UNDERSTANDING INTERACTIVE FICTIONS AS A CONTINUUM: RECIPROCITY IN EXPERIMENTAL WRITING, HYPERTEXT FICTION, AND VIDEO GAMES.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines key examples of materially experimental writing (B.S. Johnson’s *The Unfortunates*, Marc Saporta’s *Composition No. 1*, and Julio Cortázar’s *Hopscotch*), hypertext fiction (Geoff Ryman’s 253, in both the online and print versions), and video games (*Catherine*, *L.A. Noire*, *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, and *Phantasmagoria*), and asks what new critical understanding of these ‘interactive’ texts, and their broader significance, can be developed by considering the examples as part of a textual continuum.

Chapter one focuses on materially experimental writing as part of the textual continuum that is discussed throughout this thesis. It examines the form, function, and reception of key texts, and unpicks emerging issues surrounding truth and realism, the idea of the ostensibly ‘infinite’ text in relation to multicursality and potentiality, and the significance of the presence of authorial instructions that explain to readers how to interact with the texts. The discussions of chapter two centre on hypertext fiction, and examine the significance of new technologies to the acts of reading and writing. This chapter addresses hypertext fiction as part of the continuum on which materially experimental writing and video games are placed, and explores reciprocal concerns of reader agency, multicursality, and the idea of the ‘naturalness’ of hypertext as a method of reading and writing. Chapter three examines video games as part of the continuum, exploring the relationship between print textuality and digital textuality. This chapter draws together the discussions of reciprocity that are ongoing throughout the thesis, examines the significance of open world gaming environments to player agency, and unpicks the idea of empowerment in players and readers. This chapter concludes with a discussion of possible cultural reasons behind what I argue is the reader’s/player’s desire for a high level of perceived agency.

The significance of this thesis, then, lies in how it establishes the existence of several reciprocal concerns in these texts including multicursality/potentiality, realism and the accurate representation of truth and, in particular, player and reader agency, which allow the texts to be placed on a textual continuum. This enables cross-media discussions of the reciprocal concerns raised in the texts, which ultimately reveals the ways in which our experiences with these interactive texts are deeply connected to our anxieties about agency in a cultural context in which individualism is encouraged, but our actual individual agency is highly limited.
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IDDQD.
Introduction

This thesis examines several key examples of materially experimental writing, hypertext fiction, and video games, and establishes that the exploration of those texts reveals a number of reciprocal concerns, including issues of truth and realism, multicursality, and reader and player agency. I posit that these shared concerns allow the texts on which I focus to be examined as part of a textual continuum. This continuum, I show, facilitates cross-media discussions of the key reciprocal concerns that emerge from the texts; examining closely these texts in the light of their broader critical, theoretical, and cultural contexts, rather than as examples isolated within their own research fields, is a productive method for establishing new critical readings and understanding of those texts. As such, the primary question that I address is: what new critical understanding of materially experimental writing, hypertext fiction, and video games, can be developed by considering key examples as part of a textual continuum?

In researching and writing this thesis, I have focused on a few specific examples of materially experimental writing, hypertext fiction, and video games, in order to fulfil the aim of examining closely individual texts, whilst also paying attention to particularly significant aspects of their broader contexts (relevant criticism, theory, and the contemporary cultural backdrops of the texts). The key examples of materially experimental writing on which I focus are B.S. Johnson’s *The Unfortunates* (first published in 1969), Marc Saporta’s *Composition No. 1* (first published in 1962), and Julio Cortázar’s *Hopscotch* (first published in 1963).
I have focused specifically on *materially* experimental writing because of the interesting issues surrounding reader agency that emerge from it, as well as the focus on multicursality stemming from the different possible combinations of szujet. As I explain further in chapter one, I have chosen these texts for their interactivity, their interesting engagement with rules, the fact that they exhibit different sides of the materially experimental, and because all three of these texts have been described in previous research as proto-hypertexts (respectively in Bell, Ensslin, and Rustad, 2014b, p. 8; Ensslin, 2007, p. 11, and Bell, 2010, p. 2; Landow, 1992, p. 38, and Ciccoricco, 2012, p. 470). In chapter two I concentrate on Geoff Ryman’s *253* – a first-generation, canonical, hypertext (Ensslin, 2007). This is primarily due to its existence both online (1996) and as a ‘print remix’ (1998), which consists of ‘the full text of the award-winning *253* web site [remixed into print]. Nothing has been cut or censored. Experience *253* offline ... now with six added introductory bonus pages!’ (Ryman, 1998, ‘This is an ezi-access novel’); the existence of these two versions of the novel facilitates cross-media discussions and highlights an element of reciprocity between digital textuality and print textuality. In chapter three I discuss *L.A. Noire* (2011) with a specific interest in the ways in which the game declares an ‘allegiance to print’ (phrasing borrowed from Hayles, 2008, p.162); *Phantasmagoria* (1995) in relation to how it offers the player multicursal pathways, but one correct linear path to win; *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* in relation to its open world environment (2006; henceforth referred to as *Oblivion*); and *Catherine* (2012), which demonstrates multiple endings based on the player’s responses to questions, and illustrates concerns surrounding player agency in interesting ways.
I have also been necessarily selective about the theories and other scholarship to which I refer. In *The Language of Gaming*, Ensslin draws attention to the fact that ‘[c]learly, [in 2012], the field of game studies has grown too large to allow me to paint a comprehensive picture of its theoretical ramifications in a book that is dedicated primarily to discourse and communication’ (2012c, p. 29). The issue Ensslin raises has also been a constraining factor here: the three primary fields of study on which this thesis impacts – materially experimental writing, hypertext fiction, and video games – are all large research areas. Because of this, I have tried to present as comprehensive a discussion of the most significant arguments in each field (in relation to the argument of this thesis) as spatial constraints have allowed. In particular, I have drawn together arguments that bear significance for more than one aspect of the thesis (for instance, the work of Ensslin).

There is a recognised need for new critical readings of texts in these fields; previous research acknowledges this gap, as I will discuss shortly. Similarly, previous research has implied connections between the three areas to which this thesis contributes. I address this need to look closely at the texts themselves to establish why they are important, whilst also building upon these connections between fields and so clearly provide an original contribution to established scholarly knowledge. Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin, and Hans Rustad have recently commented that:

[they were] surprised to see how few of the existing approaches to digital fiction put their trust in the literary work itself, and to acknowledge that these works and their authors say something important about literature as an art form, about the media ecology of our time, and about our society
and cultural practices. Too often, [they] felt, arguments about the importance of digital fiction are found, not within the text, but outside the fictional work. (2014b, p. 3)

This calls for research which looks closely at texts in order to establish what significance they have in terms of our broader cultural and social concerns, putting ‘trust in the [importance of the] literary work itself’, rather than finding that importance purely ‘outside the fictional work’ (2014b, p. 3), for instance in the media used to create the text. In addition to this call for criticism that focuses closely on the text, Bell, Ensslin and Rustad also note that there is a lack of scholarly material focused on ‘criticism of specific [hypertext] works’ (2014b, p. 10). This is specifically in relation to a special edition of the *Journal of Digital Information* entitled ‘Hypertext Criticism: Writing about Hypertext’, which aimed to ‘contribute to this area by publishing criticism of specific works and discussions about the state of hypertext criticism’ (Tosca and Walker, 2003). Despite this aim, say Bell, Ensslin, and Rustad, the issue ‘somewhat disappointingly’ primarily contains discussions about hypertext criticism, rather than critical readings of specific hypertext works. Similarly, in this issue of *JoDI*, Richard E. Higgason calls for ‘a body of criticism [which] can provide various [close] readings of the [hyper]texts’ (2003), and Adrian Miles comments that the field of digital fiction is ‘hobbled by the lack of examples of such simple things as what an individual hypertext might mean’ (2003); these acknowledge the tendency in previous hypertext research to examine the *medium* of hypertext, rather than the *content* of individual hypertext novels. Both Miles and Higgason highlight the need for close critical attention to be paid to individual hypertext fictions, and I address this in my analyses of 253.
As I have noted above, numerous scholars (Bell; Ensslin; Ciccoricco; Landow; Bell, Ensslin and Rustad) have called the examples of materially experimental writing that I examine in the first chapter of this thesis proto-hypertexts. Additionally, Ensslin argues that hypertext literature is ‘akin to print texts, from Sterne to Saporta, that defy closure and challenge readers formally and thematically’ (2014b, p. 57); Marie-Laure Ryan suggests that hypertext fiction behaves more like games, ‘emphasising the active participation of the reader’ (1998, p. 143); and David Ciccoricco argues ‘that digital fiction extends the tradition of experimental literature in significant ways’, and that this ‘does more than provide a new venue for older or existing forms of literary experimentation’ (2012, pp. 469, 479). I explore within materially experimental writing several key themes – realism, multicursality/potentiality, and agency – that emerge throughout the texts under consideration in the thesis as a whole, thus building on the idea of these texts as ‘proto-hypertext[s]’ and, by establishing a textual continuum on which some examples of materially experimental writing, hypertext fiction, and video games, can be plotted, further investigating the nature of the extension proposed by Ciccoricco (though, as I argue in chapter two, I believe this is not so much an extension as a reciprocal relationship which displays elements of continuity; an extension could be seen to imply that hypertext is an inherently superior evolution of experimental literature). Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale (2012) acknowledge that the recent *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* is an attempt to ‘go some way toward salvaging the term experimental, rescuing it from the contexts where it is a term of dismissal and condescension, and reinvigorating its connotations of edginess, renovation and
aesthetic adventure’ (2012, p. 3); by exploring the reciprocity between materially experimental writing, hypertext fiction, and video games, and producing new critical readings of the materially experimental texts in question, this thesis also contributes to this implicit call for new research which examines the ‘experimental’ in literature in new and productive ways.

In *Half Real*, Jesper Juul observes that ‘video games are the latest development in a history of games that spans millenia’ (2005, p. 54); similarly, as I observe in the first chapter of this thesis, materially experimental writing has a history which can be traced back to novels such as Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759 – 1767). The texts on which I focus in this thesis can all be linked to a longer textual history, as can the broader convergence of literature and ludology in criticism and theory. Gonzalo Frasca (2003a) summarises the so-called narratology-ludology debate, noting that it ‘opposed two groups: ludologists and narratologists. Ludologists are supposed to focus on game mechanics and reject any room in the field for analyzing games as narrative, while narratologists argue that games are closely connected to stories’. However, Frasca states, ‘this description of the participants is erroneous’, and ‘this debate as presented never really took place because it was cluttered with a series of misunderstandings and misconceptions’; this Frasca argues, is particularly because ludologists do not reject outright work that considers narrative elements in video games, and the ‘radicalisation’ of the argument as presented between narratology and ludology is ‘totally unfounded’ (2003a). Other scholars suggest that *totally unfounded* is not quite accurate as a description. Jon Dovey and Helen Kennedy observe that Markku Eskelinen (2001), ‘like much of
the ludological critique of narrative approaches, [suggests] that games should only be studied in relation to what makes them a game (the rules, the materials, the events that constitute the gaming situation’) (2006, p. 87), and Ryan states that:

[for the Scandinavian school of ludology (Espen Aarseth, Markku Eskelinen, Jesper Juul and Gonzalo Frasca), games are games and stories are stories and these two types of cultural artefacts cannot hybridise, because they present radically different essences. For me it is like saying that stories are stories and operas are music and therefore an opera cannot have a narrative libretto. (2007, p. 264)]

Frasca’s argument concludes that ‘[t]he real issue here is not [whether] games are narratives or not, but [whether] we can really expand our knowledge on games by taking whichever route we follow’ (Frasca, 2003a). More recently, Ensslin has noted that this so-called debate has given way to ‘a more synthetical view’, focused more on the synthesis of different areas of relevance, with most ludologists agreeing that ‘in order to study videogames comprehensively, a wide range of ludic, technological, medial, representational, textual, social, cultural, communicative, psychological, physiological and economic aspects needs to be considered’ (Ensslin, 2012c, p. 30). By examining video games as part of a textual continuum alongside materially experimental writing and hypertext fiction, I contribute to this changing critical landscape. Some previous research, like that described above by Dovey and Kennedy, suggests that games should ‘only be studied in relation to what makes them a game (the rules, the materials, the events that constitute the gaming situation)’ (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006, p. 87, in reference to Eskelinen, 2001); I adopt Ensslin’s view, examining closely the video games in question as texts which combine ‘elements of rules and textuality [...] rather than being constituted first and foremost by either one of them’ (Ensslin, 2012c, p. 30). I am not conducting what Espen Aarseth might describe as a
‘colonising attempt from [literary studies]’ (2001), but rather responding to
research that understands that games are both ‘rules and fiction’ (Juul, 2005, p. 12; see also Newman, 2004, and Atkins and Krzywinska, 2007). I also adopt the
view that, in the same way that ‘[f]or hypertext, a medially extended concept of
“text” needs to be assumed, encompassing various semiotic systems such as
image, script and sound, their “codes” and their denotative and connotative
interplay’ (Ensslin, 2007, p. 164), close examination of video games begins from
the ‘assumption that [video games] are textual in nature’ due to the fact that ‘even
the rules on which they are based are conceived of and articulated semiotically –
verbally and audio-visually’, and ‘the interface that connects the player with the
gameworld combines a variety of different semiotic modes and text types’,
including ‘spoken and written language, moving and still images, and a wide
range of different sound types including music, noise and voice’ (Ensslin, 2012c,
p. 41). By examining the video games on which I focus (some of which – L.A.
Noire, and especially Catherine – have not been examined in detail in scholarship
to date) within the context of the textual continuum on which I place materially
experimental writing and hypertext fiction, I establish reciprocal concerns which
ultimately enable us to further our understanding of our complicated relationship
with agency.

Ciccoricco argues that ‘while it is not only possible but immensely
productive to apply narrative-theoretical frameworks to certain video games, it is
also necessary to avoid losing sight of the specificity of the gaming experience’
(2014b, p. 227):
Video games are not narratives, and they do not tell stories in any straightforward sense of the phrase. Although it can be said that play often involves storytelling at a fundamental level and the practices of playing games and telling stories are often interrelated, what ultimately makes video games compelling has little to do with heralding a new form of narrative media. In fact, the experience that video games yield as rule-based systems sets them apart from other artistic media. (Ciccoricco, 2014b, p. 225)

Certainly, video games are not simply narratives, and they do not simply ‘tell stories’; Ciccoricco is also correct that video games are ‘rule based systems’, but that in itself does not ‘[set] them apart from other artistic media’: literature, too, is ‘a rule-based system’. Reading, as I argue in chapter one, is an activity carried out within established rules and conventions. Furthermore, the materially experimental writing and hypertext fiction on which I focus is subject to additional rules, imposed by the organisation of the text (for instance, the requirement to shuffle Composition No. 1, or click through links in 253) or – even more explicitly – presented to the reader as a set of instructions (Composition No. 1; The Unfortunates; Hopscotch; 253). Clearly, the examples of materially experimental writing and hypertext fiction which I examine in this thesis are also ‘rule-based systems’, as is literature in general. That said, I agree that video games are not ‘literature because they have to be played rather than read’ (Ensslin, 2012b, p. 507), and the materially experimental writing and hypertext fictions discussed in this thesis are not games, but they do possess aspects which are connected to definitions of play and games, such as rules, fictionality, and a requirement for the reader to interact with the materiality of the text (whether that be shuffling Composition No. 1 or The Unfortunates, navigating through links in 253, or flipping between chapters in Hopscotch – which is, of course, also named after a children’s game); they also, of course, form part of the wider field of
material intended for entertainment. Roger Caillois argues that games are a ‘free and voluntary activity’, much like reading, and acknowledges the player who ‘refuses to play because the game is meaningless’ (1961, pp. 6, 7); this is reminiscent of some responses to The Unfortunates, particularly Giles Coren’s (as I discuss in chapter one):

[d]on’t go pretending you’ve read B.S. Johnson. It won’t wash. Because nobody has. [...] [Y]ou probably read only the review [of The Unfortunates] in The Times. And that was written by me. And I didn’t bother to read the book either. Just three of the chapters. But then, as far as the late and crippingly experimental BSJ was concerned, that would have been as valid a reading of his novel as any. (Coren, 2004, p. 13)

Coren here is akin to Johan Huizinga’s ‘spoilsport’ who refuses to interact with the game. The spoilsport, unlike the cheat (the cheat pretends to play the game by the rules), robs play of its illusion by refusing to play, by ‘trespassing against the rules or ignoring them’ (1970, p. 30). The spoilsport is ‘one who refuses to seek enjoyment’ in the game (Juul, 2005, p. 40). Caillois also argues, as is often cited, that games are ‘not ruled and make-believe. Rather, they are ruled or make believe’ (1961, p. 9) – this is due to what Caillois sees as an incompatibility between imaginative play comprised of free improvisation and make-believe (paidia), and play within a stricter set of rules, predefined and accepted by all players (ludus). However, as Juul notes, ‘[m]ost video games are ruled and make-believe’ (2005, p. 13), a state which is also akin to reading in that it consists of interacting with both fictional elements (the story) and real rules (the rules, or conventions, of reading, as I discuss in chapter one). Frasca discusses the distinction between paidia and ludus, relating the two types of play to narrative. He observes that ‘the difference between paidia and ludus is that the latter
incorporates rules that define a winner and a loser, whereas the former does not’, and that:

\[
{ludus} \text{ games provide an “organic whole,” a closed product that can only be explored within a secluded set of rules provided by the author. Certainly, just as it happens in narrative, the reader/player is free to participate within those limits and this is where the pleasure of reading/playing resides. Even so, } ludus \text{ remains ideologically too attached to the idea of a centralised author. By contrast, } paidia \text{ games are more “open-ended” than their } ludus \text{ counterparts. (Frasca, 2003b, p. 230)}
\]

Though the instructions provided by the authors in the texts I discuss in chapter one do not define ways in which to win and lose, the rule-based activity of reading displays elements of \textit{ludus}. Juul’s classic game model (2005) places storytelling and hypertext fiction outside of the definition of games partially due to the presence of a fixed outcome, but in the case of texts like \textit{Composition No. 1}, the outcome is surely variable rather than fixed due to the large number of potential variations of text. Arguably, this places \textit{Composition No. 1} closer to the borderline cases, rather than in the circle of those forms that are definitively \textit{not} game-like. Spatial constraints limit me from pursuing this idea further, but I should note that borderline cases of \textit{games} exist in video games too. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman acknowledge the problem with formal game definitions, observing that this focus on definition ‘makes non-games, or borderline cases, of many experiences that we commonly call games, including simulation games and role-playing games’. They argue that ‘[a]s with other open-ended game-like experiences such as \textit{Sim City}, [role playing games] have emergent quantifiable goals but usually no single overriding outcome’ (2004, pp. 80, 38). Similarly, the status of \textit{The Sims} as a game according to strict definitions has been questioned due to its lack of quantifiable goals (Wardrip-Fruin, 2005; Juul, 2005, p. 35). It
would seem that definitions of what makes something a game and what does not are not as straightforward as they may at first seem. Elucidating this argument, Ensslin states that games are ‘the most structured and rule-bound form of play, and they are often described in terms of systems, or mechanics, which involve the rules, targets, actions, challenges, risks, rewards, victory, and termination conditions to which players have to commit’ (2014b, p. 8), whereas:

[play, on the other hand, is a much broader and looser concept that can relate to games but more often than not refers to nongame activities, which are open, unstructured, and spontaneous and do not meet the game-ness criteria outlined in the previous paragraph. Hence, the so-called “games authors play” (Hutchinson 1983) aren’t normally games in the narrow sense of the word but rather playful activities on the part of literary communicators (reader and writer). (2014b, pp. 8 – 9)

Therefore, Ensslin argues, ‘a more suitable term [than “games”] for the sort of activities undertaken by readers and writers of ludic print literature is playful activities: literary play between reader, writer, and text (in various combinations depending on the type of play)’ (2014b, p. 27). In this respect, the act of reading can involve a certain playfulness, without exhibiting more strict elements of gaming, such as performance measurement. This sort of playfulness is apparent in 253, particularly in the more humorous of the author’s addresses to his reader, and in the ‘Reader Satisfaction Survey’ (1998, pp. 365 – 366) which, as I argue later in the thesis, emphasises the illusory nature of the reader’s agency.

‘Experimental literature’, as Bray, Gibbons, and McHale acknowledge, ‘is irreducibly diverse’. They note that, in The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature, ‘the modifier experimental is used more or less interchangeably with avant-garde, and sometimes innovative. Though the terms function roughly
synonymously, there are important nuances of difference in connotation’, explaining that ‘the early twentieth-century avant-gardes [...] embraced the term [experimental] enthusiastically, and it is largely thanks to them that we continue to regard unconventional, cutting-edge literature as “experimental,”’ (2012, pp. 1, 2). Hayles and Montfort state that ‘[t]he histories of interactive fiction in print and digital media suggest that the connotations of “experimental” differ according to the specificities of the media, their histories of development, and the expectations of readers’. They argue that:

[O]ne way to think about what makes a text “experimental” in interactive fiction is that it twists, perverts, or plays with the reader’s expectations for work in that medium and with that particular history. Situated within a strong tradition of codex fiction, “experimental” print interactive fictions may play with typography, sequencing, narrative arc, and the collision of multiple storyworlds. In digital interactive fiction, by contrast, “experimental” may mean playing with ideas of winning or losing, having a world to explore, exploring it through a set of typical commands, and interacting through a more or less standard computer interface. (Hayles and Montfort, 2012, pp. 464 – 465)

This serves as a ‘cautionary note to positioning “experimental” as an ontological property with attributes that are the same for every place and every time’ (Hayles and Montfort, 2012, p. 465). As I have discussed above, in this thesis I have focused my attention on materially experimental writing, that is to say writing in which experimentalism is situated in the material aspects of the text – the typography, the physical form of the text including its binding (or lack thereof), and so on. I made the choice to focus on materially experimental writing due to the concerns regarding reader agency which emerge from its interactivity, in addition to the interesting ways multicursality is represented in the construction of, and navigation through, the szujets of the novels on which I focus.
As the majority of my discussions focus specifically on hypertext fiction (rather than other forms of digital literature), terminology in this instance has not posed a great problem. Peter Gendolla and Jörgen Schäfer discuss the range of terms used to describe digital literature, and note that several terms are used interchangeably, including ‘digital literature’, ‘net literature’, ‘ergodic literature’ and ‘hyperfiction’, noting that, for instance, Roberto Simanowski ‘favours the term “digital literature” [...] [as his] considerations are centred on the question of the genuineness and relevance of “digital” media for “literary texts”’ (2007, p. 10). As this thesis explores the relationship between literary print texts and digital texts, I felt it appropriate that I also use the term digital literature when needing one clear umbrella term to incorporate all the above terms that have tended to be used interchangeably. As I discuss in chapter two, different types of digital literature have been categorised by Ensslin, who provides specific definitions of ‘hypertext’ (first generation digital literature), ‘hypermedia’ (second generation), and ‘cybertext’ (third generation), which come under the umbrella term of ‘digital literature’ (2007, pp. 21 – 24).¹

Previous research seems to use the terms computer games and video games somewhat interchangeably. I have chosen to use the term video games rather than computer games. Frasca defines computer games as ‘any form of computer-based entertainment software, either textual or image-based, using any

¹ Rustad has suggested a fourth generation of digital literature, which he calls ‘social media literature’ (2012). Social media literature, he posits, is both created and read on social media platforms (for instance Facebook and Twitter), with the platform forming ‘a significant part of the aesthetic expression and the meaning potential’ (Bell, Ensslin, and Rustad, 2014b, p. 10).
electronic platform such as personal computers or consoles and involving one or multiple players in a physical or networked environment’ (2001, p. 4). Juul’s definition specifies ‘games played using computer power, where the computer upholds the rules of the game and where the game is played using a video display’, and he uses ‘video games as an umbrella term to describe all such PC, console, arcade, and other digital games’ (2005, viii). I have similarly chosen to use the term video games, as I believe that the term computer games is (despite what Frasca argues above), in literal meaning, too closely aligned to computers rather than consoles. This thesis does not make a point of distinguishing between the platforms on which the games on which I focus are available. For instance, Oblivion is available on several platforms including both consoles and PCs. My personal experience involved playing it on a console, but the difference – for the purposes of the discussions held in this thesis – is negligible. Therefore, I feel is it is important to use a term that is inclusive of all platforms available (or rather, does not specify one in particular): in light of this, I have chosen video games as an umbrella term, as Juul does (2005, viii).

In this thesis I talk about the idea of a textual continuum. It was difficult to pin down a term that represented exactly what I meant by this, so I will elucidate a little here in order to be clear. By a textual continuum, I mean a group of texts which, due to their reciprocity (as illustrated in this thesis), can be examined as a continuous series. I chose the term continuum, to imply in a wider sense the aspect of any continuum that highlights that adjacent parts are only marginally different, but the extreme ends are quite distinct. This was intended to acknowledge that print texts and digital texts, in many cases, are very different things, but that the
texts on which I have focused form the more closely related aspect of my textual continuum – they are akin to the adjacent elements, not the extremes.

I use the term *reciprocity* to highlight elements in the texts in question that are of mutual concern. From the Latin *reciprocus* – meaning ‘moving backwards and forwards’ (Stevenson, 2010, p. 1483) – this term is intended to reflect my argument that texts that can be seen as a ‘bridge’ to digital textuality do not signal the ‘late age of print’ (Bolter, 2000, p. 150). None of these new textual forms signal ‘the end’ (Bolter, 2000, p. 150) of any of the previous ones, and so *reciprocus* reflects the idea of continuity, rather than replacement.

*Interactivity* is a difficult term to define. Dovey and Kennedy observe that ‘[o]riginally, a text was said to be “interactive” when an individual could directly intervene in and *change* the images and texts that he or she sees’. In this way, ‘audiences for new media became “users” rather than “viewers” of visual culture, film and TV, or “readers” of literature’; in video game research, the text ‘becomes the complex interaction between player and game’ (2006, p. 6). They note that Lev Manovich (2001, pp. 49-61) and Aarseth (2004b) both argue that we already have highly interactive relationships with media texts, and argue that both Manovich and Aarseth ‘[conflate] “interactive” with “actively interpreting” [which] does not help us to differentiate between texts’ (2006, p. 6). In relation to the interaction between human and computer, Jens F. Jensen conceives interactivity as a ‘way of controlling computing processes whilst they [are] continuing’ (1999, cited in Dovey and Kennedy, 2006, p. 6), which is also interesting in relation to the ways in which a reader is involved in the construction
of the szujet as he or she reads the materially experimental writing and hypertext fiction discussed throughout this thesis. However, in this respect (and for my definition) the notion of ‘control’, particularly in relation to player/reader agency, is problematic, as I discuss in the main body of the thesis, due to the fact that the level of control available to the player or reader is always of a limited and negotiated nature. In games studies, the idea of configuration has emerged, in which ‘the idea of “point-and-click” interactivity, in which the user makes simple reading choices, is transformed into the idea of the user making significant interventions into a game world that have dynamic effects throughout its system’; ‘configuration [is] a way of engaging not just immediate game elements but also the game’s social and material conditions’ (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006, p. 7; Moulthrop, 2004, p. 66). Configuration does not work as a broad definition for interactivity in this thesis; perhaps the best definition I can provide within the spatial constraints of this brief elucidation of terminology is somewhere between a variation on Jensen’s idea, and a variation on Friedrich W. Block, Christiane Heibach, and Karin Wenz’s use of the term interactivity ‘in terms of an interchange between human being and machine, between user and computer, which, due to its contingency upon situational and psychological circumstances, results in highly personalised, unrepeatable aesthetic experiences’ (2004, cited in Ensslin, 2007, p. 36). In combining these variations on previous definitions, interactivity for my purposes can be defined as an activity where the player or reader is actively engaged in textual ‘processes whilst they [are] continuing’ (i.e. the construction of a materially experimental or hypertext novel’s szujet, or the playing of a game), which results in ‘personalised [...] aesthetic experiences’ (I
discuss in the main body of the thesis the idea of a version of the text which is specific to that particular reader during that particular reading of the text).

I should also mention that when I discuss randomness in relation to texts, I use the term in a specific manner. Ryan explains notions of randomness as follows:

> [r]andomness can be conceived in many ways, depending on the context in which the word is used: as lack of predictability (the result of the throw of the dice), as the failure of causality (the behaviour of particles in quantum mechanics), as that which cannot be defined by an algorithm (a sequence of random numbers), and as that which we cannot control (fate), a conception particularly productive in narrative texts. [...] While determinists would argue that randomness does not truly exist in nature – it is just the name given to that which we cannot explain – some mystics and clairvoyants regard it as the voice of a higher power: random processes, such as drawing cards, are often used in divination. (2014, p. 417)

My discussions of randomness focus primarily around the idea of the ostensibly infinite text. This is because, in the key texts on which I focus, issues of randomness relate primarily to the possible variations of szujet available to the reader; and in the key texts these variations are fundamentally tied to issues of potential quantity – as Saporta suggests regarding Composition No. 1, ‘the number of possible combinations is infinite’ (1963, ‘The Reader is Requested’). The definition of randomness in Ryan’s above list most akin to my own is ‘lack of predictability’, but this is problematic. In chapter one I refer to Gregory J. Chaitin’s “Randomness and Mathematical Proof”, which states that ‘[t]ossing a coin is a classical procedure for producing a random number, and one might think at first that the provenance of the series alone would certify that it is random’ but that actually ‘[t]ossing a coin 20 times can produce any one of 220 (or a little
more than a million) binary series, and each of them has exactly the same probability’ (1975, p. 47). This reveals that the way in which Ryan describes ‘the result of the throw of the dice’ as ‘lack of predictability’ is incorrect: in fact, the resulting sequence emerging from any finite set of units (including throws of dice) is entirely predictable. In my discussions of Oulipian texts in chapter one, I observe that here chance is not chance in the sense of randomness, or uncontrollability, but chance in the sense of potentiality – there are many outcomes, but all are anticipated. This is like my use of the term randomness. I do not mean any vague conception of what randomness might mean, but a concrete definition that could be phrased something like apparent lack of predictability, which is, mathematically speaking, entirely finite and countable, and thus predictable. This is why I argue that in texts comprised of a finite number of countable units, there is no randomness (and, of course, no infinity), although this can be described as potentiality in the Oulipian sense.

I have structured this thesis into three loosely chronological chapters: I begin my argument by focusing on materially experimental writing in chapter one, then move on to hypertext fiction in chapter two, and finally video games in chapter three. I say ‘loosely’ in order to acknowledge that the comparisons drawn in each chapter – comparisons which become more frequent and increasingly detailed as the thesis progresses – often refer to texts from more than one chapter. Thus although the thesis is chronological in the sense of the primary area of focus in each chapter, this is not a structure to which I strictly adhere in terms of the more detailed discussions of each chapter, but which rather enables an overview
of the thesis as a whole. Within the contextual discussions held in each chapter, I examine closely the key texts as my argument progresses.

Chapter one looks primarily at *The Unfortunates*, *Hopscotch*, and *Composition No. 1*, beginning by examining the texts within their critical, theoretical, and cultural contexts. This introduces ideas of metafictionality, realism, and Johnson’s belief that ‘[n]ovelists must evolve (by inventing, borrowing, stealing or cobbling from other media) forms which will more or less satisfactorily contain an ever-changing reality, their own reality and not Dickens’ reality or even James Joyce’s reality’ (1973, pp. 16 – 17). The way the texts were received is discussed in order to illustrate some of the wider implications of material experimentalism in literature. I explore the idea of the infinite text – the idea that ‘the number of possible combinations is infinite’ (Saporta, 1963, ‘The Reader is Requested’) – consider the political implications of experimentalism in literature, and look at potentiality and the work of the Oulipo (*Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*; the Workshop of Potential Literature). I then focus closely on the presence of instructions written by the author for the reader in the three key texts, examining the implications of these instructions within the text and for the reader.

Chapter two focuses on 253, taking account of the differences between the online and print versions of the novel. This chapter begins by looking at some of the key theorists in hypertext research (including George Landow, Espen Aarseth, and Jay David Bolter) and contextualising hypertext fiction within the parameters of the thesis. It then builds on the exploration of ideas of the infinite text as
discussed in chapter one, and looks at how readers of hypertext are involved in the construction of the emerging text. The chapter then considers the significance of footnotes, particularly in relation to wider discussions about fiction as a vehicle for truth. I then examine some of the footnotes in 253 and develop my reading of 253 in light of the Oulipian idea of the clinamen in literature. The chapter then builds on the discussions regarding realism held in chapter one, particularly in relation to 253.

I examine some of the terminology that has been used in the study of hypertext fiction, noting the use of terms like ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ (Bolter, 2000, p. 27; Tomasula, 2012a, p. 495). I explore what is meant by this, and determine how hypertext is ‘uniquely positioned in its ability to use new and still relatively unfamiliar tools to [...] reflect on a cultural moment of great technological change’ (Ciccoricco, 2012, p. 469), in order to ‘say something that we, at our moment in time, can believe, in ways that allow it to be said, at our moment in time, as no other way can’ (Tomasula, 2012a, p. 495). I show how this is connected to earlier discussions surrounding the ways in which some materially experimental writing seeks to ‘successfully embody present-day reality’ (Johnson, 1973, p. 16), and how this is connected to the readers’, or players’, desire for a perception of empowerment during interaction. Throughout this exploration I examine closely 253, looking at the way in which it portrays a concern with the simultaneous distance between and proximity of individuals and ideas of interconnectedness at the level of content and form. As with my examination of the key texts in chapter one, in chapter two I pay close attention to 253 within all broader discussions.
Chapter three looks at the significance of video games to the textual continuum on which I have placed the materially experimental writing and hypertext fiction discussed in chapters one and two. In chapter three, I focus my discussions on the relationship between print textuality and digital textuality. The specific examples in this chapter are *L.A. Noire*, *Phantasmagoria*, *Catherine*, and *Oblivion*. I begin by looking at Hayles’s notion of the ‘mark of the digital’ (2008, p. 185), and extend this to suggest a reciprocal *mark of print*; this is a useful way of thinking about how print textuality and digital textuality can be seen to mark each other in the texts in question. I explore this idea in relation to Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*, and extend these ideas to closely examine *L.A. Noire* in the context of the idea of a text ‘declaring allegiance to print’ (Hayles, 2008, p. 162). The reciprocity between print and digital textuality in this case is examined further by looking at the short story collection *L.A. Noire: the Collected Stories* (2011), and Robert Kendall’s hypertext detective fiction *Clues* (2001 – 2008). Chapter three then looks at ideas of success and failure, and the idea of the “correct” linear path’ (Ndalianis, 2004, p. 124), alongside issues of closure, multiple endings, and the ‘forever unfinished’ text (Ndalianis, 2004, p. 123). The final section of chapter three draws together several discussions which have been ongoing throughout the thesis regarding reader/player agency, examining the significance of open world games (specifically *Oblivion*) and the idea of the ‘player as god’ (Ndalianis, 2004, p. 129).

Throughout this thesis I will show how the texts in question, though from distinct areas of study, demonstrate reciprocity in their concerns and in the relationship between print textuality and digital textuality that they illustrate. This
allows the texts to be considered as part of a continuum, which involves examining closely the texts in the illumination offered by each other’s contexts. This, I believe, will enable productive cross-media discussions of reader and player agency, and ultimately reveal the ways in which reader and player interactions with these texts are tied to broader cultural issues surrounding the perception of agency in interactive texts.
Chapter One: Materially Experimental Writing

1.1 Introduction

This thesis will begin by looking at the ways in which the materially experimental novels of the 1960s shape and alter the experience and process of reading, and asking how this relates to texts and readers in a wider sense, with the intention of discovering how we can further our understanding of these texts by considering them within each other’s contexts rather than as isolated examples. This chapter will look closely at key examples of materially experimental writing from the 1960s and examine the critical context and history from which these literary experiments emerged. It will consider the form, function, and reception of these texts, unpicking key issues such as ostensible randomness, and concerns surrounding textual control (by author and/or reader), and examining the resulting reading experience that emerges. It will conduct these discussions via close analysis of key materially experimental and critical texts, offering comparisons of the texts and of responses to the texts. The chapter also instigates the broader discussions of the thesis, which situate the study of materially experimental writing within the sphere of digital textuality and investigate comparisons between materially experimental writing, hypertext fiction, and video games. Within these discussions, this first chapter will contribute to a new understanding of what position is occupied by materially experimental writing, and what impact this writing has, in terms of a broader textual continuum of print and digital textualities.
This chapter will also begin with a story. Jorge Luis Borges’s ‘The Book of Sand’ tells the story of a man living alone in Buenos Aires who receives a visit from a mysterious foreigner. In exchange for the amount of the man’s pension cheque and a black-letter Wiclif Bible, the foreigner gives him a book:

[t]he pages, which were worn and typographically poor, were laid out in double columns, as in a Bible. The text was closely printed, and it was ordered in versicles. In the upper corners of the pages were Arabic numbers. I noticed that one left-hand page bore the number (let us say) 40,514 and the facing right-hand page 999. I turned the leaf; it was numbered with eight digits. It also bore a small illustration, like the kind used in dictionaries – an anchor drawn with pen and ink, as if by a schoolboy’s clumsy hand. It was at this point that the stranger said, “Look at the illustration closely. You’ll never see it again.” [...] His book was called the Book of Sand, because neither the book nor the sand has any beginning or end. (1979, pp. 88 – 89)

After reading one seemingly arbitrarily numbered page or viewing one illustration, the man finds that it is impossible to return to that page or illustration again. When the foreigner asks him to locate the first page, the experience he has is similarly impossible:

I laid my left hand on the cover and, trying to put my thumb on the flyleaf, I opened the book. It was useless. Every time I tried, a number of pages came between the cover and my thumb. It was as if they kept growing from the book. (1979, p. 89)

In a low voice, the foreigner explains that ‘the number of pages in this book is no more or less than infinite. None is the first page, none the last.’ (1979, p. 89).

When the foreigner leaves, the man hides the book and retires to bed, ‘waking at three or four in the morning [...] [to read] the impossible book’ (1979, p. 89). He begins to suffer from insomnia and his everyday activities deteriorate until his thoughts and actions revolve entirely around the study of the book; ‘[w]ith only a few friends left [the man] now stopped seeing even them. A prisoner of the book, [he] almost never went out anymore.’ (1979, p. 91). Summer comes and goes, and
the man finds that the book has overwhelmed him; it is a ‘nightmarish object, an obscene thing that affronted and tainted reality itself’ (1979, p. 91). Like the foreigner before him, the man must try to rid himself of the book, and to do so he returns to his old place of employment, the Argentine National Library. He succeeds in losing the book on one of the basement shelves, ‘trying not to notice at what height or distance from the door’ it was placed (1979, p. 91).

