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Reader-Players: The 39 Clues, Cathy’s Book, and the Nintendo DS

Lisa Dusenberry

While participatory culture is a relatively new concept, children’s texts and games arguably have a long history of demanding active reader participation. For example, Marah Gubar’s *Artful Dodgers* makes a compelling argument for Golden Age children’s authors’ respect for engaged child readers and its ramifications: “these writers were invested in blurring rather than policing the subject positions of child and adult, reader and writer. Yet even as they represent the child as a potential collaborator, they also recognize that the idea of reciprocity can itself function as a seductive mirage that curtails the agency of children” (7–8). Gubar’s insights about children participating as collaborators are useful far beyond understanding the Victorian period in children’s literature; many current children’s texts depend on this (uneven) “reciprocity” among child, writer, and text as co-participants in creating their meaning.

Current books like the ten novels in *The 39 Clues* series (2008–2010) by various authors or the *Cathy’s Book* trilogy (2006, 2008, 2009) by Sean Stewart and Jordan Weisman are created with active, participative readers in mind. They extend their reach beyond the codex to include websites, voice mail, playing cards, and more as part of the reading experience. Video games like *Trace Memory* (Cing 2005) are branded as “interactive mystery novel[s] come to life,” and video games like *Scribblenauts* (5th Cell Media 2009) depend on users’ input to produce meaning. All of these texts present challenges for analysis because they are not restricted to a single medium, a single source text, and/or a single method of reader interaction. They are, to borrow media theorist N. Katherine Hayles’s term, intermediated: “they involve complex transactions between bodies and texts as well as between different forms of media,” and they depend on the *materiality* of the text itself, the *subjectivity* of the user, and the dynamic, recursive *process* both user and text participate in to create meaning (7). By combining Marah Gubar’s concept of child-as-collaborator with

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Hayles’s theory of intermediation, we can examine current media-enhanced children’s texts and reconnect them to the traditions of children’s literature and playable media.

Texts like *The 39 Clues*, *Cathy’s Book*, *Trace Memory*, and *Scribblenauts* all require the reader to participate in a variety of ways: asking her to use her knowledge of intertextual information, to do outside research, to solve puzzles, to play games. Three core similarities among these media-enhanced children’s texts allow them to create meaningful interactions with their users: their acknowledgment and manipulation of the reader-player’s expectations, their dependence on both rules and narrative, and their relationship to collaboration and collective intelligence. And these three characteristics apply to more than just current media-enhanced children’s texts. That these current texts are more complexly intermediated is important, but their intermediation (dependence on complex transactions between the material text and the subjective user) is a question of scale rather than presence; children’s texts have been performing these same core functions since their inception. By focusing on both the relationship between the material and the subjective via intermediation and the way child characters and players are invited to become (limited) collaborators, we can discover methods of evaluating all children’s texts, media-enhanced or not, on the same terms. The core questions at the heart of this model are: How does the text communicate to the user what actions and knowledge are meaningful, and What ramifications does this dynamic have for the reader-player and for our constructions of childhood?

**The 39 Clues and Cathy’s Book**

Playable children’s texts depend on the user’s process and expectations, which make them complicated to analyze. Media theorist and digital fiction writer Noah Wardrip-Fruin notes that “the operations of digital media are, in crucial ways, only truly realized in contact with audiences” (11). The user’s expectations of what the text will be and will do shape what it can be and can do. Reader-players come to game books with expectations about the genres and mechanics of the texts. A good game book works with these initial expectations and uses them to shift the player into the kind of actions and goals that are meaningful for that particular text.

*The 39 Clues* novels use the reader’s familiarity with mystery and detective fiction conventions to ease her into online participation. The series is a mystery game-book series about siblings Amy and Dan Cahill’s search for clues to their family secret. Each novel includes a card set, and there are alternate card sets that can be purchased separately. Readers can enter their cards into online profiles and gain access to a relatively robust online community/gaming site based on the traveling and clue hunting that occur within the books. The reader, however, does not need to play the game or visit the online community to comprehend the plot of the novels. The novels purposefully give the reader
the expectation that reading the books comes first, then collecting playing cards, followed by participating in the online community. The reader can call on her knowledge of the books to make sense of the cards, which, in turn, assist her in discovering the actions available to her online. If she has read the novels, then participation in the community and navigation around the Web site seem familiar and natural.

But the player does not necessarily have to experience the novels in order to participate in the community. The user’s knowledge about the series and her familiarity with genre conventions greatly change the meaning she draws from *The 39 Clues*. From the child who only reads the novels, to the child who reads and then plays, to the child who bypasses the novels to immediately go online, each user dictates her willingness to take advantage of all the different media available to her. The reader-player who cannot recognize the conventions of online games, understand how to use the cards, or complete the novels’/cards’/Web site’s puzzles, will find *The 39 Clues*’ system deficient and may reject the possibility of meaningful participation with its extratextual elements. Thus, the novels and the online community strive to meet users’ initial expectations and use reader-players’ existing knowledge to cultivate actions and goals the text prefers.

