of that engagement change – with consequences for the affective tenor of the experience. If that same novel becomes serialised as an audio-book or a radio show, the structure of that text might remain entirely the same, and yet the experience of engaging with it will be entirely different – to the point where few people would consider them the same media form. Elements of the experience of audiobooks are shaped by the new context for engagement: once again, outside of a printed context, there is less of a tactile awareness of how far through the text the listener is – unless s/he makes the conscious decision to check his/her audio-player. Also, people who engage with audio adaptations of novelised works are ultimately engaging with the voice of the person reading the text. Anecdotal discussions have suggested several of my friends follow particular individuals who narrate/present audiobooks as much as they do the authors who write them, and the interpretation of which words to emphasise or the accents they adopt for particular characters can dramatically shape the affective quality of the experience.

I argue that such changes are relevant because we already shape our storytelling to suit the particular media form the text will be released in, and more than that, we use the structures of the underlying media as ways of creating the textual experience we want others to have. If eBooks become popular within wider culture as a way of engaging with textual prose, then texts will be created with this context in mind: one example of how the change might (hypothetically) manifest is that eReaders could eliminate a structural bias against over-large books. In the context of audiobooks and podcast fiction, the sites of our engagement are increasingly mobile as people use MP3 players during exercise, walking, or as they drive. Arguably, this mobility and the shifting affective associations people pick up from their environments change what it means to experience an audiobook, just as an audiobook changes what it means to experience the same text in print form.

Additionally, sites such as Podiobooks.com are releasing serialised audiobooks, many of which are being written for the rapidly growing podcast market rather than being adapted from printed work – similar to the precedent set by serialised novels, such as those written by Dickens. Likewise, a new market has been growing in recent years for short-fiction which is written specifically to cater to podcast magazines. We must now ask how these stories

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156 A trend is growing where books released free in audiobook form and created for that format are later picked up by traditional publishers, such as the work of Scott Sigler.
157 Examples can be found free online, such as ‘Escape Pod,’ ‘PseudoPod’ and ‘Starship Sofa.’
are shaped for audience engagement in an aural context, and how such shaping affects the affective quality of the experience. Does serialisation change the internal pacing of a story in a similar way to writing for television, so that there are peaks before each breakpoint? Also, many of these serialised audio-stories qualify as extending technological filaments (see Page 185) into the lives of the people who engage with them by using RSS feeds and ‘podcatcher’ software: news of updates can be automatically emailed out to listeners as soon as they are uploaded, and it is possible to set up programs to automatically download new files, ready for listening. Does it change the context for engagement with a piece of serialised fiction when you receive word that it is waiting for you while you are at work, school, or spending time with family? In a similar fashion to ARGs, does this introduce affects of anticipation into the daily worlds-of-concern of the people who engage with them?

Another example of how textual engagement is already folded into our definitions of forms of mediated storytelling has been discussed in the example of Broken Saints (Burgess, Kirby and West 2001) in Chapter 4 (see Page 118): the line that separates comics and animation on the continuum of inference (see Page 110) is that we read comics, and watch animation. The key difference is due to the presence of frames within comic texts. Animation is where the frames are invisible: no inference is required to comprehend the text, since the text does the work of chaining together movement and time, filling in the gaps normally implied between frames. The distinction between the two forms of engagement also has an affective dimension: it can be argued that watching animation involves less experiential writerly-ness, since the person negotiating the text is called upon to do less interpretation of the gaps between frames, instead relying on the text itself to tell the story.

It is important to consider the phenomenological experience of textual storytelling because there are incremental changes occurring to traditional media forms in the context of increasingly ubiquitous digital technology. For example, it has been discussed that one of the elements of engaging with prose novels is that the reader is aware how far through the book s/he is as s/he reads, and this awareness is incorporated into his/her experience of the text. So, in an environment where eBook readers of various stripes are becoming increasingly common, what is this change in context going to do for the phenomenological experience of a text? At what point does the feel of reading a text in a printed format start to become closer to the experience of engaging with a hypertext where one must negotiate each page in sequence? Anecdotal discussion in online forums notes that internal navigation within books on platforms like the Kindle and Android is problematic at best, and one commenter notes that it is particularly difficult to find specific content without the ‘physical awareness’ of how
far through the physical structure of the book the page is. There are also questions of ‘optimisation,’ where there is debate about which eBook platform presents the easiest experience of reading text for prolonged periods, and technological attempts to circumvent the difficulty some people have reading text on a screen rather than from a printed page. These discussions reflect attempts to remediate an experience of engagement rather than a textual structure, emphasising the extent to which textual engagement is already deeply important to our experiences of fiction.