Although Borges’s book is fictional, its impossible materiality exhibits features of real texts. Odd pagination, or no pagination, and a difficulty in finding one’s place once lost are not uncommon experiences when reading materially experimental writing. Like ‘The Book of Sand’, the history of ostensibly materially experimental works can be opened at any point, and attempting to open it at the beginning results in more pages growing between the cover and one’s thumb. Though this discussion could begin comfortably with earlier experimentalism such as Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759 – 1767)¹ it takes a chronological jump forward from that point.

¹ Published in nine volumes over eight years, *Tristram Shandy* is materially experimental in that it includes a black page (Sterne, 2003, pp. 31 – 32) and a marbled page (pp. 205 – 206); it also instructs the reader to:

> [r]ead, read, read, read, my unlearned reader! read, – or by the knowledge of the great saint *Paraleipomenon* – I tell you before-hand, you had better throw down the book at once; for without *much reading*, by which your reverence knows, I mean *much knowledge*, you will no more be able to penetrate the moral of the next marbled page (motly [sic] emblem of my work!) than the world with all its sagacity has been able to unraval [sic] the many options, transactions and truths which still lie mystically hidden under the dark veil of the black one. (pp. 203 – 204)

Currie notes that ‘[n]ovelistic parodies like Lawrence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* [...] are seen as early metafictions precisely because the basis of their comedy is in making the [metafictional] paradox visible’ (1995, p. 5).
to focus on the experimentalism of the 1960s. The pieces of materially experimental fiction on which this chapter will concentrate are *The Unfortunates* (1999, first published in 1969) by B.S. Johnson – arguably the ‘best-known and most vocal of the experimental novelists of the period’ (Booth, 2012, p. 392), Julio Cortázar’s *Hopscotch* (1966a, first published in Spanish in 1963), and Marc Saporta’s *Composition No. 1* (1963, first published in French in 1962). In addition to these key examples, the chapter will discuss Oulipian literature, Georges Perec’s *Life: a User’s Manual* (1987, first published in French in 1978), and the techniques of William S. Burroughs, alongside further relevant literary examples. The key examples of materially experimental writing in this chapter have been chosen for their deliberate self-consciousness, a self-consciousness that draws attention to the artificiality of fiction and the presence of the author within the text, the physical requirements of the act of reading and the materiality of the text. Juxtaposing these texts in this study does not assign to them a cohesive group identity; the authors did not exist in any coherent movement and, although written in the Western world, the texts differ in original language of the text and cultural, historical, and social contexts. The texts have been chosen for this study as they exhibit different sides of the materially experimental. Regarded as a proto-hypertext (Ensslin, 2007, p. 11; Bell, 2010, p. 2), *Composition No. 1* is unbound, consisting of one hundred and fifty loose sheets of A5 paper, printed on one side with varying amounts of text to a page, and contained within a box that serves as

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2 Excluding the Oulipo (discussed later in this chapter), who ‘proclaimed their membership publicly, pledging allegiance to the experimental spirit of the group and progressively eliminating their non-OuLiPian production’ (Baetens, 2012, p. 118).
front and back covers, and spine. The reader is asked to shuffle the pages in order
to compose the szujet (the order of the narrative, as opposed to the fabula which is
the chronological sequence of events). The Unfortunates is also contained within a
box (the novel is commonly referred to as Johnson’s ‘book-in-a-box’, for instance
by Tew, 2001a, p. 37), and the reader is asked to shuffle the twenty-seven
individually bound chapters to compose the szujet; the ‘First’ and ‘Last’ chapters
are labelled as such and thus should not be included in the shuffling; The
Unfortunates has also been described as a proto-hypertext, or ‘early print literary
hypertext’ (Bell, Ensslin, and Rustad, 2014b, p. 8). Hopscotch, similarly regarded
as a proto-hypertext by several scholars (Landow, 1992, p. 38; Ciccoricco, 2012,
p. 470; Bell, 2010, p. 2), looks like a conventionally structured novel at first
glance, but on further inspection a reader sees that its 155 chapters, organised into
three sections, are separated into ‘two books’ (Cortázar 1966a, ‘Table of
Instructions’) by means of two explicit choices for readers. Chapters 1 – 36 (titled
‘From the Other Side’) and 37 – 56 (titled ‘From This Side’) comprise one book;
a second emerges by reading according to the chapter map provided, which
interweaves the first books with chapters 57 – 155 (titled ‘From Diverse Sides:
Expendable Chapters’), beginning the reading of the book at chapter 73, but
omitting chapter 55 (the chapter is reconstructed in chapters 129 and 133; I will
comment on this omission later in this chapter).

This chapter begins with Borges’s ‘The Book of Sand’ because it presents
an image of the object of the book as infinite, an endless source of text and
pictures which appear and disappear, seemingly with a will of its own. The
fictional book is comprised of moments captured in time – words and images
which, once found, are then lost forever. In this, it contains a microcosm of life, a series of connected words and images that can possess the appearance of randomness, much like a collection of personal memories. The title reflects the transient nature of life, akin to sand slipping through the fingers; more prominently, it presents the image of an hourglass, which recalls the passage of time and, ultimately, death and the accompanying loss of personal memories. The mixing of grains of sand parallels the infinite combination of the book’s pages, an order that can never be replicated once the arrangement is lost; it also points to a wider analogy with life experience. As I will go on to consider in detail, the cornerstone on which Composition No. 1 is founded is the idea that ‘A life is composed of many elements. But the number of possible compositions is infinite’ (Saporta, 1963, ‘The Reader is Requested’); in its structural multiplicity, Saporta’s novel replicates – as much as the physics of multiple ordering in a print novel will allow – the infinite nature of Borges’s fictional ‘impossible book’ (1979, p. 89); Montfort notes that Composition No. 1 ‘creates a storyworld so fragmentary that, although many have heard of the work, almost no one has succeeded in putting it together into a coherent narrative’ (2002). The elements of textual infinity and randomness, personal memories and life experience, and simultaneous involvement of the reader in interacting with the book (beyond the conventional involvement of the reader engaged in reading a book) and awareness of that book’s artifice – represented in Borges’s fiction as ‘impossibil[ity]’ (1979, p. 89) – in ‘The Book of Sand’ appear throughout the discussions in this chapter, and through the thesis as a whole. Before I move on to consider the importance of these key examples of materially experimental writing, it is first necessary to
consider some features of their contemporary context. Although the limited space available in this thesis necessitates a fairly brief discussion of this critical material, it is nonetheless important to consider metafiction and realism in order to begin to understand thoroughly concepts such as B.S. Johnson’s belief that ‘[t]elling stories really is telling lies’ (1973, p. 14).

1.2 Context: metafiction, realism, telling the truth, and public opinion

Using the term experimental to define methods used in writing suggests that there must be a non-experimental norm against which to compare. It should be noted that other forms of textual experimentation are possible in addition to those which I discuss (for instance, resistance to closure, neologism, use of fantastic tropes, frequent shift of narrative perspective, unreliable narrators, and so on) and some of these devices do appear in the texts in question. Due to the necessarily limited scope of this thesis, these will not be my area of focus but are nonetheless interesting to bear in mind for potential future work. To recognise what differentiates experimental texts from other forms of writing, there must be recognisable conventions apparent in what is thought of as traditional literature. These conventions must therefore, to some extent, deviate from what is thought of as experimental literature. In the majority of Western adult fiction these conventions fall into two areas. Firstly, the basic organisation of the text: such things as left-to-right, top-to-bottom reading, with complete words arranged into sentences and paragraphs. Secondly, the material: whole pages bound together on the left-hand side, and encased within a cardboard paperback cover, or a sturdier hardback cover, on the front, the back, and the spine. Readers participate in texts
at different levels, by reading across the page as above, but also interpreting meaning at levels of word, sentence, paragraph, book, series level and beyond. I wish to be careful not to gloss over the many varied forms of the book, but taking these types of features as conventions of traditional Western fiction, the kind of experimentalism on which this chapter focuses is thus concerned with subverting textual conventions to achieve an ostensibly different way of reading, and/or of writing. To clarify the definition, experimentalism in this context is used to denote a text that deviates from what might be called the traditional, or standard, form of the novel. This deviation is sometimes a physical difference, for instance nonstandard binding (or no binding at all, for instance in Marc Saporta’s Composition No. 1) or holes cut in the text’s pages (for instance B.S. Johnson’s Albert Angelo, which has a hole cut through several of its pages in order to reveal to the reader a future event). Other departures from convention include the methods required to read the text, for instance reading from the back page to the front page, or reading sections of text in a nonstandard sequence in order to follow the narrative.

A text may be defined as experimental because of its metafictionality, or ‘self-consciousness’ (Waugh, 1984, p. 3). In the introduction to this thesis I discussed some of the problems which have been identified in terms of defining metafictionality; due to the limited scope of the thesis, it is acceptable to summarise here (in conjunction with the aforementioned discussions in the introduction) that metafictionality is achieved through an explicit concern with reality and its representations: it is ‘writing which explicitly and overtly lays bare its condition of artifice, and which thereby explores the problematic relationship
between life and fiction’ (Waugh, 1984, p. 4). Put another way, it is ‘the assimilation of critical perspective within fictional narrative, a self-consciousness of the artificiality of its constructions and a fixation with the relationship between language and the world’ (Currie, 1995, p. 2). Mark Currie notes that in the postmodern context, fictional texts are no longer divided from their critical readings, but rather exist in a ‘monistic world of representations in which the boundaries between art and life, language and metalanguage, and fiction and criticism, are coming under philosophical attack’ (1995, p. 18); postmodern fiction is often self-consciously metafictional, likewise postmodern readings of fiction often identify metafictionality at a sub-textual level – Patricia Waugh argues that metafictionality is in fact ‘a tendency or function inherent in all novels’ (1984, p. 5) because the novel form is always concerned with itself, with reality, and with how reality is in turn ‘reabsorbed by’ the novel (1984, p. 148). In the texts on which I focus in this thesis, metafictionality is often apparent in the ‘self-consciousness of the artificiality of [the texts’] constructions’ (Currie, 1995, p. 2) – for instance, in the necessity for the reader to create the szujet by shuffling the loose leaves of Composition No. 1, or in the instructions addressing the reader in (amongst other texts) Composition No. 1, The Unfortunates, and Hopscotch.

Fredric Jameson notes that changes in the sphere of culture alter the perspectives from which art is viewed: seen as ‘ugly, dissonant, scandalous, obscure’ by older Victorian and post-Victorian bourgeoisie, works by Pablo Picasso and James Joyce came to be viewed later in the twentieth century as not only ‘no longer ugly [but] on the whole as rather “realistic”’ (1984, p. 191). Before beginning to discuss realism in the context of this chapter it is important to
specify, without undertaking an extensive survey of realist texts, what I mean when I use the term ‘realism’. To avoid a lengthy digression into the various definitions of realism that exist, I will borrow from the definition given by Andrzej Gasiorek:

[r]ealism in the arts can be divided into three broad kinds: a general orientation to an external world that it attempts to represent; a nineteenth-century literary and artistic movement; any non-conventional attempt to portray reality in a way believed to be more accurate than that achieved by previous exemplars. [...] All who write on realism note its slipperiness as a concept. (1995, p. 183)

Firstly, I do not discuss realism in terms of the specific artistic movement. Johnson’s The Unfortunates, as a text concerned with Johnson’s own attempts to ‘write truth in the form of a novel’ (Johnson, 1973, p. 14), complies with Gasiorek’s third definition of realism. However, since the idea of portraying reality in a way ‘believed’ (Gasiorek, 1995, p. 183) to be more accurate than earlier texts is – generally speaking – particularly subjective, I define realism as the way in which texts are generally orientated towards the external world they seek to represent. Gasiorek argues that ‘[r]ealism [...] is best seen as an open-ended concept; it gives rise to different narrative modes, which derive from authors’ particular projects, aesthetic and political convictions, and changing socio-historical contexts’ (1995, p. 17); it is this notion of realism as a concept which is continually evolving that is most useful in terms of developing an understanding of my textual continuum. Realist texts ‘look both outward to an external world that they attempt to depict in all its complexity and inward to the very processes by which such depiction is brought into being’ (Gasiorek, 1995, pp. 14 – 15); in the nineteenth century, emphasis tended to fall on the former – the
depiction of the external world; now, after the impact of modernism and postmodernism, it falls increasingly on the latter – a more self-reflexive consideration of the methods of bringing about the depiction of the external world, and more of a focus on the interior life of characters (consciousness) and on their subjective view of reality (psychological realism), which sometimes has an effect on style (for instance, in stream of consciousness in modernist texts).

John Fowles’s metafictional interventions in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* are typical features of post-war fiction, as is his avowed desire ‘to create worlds as real as, but other than the world that is’ (Fowles, 1969, cited in Gasiorek, 1995, p. 17).

As discussed by Roger Chartier (1995, p. 4) and others, it is important to consider the relationship between texts and their historical context not to reduce them to historical documents, but to reconstruct their conditions of possibility; reconstructing the critical context of the 1960s reveals parallel concerns with the ways in which reality is represented in fiction.\(^3\) In 1964, Barbara Hardy described the task of the novelist to be ‘giving form to a story, giving form to his moral and metaphysical views, and giving form to his particular experience of sensation, people, places and society.’ (p. 1). Hardy’s view, typical of many of the time, is that the novel should be all about truth: a ‘truthful realisation’ of the novelist’s ‘evaluation of life’ (pp. 2 – 3). Gasiorek (1995, p. v) argues that expressing

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\(^3\) Steven Connor’s *Postmodernist Culture* (1998, first published 1989) and Brian McHale’s *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) provide further discussions of relevant postmodernist theory and historical context. More specifically, for a detailed discussion of metafiction, see Patricia Waugh’s *Metafiction* (1984), and Mark Currie’s collection of essays, also titled *Metafiction* (1995).
realism as a set of narrative techniques, and expressing experimentalism as the
subversion of those techniques, is an inadequate way of explaining this
relationship; instead, he argues, it should be explained within its historical
context. Gasiorek points to Alex Comfort’s (1948) *The Novel and Our Time*, in
which Comfort states that post-war social life had become ‘totally fragmented’ (p.
11) and that the novel, which should display a ‘coherent attitude to history and
events’ (p. 21) was ‘patently not succeeding in coping with the material’ of reality
(p. 75). If the novel form traditionally deals with reality, as historically it has, the
novelist has the task of handling what is perceived as an increasingly fragmented
real and literary existence:

> [f]iction was becoming journalistic, and its story-telling function was
> being taken over by cinema. The novel, exhausted as a form, unable to
> meet the demands placed on it by a changing world, and challenged by the
> mass media, was thus thought to be in terminal decline. (Gasiorek, 1995,
> p. 1)

This sentiment is not so far from the view expressed by B.S. Johnson:

> [t]he novelist cannot legitimately or successfully embody present-day
> reality in exhausted forms […] Novelists must evolve (by inventing,
> borrowing, stealing or cobbling from other media) forms which will more
> or less satisfactorily contain an ever-changing reality, their own reality and
> not Dickens’ reality or even James Joyce’s reality. (1973, pp. 16 – 17)

Experimentalism in writing was to an extent a response to this cultural and critical
backdrop, with authors like B.S. Johnson employing experimental devices to
represent ‘their own reality’ accurately. More recently, Steve Tomasula has

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4 It is not a primary concern for this thesis, but it should be noted that
experimental techniques in relation to postmodern concerns also emerged in other
art forms, such as the musical experiments of John Cage.
observed that digital literature stems from the same desire, arguing that electronic writing is a:

tool (like a pencil) to do what authors and artists have always done: say something that we, at our moment in time, can believe, in ways that allow it to be said, at our moment in time, as no other way can. (2012a, p. 495)

The idea of representing reality in a way that we can believe connects to the realism described by Johnson. Johnson’s call for the evolution of a writing form that could satisfactorily represent reality mirrors Tomasula’s comment in that it describes a requirement for credibility. In the latter half of the twentieth century a particular concern with realism is apparent, often explicitly as opposed to experimentalism, with the former seen as conservative and the latter as radical. In *Critical Practice* (2002, first published 1980), Catherine Belsey claims that realism is an essentially conservative form of writing because it assembles its content from the material of everyday life; the ‘world evoked […] largely confirms the pattern[s] of the world we seem to know’ (2002, p. 47). This also connects to Tomasula’s comment, with the confirmation in literature of ‘the world we seem to know’ similarly suggesting a requirement for credibility, for a representation we, as readers, can believe. In drawing attention to the need for credible representations, Tomasula and Johnson also highlight an aspect of reader agency. Since the reader of *The Unfortunates* is required to construct the szujet of the novel through shuffling sections of text, that reader appears to possess a high degree of agency in his or her interactions with the novel. He or she is responsible for that particular arrangement of that particular (fictional) representation of the ‘world we seem to know’, and is thus a figure with a degree of perceived agency
in the construction of that representation. Gasiorek (1995) disagrees with Belsey’s claim that realism is a conservative form, arguing that:

[the claim that experimental writing is inherently radical is as mistaken as the counter-claim that realism is a fundamentally conservative form. Both claims fail to attend to the specificities of content, the situations in which textual interventions operate, and the illocutionary force that such interventions possess. (1995, p. 181)]

The kernel of this is that although realism means different things to different authors in different periods of time, what should be noted overall is, from the middle of the twentieth century, a growing preoccupation with the modes and possibilities of the representation of real life in literature, and particularly a sense of the increasing failure of realism to represent reality.

Johnson’s view on the representation of real life in literature concerns a more specific notion of truth rather than realism; ‘[l]ife’, says Johnson, ‘does not tell stories. […] Telling stories really is telling lies’ (1973, p. 14). This is elucidated in his explanation that literature ‘teaches one something about life: and how can you convey truth in a vehicle of fiction? The two terms, truth and fiction, are opposites, and it must logically be impossible’. This belief may appear to contradict his methods, but Johnson is clear in his distinction:

[the terms novel and fiction are not […] synonymous, as many seem to suppose in the way they use them interchangeably. […] The novel is a form in the same sense that a sonnet is a form; within that form, one may write truth or fiction. I choose to write truth in the form of a novel. (1973, p. 14)]

Writing truth, for Johnson, takes a number of different forms. He undertook a three-week journey as a supernumerary on a deep-sea fishing trawler, as Jonathan Coe notes, ‘to provide himself, quite deliberately and specifically, with material for a novel’ (2004, p. 19). When his publisher wanted to classify that novel –
Trawl – as an autobiography rather than a novel, Johnson ‘insisted and could prove [that it is a novel]; what it is not is fiction’ (Johnson, 1973, p. 14). The methods by which he could prove this fact remain unclear, as observed by Coe (2004, p. 19), but this is explained by Johnson’s above distinction between ‘novel’ and ‘fiction’. A hint is also provided in the novel’s opening lines: ‘I … always with I … one starts from … one and I share the same character … are one … one always starts with I’ (Johnson, 2004, p. 7), suggesting that Johnson’s characters begin with him but are not necessarily autobiographical, rather suggesting a more complex relationship between Johnson the man, and the characters he created using a methodology in which he attempted to write about ‘nothing else but what happens to [himself]’ (Johnson, 2004, p. 5, cited in Coe, 2004, p. 18). Johnson the author intervenes explicitly in the ‘Disintegration’ section of Albert Angelo with ‘—fuck all this lying look what im really trying to write about is writing not all this stuff’ (2004, p. 167). In the ‘Disintegration’ comments (2004, pp. 167 – 176), Johnson notes his difficulty in ‘echo[ing] the complexity of life, reproducing some of the complexity of selves which I contain within me, contradictory and gross as they are’ (2004, p. 170); and the ‘trouble [because] I don’t remember anything like everything, or even enough, so in writing about it I’m at a disadvantage straight away’ (2004, p. 171). Reflecting on his experiences through his writing also causes a ‘shifting of reality, [because] in the course of the book I’ve come to see differently events I believed to be fixed, changed my mind about Muriel. I have this other girl, Virginia, now, at the time of writing [...] but who knows what else will have shifted [...] by the time you are reading this?’ (2004, p. 172). Johnson’s struggle to ‘keep up with [life]’ forms one side of his telling the
truth; the other side is revealed in other parts of his ‘Disintegration’, which includes comment on ‘little Linda Taylor, made an epileptic, to suit my ends, the poor little figment’ (2004, p. 173), and superficial changes such as ‘Littlewoods I changed to Woolworths’ (2004, p. 173). This appears to contradict the very notion of telling the truth, but a resolution is possible in that ‘[i]t is permissible to fictionalis, to make things up, apparently, but only if you come clean about it in the end’ (Coe, 2004, p. 25), though this itself is contradictory – as Coe notes (citing Johnson, 2004, p. 204), ‘as Johnson’s own words make clear [...] “there’s no fooling you readers!”: he already recognises [...] that readers are sophisticated beings who are quite capable of deciding for themselves what is true and what isn’t’ (2004, p. 25).

The reaction to experimentalism in literature ranged from praise to suspicion, and even anger. This is not unlike responses to hypertext fiction, resulting in readers who are ‘either delighted or annoyed’ (Schnierer, 2003, p. 96). Ensslin discusses the various reasons for this response to hypertext, including ‘lack [of] theoretical and practical media knowledge’, ‘structural complexity, semantic opaqueness and logistic impediments’, and ‘a lack of navigational guidance and macrostructural standards [which] aggravates readers’ impression[s] of having lost or being incapable of gaining control of “their” text’ (2007, pp. 58 – 59). The fact that some readers become annoyed when feeling that they have lost control of ‘their’ text (perhaps through difficulty engaging with the medium) suggests that they desire a pleasurable perception of agency (an interactive experience with a text that is ‘their[s]’), and thus become frustrated when this experience is impeded. Interestingly, negative responses to experimental fiction
also include references to aspects of difficulty. Bray, Gibbons, and McHale note that the term ‘experimental’ in literature is associated with ‘difficulty’ (2012, p. 2), and Bolter argues that ‘[i]n keeping with their role as experimenters, topographic writers in print (James Joyce, Borges, Saporta) are “difficult” writers because they challenge the reader to read multiply’ (2000, p. 151). Months before his suicide on 13th November 1973, B.S. Johnson asserted that:

“[e]xperimental” to most reviewers is almost always a synonym for “unsuccessful”. I object to the word experimental being applied to my own work. Certainly I make experiments, but the unsuccessful ones are quietly hidden away and what I choose to publish is in my terms successful: that is, has been the best way I could find of solving particular writing problems. Where I depart from convention, it is because the convention has failed, is inadequate for conveying what I have to say. The relevant questions are surely whether each device works or not, whether it achieves what it set out to achieve, and how less good were the alternatives. So for every device I have used there is a literary rationale and a technical justification; anyone who cannot accept this has simply not understood the problem which had to be solved. (1973, pp. 19 – 20)

This view introduces ideas of ‘successful’ and ‘unsuccessful’ writing: Johnson posits successful writing as that which moves towards solving writing problems – for Johnson, this means writing as truthfully as possible – and unsuccessful writing as untruthful, which is thus an inadequate method of conveying what one has to say. Johnson is quite clear on the matter: an unconventional form is sometimes the most appropriate, or only suitable, method to achieve a successful expression of the writer’s ideas, and if a critic does not appreciate such methods then they have simply misunderstood the point. Delving into newspaper archives supplies a wide range of opinions on experimental writers, many of which repeat the views of others, still more which simply profess to like or dislike the texts. Some comments reveal gushing admiration, as did this review published shortly after Cortázar’s death in 1984:
“[a]nyone who doesn't read Cortázar is doomed,” the Nobel Prize-winning Chilean poet Pablo Neruda once said. “Not to read him is a grave invisible disease which in time can have terrible consequences... I greedily devour all the fabrications, myths, contradictions and mortal games of the great Julio Cortázar.” (Bisaillon, 1984, p. 18)

It would not be useful to catalogue responses to the texts under consideration here, but attention should be paid to a small selection of interesting comments that illustrate some of the wider implications of material experimentalism in literature.

In 1969, a review of *The Unfortunates* acknowledged the novel’s blurring of the boundary between art and life, albeit not in any particular detail:

> [w]ith the paperchase device, and his fast-running, scrupulously honest prose, he succeeds marvellously in bringing the very process of experience and recall to the reader’s attention. But this technical self-absorption – for both author and reader – is finally at the expense of the reality of other lives: Tony and June, Wendy and Ginnie, blow away like loose leaves in the wind, and the delicate hammerbeams still support nothing above. I’m not sure yet if it is a failure of art, or life. (Holmes, 1969, cited in Coe, 2004, p. 269)

Richard Holmes’s review does draw out a formalist reading of the novel, focused on the ‘technical self-absorption’ which would suggest that the story of the characters is simply there as a means for Johnson to write using an experimental structure; However, Holmes’s central concern – that this self-consciousness, for him, disrupts the novel’s representation of reality – recognises that Johnson’s experiments are designed to connect the reader to the world he is describing in the most powerful way he saw possible; this connection is expressed most poignantly by Coe, who describes how ‘to read *The Unfortunates* is to be drawn, inexorably, by the coiled, unyielding threads of Johnson’s prose, into a vortex of shared grief’ (2004, p. 23).

Saporta’s prose published prior to *Composition No. 1* received a varied reception: Reinhold Grimm and Helene Scher cite Pietro Michele Stefano
Ferrua’s 1973 PhD thesis which provided a list of the ‘extremely scarce and incoherent’ (Grimm and Scher, 1978, p. 280) criticism relating to Saporta’s corpus, including comments pronouncing his work to be ‘charming and innovative’, ‘displaying much virtuosity’, or ‘terribly artificial’ (Ferrua, 1973, cited in Grimm and Scher, 1978, p. 280). John G. Weightman’s review in the *Times Literary Supplement* (1962, p. 707) compared the novel to a bag of chips, because ‘it comes in a packet, instead of a binding, and if the reader rips open the parcel with the usual impatience of the inveterate book-addict, the pages are all over the floor’, and joked that the novel ‘came out at the beginning of the holiday season, and by now a good deal of it must have been blown away by the *mistral* or carried off on Atlantic tides – not perhaps the sort of *diffusion* M. Saporta intended’. Weightman finally opined that ‘the final message of this kind of book must be that life is a jig-saw puzzle which admits of various “solutions”, all of them meaningless’ and that:

> the first impression, unfortunately, is not that these are building-blocks upon which the reader’s imagination can exercise itself, but that they may be fragments of various unpublished novels or short stories by M. Saporta made into a *macédoine* for the benefit of admirers of the “New Novel”.

(Weightman, 1962, p. 707)\(^5\)

Delving into reviews like Weightman’s confirms the sense that some reviewers have felt that experimental texts deserve somewhat less than serious attention, or rather a different *sort* of attention: the attention ascribed to novelty texts. There is also the sense that the reviewers simply did not know how they were supposed to

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\(^5\) It should be noted for the sake of accuracy that Weightman’s review was of the original French edition (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1962).
respond to these texts. Such a sense is confirmed in responses like Giles Coren’s statement regarding *The Unfortunates*:

> [d]on’t go pretending you’ve read B.S. Johnson. It won’t wash. Because nobody has. […] [Y]ou probably read only the review [of *The Unfortunates*] in *The Times*. And that was written by me. And I didn’t bother to read the book either. Just three of the chapters. But then, as far as the late and crippingly experimental BSJ was concerned, that would have been as valid a reading of his novel as any. (Coren, 2004, p. 13)

Leaving aside the typically Coren-esque tone of the piece, it does raise a question about the marriage of form and content: does an unconventional form obscure other aspects of the text, rather than enhancing them? Even more, does an unconventional form discourage readers from reading? Johnson’s response would no doubt return to his opinion that critics expressing this sort of view had ‘simply not understood the problem’ to be solved (Johnson, 1973, p. 20). Yet, that said, Coren’s response does suggest that the novel’s form has somewhat obscured the content, or at least obscured in this instance the credibility Coren may have assigned to the novel if it were conventionally structured. Umberto Eco evinced a disinterest similar to Coren’s in approaching *Composition No. 1*; Eco describes, in *The Open Work*, his brief encounter with the novel:

> [a] brief look at the book was enough to tell me what its mechanism was, and what vision of life (and, obviously, what vision of literature) it proposed, after which I did not feel even the slightest desire to read one of its loose pages, despite its promise to yield a different story every time it was shuffled. To me, the book had exhausted all its possible readings in the very enunciation of its constructive idea. (Eco, 1989, p. 170)

The debate has raged among other experimental writers; Christine Brooke-Rose was unimpressed by Johnson’s methods, declaring them to be less original than the cut-up techniques of William S. Burroughs, where the ‘random element is introduced at source, as part of the creative process’ (1981, p. 358). Brooke-Rose
comments (inaccurately; although misremembering the protagonist and plot, she
does remember that the novel is both realistic in content, and is about football and
the Midlands) that ‘in whatever order one reads *The Unfortunates*, it is still a
realistic and dreary novel of a football player returning to his Midlands home-
town’ (1981, p. 358). Coe contends that this ‘fails even to recognise that the book
might be intended to have an emotional impact’ (2004, p. 22), and that the reason
for this disdain on the part of other writers (citing similar responses to Brooke-
Rose’s on the part of Alan Burns and Rayner Heppenstall) is that other writers
were looking for more ‘cerebral possibilities’ in the novel form, whereas Johnson
‘refused – or was unable – to sacrifice intensity of feeling on the altar of formal
ingenuity’ (2004, p. 22). Kingsley Amis notes that “[e]xperiment”, in this
[literary] context, boils down pretty regularly to “obtruded oddity”, whether in
construction – multiple viewpoints and such – or style; it is not felt that
adventurousness in subject matter or attitude or tone really counts’ (Amis, 1958,
p. 565); Coe also notes that, in her deprecation of Johnson’s methods, Brooke-
Rose has misremembered the content of *The Unfortunates*: perhaps human error,
perhaps further evidence for the experimental form’s obscuring of content.
Twenty-first century responses to novelistic experimentalism remain similarly
split. In an online conversation with *The New Yorker* journalist Ben Greenman,
American writer Jonathan Franzen described *Ulysses* as giving a ‘fucked up’
message:

*[Ulysses] routinely tops lists of the best novels of the twentieth century –
which sends this message to the common reader: Literature is horribly
hard to read. And this message to the aspiring young writer: Extreme
difficulty is the way to earn respect. This is fucked up. It’s particularly
fucked up in an era when the printed word is fighting other media for its
very life. (2002)*
In these comments are echoes of those discussed earlier: Coren’s review of *The Unfortunates*; Gasiorek’s observations about lost confidence in the novel form; and Johnson’s comments about the exhaustion of the novel form. It would seem that the book has been ‘fighting for its life’, or rather in competition with other media forms, for a while. Franzen blames in part experimental fiction for this, whereas Johnson saw the same literary experimentalism as a weapon against inadequate forms of writing. The debate goes on, and will almost certainly continue to do so with the advent of writing made possible with new technologies, such as hypertext fiction; yet perhaps the printed word is not in the declining spiral that has been foretold. Philip Ziegler points out that:

> [t]he sedate literary establishment […] can take with equanimity the experimentalism and over-the-topness of Tristram Shandy, [but] look with horror at B.S. Johnson and consider it to be the most metricious kind of exhibitionism. I suppose simply because Tristram Shandy was 200 years ago, and it’s become respectable with age! (Ziegler, [no date], cited in Coe, 2004, p. 409)

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6 An excellent response to this is posited by Ben Marcus in ‘Why experimental fiction threatens to destroy publishing, Jonathan Franzen, and life as we know it: a correction’ (2005).

7 Johnson compares new approaches to the novel to other forms of art (the examples he gives are a nineteenth-century symphony and a Pre-Raphaelite painting), commenting that ‘[t]he avant garde of even ten years ago is now accepted in music and painting, is the establishment in these arts in some cases’ (1973, p. 15). Anaïs Nin made a similar observation that ‘[p]eople accepted abstract painting in their homes and studied the abstractions of science, but in the jet age read novels which corresponded to the horse and buggy’ (Nin, 1968, cited in Booth, 2012, p. 393). This, however, perhaps says more about Johnson himself than the public reception of avant garde arts: Booth notes that ‘pace Johnson, the avant garde in music was no more accepted by the public than in literature; even though the elitist musical establishment embraced serial music, the public never accepted it’ (2012, p. 393).
Ziegler makes a good point; indeed, with the British Library’s acquisition of the B.S. Johnson archive, one wonders if enough time has now passed for Johnson’s work to become more widely accepted; Philip Tew wonders if the re-publication of Johnson’s work:

might remind the literary academic community that if his work can be seen to suggest an open, theoretically prescient critique that is differently-centred than postmodernism, then surely he deserves a renewed audience. [...] We might consider perhaps whether [Johnson’s] narratives posit a radicalised notion of the real. (2001b, p. 58)

More recently, and regarding literary experimentalism more widely, the editors of *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* state that the book aims to ‘go some way toward salvaging the term experimental, rescuing it from the contexts where it is a term of dismissal and condescension, and reinvigorating its connotations of edginess, renovation and aesthetic adventure’ (Bray, Gibbons, and McHale, 2012, p. 3). As I discuss later in the thesis, similar resistance to that observed regarding experimental texts can be seen to emerge with technologically-founded changes affecting literary circles and study such as hypertext novels – textual formats that demand a type of reading that is different to conventional reading are seen in some circles as objects of suspicion or mockery: if the experience of reading requires anything outside of these critics’ definitions, then that novel is seen to be in some way damaging other literature. As we have seen, structural experimentalism is a substantial part of that which is seen to lie outside of such definitions, and this is perhaps another reason for the suspicion that accompanies some readers’ responses. Of course, some critics responded in a positive way to experimentalism, including Robert Scholes (1967),
with a view similar to Johnson’s that it is a lack of understanding that causes negative criticism:

much of the trouble comes from inadequate understanding of this new literary mode [...] As long as we expect a nectarine to taste like either a peach or a plum we are bound to be disappointed. But once we assimilate this new category – nectarine – we begin to know what we are dealing with and how to react to it. We can judge and appreciate. (p. 14)

1.3 Randomness, political implications, and potentiality

In requiring the reader to read sections of text in a non-sequential order – that is, texts with an order which is ostensibly different on each reading, supposedly enforcing a certain randomness, and thus negating any sense of consistent sequence – Composition No. 1 and The Unfortunates necessitate the piecing together of seemingly chaotic fragments of narrative resulting in ostensible randomness. Judith Mackrell observes that ‘Reading [Johnson’s] The Unfortunates is […] not unlike reading a conventionally structured novel which makes use of flashbacks within a linear chronology’ (1985, p. 55), and this is true, but whereas it is not unlike reading flashbacks, it is not the same as reading flashbacks. Whereas flashbacks require little extra effort on the part of the reader (excluding the acceptance of an earlier event in the story, and basic memory and comprehension skills), the technique of determining the order of the chapters by shuffling them demands that connections between the fragments of the fabula are made, in order to construct the szujet. This results in the reader performing an act of physical mapping; of determining where chapters will lie in relation to other chapters; and how he or she, as the reader, can travel between those chapters.
Johnson commented that the material design of *The Unfortunates*, in attempting to facilitate the random ordering of the szujet, was intended to
‘[reflect] the randomness of the material: it was itself a physical tangible metaphor for randomness and the nature of cancer’ (1973, p. 25). As discussed earlier, Johnson remarked that ‘[l]ife does not tell stories. Life is chaotic, fluid, random; it leaves myriads of ends untied, untidily […] Telling stories really is telling lies’ (1973, p. 14), and, when examining the ways in which Johnson worked towards his quest for textual truth, the marriage of form to content achieved in *The Unfortunates* is arguably his most effective attempt at representing the nature of (a) reality through fiction. Coe notes that:

[c]ertainly there is nothing very sophisticated about Johnson’s central conceit of randomly ordered pages as a tangible metaphor for the random interplay of memories and impressions in the human mind (and also, let us not forget, for football itself, where play proceeds randomly within a framework of rules and conventions). (Coe, 2004, p. 22)

Coe is quite right here; the method could be described comfortably as an obvious way in which to write randomness – after all, if a novel’s content is concerned with randomness, why not attempt randomisation of the form? Of further interest is the subsequent mention of Johnson’s pages as a metaphor for randomness *within a framework of rules*: obviously the rules of football are significant to both the story and to Johnson’s own experiences as a journalist reporting on football, but there are also frameworks of rules which correspond to the experience of reading, and indeed to the experience of writing. There are two issues contained in this that must be tackled to understand further the focus of this chapter: before considering the significance of rules, the notion of randomness needs to be unpicked.
The idea of randomness is problematic. Contrary to the implications of the final declaration in Saporta’s instructions – ‘the number of possible combinations is infinite’ (1963, ‘The Reader is Requested’) – the number of possible combinations of the pages in Composition No. 1 is, of course, not infinite; like the deck of cards to which it is compared, the pages can only be arranged in unique orders a certain number of times. Grimm and Scher observe that, according to Stirling’s formula of approximation, there are $10^{263}$ possible combinations that can be achieved by arranging the pages (1978, p. 282).\(^8\) The potential to arrange the pages in different orders to form different combinations makes reading the novel akin to playing a card game; the individual cards being arranged and used in different ways to create different games, the employing of a set of instructions explaining how to play the game (or read the novel), and the shuffling of cards prior to the commencement of play. As such, it would appear that there should be an element of randomness to the narrative orders that emerge after shuffling.

