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INTRODUCTION

Reimagining Books

> Princess Nell lived in that castle and ruled over that island for the rest of her days, and every morning she would go for a walk in the garden where Harv had fallen. She had many adventures and became a great Queen, and in time she met and married a Prince, and had many children, and lived happily ever after.
>
> "What's an adventure?" Nell said.
>
> The word was written across the page. Then both pages filled with moving pictures of glorious things: girls in armor fighting dragons with swords, and girls riding white unicorns through the forest, and girls swinging from vines, swimming in the blue ocean, piloting rocket ships through space. Nell spent a long time looking at all of the pictures, and after a while all of the girls began to look like older versions of herself. (Stephenson 98)

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NELL HOLDS AN APPARENTLY ORDINARY book and watches as its pages fill with images just for her. It talks to her and tells her stories. It answers her questions about the world, offering her adventures. Sometimes, the book comes to life, offering Nell games and challenges as she learns fighting from her stuffed animals–turned–characters. Nell lives in the world of Neal Stephenson's cyberpunk novel *The Diamond Age: Or, a Young Lady's Illustrated Primer* (1995, print), and is the owner of the Young Lady's Illustrated Primer, a "magical book" that adapts to the child reader, filling her world with lively characters who understand the things she needs to know and respond accordingly. Though the Primer is described as a book, we would better recognize it as a game, the evolved form of "edutainment" with roots in many different media. Edutainment—the combination of educational goals with an entertaining format, such as a video game—is a false binary collapsed into one

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genre. For those of us who grew up with computers in the classroom, the term conjures memories of *Oregon Trail* (1971, HP 2100 Minicomputer) and its simulation of the risks of nineteenth-century American westward expansion, complete with the ability to name party members after classmates and watch them virtually fall victim to dysentery and starvation. This type of narrative and historically situated game, and the genre of edutainment it helped to spawn, holds the first inklings of the forms at the foundation of the Primer.

Now imagine another child—she's holding a thin silver device with a screen, no bigger than a composition book. It reads aloud from Dr. Seuss until she focuses in on a picture of a tree, and presses on it until the screen highlights the corresponding text and reads her the word. She switches to another book, and short animations from *Toy Story Read-Along* (2010, iPad) play as she flips the pages, then opens a game and directs falling army men by moving the screen from side to side. This child has an iPad, a tablet computer with a touch-only interface first released by Apple in 2010. Apple marketed the device much like a protoprimer, and the image of the child learner with tablet in hand has already created a huge demand for "interactive" picture books and games. Different media on the iPad exist side by side, the interface and experience of one blending into the next. This child may carry her expectations of a touch-responsive interface to other media she encounters, and will be raised on stories that respond to her interests and actions.

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Cyberpunk and science fiction works have continually been predicting our next narrative forms—consider the similarity between the Kinect, Microsoft's "natural" interface solution for controlling a computer with body movements, and the gesture interfaces of *Minority Report* (2002, film) and *Iron Man* (2008, film) or the holodeck of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987, film) next to the promise of virtual reality. Fiction can look ahead to when the technologies that offer narrative potential today have matured and been accepted as equal to the media we already consume every day. The stories suited to new media technology, whether they are on the computer screen or a holodeck virtual reality projection room such as envisioned on *Star Trek*, have existed well before the technologies themselves. Stories have often left the reader to choose, as in the classic case of Frank Stockton's "The Lady or the Tiger?" (1882) wherein the

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reader is left wondering which of two possible endings is "final." In that case, the reader is given no closure, as the reader cannot input his or her decision into the story to find out what happens or learn the right answer. Stockton's story is a very simple case, while more postmodern works present many possibilities in juxtaposition for reader interaction. But Neal Stephenson's vision of the Primer seems particularly prescient for its vision not just of the advancement of one medium but of the threading of pieces of performance, book, film, and game together in a single responsive device. Brooks Landon describes it as the "ultimate electronic text, a kind of pedagogical Turing machine that by itself provides a nearly complete interactive education." But while the Turing machine evokes the theoretical limits of computational power, the Primer—and its modern counterparts—relies on responsiveness generated by storytellers.