The work of this thesis provides a way to consider the points of familiarity within a change in textual engagement, together with language for negotiating how and why such a shift might be relevant to a change in the phenomenological experience presented. For example, I argue that the term ‘interactive cinema’ is problematic because the affective qualities and forms of engagement common to videogames and cinema are mutually exclusive. However, I have encountered texts which present a form of textual engagement and affective quality which is distinctive from the experience of either videogames or cinema. This raises the possibility that ‘interactive cinema’ could become a productive term to describe a form of textual experience which is currently finding its feet, and the critical toolset presented by this project offers opportunities for mapping its development.

It has to be said that in many cases, a change to the technological landscape of textual engagement may have no effect on the existing form of textual storytelling at all. For example, I argue that ‘augmented reality’ technology currently under development will not come to replace Reality Games, because their respective contexts of engagement and affective qualities remain distinct. Although augmented reality technology offers a way of integrating videogames into real-world spaces and worlds-of-concern, the mode of engagement and resulting affective quality would remain closest to that of videogame experience. As has been discussed, Reality Games operate in a context of phenomenological reality (see Page 184), rather than a logic of graphics intended to represent reality. As Augmented Reality technology becomes more common, I am certain that videogame content will colonise this new space. The differences in their respective forms of engagement suggests that tasks such as hacking within the world-of-concern are likely to involve the skills

158 Such as the examples suggested by changes of technological mediation and the contexts in which texts are experienced.
159 Another problematic point is its association with the assumption that videogames are on an evolutionary course that will inevitably make them more narrative, and closer to film as a form.
160 Such as Fahrenheit (Quantic Dream 2005) – see Pages 174-178.
161 Most commonly seen in glasses and lenses which lay digital information over the visual sensorium of the person wearing them.
the player has built up for his/her character, as opposed to the abilities of the player him/herself.  

Scenarios where a wide variety of different forms of textual engagement have migrated onto a shared platform, arguably making them appear very similar from outside the context of that engagement and yet affectively distinct from within that context, have happened before. Personal computing has provided a powerful environment for a great deal of media engagement, and produced a context where from outside it is practically impossible to tell if someone is writing or engaging with music, a novel, an essay, an email, or even playing a game without close study – yet all of those contexts are very distinctive for the person engaging with them. As has been discussed in the context of Reality Games, performing precisely the same action is affectively distinct between different contexts of engagement, such as the comparison between writing an email for work, or writing an email regarding Reality Game developments while at work. As portable computers, mobile devices and wireless internet access becomes more ubiquitous, it seems likely that many, if not all, of the forms of textual engagement will migrate off desktops and out with us as we move through our lives. From outside of the relevant world-of-concern, people playing a Reality Game will be hard to distinguish from those playing an Augmented Reality Videogame: both groups are operating in a public space under different operating logics and invested in a different world-of-concern to the people who are within the space and not playing games at all. However, despite their outward similarity, the experience of engaging with the two different kinds of texts will feel very distinct, because of their different contexts of engagement.

An example of this can be seen in Geocaching, where people use portable GPS equipment to locate hidden caches while travelling or sight-seeing. From outside the relevant context of investment, it is essentially impossible to distinguish someone Geocaching from anyone else studying an unfamiliar environment with some obvious portable electronics to hand – in other words, the modern tourist. However, the affective difference found within contextual engagement with Geocaching is huge: the physical environment becomes overlain with information that is only relevant within the explorer’s world-of-concern. Geocaching turns the world into a puzzle which enthusiasts physically move through, occupying a contextually different environment to all of the other people negotiating it in a different

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162 As discussed in the Reality Games chapter, the subjective experience of such Augmented Reality Videogames would frame the subject qua agent-of-game, rather than the subject qua subject of Reality Games themselves. (see Page 184)
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

world-of-concern. Geocaching also connects travellers with a disparate globally distributed community which shares the same world-of-concern, and is arguably an example of an offshoot of the same affective quality that distinguishes ARG engagement beginning to enter the mainstream.