Randomness tends not to factor heavily in literary criticism, but has been discussed at length in mathematics and the physical sciences; deconstructing the existence of randomness in literature is highly useful, and exposes the very notion as nonsensical. Laurent Mazliak elucidates succinctly the philosophy of randomness for the purposes of literary investigation (particularly one concerned with the pseudo-ludic formats of The Unfortunates and Composition No. 1):

[a] player shuffles cards and repeats shuffling many times. What is the expected probability of various arrangements of cards at the end? The way of shuffling is given by the player’s personal habit; one player shuffles

\(^8\) Grimm asks that readers ‘forgive [Saporta] this slight poetic licence’ in describing the number of combinations as infinite (1978, p. 282).
cards in one way, another one in a different way. The calculation, however, shows that after shuffling the pack many times, all arrangements of cards have the same probability independent of the player’s habits. The player’s individuality is mirrored in some regularity which he follows more or less consciously when he shuffles cards; thus we find that the player’s individuality does not influence the final result. (2007, pp. 6 – 7)

The outcome of shuffling sections of text does not produce random results, but rather an equally likely series; what is seemingly random is in fact entirely predictable. Numerous studies of the physics of randomness confirm the specifics of this; perhaps the clearest exposition (at least for the literary critic little versed in such matters) is Chaitin’s 1975 ‘Randomness and Mathematical Proof’:

[t]ossing a coin is a classical procedure for producing a random number, and one might think at first that the provenance of the series alone would certify that it is random. This is not so. Tossing a coin 20 times can produce any one of $2^{20}$ (or a little more than a million) binary series, and each of them has exactly the same probability. Thus it should be no more surprising to obtain the series with an obvious pattern than to obtain the one that seems to be random; each represents an event with a probability of $2^{-20}$. (Chaitin, 1975, p. 47)

Beyond mathematical approaches to randomness, a more conventionally literary approach to the question results in the same findings. As Nicolas Tredell (2000, p. 100) notes, The Unfortunates consists of two fabulae. The first is a day-long story of the narrator reporting on a football match in Nottingham, and the memories of the city that are evoked during the day. The second is the story of the narrator’s friendship with Tony, an academic who dies of cancer, beginning with when they met at University, and ending with Tony’s death. Glyn White argues that the fact that ‘we can reconstruct these fabulae at all argues against genuine randomness in content’ (2005, p. 115), a factor which he notes that friends and critics of Johnson also found to be a problem: Zulfikar Ghose (1985, p. 33) recalls
arguing with Johnson over this.⁹ Even if the attempted textual randomness of The Unfortunates were actually to achieve literary randomness, the experience of reading the novel would negate this: as White notes, ‘since every reading will be randomised across the untitled sections (at least), it makes it fruitless for commentators to discuss their individual orders of reading since no one else will share them. In this sense randomness gives way to specificity’ (2005, p. 115). Patrick Parrinder dismissed the randomness of The Unfortunates as ‘superfluous’ (1977, p. 45); but this statement does not go far enough. The Unfortunates, Composition No. 1, and indeed any writing which professes to provide a random method of readerly construction through such methods, has only the (false) appearance of randomness; an illusion of randomness.

Other notable appearances of supposed randomness in literature in the 1960s and 1970s include William S. Burroughs’s cut-up and fold-in techniques.¹⁰

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⁹ Ghose states that:

[w]e quarrel and we quarrel. All right, I say, so the loose sheets in the box mirror the idea of randomness but after I’ve shuffled them and shuffled them and read them and closed the box what there is in my mind is a biography whose form is really no different from David Copperfield because after I’ve read David Copperfield what is in my mind is not a chronological life but a group of random images. Bollocks, he says. (1985, p. 33)

¹⁰ Rona Cran notes the prevalence of cut-up techniques across the arts (and the decades), including in Hopscotch:

John Cage and Morton Feldman developed collage musically, [...] George Martin and the Beatles spliced up tape, and David Bowie used the cut-up method to write lyrics, a practice which later influenced Thom Yorke and Kurt Cobain. Julio Cortázar used collage and cut-ups to write his “counter-novel”, Hopscotch (1963), whilst Allen Ginsberg also realised [...] the potency of “images juxtaposed” and the facility, offered by collage, for processing and presenting real information. (2014, p. 214)
The former of these techniques involves taking a text, or several texts, and cutting it into smaller pieces; these pieces are then rearranged to form a new text, with additional words added to ensure sense in the most nonsensical resulting combinations. The fold-in technique involves taking two sheets of text and folding each sheet in half; the different halves are then combined and the text is read across this new page. As Francis Booth (2012) observes, some reviewers contemporary with Burroughs and Johnson seemed to accept the techniques used by Burroughs, but denigrated Johnson’s *The Unfortunates*; Booth notes an unsigned review in the *Times Literary Supplement* which stated that ‘[c]ut-ups are all very well, but B.S. Johnson’s new “experimental” novel is more like a carve-up, discreetly doctored naturalism in a brazen avant-garde wrapping’ (1969, cited in Booth, 2012, p. 395). This reviewer appears to be unhappy with the content of *The Unfortunates*, but has perhaps misunderstood the purpose of Johnson’s presentation of realistic content within an experimental form, which actually – in its fragmented physical form, and the fragmented, broken style of the narrative – represents well the novel’s concern with death and loss, and fragments of memory. As noted earlier, Brooke-Rose judged Burroughs’s techniques to be more original than those used by Johnson, believing that the ‘random element is introduced at source’ (Brooke-Rose, 1981, p. 358). Yet the problem with literary randomness also occurs with Burroughs’s techniques: the cut-up method may appear random, but it is not randomness that is achieved. In an interview with Daniel Odier, the following exchange was recorded:

*Q:* To what degree do you control what you put into your montages?
*A:* Well you control what you put into your montages; you don’t fully control what comes out. That is, I select a page to cut up and I have control
over what I put in. I simply form what comes out of the cut-ups back into a narrative structure. (Odier, 1974, p. 31)

The element of authorial choice involved in selection negates the possibility of a truly random outcome.

Burroughs’s opinions on the state of the novel show remarkably similar concerns to those of Johnson, not least in the following comment, in which the exhaustion of the novel form, concerns over new media, and the need to develop new novelistic techniques are raised:

Q: Your books, since The Ticket that Exploded especially, are no longer “novels”; a breaking up of novelistic form is noticeable in Naked Lunch. Toward what end or goal is this break-up heading?
A: That’s very difficult to say. I think that the novelistic form is probably outmoded and that we may look forward perhaps to a future in which people do not read at all or read only illustrated books and magazines or some abbreviated form of reading matter. To compete with television and photo magazines writers will have to develop more precise techniques producing the same effect on the reader as a lurid action photo. (Odier, 1974, p. 27)

As Johnson was exploring structural experiments to tell the truth more accurately, Burroughs was exploring ways to break away from logical sequence, which he considered to be an inadequate method of representing reality:

[w]hen people speak of clarity in writing they generally mean plot, continuity, beginning middle and end, adhering to “logical” sequence. But things don’t happen in logical sequence and people don’t think in logical sequence. Any writer who hopes to approximate what actually occurs in the mind and body of characters cannot confine himself to such an arbitrary structure as “logical” sequence. Joyce was accused of being unintelligible and he was presenting only one level of cerebral events: conscious sub-vocal speech. I think it is possible to create multilevel events and characters that a reader could comprehend with his entire organic being. (Odier, 1974, p. 35)

The similarities in Johnson’s and Burroughs’s vision of creativity do not extend to their views on what such methods could achieve. Johnson’s use of unbound chapters in The Unfortunates helps create a self-focused portrait of fragments of
memory circling in a human mind, and this asserts a certain authorial control over the reader by containing them within a highly introspective narrative – the ‘vortex of shared grief’ described by Coe (2004, p. 23) – and the final line of the novel seems to propound the importance of personal experience over details of sequence; a final note which suggests that however the novel is read, it is the convergence of fiction and reality that really matters: ‘Not how he died, not what he died of, even less why he died, are of concern, to me, only the fact that he did die, he is dead, is important: the loss to me, to us’ (Johnson, 1999, ‘Last’, p. 6).

Burroughs believed that his techniques bore real-world significance, but in the much larger context of weapons against an ever-more controlling state:

Q: Do you think that the prejudice that exists against the cut-up method and its extension can be attributed to the fear of really penetrating into time and space?
A: Very definitely. The word of course is one of the most powerful instruments of control as exercised by the newspaper and images as well, there are both words and images in newspapers… Now if you start cutting these up and rearranging them you are breaking down the control system. Fear and prejudice are always dictated by the control system […] This [technique] is something that threatens the position of the establishment of any establishment, and therefore they will oppose it, will condition people to fear and reject or ridicule it. (Odier, 1974, pp. 33 – 34)

Both Burroughs and Johnson, then, believed that writing using experimental techniques produced literature that genuinely had an impact on the reader and on the real world beyond that which a standard novel could achieve. Johnson believed in its ability to convey truth more successfully, Burroughs believed that experimental writing – specifically the techniques he used – could threaten the position of the establishment (state officials and the privileged classes; those with political or social power). This is a bold principle, and awareness of Burroughs’s personal life does evoke a certain dismissal of the idea
as stemming from the paranoia of the addict, but it is less easy to dismiss – and can be better understood – in its social context. Lucien Goldmann notes that ‘sociologists of literature have raised the importance of reification in understanding certain modern novels’ (1976, p. 79) and draws comparisons between the reified structure of the liberal market and the novel form, describing the novel as the ‘highest-level meeting point of group and individual life. Its essence is to raise collective consciousness to a degree of unity toward which it was spontaneously oriented but might never have attained in empirical reality without the intervention of creative individuality’ (1976, p. 78). As Terry Eagleton and Drew Milne note, Goldmann’s work on the novel is generally considered to be less convincing than the rest of his oeuvre (1996, p. 204), but Goldmann goes on to develop the idea of literature in relation to society in a more productive and specific way, drawing parallels between the impact of production in the economic sector on social life, and the changing novel form. In the absence of a ‘positive hero’ (a character who ‘consciously embodies the values governing the work’s universe in his thinking and acts’; a character who would embody the unified values of the social group), the literary creation parallels broader oppositional forces in society; the novel is no longer ‘the expression […] of the social group but of a resistance to it, or at least the non-acceptance of it’ (1976, p. 80).

Although at first glance Burroughs’s comments about the political potential in radical creative techniques seem only tenuously related to any social reality, Goldmann’s argument that changes in literary creation can be traced as parallel to changes in the reified structure of the liberal market lend a theoretical
validity to Burroughs’s beliefs. Burroughs’s cut-up and fold-in techniques disturb the ‘ahuman universe [which is located on the plane] of language’ (1976, p. 86): whereas *The Unfortunates* and *Composition No. 1* disturb literary convention at page level (structural disturbance), Burroughs’s cut-up experiments (notably the trilogy of *The Soft Machine*, *The Ticket That Exploded*, and *Nova Express*) disturb literary convention at page, paragraph, sentence and word level (disturbance at the level of comprehension and composition). In *Composition No. 1* and *The Unfortunates*, the moment of radicalisation exists in the spaces between the pages (at the source of the structural division); in Burroughs’s cut-ups, the moment of radicalisation exists in the spaces between the words at the source of the cut-up division and/or in the spaces between the words at the source of the fold-in division.

A different approach to literary experimentalism was taken by the Oulipo (*Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*; the Workshop of Potential Literature), a writers’ group founded in 1960 under the initiative of Raymond Queneau (and announced at a colloquium centred on his work) and François Le Lionnais. The group was originally titled *Séminaire de Littérature Expérimentale*, but this was altered as, to the members’ way of thinking, it was a more precise definition of the literary tasks they were to undertake (Motte, 1986b, p.1). The group was not interested in experimentalism as it is recognised in other writers’ work (for instance the fragmented form of *The Unfortunates*), so much as in literary potentiality. I shall now discuss some of the extensive work and theories of the group, necessarily briefly in order not to diverge too far from the scope of this thesis (Jan Baetens (2012) and Warren F. Motte Jr. (1986b) provide excellent
accounts of the history and context of the Oulipo). The Oulipo’s presence in literary spheres was affirmed openly with the publication of *La Littérature Potentielle*, a collection of writings that included theoretical texts and exercises. Although short, the pieces identified the two primary directions of the movement: as Le Lionnais puts it in the Oulipo’s ‘First Manifesto’, these are analysis – derived from analytic tendency: the identification and recuperation of older experiments with form – and synthesis – derived from synthetic tendency: the elaboration of new forms (1986, p. 27). Le Lionnais elucidated these respectively: ‘Analytic lipo seeks possibilities existing in the work of certain authors unbeknownst to them. Synthetic lipo constitutes the principal mission of the Oulipian; it is a question of opening new possibilities previously unknown to authors’ (cited in Bens, 1986, p. 65); this division is not total, as Le Lionnais clarifies that ‘Anoulipism is devoted to discovery, Synoulipism to invention. From the one to the other there exist many subtle channels’ (1986, p. 28). The inescapable fact that the techniques of Burroughs, Johnson, and Saporta do not actually produce truly random results is to an extent circumnavigated by the experimental writing of the Oulipo, whose aims are explicitly anti-random. Jacques Bens noted that:

> [t]he members of the Oulipo have never hidden their abhorrence of the aleatory, of bogus fortunetellers and penny-ante lotteries: ‘The Oulipo is anti-chance,’ the Oulipian Claude Berge affirmed one day with a straight face, which leaves no doubt about our aversion to the dice shaker. Make no mistake about it: potentiality is uncertain, but not a matter of chance. We know perfectly well everything that can happen, but we don’t know whether it will happen. (1986, p. 67)

The group’s methods for exploring textual potentiality are numerous, and include the idea of using constraint as a literary technique. As Baetens notes, ‘a strictly
technical definition of constrained writing is very difficult, if not impossible, given the weight of contextual aspects and interpretive communities in our consideration of what a constraint is or may be’ (2012, p. 115). Baetens goes on to explore the idea in more detail (see also Andrews, 2003), but for our purposes a constraint can be defined as a literary device, used systematically, that has been chosen specifically (i.e. is not usually present in the literature – for instance rhyme in poetry) and is more than a convention: it is either ‘something new or something that is “made anew”’. Intentional exceptions to the system of constraint, as I shall discuss shortly, are known as ‘clinamen’. If the constraint was seen as a type of ‘mathematical theorem’, then the textual production that accompanied that restraint was ‘seen as one of its possible demonstrations’ (Baetens, 2012, pp. 115, 117). One such method for the exploration of textual potentiality, as discussed by Claude Berge, is factorial poetry:

in which certain elements of the text may be permuted in all possible ways as the reader (or chance) sees fits; the meaning changes, but syntactic correctness is preserved […] With n words to permute, the number of possibilities would be “n factorial”, that is, the number:

\[ n! = 1 \times 2 \times \ldots \times n \] (Berge, 1986, p. 117)

In this, it can be seen that chance is not chance in the sense of randomness, or uncontrollability, but chance in the sense of potentiality: there are many outcomes, but all are anticipated. Perhaps it is the visibility of the formula behind the writing that makes the tight control over the text quite so clear. Jacques Bens,

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11 A deviation, often referred to as a swerve, from the norm in atomic theory. A term reappropriated by the Oulipo, Motte describes the clinamen as ‘an element distinct from the system, intervening in aleatory fashion; its function is on the contrary to subvert the control mechanism’ (1986a, p. 265). For a detailed discussion of the idea of the clinamen in literature, see Motte’s ‘Clinamen Redux’ (1986a).
Claude Berge, and Paul Braffort describe Composition No. 1 as a ““factorial” novel, whose pages, unbound, may be read in any order, according to the whim of the reader’ (1986, p. 117); in using the term and seeing the formula associated with it, Composition No. 1 — and indeed The Unfortunates (which by this definition is also factorial, albeit with fixed beginning and end points) — are dissected into algorithmic pieces of work, not expansive, random, anything-could-happen texts but rather texts which are interactive within a defined space of potentiality. The novels in question create a sense of intimacy; a repeated concern with the details of ordinary lives exists in Saporta’s, Johnson’s and Cortázar’s texts and this is an integral part of the experience of reading these texts: moving into an intimate space in which readers engage with the personal experiences of the story and with the visible underlying algorithms.

There is, as Motte observes, a problem with potentiality: even with controls to exclude it, ‘the aleatory cunningly seems to insinuate itself even where efforts to exclude it are most diligent’ (1986b, p. 18). For example, ‘what if the law itself is aleatory – for instance, the mathematical law that permits us to engender the series of prime numbers, or, analogously, the system of constraint through which an Oulipian text is generated?’ (Motte, 1986b, p. 18). Roubard addresses the contradiction in this formal aesthetic as an ‘inherent ambiguity [within] the procedure’:

[O]n the one hand, the eminently arbitrary character of constraints is revindicated; at the same time traditional constraints are marked as arbitrary, but, precisely because they are traditional and solidly anchored in history, they guard a power of fascination that situates them elsewhere, beyond the arbitrary… it is difficult to get out of this. (Roubard, cited in Motte, 1986b, p. 18)
This concern with the underlying algorithms of the text (and whether those algorithms are themselves founded in chance) is linked to Queneau’s fascination with prime numbers, which Roubard explains as being a fascination with the way in which prime numbers ‘imitate chance while obeying a law’ (cited in Motte, 1986b, p. 18). The Oulipian logic accompanying this is that, in recognising chance for what it is, ‘chance is exorcised […] and thus is mastered’ (Motte, 1986b, p. 18). In the case of Georges Perec’s ‘colossal success’ (Baetens, 2012, p. 118) 

Life: a User’s Manual (1987, first published in French in 1978), which is set in an apartment block and concerns itself with the details of the residents’ lives, an error is introduced into the system in order to attempt to rectify some of the problems associated with aleatoricism. By beginning with a system of constraint, a piece of writing is produced; that system may to an extent be an aleatory system, or the rules which govern it may be aleatory, so an error is deliberately introduced to destroy the constraint, thus anything aleatory within the system becomes controlled. Perec’s novel was devised according to a strictly rigid structure; Peter Schwenger describes in detail the novel’s symmetry:

[t]he novel is laid out in squares: the squares are the rooms of a cross-sectioned Paris apartment building. Each chapter describes the contents of one of the rooms. Those contents may include people subjected to the same impassive gaze as objects, people treated like objects. And each chapter includes a narrative element, telling us the history of the room’s furnishings and their relation to the room’s occupant, and at times telling us about the people depicted in the art on the walls: objects treated like people. The squares that make up the cross-sectioned apartment building could also be seen to make up a chessboard, for Perec demands of himself that the transition from one room to another be accomplished by way of the knight’s move in chess. In the rules of Perec’s game each chapter had to adhere to forty-two constraints, corresponding to the same number of lists. These lists were composed of such things as authors who had to be quoted; types of printed material such as newspapers, catalogues, and theatre programs that had to be interpolated; references to his own works;
numerical allusions to the chapter’s position on the grid; and so on. (2002, p. 146)

Additionally, as noted by N. Katherine Hayles and Nick Montfort, the moves visit each room ‘once and only once, executing a mathematical strategy called the Knight’s Tour’ (2012, p. 455). Perec’s introduction of an error into the system consisted of the removal of a chapter from the novel: the 100 rooms that comprise the 10x10 grid of the chessboard become 99 chapters, and the representation of a room in the apartment block is destroyed. Perec explained this method in terms of the clinamen, the flaw in the system that ensures creativity:

This idea is useful in understanding Cortázar’s *Hopscotch*. If reading according to the second chapter map, the reader of *Hopscotch* will not read chapter 55: it is omitted. This reinforces the explicit anti-aleatory chapter maps of *Hopscotch* by introducing a clinamen, a deviation that, according to Oulipian logic, enables the control of the aleatory within the novel by destroying the system of constraint. Barbara L. Hussey discusses the omission of chapter 55 as a presence created through absence, much like the silences used by John Cage (Hussey, 1981, p. 53). Hussey’s article is particularly interesting because other critics, for instance Scott Simpkins (1990), simply note the absence of chapter 55 without further
Hussey argues that the omission of chapter 55 is linked to Cortázar’s interest in jazz music, explaining Cortázar’s reasoning that ‘when a great jazzman dies, a record company will frequently produce, from its archives, a recording of several “takes” of one theme [...] a work in multiple variations of itself [...] opening the door on the artist’s activity’. Hussey argues that this is comparable to the omission of chapter 55 because it ‘offers the reader a sense of participating in the immediate creative process of the author, encouraging him to experience the novel as a performance and, as such, temporary rather than timeless’ (1981, p. 57). Following Cortázar’s ‘insistence that if a “take” is really good, it is not an improvement on the preceding execution but something different’, the reconstructions of chapter 55 in chapters 129 and 133 are not ‘mere echoes’, but are in themselves takes: ‘at once a new experience and a repetition’ (1981, pp. 57, 58). This is an idea that will continue to be useful throughout this thesis: when the reader participates in the creative process of the author, he or she experiences the text as a ‘take’, a temporary event which simultaneously repeats the author’s work and creates a new experience.

12 ‘To discourage the reader from settling for the shorter version, [Cortázar] leads us to conclude that the longer, interspersed version is the only entire one (even though chapter 55 is omitted from it)’ (Simpkins, 1990, p. 68). No further mention of the omission is made.

13 Hussey also discusses the ‘suppressed chapter of [Hopscotch] (originally 126)’ which, she argues, parallels what Cortázar intended to accomplish through his treatment of chapter 55: to ‘show to what extent he stresses the important of the reader’s ability to reconstruct the author’s creative experience’ (1981, p. 58).
1.4 Instructions

1.41 Hopscotch

The consideration of Oulipian poetics aids in further scrutiny of experimental forms of writing; dissecting experimental literature reveals formations existing within tightly controlled, intimate spaces, spaces which are created or arranged according to patterns relying on different forms of spatial ordering – certain formulae (explicit or otherwise), or the appearance of structural randomness.

Rules and constraints in the primary texts in question appear prominently in the form of instructions provided for the reader, which function as manuals detailing how to interact with each text. In a manner, all texts have implicit instructions delivered through the conventions of reading which dictate the methods by which most literary texts are read (as aforementioned, in the Western world these conventions are left-to-right, top-to-bottom reading, with pages ordered in a linear sequence). Instructions in a literary text are sometimes little more than an explicit announcement of usually implicit conventions – as we shall see, Cortázar’s instructions for *Hopscotch* begin with such an announcement – but the inclusion of instructions has further significant implications. Two questions need to be answered: what purpose the presence of instructions in *Hopscotch* serves beyond the explicit statement of the deviation from traditional reading conventions; and the significance of the instructions beyond announcing these different rules of play.

Different publications of *Hopscotch* provide the same opening content, labelled either as a ‘Table of Instructions’ (1966a, New York: Pantheon Books) or as an ‘Author’s Note’ (1966b, London: The Harvill Press). I do not intend to
provide a close reading of the entirety of this section – that task is addressed by Simpkins (1990) – but rather to unpick the further implications of its inclusion, and the methods it prescribes. The instructions state that:

[i]n its own way, this book consists of many books, but two books above all.

The reader is invited to choose between these two possibilities: The first can be read in a normal fashion and it ends with Chapter 56, at the close of which there are three garish little stars which stand for the words The End. Consequently, the reader may ignore what follows with a clean conscience.

The second should be read by beginning with Chapter 73 and then following the sequence indicated at the end of each chapter. In case of confusion or forgetfulness, one need only consult the following list:


Each chapter has its number at the top of every right-hand page to facilitate the search.
(Cortázar, 1966a, ‘Table of Instructions’)

The different pathways through the novel – pathways which jump about and wander through the text – mirror the many different adventures, or ‘episodes that Oliveira is] always getting involved in’ (1966a, p. 10). Oliveira lives an unsettled existence, drifting from place to place and feeling isolated from society – as he phrases it, he is not ‘a man of the territory’ (1966a, p. 347) – and this unsettledness is reflected in the wandering organisation of the novel’s second chapter map. The instructions also function as a manual on how to read the text; following the second method provides a code through the text, interweaving the ‘first book’ with the expendable passages. A reader left to his or her own devices is unlikely to read a conventionally structured novel in any order other than that in which it came; in Hopscotch, the existence of instructions (a manual on how to read) presents the reader with an explicit choice between two methods of
approaching the text. The reader can read as one would read a conventionally structured novel by using the first method: in doing this, the reader is told that he or she may ignore the rest of *Hopscotch* ‘with a clean conscience’; in following the second option (the map) it is then suggested that the reader’s conscience may be sullied in some way. This posits the reader as a figure with a certain ethics, a responsibility of reading: if he or she chooses to read according to the chapter map then this allows for a clean conscience; if choosing the seemingly darker path – to go against the actions prescribed – his or her conscience is no longer ‘clean’.

When reading by the second method, it is easy in the physical movement between chapters to become lost in the labyrinthine spaces of the narrative; the map requires the reader physically to traverse the text to follow the story and, once lost, it is not easy to backtrack and rediscover the path. If the reader can make such mistakes, there is a potential for his or her engagement with the narrative to go awry, or even the possibility of failing at reading due to an inability to engage successfully (that is, as stated in the rules) with the formally experimental aspects of the text. Put a different way, if the reader does give up his or her clean conscience and reads the expendable chapters, is that then an act of rebellion against convention? In reading the book in a different order to a front-to-back conventional text, is the reader actually doing anything subversive? The answer to this is no: although the text, in its metafictionality, is preventing the suspension of disbelief, and drawing attention to its own artifice and the reader’s investment in causality and chronology, what the reader is doing is simply adding the author’s instructions onto his or her learnt reading conventions: reading top-to-bottom, left-to-right, and still beginning at the start and ending at the end – it is just that, in
this case, the rules state that chapter 73 is the start. In following the instructions a reader is not circumventing these conventions but has simply substituted one method of interaction for another: the chapter map of *Hopscotch* replaces the standard numerical sequence of chapters in a novel that requires reading from page one to the end. The reader is only following instructions; Cortázar’s offer of a ‘clean conscience’ functions more as a device of temptation, seeming to grant readers a greater (illusory) agency than they actually possess, an opportunity to delve past the literary conventions of reading. In truth, it does nothing of the sort; in substituting Cortázar’s instructions for standard reading conventions, the reader is certainly not reading subversively.\(^{14}\)

Hussey (1981) argues (using the term ‘book’ where I have used, for clarity’s sake, the alternative term ‘chapter map’) that the absence of chapter 55 in the second book ‘derives from its presence in the first book. Without its appearance, we have neither a discernible silence nor a privileged insight into the improvisational nature of the second book. This would indicate a necessary symbiosis of novel and antinovel’ (1981, p. 58). Without the ‘tradition of the novel [present in the first book]’, Hussey argues, ‘the reader [...] could not derive the desired effect [of the second book]’ (1981, p. 59). She observes that ‘Cortázar often proclaims the opposite of what he means’ (1981, p. 59) and that though the

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\(^{14}\) In addition to my own discussion of subversive reading in specific texts, I should also note here the argument against any innate element of subversiveness in experimental literature put forward by Rita Felski. Felski argues that theorists ‘who proclaim the subversive power of formal experimentation, fail to consider that the breaking of conventions itself becomes conventional, and the shock effect of any challenge to existing structures of representation is necessarily of limited duration’ (1989, p. 159).
instructions for *Hopscotch* announce a choice between two methods of reading, since he ‘repeatedly draws the lessons of the second book from the presence of the first, [...] a re-examination of the “option” offered to the reader will demonstrate the absurdity of any choice between the two’ (1981, p. 59). In offering an apparent choice that ‘singl[es] out and attack[s] the passive reader’ Cortázar has effectively ‘eliminated rather than suggested an option’, as ‘the first book never counted as an option’:

> Its purpose is [...] to provide the novel Cortázar’s antinovel contains and to offer the assumptions about literary order that it cancels. The second book relies on the first book for its condemnation of conventional plots, passive readers and numerically-ordered systems [...] The first book posits an order that the second book ruptures, a plot that the second book makes irrelevant, and a permanence that the second book undermines by altering its figurations and exposing them as subject to the caprice of their creator. (1981, pp. 59 – 60)

The implication here is not only that the instructions for *Hopscotch* imply that the second chapter map is the more complex and rewarding one, but in fact that it is really the *only* one: the first chapter map exists as an exemplar of conventional reading, and the second book can be termed experimental because it deviates from this. In this case, any element of subversiveness is also destroyed: as I argued above, Cortázar’s offer of a ‘clean conscience’ appears to grant his readers a greater agency than they actually possess (though this agency is illusory), an opportunity to circumvent the conventions of reading. Hussey’s argument reinforces this idea: the reader really *has* no choice, and – in addition to the ‘reciprocal relationship’ (Hussey, 1981, p. 59) between the two – the antinovel emerging from the second chapter map depends upon the novel created in the first chapter map as a convention against which to exhibit explicitly its experimentalism (as opposed to, for instance *Composition No. 1*, which must,
therefore, be considered experimental because of the conventions of other novels external to it).

Reader participation is defined by Cortázar as the reading of the ‘male reader’ and that of the ‘female-reader’ – as noted by E. Joseph Sharkey, Hopscotch ‘is or was at one time infamous for two things: its self-conscious metafictionality and its sexist nomenclature’ (2001, p. 423). Definitions of the ‘male-reader’ and ‘female-reader’ (later referred to as ‘passive reader’) have been discussed prolifically amongst Cortázar’s critics; though Simpkins notes that Cortázar has, in interview, asked for forgiveness for an essentially ‘innocent’ mistake:

[i]n an interview with Evelyn Picon Garfield, Cortázar remarked that I ask pardon of the women of the world for the fact that I used such a “machista” expression so typical of Latin American underdevelopment... I did it innocently and I have no excuse. But when I began to hear the opinions of my friends, women readers who heartily insulted me, I realised that I had done something foolish. I should have put “passive reader” and not “female reader” because there’s no reason for believing that females are continually passive. They are in certain circumstances and are not in others, the same as males. (1990, p. 71; Garfield, 1975, p. 108)

Simpkins provides a clear elucidation of Cortázar’s conception of reading:

[t]he female-reader desires an already finished text that requires no participation in its production. This reader, in effect, acquiesces when confronted with the task of reading, desiring instead the convenient commodity of a completed text. There is no gaming for this reader; indeed, the author has won even before the game begins. But the male-reader faces the text head on, eager for an energetic encounter whose outcome is by no means forgone in the author’s favour. (1990, p. 61)

Sharkey notes that critics who accept this conception of reading turn to reader-response theories to substantiate the idea that, ultimately, it is the active (or male) reader that is in control of the text (2001, pp. 425 – 426). I would suggest that the ‘sexist nomenclature’ (Sharkey, 2001, p. 423) of the passive female reader and
active male reader is, as Cortázar states above, simply an ‘innocent’, though misguided, mistake. In *Hopscotch*, Oliveira acknowledges that while other characters live their lives in what seem to him to be more successful ways, he does not ‘swim’ in those ‘metaphysical rives’ in the same way that his mistress, La Maga, does, but rather ‘describe[s] and define[s] and desire[s] those rivers’ and desires to ‘see some day the way [La Maga’s] eyes see’ (1966a, p. 96). Full of ‘useless anxiety’, Oliveira observes that he was ‘pretending that [he] was dedicated to a profound existence while all the time it was [an existence] that barely dipped its toe into the terrible waters’, and he was thus ‘imposing’ the false order that hides chaos’ onto his and La Maga’s relationship (1966a, p. 96).

In this respect, the portrayal of male and female characters in the novel does not support the accusation of sexism, as Oliveira is portrayed as a passive agent in his own existence. Simpkins view on the agency of the ‘male-reader’ as follows:

> [i]n fact, authors can never win this game against male-readers; they are given only one move – the “initial” text – while the male-readers have a limitless number of moves to play what one of Cortázár's characters, in a slightly different context, refers to as “the infinite game” (564). Certainly, authors can employ strategies that attempt to wrest this control from the male-readers, but the success of such ploys is never more than illusory because these readers always have the final word, so to speak. Accordingly, notes to the reader, prefaces, introductions, a “Table of Instructions” in Cortázar's case – all attempts to control the male-reader's power, fail inevitably in the same manner that the initial control of the reader – the “main” text-fails. For the author remains perpetually unable to exert any final, authoritative power. That power rests in the hands of the male-reader. (1990, pp. 61 – 62)

This view – that the active reader is ultimately in control of the text – is overly confident. Sharkey’s (2001) argument is more convincing, stating that although *Hopscotch’s* ‘second book is premised on the confused idea that the reader’s participation in a novel is inversely related to the writer’s […] in fact the finite
conditions of understanding make it possible for both to increase as one’ (2001, p. 426). The author does not ultimately control the text – how could he? Likewise, a final, authoritative power does not lie with a particular type of reader, but rather reveals the process of reading and making meaning from *Hopscotch* to be a collaborative effort between reader and writer, with both sides possessing influence. Sharkey observes that ‘[a]ccording to Gadamer, neither a reader nor an author could ever be in complete control of the reading experience, and it is not because one is crowding the other, but simply because both are finite’ (2001, p. 438): it is true that complete control cannot rest with one person, but this is because reading is an interactive experience. Furthermore, all reading requires the reader to engage with the text, but *Hopscotch* (amongst other, notably experimental, writing) requires a further level of physical interaction – a flipping between pages in a nonstandard way, a certain formalisation of accepting or rejecting the reading sequence, a spatial ordering that enables a different method of engaging with and making meaning from a novel.

A correlative view exists to the above discussion of subversion. I stated above that if a reader chooses the seemingly darker path – to go against the actions prescribed – his or her conscience is no longer ‘clean’, which posits the reader as having a certain implicit responsibility towards reading convention. Alternatively, this implies that those chapters beyond chapter 56 are of no consequence: a reader may stop reading with a clean conscience because the rest

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15. Aarseth posits this kind of interactivity as ergodic (I will discuss this in more detail in the second chapter): ‘[i]n ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text’ (1997a p. 1).
does not really have an impact on the narrative; the later chapters are, after all, grouped under the title of ‘Expendable Chapters’. In this, the final chapters are more like a series of notes from the author, in which case they serve as a reminder throughout reading – as does the dual structure indicated by the instructions – that the text is a product of authorial construction, and has been edited as to what to include and what to set out separately as expendable. This relates back to the ‘Instructions’ not as instructions, but as an ‘Author’s Note’: a further intervention to remind the reader of the author’s presence. Evidence towards a better understanding of the implications of this is found within the expendable chapters themselves. Chapter 95 provides comment:

[t]he tone of the notes (jottings with a view to mnemotechny or an end not too well explained) seemed to indicate that Morelli had gone off into an adventure analogous to the work he been painfully writing and publishing over the years. For some of his readers (and for himself) it was laughable to try to write the kind of novel that would do away with the logical articulations of discourse. One ended up by divining a kind of transaction, a proceeding (even though the absurdity of choosing a narration for ends that did not seem to be narrative might remain standing).* (1966a, pp. 430–431)

The star then refers to another paragraph below the first, which ends **, and this proceeds, with each paragraph detailing an element of Morelli’s background, until ******. The final two paragraphs of this section end as follows:

his book was before anything else a literary undertaking, precisely because it was set forth as the destruction of literary forms (formulas). ******

*******Also Western, although it should be said as praise, from the Christian conviction that there is no individual salvation possible, and that one’s faults stain everyone and vice versa. Perhaps that is why (Oliveira had a hunch) he chose the novel form for his meanderings, and published in addition what he kept on finding or unfinding. (1966a, p. 432)

Leaving aside for the moment the important fact of the ‘destruction of literary forms’, this raises questions of morality and of deferral. In the context of the
extract, and of the wider expendable sections, the point that ‘one’s faults stain everyone and vice versa’ refers to a standard conception of moral influence – that the actions of the characters resonate through the novel in chains of cause and effect – and also to chains of literary meaning and construction. This points to a conception of Morelli’s work – which, through its methods of construction, and the general acceptance that the character of Morelli bears relation to Cortázar as an author figure, can be taken to be of significance to Hopscotch – as endlessly deferring signification, both in terms of the (continual) publishing of additional material, and the influence of the individual section on the work in its entirety (and vice versa). Extending this notion of endlessness also enables comparisons to a reader’s physical interactions with a text like Composition No. 1 or The Unfortunates, as the shuffling of pages is designed to create multiple or (ostensibly) ‘infinite’ combinations of pages. Chapter 66 of Hopscotch describes how Morelli:

would like to sketch certain ideas, but he is incapable of doing so. The designs which appear in the margins of his notes are terrible. The obsessive repetition of a tremulous spiral […] He plans one of the many endings to his unfinished book, and he leaves a mockup. The page contains a single sentence: “Underneath it all he knew that one cannot go beyond because there isn’t any.” The sentence is repeated over and over for the whole length of the page, giving the impression of a wall, of an impediment. There are no periods or commas or margins. A wall, in fact, of words that illustrate the meaning of the sentence, the collision with a wall behind which there is nothing. But towards the bottom and on the right, in one of the sentences the word any is missing. A sensitive eye can discover the hole among the bricks, the light that shows through. (1966a, p. 370)

By reading the earlier reference to the ‘destruction of literary forms’ (1966a, p. 432) (which in turn refers explicitly to the breaking down of ‘formulas’) in conjunction with Chapter 66, it becomes possible to recognise and dissect four
layers. Firstly, this refers to the ‘obsessive repetition of [the] tremulous spiral’ (1966a, p. 370) at which the chapter map points: the open dash at the end of the map sequence indicates the potential for the addition of more ‘endings to [the] unfinished book’ (1966a, p. 370), the endless repetitions and additions of ‘what [the author] kept on finding or unfinding’ (1966a, p. 432). In this, there is a suggestion that in representing (a) reality – in the novel form which is, in the instance of *Hopscotch* and others as discussed elsewhere in this chapter, concerned with the details of everyday lives – those details cannot be contained within the fixed parameters of a beginning and an end, that there is always more ‘finding or unfinding’ (1966a, p. 432) to be done; yet in the statement that ‘[u]nderneath it all he knew that one cannot go beyond because there isn’t any’ (1966a, p. 370) there is recognition that the writing of a (published) novel must come to an end, and that the reality represented does not, once one stands back from the novel, go ‘beyond’ (1966a, p. 370) that which is written: representation is all that there is. Secondly, this refers to the inadequacies of language as a means of representation: ‘[Morelli] would like to *sketch* certain ideas, but he is incapable of doing so’ (1966a, p. 370), so he creates an ending in the form of a ‘wall’ (1966a, p. 370), devoid of punctuation, which repeats the idea that ‘one cannot go beyond (language) because there isn’t any’ (1966a, p. 370). This second point brings the discussion back to the struggle to represent (any) reality through writing, due to the inadequacy of writing as a means for doing this (both at the basic level of language, and at the level of novelistic form).

The third point which emerges from this is that, in this wall, ‘towards the bottom and on the right, in one of the sentences the word *any* is missing. A
sensitive eye can discover the hole among the bricks, the light that shows through.’ This gestures towards the ongoing struggle with representing reality, that despite the ‘wall’, there remains the possibility of reaching beyond the inadequacies into the – source unspecified – ‘light’ behind the wall. This is also true when read in the light of Perec’s concern, discussed earlier, with the destruction of the system of constraints in writing through the introduction of a clinamen. The removal of ‘any’ in Cortázar’s wall introduces an anticonstraint, the error in the system, which reintroduces an element of authorial control, somewhat addressing those problems with representation or at least controlling the system of representations to a greater degree.