The reader-player is not in complete control of the meaning of the text, however. *The 39 Clues* reveals what Gubar notes as the child’s position as “collaborator-after-the-fact” (8). The child is allowed to exert force on the text’s meaning only after the initial limits have been set. Game books carefully structure user participation to privilege certain types of knowledge. While each game book’s effectiveness depends on its ability to negotiate reader-players’ expectations, they also use her knowledge of intertextual references and genre conventions to promote specific actions and agendas. For example, *The 39 Clues* online games overlay the novels’ events and characters onto real world places and rely on information about historic events, people, and places that children should be familiar with or, if not, should at least attempt to learn about. For example, online game “Mission 1: Titanic—The Lost Clue” (Scholastic) weaves together the history of the Titanic, myth of Loch Ness, and a story about a fictional character, Anne Cahill. Anne and the clue she protected supposedly sank with the ship. However, after reading through the onscreen information, the player finds out that Anne escaped the Titanic and spent her life hiding in Scotland with the clue. After some time, the clue was lost in Loch Ness. The real Loch Ness monster myth is then written into the online game fiction as a cover story for protecting the clue.

The layering of fiction and real events provides the impetus for the player to complete a submarine mini-game to retrieve the clue element from the bottom of the Loch. The mini-game has everything to do with hand-eye coordination and little to do with Loch Ness or actual submarine navigational skills. Yet, the mini-game is connected through narrative to the storyline of the novels and to the larger web of associations the player can make with the real world places and
events. These intertextual elements and the combination of the novel/online community dynamic make this mini-game meaningful beyond just scoring points or mastering the controls. The enjoyment of the text comes from the combination of the rules, which make the game function, and the narrative, which provides a framework and context for those rules.

While *The 39 Clues* privileges linear, cause-and-effect knowledge, the reader-player can negotiate with and around the structures of the novel/online community by pooling her resources with other players. Reader-players can use Internet spoiler sites and other players’ knowledge to solve puzzles and score points. The reader-player who finds a particular game frustrating or impossible to play might enlist friends, parents, or others to play that portion and attain the goal. Reader-players might also decide to pool their cards and play together on one profile, thus increasing their influence through their collective intelligence. *The 39 Clues* even subtly fosters community action by allowing players to create and share personalized agent cards with others online; players who share each other’s cards are marked as allies. Thus, the game interface suggests that players might come together and create networks to share information.

While *Cathy’s Book* is more seamlessly intermediated than *The 39 Clues* series, it depends on the reader-player’s expectations in a similar way. *Cathy’s Book* uses the reader’s knowledge of diaries and mysteries but also continually pushes the reader-player to think beyond genre expectations by participating in its extratextual, Alternate Reality Game (ARG) elements. The ARG elements require subtler uses of a reader-player’s knowledge of systems and genres. The text indicates that clues from the book (for example, a phone number) actually exist and that taking full advantage of the text means performing the action associated with the clue in the real world (for example, calling the number). The book includes marginal comments encouraging the reader to Web search topics, which enhances the reader’s knowledge of the novel’s location and events. The novel also includes Cathy’s personal notes about her own discovery process to nudge the reader into taking action: “Notice how much less crazy I was then? Didn’t even think of dialing the # . . .” (Stewart and Weisman 23). These nudges are shrewd ways *Cathy’s Book* shifts the reader from her traditional role as interpreter of the text before her to player/detective who must identify the outside references and do the research to augment the text’s meaning. *Cathy’s Book* builds on the established rules of reading and text interpretation to bring the uninitiated reader into the chaotic space of the ARG.

The collaboration and collective intelligence these game books foster rely upon intertextuality and intermediation. Both *The 39 Clues* and *Cathy’s Book* create online databases of knowledge about the world each text creates. Users counter the control of that knowledge with both authorized collaboration/pooling of resources (like exploring the official site forums) and with unauthorized collaboration/utilization of collective intelligence—by creating walkthroughs and unofficial forums and by extending the reach of the texts into other media.
Trace Memory and Scribblenauts

While The 39 Clues and Cathy’s Book are primarily books and secondarily games, one would expect offerings for the Nintendo DS handheld to be primarily games (rule- and task-driven, not narrative). However, several games for the system have challenged players to think of games as participative fictions. Similar to the other game books, these DS games depend on user expectations and knowledge to function and to make their games coherent and enjoyable. Trace Memory is the story of Ashley Robbins as she tries to discover the truth about her father’s death and her own memories. As Ashley, the player must explore the game area, solve riddles and puzzles, and respond to quizzes at the end of every chapter of game play in order to uncover Ashley’s past. Trace Memory is not particularly innovative in its storyline or in the options it provides to players. Successful completion depends primarily on players achieving certain goals, and those actions trigger new dialog or open up new areas for exploration.