Likewise, the current trend where printed comic-books are migrating into online stores for eReaders and Apple’s iPad underlines the point: despite the fact that traditional comics and webcomics are going to exist in a digital format together, the modes of engagement and the affective quality of their experiences will remain distinct, because of the affective quality webcomics are able to make available through being temporally extended experiences. Traditional comic texts will retain the tighter narrative common to printed comics, and focus more on drama and specific narrative moments than on quotidian moments of intimacy; the difference will be that they are becoming distributed electronically. As with the move to eBooks, some contextual changes to the experience will occur, such as a loss of awareness of how many pages remain to be read.\(^{163}\) However, the fundamental difference in textual engagement and affective quality presented by webcomics is more significant than the fact they exist in a digital platform. Just because they are becoming more common in a digital format does not mean that traditional comics will duplicate the extended temporal context common to webcomics, or the modes of intimacy readers are able to associate both with characters within their worlds-of-concern, and with the authors themselves.

The Economy of Amusement and the State of Play

A point which is also becoming obvious is that across all of the textual forms of storytelling, people are willing to invest a staggering amount of work in their relaxation. I do not mean by this that qualitative labour being required to negotiate textual storytelling is a new invention, simply that it has become more visible in textual forms where the person negotiating the text is required to be more active to make progress. Reading books is not a passive form of engagement. *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien 1954-1955) is approximately 450,000 words long, which is not a small investment of time and energy. *Planescape: Torment* (Black Isle Studios 1999) is estimated to have a script of between 500,000 and 800,000 words (Gillen 2007), although, since it is a cybertext, each player will not be exposed to the entire text. The complete box set of Blu-Ray discs for *Lost* (Abrams 2004)

\(^{163}\) There are also discussions at work within the industry regarding the possible shifts such a movement would cause, analogous to moving from selling collected ‘albums’ to selling the equivalent of ‘MP3s,’ and how that change would shape the conceptualisation of texts (Ellis 2011).
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contains 5074 minutes of screen time. This is approximately 84.5 hours, and many fans will have engaged in detail with all of those hours, particularly considering the ‘forensic fandom’ discussed by Jason Mittell, “a mode of television engagement encouraging research, collaboration, analysis, and interpretation” (Mittell 2009a; Mittell 2009b). It would be critically limited to focus on the amount of work those engaging with Reality Games are applying to solving puzzles in a context of phenomenological reality – which is admittedly astonishing – without accounting for the people investing huge amounts of time in engaging with and studying serialised television like Lost, or with World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) communities. The point is that people are happy to labour for their fun, even when engaging with complex texts across a variety of media forms, both traditional ones and those within a digital context. What makes Reality Games an obvious example for this discussion is that people are taking activities and skill sets away from, for example, their everyday jobs – and then applying those same working-day activities and skills for fun on their own time.

Something which we need to be aware of as we engage with the media contexts which surround us is that when we are labouring to have fun, we are still working for someone else (Andrejevic 2007). The most obvious and direct example of this process is Reality Games, which have thus far represented corporate-backed exercises with a significant budget, and which are either focused on promoting a particular product, or are products for sale in their own right. When we engage with a Reality Game and work with other people in the community to locate new material and find links between existing material that might provide more clues, we are working in our leisure time in the service of advertising. If we spend time writing Guides designed to clarify the work of the Reality Game to date, we are effectively investing our own time to promote a product. The engagement with the world-of-concern and the distinctive affective qualities which Reality Games provide make people passionate and dedicated to an experience of community and a process of problem-solving, but the outcome of that process is income for a group separate from those who play the game. Similar arguments can be made about any storytelling form within the digital context: The Dionaea House came close to functioning as an ARG (see Pages 207-208) from free promotion online, to such an extent that the author was not prepared to deal with it. The webcomic paratext creates a publicity network where readers are inspired to speak about the comic online, either to other fans or to people who are potential fans.

The economies of amusement which we participate in are not obvious as such, or even obvious as work. The core process, however, is not new: as has been discussed, the
investment represented by watching the whole of *Lost* is significant, as it is for any of the other often-discussed works currently shaping the landscape of popular culture. Traditional media are just as good (or bad, depending on one’s point of view) at establishing economies of amusement as the newer digital context. Nonetheless, examples from the digital context are newer to the cultural landscape, and more likely to be noticed. When morning travellers read the paper on the way to work every morning as they ride the train, they are advertising that paper. Likewise, if a traveller’s entertainment of choice is a book, then the cover is a miniature billboard. Should they choose to play a portable game on a Nintendo DS or Sony Playstation-Portable, then the media device itself might be sufficient to gain interest. People who adjust their schedules around being home at set times each week in order to watch a particular television show are making a particular effort to present themselves to advertisers.\(^{164}\)

Not only is this amusement economy relevant to considering how much personal time and effort we invest in what we enjoy, potentially in service to commercial interests. I would also argue that the quality of the investments involved will shape the modes of engagement associated with experiencing a given text. Being home on time to watch the live broadcast of a new show, or even ritualistically downloading episodes as soon as they are released in their country of origin, can be part of the contextual world-of-concern associated with the experience. If busses run late, for example, raising the tension that the first moments of a new episode might be missed, then affects of relief are going to be folded into the excitement of getting to the television just in time. Correspondingly, people invest in watching certain films or television shows with particular other people, and will hold off doing so in their absence. Affective phenomenology provides tools with which to analyse our invested relationships with the mediascape, along with how it forms and what can manifest in terms of ritual or labour as a result.