This brings us to the fourth point: writing in a truthful way. Chapter 94 of *Hopscotch* presents musings on this problem:

[a] piece of prose can turn rotten like a side of beef […] rotting means the end of the impurities in the component parts and the return of rights to chemically pure sodium, magnesium, carbon. […] I get the feeling I should establish elements […] The rest is the job of stuffing and it does not work out well for me.

“Yes, but elements, are they the essential thing? Establishing carbon is not worth as much as establishing the Guermantes family.”

“I think in a vague sort of way that the elements I am aiming for are a result of composition. The schoolboy chemistry point of view has been turned inside out. When composition has reached its extreme limit, the territory of the elemental opens up. Establish them and if it is possible, be them.” (1966a, p. 429)

If the ‘stuffing’ – any writing which is not the essential core of what is to be said – rots away, what are left are the chemically pure (true) elements of the text: to write truthfully, elements must be established and, since it is stated that they are ‘a result of composition’ (1966a, p. 429), these elements then come into being through combination with other elements. Combining this with a question asking
whether ‘[e]stablishing carbon is [...] worth as much as establishing the
Guermantes family’ (1966a, p. 429) reinforces the idea that avoiding ‘stuffing’
(1966a, p. 429) – by writing truth in the smallest details – results in a truer,
‘pure[r]’ (1966a, p. 429), overall composition: after all, it is carbon molecules
which are the basic chemical building blocks of all human bodies (as if this were
not enough, Cortázar includes the statement that writing should ‘[e]stablish
[elements] and if it is possible, be them’ (1966a, p. 429). This provides a more
intricate view of writing truth than the view expressed by Johnson, as discussed
earlier, but both focus on a need to avoid unnecessary stuffing and maintain purity
of expression.

To return to the question I posed a short while ago, in considering the
presence of instructions the easy argument is to suggest that the instructions are
there as a means for the author to maintain an element of control over the reading
experience and give choices to, or take choices away from, the reader. To move
beyond this argument, we need to ask what effect the inclusion of instructions has:
does it make for a different reading experience? The inclusion of instructions on
how to read a novel draws attention to that novel’s status as an object of
interaction and so makes the reader explicitly aware of the process of reading, and
the artificiality of the text. If a reader were to read one of the texts without its
instructions (or explanatory preface) what would happen? Would the reader not
know what to do with it? Without explanation, a reader could easily establish how
to read *The Unfortunates*, because each section is stapled, and the first and last
sections are labelled as such; a similar case can be put forward for *Hopscotch* (although, with no chapter map, the expendable chapters would most likely be read in sequence); and a reader might be unsure how to arrange *Composition No. 1*, but would be likely to read it in whatever order they found it. A reader would, in fact, be able to read each of these novels without further instruction. That reader may wonder why the novel is arranged in a different way to a standard novel, but the reading itself would not pose a problem. In the texts under scrutiny, instructions are clearly not for purely instructive purposes, but draw attention to their artificiality by explicitly referring to the reading process (the process of using that text) – for clarity, an example of this beyond the texts in question is Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*, which begins with an address to the reader regarding that reader’s current physical position and surrounding environment. In the case of *Hopscotch*, the ‘Table of Instructions’ (or ‘Author’s Note’ if reading The Harvill Press publication) is necessary to the functioning of

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16 In an effort to keep secure the loose sections of *The Unfortunates*, some libraries have chosen to bind together the chapters. This effectively forces a reader to read the book sequentially according to the library binding, as the softly bound pages are not robustly held together and a library patron would be unlikely to pull apart this binding for fear of being accused of damage. Once, on borrowing a library-bound edition of the text, I was cautioned by a librarian to be careful not to damage the binding, a caution which seemed bizarre when considering the prior efforts to create the unbound format.

17 You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveller*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade. Best to close the door; the TV is always on in the next room. Tell the others right away, “No, I don't want to watch TV!” Raise your voice - they won't hear you otherwise – “I'm reading! I don't want to be disturbed!” Maybe they haven't heard you, with all that racket; speak louder, yell: “I'm beginning to read Italo Calvino's new novel!” Or if you prefer, don't say anything; just hope they'll leave you alone. (Calvino, 1979, p. 3)
the novel: unlike *The Unfortunates* and *Composition No. 1*, *Hopscotch* does not attempt to conjure any appearance of randomness (quite the opposite in fact; it adheres to the Oulipian notion of anti-chance), but the novel’s structure necessitates an explicit statement of sequence. Quite simply, *Hopscotch* is designed to be read a certain way; the chapter maps allow the simultaneous existence of the ‘two books’ (Cortázar, 1966a, ‘Table of Instructions’) and this, as I observed earlier, is necessary in terms of the interaction between novel and reader: the ‘second book relies on the first book for its condemnation of conventional plots, passive readers and numerically-ordered systems’ and the first book ‘posits an order that the second book ruptures, a plot that the second book makes irrelevant, and a permanence that the second book undermines by altering its figurations and exposing them as subject to the caprice of their creator’ (Hussey, 1981, pp. 59 – 60).

### 1.42 The Unfortunates

Johnson’s *The Unfortunates* is more random in appearance than *Hopscotch*, with instructions presented as a ‘note’ set out centrally in the inside box cover:

```
[this] novel has
twenty-seven sections,
temporarily held together by a
removable wrapper.
Apart from the first
and last sections
(which are marked as such)
the other
twenty-five sections
are intended to be read
in random order.
If readers prefer not
to accept the random order in
which they receive the novel,
```
then they may
re-arrange the sections into any
other random order before
reading. (1999)

To establish what purpose the presence of instructions serves beyond the explicit statement of the deviation from traditional reading conventions; and the significance of the instructions beyond announcing these different rules of play, it is useful to note that Johnson’s instructions in this case are grouped into three areas in both positioning and meaning. The first section is focused on describing the material aspects of the text; the second moves from the description of textual materiality into authorial intention; the third concerns the physical embodiment of this intention and its potential subversion – the book has been arranged so that it is in a supposedly random order when the reader receives it, but there exists a certain amount of agency in choosing to accept or reject this order. Ultimately, the reader has little choice in the matter of orientation. This is made clear in the materiality of the book, and in the content: the novel offers a visibly limited number of combinations (whereas Composition No. 1 has the appearance of infinite combinations, The Unfortunates does not have quite such an effect in its twenty-seven sections); and in the offer of acceptance or rejection, the instructions have already pre-empted any element of choice by permitting the reader to act either way – arguably, rejection becomes acceptance. Johnson said:

I want my ideas to be expressed so precisely that the very minimum of room for interpretation is left. Indeed I would go further and say that to the extent that a reader can impose his own imagination on my words, then that piece of writing is a failure. I want him to see my (vision), not something conjured out of his own imagination. How is he supposed to grow unless he will admit others’ ideas? If he wants to impose his imagination, let him write his own books. That may be thought to be anti-reader; but think a little further, and what I am really doing is challenging
the reader to prove his own existence as palpably as I am proving mine by the act of writing. (1973, p. 28)

This suggests that Johnson saw himself as a figure in complete control of his writing, even when that writing is in the hands of a reader. Arguably, *The Unfortunates* is as anti-chance as *Hopscotch*: like *Hopscotch, The Unfortunates* ‘consists of many books, but two books above all [and] the reader is invited to choose between these two possibilities’ (Cortázar, 1966a, ‘Table of Instructions’).

In the case of *The Unfortunates*, the first book is the ‘the random order in which [the reader] receives the novel’ (Johnson, 1999, ‘Note’), and the second is the book in which the reader ‘re-aranges the sections into any other random order before reading’ (Johnson, 1999, ‘Note’) – for any particular reader at any particular reading, these are the only two options available. Kaye Mitchell notes that, in *The Unfortunates*:

> the number of possible combinations of the unbound chapters is finite; the *fabula* is decided (in its scope and sequence); it is the *sjužet* which is apparently undecided (in its sequence, but not in its scope). The level of authorial control here is in fact relatively high. (2007, p. 60)

This is true; ‘the reader’s consciousness [...] is, arguably, colonised by the work’ (Mitchell, 2007, p. 60): the reader’s interactions with the text are programmed by the design of that text, while the reader, to an extent, programs it through his or her physical interaction.

In the act of rearranging the sections of the novel, spatial and temporal ordering come into play. As discussed earlier, Coe notes that that ‘Johnson’s central conceit [in *The Unfortunates* is] randomly ordered pages as a tangible metaphor for the random interplay of memories and impressions in the human mind’ (2004, p. 22) and Johnson described the reading method as being intended
to ‘[reflect] the randomness of the [content]: it was itself a physical tangible metaphor for randomness and the nature of cancer’ (1973, p. 25). The sections of the novel are read as fragments of memory, so the reader is rearranging sections which – as representative of memories – bear relation to their real counterparts, in that memories are ordered and re-ordered as they occur in the human mind; memories of an event (or a lifelong friendship) do not always occur in the same order, but the content is substantively the same. Extending this comparison, the reader therefore makes sense of each fragment of memory (section of text) by relating it to the others, and an overall picture emerges from the relationships drawn. Earlier I discussed Hussey’s argument that the omission of chapter 55 in *Hopscotch* relates to Cortázar’s interest in jazz music and the idea of the ‘take’ – a variation on other executions of the piece of work that is not necessarily an improvement, but is a different version. In ‘opening the door on the artist’s activity’ this ‘offers the reader a sense of participating in the immediate creative process of the author, encouraging him to experience the novel as a performance and, as such, temporary rather than timeless’ (1981, p. 57). If *The Unfortunates* is considered under this light, then Johnson’s ‘physical tangible metaphor for randomness and the nature of cancer’ (Johnson, 1973, p. 25) is especially effective. In allowing the reader *some* agency in the order in which he or she reads the text (however directed and limited that choice is), the reader becomes responsible for the szujet of the novel during that particular reading. As such, the reader has ‘participat[ed] in the immediate creative process’ and experiences the text as ‘temporary rather than timeless’ (Hussey, 1981, p. 57): Johnson’s ‘physical
tangible metaphor for randomness and the nature of cancer’ is, in this respect, illustrated clearly and effectively.

1.43 Composition No. 1

The instructions provided in Composition No. 1 draw attention to the novel’s deviation from traditional reading conventions, but also announce the role played by the reader in constructing the fate of the characters. They are printed on the inside front cover of the box, and read as follows:

[t]he reader is requested to shuffle these pages like a deck of cards; to cut, if he likes, with his left hand, as at a fortuneteller’s. The order the pages then assume will orient X’s fate. For the time and order of events control a man’s life more than the nature of such events. Certainly there is a framework which history imposes: the presence of a man in the resistance, his transfer to the Army of Occupation in Germany, relate to a specific period. Similarly, the events that marked his childhood cannot be presented in the same way as those which he experienced as an adult. Nor is it a matter of indifference to know if he met his mistress Dagmar before or after his marriage; if he took advantage of Helga at the time of her adolescence or her maturity; if the theft he has committed occurred under cover of the resistance or in less troubled times; if the automobile accident in which he has been hurt is unrelated to the theft — or the rape — or if it occurred during his getaway. Whether the story ends well or badly depends on the concatenation of circumstances. A life is composed of many elements. But the number of possible compositions is infinite. (Saporta, 1963, ‘The Reader is Requested’)

Saporta’s emphasis on the reader’s construction of the story raises issues relating to reader choices and the reader’s level of involvement in constructing the text. Esther MacCallum-Stewart and Justin Parsler, through a reading of the video game Vampire: the Masquerade, describe the false sense of agency created in the reader as ‘Illusory Agency’:

[t]he process of “tricking” a reader into believing they have greater impact on and import within the game […] is a facet of the game design which appears to allow the player free reign [sic] and personal choice, but in fact guides them along rigid lines through a relatively linear narrative. (2007)
MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler suggest that the illusion of free choice creates a feeling of empowerment in players. In considering notions of agency and power within experimental fictions, this relates to a false sense of control that convinces the reader that he or she has a greater impact on the text than he or she genuinely does. In *Composition No. 1*, the instructions state that the order the pages assume following the reader’s shuffling are the direct cause of X’s fate, because ‘[w]hether the story ends well or badly depends on the concatenation of circumstances’ (1963, ‘The Reader is Requested’). In the list of narrative factors given, time and order are highlighted as the most important in this respect. It is important to focus in on this: the reader is told that the time and order of events is crucial; that the situation is set in a specific historical period; that both childhood and adulthood are represented; that X. may have met Dagmar before or after his marriage; that the theft could have been during the resistance or in ‘less troubled times’ (1963, ‘The Reader is Requested’); that the accident may or may not be related to the theft or the rape; and, crucially, whether X. ‘took advantage of Helga at the time of her adolescence or her maturity’ (1963, ‘The Reader is Requested’). If considering X.’s fate, the rape and the theft both carry potential legal repercussions. More than this, what defines the adolescent period varies between theories, but assuming that the period of 12 – 21 years of age for female adolescence is accurate, there is a substantial chance that X. raped Helga when she was, in legal terms, still a child.\footnote{\textit{The Oxford English Dictionary} suggests this age range.} Within the fictional world of the novel, assuming X.’s imprisonment is a consequence of the reader’s shuffling does take

liberties with the narrative (raising valid in reality, but irrelevant and somewhat ridiculous here, questions: how would X. be caught? Would the case stand up at trial with a lack of physical evidence?), but what is important here is that nothing else in the events is so likely to affect the character’s fate: potentially, X. is a child rapist imprisoned for some if not all of his later adult life.

In this respect, the (fictional) consequences resulting from the reader’s actions give him or her a sense of perceived power over the outcome. This agency is, of course, illusory: the (false) appearance of possessing a higher level of agency over the narrative than truly exists. This creates a sense that the reader really does have a significant part to play in the forming of the narrative, and also a part in forming the novel’s wider literary universe, for instance what happens to X. after the novel has ended, which – although a matter of fiction – is important in the sense of potentiality, much like the significance attached to the ‘tremulous spiral [...] of the many endings to [Morelli’s] unfinished book’ (Cortázár, 1966a, p. 370) in Hopscotch. The intimacy and emotional involvement in terms of character and fate involve the suspension of disbelief, yet by directly addressing the reader – and asking that reader to play a part in the construction of that fate – the text also draws attention to its own artifice. Additionally, the reader of Composition No. 1 (in a similar way to the reader of The Unfortunates) is responsible for the creation of the szujet of the novel during that particular reading, and so has ‘participat[ed] in the immediate creative process’ of constructing the novel, thus experiencing the text as ‘temporary rather than timeless’ (Hussey, 1981, p. 57). This presents the reader with an implicit statement that he or she is responsible for X.’s fate, but only for that particular
‘temporary’ textual construction. This reveals further the artifice of the novel, particularly so in conjunction with the physical shuffling of the loose leaves, which in itself is an act that reinforces the ‘temporary’ unboundness of the novel (Hussey, 1981, p. 57). In this way, the reader both perceives that he or she has a high level of agency in terms of the construction of szujet and resulting narrative, but is also aware that this is not a real responsibility.

In light of the suspicion that can be seen in attitudes toward experimental writing and hypertext fiction, it is interesting to see that in the twenty-first century explicit material connections have been made between the two forms outside of the academic arena: ‘recently, experimental writing has been mapped across different media. For example [...] [a] digital edition of Composition No. 1 for the iPad was published in 2011, with touch-pad movements replacing the physical shuffling of its leaves’ (Ensslin, 2014b, p. 11). Visual Editions, the publishers of the digital edition and a ‘reimagined’ print version of the novel, state that:

In so many ways, Composition No.1 was published ahead of its time: the book raises all the questions we ask ourselves today about user-centric, non-linear screen driven ways of reading. So it made sense to develop a screen version too: Composition No.1 as an iPad app. (Visual Editions, 2015)

As a ‘user-centric’ text, it is odd that ‘[w]hile the printed book asks readers to shuffle pages, the screen version is an automatic screen shuffle that forces readers to get involved’ (Visual Editions, 2015). The pages ‘shuffle’ themselves by appearing in a random order on screen, much too quickly to be read. The reader then pauses on a particular page by touching the screen with a finger. When the finger is lifted, the shuffling resumes. A number of issues are raised by this. The automatic shuffling on the reader’s behalf highlights the underlying algorithms of
the fact that a machine has taken over the physical, ergodic, effort, of shuffling the loose pages of the novel foregrounds the fact that the novel is comprised of a finite number of pre-programmed outcomes (as I discussed earlier, there are $10^{263}$ combinations possible). The digital edition has been described by reviewer John Pavlus (2011) as ‘more like wrestling than reading’, who asks ‘[w]hat other book out there has to be literally held down in order to be read?’; yet, even in Pavlus’s apparent excitement at this ‘trail [blazing]’ edition, he notes that the experience is ‘irritating’ (2011). Though gaining a digital edition, which is certainly an interesting prospect, the auto-shuffle feature of the Visual Editions version results in the reader losing the physical interaction with the materiality of the novel: lifting and placing a finger without further thought or engagement is a trivial interaction, unlike the experience of navigating through links in a hypertext, or physically shuffling print pages, or playing a complex video game.

In losing this perception of agency achieved through ‘non-trivial’ interaction (Aarseth, 1997a, p. 1; a concept which I discuss further in chapter two), an element of pleasure is lost and the text becomes, as Pavlus comments, ‘irritating’ (2011). Interestingly, Coe found the digital edition of Composition No. 1 unpleasurable in its very format, stating in a review of both versions that the 2011 print edition is:

a beautiful artefact: the enclosing box is sturdy and smooth to the touch, decorated with swarms of random letters scattered over a vivid yellow background. The box's interior, a luscious scarlet, is equally attractive. Merely holding the book gives you a sensual thrill. Here is an object whose visual and tactile beauty simply cannot be reproduced digitally. (Coe, 2011)
Part of the pleasure of the text is lost; and readers are not ‘forc[ed] to get involved’ (Visual Editions, 2015), but rather forced to relinquish some of their agency, by having no choice but to allow the machine to auto-shuffle for them.

Coe also comments on the ‘bizarre’ absence of Saporta’s instructions, stating that ‘unless I missed something (and one should always allow for the possibility that a page might have fallen out of the box) – there is no sign of the author’s explanatory note’ (Coe, 2011). In its place is an ‘Introduction’, written by the Creative Director for Google’s Creative Lab in Sydney, Tom Uglow. In this, Uglow states that, when reading the novel:

[...] most often, it is the previous reader who has decided the order you read it in, as the instinct not to manipulate the “deck” is almost overwhelming. [...] In 2011, this instinct appears innate, despite our age of hypertext and “user-generated content”. (Saporta, 2011, ‘Introduction’)

This truly is ‘bizarre’, standing in opposition to Saporta’s own instructions and reversing the perception of agency associated with the novel. Instead of seeming to grant the reader ‘infinite’ combinations of szujet to construct (Saporta, 1963, ‘The Reader is Requested’) the novel is, according to Uglow, apparently ‘most often’ read in the order left by the previous reader, and the reader will, ‘overwhelming[ly]’ feel the ‘instinct not to manipulate’ the novel at all. Uglow here suggests strongly that our instinct should be to not shuffle, and furthermore, most often, we will all just read it as the previous reader did. In choosing, ‘most often’, to accept the order in which the novel is received, and accepting that perhaps we should – like Uglow’s ‘Introduction’ says – feel an overwhelming urge not to shuffle, we are left to read the novel as one would read a conventionally bound novel. This removes the pleasure of constructing one’s own pathway – marked ‘with [one’s own] signature’ (Aarseth, 1997a, p. 95) – through
the szujet, and also removes the associated pleasurable perceptions of responsibility and agency. Uglow also states that:

we live in fear that our bookcases will be replaced by shiny white machines. This new edition of Saporta’s work in both digital and physical form throws a warm light on this future. The physical edition of *Composition No. 1* is an object to be held, owned and loved. The digital edition is to be read, pushed, shared, discarded, and reinvented. (Saporta, 2011, ‘Introduction’)

This, again, suggests that the digital version is for ‘discard[ing]’ and ‘reinvent[ing]’ (by which I assume Uglov means reading, then re-reading with a different auto-shuffled order of szujet, rather than to imply a more general element of disposability), but somehow the print edition is not. It does suggest that print and digital editions can coexist (although we already know this, because of novels like 253 which, as I discuss in chapter two, exists as both an online hypertext and a print novel), but, by replacing Saporta’s ‘The Reader Is Requested’ (1963) with Uglov’s strange ‘Introduction’ (2011), the interactivity of *Composition No. 1*, and its importance, is misrepresented. In chapter two I highlight Kate Pullinger’s *The Breathing Wall*, in which the reader’s rate of breathing controls the speed of the text, with the intention of lulling the reader into a hypnotic state akin to the text’s fictional dream sequences. The difference in the case of the digital edition of *Composition No. 1* is that there is seemingly no wider purpose to the auto-shuffling; it seems only to exist as a device to replace the physical shuffling with a similarly – in the view of Visual Editions – ‘user-centric’ interactive interface (2015). The only way that this can be accepted as ‘user-centric’, surely, is in the obvious comparison to make with another Apple product: as Jonathan Gibbs says, oddly without a hint of disparagement, ‘the App’s reading interface is another
unexpected take on the iPod’s shuffling process’ (Gibbs, 2011), suggesting that the medium is dictating the form, rather than vice versa.

1.5 Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the key examples of materially experimental writing under scrutiny in this thesis in context, including a consideration of significant critical and public reception, and the political implications of experimental writing. It has debunked the idea of the infinite text, and gone on to unpick the significance of apparent textual infinity, gesturing towards discussions later on in the thesis regarding apparent infinity and multicursality in hypertext fiction and video games. This chapter has also looked in depth at the three key texts, *The Unfortunates*, *Hopscotch*, and *Composition No. 1*. In considering the texts in detail and as part of a continuum (which extends throughout the texts considered in this thesis), the chapter has explored new ways to gain a better understanding of what these experimental texts do, how they do it, and the broader implications both for readers and also for other texts which are part of the same continuum on which I focus in this thesis. The next stage of my argument requires close consideration of hypertext theory and fiction, the latter of which could be called materially experimental fiction for a digital age. Indeed, in its dual concern with fiction and criticism, and with the reading process, literary experimentalism anticipates the birth of hypertext fiction, which has been described as the ‘convergence of critical theory and technology’ (Landow, 2006, p. 65). Parallels can also be drawn with materially experimental writing’s concern with visuality and spatial arrangement and, perhaps less obviously, the nature of materially
experimental writing as a borderline discourse with a focus on reality and its representation.
Chapter Two: Hypertext Fiction

2.1 Introduction

In considering the movement of storytelling into digital media, this chapter acknowledges the significance of new technologies to the acts of reading and writing and addresses hypertext fiction as a literary form which shares reciprocal concerns with materially experimental writing (with an emphasis on interaction between reader and text), as well as revealing the ways in which this experimental writing anticipates some of the issues seen in the hypertext fiction on which I focus. Ciccoricco argues ‘that digital fiction extends the tradition of experimental literature in significant ways’, but that it ‘does more than provide a new venue for older or existing forms of literary experimentation’ (2012, pp. 469, 479). Though Ciccoricco’s connection between digital fiction and experimental writing is certainly a valid one, and a connection which I agree exists, I do not agree that extend is necessarily the correct word to use here; the idea of extension arguably implies that digital fiction is a superior evolution of experimental writing, whereas I believe that the relationship between the two is one of reciprocity and continuity. Ciccoricco draws attention to how digital literature is different to experimental writing:

[d]igital fictions can be said to differ from the anti-novel (made up of fragments) in that they are comprised of nodes, not fragments (which imply that something larger has been subsequently broken). Nodes are authored as

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1 Andrews similarly argues, in relation to poetry, that writing ‘needs to move into the digital and find new ground rather than simply porting print to the digital’ (2007, p. 58).
nodes, which is to say they are self-contained semantic entities, meaningful both in isolation and in relation to the network of which they are a part. The hypertextual nodes are furthermore unlike pages, which are indeed (arbitrarily) broken \textit{ex post facto}. Pages are numbered; nodes are titled. In this sense, hypertextual nodes represent a new bibliographical unit peculiar to digital environments, much like a chapter, a footnote, or a stanza. (2012, pp. 479 – 480)

Engagement with these hypertextual nodes results in a reading experience that includes recurrence as a ‘common and often inevitable function of the interface’.

This emphasis on the likelihood of repetition (loops) is also what, Ciccoricco argues, ‘renders digital fiction fundamentally different from proto-hypertexts and networked narratives in print, even ones with mobile components such as Marc Saporta’s (1963 [1961]) “box of fiction” that consists of pages that could be shuffled and read in any order’ (2012, p. 480). This relates to the way in which hypertext fiction is digital-born, ‘written for and read on a computer screen, [hypertext] pursues its verbal, discursive and/or conceptual complexity through the digital medium, and would lose something of its aesthetic and semiotic function if it were removed from that medium’ (Bell et al., 2010) – or, as Robert Coover phrased it very simply in 1992, ‘[a]rtists who work [in hypertext] must be read there’. This chapter aims to explore how hypertext fiction ‘extends the tradition of experimental literature in significant ways’ (Ciccoricco, 2012, p. 469) by investigating the relationship between key examples of materially experimental writing and hypertext fiction to see how these can inform our understanding of both. In the previous chapter I discussed comments by Gasiorek and Johnson, respectively that, ‘[t]he [post-war] novel, exhausted as a form, unable to meet the demands placed on it by a changing world, and challenged by the mass media, was thus thought to be in terminal decline’ (Gasiorek, 1995, p. 1); and that, ‘[t]he novelist cannot legitimately or successfully embody present-day reality in exhausted forms […]
Novelists must evolve (by inventing, borrowing, stealing or cobbled from other media)” (Johnson, 1973, pp. 16 – 17). It appears that the problem of form is still prevalent in twenty-first century fiction: as Tomasula observes, ‘[a]t this early date in the twenty-first century, it seems that the novel [...] is once again a design problem’ (2012b, p. 445). Ensslin notes that hypertext literature has often been described as ‘playful’ and/or like a ‘game’, and that it is ‘akin to print texts, from Sterne to Saporita, that defy closure and challenge readers formally and thematically’ (2014b, p. 57); ‘literary hypertext may be considered the digital poetic form most akin to the book’ (Ensslin, 2007, p. 3). In her exposition of her analytical method (termed ludostylistics) for examining literary video games (‘digital games that can be read’), and ludic digital literature (‘digital books that can be played’; 2014b, p. 1), Ensslin notes that hypertext is in fact more akin to literature than it is to video games, because ‘many core elements of ludostylistics cannot be applied to [hyperfictions and hyperpoems], which places them closer to the literary than the ludic end of the [literary-ludic] spectrum’ explored in Literary Gaming. This is ‘not least because the texts prevent any form of hyper attention’, but also because

2 Regarding the idea of hypertext as ‘playful’, Ensslin points her readers to Jurgen Fauth (1995), Wendy Morgan and Richard Andrews (1999), and David E. Millard et al. (2005); for the idea of hypertext as a game, she points her readers again to Fauth (1995), and also Rebecca Luce-Kapler and Teresa Dobson (2005), Hans Rustad (2009), and Alice Bell (2010).

3 Deep attention, the cognitive style traditionally associated with the humanities, is characterised by concentrating on a single object for long periods (say, a novel by Dickens), ignoring outside stimuli while so engaged, preferring a single information stream, and having a high tolerance for long focus times. Hyper attention, by contrast, is characterised by switching focus rapidly between different tasks, preferring multiple information streams, seeking a high level of stimulation, and having a low tolerance for boredom. (Hayles, 2007, p. 187)
‘[l]iterary gaming in the sense of operating ludic mechanics does not actually happen when reading hypertext literature’ – ‘with very few exceptions, ludic mechanics are not implemented in hypertext fiction and poetry’ (2014b, pp. 57 – 58, 13). Ensslin elucidates the difference between games and play, stating that:

[...] Games are the most structured and rule-bound form of play, and they are often described in terms of systems, or mechanics, which involve the rules, targets, actions, challenges, risks, rewards, victory, and termination conditions to which players have to commit. [...] Play, on the other hand, is a much broader and looser concept that can relate to games but more often than not refers to nongame activities, which are open, unstructured, and spontaneous and do not meet the game-ness criteria outlined in the previous paragraph. Hence, the so-called “games authors play” (Hutchinson 1983) aren’t normally games in the narrow sense of the word but rather playful activities on the part of literary communicators (reader and writer).’ (2014b, pp. 8 – 9)

Reading hypertext fiction, then, does involve playfulness but not strict ludic mechanics such as credit counts or performance measurement (2014b, p. 12). As I noted in the introduction, and discuss later, this playfulness is explicitly apparent in 253, particularly in Ryman’s jocular addresses to his reader, and in the ‘Reader Satisfaction Survey’ (1998, pp. 365 – 366) which, I argue, emphasises the illusory nature of the reader’s agency.

This chapter builds on the discussions held in chapter one, and asks what we can learn from hypertext fiction when it is looked at as part of the literary continuum explored in this thesis, rather than in isolation. As part of this exploration, the chapter refers back to texts examined in the previous chapter in order to further our understanding of both the experimental texts, and hypertexts, in question. Throughout the chapter, comparisons are drawn between hypertext fiction and related criticism, and experimental literature and related criticism, in order to establish what similarities and differences exist in these non-conventional literary
forms, and how these can inform our understanding of key examples of hypertext fiction, and the literary continuum exposed in this thesis, in new and productive ways. In doing this, the chapter considers the critical context of hypertext and, amongst discussions of broader examples which have been discussed more extensively in previous research (for instance, Michael Joyce’s *afternoon: a story*), focuses on one primary hypertext novel, Geoff Ryman’s *253*. *253*, a first-generation, canonical, hypertext (Ensslin, 2007) is a particularly interesting example of hypertext fiction in the context of this thesis, due to its publication online in 1996 and subsequent print publication (‘the print remix’) in 1998; Nora Pleßke (2014) notes that the online version of *253* has, since its publication, ‘been considered a paradigm of hypertext fiction’ and the ‘paper-based *Print Remix* became the first-ever website-to-book adaptation’ (p. 234). It is for these reasons, and for the way in which *253* illustrates its key concerns, that this chapter dedicates much of its space to exploring the novel within the framework of the chapter’s broader discussions. Additionally, though Ryman’s novel exhibits both print and digital textuality in its different forms, I believe there is a considerable lack of scholarly research examining closely this key piece of hypertext fiction. As Bolter stated that ‘[we see] in Saporta’s experiment, and in others like it [...] a bridge to the electronic medium’ (2000, p. 150), so too should it be stated that in Ryman’s *253*, we see a bridge running clearly from the electronic medium to print and back. Ciccoricco argues that ‘any conception of digital fiction must rely on a fundamental premise of non-transferability’, clarifying that publishing a novel online as an downloadable file ‘by definition is not a work of digital fiction’; likewise an ‘*existing* short story in print adapted into a multilinear hypertext format’ (2012, p.
Ryman’s 253 does the opposite of this: ‘[remixing] the full text of the award-winning 253 web site [into print]. Nothing has been cut or censored. Experience 253 offline ... now with six added introductory bonus pages!’ (Ryman, 1998, ‘This is an ezi-access novel’). In adapting a hypertext novel to print, without significant alterations to its content, Ryman successfully illustrates reciprocity between print and digital textuality, using (as I shall discuss later in this chapter) each to foreground different concerns within the text. Though the additional of six introductory pages does mean that the print and digital versions of 253 differ slightly, undertaking cataloguing of the differences is unnecessary for this thesis, particularly since several of the introductory pages are slightly reworked versions of introductory material from the digital version: for instance, ‘Why the title?’ (1998, p. 1), ‘How to use this book’ (1998, p. 2), and ‘Other Information’ (1998, p. 4), are essentially an amalgam of ‘253? Why 253?’ (Ryman, 1996). Throughout the novel there are other minor changes – such as passenger 4, Donald Varda, being ‘[b]londe, plump, about 30’ (1998, p. 14), or ‘[e]bullient, 30, blond, plump’ (1996) – but, similarly, cataloguing these small differences is not a productive activity in the context of this thesis. 253 is concerned with the personal lives of 253 people – 252 passengers plus a driver – capturing snapshots of each passenger’s life framed within the short journey on the London tube line between Embankment and the Elephant and Castle. The print remix of 253 consists of seven sections, each corresponding to one of the fictional train carriages, and each consisting of thirty-

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4 Though Ciccoricco’s point is not wrong exactly, some hypertexts do ‘recycle’ other texts. Ensslin notes that Edward Falco’s ‘A Dream With Demons’ (1997) is ‘largely based on a novel by Preston Morris. Apart from the fact that hyperlinks are available for navigation, the hypertext reads like a linear novel’ (2007, p. 68).
six smaller sections (of 253 words per section, not including headings, page numbers or footnotes). These main sections are interspersed with fictional advertisements. The hypertext 253 is comprised of essentially the same segments, but is organised structurally into hypertext nodes rather than the necessarily linear arrangement of the print remix. Each of the thirty-six sections is dedicated to the description of one character, and each description is split into three parts divided by headings: that character’s ‘outward appearance’; ‘inside information’ on the character, information that is often posited as the truth behind the sometimes misleading outward appearance; and ‘what he [or she] is doing or thinking’. Each of the seven sections is preceded by a map, spread over two pages, which details where each passenger is sitting (or standing), with a short summary (most are two or three words long) of his or her interests and concerns at the time the novel takes place: the seven and a half minutes it takes the train to travel from Embankment to Elephant and Castle on the Bakerloo line.

2.2 Hypertexts: books that don’t end?

Writers on hypertext (Landow, 1992; Bolter, 1992) trace the origins of the concept to Vannevar Bush’s 1945 article “As We May Think”, in which Bush notes the difficulty in working with increasing amounts of information, and the need to improve methods of accessing and moving between information in this ‘growing mountain of research’ (1945, p. 101). Bush notes that:

[w]hen data of any sort are placed in storage, they are filed alphabetically or numerically, and information is found (when it is) by tracing it down from subclass to subclass. It can be in only one place, unless duplicates are used; one has to have rules as to which path will locate it, and the rules are cumbersome. Having found one item, moreover, one has to emerge from the system and re-enter on a new path.
The human mind does not work that way. It operates by association. With one item in its grasp, it snaps instantly to the next that is suggested by the association of thoughts, in accordance with some intricate web of trails carried by the cells of the brain. (1945, p. 106)

The hypothetical device which Bush proposes as a means of addressing this problem, named a memex (a term which, in Bush’s words, was ‘coin[ed] at random’), is conceived as a desk with slanted screens, ‘on which material can be projected for convenient reading’, operated by a keyboard, buttons and levers. Bush goes on to detail the specific workings of the memex (Bush, 1945, pp. 106 – 108), notably that:

[i]t affords an immediate step [...] to associative indexing, the basic idea of which is a provision whereby any item may be caused at will to select immediately and automatically another. This is the essential feature of the memex. The process of tying two items together is the important thing. [...] Moreover, when numerous items have been thus joined together to form a trail, they can be reviewed in turn, rapidly or slowly, by deflecting a lever like that used for turning the pages of a book. It is exactly as though the physical items had been gathered together from widely separated sources and bound together to form a new book. It is more than this, for any item can be joined into numerous trails. (1945, p. 107)

With advances in technology, the vision of linking information in this way became reality in hypertext: a ‘vast assemblage’ (Landow, 1992, p. 9) which Theodor H. Nelson, prominent follower of Bush and originator of the word ‘hypertext’ (Nelson, 1981, p. 0/2), terms the ‘docuverse’ (1981, p. 4/15). Nelson’s definition of hypertext is one of the most, if not the most, quoted definition of the form: ‘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

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5 The term ‘hypertext’ is derived from ‘Greek hypér (over, above, beyond) and Latin texere (to weave)’, referring to the ‘metatextual function of hypertext as a principle of structuring and connecting subordinate electronic texts’; the term was coined by Nelson in his 1965 lectures at Vassar College (Ensslin, 2014a, p. 258).
connected by links which offer the reader different pathways’ (1981, p. 0/2). In relation to this definition, and importantly, Ensslin notes that ‘[f]or hypertext, a mediately extended concept of “text” needs to be assumed, encompassing various semiotic systems such as image, script and sound, their “codes” and their denotative and connotative interplay’ (2007, p. 164). Early scholarly discussions of hypertext focused on its implications for printed media, and the significance of hypertext to theories of reading and writing; amongst others, George Landow hails hypertext as the embodiment of poststructuralist conceptions of textuality, claiming that ‘Barthes’s distinction between readerly and writerly texts appears to be essentially a distinction between text based on print technology and electronic hypertext [...]. Hypertext produces Barthes’s writerly text’ (1992; 1994; 2006, p. 4). The positioning of hypertext as the final answer to the questions of postmodernism is a fallacious move, and Landow’s declaration is problematic to say the least. Roland Barthes’s distinction is not in essence the distinction between print and electronic texts, as it both predates the emergence of hypertext and is a distinction relating to printed texts; perhaps what Landow meant by this comment is that Barthes’s distinction between readerly and writerly texts is comparable to the distinction between print and electronic texts. A few years later, in his exposition of his theory of cybertext, Aarseth argues that:

[t]o claim that hypertext is fulfilling “postmodern theory” – and that “postmodern theorists have been [describing hypertext] without knowing it” [...] – is an attempt to colonise several rather different fields by replacing their empirical object or objects on the imperialist pretext that they did not really have one until now. (Aarseth, 1997a, p. 83)

In a somewhat indignant response to this, Landow states that ‘[f]or some reason, [Aarseth] seems to believe [...] that to clear intellectual space for games, MUDs, and other forms of what he terms “cybertext”, he must trash hypertext, denying that it has any positive qualities’ (Landow, 2006, p. 326). There is a degree of misunderstanding on both sides: Aarseth does not position himself as a ‘most extreme doubter [...] the leading antihypertext theorist’ (Landow, 2006, p. 326) as he is characterised by Landow, but is rather concerned with the establishment of his own theory of cybertext, or ergodic literature, and what he terms the ‘dangerously superficial’ (Aarseth, 1997b) and persistently unchallenged link between postmodern theory and hypertext; he states that ‘[w]hat is needed now is something that the Literature professors in love with hypertext can’t give us, and that is a critical perspective on technologies of communication’ (Aarseth, 1997b).