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The iPad and similar tablets and emerging mobile devices, like the fictional Primer, lend themselves to what Henry Jenkins calls "media convergence." He defines *convergence* as depending upon the intermingling of media content and forms, but not solely the media devices themselves—"convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others" (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 3). As devices optimized for the consumption of content of all media forms, they place books, games, and films on the same playing field, accessed through the same interface. The touch screen acts as a chameleon, imitating on-screen controls, keyboards, and even the flipping of a page as appropriate to the content. The convergence of media forms alongside the relative transparency and adaptability of the touch screen interface became a core part of Apple's initial iPad campaign emphasizing the device's magic. But the magic of the iPad is drawing upon a history of convergence in digital storytelling that has evolved alongside computing itself, as new tools and models for interactive narrative and the increased accessibility of those tools have allowed for a broad range of storytellers to build on these emerging models for literary interaction. Bryan Alexander describes such work as the "networked book," suggesting a strong dependence on linking both within and without (127). Nell's Primer is an apt example, particularly in its reliance upon an outside human to provide the emotional depth for the interaction—literally, a speaker for the dialogue.

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For Nell and the child with the iPad, the devices in their hands appear magical. But their magic is human-generated. For Nell, the true responsiveness of the device requires a human storyteller as voice. The Primer relies on a "ractor": an actor tasked with providing voice and body for the Primer's electronic text. The iPad relies on storytellers who are, through the creation of interactive narratives, able to stay in dialogue with their readers through the mediation of apps. Defining interactivity within digital spaces is difficult because of the wide range of levels of responsiveness. Marie-Laure Ryan offers us a definition based on reciprocal dialogue: "a genuinely interactive system involves not only choice—dolls, toy trucks, and ergodic print texts also lend themselves to multiple uses—but also a two-sided effort that creates a feedback loop" (35). "Ergodic literature" is defined by Espen Aarseth as literature that requires "nontrivial effort" to "traverse" (*Cybertext* 1–2). For instance, the physical act of flipping pages to follow a linear book is a trivial effort: the exploration of a text with many choices is "ergodic," or interactive. Ryan further breaks down interactivity in digital narratives into layers based on the level of responsiveness of the system to the user. It is this space—the territory between the traditional printed book and the genuinely "interactive" book—on which I focus: a space between book and game, where the needs of storytelling are balanced with the desire (and technical ability) to create a dialogue between story, reader, and author. I argue that this space of convergence of book and game is where the distinction between reader, player, and author is narrowing. I focus on the evolution of the adventure game as a genre from its golden age in the 1990s to its current resurgence. The fans of these story-driven "ergodic" texts worked both to preserve the genre and to assert their own power as storytellers, crafting a participatory model that is spreading through the industry.

ADVENTURE GAMES

Long before the iPad, and even as Neal Stephenson was imagining his Primer, one genre of games stood in the as-yet-uncharted space between game and book. This genre was labeled "adventure games": an adventure game involves a player seeing a story through from beginning

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to end, following the experience of a viewpoint character—the player's avatar—on a quest shaped by the world and story crafted by the designer. Progress is inhibited not by enemies to be fought but by puzzles to be solved, whether those puzzles involve sneaking past guards, finding a key, or finishing tasks for a character in order to learn a vital clue, just as Nell gradually explores the stories of the Primer through manipulating objects and text with her own words.

The adventure game is usually mentioned as at most a footnote within gaming histories: the genre had faded from the mainstream radar and belongs to a formative past when game creators were just beginning to explore their boundaries and possibilities rather than to a modern era of games. Steven Kent's *The Ultimate History of Video Games: From Pong to Pokemon and Beyond* (2001) mentions the original *Adventure* and *Myst* (Cyan 1993), but ignores the rest of the genre. Tristan Donovan's *Replay: The History of Video Games* (2010) discusses several classics, but notes that the genre then faded into obscurity. Perhaps in part due to the seeming absence of adventure games from the mainstream, the importance of the adventure game in studying the concept of games in general has been minimized. When examining adventure games near the pinnacle of their mainstream success, Aarseth noted the challenge they presented for academic study: "Compared to all other literary formats, including hypertext novels, the adventure game's textual structure is an alien, too far removed from the genus of hegemonic literature to be recognized by any but a few xenophiles. . . . No wonder their chosen strategy most often is one of seeking similarity, bridging the gap, and trying to find a perspective, however narrow, that demonstrates that the species does not lack all the important marks of literature that we know and love so well" (*Cybertext* 109). As Aarseth's work was published in 1997, he observed this "alien" form just as it was being pronounced as dead.