What this project has helped to demonstrate is that within a wide range of contexts, there is great continuity between traditional and digital media forms. Above all else, one core factor they share is that affective distinctiveness defines each form of textual engagement, far more than the specific processes associated with each media text. It seems likely that the capacities of portable technology will continue to expand, so that engagement with both traditional forms of media and those we are already used to engaging with in a digital context

\(^{164}\) With some caveats regarding the ability of digital video recorders to remove advertising, which returns us to the issue of how to define ‘television,’ and ‘the television audience’ in the modern context.
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will increasingly occur on centralised portable media platforms. This migration is going to have affective consequences for engaging with texts, since sharing the same platform is going to mean many different forms of media storytelling are sharing some of the same processes of engagement. An example from the modern technological landscape is that one of the changes to moving both prose novels and comics into an online context is that the person negotiating those texts loses any physical cues about how much of the text remains to be read. However, the fact that these textual forms share a platform for mediation does not mean that the affectively distinctive quality which separates them is eliminated, in the same way that comics and novels feel different when sharing a platform of printed pages in a traditional context.

What is important to note is that although comics and novels are affectively distinct when sharing the platform for mediation presented by printed pages, and will remain affectively distinct in the context of digital engagement, the experience of a novel will also be affectively distinguished according to whether it is experienced in the context of a printed book or a digital format. The same is true of comics: reading a printed comic book will be experientially different than engaging with the same comic through an eReader or tablet computer. In part, this is due to embodiment: in moving a given text onto a digital platform, the physical interface and all of the contextual information which goes along with it also changes.

What the migration to common platforms is likely to introduce is shared features which are folded into the experience of texts in different media forms. As has been discussed, the multiple contexts in which someone can engage with an audiobook raises questions about how that mobility shapes the experience of the text. Mobility has arguably always applied to printed books, for those who carry novels with them on the bus or train, but the processes of engagement required to negotiate the text have been contextually limited: one can listen to an audiobook while jogging or at the gym, but reading becomes more difficult. However, if we imagine a context of augmented reality, how would the same mobility shape the experience of engaging with a novel displayed as a visual overlay for the world within digital lenses? How would the experience of engaging with a novel displayed through Augmented Reality technology in a mobile context feel different than listening to an audiobook in the same context? Essentially, it seems that there are two different registers of affective distinctiveness at work within our engagement with textual storytelling, since both the textual form we are engaging with and the platform through which we engage with the textual form are relevant to the experience of the text.

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The process of analytical juxtaposition proposed here is intended to help assess the experiences of different texts and forms of texts. In exploring how the processes of negotiating textual structures shape the experiences of the texts they mediate, this project has already encountered edge-cases where the distinction between experiential forms are entirely on the human-side of the equation. The distinction between the experiential qualities of juxtapositional versus topographical hypertext fiction, the difference between engaging with comics and animation, as well as the experiential proximity of *The Dionaea House* to an Alternate Reality Game despite being conceptualised as a hypertext fiction are all examples of analytical insight that would be lost without considering the affective phenomenology of textual experience.

The work of this thesis has been primarily focused on the affective distinctions presented by the experience of engaging with different forms of textual storytelling, as opposed to the axis presented by the platforms which mediate those textual forms. This new axis is still very much in development, particularly considering the rapid rate of change in terms of the digital platforms for engaging with textual storytelling. However, the work of this project in considering the affective qualities of engaging at the level of the textual form can ground work to come on media platforms and affect.

The concepts and theories presented in this thesis offer a way to consider how the processes of textual engagement shape our affective responses to storytelling in different textual forms, and raise the possibility that comparisons between texts with wildly different structures are productively possible. I argue that an analytical framework for comparing textual experience will continue to be useful as both technology and storytelling continue to evolve, both as a way of making sense of the scenarios which have been discussed, and for options which have not been imagined yet.


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**Comics and Webcomics**


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