The answer which Aarseth offers to this problem is his concept of cybertext: a ‘way to expand the scope of literary studies to include phenomena that today are perceived as outside of, or marginalised by, the field of literature [...] for purely extraneous reasons’ (1997a, p. 18). Aarseth’s theory posits that:

\[\text{[t]he performance of [the reader-response theorists’] reader takes place all in his head, while the user of cybertext also performs in an extranoematic sense. During the cybertexual process, the user will have effectuated a semiotic sequence, and this selective movement is a work of physical construction that [reader-response] concepts of “reading” do not account for. This phenomenon I call \textit{ergodic}, using a term appropriated from physics}\]

\[7\] On the other hand, Landow notes that Aarseth has misunderstood his claim that ‘the reader who chooses among links or takes advantage of Storyspace’s spatial-hypertext capabilities shares some of the power of the author’ (Landow, 2006, p. 327), instead reading the idea as a self-contradictory statement ‘that hypertext blurs the distinction between reader and author whilst at the same time permitting the former to become the latter’ (Aarseth, 1997a, p. 173).
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. (1997a, pp. 1 – 2)

The concept of cybertext provides a framework for looking at fictions which exist on the ‘margin[s]’ (Aarseth, 1997a, p. 18) of literature, a framework which was much-needed at the time of publication as both an approach to study and as a means of forging scholarly recognition of these ‘marginal’ texts (Aarseth, 1997a, p. 18).

Ergodic literature is not limited to digital texts, but includes any texts which meet the requirements for non-trivial effort; this includes Saporta’s *Composition No. 1* and Johnson’s *The Unfortunates*, as well as texts such as Queneau’s *Cent Mille Milliards de Poèmes* (a hundred thousand billion poems), in addition to perhaps less obvious digital texts like video games. Ensslin adapts the term ‘cybertext’ (2007, 22 – 24), to refer to a specific type of digital literature. She posits that there are three generations of digital literature. The first is hypertext, which she defines as ‘a largely script-based form of interactive computer-based literature’ which translates ‘previously linear forms of writing into a technologically nonlinear format [...] thereby instigating multilinear reading processes’ (for instance, Michael Joyce’s *afternoon: a story*) (2007, p. 20). The second, hypermedia, is characterised by a ‘variety of pastiche and collage techniques’, in which ‘authors employ images, animation, film and sound to create additional layers of meaning, which correlate to textual meaning in various ways’ (for instance, Judd Morrissey and Lori Talley’s *My Name is Captain, Captain*) (2007, p. 21). Cybertext, the third type, is designed to ‘diminish readerly agency to such an extent that the underlying machine code seems to be either fully or partially in control whilst, at the same time, inducing
readers to expect high levels of agency’ (Ensslin, 2012b, p. 500). An example of this is Kate Pullinger’s *The Breathing Wall* (2004a) which, through the reader’s microphone, responds to his or her rate of breathing. During the dream sections of *The Breathing Wall*, to encounter a slower pace of text a slow rate of breathing is required, which thereby ‘induce[s] a hypnotic or meditative state in the reader, allowing he or she [sic] to enter the dream’ (2004b, ‘*The Breathing Wall* press release’). As the reader is unable to choose the pace at which the text is read, it is the programme – the ‘underlying machine code’ (Ensslin, 2012b, p. 500) – which is in control. In this respect, cybertexts (as Ensslin defines them) ‘assume power over the reader by literally “writing themselves” rather than allowing readers to control their own trajectory’ (Ensslin, 2014b, p. 47); this does not remove the reader’s perception of agency (or interactivity), but does highlight the illusory nature of that agency in reminding the reader than he or she is not entirely in control of his or her experience. In her discussion of labyrinths, Penelope Reed Doob (1990, cited in Aarseth, 1997a, pp. 5 – 6) distinguishes between two types of labyrinth: the labyrinth with one path, a path which usually reaches one centre point (the unicursal labyrinth), and the labyrinth with multiple pathways which require the navigator to make choices about his or her direction (the multicursal labyrinth).8 Applying this logic to ergodic texts (as he defines them), Aarseth notes that Cortázar’s *Hopscotch* is topologically multicursal, whereas Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller* is topologically unicursal, and that some texts are more

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8 These two types correspond respectively to Eco’s linear labyrinth and maze labyrinth; Eco also proposes a third type, the net, (similar to Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome) in which ‘every point can be connected with every other point’ (Eco, 1984, pp. 80 - 81).
difficult to define in this way: footnotes ‘can be seen as both uni- and multicursal
[...] Perhaps a footnoted text can be described as multicursal on the micro level
and unicursal on the macro level’ (1997a, pp. 7–8) – by way of example, Vladimir
Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* (2012, first published 1962), consisting of a foreword, a 999-
line poem, a long commentary of notes addressing individual lines (which tell the
commentator’s story) and an index, sits between unicursality and multicursality as
it can be read from first to last page, or by jumping between the different parts of
the text (Aarseth, 1997a, p. 8). While multicursality is not unique to experimental or
digital texts, the labyrinth – and particularly the distinction between unicursality
and multicursality – provides a useful way in which to discuss what might
otherwise be called non-traditionally structured texts. Multicursality is, in itself, a
complex concept; as Ensslin notes, ‘with regard to literary hypertexts [an] elaborate
distinction between various types of referential link is required’ (2007, p. 17). She
argues that the view that the presence of links in a text presents the reader with
multiple ways to navigate the text is, ‘upon close examination, a simplification’
(2007, p. 16). This is elucidated by positing three levels of relative (anti)linearity:
the ‘non-sequential macrostructural level (the underlying map, undermining
structural linearity and providing many possible reading paths)’; the computer
interface, which ‘presents the reader with lexias that have to be read in a linear
fashion, no matter how many links they display’; and the aesthetic object which
results from the reading, which exists in the reader’s mind and ‘may present itself
as a flexible, ever-changing image which mirrors the macro- and microstructure as
perceived by the reader’ – this ‘includes subjective impressions of antilinearity’
(2007, p. 16). Ensslin’s definitions highlight the intricacies of textual multicursality,
and she further clarifies that – when using the term ‘antilinearity’ – she is making a point of setting out a ‘clearly defined nomenclature’ to resolve the question of whether we should speak of ‘antilinearity’, ‘nonlinearity’ or ‘multilinearity’. In using ‘antilinearity’ – by which she means ‘anti-monolinearity’ – she is not ‘marginalizing any of the three terms but rather [defining] them as mutually complementary concepts’ (2007, p. 5, pp. 164 – 165). As the detailed intricacies of these definitions are beyond the scope of this thesis, I discuss multicursal texts, like Doob’s multicursal labyrinth, as texts with multiple pathways that require the person interacting to make decisions about his or her route through the text.

At the time of Landow’s *Hypertext* (1992), ‘poetry, fiction and other materials originally conceived for book technology’ (Landow, 1992, p. 33) were being translated into hypertext. In 1987 Eastgate Systems published Michael Joyce’s *afternoon, a story* – a hypertext fiction created using Storyspace (a system created by J. David Bolter, Michael Joyce and John B. Smith) – which is now widely acknowledged to be the first significant, or ‘canonical’, hypertext fiction (Ensslin, 2007, pp. 69 – 72). In a way comparable to the reader-shuffled pages of *Composition No. 1* and *The Unfortunates*, hypertext fiction facilitates ostensibly random connections, highlighted visually in the form of hypertext as individual nodes, and the links between those nodes. Bolter draws comparisons between hypertext and printed books in that text and graphics are visible on the pages of both, but that ‘[in hypertext] unlike in a book [...] [o]ne page can be linked

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9 For instance, see Landow (1997), for a discussion and screenshots of *The “In Memoriam” Web*, which ‘uses electronic links to map and hence reify a text’s internal and external allusions and references – its inter- and inratextuality’ (p. 51).
electronically to many others’, noting that ‘[i]n one sense this linking is simply the electronic equivalent of the footnote used in printed books for hundreds of years’ (2000, p. 27). The important difference between print and electronic forms of text, says Bolter, lies in the fact that ‘the second Web page can also contain linked phrases [...] The process can continue indefinitely as the reader moves through a textual space that, in the case of the World Wide Web, can extend throughout the Internet’ (2000, p. 27). This part of Bolter’s argument rests on the assumption that links in printed books would consist of ‘intolerably pedantic [...] footnotes to footnotes’ (2000, p. 27), an assumption that does not account for the significance of this to fiction rather than scholarly research. The obvious comparison to make regarding this is that Composition No. 1 achieves similar linking in the print medium, the narrative moving through linked pages of textual space, and Bolter does make this comparison, observing that ‘[we see] in Saporta’s experiment, and in others like it [...] a bridge to the electronic medium’ (2000, p. 150). Bolter’s discussion, however, misrepresents the nature of this ‘bridge’ by claiming that it signals ‘the end of printed fiction [...] Composition No. 1 seems emblematic of the late age of print’ (2000, p. 150). After the discussions of the previous chapter, it should suffice to say here that neither experimental fiction (nor hypertext fiction) signals the impending end of printed fiction; fictions written for digital media will not replace print fictions, but what is signalled with this difference in forms is a change in the potentiality of reading material. This does not mean that digital reading is a completely different experience to reading print, but rather that the formal possibilities that digital media affords herald a significant point in the continuum of how readers have, up to this point, participated in the act of reading –
causing changes to what fiction is, formally, able to do, and thus how the reader reads. As this thesis shows, it is necessary to look at these developments in reading as a continuum, not as isolated examples of ostensibly new ways of reading; in doing so, it becomes clear that digital and printed texts inform each other in many ways, and that a better critical understanding of the texts in question is gained by employing a more inclusive approach.

The reader’s ability to make alterations to hypertext is credited by Landow with creating a reader/writer figure with seemingly equal editorial access to the text as that of the actual author. Landow states that:

unlike a book [...] [a full hypertext system] offers the reader and writer the same environment. Therefore, by opening the text-processing program, or editor, as it is known, you can take notes, or you can write against my interpretations, against my text. Although you cannot change my text, you can write a response and then link it to my document. You thus have read the readerly text in several ways not possible with a book: You have chosen your reading path [...] [and] [y]ou might also have begun to take notes or produce responses to the text as you read, some of which might take the form of texts that either support or contradict interpretations proposed in my texts. (Landow, 2006, p. 27)

Whilst Landow’s basic assumptions here are reasonable, several problems remain. The notion that hypertext provides the same environment for both reader and writer and, following on from this, that the notes a reader produces in conjunction with the text in some way make that readerly text akin to the writerly text – that is, Barthes’s vision of text in which the ‘reader [is] no longer a consumer, but a producer’ (Barthes, 1975, p. 4) – is a problem. In the readerly text, the reader is ‘plunged into a kind of idleness [...] with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text: reading is nothing more than a referendum’ (this is tied into the commercialisation of literature); by contrast, the writerly text is ‘ourselves writing’,
‘plural’ writing which is ‘a perpetual present, upon which no consequent language (which would inevitably make it past) can be superimposed’, it is ‘novelistic without the novel [...] a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances [of equal status]’ (Barthes, 1975, pp. 6 – 7). If the reader, in his or her annotations, ‘cannot change [the author’s] text [but] can write a response and link it to the [author’s] document’ (Landow, 2006, p. 27), this suggests that the author’s text is still very much that – the author’s text: if Landow’s comparison can hold true, the reader must be able to produce something in that same text. What is actually happening in Landow’s example is that the reader is producing something that will sit alongside the original text, not producing anything within the text itself. As Ensslin notes, ‘readers of individually read hypertexts do not have the alleged liberty to author – either physically or metaphorically – their own story’, and Landow’s ‘wreader’ (Landow, 2006, p. 20) – the hypertext reader who is as much as a producer of the text as is the author – most closely resembles ‘participants in collaborative writing projects’ (Ensslin, 2007, p. 33). The notes added to a text, as described by Landow, are better defined in a similar way to Bronwen Thomas’s discussion of Internet fan fiction – which, as Thomas observes, ‘precisely aims to extend the fictional world of the source text and to even go beyond it to create alternate universes […] the concept of an individual piece of fiction as a fixed entity gives way to a more fluid conception of “text”’ (2007). Thomas refers to material created as ‘an addition or supplement to the canon’ (the original source text) as the ‘fanon’: material that is accepted by the (fan) community as a valid variation on the source text, and as a result is often included in the work of other fan fiction writers. As Thomas notes,
the fanon is ‘something that is collaboratively achieved and subject to constant revision and updating’ (2007); the reading community builds on a text, providing links and extra material, and challenging the original text: fanonical material does not change the original text, but its reader/writers create a response which is linked to the original document (implicitly) and to other fanonical material based on that original document (explicitly). In the context of hypertext, Thomas’s distinction between the canon and fanon is a more valid model of original material and additional marginal annotations than the rather forced mould of readerly and writerly texts used by Landow. Aarseth’s work posits a similar criticism of early hypertext theorists; ‘[r]ecent studies of hypertext fiction’, says Aarseth, ‘are often concerned with showing how hypertext embodies the iconoclastic musings of the so-called poststructuralist movement’ (1997a, p. 83), citing Bolter’s comment that:

postmodern theorists from reader response critics to deconstructionists have been talking about text in terms that are strikingly appropriate to hypertext in the computer. When Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish argue that the reader constitutes the text in the act of reading, they are describing hypertext. When the deconstructionists emphasise that a text is unlimited, that it expands to include its own interpretations – they are describing a hypertext, which grows with the addition of new links and elements. When Roland Barthes draws his famous distinction between the work and the text, he is giving a perfect characterisation of the difference between writing in a printed book and writing by computer. (Bolter, 1992, p. 24)
Bolter is wrong to state that Iser and Fish are describing hypertext (obviously they are not doing this, although what they say is relevant to a wider discussion of hypertext), and similarly neither are the deconstructionists describing hypertext.¹⁰

Bolter’s suggestion that movement through the textual space of a hypertext can continue indefinitely (2000, p. 27) is comparable to movement through a print text such as Composition No. 1; Saporta’s novel, though print based rather than digital, achieves a similar process in moving through linked pages of textual space. What does not work in Bolter’s suggestion is the notion of indefinite continuation: materially experimental fiction is not endless (even Composition No. 1, as I have discussed in the previous chapter, has a finite $10^{263}$ combinations), and neither is hypertext fiction; a hypertext fiction may have multiple variations of szujet but these variations are comprised of a limited number of elements. Focusing on the rest of Bolter’s statement – that a text could ‘extend [indefinitely] throughout the Internet’ (2000, p. 27) – this limitation is also the case with the Internet: if one has endless time, repetition will occur eventually, as it is an eventual inevitability in any case involving the ordering and re-ordering of finite countable sets, voiding any suggestion to the contrary that these texts are infinite. Not only are these texts not

¹⁰Aarseth explains that this comment ‘is based on a confusion of two different levels – between Ingarden’s “real object” and “aesthetic object”, that is, between physical reality and the construction in the reader’s mind’ (1997a, p. 83). Ensslin adds that:

for hypertext we need an additional, third layer of observation, which is situated between the manifest and the aesthetic object, or rather the mental representation of the object. In fact, we need to add the individual reading path, which constitutes the reader’s physical and mental interaction with the text and forms the prerequisite of any mental representation(s). (2007, p. 137)
infinite, they cannot be so: being comprised of a finite, countable set of discrete elements (akin to integers, rather than real numbers), neither infiniteness nor true randomness is possible in the texts: they provide a finite, countable, and predictable set of variations. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Chaitin states that ‘[t]ossing a coin is a classical procedure for producing a random number, and one might think at first that the provenance of the series alone would certify that it is random’ but that actually ‘[t]ossing a coin 20 times can produce any one of 220 (or a little more than a million) binary series, and each of them has exactly the same probability’, so ‘it should be no more surprising to obtain the series with an obvious pattern than to obtain the one that seems to be random; each represents an event with a probability of 2−20’ (1975, p. 47). This aids in pinpointing how this observation has further significance to texts with multiple potential orderings of szujet, and applying this theorem to a text with discrete, moveable units provides a useful conclusion. Taking two examples I discuss in this thesis – Composition No. 1 and Ryman’s hypertext 253 – if a reader shuffles the text (or, in the latter case, selects the order in which he or she will progress through the linked nodes) on enough occasions, the potential resulting sequences of szujet (outcomes) over that large number of orderings will have equal probability; each variation will be selected a statistically equal number of times. Thus, the probability of selecting any of the potential outcomes is equal. Similarly, since the elements comprising the outcome are a finite, countable set, we cannot discuss the variations of szujet as being infinite; what is left from this explosion of the myth of infinite readings is that the primary impact (other than on a text’s material form) of multiple variations is that felt by the individual reader, an impact which goes some way to explaining
the strong expressions of appreciation or contempt, discussed in the previous chapter, associated with forms of writing which employ multicursality. The individual reader feels that what they are reading is infinitely re-orderable, and that the path they have selected is an exclusive individual choice taken from that infinite selection of paths – reading 253, for instance, a reader chooses from the text’s multicursral paths to construct his or her own route through the fictional carriages, and the lives of the people therein. This highlights the finite nature of reading: indeed, the act of reading itself is a finite experience with a defined beginning and end – but in requiring the reader to select his or her path, he or she becomes involved in the construction of, for instance, 253. I say ‘construction’, as distinct from co-authorship; I do not mean to suggest that this constructive act is of a ‘wreaderly’ nature (Landow, 2006, p. 20). As I highlighted earlier, ‘readers of individually read hypertexts do not have the alleged liberty to author – either physically or metaphorically – their own story’ (Ensslin, 2007, p. 33) – but those readers are able to be involved in the creative process (in the creation of the szujet). As discussed in chapter one in relation to several experimental texts, this act of construction ‘offers the reader a sense of participating in the immediate creative process of the author, encouraging him to experience the novel as a performance and, as such, temporary rather than timeless’ (Hussey, 1981, p. 57); each reading is in itself a ‘take’ on the text which the author composed, and is as such simultaneously ‘at once a new experience and a repetition’ (Hussey, 1981, pp. 57, 58). Both here, and in the previous chapter, I have discussed the idea of the infinite text; I have posited that the texts in question do not fulfil the promise that ‘the number of possible compositions is infinite’ (Saporta, 1963, ‘The Reader is
Requested’). However, what emerges from this here is that the way in which the reader’s participation in the creative process of the author results in him or her experiencing the text as a temporary event, simultaneously repeating the author’s work and creating a new ‘take’ (Hussey, 1981, p. 57), reveals hypertexts to share the transience (as well as the finitude) of the experimental texts discussed in the first chapter.

This feeling that one’s reading path is exclusive to oneself, that the path leads to a personal – or personalised – outcome (as Aarseth puts it (1997a, p. 95), one which is marked ‘with the reader’s signature’) provokes a sense of ownership of the szujet and indeed (as in my discussion of the fate of X. in the previous chapter) of the fabula: a sense of individual selection of a reading path from an ostensibly unlimited set of choices, and personal possession of that path as it is possible that no other readers of the text might have chosen the same one. Indeed, that reading is particular to that reader at that particular time. Jane Yellowlees Douglas observes that each reading of a hypertext fiction ‘breathes life into a narrative of possibilities’, so that in the ‘third or fourth encounter with the same place, the immediate encounter remains the same as the first, [but] what changes is [our] understanding’ (1991, p. 118); Michael Joyce builds on this, stating that ‘[t]he [hyper]text becomes a present tense palimpsest where what shines through are not past versions but potential, alternate views’ (1995, p. 3). Even if a reader acknowledges that there are a limited number of pathways in the text, the notion of personalisation is still present: the pathway chosen is still one which, however many potential variations of that text there are (for instance $10^{263}$ in Composition No. 1), belongs to that particular reader at that particular time of reading, provoking
the sense of responsibility discussed in the previous chapter. James Carroll (2007) notes, whilst discussing the change from the oral tradition of reading aloud to others to silent reading to oneself, that reading is ‘both the sign of and a means to self-awareness, with the knower taking responsibility for what is known,’ and what is apparent with texts which require a reader to make interactive choices which affect the outcome of the fiction is a broadening of this sense of taking responsibility for one’s own reading, however transient that reading actually is. ‘[W]hat is known’ (Carroll, 2007) – i.e. what the reader understands from his or her reading – becomes increasingly personal, both in terms of the actual organisation of the szuget (the reader’s acts of construction), and the feeling of ownership of that particular reading at that particular time. This explains, at least partially, the absolute importance of texts that are ostensibly infinite: as I discuss in the next chapter, the ‘seemingly infinite expanse’ with which to interact (Martin, 2011) apparent in some video game landscapes, hypertext fictions, and materially experimental printed texts, fulfils a desire invoked by the natural tendency of man to ‘hate every thing that looks like a Restraint’ (Addison, 1712, cited in Martin, 2011). Like the experimental texts discussed in the previous chapter, 253 addresses its reader with the second person in the introductory section of the novel, which concludes with the statement ‘Enjoy your copy of 253’ (1998, p. 5). As a final comment from the author to the reader before he or she commences his or her reading, this statement draws attention to two things: this is your copy, both in terms of the object of the book itself, and also that this reading (this copy, or version, of the text) belongs to you at this particular time of reading – as Jim Andrews (2007) puts it, ‘when you read [...] you make something different of/from/with it than the next person, just as
two playings of a game may differ’ (p. 55). Interestingly, this statement is not included in the hypertext 253; Ryman instead states ‘[s]imply click on the option of your choice. Relax! It’s so easy, travelling with 253’ (1996, 253 homepage). This replaces the idea of the material ‘your copy’ with the, still personal, ‘click [on] your choice’ – or rather, since the hypertext version predates the print remix, perhaps it is more appropriate to comment that the material value suggested in the statement ‘your copy’ (an object you can hold, rather than an Internet novel which cannot be physically owned in this way) is more a device which draws attention to the fact that the print remix of 253 is ‘the full text of the award-winning 253 web site [into print]. Nothing has been cut or censored. Experience 253 offline’, but in a different material form (Ryman, 1998, ‘This is an ezi-access novel’).

2.3 Footnotes and telling the truth

Ensslin notes that ‘[a]lready, in the early 1990s, hypertext scholarship pointed to the structural similarities between digital hypertext […] and proto-hypertextual, nonlinear writing such as biblical glosses, encyclopedias, and fictional footnotes (Ensslin, 2014b, p. 11). Alasdair Gray’s 1981 Lanark: a Life in Four Books uses footnotes both as a metafictional device and as a comment on the relationship between scholarly texts and their criticism. Lanark includes an epilogue containing a conversation between the author figure, Nastler, and his character, Lanark, in which Lanark discovers with ‘loathing’ the influence of the author, or ‘damned conjuror’ (Gray, 1991, p. 484), in creating the sorrows he has faced. Nastler comments that his epilogue:

[...]ough not essential to the plot it provides some comic distraction at a moment when the narrative sorely needs it. And it lets me offer some fine sentiments which I could hardly trust to a mere character. And it contains
critical notes which will save research scholars years of toil. In fact my epilogue is so essential that I am working on it with nearly a quarter of the book still unwritten. I am working on it here, just now, in this conversation. But you have yet to reach this room by passing through several chapters I haven’t clearly imagined yet, so you know details of the story which I don’t. (1991, p. 483)

It is these as yet unknown details — specifically the detail that Lanark has a son — which leave Nastler ‘unhappy’ but defiant that he ‘can’t change [his] overall plan now.’ (1991, pp. 498 – 499). The critical notes to which Nastler refers are included in the epilogue as an ‘Index of Plagiarisms’ (1991, p. 485) which detail his influences; in the guise of simply ‘sav[ing] years of [scholarly toil]’ (1991, p. 483), Nastler attempts to pre-empt criticism of his work by providing his own ‘critical notes’ (1991, p. 483), stating that ‘[t]he critics will accuse me of self-indulgence but I don’t care’ (1991, p. 481), following this with a footnote that anticipates negative criticism of this, noting that ‘[t]o have an objection anticipated is no reason for failing to raise it’ (1991, p. 481). Luis de Juan Hatchard observes of the epilogue of Lanark that:

[t]he series of thirteen footnotes, despite [the author figure] Nastler’s claim that his fiction “contains critical notes which will save research scholars years of toil” (p. 483), is probably much more ironic: in a brilliant and baffling piece of self-criticism in footnote six, Mr Sidney Workman, the fictional author of these annotations, states that “a parade of irrelevant erudition through grotesquely inflated footnotes” (p. 490) has been thieved from T.S. Eliot, Nabokov and Flann O’Brien. They bring to mind Borges’s rather than T.S. Eliot’s use of a similar strategy: the role of this particular critic is parodied in a number of ways — from the not very illuminating information provided in footnotes one, seven and eight to the irrelevant erudition contained in footnotes nine, ten, eleven and twelve — but these footnotes are probably better understood as a means of questioning the traditional distinction between fiction and such critical discourses as the treatise and the essay, thus undermining the world of meditation and analysis, of fact and data, perhaps implying that reasoning and data are themselves wildly fictitious. (2002, p. 117)
In proposing within footnotes (which are seemingly outside of the novel’s primary content) that reasoning and data are fictitious in themselves, *Lanark* asks its readers to consider what is true and what is false not only in a metafictional sense, but also in the external world. In *The Footnote: a Curious History*, Anthony Grafton observes that footnotes are a guarantee of neither truth nor falsehood, stating that:

> [f]ootnotes guarantee nothing, in themselves. The enemies of truth – and truth has enemies – can use them to deny the same facts that honest historians use them to assert. The enemies of ideas – and they have enemies as well – can use them to amass citations and quotations of no interest to any reader, or to attack anything that resembles a new thesis. Yet, footnotes form an indispensable if messy part of the indispensable, messy mixture of art and science: modern history.¹¹ (1997, p. 235)

In 253, Ryman informs his reader that:

> [o]ne of the key considerations of any Web professional such as myself is the downloading times of files and ensuring that the reader needs to download as few files as possible. For that reason, 253, the Internet version, made this promise about footnotes: not only did I promise that all footnotes are likely to be misleading and false, I also promised there will be no more than one footnote dedicated to each passenger, no matter how much I wanted to say. The result was some very long footnotes. (1998, p. 277)

Ryman’s comical statement that in restricting his use of footnotes, he is ‘ensuring that the reader needs to download as few files as possible’ as well as that ‘all footnotes are likely to be misleading and false’ (1998, p. 277) draws attention, in the latter case, to the novel’s artificiality and also, in the former, the presence of an author who has constructed the text in a way which is specifically, and explicitly, for the convenience of the reader (of course Ryman’s direct addresses to the reader are often humorous, so this statement should not be read as one that is utterly serious in tone). The authorial promise that all footnotes are unlikely to be telling

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¹¹ For the first half of this quotation Grafton directs his reader to Pierre Vidal-Naquet’s (1987) *Les assassins de la mémoire*. 
the truth is improbable in itself: Ryman states that the footnotes are ‘likely’ (1998, p. 277) to be misleading, a statement which neither guarantees that the footnotes are, or are not, misleading. In this respect, Ryman’s footnotes ‘guarantee nothing, in themselves’ (Grafton, 1997, p. 235). Similarly, Ryman also promises that ‘there will be no more than one footnote dedicated to each passenger’ (1998, p. 277), yet footnote 2 (1998, p. 185) is in essence two footnotes, simply formatted in such a manner as to circumvent his own rule. In addition to footnote 2, ‘Another helpful and informative 253 footnote’, there is a footnote 2a, which is titled ‘A helpful and informative 253 footnote within a footnote’ (1998, p. 185). Footnote 2a is a fictional account of William Blake’s journey forwards in time to Hercules Road in London on the day 253 is set, and is formatted in a similar manner to the passenger sections, split into sections detailing ‘Outward appearance’, ‘So who is William Blake?’ and ‘What he is doing or thinking’ (1998, pp. 185 – 186). In doing this, Ryman breaks his own rules imposed regarding a single footnote per passenger, and also in essence creates a new passenger entry within the footnotes – though William Blake is not a passenger travelling on the carriages, he does have his own lengthy entry organised in the same manner as all the other passengers. In this way, the character of William Blake in 253 is another passenger contained within the footnotes, stated to be travelling ‘two hundred years old’ ‘back to Hercules Road’ (1998, p. 185) on the day of the crash. In this way, by imposing rules on his inclusion of footnotes – and then breaking those rules – Ryman is able to include a 254th character. Though at first this footnote may not seem important, it is actually this element of it that is important to understanding 253 within the continuum of texts that this thesis discusses. Ryman’s introduction of rules – constraints – and his subsequent
destruction of those rules, is related to the idea of the clinamen in Oulipian poetics. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Perec’s *Life: a User’s Manual* is devised accordingly to a rigid structure, and has one of the 100 chapters removed; Perec states that ‘[t]his chapter must disappear in order to break the symmetry, to introduce an error into the system, because when a system of constraints is established, there must also be an anticonstraint within it [...] there must be a clinamen’ (Perec, 1983, pp. 70 – 71). Similarly to Perec’s novel, in Ryman’s 253, it is the ‘error in the system’ – the 253\textsuperscript{rd} passenger (making 254 people inclusive of the driver), albeit one who travels through time to the train, rather than travelling *on* the train – that breaks the symmetry of the novel and introduces an anticonstraint. As Motte notes, this anticonstraint relates to the idea that ‘the textual system must be intentionally flawed, the flaw scrupulously cultivated, in turn, as the real locus of poetic creativity’ (1986b, p. 276): Ryman’s text, in this respect, mirrors Oulipian poetics in that the 254\textsuperscript{th} person on the train is a cultivated flaw in an otherwise ordered system (of 253 people, with 253 words each, and no more than one footnote), which reflects the underlying impending chaos of the crash in a journey otherwise assumed to be ordered and predictable – ‘the illusion of an orderly universe’ (Ryman, 1998, p. 2).\textsuperscript{12} The real ‘genius’ of this particular ‘error in the

\textsuperscript{12} Laura Colombino comments on the orderliness of the structure of 253, stating that:

[t]he tremendously extensive – at least for the space of a novel – human material at stake here paradoxically amounts to an absolutely enclosed and predetermined structure. [...] If on the one hand the book profits from the supposed democracy of the net, which allows the free play of signifiers through the reader’s ability to erratically switch from one (web) page to another, on the other hand it confines this game within an all-encompassing and perfectly arranged grid of control. (2006, p. 624)
system’ is that the Oulipian anticonstraint is a way of controlling chance, and so in introducing the clinamen of William Blake, Ryman is both reflecting the chaos of the crash, and also commenting on the artificiality of the novel, because even the crash (and the character of William Blake, and the anticonstraint within the system of formal constraints Ryman placed on his own writing) is in fact controlled by the author.

To gesture forwards to a novel discussed in the next chapter, Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* contains large numbers of footnotes (amongst other less traditional literary devices, such as unconventional typography, photographic images, and musical notation). Hayles and Montfort observe that the footnotes in the novel ‘quickly grow into a story in their own right and threaten the hegemony of the putative “main” narrative’ (2012, p. 158), particularly the ‘extraordinarily important’ (2012, p. 460) editors’ footnotes which advise the reader to skip ahead to the appendix containing the letters written by Pelafina, Johnny Truant’s mother who was institutionalised on the grounds of insanity. If the reader follows this suggestion, the rest of the narrative is likely to be seen in the context of Pelafina’s letters, which may lead the reader to conclude that ‘neither Zampanò nor Johnny is the enframing narrative but Pelafina herself’ (2012, p. 460). If the reader does not follow the suggestion in the editors’ footnotes, he or she will read Pelafina’s letters in the appendix, after having read the stories of Zampanò and Johnny. In this latter case, the letters are an ‘echo [of] the preceding narratives’ that the reader has already encountered, rather than the ‘source of the echoes’ (2012, p. 461). In relation to *House of Leaves*, Mark B. N. Hansen states that:
Zampanò, a Borges-like figure, [...] possesses a diabolical penchant for mixing real and fictional sources in an apparent bid to garner verisimilitude for his enterprise. (*House of Leaves*, in consequence, is littered with footnotes, an indeterminate number of which are pure inventions of its author). (Hansen, 2004, p. 601)

In this case too, the use of footnotes – which ‘guarantee nothing, in themselves’ (Grafton, 1997, p. 235) is linked with both the presentation of truth (the ‘garner[ing] of verisimilitude’) and the ensuing conflict between truth and the artificiality of fiction (the ‘pure inventions of [the] author’). Perhaps Ryman’s footnote linked to passenger 45, Doreen Goodman, is the best example that could illustrate this sentiment: Ryman states that ‘[t]here is no such thing as the London Emergency Service. I made it up. Think of it as a glorified ambulance service’ (1998, p. 69), which both acknowledges his own authorial construction of the text in ‘ma[king] it up’, and admits the ‘misleading’ (1998, p. 277) nature of that text, because he ‘made it up’.

### 2.4 Realism

In chapter one I discussed how Fowles wanted to create fictional worlds that were realistic, but not the reality external to the text. I compared this to Johnson, who strove to create writing which told ‘truth in the form of a novel’ (Johnson, 1973, p. 14) and, in this way, accurately represented, as Fowles described it, ‘the world that is’ (1969, p. 105). In 253, Ryman uses hypertext as a device for creating fiction, but also links that fictional world to his own external ‘world that is’. Earlier in this chapter I discussed Ryman’s use of the second person pronoun to address his reader in the introductory section of the novel. This use of ‘you’ also serves as a device to remind the reader of the artificiality of the novel, specifically that what he or she is reading is a work of fiction commercially produced and distributed. In the hypertext
253, specifically in the section which ‘tells you a bit more about 253 and the
author’ (1996, 253 homepage). Ryman highlights this by reminding the reader that
‘[a]ll material on this site is copyright. I love you, God loves you, but you have no
right to re-use or redistribute any of this material’ and that ‘if you work for the
public sector in the United Kingdom, this same team can help design your Website.
Contact us by email at Ryman.Worksltd@btinternet.com’ (Ryman, ‘About this
site’). Neither of these pieces of information, strictly speaking, tells the reader more
about 253; what they do, however, is draw attention to the fact that 253 is a
commercially produced work of fiction. The reader is further reminded of this in
the ‘Time Span’ section of the print remix. Here, Ryman notes that 253, with a
fabula that lasts for seven and a half minutes, ‘probably takes longer to read [...] than it would to live it. This may strike you as absurd’. He goes on to say:

[i]f so, may I recommend my previous work of serious fiction, Was? It lasts
114 years and takes most people considerably less time to read. [...] To
order Was in the United Kingdom, email me, the author, at:
Ryman.Worksltd@btinternet.com. In the United States, simply visit your
local bookstore and find a member of its Sales and Service team. Ask a team
member to order the book for you. Quote the following ISBN numbers: 0-
679-40429-5 (hardback) or 0-14-017872-4 (paperback). You should find the
Sales Team members very helpful.

If they are not helpful, email me. I will sort them out for you. (1998, p. 4)

This again highlights the commercial nature of the novel but, by including the real
ISBN numbers for Was, also emphasises the connection of the fiction to both the
wider world of Ryman’s fictions, and the real ‘world that is’. In foregrounding the
link between 253 and its author, Ryman reminds his readers that the novel is a work
of fiction, but connects it to the real world by highlighting his own existence as the
novel’s author (and, as I discuss shortly, adds to these metafictional overtones by
including a comical portrait of himself as one of the passengers on the train). In this respect, the reader of 253 is encouraged to think of the novel as a piece of fiction, existing within a wider body of fictional works, but is also reminded that these works have been created by an author, and are part of a commercial distribution system. The way in which Ryman links the fictional world of 253 to his own external ‘world that is’ is also apparent when he reveals that ‘253 happens on January 11th 1995, which is the day I learned my best friend was dying of AIDS’ (Ryman, 1996, ‘253? Why 253?’). At this point, a change in authorial tone is apparent; Ryman moves from the jocular phrasing of the information about Was to an altogether more abrupt statement regarding the death of a friend, with the change in tone serving to highlight the change in subject matter, from marketing to mortality. Though of course authorial statements such as this in novels do not always point to a true event outside of the fiction any more than the footnotes I discussed earlier do, Ryman has lent verisimilitude to this statement by commenting in an interview that:

[that was the big thing about AIDS, wasn’t it? There were an awful lot of people who thought they were going to live until their seventies and die of cancer, and suddenly found they were going to die a whole lot sooner. You started losing friends when you just didn’t expect to lose them. (Ryman, in Brown, 2001)]

The date given as the day on which Ryman learned his best friend was dying of AIDS is given a further level of significance when Ryman mentions it again; this subsequent mention is included in the crucial clinamen section of the novel:

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13 Ensslin observes that the date on which the novel is set ‘is of particular significance because it marks the day when his best friend announced he would soon die of AIDS’ and that ‘[i]n fact, the tragic ending did not enter Ryman’s imaginative mind until he learned the sad news’ (2007, p. 84).
footnote 2a begins ‘[o]n 11th January 1995, William Blake came back to Hercules Road’ (Ryman, 1998, p. 185). Of course, this is the date on which the novel is set, but the fact that Ryman states the date again – and particularly that he mentions it during what is arguably the most important section (in terms of the way the novel is constructed) – highlights the link between the fictional world of 253 and the author’s own external ‘world that is’. In this respect, where Fowles was trying ‘to create worlds as real as, but other than the world that is’ (Fowles, 1969, p. 105) and Johnson desired ‘truth in the form of a novel’ (Johnson, 1973, p. 14), Ryman’s novel approaches realism in a manner which incorporates both. The fictional world of 253 is ‘other than the world that is’, with characters such as William Blake (1998, p. 185) and Mme. Matisse, who ‘bears no relation to any of Matisse’s surviving relatives. [And] does not exist, more’s the pity’ (1998, p. 116). It is also to an extent a presentation of ‘truth in the form of a novel’ (Johnson, 1973, p. 14), because although the crash is fictional, it can also be said to mirror the emotional state of the author on ‘January 11th, 1995 [which] is the day [he] learned [his] best friend not only had AIDS, but would die within days’ (Ryman, 1998, p. 354). There is a further reference to January 11th, 1995, providing further comment on the relationship between truth and fiction, in the footnote to the section describing passenger 226 Mrs Gemma Carty:

[t]he real Suschita Jungblot [sic] was murdered a few days before January 11th, 1995 in the town of Dunstable. She was a twenty-year-old au pair studying English with the Hofers. In this fictional world, things worked out differently.’ (1998, p. 311)

Though Ryman gives an inaccurate reference to the date, the murder he mentions is a true event, occurring on January 10th 1995 (Birmingham Evening Mail, 1999, p. 5). As Ryman states, in the fictional world of 253 the murder does not take place. In
including, and specifically rewriting, the death of Suschita Jungblut, there is perhaps a sense that though the author’s own ‘truth’ of January 11th, 1995 cannot be rewritten, the ‘fictional world’ (Ryman, 1998, p. 311) of 253 is concerned with, and aligns itself closely to, the author’s own external ‘world that is’ (Fowles, 1969, p. 105), even if that world is sometimes ‘truth in the form of a novel’ (Johnson, 1973, p. 14), and sometimes ‘made [...] up’ (1998, p. 69). In traversing the text by journeying from link to link, 253 creates a sense of movement mirroring that of the ill-fated train carriages and sends the reader travelling (in an ergodic sense) through a multicursal textual map. When Ryman states ‘[t]he question is not what happens next? but where will we go next?’ (Ryman, 1996, “Another One Along in a Minute”), he highlights the importance of personal experience over details of sequence. This presents a concern similar to Johnson’s The Unfortunates, as the final line of the novel states that it is not how events came to pass, but rather the personal consequences of this, that are important: ‘[n]ot how he died, not what he died of, even less why he died, are of concern, to me, only the fact that he did die, he is dead, is important: the loss to me, to us’ (Johnson, 1999, ‘Last’, p. 6). Here, it is not ‘what happens’ (Ryman, 1996, “Another One Along in a Minute”) as Tony dies that is the crucial factor, but rather ‘where [...] we go’ (Ryman, 1996, “Another One Along in a Minute”) following the death of a friend. This sense is also present in 253 during the crash, which is ‘truth in the form of a novel’ (Johnson, 1973, p. 14), mirroring the impending ‘loss’ (Johnson, 1999, ‘Last’, p. 6) of the author on ‘January 11th, 1995 [which] is the day [he] learned [his] best friend not only had AIDS, but would die within days’ (Ryman, 1998, p. 354). In this respect, the ‘vortex of shared grief’ (Coe, 2004, p. 23) into which the reader is drawn in The
*Unfortunates* is also present in 253: it is not just ‘what happens’ (Ryman, 1996, “Another One Along in a Minute”) in our lives that is important, but also ‘where [...] we go’ (Ryman, 1996, “Another One Along in a Minute”) as individuals following a personal tragedy. Highlighting the importance of personal experience over details of sequence does perhaps raise a question regarding the point of a non-sequential reading strategy. In the previous chapter I discussed Hussey’s argument that the omission of chapter 55 in *Hopscotch* relates to the idea of the ‘take’ – that in ‘participating in the immediate creative process’ of constructing of the szujet, the reader is encouraged to ‘experience the novel as a performance and, as such, temporary rather than timeless’ (Hussey, 1981, p. 57). In this respect, Johnson’s ‘physical tangible metaphor for randomness and the nature of cancer’ (1973, p. 25) in *The Unfortunates* is illustrated very effectively, as the finitude of the text (achieved by requiring the reader to construct his or her own variation on the szujet) reflects the finitude of human life. This is also true in 253: the reader constructs his or her own (finite and temporary) journey through the text, and in thus ‘experienc[ing] the novel as [...] temporary rather than timeless’ (Hussey, 1981, p. 57), the reader experiences the temporariness of the fictional train journey, the temporariness of the lives of the fictional characters on the train heading towards its fatal crash, and the temporariness of the real lives in Ryman’s own (and, for that matter, everybody’s own) external ‘world that is’ (Fowles, 1969, p. 105).