The interesting element of Trace Memory is the way the player’s knowledge is called into question and her ability to interfere with the game’s demands. A seasoned mystery adventure game player would come to Trace Memory with the expectation that she should explore all playable areas, pick up whatever she can, and use those items persistently until she triggers task completion. Most adventure games do not require or reward knowledge of dialog or character development; the rules and tasks of the game take precedence over the narrative, even though it is the narrative that provides the motives for, context of, and meaning of the actions the rules stipulate. Trace Memory, however, forces the player to commit the narrative and character relationships to memory by literally quizzing the player over the events that have occurred. To this effect, the game tries to trigger the player’s interest in the dialog at the outset by issuing a warning. Captain, one of the first characters the player meets, cautions Ashley about remembering the game’s events: “Just keep repeating whatever [you want to remember] in your head.” Ashley recalls this for the player at the end of the first chapter, “I’m suddenly reminded of Captain’s words from earlier. ‘Just keep repeating whatever it is in your head. You won’t forget.’ Repetition is the key. Yes. I have to keep repeating the facts in my head.” The player must then take the first chapter quiz.

Whereas most games make the player sit through dialog and cut scenes but do not make the player recall the narrative later, Trace Memory forces players (contrary to convention) actively to keep the narrative in mind. To achieve narrative cohesion, the game disguises quizzes as internal monologue as Ashley struggles to commit the timeline of events to memory. For example, at the end of the first chapter of play, Ashley says “Using the letter [Dad sent me], I tracked him to the island, but when we arrived, he wasn’t there. The first person who went to look for him was...” and the player selects one of the multiple choice options to complete the thought. Ashley then reacts to the player’s selection by either pretending that the answer is a sudden memory or by berating herself.
(and, by extension, the player) for not remembering correctly and reposing the same question. *Trace Memory* places a premium on dialog and the practices of “tracing” memories and building knowledge about characters’ pasts and motivations.

If *Trace Memory* is more a novel in game form, then *Scribblenauts* is certainly more of a standard game. Unlike the previous examples, *Scribblenauts* does not create a substantial narrative to provide background and cue particular player behaviors. *Scribblenauts* effectively puts the burden on the player to provide her own sense of narration with minimal prompting. The player must create a way for her character, Maxwell, to reach the object he desires (a Starite); how she goes about it and why she chooses that method is up to her. She can write the word “panda” and have Maxwell ride the newly created panda across the screen to the Starite. She can write the word ladder and have Maxwell climb the brand new ladder up a cliff to the Starite. The player becomes an active producer with the text in a way that the other game books allow only intertextually. However, this seemingly powerful participation with the text is highly structured.

The player is limited to the game’s dictionary of available items, item properties, and items’ specific visual representations. For example, the word “ladder” always creates a wooden ladder of a certain height. Specifying other materials (like iron, metal, cheese, etc.) occasionally creates a different item, but, more often, just results in the same representation of the original item. For example, a “sword” and “Excalibur” are represented by the same graphic and perform the same function but count as different items/methods of solving Maxwell’s problem. So while the two separate items accomplish the player’s goal, they do not, contrary to player expectations (for example, knowledge of Excalibur’s mythical significance), provide any new actions, powers, or game play events.

However, the game does allow for some interesting and unexpected possibilities. If the player enters the word “nothing,” the game produces a destructive (and useful) black hole. Amusing and unexpected combinations like this also lead to frustration when objects do not act as the player expects. Objects are limited to specific functions and, while the player may be engaging in complex problem-solving and narrative creation, the objects often fail to fulfill the narrative the player has planned. For example, hooking dogs up to dog sleds does not always have the desired effect of creating usable vehicles. The player may miss the necessary element of adding an incentive (treat, whip, etc.) for the dogs to pull the sled. Often these moments of frustration stem from a discrepancy between the player’s assumptions about how objects work and the underlying code/system, which includes variables the player does not consider.

While the initial sense of collaboration between system and user to create meaningful interactions seems liberating, in practice the coding/word database are (necessarily) not quite flexible enough to enact the game’s tagline—“Write Anything. Solve Everything.” Thus, completing the various scenarios in *Scribblenauts* often becomes a collective enterprise. Players share tips, tricks, and
solutions through Web forums and walk-throughs. They encourage each other to test the database of words and find its limits. They create outlandish combinations of items in order to turn the frustration of limitations and unexpected object actions into enjoyment and building of collective knowledge.

The three core similarities of these media-enhanced texts (manipulation of reader-players’ expectations, dependence on both narrative storytelling and rule-based world building, and relationship to collaboration and collective intelligence) provide useful avenues of study. In order to focus on intermediation, we must see these texts as an interaction between subjectivity and materiality: we must work to dissect the complex transactions that happen between text and reader, including the interface the text provides and the expectations the reader-player brings to and develops from the text. Viewing the child as a possible collaborator acknowledges the ways each element, medium, and textual object these game books use both defines the limits of the reader-player and provides the reader-player with openings to wreak havoc on the text’s expectations and limits.

Note

1. The game is portioned out into 6 chapters and an epilogue, each marked by a chapter heading that begins the sequence and a quiz over the events that happened during the sequence at the end.

Works Cited