Yet as the adventure game genre is being reborn—both as such and through other forms of interactive storytelling, including many iterations on the iPad—its evolution offers a model for understanding the broader future of narrative, as its structures have moved outward to reshape models of the book. I agree with Aarseth that to apply the expectations of the literary to the genre and its heirs is inappropriate; however, literature is not monolithic, and the book is far from an unchanging

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or constant reference. The adventure game exists alongside a number of experimental forms, some burdened with the label of "book," others with the label of "game," but in all cases both of these terms fall short. Bryan Alexander's suggested term "networked book" helps bridge this gap, but also perhaps unfairly implies that there exists a *prior* book that was not networked, an assumption that many of the works under study here would challenge. A story's association with a particular medium (or platform) does not inherently determine its interactivity. As Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost set out to define in their platform studies series, a platform in digital media can be understood as "the computing systems, both hardware and software, that developers and users depend upon for artistic, literary, gaming, and other creative development" (vii). The book is also a platform, and today is equally reliant upon changing hardware and software systems that change the potential creative output of writers and readers, as Matthew Kirschenbaum's ongoing study of word processors further illuminates (Schuessler).

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Placing these different platforms in a chronological and evolutionary space illuminates the new structures upon which their narratives rely. This process of transformation in the structure of narrative by the proliferation of platforms recalls but does not precisely echo Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's concept of remediation, or the process by which so-called new media are constructed in part by drawing upon previous media (4). Bolter and Grusin suggest that every medium depends on remediation, and "a medium in our culture can never operate in isolation, because it must enter into relationships of respect and rivalry with other media" (65). The adventure game and its heirs can be probed with the lens of remediation but must also be understood as providing new models for narrative play.

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Several elements of the adventure game make it an essential case study for looking at specific structures for interactive storytelling:

1. The focus on character rather than player makes the game "about" someone with specific gender and class traits—which the player may or may not share—and places the player in dialogue with the storyteller's world and characters.
2. The use of traditional narrative techniques interspersed with inter-

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activity weds the acts of reading and playing and the forms of book and game.

3. The genre's eventual "death" and rebirth have been tied to the actions of fans as storytellers, empowering the player-creator in shaping the future of interactive narrative.

4. The modern adventure game is a powerful platform for personal storytelling, making it a viable choice for single-authored works with literary aspirations.

In unwinding the history of interactive storytelling, I reject or restructure many binaries, including the distinction between reader and player. Drawing clear distinctions between games and other media, such as books and film, was at first essential to appreciating what video games can do that other media do not so readily offer, which is interactivity. However, the desire to divorce play from seemingly passive experiences like reading can lead one to overlook the hybrid roles in between. For instance, Jesper Juul set out a strong binary between reader and player: "The relations between reader/story and player/game are completely different—the player inhabits a twilight zone where he/she is both an empirical subject outside the game *and* undertakes a role inside the game" (Juul, "Games Telling Stories?"). He appeared to discourage the literal projection of film and literary models onto games, recalling Aarseth's warning that the structures of the adventure game cannot easily be understood through the lens of traditional literary studies.

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However, interactive storytelling—through the adventure game genre and its heirs among the new "magical books"—casts the reader as player, player as reader, and even player as creator in shifting interactions borrowed from several media genres. We can begin to see how the games work by examining the nature of reading practices. George Landow advances a model for the reader of hypertext that is not dissimilar to the act of reading any text: "Since readers always, but particularly in this environment, fabricate their own structures, sequences, and meanings, they have surprisingly little trouble reading a story or reading for a story. . . . This active reader-author inevitably has more in common with the bard who constructed meaning and narrative from fragments provided by someone else, by another author or by many other authors"

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(197). If reading is active to begin with, it is not as different from gameplay as some would argue. Ergodic texts are not limited to the digital. Adventure games can help us generate more useful understandings of the relationship between reader and player than the existing binaries. In this moment of media and platform convergence, new models for understanding our interactions with the many platforms now available must emerge, as the commonly accepted distinction between reading and play is not capable of describing the range of possible interactions we may have with increasingly "ergodic" and interactive narratives.