### 2.5 The apparent ‘naturalness’ of hypertext

The mechanics of reading hypertext have often been described as illustrating a more ‘natural’ method of reading (and thinking) than traditionally structured print texts. Bolter comments that ‘[a]lthough in a printed book it would be intolerably
pedantic to write footnotes to footnotes, in the computer we have already come to regard this layered writing and reading as natural’ (2000, p. 27), and Bush argues that the benefits of the memex include an ability to select information associatively (much like selecting the next link to read in a hypertext fiction) in a manner that compliments this ‘natural’ process:

[the human mind] operates by association. With one item in its grasp, it snaps instantly to the next that is suggested by the association of thoughts, in accordance with some intricate web of trails carried by the cells of the brain. It has other characteristics, of course; trails that are not frequently followed are prone to fade, items are not fully permanent, memory is transitory. Yet the speed of action, the intricacy of trails, the detail of mental pictures, is awe-inspiring beyond all else in nature. (1945, p. 106)

Bolter observes the appearance of the concept of hypertext as a more natural form in Michael Joyce’s seminal hypertext afternoon, a story. One of the 538 lexias of afternoon, titled “work in progress”, states:

[c]losure is, as in any fiction, a suspect quality, although here it is made manifest. When the story no longer progresses, or when it cycles, or when you tire of the paths, the experience of reading it ends. Even so, there are likely to be more opportunities than you think there are at first. A word which doesn’t yield the first time you read a section may take you elsewhere if you choose it when you encounter the section again; and sometimes what seems a loop, like memory, heads off again in another direction. There is no simple way to say this. (Joyce, 1987, “work in progress”)

Bolter cites this passage from afternoon as evidence for the naturalness of hypertext, arguing that:

[w]hat afternoon and other hyperfictions are suggesting is that there is no simple way to say this in the linear writing of print, that what is unnatural in print becomes natural in the electronic medium and will soon no longer need saying at all, because it can be shown. (1991, p. 143)

In the previous chapter, I discussed B.S. Johnson’s comments that ‘Life does not tell stories. Life is chaotic, fluid, random; it leaves myriads of ends untied, untidily [...] Telling stories really is telling lies’ and that ‘[t]he novelist cannot legitimately
or successfully embody present-day reality in exhausted forms’, and must instead ‘evolve [...] forms which will more or less satisfactorily contain an ever-changing reality’ (1973, pp. 14, 16 – 17). What better way, then, to capture the contemporary reality in which hypertext fictions are being written, than the hypertext form? As Ciccoricco puts it, ‘[d]igital fiction is uniquely positioned in its ability to use new and still relatively unfamiliar tools to [...] reflect on a cultural moment of great technological change’ (2012, p. 469); does a digital age call for digital storytelling to legitimately and successfully represent its reality? This idea echoes the argument that I cited in chapter one, that electronic writing is a method to create credible representations of our digital cultural moment – in essence, a digital form of creation to create texts for a digital culture (Tomasula, 2012a). This also raises two other significant issues. Firstly, is Johnson’s The Unfortunates, with its focus on adequately representing truth and memory (in a ‘natural’, accurate manner), then aiming for the ‘natural[ness]’ (Bolter, 2000, p. 27) of hypertext before hypertext systems evolved? Secondly, is hypertext then not simply a digital form to represent a digital age, but also a form that engages with similar concerns to those of the experimental writers discussed in the previous chapter?

In suggesting that a digital age might call for the development of a digital medium of storytelling, I have posited a statement that requires further discussion, as the immediate question emerging from this is has contemporary reality actually changed significantly, and have reader’s interactions with that reality changed? The most appropriate point at which to begin this discussion, tying in with the decade which produced several of the experimental texts discussed in the previous chapter, is 1964, with Marshall McLuhan’s first publication of Understanding Media: the
Extensions of Man. McLuhan’s text, while celebrating the potential of new forms of communication, also suggested that new communication technologies could pose a threat to a society that was unaware of its potential to change the status quo, commenting that ‘[t]he electric technology is within the gates, and we are numb, deaf, blind and mute about its encounter with the Gutenberg technology, on and through which the American way of life was formed’ (McLuhan, 2003, p. 5). As Nicholas Carr notes, arguments for and against a new medium tend to focus on the content rather than the medium itself (the hypers’ accessibility versus the sceptics’ mediocrity), yet ‘in the long run a medium’s content matters less than the medium itself in influencing how we think and act. [...] If we use it enough, it changes who we are as individuals and as a society’ (2010, pp. 2 – 3). This was also argued to be the case in 1964: McLuhan notes that ‘the effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts [but rather they change] patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance’ (2003, p. 31). Where this is useful in the context of this thesis is as an opening statement to the answer to the previous question: it seems, then, that our interactions with reality have indeed altered.

Carr’s recent The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains provides some interesting evidence (both empirical and anecdotal) of the nature of this change, observing that ‘my mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles. [...] Maybe I’m an aberration, an outlier. But it doesn’t seem that way’ (2010, p. 7).

Ryman’s descriptions of the passengers in 253 demonstrate this idea of information as a ‘swiftly moving stream’; each passenger in 253 is described according to three succinct categories: ‘Outward appearance’, ‘Inside information’,
and ‘What they are thinking and doing’. The categories provide respectively the following information:

**Outward appearance**

Do the characters dress well? Do they look like someone you would like to have for a friend? Remember: this book happens in winter. Many of the passengers are wearing thick winter clothing. This hides some of their individuality. For example, few of them are wearing T-shirts with messages, or revealing lycra shorts. Nevertheless, **Outward appearance** should help you to decide if you want to read more about that particular person.

**Inside information**

People are not always what they seem. **Inside information** provides key facts about each passenger. Some are very interesting. Others are not.

**What they are thinking and doing**

Some of them are thinking positive thoughts. Others are up to no good at all. Some of them take decisive actions. Most of them simply sit and think. Whatever happens to them, you will share their London Transport experience. (1998, pp. 2 – 3)

The first of these categories is (both typographically per passenger and in its purpose) the gauge by which to judge the passenger described, the first link of that passenger’s hypertext system: if his or her appearance does not interest you, if they do not look like somebody whose company you would enjoy, you are offered the option to move on to another passenger. A reader of a hypertext on screen can readily skip between character sections in this way, and this suggestion that a reader decides whether or not to continue reading about that passenger makes the print remix more akin to the hypertext 253. Whether or not individual readers would choose to skip a section in this way in print is impossible to state (and is not a necessary point to establish), but the print remix does put in place, in the emphasis on selectivity and multicursality, elements to make the reading experience more akin to the experience of a hypertext. The detailed descriptions of the people in the
carriages make those characters very visually accessible; as the main means by which we present, and are presented, to other people (at least initially), this emphasis on visuality provides a comment on the ways in which we judge those people we come into contact with each day, but with whom we barely interact: the carriages are congested, yet the people are isolated and alienated from each other. These ‘Outward Appearance’ sections illustrate that the characters are ‘not always what they seem’ (1998, p. 3), and as well as categorising people according to appearance, core information and thoughts/actions, the novel includes a (fictional) ‘advertisement’ detailing ‘the professional way to describe criminals’ with ‘the 253 Interpersonal Description Guide’ (1998, p. 251). This actually suggests a method to describe anybody, not just criminals, as ‘[y]ou can never tell when you might witness a crime. [...] You must be ready to describe exactly everyone around you. [...] Shop your neighbours! Use the 253 Interpersonal Description Guide!’; the guide suggests using the following ‘code’:

- Are they
  - □ puny: (short and thin)
  - □ squat: (short and fat)
  - □ fat: (medium to tall but bloated)
  - □ scrawny: (tall and skinny)
  - □ apple on a stick: (skinny with a pot belly)?

- Is their hair
  - □ permed like a poodle
  - □ crisp with gel
  - □ blue with rinse
  - □ bacon-streaky with tints?

- Are their faces
  - □ oblong,
  - □ round,
  - □ square

- Do they suffer from
  - □ receding hair
  - □ facial scars or other disfigurements
  - □ grey anoraks?
These (comically) limited categories in which people can be placed draw comparisons between a reader’s interaction with the novel (and consideration of the people around the reader) and the way in which Internet mediation can allow for, and perhaps encourage, misrepresentation (it is, of course, not only the Internet that allows for misrepresentation). This then makes sense of the fact that each individual passenger’s page, each link, should be read in whatever order the reader chooses as (seemingly) randomly as possible: readers are to select the characters, like choosing an arrangement for the individual leaves of Composition No. 1, as if 253 were ‘a deck of cards’ (Saporta, 1963, ‘The Reader is Requested’). Like the materially experimental texts of the previous chapter, which experimented with print and produced fictions which commented on their own fictionality, 253, even as a print remix, comments on the turning of personal human activities into scripted rituals by categorising individuals in these ways. It has been argued that this ritualisation of activity stems from the increasing digitalisation of the contemporary world:

[as the computer programmer Thomas Lord has argued, software can end up turning the most intimate and personal of human activities into mindless “rituals” whose steps are “encoded in the logic of web pages.” Rather than acting according to our own knowledge and intuition, we go through the motions. (Carr, 2010, pp. 128 – 129)

Whether or not the presentation of the self is truly becoming a ‘mindless ritual’ is a discussion for another time, but the idea that personal aspects of humanity have become based on the encoding found in web pages (which is another way of saying that people are increasingly following the subtle instructions issued to them by the scripts of the Internet) posits the use of computing technologies in this way as a
reality-changing phenomenon. There is another layer to this categorisation-as-representation in 253. The categorisation model offered in the ‘253 Interpersonal Description Guide’ does possess elements mimicking those of a social network page model; however, the options for description listed are ridiculously limited, and moreover comical. In this way, 253 comments on the way the Internet can mediate the real identities of its users (with different levels of user awareness of this mediation), and draws attention to these digital identities (presented as real identities) as themselves being works of fiction constructed by authors; Ryman’s footnote regarding passenger 45, Doreen Goodman, highlights his presence as the authorial creator of the (fictional) organisations and identities in the novel, stating that ‘[t]here is no such thing as the London Emergency Service. I made it up. Think of it as a glorified ambulance service’ (1998, p. 69).

To understand the changes in the way we interact with reality, discussed by McLuhan, Carr, and others, it is necessary to look briefly at the biology behind the corresponding changes in the way we think. The plasticity of the brain is widely noted (Olds, 2008; Merzenich et al., 2006, cited in Lawton, 2008, pp. 27 – 29), and Alvaro Pascual-Leone, Professor of Neurology at Harvard Medical School, confirms that plasticity is ‘not an occasional state of the nervous system; instead, it is the normal ongoing state of the nervous system throughout the life span’ (2005, p. 379). Not only does the brain physically change with the repeated use of new media, but with the reduction in our use of other forms (for instance, a greater use

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14 Of course, at the time of 253, social networking websites were not as prolific as they are at the time of writing this thesis; though Classmates.com and Bolt.com were active, having been launched, respectively, in 1995 and 1996.
of digital media or research techniques rather than their print equivalents), ‘we do not just forget [these mental skills]: the brain map space for those skills is turned over to the skills we practice instead’ (Doidge, 2007, p. 59). If this is the case, and the increasingly prevalent use of digital media could be changing the way our brains work, hypertext is then indeed a ‘natural’ form of writing, which reflects in its interactivity the changing ‘brain map’ described by Norman Doidge.

There is an immediate problem with stating that hypertext is more suited to the way the mind works, or is a more ‘natural’ way of reading (Bolter, 2000, p. 27). Ciccoricco notes that studies carried out by Davida Charney (1994) and Johndan Johnson-Eilola (1991) point to a certain degree of linear comprehension of texts, regardless of whether that text has a more traditional, or a hypertextual, structure. Charney suggests that readers cognitively prioritise information in the same manner regardless of the order in which it is read, and that:

[s]ince the mind cannot import textual structures all at once into long-term memory, the resemblance of a hypertextual structure to long-term memory is irrelevant; in turn, the claim that hypertexts are more natural reading environments because of their resemblance to neural networks is not valid. (Ciccoricco, 2004)

There are problems with citing this as a final argument on the matter, not least in that it accounts for the individual’s reading comprehension at a cognitive level, which is only one aspect of the experience of reading and its wider significance. However, the arguments put forward for hypertext as a more ‘natural’ (Bolter, 2000, p. 27) form based on assumed resemblance to neural pathways require more

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15 According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, young adults between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-four (a group into which falls some of the most avid users of the Internet), read printed texts for a total of forty-nine minutes a week in 2008, a fall of 29% from the comparative figures for 2004. (Carr, 2010)
investigation. Carr notes that, ‘deciphering hypertext substantially increases readers’ cognitive load and hence weakens their ability to comprehend and retain what they’re reading’ and that a ‘1989 study showed that readers of hypertext often ended up clicking distractedly “through pages instead of reading them carefully”’ (2010, p. 126). This would seem to suggest that there is in fact a difference in the way hypertextual structures are read, but that it is a difference that lies in the way the reader interacts with the text, rather than how a reader comprehends an entire text in relation to long-term memory.

Carr’s observation suggests that a text is perhaps read in a less careful manner if it is a hypertext, rather than a printed text. This in itself is interesting in the context of 253. Using the allegory of the labyrinth, in 253 the multiple life pathways of the individual passengers on the train converge in one unicursal journey heading towards the crash. This is framed within a multicursal hypertext in which readers can travel back and forth between passengers and carriages as if they themselves were walking between the different sections of the train. The arrangement of the different passenger sections into discrete modules encourages the reader to dip in and out of the novel at ease since it is not necessary to have read, for instance, about the passengers in the first carriage to be able to understand the section dealing with the passengers in the fourth carriage. In fact, although the stories of the individual passengers appear on the surface to be of little importance to each other (albeit with coincidences or relationships linking different passengers occurring throughout; these are noted in the list of links (1998, pp. 354 – 364) at the end of the novel as ‘Friends, Relatives, Personal or Other Individual Links’, (1998, pp. 356 – 359); of course, a more careful reading reveals the connectedness of
individuals as I will discuss shortly), the apparent distance between the passengers is minimal, when compared to the distance between passengers on a real life daily commute – which, years of experience has taught me, goes rarely and little beyond ‘passenger A usually gets the same daily morning train as passenger B’. In this respect, the observation ‘that readers of hypertext often [end] up clicking distractedly “through pages instead of reading them carefully”’ (Carr, 2010, p. 126) is perfectly appropriate for 253, as it reflects what is often the reality of personal interaction on commuter trains: brief interaction without any focused attention.

An analogy is also drawn between the fictional passengers in 253 and the passengers on real life trains: by presenting each passenger separately, as a discrete and carefully individuated unit, whilst also providing a list of the numerous connections between them, 253 suggests simultaneously that there is no interaction between passengers, and that there are numerous connections between them. Having earlier defined realism as the way in which texts are generally orientated towards the external world they seek to represent, 253 can be considered a realist text because of its concern with representing its external ‘world that is’ (Fowles, 1969, p. 105), and because its hypertext format further foregrounds the novel’s representations of commuter travel. Tobias Döring notes that ‘among the fictive crowd of 253 underground travellers not everyone is a stranger to the other and not everything occurs at random; characters interrelate and interact, some are violent, some are affectionate to one another’ (2002, p. 58); Berthold Schoene builds on this idea, observing that:

the people portrayed by Ryman are always already in touch: they are relatives, rivals, neighbours, lovers, colleagues, service providers and customers, or, if they are indeed strangers, they are shown to be only ever
one small step removed from making contact. Ryman shows them bumping into each other, responding to each other’s facial expressions and involuntary gestures, being touched by one another’s joy, hope, anger, stress and frustration, confronting strikingly similar dilemmas or sharing common interests, longing to converse, and rushing to each other’s aid. (2013, p. 11)

Schoene argues that because ‘Ryman names all his characters, [he is] thus highlighting everybody’s unique individuality as well as the transience and ultimate inconsequence of their existence’ (2013, p. 11). Eric Sonstroem makes a similar point, arguing that the structure of 253 itself foregrounds the ways in which passengers are linked and alike:

There are three obvious types of looping that occur simultaneously in this text. The first is temporal, as each of the 253 passengers recounts the same seven and a half minutes. The second has to do with the reader’s incrementally enhanced perspective; each of the three sub-sections that comprise every passenger’s description is a revisititation of that passenger, a kind of double-take. The third form of looping is narrative. Passengers are hyperlinked together by common bonds. If passengers know each other, they are linked. If they think about or do the same thing, they are linked. If they interact or even glance at each other, they are linked. (2004)

The quantity of coincidences and relationships that provide links between passengers in 253 suggests that the characters on the train are an overtly connected mass of lives, a web in which passengers are simultaneously connected and atomised like links between hypertext nodes.

253, in its print and digital forms, allows for a mixture of both unicursal and multicursal reading methods. The original hypertext version of 253 (1996) encourages a multicursal approach to reading by providing links highlighting things that passengers have in common. It has been argued that though ‘every character sketch needs to have the potential to engage the readers’ interest and cause them to continue’, Ryman ‘cannot expect the reader to complete all 253 lexias and therefore has to transmit a feeling of understanding the gist and purpose of the hypertext at
any given stage. This is a challenging objective, which Ryman has managed to achieve’ (Ensslin, 2007, p. 85). The print remix appears to function more unicursally, its material form encouraging the reader to read sequentially from the front page to the back page, however much readers are encouraged to adopt a less sequential reading strategy. Schoene argues that the print remix of 253 causes difficulties in terms of the reader’s awareness of the common factors between characters, and that the hypertext makes the discovery of these similarities much easier (2013, p. 13). This is illustrated in the ‘Big Issue love chain’ (Ryman, 1998, p. 355) between Sam Cruza (passenger 216), Beverly Tompset (passenger 198), Anita Mazzoni (passenger 140), Marge Matisse (passenger 79) and Maggie Rolt (passenger 57). Sam Cruza is a New York taxi driver who ‘[c]ame to London for some fun, plus he had to duck out of a drugs rap [...] Now he sells The Big Issue’ (p. 295), and has introduced himself to the four women as, respectively, a Cossack named Attila ‘who worked many years on American merchant vessels’ (1998, p. 271), an Italian actor named Antonio (1998, p. 195), an ‘uneducated Albanian seaman’ (1998, p. 115), and a Swiss landscape painter named Pascal (1998, p. 85). Sam is most interested in Maggie, ‘only ’cause she’s the coldest piece of ass’; wants Beverly because ‘she’ll be good for cash’; suspects Marge is ‘poor, but who knows – maybe she’ll give him a [Matisse] painting’; and his character is given a particularly unpleasant edge in his description of the final passenger linked to the ‘Big Issue love chain’, Anita, who he describes as ‘dangerous. She’s smart; she could turn on him. Sam’s a little afraid of Anita. Her, he would like to hurt’ (1998, p. 295). Schoene argues that the discovery of linking factors between passengers in the ‘Big Issue love chain’ is ‘much easier in the novel’s web version than the “print
remix”, which relies primarily on the reader’s own perspicacity and only secondarily on the appended index, which makes an awkward substitute for the web version’s abundance of signposted hyperlinks’ (2013, p. 13). I would argue that it is perhaps not perspicacity, but rather a reasonable memory for things one has read in a novel (combined, of course, with the list of links), that enables the reader of the print remix of 253 to notice the ‘Big Issue love chain’. Schoene also notes that, by using the hypertextual linking device, the four women involved are shown to be intimately linked and alike without the novel presenting a direct comparison or confrontation:

[r]ather than comparing and categorising the four women in relation to each other, let alone the feckless male via whom they are linked, the novel accentuates their differences and similarities which define their contemporariness by means of mutual exposure. Without their knowledge or intention, the women’s lives and identities are shown to be leaning towards each other as if engaged in intimate communication. Their exposure to each other both defines and augments their singularity while at the same time alleviating the pain of individuality. (Schoene, 2013, p. 13)

Ensslin argues a similar case, stating that ‘[w]hat the “novel” really provides is a complex, interwoven network of individual character studies’, and that the ‘printed version [of 253] cannot be called nearly as successful and effective as the hypertext, mainly because it does not have links’ (2007, p. 84). Ryman states that the meaning of 253 changes, depending on whether a reader is reading the hypertext novel or the print remix:

253 with links is about what makes people the same, because you can follow through – the grandparent theme, the people thinking about Thatcher. It’s about the subliminal ways we’re linked and alike. You just read it passenger by passenger, and it’s about how different we all are. The links change the meaning of the novel. I think I’m going to like the print version more because it emphasises more just how multi- various the cars are, but the linked version is fun. (Ryman, in Grossman, 1997)
According to Ryman, then, the hypertext 253 is concerned with making explicit the similarities and connections between passengers, and uses links to highlight the existence of this intrinsic proximity of individuals; the print remix, without this capacity, becomes more about the distance between those same individuals. In this way, in 253 Ryman uses the differences between the print and digital versions to expose the novel’s fundamental concern with the simultaneous distance and proximity of individuals.

The list of links between passengers included at the end of the print remix (1998, pp. 354 – 364) suggests that, actually, the individuals in the novel (and individuals in real life, if Ryman’s above statement is accepted) are all ‘linked and alike’ (Ryman, in Grossman, 1997), but that sometimes form can obscure content, making this proximity of individuals more implicit than explicit. Similarly, the footnotes included throughout 253 are positioned in a standard manner at the end of the relevant passenger section in the print remix, and are accessed via hyperlinks in the online version. Ryman’s use of footnotes further emphasises the simultaneous distance and proximity of the individuals on the train: the additional information provided therein is often relevant and personal, yet typographically distanced. For example, the footnote relating to passenger 79, Mme. Marge Matisse, is set out on the following page to her section and adds this information:

[s]he’d be a great dinner party guest, full of spurious stories about [Henri Matisse], whom she’d never really met. She’d leave thick lipstick on your cups and not allow anyone else to talk and need helping home, declaring “I’ve only had one glass of wine!” (1998, p. 116).

Those footnotes providing other information than that regarding passengers, for instance, the ‘footnote within a footnote’ discussing William Blake (1998, pp. 185 –
189), draw the reader’s attention away from the personal details of the individual in that section (in this case passenger 134, Leon de Marco) before moving immediately to the details of the next passenger. Passenger 96 in 253 is called Geoff Ryman, and this character presents the reader with a fictional figure who bears not only the author’s name, but also his appearance. Passenger 96 Geoff Ryman is a ‘[t]all, ravaged, nervous-looking, middle-aged man’ (1998, p. 137); real life Geoff Ryman was born in 1951, has been described as ‘a very tall Canadian with a slightly nervous disposition’ (Grossman, 1997), and has described himself as ‘ravaged’ in an interview: in answer to the question ‘[d]id you really think of yourself as ‘ravaged’ (passenger 96 in 253)?’ posed by Carolyn Hill (2006), Ryman replied ‘[y]eah, and that was in 1995... now the wrinkles are even deeper’. Ryman also suggests that the experience of passenger 96 in 253 is based on his own experience: Hill (2006) asked ‘[i]s there really a Mind the Gap performance troupe, and did you ever participate as described in 253?’, to which Ryman answered ‘[y]eah, there was. It really did have a comic actor leading it, we really did sell tickets, he really did go running off and leave us when the police showed up’. Geoff Ryman is both a real and fictional presence in the novel: he exists as the fictional passenger 96, but that fictional character bears enough similarity to the real life Ryman to allow the author a physical presence within the novel, which foregrounds simultaneously the artifice of the novel and its concern with realism. The inclusion of the Mind the Gap theatre company, specifically the group’s name, reflects the London Underground setting of the novel – though, as Wendy Grossman comments:

[n]on-Londoners may not get the joke. “Mind the Gap” is sung out sonorously over the PA system at several stations on the Bakerloo line
where sharper than usual curves in the platform leave wide openings that passengers must cross to board the trains. (1997)

In the context of the concern expressed in 253 with the distance and proximity of individuals, ‘Mind the Gap’ also draws attention to the ‘gap’ between passengers, and seems to be an implicit suggestion that commuters should ‘mind’ (either in the sense of be concerned about, or in the sense of pay attention to, or perhaps both) this distance between them. As part of the ‘Mind the Gap’ performance, the fictional Geoff Ryman accidentally ‘sits back down on top of an elderly passenger’ instead of sitting on ‘Ben, the leader of MrG, on whom he should have sat’ (1998, p. 137). At this point, the forced and ‘embarrassing’ closeness with the elderly passenger, proximity that Geoff does not want, is placed typographically next to the increasing distance, which he also does not want, between him and the group leader ‘Ben flee[ing] up the steps’ on the arrival of a policeman who wants to see the group’s letter of permission for the performance (which, it would seem, they do not have) (1998, p. 137). The concern with distance and proximity is further highlighted throughout the novel’s content; for instance, passengers 37 and 235, Richard Tomlinson and Tristan Sawyer, formerly ‘best friend[s]’ are listed in the glossary as linked because the latter ‘stopped seeing’ the former, and the former ‘feels deserted by’ the latter (1998, pp. 321, 356, 358). The former friends, no longer close due to circumstances surrounding Richard’s illness, are seated at opposite ends of the train (in cars 1 and 7, respectively) and are thus spatially distanced, yet the information given in both of their sections presents an emotionally charged relationship: Tristan is:

[...thinking he really should give Richard a call. Tristan was very angry with him for getting himself infected. Silly trollop, there were plenty of nice young men who would have fallen all over themselves to have a relationship]
with him. [...] Tristan suddenly sees Richard’s face as it was in Cornwall:
happy, bold, smiling, beautiful. He tries to dismiss it, and can’t. (1998, p. 321)

In a similarly emotionally charged entry, Richard is:

[r]eturning from hospital having failed to convince them to let him die. This
is his second bout of pneumonia and he has survived three suicide attempts.
[...] None of his friends know he is ill – except one, Passenger 235, who
withdrew from him in fear and disgust. Richard lost heart after that. (1998,
p. 55)

The typographical distance between Richard and Tristan mirrors the distance in
their relationship, as does the way in which Tristan is not called by name, but
simply called ‘Passenger 235’, in Richard’s section. These factors, combined with
the way in which the former ‘best friend[s]’ are thinking about other in such
emotional terms, reflects the fundamental concern with the simultaneous distance
and proximity of individuals in 253, as well as gesturing towards other forms of
contradiction important to the novel, such as the ubiquitous concern – as the train

Pléßke notes that the temporal setting of the novel also highlights this
concern with life and death, arguing that the time preceding the train’s crash at
Elephant and Castle ‘is represented as the remaining time of the characters’ lives’,
and thus this time period ‘characterises the Tube as the liminal space between life
and death’ (2014, p. 261). Pléßke goes on to suggest that, because of this, the
passengers aboard the train can be understood as ‘urban zombies, reduced to lost
souls by the city’s violent demands’ and that the footnote within a footnote
describing William Blake is an ‘early mention of this ghostly trail’ (2014, p. 261).
This idea of the ghostly is supported in the novel at the point of Blake’s entry into
the text, as ‘[t]he train, trailing spirits, pulled him. He arrived staggering forward as
if hurled’ (1998, p. 185). I argued earlier that although Blake is not a passenger travelling on the train, he does have his own lengthy entry organised in the same manner as all the other passengers and, in this way, is another passenger contained within the footnotes. If this is considered in the light of Pleßke’s argument, Blake can be seen as a 254th passenger, as I argued earlier, but we can also see that his presence in the footnotes is a reflection of this ghostly nature. He is a passenger, but exists as a footnote to the living passengers, serving as a forewarning of the impending crash and further highlighting 253’s concern with life and death. The interplay between distance and proximity in the form of 253 reflects those concerns within the content of the novel: the distances and links between the passengers, the physical movement of the train culminating in the eventual ‘hurtling’ crash (1998, p. 345), and the subsequent coming together of machine and human. This idea is evident in a subtle manner throughout the novel, for instance in the case of the aforementioned passenger 37, Richard Tomlinson, who has ‘just enough strength left to walk from the tube’ and is going home to ‘let the pneumonia blossom’. At home ‘[a]n answering machine will take all of his calls’, stating explicitly that a machine will take over the task of receiving any communication, but also perhaps with an implied suggestion – with his previous ‘three [failed] suicide attempts’ and chronic illness – that Richard Tomlinson does not intend to listen to any messages and thus the answering machine will in fact be the only recipient of those messages (1998, p. 55; of course, this is not the case anyhow due to the impending crash). In this case, the coming together of man and machine is presented subtly as the replacement of man with machine: as the mortality of man reaches its limits, what is left behind is the machine. This, of course, also mirrors the overarching fabula of
the novel, which ends with the crashing train filled with many dead or dying passengers. At this stage in the novel the train is also described in terms that suggest it is coming alive just as many of its passengers are dying: ‘[t]he whole end of the car has blossomed like a flower in time-lapse photography. Its petals unfurl, sucking in the roof’ (1998, p. 349); ‘[o]ne end of the carriage puckers, then erupts like a volcano. The two men [passenger 101 Paul Launcey, and passenger 75 Stefan Braun] are lifted up as if on lava’ (p. 349). Both descriptions assign natural attributes to machinery, and while the former compares the train to a small, gentle flower blossoming, the latter compares the train to an enormous and violent volcanic eruption; these descriptions present the crash in a way which mirrors the novel’s concern with ideas of contradiction (similarity and difference, distance and proximity; machine and human). Interestingly, O’Brien notes that Danish architect and urban planner Steen Eiuler Rasmussen described Piccadilly Circus tube station as ‘[a] turbine grinding out human beings on all sides’ and that ‘[t]he London Underground, in its size, history and complexity, does indeed, function like a machine’ (Rasmussen, 1960, cited in O’Brien, 2010, p. 55). The coming together of man and machine in a more literal sense is illustrated particularly graphically in the ‘fist of metal’ that ‘come[s] for’ (1998, p. 345) passenger 23, Yoshi Kamimura and the death of passenger 73, Milton Richards, who dies ‘enfolded in the steel arms of Jesus’ (1998, p. 346). The collision of the carriages, and with them the passengers who were previously typographically separated (1998, pp. 345 – 351), resolves the novel’s concern with distance and proximity in a violent way, arguably gesturing towards the dangers of a society in which individuals are isolated from each other. 253 does not, however, suggest that proximity is better than distance, but rather
illustrates that the relationship between the two states is complex. Ryman’s various mentions of his friend’s death from AIDS, and the emotionally charged sections for passengers Richard Tomlinson and Tristan Sawyer – which, as I discuss above, suggest that Richard became ‘infected’ during a brief homosexual encounter (rather than a ‘relationship’ with ‘a nice young [man]’) (1998, p. 321) – also gesture towards a dangerous aspect of interconnectedness. Through the novel’s tacit concern with AIDS, *sexual* proximity is highlighted; the hypertext structure of the novel then can be seen to reflect the complex web of sexual links between people that allows a virus to spread. The final section of the print remix of 253 is a ‘Reader Satisfaction Survey’ (1998, pp. 365 – 366); regarding his receipt of completed 253 surveys, Ryman comments that:

I learned a lot of things. I learned that some people can’t recognise jokes. I learned that some people regarded feedback forms as an assault on the dignity of literature.

[...] I had to face the fact that some people simply didn’t like the book. I could agree with why they didn’t like it and learn a lesson for next time. Or I could decide they disliked the book because it was wrong for them and accept that you can’t please everybody.

I also got a strong sense of what feedback will teach us all: that most of us walk around in an armour of our own concerns and perceptions. If you want to talk to people and you want them to respond, you’re going to have to find a way to pierce their armour.

Increasingly, to do that, you will have to allow them to pierce yours. That’s feedback. (Ryman, 2000)

This notion of individuals as spending their everyday lives ‘walk[ing] around in [...] armour’ further confronts 253’s concern with distance and proximity – with the isolation of individuals who, actually, are all intrinsically ‘linked and alike’ (Ryman, in Grossman, 1997), even if those common factors are not explicitly
apparent but, like the list of links between passengers in the print remix, are hidden away from the immediate surface.

Hypertext links can create ‘layered writing and reading’ (Bolter, 2000, p. 27) which enables the reader to move from page to page in a way which is well suited to present a realistic picture of the ‘chaotic, fluid, random’ nature of life, which ‘leaves myriads of ends untied, untidily’ (Johnson, 1973, p. 14). I asked earlier if Johnson’s *The Unfortunates*, with its focus on adequately representing truth and memory (in a ‘natural’, accurate manner), can be said to be aiming for the ‘natural[ness]’ (Bolter, 2000, p. 27) of hypertext before hypertext systems were developed and, if so, whether this means that hypertext is not simply a digital form to represent a digital age, but rather a form which engages with similar concerns, and employs similar methods, to those of the experimental writers discussed in the previous chapter. In *The Unfortunates*, the fabula addresses the narrator’s memories, and the reader’s participation in the construction of the szujet enacts the ordering and re-ordering of memories (as I discussed in the previous chapter, memories of an event do not always occur in the same order, but the content is substantively the same; the reader therefore makes sense of each fragment of memory – section of the novel – by relating it to the others, and an overall understanding of the events emerge from these relationships). In this way, the structure of *The Unfortunates* mirrors the cognitive processes of making sense of memory, and so in this regard can be said to be presenting ‘truth in the form of a novel’ (Johnson, 1973, p. 14) in a comparable way to how hypertext novels are a ‘natural’ (Bolter, 2000, p. 27) form of writing which reflect the changing reality of cognitive processes, as I have discussed with reference to Doidge (2007), and
Pascual-Leone (2005). Though Johnson’s novel was written before hypertext was an available writing medium, *The Unfortunates* – in its concern with presenting truth and mirroring the disordered and associative workings of memory – is as ‘natural’ a text as 253.16 Interestingly, Carr’s observation ‘that readers of hypertext often [end] up clicking distractedly “through pages instead of reading them carefully”’ (Carr, 2010, p. 126) can also be observed of *The Unfortunates*. Firstly, evidence for this can be seen in reviews like Coren’s, that he ‘didn’t bother to read the book either. Just three of the chapters. But [...] that would have been as valid a reading of [*The Unfortunates*] as any’ (2004, p. 13), and particularly in the comments of Christine Brooke-Rose, who must surely have been reading ‘distractedly’ (Carr, 2010, p. 126) in order to mix up details of the plot and content of the novel, as I discussed in chapter one.

In both 253 and *The Unfortunates*, then, it can be seen that an overall understanding of the text emerges by piecing together discrete units of text; *Composition No. 1* anticipates the connective methods of reading hypertext in a similar way to *The Unfortunates*, by requiring its readers to construct the szujet by moving from discrete page to discrete page in an unspecified order. Bolter states

16 Mitchell also observes this point about the form of *The Unfortunates* mirroring its content:

[as] if to prove the point that form and content cannot easily be separated, *The Unfortunates* is preoccupied with time, memory, reconstruction, ordering and sequence: with how things fit together (or don’t) in a temporal and/or causal sense. The act of re-ordering that the reader performs mirrors that of the narrator in reconstructing (re-membering, giving a body or substance to) his memories of Tony; both acts attempt to fend off meaninglessness or death (respectively), as evinced by Tony’s bodily and verbal disintegration. (2007, p. 61)
that ‘[we see] in Saporta’s experiment, and in others like it [...] a bridge to the electronic medium’ (2000, p. 150); William Paulson also notes that experimental texts have the appearance of being produced by computers, before hypertext systems were developed:

[...] or a demonstration of the sheer variety inherent in combinatoric composition, one need look no further than Queneau’s *Cent Mille Milliards de Poèmes* (One Hundred Thousand Billion Poems), in which the reader can choose from ten possibilities for each of the fourteen lines of a sonnet. The book’s 140 lines thus contain 10^{14}, or 100,000,000,000,000, potential poems. Each of its ten text “pages” is cut into fourteen horizontal strips, so that by turning the strips the reader selects a line for each position and thereby sets up a sonnet that can be read in the usual manner. Obviously the possibilities of the book as format are being strained to the limit, and *Cent Mille Milliards de Poèmes* would be an ideal candidate for a computerised edition. When today’s students encounter Oulipian texts, they spontaneously believe them to have been produced with the aid of computers. (Paulson, 1989, p. 297)\(^\text{17}\)

The research I have discussed in this section, such as Carr (2010), posits that, with the increased use of digital media in our everyday lives, the way we see and interact with the world is changing. As digital forms of writing and reading become increasingly prevalent, neurological changes take place and literary forms like hypertext – the formal possibilities of which ‘encourage us to dip in and out’ of texts (Carr, 2010, p. 90) – reflect these changes: hypertext as a literary form reflects our increasingly ‘technologically textured’ reality (I appropriate this term from Don Ihde, 1993, p. 113).\(^\text{18}\)

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17 Tomasula notes that Queneau’s text allows for ‘a potential reading of 10^{14} sonnets’ (2012a, p. 490).

18 Discussing the ways in which technology mediates the human world, Ihde argues that:

[it is] not at all accidental that the primary metaphors for explaining bodily functions should be technological ones – hearts are “pumps,” brains have
When B.S. Johnson spoke of telling the ‘truth’ (1973, p. 14), he was noting that the changes in reality – also noted by McLuhan in 1964 (2003, p. 5) – made it necessary for literature to ‘evolve’ (Johnson, 1973, p. 16); from the late 20th century, hypertext provides a continuation of these concerns in an ‘ever-changing reality’ (Johnson, 1973, p. 17). Terms such as ‘natural’ (Bolter, 2000, p. 27) are not particularly helpful in broadening our understanding of what hypertext (or indeed any text) is and does without a broader understanding, as I have elucidated here, of how our brains are indeed being ‘turned over’ to mental skills associated with the use of digital media (Doidge, 2007, p. 59). Tomasula argues that:

> [u]nlike printed books, many of the inherent characteristics of electronic writing – malleability, ease of recombination, dependence on the image, interactivity, linkage and therefore indeterminacy, dispersal of Origins, of Author/Authority, erosion of genre boundaries as well as boundaries between nations, human and machine, the public and private – many of these characteristics seem also to characterise our historical moment. Electronic reading and writing feels, in other words, normal. (2012a, p. 495)

The term ‘normal’ is no more useful than ‘natural’ without the aforementioned illumination, but Tomasula’s argument is useful in that it highlights the fact that electronic writing seems ‘to characterise our historical moment’. This foregrounds the idea of hypertext as a literary form that reflects the processes of contemporary brains used to interacting with digital media and is thus what one might call a digital form to represent realistically a digital age. Yet hypertext is not simply a ‘natural’ way of reading by this definition; it also engages with similar concerns to those seen in the work of the experimental writers discussed throughout this thesis,

“wiring,” language learning is “pre-programmed,” etc. Rather, this is a reflection of a basic and immediate environmental texture which, for the late modern, is a technologically textured one. (1993, pp. 112 – 113)
and is understood most productively when considered as a textual form emerging from a ‘technologically textured’ cultural and social environment (Ihde, 1993, p. 113), and which continues some of the concerns surrounding truth and realism seen in materially experimental writing.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has continued to explore the idea of a literary continuum, by asking what we can gain from looking at hypertext fiction in relation to earlier materially experimental writing, rather than in isolation and only in the context of hypertext theory and criticism. It has considered relevant theoretical and contextual material, explored the idea of the infinite text (as discussed in chapter one) in relation to hypertext, examined the significance of footnotes, and explored the idea of telling, in hypertext, ‘truth in the form of a novel’ (Johnson, 1973, p. 14). Focusing mainly on Geoff Ryman’s 253, the chapter has drawn comparisons between hypertext fiction and materially experimental writing and established that the texts in question display similar concerns and similar methods of exploring those concerns – within their respective technological/material boundaries. In doing this, this chapter has informed our understanding of key examples of hypertext fiction and the literary continuum exposed in this thesis in new and productive ways. The final chapter will explore further this reciprocity and continuity, examining the significance of video games as a part of the textual continuum under exploration throughout this thesis.
Chapter Three: Video Games

3.1 Introduction

Earlier I discussed J. David Bolter’s comment that ‘[we see] in Saporta’s experiment [Composition No. 1], and in others like it [...] a bridge to the electronic medium’ (Bolter, 2000, p. 150) and argued, in opposition to Bolter, that texts that can be seen as a ‘bridge’ to digital textuality do not signal the ‘late age of print’ (2000, p. 150) or the end of printed fiction as we know it. Just as the materially experimental texts and hypertext fiction that I discussed in the earlier chapters of this thesis are not emblematic of the death of print fiction, video games do not mean the end of hypertext, or of print; none of these new technologies signal ‘the end’ (Bolter, 2000, p. 150) of any of the previous ones. I have argued throughout this thesis that the texts on which I focus, and others like them, are not entirely different to those that have gone before (or that come after), arguing instead that they display common concerns, particularly with the (perceived) agency of the reader or player, and are a response to their contemporary cultural backdrops. In this way, these texts can be plotted on a continuum; this allows us to explore how looking at the texts within an inclusive framework which examines reciprocal elements, rather than treating them as isolated examples, can help us to understand the texts, and their broader significance, in new ways. This chapter will draw together the discussions of the first two chapters, exploring the relationship between print textuality and digital textuality, and investigating what part is played by video games in the textual continuum on which this thesis focuses. Through examining closely the texts in question within their broader cultural,
critical, and theoretical contexts, the chapter will examine similarities and differences in the texts in question, and will look at how the video games on which I focus illustrate parallel concerns to the materially experimental writing and hypertext fiction studied in previous chapters. In doing this, the chapter will present new critical analyses of the video games in question, draw new comparisons with the texts discussed in earlier chapters, and develop a broader understanding of the significance of the individual texts in question, and their wider importance as part of the textual continuum.

In conducting this investigation, I am not positing that video games should be considered as literature; I agree with Ensslin’s statement that ‘by definition, computer games aren’t literature because they have to be played rather than read’ (Ensslin, 2012b, p. 507). I also do not intend to be caught up in the narratology-ludology debate, but rather to examine closely the video games under consideration in this chapter as texts in themselves, looking for their importance ‘within the text [rather than] outside the fictional work’ (Bell, Ensslin and Rustad, 2014b, p. 3; stated regarding the lack of scholarship closely examining digital fiction). Indeed, as I discussed in my introduction, Ensslin notes that the narratology-ludology debate (a misleading term in itself due to the dearth of any actual debate) has given way to a ‘a more synthetical view’, with most ludologists agreeing that ‘in order to study videogames comprehensively, a wide range of ludic, technological, medial, representational, textual, social, cultural, communicative, psychological, physiological and economic aspects needs to be considered’ (2012c, p. 30). Frans Mäyrä argues that ‘games are best conceived as multiple-layered systems and processes of signification that mix representational
and performative, rule-based and improvisational modes in their cultural character’ (2009, p. 314); and Dovey and Kennedy note that:

> [f]or many of us, the pleasures of gameplay lie in [the] negotiation of and submission to the rules of the game – a pleasure that lies in an oscillation between activity and passivity. We actively participate in the creation of the game as we play it, while at the same time we passively submit to rules which limit our possible behaviours. (2006, p. 26)

In fact, games are both ‘rules and fiction’ (Juul, 2005, p. 12; see also Newman, 2004, and Atkins and Krzywinska, 2007), combining ‘elements of rules and textuality [...] rather than being constituted first and foremost by either one of them’ (Ensslin, 2012c, p. 30).¹ In chapter two I noted Ensslin’s observation that when discussing ‘hypertext, a medially extended concept of “text” needs to be assumed, encompassing various semiotic systems such as image, script and sound, their “codes” and their denotative and connotative interplay’ (Ensslin, 2007, p. 164). In this chapter I am using a similar definition for video games, also put forward by Ensslin (2012c), which starts from:

> the assumption that videogames are textual in nature. After all, even the rules on which they are based are conceived of and articulated semiotically – verbally and audio-visually. Furthermore, the interface that connects the player with the gameworld combines a variety of different semiotic modes and text types, such as spoken and written language, moving and still images, and a wide range of different sound types including music, noise and voice. (p. 41)

Clearly, ‘some videogame genres are more “textual” than others in that they integrate more representational modes because they seek to create complex game

¹ This argument is in opposition to Caillois’s often mentioned argument that games are ‘not ruled and make-believe. Rather, they are ruled or make believe’ (Caillois, 1961, pp. 8 – 9). As Juul notes, ‘most modern board games and video games’ contradict this argument: ‘[m]ost video games are ruled and make-believe’ (Juul, 2005, p. 13).
worlds rather than restricting themselves to a minimum abstract level of rule instantiation’ (Ensslin, 2012c, p. 42), but the video games in question in this chapter, by these definitions, are clearly textual in nature.

The chapter will begin by examining recent scholarly discussions regarding the relationship between print textuality and digital textuality and will consider Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* as a key text within these discussions, as a novel which showcases features of both print and digital textuality whilst maintaining its ‘allegiance to print regardless of the availability of other media’ (Hayles, 2008, p. 162). The chapter will then unpick the relationship between print and digital texts by considering closely several key video games. It will consider *L.A. Noire* (2011), with a specific interest in the ways in which the game declares an ‘allegiance to print’; it will consider *Phantasmagoria* (1995) as an example of a realistic interactive movie offering the player multicursal pathways, but one correct path to win; it will consider *Oblivion* in relation to its open world environment; and it will consider *Catherine* (2012), the ending of which is dependant on answers given by the player in response to questions posed by the game, and which illustrates concerns surrounding player agency in interesting ways. *L.A. Noire* and *Catherine*, to date, have been largely ignored by scholars, whereas *Phantasmagoria* and *Oblivion* have been considered in discussions peripheral to the discussions held in this thesis. In choosing these examples, I intend to build upon the scholarly work that already exists, but also to extend and rework ideas within the context of my own argument.
3.2 The ‘mark of the digital’

N. Katherine Hayles has observed the relationship between print and electronic textuality as one of ‘complementary strategies’ (2008, p. 162). She describes how ‘digital technologies have completely interpenetrated the printing process’, creating ‘print novel[s] bearing the mark of the digital’ (2008, p. 185). Hayles describes the existence of the mark of the digital in print texts as now inherent, as ‘almost all contemporary literature is already digital’ (2008, p. 159). This is because, aside from the relatively small number of books created by press, the majority of books exist in digital form ‘throughout most of [their] existence’ (2008, p. 159). This appears to be a rather odd comment, as print books surely, once printed, exist in that printed form for the majority of their existence. What Hayles means is that most books exist as digital files through the majority of their creation, and during their production before they emerge as printed papers. Additionally, this refers to how developments in digital technology enable previously difficult or impossible changes to be made in the sphere of printed books: for instance, innovative typography and changes to the aesthetics of printed books, new forms of marketing, and e-book readers. This is one side to how Hayles sees the mark of the digital; the other side is apparent in those texts that can be described as ‘digital born’ (2008, p. 160). These are texts created in digital media, that are intended to be experienced as digital texts – defined in the last chapter as texts which are, ‘written for and read on a computer screen [pursuing their] verbal, discursive and/or conceptual complexity through the digital medium, and [which] would lose something of [their] aesthetic and semiotic function if [they] were removed from that medium’ (Bell et al., 2010).
As Hayles sees it, print texts and digital born texts ‘differ significantly in their functionalities, [and] are best considered as two components of a complex and dynamic media ecology’ (2008, p. 160). Essentially, and borrowing from John Cayley (2005), Hayles agrees that ‘[t]he surface of writing is and has always been complex’, and that the ‘surfaces created in the new millenium have a historical specificity that comes from their engagement with digitality’ (2008, p. 160); this digital engagement is apparent in production methods, phenomonology, and conceptual and thematic concerns’.

‘Digital literature’, argues Hayles, ‘will be a significant component of the twenty-first century canon’ (2008, p. 159). Whereas Hayles’s primary interest here lies in the mark of the digital on print texts, rather than digital born texts, I am interested in how the idea of the mark of the digital extends and reveals the reciprocity which is apparent across print and digital literature, in effect creating a *mark of print* which sits alongside the mark of the digital. My interest in this chapter lies in the reciprocity between forms, in the mark of the digital as existing in tandem with what I shall call the mark of print. In brief, Hayles’s mark of the digital refers to how digital technologies have affected print texts; my mark of print co-exists with this, and refers to the ways in which a reciprocal relationship can be seen between print and digital texts.

The ‘anxiety of obsolescence’ surrounding the digital invasion of print texts resulted in a creative explosion in print novels (Hayles, 2008, p. 162).²

Though the textual innovations made possible by digital technology (for instance

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² See also Kathleen Fitzpatrick’s (2006) *The Anxiety of Obsolescence: the American Novel in the Age of Television*. 
dancing text) can be seen to seduce readers and thus ‘endanger’ print, the same technology is also now inherent as part of the process of creating print; as Hayles puts it, ‘we have met the enemy and he is us’ (2008, p. 162). In fact, the gist of Hayles’s argument is not that digital text is ‘the enemy’ of print, but rather that the two are increasingly interdependent. Though she later concludes *Electronic Literature* by stating that ‘[b]ooks will not disappear, but neither will they escape the effects of the digital technologies that interpenetrate them [...] digitality has become the textual condition of twenty-first century literature’ (2008, p. 186), this new textual condition is not stated as being an inherently negative one. As time passes, and digital texts do not replace print texts, this fear of digital textuality as a replacement for print seems to have subsided somewhat (Ensslin 2007, p. 54), but in the earlier stages of the recent history of digital texts it seemed to some, as David S. Miall and Teresa Dobson note, that ‘the reading of literary texts may simply seem rather dull in competition with the multimedia, virtual reality simulations that are now being rushed to market’ (2001). Other discussions surrounding concerns about the death of print have been noted throughout this thesis, and it is important to note that, prior to those fears, there were concerns about the arrival of cinema. Scholes (1967) states that:

the cinema provides a particularly frightening [threat] for those of us who love words, because it threatens to take over from the word-smiths the business of story-telling. [...] In the face of competition from cinema, fiction must abandon its attempt to “represent reality” and rely more on the power of words to stimulate the imagination. (pp. 11 – 12)

Similarly, B.S. Johnson comments that:

[i]t is a fact of crucial significance in the history of the novel this century that James Joyce opened the first cinema in Dublin in 1909. Joyce saw
very early on that film must usurp some of the prerogatives which until then had belonged exclusively to the novelist. Film could tell a story more directly, in less time and with more concrete detail than a novel [...] no novelist’s description of a battle squadron at sea in a gale could really hope to compete with that in a well-shot film; and why should anyone who simply wanted to be told a story spend all his spare time for a week or weeks reading a book when he could experience the same thing in a version in some ways superior at his local cinema in only one evening? (1973, p. 11)

With these views in focus, it seems that perhaps the emergence of any new creative technology is likely to result in fears regarding the obsolescence of current forms. On the increasing prevalence of electronic textuality, the print novel looked to ‘one-up’ (Hayles, 2008, p. 162) the digital text, whilst simultaneously realising that digital technologies actually made possible innovations in the print novel itself; this dynamic has been described in terms of two emerging strategies: imitating (‘imitating electronic textuality through comparable devices in print’), and intensifying (‘in effect declaring allegiance to print regardless of the availability of other media’) (Hayles, 2008, p. 162). The dynamic of intensification and imitation is entangled to such a degree in *House of Leaves* that it is difficult to tell which medium, the print or the digital, is ‘more important in producing the novel’s effects’ (2008, p. 175). Though this statement posits an interesting point in relation to the novel, it also continues to formulate the relationship between print and digital textuality as one of conflict. It is not the case that one medium must be ‘more important’, but rather that the two inform and build on each other. In many ways, *House of Leaves* presents its reader with an interactive experience based on this reciprocity, mirrored from form to content: the text is a print novel with clear aspects of digital textuality, yet commits fully to
neither, and takes place in a house which is a ‘strange spatial violation’
(Danielewski, 2001, p. 24). This idea of violation also seems apparent overall in
Hayles’s study of the relationship between print and the digital, as she concludes
that ‘[b]ooks will not [...] escape the effects of the digital technologies that
interpenetrate them’ (2008, p. 186), as if print was being held hostage by
computer technology. What does emerge clearly here is a concern with dualism,
but rather than talk in terms of conflict and escape, I see House of Leaves as a key
example of why it is so important to consider texts as belonging to both worlds,
and to explore how the reciprocity in this relationship works.

Hayles goes to lengths to highlight that ‘ELECTRONIC LITERATURE IS
NOT PRINT’ (2008, p. 30), stating that:

[p]laying attention to the ways in which electronic literature both extends
and disrupts print conventions is a neat trick, and the criticism is littered
with people who [are] ballyhooing its novelty or failing to see the genuine

Clearly, electronic literature is different from print. Yet this does not mean that it
is unimportant to consider the relationship between the two in a more detailed and
specific manner. Far from being ‘a neat trick’, a detailed examination of the
reciprocity between digital textuality and print textuality aids us in developing our
understanding of both; and, following in a loosely chronological fashion from the
discussions of the previous two chapters, video games are the next important
aspect of this exploration to consider. Ryan comments that ‘[f]or the Scandinavian
school of ludology (Espen Aarseth, Markku Eskelinen, Jesper Juul and Gonzalo
Frasca), games are games and stories are stories and these two types of cultural
artefacts cannot hybridise, because they present radically different essences’, but
that ‘[f]or [her] it is like saying that stories are stories and operas are music and therefore an opera cannot have a narrative libretto’ (2007, p. 264). Ryan’s focus is on the narrative aspects of gaming, but her general position is one with which I agree. As I discussed earlier, Dovey and Kennedy comment that Eskelinen (2001), ‘like much of the ludological critique of narrative approaches, [suggests] that games should only be studied in relation to what makes them a game (the rules, the materials, the events that constitute the gaming situation)’ (2006, p. 87); and Aarseth argues that ‘[g]ames are not a kind of cinema, or literature, but colonising attempts from both these fields have already happened, and no doubt will happen again [and] again, until computer game studies emerges as a clearly self-sustained academic field’ (2001). Certainly video games are not strictly a kind of cinema, or literature, but this fails to take account of the fact that they can contain cinematic aspects (Klevjer, 2002) and literary aspects (Ensslin, 2014b). Dovey and Kennedy note the potential difficulties raised in studying video games, but confirm that although:

[o]n the surface it may be hard to identify the common properties of Parappa the Rapper (Sony 1997), The Legend of Zelda (Nintendo 1998) and FIFA 2005 (EA 2005) [...] the same might have been said of Griffith’s Birth of a Nation (1915), The Cabinet of Dr Caligari (Robert Wiene 1920) or Modern Times (Chaplin 1936), yet we are able to assign them key places in the history of what we call cinema [...]. Genre differences should not prevent us from identifying some common approaches or “forms of attention” appropriate to the study of computer games. (2006, pp. 84 – 85)

Video games are an integral part of the textual continuum discussed in this thesis, a continuum as important as the one Juul references when he states in his seminal Half Real that ‘video games are the latest development in a history of games that spans millenia’ (2005, p. 54). Hayles has argued that ‘[d]igital technologies do
more than mark the surfaces of contemporary print novels. They also put into play
dynamics that interrogate and reconfigure the relations between authors and
readers, humans and intelligent machines, code and language’ (2008, p. 186). I
believe what is missing from this equation is the fact that, additionally, print
technologies do more than mark the surface of contemporary digital texts. I will
explore how the mark of print and the mark of the digital work together in video
games, which have been described as, ‘in both production and consumption, the
ideal product of the contemporary moment’ (Kline, Dyer-Witherford, and de

3.3 Declaring allegiance to a history of print

In an interview in 2003 with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, Danielewski
answers the question of whether computers were important for the composition of

*House of Leaves* by stating that:

I didn’t write *House of Leaves* on a word processor. In fact, I wrote out the
entire thing in pencil! And what’s most ironic, I’m still convinced that it’s
a great deal easier to write something out by hand than on a computer.
You hear a lot of people talking about how computers make writing so
much easier because they offer the writer so many choices, whereas in fact
pencil and paper allow you a much greater freedom. You can do anything
in pencil! (2003, p. 117)³

The fact that Danielewski posits the pencil as an object that stands in opposition to
the computer is interesting in comparison with Tomasula’s comment that
electronic writing is ‘a tool (like a pencil)’ used to create credible representations

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³ Danielewski *does* acknowledge the importance of computers in the production of
printed books: ‘There’s no doubt computers, new software, and other technologies
play a big role in getting any book ready for production these days’ (McCaffery
of our digital cultural moment (2012a). Though Tomasula’s comment does not, of course, state that a pencil is the same as a computer, or by extension that print literature and digital literature are the same, it does posit digital textuality as akin, creatively speaking, to the ‘pencil and paper’ method, but using tools from a different ‘moment in time’, in order to accurately represent that moment in time. Danielewski’s suggestion that pencil and paper allow a much greater authorial freedom than a computer is used by Hayles as evidence that House of Leaves ‘position[s] itself as a rival to the computer’s ability to represent within itself other media’, ‘remediating[ing] an astonishing variety of media, including film, video, photography, telegraphy, painting, collage, and graphics’ (2008, p. 177). Similarly, House of Leaves is, according to Hansen, ‘obsessed with technical mediation [...] [and] a hybrid media ecology’, and Danielewski ‘takes pains to circumscribe the constitutive limitations of each [media form] and, in line with his stated aim, to champion the superiority of print’ (2004, p. 598 – 599); Hayles agrees, stating that in House of Leaves, Danielewski is effectively ‘declaring allegiance to print regardless of the availability of other media’ (Hayles, 2008, p. 162). It is in this idea of championing the superiority of print that something particularly important emerges. Hansen’s article opens with the same citation that I must here repeat, though drawing different conclusions:

books don’t have to be so limited. They can intensify informational content and experience. Multiple stories can lie side by side on the page. Search engines – in the case of House of Leaves a word index – will allow for easy cross-referencing. Passages may be found, studied, revisited, or even skimmed. And that’s just the beginning. Words can also be coloured and those colours can have meaning. How quickly pages are turned or not turned can be addressed. Hell pages can be tilted, turned upside down, even read backwards. I’d love to see that. Someone on the subway spinning a book as they’re reading it. But here’s the joke. Books have had
this capacity all along [...]. Books are remarkable constructions with enormous possibilities [...]. But somehow the analogue powers of these wonderful bundles of paper have been forgotten. Somewhere along the way, all its possibilities were denied. I’d like to see that perception change. I’d like to see the book reintroduced for all it really is. Not impossible. We just have to do it. (Danielewski, in Cottrell, 2002)

Arguably, this part of the interview with Danielewski is filled with the ‘anxiety of obsolescence’ described earlier (Hayles, 2008, p. 162); this is not necessarily regarding his own novel (about which he seems entirely confident), but about print novels generally speaking. Though he acknowledges that ‘here’s the joke’, he has misunderstood the punchline of that joke. Indeed, books have ‘had this capacity all along’, and his own House of Leaves exists as part of a textual continuum that includes authors like B.S. Johnson and Marc Saporta, who have already played with these ‘enormous possibilities’ to great effect, albeit not necessarily great reception. And therein lies the real punchline to Danielewski’s ‘joke’: House of Leaves ‘reintroduce[s]’ the book ‘for all it really is’, just as B.S. Johnson did, and as Marc Saporta did, in the post-war period. As I discussed in chapter one, Johnson declared regarding his own work that “‘[e]xperimental’ to most reviewers is almost always a synonym for ‘unsuccessful’. [...] Where I depart from convention, it is because the convention has failed, is inadequate for conveying what I have to say’ and that ‘for every device I have used there is a literary rationale and a technical justification; anyone who cannot accept this has simply not understood the problem which had to be solved’ (1973, pp. 19 – 20).

Read side by side with Danielewski’s comments regarding how books can ‘intensify informational content and experience’, it seems that whereas general critical opinion required Johnson to defend his experimental methods (as I discuss in chapter one), House of Leaves appears to require far less of a defence. For
instance, though *House of Leaves* is arguably no less ‘cripplingly experimental’ than *The Unfortunates* (Coren, 2004), *The Guardian*’s Steven Poole comments that ‘[it] is not often that a reviewer devours a 700-page novel at one sitting; but I did [...]. [*House of Leaves* is] a rare debut: genuinely exciting in its technical and literary exuberance’ (Poole, 2000). *House of Leaves* is certainly a ‘print novel bearing the mark of the digital’ (Hayles, 2008, p. 185), but it is more than that. Danielewski may state that ‘[s]omewhere along the way, all [the] possibilities [of books] were denied. I’d like to see that perception change. I’d like to see the book reintroduced for all it really is’ (Danielewski, in Cottrell, 2002), but his novel is by no means the first to try this. What Danielewski’s novel benefits from, which Johnson’s, Saporta’s, and Cortázar’s did not, is the digital textuality that marks it. *House of Leaves* can be described as a ‘print novel bearing the mark of the digital’ (2008, p. 185), because digital textuality is its contemporary; it also explicitly draws on hypertextuality. This is clear firstly in the choice of blue colouring for the word ‘house’ throughout the colour editions of the text (the colour of hyperlinks, suggesting, fittingly, that interacting with the ‘house’ will transport you elsewhere; in greyscale print the word is a lighter shade than the surrounding text). The explicit link to hypertextuality is also apparent in such examples as Johnny Truant’s footnote 36 to Zampanò’s text:

> [s]o you see from my perspective, having to decide between old man Z and his story is an artificial, maybe even dangerous choice, and one I’m

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4 Danielewski has been unwilling to comment definitively on the significance of the blue text in *House of Leaves*, sparking a number of discussions of the matter, including Martin Brick (2004), N. Katherine Hayles (2002a), and Jessica Pressman (2006).
obviously not comfortable making. The way I figure it, if there’s
something you find irksome – go ahead and skip it. I couldn’t care less
how you read any of this. His wandering passages are staying, along with
all his oddly canted phrases and even some warped bits in the plot. There’s
just too much at stake. It may be the wrong decision, but fuck it, it’s mine.
(Danielewski, 2001, p. 31)

Ideas of the reader choosing how to read, and skipping parts as he or she wishes,
are explicitly reminiscent of how a reader interacts with hypertext novels. Of
course, the notion of skipping sections is not exclusive to hypertext, as I have
discussed elsewhere in this thesis. The ‘Table of Instructions’ (1966a, New York:
Pantheon Books), also referred to as an ‘Author’s Note’ (1966b, London: The
Harvill Press), in Cortázar’s Hopscotch invites its readers to ‘choose between [two
possibilities]’ of reading pathway, and – like the invitation to ‘skip’ (Danielewski,
2001, p. 31) of sections in House of Leaves – ‘the reader may ignore [the second
pathway]’ in Hopscotch (1966a, ‘Table of Instructions’ or ‘Author’s Note’).

House of Leaves illustrates the reciprocity of digital textuality and print through
its play with digital textuality contained within a print format. Hansen equates the
‘physically impossible [and unrepresentable] object’ of the house (2004, p. 599),
with digital technology which, Hansen argues, does not require a pre-existing
original object to create its representations; thus the ‘house is nothing if not a
figure for the digital’ (2004, p. 609).5 This analogy of the house with the digital is
linked with the description of the house as a ‘strange spatial violation’
(Danielewski, 2001, p. 24); the formal and typographical innovations in the novel

5 Hayles counter argues that: ‘[i]n Hansen’s argument, a slippage occurs in the
equation of the house as an unrepresentable object with digital technology’s
ability to create simulacra’, as although ‘digital technologies can create objects for
which there is no original […] the technology itself is perfectly representable [for
(for instance, extensive footnotes and marginalia, experimental typography and unconventional page layouts) imply that print is the ideal medium to convey the novel’s concern with exploration and the idea of the ‘quest’ (Danielewski, 2001, p. 30). Similarly, those formal/typographical innovations in themselves mimic the patterns of movement found in the navigation of hypertext fiction, further adding to Danielewski’s ‘champion[ing]’ of print in *House of Leaves*, as this reinforces the idea that printed ‘[b]ooks have had this capacity all along’ to stimulate a more interactive, ergodic experience of reading (Danielewski, in Cottrell, 2002).6

The video game *L.A. Noire* (2011) was notably ground-breaking in its animation techniques, yielding an exceptionally ‘real’ visual appearance, and delivering what was described as an ‘unprecedented interactive experience’ (Rockstar Games, 2011). The game ‘is a violent crime thriller that blends breathtaking action with true detective work’ (Rockstar Games, 2011), and is set in a fictional version of 1947 Los Angeles, ‘[u]sing groundbreaking new animation technology that captures every nuance of an actor’s facial performance in astonishing detail’ (Rockstar Games, 2011). The story of *L.A. Noire* is centred on Officer Cole Phelps, a decorated United States Marine Corps veteran, who has

6 In a similar nod to this pencil-and-paper way of working, Danielewski comments that:

[computers] make it easier for a publisher to consider releasing a book like mine that previously would have been considered too complicated and expensive to typeset by hand. Yet despite all the technological advances currently available, the latter stages of getting House of Leaves ready for production involved such a great deal of work that Pantheon began to wonder if they were going to be able to publish it the way I wanted. So I wound up having to do the typesetting myself. (McCaffery and Gregory, 2003, pp. 118 - 119)
joined the Los Angeles police department. As the player solves crimes to complete missions (which, ultimately, leads to the player winning the game; failure results in restarting the failed mission), he or she is rewarded with Phelps’s progression through the ranks of the department, and also with the advancement of the broader story which follows Phelps as he falls in love with a German singer, leading to the collapse of his marriage and his public reputation. In an article for *The Guardian*, Alison Flood cites Rockstar’s founder Sam Houser as stating that ‘*L.A. Noire* draws on a rich history of not just film, but also great crime literature for inspiration’ (Flood, 2011). Reported player experiences, such as that of *Kotaku* reviewer Stephen Totilo, describe not the ‘immediate action and constant commotion’ (2011) associated with games such as *Grand Theft Auto* (Rockstar’s signature series), but rather that *L.A. Noire* invokes an interactivity that is ‘mostly [mental], mostly motionless, mostly captivated’ (Totilo, 2011). This is arguably an experience somewhat akin to reading print, particularly when considered in the light of Hayles’s definitions of hyper and deep attention, which I outlined in the previous chapter. Hayles argues that deep attention is ‘traditionally associated with the humanities’, and gives reading ‘a novel by Dickens’ as an example of an activity requiring deep attention. Totilo’s above observation that some other games create an interactivity comprising ‘constant commotion’ and ‘immediate action’ (2011) highlights a requirement for hyper attention, as it is suggestive of a ‘high level of stimulation’ stemming from ‘multiple information streams’, and requiring the player to ‘[switch] focus rapidly’ (Hayles, 2007, p. 187). Totilo’s description of the interactivity of *L.A. Noire*, however, is more suggestive of deep attention: the ‘long focus times’ and ‘ignoring [of] outside
stimuli’ described by Hayles (2007, p. 187) also describe the ‘motionless[ness]’ and ‘captivat[ion]’ which Totilo attributes to L.A. Noire. Before I begin more detailed discussion on the matter, it is clear that L.A. Noire belongs to a wider tradition of detective fiction; however, as I shall explain, the mark of print is apparent throughout the game in a much deeper and more integral manner.

Though L.A. Noire is, as a video game, ‘digital born’ in a number of ways it is also what might be called ‘print born’.

All of the speech in L.A. Noire, including that of the narrator, is recorded in a ‘Transcription Log’. This is presented as a typed document recording everything said as a case file, which gives the player the opportunity to look back and check what has happened up to that point in the case. It is also a print record mirroring everything said in the game, including the choices that the player makes during interviews with suspects. The transcription log acts as a confession to the position of L.A. Noire within a tradition of print texts; the log, and game, open with this statement:

NARRATOR: Well, you picked the right place, Cole. A city that needed an honest cop like a thirsty man needed water. You’d heard the stories, but you weren’t interested. You were here to fight the good fight – solve cases, right wrongs – but the force is like politics. There’s no sitting on the fence. You have to choose sides. A brown paper envelope or a Greyhound ticket to Palookaville. It could only ever end one way. (L.A. Noire, 2011)

The idea of having ‘heard the stories’ but being uninterested is significant. Explicitly, this appears to be nothing more than the casual observations of the
classic detective novel narrator; implicitly, this hints at this (detective story) game as moving in a different direction to the detective novel – a different way of interacting with the genre for those players who are uninterested in the ‘stories’, and are looking instead for what is explicitly labelled as a ‘game’. In fact, print textuality plays a key role in the mechanics of the game. The player’s progress is recorded in a notebook, accessible through the menu, which keeps track of all the key information pertaining to each case the player undertakes. This includes all clues found during a case, all relevant locations (the ability to fast travel – to move instantly to a location rather than driving there – is available here), people of interest, ‘intuition points’ (earned hints) and the objectives of each case. The player, using his or her controller to select options, moves a pencil around the screen to make selections. In requiring the player to use a digital version of a notebook and pencil to interact with the game, *L.A. Noire* constantly reminds its players of the game’s connection to the ‘pencil and paper’ texts championed by (amongst others) Danielewski (2003, p. 117). In fact, the way in which *L.A. Noire* requires its players to interact with the menu by using a pencil further highlights the ubiquitous background of print textuality: the player cannot use their PS3, or Xbox 360, (or, for that matter, PC) controller (or keyboard) to engage with the game’s key functions – that controller serves only as an intermediary device between player and pencil. Realising this elicits an amount of humour from Danielewski’s observations of his own experience of writing *House of Leaves*: ‘[y]ou can do anything in pencil!’ (2003, p. 17) – in *L.A. Noire*, you can do

7 The telegraphmatic style of narration used here is in a similar vein to crime writers like James Ellroy.
nothing without it. Without the pencil, *L.A. Noire* cannot function; or rather, the player would have no means with which to interact with the game.

As I discussed earlier, Hayles, commenting on the dynamic between print and digital technologies, sees two emerging strategies of imitation and intensification: ‘imitating electronic textuality through comparable devices in print’, and ‘declaring allegiance to print regardless of the availability of other media’ (2008, p. 162); *L.A. Noire* reverses the direction of the dynamic described by Hayles, by imitating print textuality through comparable devices (the pencil, the notebook, the transcription log) in the digital text. In this, and in its own acknowledgement of its position within a tradition of print texts in the crime thriller genre, *L.A. Noire* firmly declares its allegiance to print as enthusiastically as does Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*.

The fictional world of *L.A. Noire* has also spawned a series of eight short stories, ‘inspired by the world of the game’ (Rockstar Games, 2011), written by Joyce Carol Oates, Francine Prose, Lawrence Block, Joe Lansdale, Jonathan Santlofer (who also edited the collection), Andrew Vachss, Megan Abbott, and Duane Swierczynski, and published together in *L.A. Noire: the Collected Stories* (2011). Rockstar founder Sam Houser describes how ‘[u]sing the game’s world as a springboard, we worked with the genre’s best writers to create stories that lived up to the finest traditions of crime fiction’ (Flood, 2011). In the stories:

1940s Hollywood, murder, deception and mystery take centre stage as readers reintroduce themselves to characters seen in *L.A. Noire*. Explore the lives of actresses desperate for the Hollywood spotlight; heroes turned defeated men; and classic Noir villains. Readers will come across not only familiar faces, but familiar cases from the game that take on a new spin to tell the tales of
emotionally torn protagonists, depraved schemers and their ill-fated victims. (Mulholland Books, 2011)

Hayles argues that ‘digitality has become the textual condition of twenty-first century literature’ (2008, p. 186), and the reciprocal relationship that can be observed in *L.A. Noire*’s birthing of a short fiction series which extends the characters and cases in the game puts a different perspective on the idea of ‘a print [text] bearing the mark of the digital’ (2008, p. 185). Oddly enough, the 2011 Mulholland books publication currently exists only in ebook form. *L.A. Noire* is thus the inspiration for a collection of ‘print’ stories (in that they are written as conventional novels, in the tradition of the crime thriller genre), which have only been published in digital form; much like *L.A. Noire* itself, *L.A. Noire: the Collected Stories* is born of a reciprocal relationship between digital and print textuality.

Robert Kendall’s detective fiction *Clues* (2001 – 2008), a poetic hypertext, is an interesting comparison in relation to questions of print textuality in *L.A. Noire*. *Clues* presents its reader/player with ‘The Rules’ and, like Cortázar’s instructions at the beginning of *Hopscotch*, these ‘invite’ (Cortázar, 1966a, ‘Table of Instructions’) the reader/player to engage with the text:

There are no rules.

Well, perhaps there are, but “rules” is such an ugly word, isn’t it? Let’s just say there are no rules except those of communication, knowledge, and identity. What I present to you here instead is an offer, an invitation—just a few suggestions in terms I’d like to think you can’t refuse.

You are invited to solve the mystery contained herein by uncovering clues linked to images. The search will lead you down back alleys, empty hallways, wooded trails. You must decide which characters to engage with, which objects to investigate. Choose carefully that upon which you
click, for the red herrings will only keep you from your goal. You must uncover every clue to win the game. Your score (in the upper right-hand corner) will be your constant traveling companion. (We’ll leave aside for now the question of whether winning or losing represents the superior outcome.) And if you choose not to accept this friendly invitation? Well, let’s just say there will be consequences. (Kendall, 2001 – 2008, ‘The Rules’)

I argued earlier that *L.A. Noire* reverses the direction of the dynamic described by Hayles in that it imitates print textuality (through devices such as the pencil and notebook) in digital text, rather than the dynamic Hayles describes of ‘imitating electronic textuality through comparable devices in print’ (2008, p. 162). In this respect, and in its acknowledgement of its position within the tradition of detective fiction, *L.A. Noire* declares allegiance to print within its digital format. *Clues*, a digital born detective fiction, instructs the reader to ‘Play the words. Crack the text. Win the game’, immediately framing itself as a ‘game’, and indeed ‘meet[ing] a range of ludic criteria while still maintaining its emphasis on digital literariness’ (Ensslin, 2014b, p. 67). As *L.A. Noire* is a game which declares allegiance to print, *Clues* similarly comments that ‘[t]he pen is your weapon of choice’, and that ‘this is poetry, goddammit’, thus similarly illustrating the reciprocal relationship between digital and print textuality. Ensslin notes that the ‘true riddle’ of *Clues* ‘lies in interpreting the text’s metafictional and metapoetic layers of meaning and rediscovering one’s own role in the literary communication process’ and places it ‘exactly on the median line’ of her literary-ludic spectrum (2014b, pp. 68, 71 – 72), further aligning *Clues* as a ludic hypertext which, though digital born (like *L.A. Noire*), still maintains an allegiance to print textuality.
3.4 Abort, Retry, Fail?: multicursality and the ‘correct’ linear path

At this stage in the thesis, it is becoming more apparent that the relationship between print textuality and digital textuality is complex and of a reciprocal nature. In addition to considering the existence of the mark of print on digital texts, what I also need to examine is what looking at our interactions with digital texts can do to further our understanding of our interactions with print texts. For instance, we might agree that *Composition No. 1*, *Hopscotch*, and *The Unfortunates* are proto-hypertexts (Ensslin, 2007, p. 11; Bell, 2010, p. 2; Landow, 1992, p. 38; Ciccoricco, 2012, p. 470; Bell, 2010, p. 2; Bell, Ensslin, and Rustad, 2014b, p. 8), and consider the implications of those novels for contemporary hypertexts; but what, if anything, can video games help us to understand about these novels? And what new approaches to, and understanding of, digital texts might come as a result of studying that relationship? I shall begin answering this question by looking at the CD-ROM ‘interactive movie’ *Phantasmagoria* (1995).