Ultimately, the impacts of the formal shift can be seen in every genre of narrative, not just in the adaptation of video game narratives or text room chat to shape "traditional" novels or the corresponding adaptation of books to games, but in the restructuring of those stories. Placing current texts on a spectrum between book and game requires considering interactivity. Traditional measures of narrative (or the expectations we bring to the literary canon) are insufficient when considering storytelling that takes alternative forms, as the story moves away from linearity in its overarching structure. However, a simple construction of the book as "passive" and the game as "interactive" ignores the range within the space. The printed book might appear final, but the reader's engagement with it has never been passive. In online spaces, the activeness of the reader comes to life in everything from writing and art to Tumblr sites dedicated to characters—and this is only a visible, community-oriented output of the same type of engagement print demanded before the introduction of digital technology. As Alberto Manguel chronicles in his *History of Reading*: "it is the reader who reads the sense; it is the reader who grants or recognizes in an object, place or event a certain possible readability; it is the reader who must attribute meaning to a system of signs, and then decipher it" (7). Both reader and player create meaning from the world: the dialogue of book or game is incomplete without them, and the same can be said of the hybrid forms in between.

Thus the story that is being told in today's "magical books" begins much earlier, with the first forays into digital forms of interactive storytelling on early personal computers (PCs). Text-based interactive fiction, or story worlds responsive to certain verbs and constructed with objects for a player to explore through words, took the first steps. The

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introduction of graphics into the same model gradually integrated multimedia into the form, giving birth to the adventure game genre. The rise and fall of the adventure game genre in the mainstream, its subsequent life in fan production and personal storytelling, and eventually its reemergence as a prominent form in the landscape of convergent storytelling offer a model for understanding the range of interactions now being integrated into our everyday consumption of narratives.

OVERVIEW

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I begin by examining the adventure game's roots in other forms of interactive narrative that owe a strong debt to text. In chapter 1, I look at various hybrid forms existing between book and game that predate the digital, including *Dungeons & Dragons* tabletop role-playing games and the *Choose Your Own Adventure* gamebooks. These forms parallel the rise of interactive fiction, perhaps the most booklike of early digital narratives. But while these works are apparently booklike in nature, I further examine how these forms rely not on print but on orality, offering a preview of the role communal storytelling will play throughout the emergence of interactive storytelling.

In chapter 2, I revisit one of Nell's first questions to the Primer, "What is an adventure?" I trace the early roots of graphical adventure games, beginning with Roberta Williams's *Mystery House* (1980) through the golden age of releases dominated by two companies, Sierra and LucasArts. These early games evolved both the interface and potential interactions within the genre. I take a closer look at one of the best-known adventure game series of all time, *King's Quest* (1984–1998), in chapter 3, with particular attention to its position between traditions of orality, print, and film and its construction of player-character relationships.

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As the *King's Quest* series vanished, so too did the adventure game apparently decline as a mainstream commercial form. But the epitaphs for the genre were premature, as the story moves into the hands of fans and new storytellers inspired by the genre's affordances. In chapter 4, I examine the movement of creativity to the collaborative spaces of fans in the wake of commercial disinterest. In chapter 5, I examine how

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fans built new platforms for both reimagining classic adventure games and building their own entries into existing stories, which parallels the growing awareness of fan creativity and transformative works around the web. But these creators also took the genre to new spaces, and in chapter 6 I examine some exemplars of original works emerging out of online adventure game communities.

With fan-created models for creativity infusing continued life and growth into the original structures of the adventure game, it is perhaps unsurprising that the commercial game industry would eventually return to the genre. The tools of this resurgence, which I critique in chapter 7, were borrowed from crowd-sourced and collaborative models and relied heavily on the active involvement of fans. Not coincidentally, this rebirth coincided with the emergence of the iPad and other personal, touch-based devices for the consumption of media, which proved to be well suited to the heirs of the adventure game. In chapter 8, we come full circle and return to many of the forms explored throughout: gamebooks, interactive fiction, adventure games, and electronic literature. I explore the consequences of this convergence for the future of "magical books" as electronic literature built by participatory communities becomes a more prominent form of storytelling.

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