*Phantasmagoria* features seven chapters, each of which begins with a full-motion video introduction during which the player can only observe; following this, the player is able to control the protagonist, Adrienne, in a point-and-click manner, directing her to explore the game environment and examine and collect objects. These objects allow the player to access different areas of the environment (for instance, the player must find a fireplace poker in order to open the hatch under the rug in the pantry area) and are necessary for the progression of the story and, ultimately, enable the player to win. The game is set in a mansion into which Adrienne and her husband Don have recently moved, which was inhabited
previously by a magician, Zoltan Carnovasch. Carnovasch, a practitioner of black magic, had summoned an evil spirit which took possession of him, resulting in the murders of his five wives (whose bodies are found by Adrienne as the story progresses). The evil spirit also takes possession of Don, resulting in acts of violence against Adrienne, and setting the overall objective for the game: to enable Adrienne to escape alive (failing in this results in a ‘game over’). With its immersive full motion videos and use of real actors as the visual representations of the characters, *Phantasmagoria* is certainly more cinematic (and realistic) than some earlier games, including other 3D games such as *Wolfenstein 3D* (1991), a ‘cartoonish, two-dimensional articulation of a three-dimensional space’ (Ndalianis, 2012, p. 159). The interactivity of the game is a more complicated point to address. Angela Ndalianis notes that ‘some aspects of the narrative action [in *Phantasmagoria*] are closed off until other paths are explored’ and that although there is ‘always a “correct” linear path’ there are other paths introduced which ‘complic[ate] this stricter, more “correct” form of linearity’ (2004, p. 124). Though the player can direct Adrienne through the different spaces in the game in different orders as he or she chooses, the game is ultimately multicursal but with one, correct, linear route of participation that results in a *successful* interactive experience: winning the game. This is where a notable difference in the interactivity of print texts and game texts is apparent. In video games such as *Phantasmagoria*, in which there is one correct outcome (the ‘winning’ result) to be found in a multicursal labyrinth of other paths leading to other outcomes, if the correct path is not found then the game is over – in this case, if Adrienne does not find the pathway to escape. The game can thus be broken down into a series of
questions to which the player can answer either ‘yes’ or ‘no’ – yes, you will enter
the room on the right; no, you will not take the snowman ornament which is vital
to completing the final chapter successfully and winning the game – which
provide an end result of ‘yes’ you have won, or ‘no’ the game is over. If the same
logic is applied to a print text, for instance Johnson’s The Unfortunates, what
quickly becomes apparent is this: although in Phantasmagoria (multicursal but
with a single correct linear pathway) the player is limited to many yes or no
choices, terminating in a yes or no result, the reader of The Unfortunates is not.
He or she could apply the same logic and choose to shuffle or not, or even to read
this section or not, but it is not the same in terms of comparison. With a print text
like The Unfortunates, or Composition No. 1, there is no winning or losing.
Indeed, the concept of ‘winning’ at reading seems bizarre. Is there any way,
excluding the obvious and unhelpful ‘putting down the book and just not finishing
it’, a reader can fail? Juul argues not:

while the audience is active in relation to all art forms by way of
interpreting the signs that they are exposed to, [video] games are unique in
explicitly evaluating the performance of the audience, and in controlling
the audience access to further content based on that evaluation.
Colloquially, only games can be won or lost, and only games have GAME
OVER. (2014, p. 216)

Perhaps more useful is the way in which the idea of the “‘correct” linear path’ in
video games (Ndalianis, 2004, p. 124) reveals reciprocity between print and
digital textuality in relation to the pathways available to the reader of some print
texts. Looking at Johnson’s The Unfortunates in response to this question, the
reader can shuffle Johnson’s chapters as he or she pleases but will always finish in
a manner that can be called successful, since there is nothing to inform or suggest
explicitly to the reader that he or she has got it wrong. Further to this, since the novel begins and ends with sections marked ‘First’ and ‘Last’, if read in a manner which places these sections as they were intended, then regardless of the order of the remaining chapters a sense of closure is conferred. Even if not read in this order, the very fact that the final chapter is titled ‘Last’ enforces a kind of closure: it is still the end of the novel, even if the reader chose not to follow the instructions and read it as such. Douglas argues that ‘[w]here print readers encounter texts already supplied with closure and endings, readers of interactive fiction generally must supply their own sense of an ending’, asking ‘[w]hat prompts readers to decide they are “finished” with a particular interactive narrative and to discontinue their readings of it?’ (2009, p. 65). She states that:

\[e\]ven in interactive narratives, we as readers never encounter anything quite so definitive as the words “The End,” or the last page of a story or novel; our experience of the text is not only guided but enabled by our sense of the “ending” awaiting us [...]. Ultimately, we cannot separate the desire for an ending [...] with our need to create contexts for the perception of what we encounter as we read in the immediate sense by anticipating what might follow in the future. [...] So when we navigate through interactive narratives, we are pursuing the same sorts of goals as we do as readers of print narratives – even when we know that the text will not bestow upon us the final sanction of a singular ending that either authorises or invalidates our interpretations of the text. (2009, pp. 84 – 84)

Of course, not all print texts provide clear ‘closure and endings’ in a narrative sense, but conventionally structured print texts do present the reader with a final page, and therefore offer closure in a material sense, if not within the actual narrative itself. In this way, open-endedness in conventionally structured print texts is always already limited by the physical presence of a final page – a singular ending that, regardless of contradictions or multiplicities in the narrative
which negate or prevent any sense of closure, is still unalterably the last page of
the text. Peter Brooks argues that:

[the sense of a beginning, then, must in some important way be
determined by the sense of an ending. We might say that we are able to
read present moments – in literature and, by extension, in life – as
endowed with narrative meaning only because we read them in
anticipation of the structuring power of those endings that will
retrospectively give them the order and significance of plot. (1984, p. 94)

If, as Brooks argues, the ending of a text has the ability to confer meaning and
shape on what has gone before, then this must translate into an open-endedness of
meaning in texts that are materially open-ended (such as Composition No. 1). In
afternoon, a story, closure in the context of hypertext fiction is described as ‘a
suspect quality [...] made manifest. When the story no longer progresses, or when
it cycles, or when you tire of the paths, the experience of reading it ends’ (Joyce,
1987, “work in progress”). This foregrounds the open-endedness and looping that
is inevitably part of a text with no predetermined end section: words which do not
‘yield the first time you read a section may take you elsewhere if you choose it
when you encounter the section again; and sometimes what seems a loop, like
memory, heads off again in another direction’ (Joyce, 1987, “work in progress”).
In explicitly providing a section to be read ‘Last’, The Unfortunates bestows a
final sanction of a singular ending, which in effect provides the reader with a
single correct linearity similar to that in Phantasmagoria: the reader can take
many different pathways through the text, but must begin and end at the
appropriately labelled ‘First’ (when Adrienne is sitting at the kitchen table) and
‘Last’ (when, having defeated the demon, the bloodstained Adrienne walks away
from the mansion). Further highlighting this element of reciprocity between
examples of materially experimental writing, video games, and hypertext fiction, a similar point can be made about the ‘First’ pages to many hypertext novels: as Ensslin notes, ‘hypertexts are never entirely nonhierarchical and decentred. Although, seemingly, all nodes are equivalent, entry pages tend to be the same, i.e. readers are initially presented with the same lexia and possible reading paths’ (2007 p. 15).

The ‘game over... retry?’ does, however, exist in print, in the form of the Choose Your Own Adventure series, noted by Hayles and Montfort to be ‘the simplest form’ of interactive fiction ‘offering multiple reading paths through a codex’ (Hayles and Montfort, 2012, p. 455). Now published predominantly by Chooseco, LLC, the books are written in the second person, with the reader assuming the role of the protagonist and making decisions in response to the developing plot. For instance, in Mystery of the Maya (Montgomery, 2008, first published in 1982), the protagonist’s best friend, Tom, has gone missing whilst in Mexico. The reader reads sequentially to page six, at which point he or she is given the first choice:

If you decide to visit Dr. Lopez, turn to page 7.

If you decide to go right to Chichen Itza, turn to page 38. (2008, p. 6)

Each Choose Your Own Adventure book follows a similar format, with the reader’s choices determining the path he or she takes, leading to more decisions and multiple possible endings. In the case of Mystery of the Maya, there are thirty-nine possible endings, although later books had longer plot threads and thus available page space dictated fewer endings; in some cases, such as The Golden
Path Volume Two: Burned by the Inner Sun (Montgomery, 2008), there are only four. The ‘types of endings’ that the Chooseco books feature cover a fairly wide range, from the winning result, a ‘highly desired resolution, often involving the discovery of a handsome monetary reward’, to the failing result, ‘the death of “you”, your companions or both’. Intermediate endings ‘may be either satisfactory (but not the most desired ending) or unsatisfactory (but not totally bad)’ (Choose Your Own Adventure, 2014, ‘History of CYOA’). Essentially, these are win, fail, or could be improved endings. Yet, notably:

> occasionally a particular set of choices will throw the reader into a loop where they repeatedly reach the same page (often with a reference to the situation being familiar). At this point the reader’s only option is to restart the adventure. (Choose Your Own Adventure, 2014, ‘History of CYOA’)

In these cases, a loop is included in the story that explicitly forces the reader to repeat his or her steps, becoming stuck with no way out to escape the repetition. In these cases the reader has failed in his or her adventure and must either give up or, more likely, begin reading at the start and try again.

Initially, it appeared to me that this was the only way in which a reader could experience a ‘game over’ in a book. However, the explicit ‘game over’ of Choose Your Own Adventure does, in fact, occur elsewhere in print novels, specifically in other novels highlighted as being like games; in this, it showcases the reciprocity inherent in the continuum on which I have argued that materially experimental writing, hypertext fiction, and video games exist, since a form of ‘game over’ does occur in Cortázar’s Hopscotch (described in Simpkins’s 1990 article of the same name as “The Infinite Game”). As I noted in chapter one,
different publications of *Hopscotch* provide the same opening content, either
under the heading of ‘Table of Instructions’ (1966a, New York: Pantheon Books)
or ‘Author’s Note’ (1966b, London: The Harvill Press). What is noticeable in the
second chapter map is that it ends in a loop repeating chapters 131 and 58. Peter
Standish notes the existence of this ‘endless loop’ (2001, p. 95), adding that the
expendable chapters are not, ‘as some have argued, assembled in a loose collage,
but instead form a very carefully woven web that crisscrosses with the chapters in
parts 1 and 2’ (2001, p. 95). Standish argues that this web ‘formally and
symbolically hints at the climactic scene in which Oliveira will try to set up a
defence system based on a network made of twine or, indeed, at the fictional web
in which the reader is caught’ (2001, p. 96); similarly, Steven Boldy argues that
Oliveira’s ‘strings, the same that he uses in his mobiles, are an image of the open
logic of the novel, of the mysterious relations between disparate objects and
people’ (1980, p. 93). Though he goes no further with this point, and does not
state it explicitly, Standish’s two comments suggest a valid argument: that the
loop at the end of the novel exists as a formal mirror of the events in the fabula, or
of the reader’s entanglement in a less than straightforward szujet. I posit that the
explanation of mirroring does not go far enough. *Hopscotch*, named after the
children’s game, involves the reader in playing a game not dissimilar to that
played in the Choose Your Own Adventure books or, indeed, *Phantasmagoria.*
By this, I mean that the reader of *Hopscotch* is, unlike the reader of *The
Unfortunates* (or, for instance, a conventionally structured novel), able to take part
in a reading with an ending akin to the ‘game over’. In choosing to read the novel
‘in a normal fashion’ (Cortázar, 1966a, ‘Table of Instructions’), the reader reaches
‘The End’ with, as detailed in Cortázar’s Author’s Note/Table of Instructions, a ‘clean conscience’ (1966a, ‘Table of Instructions’). This clean conscience is that of a reader who is untroubled; a reader who has finished reading the novel and can now go on with his or her daily life (albeit without a definitive sense of closure, as he or she is left wondering whether Oliveira threw himself from the window).

This is problematised if the reader chooses to read the Expendable Chapters, as the loop at the end of Cortázar’s novel enables the reader to become stuck in a permanent state of oscillation. Unable to finish the novel according to the rules of reading, the reader cannot complete his or her reading and must abandon it. This is not an unsuccessful reading, because the loop is part of the experience of reading the chapter map (and, as Standish (2001, p. 96) argues above, the loop mirrors the ‘fictional web in which the reader is caught’) but it does force the reader to abandon or her reading. This prevents any final sense of closure (a sense such as that created by the ‘Last’ section of The Unfortunates), and leaves the reader with a form of ‘game over’, because there is no material ending point: he or she has no choice but to jump from the loop in much the same way that Oliveira may or may not have done from the window, had he or she read in a ‘normal fashion’ (Cortázar, 1966a, ‘Table of Instructions’). This lack of closure created in both chapter maps – by the loop in the second, and by Oliveira’s potential suicide in the first – parallels the unsettledness of Oliveira’s life.

Games such as the Silent Hill series (1999 – 2012) or Catherine (2012) enable the player to follow multicursal pathways resulting in different types of ending, ranging from those labelled as (for instance) lawful/good, to chaotic/evil, with variations and neutralities in between. Earlier I observed that the Choose
Your Own Adventure books tend to contain a positive, desired ending, negative endings, and intermediate endings that ‘may be either satisfactory (but not the most desired ending) or unsatisfactory (but not totally bad)’ (Choose Your Own Adventure, 2014, ‘History of CYOA’). As shown above, different ending scenarios can also be seen in *Hopscotch*. Primarily a novel, rather than a game in the way that the Choose Your Own Adventure books can be called games, *Hopscotch* only contains these two possible ways of finishing the book, rather than the multiple endings of, for instance, *Mystery of the Maya* (Montgomery, 1982; thirty-nine endings). This is comparable to the difference between *Phantasmagoria* and *Catherine* (Atlus, 2012): whereas *Phantasmagoria* is structured around a “‘correct’ linear path’ resulting in one winning scenario (Ndalianis, 2004, p. 124), *Catherine* contains the possibility of the player reaching any one of eight possible endings, any of which can be technically classed as a win due to the fact that the player has completed the game (if Vincent falls – and thus dies – whilst climbing the blocks then the player must restart the level from the beginning, or from a checkpoint if one has been reached). The multiple endings in *Catherine* are not the ‘numerous premature endings, which are triggered by the player’s failure to meet the objectives of a level and often manifest themselves in terms of the [player-character’s] metaphorical death’, but rather a result of successfully completing ‘the ultimate challenge, such as the “boss”, or most testing monster. Overcoming that final challenge will result in winning the game and [will] add closure to the game plot’ (Ensslin, 2012c, p. 146). At this point in *Catherine*, the final ‘boss’ appears with the name Thomas Mutton (or Dumuzid), though for the majority of the game he is known only as
‘Boss’, presumably because he is the owner of the Stray Sheep bar in which the player, as the protagonist Vincent, spends much of his or her time. As ‘Boss’ emerges as the final boss of the game, the player is reminded of the game’s artifice in a similar way that the reader of the texts discussed in earlier chapters are reminded of the artifice of the novel through devices such as authorial interventions and second person addresses directed at the reader.

The narrative of Catherine is centred on Vincent’s relationships. Vincent, an indecisive, 32-year-old computer programmer, begins to suffer from nightmares when his long-term girlfriend, Katherine, begins to talk about marriage. He then meets a girl named Catherine (who is actually a demon) and begins having an affair, during which his nightmares worsen and he finds himself repeatedly in a nightmarish world also occupied by anthropomorphised sheep (who, it appears, are other male characters from the game world). The gameplay of Catherine, a puzzle-platformer game, is divided into three types of activity. Each evening, Vincent suffers a nightmare in which he attempts to climb a tower of moveable falling blocks whilst being chased by various monsters created from Vincent’s fears and worries (for instance ‘The Child’: an undead baby; ‘Immoral Beast’: a conjoined being of arms, legs and buttocks with a large tooth-filled mouth in place of a vagina; and the more self-explanatory ‘Shadow of Vincent’ and ‘Doom’s Bride’, amongst others) – these sections are the main action sections of the game during which the player moves Vincent vertically through the levels before the blocks crumble beneath him. While Vincent is awake, the player controls his movements but is restricted entirely to the inside of The Stray Sheep bar and its toilets. The remaining sections of the game are cut scenes (which, like
completing the nightmare stages, reward the player’s progression by advancing the story), and often show the events that occur when Vincent returns home to go to sleep, or when he wakes up. During the parts of the game based in The Stray Sheep, Vincent can drink beer, sake, cocktails, or whisky (the mechanics of the game make this advisable, as the drunker Vincent becomes the faster his movement in the dream state sections); change the music on the jukebox; play an arcade game, Rapunzel, (a minigame with the same basic strategy as Catherine); go to the toilet to check his phone (crucial for responding to the more risqué messages received from Catherine) or wash his face and look in the mirror (where the player is rewarded, in the first instance of the interaction, with a glimpse of the nightmare to come that evening); or talk to the other patrons of the bar. The latter of these activities is the only activity which actually advances time in the game, and during conversations other patrons of the bar may come and go, thus providing opportunities – and missed opportunities – to complete certain aspects of the game involving helping those characters.

The way in which the player can ignore these opportunities to meet and assist other characters is comparable to the way a reader can choose to ignore the Expendable Chapters in *Hopscotch*, choose to ignore the extra (optional) missions in *L.A. Noire*, or choose to skip some lexias in a hypertext novel. The optional tasks in *L.A. Noire* create tangential pathways for the player to explore: the player may be presented periodically with the option to undertake game missions that are not vital to the completion of the main storyline. Such missions take the shape of calls on the police radio whilst the player is travelling from place to place; if the player chooses to travel automatically to the destination – i.e. does not choose to
drive the car him or herself (or have his or her partner drive it) across the map but rather skips instantly (fast travels) to the destination – the choice to undertake these missions is not made available. The potential fabula of *L.A. Noire* is comprised of the cut scenes detailing the events of Phelps’s present and past, but also all the potential optional missions a player might undertake, and the details of the progression of each scene where the player must interrogate a suspect. In this way, both the szujet and the fabula are constructed, to an extent, by the player: this is because the player, though *not* in control of the sequence of chapters, *is* in control of the order in which he or she finds clues, drives around the city or fast travels, or completes additional tasks. Mitchell’s comment (cited in chapter one) regarding Johnson’s *The Unfortunates* is interesting to consider in this context: that ‘the number of possible combinations of the unbound chapters [of *The Unfortunates*] is finite; the fabula is decided (in its scope and sequence); it is the szużet which is apparently undecided’ (2007, p. 60). The tangential missions offer an addition to the game in terms of its final szujet (an order with, or without, the hiatuses offered by these missions), but also in terms of minor adjustments to the emerging fabula. In this respect, similarly to the way in which ‘[Johnson’s] reader’s consciousness […] is, arguably, colonised by the work’ (Mitchell, 2007, p. 60), the player’s interactions with *L.A. Noire* are constructed around the limitations and sequences built into the game, but the player also constructs the emerging narrative through his or her interaction.

As with many other games, *Catherine* contains many chances to make mistakes. Juul reports that, in his 2009 study which asked players to rate a game – Juul’s own ‘prototype specifically designed to gather data […] a combination of
Pac-Man (Namco, 1980) and Snake (Gremlin, 1977)’ – the data associated with the ‘players who answered “the game was too hard” compared with those who answered “I made a mistake” [indicated that] players prefer feeling responsible for their own failure’ (Juul, 2009, pp. 240, 245). Juul concludes that ‘the role of failure is much more than a contrast to winning – failure pushes the player into reconsidering strategy, and failure thereby subjectively adds content to the game. The game appears deeper when the player fails; failure makes the game more strategic’ (Juul, 2009, p. 245). Mistakes take different formats in different games: for instance, during the interrogation sequences in L.A. Noire, the options available to the player depend on how much of the available evidence was found at each crime scene. Without all the clues, the interrogations will be more difficult. The player must choose from three options: ‘truth’, for when the player thinks the suspect is telling the truth; ‘lie’, for when the player thinks they are lying and also has located the evidence to prove this; and ‘doubt’, for when the player thinks the suspect is lying but has not located any evidence to prove this, or thinks the suspect is not revealing the full story. However, if the player makes mistakes in the interrogations and charges the wrong suspect, the game proceeds with the player being given a lower star rating for that case (higher star ratings are

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Arguably, all games contain the possibility of making mistakes, to greater or lesser degrees. Even in the case of games like EA’s The Sims series, which has had its status as a game questioned due to its lack of quantifiable goals (Wardrip-Fruin, 2005; Juul, 2005, p. 35), the possibility of making a mistake exists. Mela Kocher argues that, in The Sims, ‘there are no rights or wrongs in choosing from these options [to direct your Sims] but just actions and their consequences’ (2007, p. 114); this may be true in terms of player actions, but mistakes still happen: a player can take his eye off the game for a moment and, before the player knows it, the Sim has set fire to the kitchen while making his or her grilled cheese sandwich.
required to unlock achievements/trophies). That said, in the case of *L.A. Noire*, the player’s mistakes do not impact significantly upon the story progression (another instance of a single correct linearity within a multicursal system). At most, if a case is failed by the player allowing Phelps to be killed, knocked out, or sometimes by being seen during surveillance missions, the player simply restarts at the most recent save point.

This is also the case with the puzzle sections of *Catherine*, in which Vincent can fall to his death and simply begin again. It is the choices that the player makes that produce discernibly different outcomes. The ending experienced by the player in *Catherine* is arrived at based on two factors: the player’s karma metre at the end of the game, and the answers given to three of the four questions posed during the final stage, ‘The Empireo’ (the ninth night, during which Vincent encounters the monstrous form of ‘Boss’). The karma metre ranges from Order (linked to player behaviour which favours Katherine) to Chaos (linked to player behaviour which favours Catherine), with a middle ground of Neutral. The fourth question asked in ‘The Empireo’ is dependant on the answers given to questions two and three as well as the player’s karma metre, and the answer given to that fourth question (a question posed, based on the described factors, from a possible six) results in one of eight possible endings. In this respect, the narrative of *Catherine* can be described as ‘arborescent’:

> [a]n arborescent fiction [by contrast to axial or networked fictions] can refer to a narrative with branches but specifically those that contain mutually exclusive story events or outcomes; a reader of an arborescent
narrative makes choices at bifurcating points in the text and continues on until the end of one of the branches is reached. (Ciccoricco, 2007, p. 6)\(^9\)

The eight different endings in *Catherine* (within the story mode – which is referred to in the game as the ‘Golden Playhouse’) fall into three categories: those aligned to Catherine; those aligned to Katherine; and those aligned to neither woman, labelled ‘Freedom’. Both the Katherine and Catherine endings exist in ‘True’, ‘Good’, and ‘Bad’ form, whereas the ‘Freedom’ endings exist in ‘True’ and ‘Good’. \(^{10}\)

\(^9\) Ciccoricco is here referring to the ‘three-tiered distinction of axial, arborescent, and networked structures [which] adds greater precision when applied to narrative fiction’ (2007, pp. 5 – 6). An axial narrative can refer to ‘a narrative where digressions are present in the form of glosses or notes that are secondary to the main narrative; typically, a reader returns to the main text after the digression’ (2007, p. 6). A network narrative (such as *House of Leaves*) ‘differs not only in its nonhierarchical organisation but also in that its narrative emerges gradually through a recombination of elements [...] Fixed sequence does not play a crucial role in determining meaning in network fictions [...] The parts, or nodes, of network narratives are self-contained semantic entities – and each screenful of narrative material must be combined and recombined in order for a higher level of coherence to emerge’ (2007, p. 7).

\(^{10}\) To elucidate as briefly as possible, the endings are as follows. Katherine (Bad): Katherine leaves Vincent because of his affair with Catherine. Katherine (Good): Vincent’s friends set about proving that Catherine is not real, and therefore Vincent cannot have cheated. Vincent and Katherine resume their relationship as a result. Katherine (True): The same as Katherine (Good), but Vincent and Katherine are married (an extended wedding scene is included). Catherine (Bad): Vincent proposes to the demon Catherine, but she refuses him on the grounds of her being inhuman. Catherine (Good): The same as Catherine (Bad), but she accepts after consultation with her father Nergal. The couple are transported to live in the Underworld. Catherine (True): The same as Catherine (Good), but Vincent subsequently overthrows Nergal and becomes King of the Underworld. Freedom (Good): Vincent walks away from both women, instead choosing to search his soul for his true desires. Vincent places a bet on a wrestling match and loses. Freedom (True): The same as Freedom (Good), but Vincent wins the bet and uses the money to make his childhood dream, space tourism, come true. (*Catherine*, 2012)
In addition to the main story mode of *Catherine* being given the theatrical title of the ‘Golden Playhouse’, the game explicitly posits itself as cinematic in other ways: the first chapter is introduced with a screen stating that ‘all the world’s a stage, [a]nd all the men and women merely players — Shakespeare, (As You Like It)’, followed by a cut scene which references several films in stylised graphics, including *Godzilla, Lord of the Rings*, and the popular Japanese horror *Ring*; following the introduction, *Catherine* proceeds with a screen introducing the fictional characters as the cast (‘Starring Vincent Brooks’). Trisha, who at this early stage in the game is known only as the host of the ‘Golden Playhouse’, declares that ‘[Vincent’s] outcome ... depends on you, viewers! [...] Now enjoy the show!’ (*Catherine*, 2012). The player is thus presented as both a player, and an observer: this implies that he or she can both affect the ending of the game, and cannot. In fact, both are true: the latter, because the number of endings is finite, and so the player can only affect the ending within the limitations laid out within the game – he or she cannot affect it in ways that are beyond these limitations. The inclusion of the eight different ‘Golden Playhouse’ endings in *Catherine* foregrounds the impact of the player’s choices, rather than their progression along a ““correct” linear path” (Ndalianis, 2004, p. 124). This is both in terms of the answers given to questions such as ‘Does life begin or end at marriage?’ and ‘does your job always come first?’ (*Catherine*, 2012), and the ways in which the player directs Vincent’s behaviour during his affair.

Ndalianis argues that ‘the work in continual progress [is] a multidirectional labyrinth that expands continously and therefore remains forever unfinished’ (2004, p. 123); the basis of this is Eco’s ‘net’ labyrinth model, the main feature of
which ‘is that every point can be connected with every other point and, where connections are not yet designed, they are conceivable and designable’ (Eco, 1984, p. 81). In this respect, the ‘forever unfinished’ text (Ndalianis, 2004, p. 123) – elsewhere described as ‘an essentially incomplete and infinitely extendible text’ to which the reader makes a ‘physical and mental contribution’ (Ensslin, 2007, p. 37) – is a text that has the potential to expand constantly, much like the ‘vast assemblage’ (Landow, 1992, p. 9) of information in hypertext systems. The idea appears problematic in that (on the basis of the points made in previous chapters regarding the impossibilities of the infinite; and, indeed, also on the finite nature of language itself) no textual work can be ‘forever unfinished’ in this respect unless its content is continually altered (rather than its form simply rearranged each time it is read). However, since each particular reader at each particular reading creates a work which is, as Aarseth puts it, marked ‘with the reader’s signature’ (1997a, p. 95), a text can indeed be said to be ‘in continual progress’ (Ndalianis, 2004, p. 123) despite its lack of infinite combinations, as it is being constructed and reconstructed by each reader with each reading, requiring a ‘physical and mental contribution’ (Ensslin, 2007, p. 37).

*Catherine* is, arguably (at least up until the end) a ‘work in continual progress’, in the sense that the ending (though already written as part of the text) is not predetermined for that particular player at that particular playthrough, and is reached through an ‘arborescent’ structure (Ciccoricco, 2007, p. 6) during which the player must answer questions linked to his or her views on real life situations – ‘does your job always come first?’ (*Catherine*, 2012; emphasis mine). In this respect, since it is based on the answers to the series of morally investigative
questions answered by the player, the ending arrived at is one which is personalized, and which is – to adapt Aarseth’s phrasing – marked ‘with the [player’s] signature’ (1997a, p. 95). It is true that in addition to the winning outcome, there is the option to fail numerous times by falling from the blocks during the nightmare stages, but this does not constitute a separate ending (just as a reader putting down a novel mid-way through does not create a multiple ending which concludes at that point) – if the player fails, it is simply one of the ‘numerous premature endings, which are triggered by the player’s failure [...] and often manifest themselves [as the character’s] death’ (Ensslin, 2012c, p. 146).

3.5 ‘Godlike’ authors; ‘Godlike’ readers and players

The eight different ‘Golden Playhouse’ endings aside, there is a ninth ending to Catherine, unlocked on completion of the final stage of the ‘Babel’ challenges. These challenges become available as the player gains gold trophies (for completing stages to a high standard) in the ‘Golden Playhouse’. Playing through the Babel game mode requires the player to climb four towers with complex block arrangements; the towers also rearrange themselves each time the challenge is undertaken (preventing the player from completing the tower based on previous practice runs and memory). In the ninth ending the ‘host’ of Catherine, Trisha, reveals that she is actually the fertility goddess Ishtar (an anagram of Trisha) and has been overseeing the progression of Vincent’s nightmares. The ninth ending also reveals that Ishtar has chosen to become involved in this way because she is testing the player for suitability to become her new consort, replacing the unfaithful Dumuzid (Thomas Mutton, the ‘Boss’ from the ‘Golden Playhouse’ mode); she states that the player has ‘caught the eye of the Goddess of Fertility...
And don’t misunderstand, I don’t mean “Vincent.” I’m talking about you, the one who borrowed his form to make it here’ (Catherine, 2012). On completing the ninth ending of Catherine, the player is deemed to be suitable to take his or her place as a god, or at least of a goddess’s consort, and in effect become the replacement ‘Boss’. In this respect, the player has been tested twice: once in the real world in terms of his or her ability to complete the Babel challenges, and also within the fiction, as the ‘one who borrowed [Vincent’s] form’ (Catherine, 2012), and Ishtar, in highlighting that the player has ‘borrowed [Vincent’s] form’, further draws attention to the artifice of the game. If Ryman’s ‘Reader Satisfaction Survey’ at the end of 253 exists arguably ‘as a deliberate mockery of interactivity’ in literature (Ryman, 1998, pp. 365 – 366), and highlights that he as author is no grander (253 was written because ‘Geoff had a contract’) than the readers who make meaning from the novel, then the final triumph of the player of Catherine, now rendered omniscient and claiming a place in the ‘realm of the gods [with the goddess of fertility]’ (Catherine, 2012), is as big a ‘joke’ (Ryman, 2000) as Ryman’s feedback form in 253, and, arguably, exists as a deliberate mockery of the very notion of the player as the almighty ‘godlike’ winner; or, rather, a deliberate mockery of the perception of agency in interactive texts.

Readers of Edward Packard’s Choose Your Own Adventure book Inside UFO 54-40 (1983) find themselves able to make choices regarding the path they take through the book, yet none of the thirty different endings available is a true win: the fabula revolves around the search for a paradise, but the szujet – at least if the reader follows the rules, by following the chapter sequence presented to him or her based on the choices made – does not allow for that winning scenario to
occur. Any pathway followed according to the sequences laid out in the book (sequences which emerge following each choice the reader makes) will lead to one of the thirty different endings, but none of those pathways lead to the paradise at the centre of the search. However, as I discuss later, one of the pages of Inside UFO 54-40 does describe the reader finding the paradise in question and spending the rest of his or her life happily living there. The paradise ending can only be found by disregarding the rules of the book (and the rules of the Choose Your Own Adventure series, and indeed the convention of reading in general), and going through the book at random, sequentially first to last chapter, or by accident.

The disregarding of the conventional rules for interacting with texts translates in an interesting manner into video game texts. It is not by following the rules that the reader of UFO 54-40 reaches the ideal ending; in Phantasmagoria, by not following the rules the player can rework entirely the szujet:

- technologically savvy players can access video program files (.vmd, or “video and music data” files) from each of the game’s seven CD-ROMs and copy them onto the computer hard drive. Through additional program manipulations, players may then view the game’s scenes at different temporal points in the story. For example, Don’s rape of Adrienne in chapter 4 can be shifted into an earlier chapter. This can radically affect questions of character motivation, especially if the rape takes place prior to Don’s demonic possession. [...] Likewise, those not interested in the narrative elements can copy all the .vmd files onto their hard disk. (Ndalianis, 2004, pp. 126 – 127)

This kind of textual manipulation raises questions in relation to the idea of the ‘player as god’ (Ndalianis, 2004, p. 129), and these issues can be elucidated by looking at this element of the game in juxtaposition with Saporta’s Composition
No. 1. Crucially, Ndalianis notes the concern with the positioning of the rape scene: if a player reorders the cut scenes, reshuffling the .vmd file of the rape of Adrienne into an earlier position than the beginning of chapter four, questions surrounding character motivation become drastically different. The ethical issues that are raised by this are comparable to Composition No. 1, specifically the question of whether ‘[X.] took advantage of Helga at the time of her adolescence or her maturity’ (Saporta, 1963, ‘The Reader is Requested’). As I discussed in the first chapter, MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler (2007) argue that the illusion of free choice creates a feeling of empowerment. This feeling of empowerment emerges from the loose leaves of Composition No. 1 in conjunction with the novel’s metafictionalit, resulting in the revelation of the reader’s intimate involvement with the text combined with the simultaneous and acute awareness of its artifice. Phantasmagoria uses human actors to create a greater sense of realism, and the player is unable to control Adrienne during the full motion video cut scenes. Thomas Elsaesser argues that:

[w]hile the ideology of a self-selected narrative and open-ended storyline suggests freedom and choice, this is precisely what interactive cinema strives to conceal. The user colludes with being a “player”, whose freedom can be summed up as: “you can go wherever you like, so long as I was there before you” – which is of course precisely also the strategy of the “conventional” story-teller (or narrational agency) whose skill lies in the ability to suggest an open future at every point of the narrative, while having, of course, planned or “programmed” the progress and the resolution in advance. (1998, p. 217)

In shuffling the cut scenes into different positions the player is reappropriating the parts of the text which he or she cannot control (i.e. those parts during which direct control of Adrienne is removed), and returning an element of control to him
or herself as the player. The player in this sense becomes ‘god[like]’ as Ndalianis uses the term, in that ‘the player as god makes choices by journeying through spaces [...] and when that same space is reexperienced, the events that previously occurred there may also be rewritten (Ndalianis, 2004, p. 129); put another way, and to avoid the somewhat overstated language of the ‘godlike’, the player gains an increased degree of agency over the material of the game.

The simultaneous reader involvement and awareness of artifice that emerges from Composition No. 1 is also apparent in the player’s reshuffling of Phantasmagoria. In the player’s reordering of the text – in not following the rules laid down for playing the game – the cut scenes of Phantasmagoria become an interactive element in themselves, highlighting the game’s artifice despite its attempts to be as realistic as possible by using real actors and (what were, before player intervention) carefully placed full motion videos. In doing this, the player makes himself or herself akin to an author figure by ‘participating in the immediate creative process’ of constructing the text (Hussey, 1981, p. 57). Hussey notes that Cortázar ‘insiste[d] that if a “take” is really good, it is not an improvement on the preceding execution but something different’ arguing that the reconstructions of chapter 55 in chapters 129 and 133 in Hopscotch are not ‘mere echoes’, but are in themselves ‘takes’, and are ‘at once a new experience and a repetition’ (1981, pp. 57 – 58). If we look at this idea in relation to Phantasmagoria, we can see that in shuffling the cut scenes, and thus reordering those sections of the game, the reader is creatively akin to an author figure, constructing a take that is ‘at once a new experience and a repetition’ (Hussey, 1981, p. 58) of the original game text; not ‘an improvement [...] but something
different’ (Hussey, 1981, p. 57) – a version of the text that is marked ‘with the reader’s signature’ (Aarseth, 1997a, p. 95).

If limitations on player choice problematise the perception of agency, the next question that must be addressed is what happens to the text, and the idea of the ‘player as god’ (Ndalianis, 2004, p. 129), in ostensibly open world game texts? If player agency dissolves because of the limitations put in place on the number of potential directions along potential pathways a player or reader of, for instance, Catherine or 253, can travel along, what happens when those pathways open up and allow that individual to wander around what seem visually to be infinite spaces? Oblivion (2006), the fourth game in Bethesda’s The Elder Scrolls series (1994 – present) is a single-player action role-playing game, the narrative of which is centred around the Oblivion Crisis which takes place in Cyrodiil in the year 3E 433 (6 years after the previous Elder Scrolls game, Morrowind, is set). The game begins with the player directing the protagonist (a character whose attributes and visual appearance are created by the player from an available selection) to escape from a small prison cell, and (following the assassination of the Emperor Uriel Septim VII) begin a quest which ultimately leads him or her to seek out the lost heir to the throne and save Tamriel from the invasion from the Oblivion realm (resulting in a victorious result for the player; if the player’s character is killed at any time, the game resumes from the last saved point).

Oblivion presents the player with a vast environment to explore, large numbers of quests to complete (including quests to find people or objects, and quests centred around killing non-player characters), and the possibility of wandering around the game space completing tasks based entirely on serendipitous encounters and
discoveries rather than following a set path (all of which reward the player in terms of character development, story progression, and knowledge of wider Elder Scrolls lore); Grant Tavinor observes that ‘The Elder Scrolls: Oblivion contains hard to access locations [and quests] in the mountains that seem placed there solely to encourage an aesthetic exploration of the environment’ (2009). That environment is, however, of course still limited. The player may at first glance be perceived to possess a high level of agency due to the spatial freedom that the open world environment brings, but the limitations of the environment are the same limitations the physicality of the book imposes on its readers. Paul Martin (2011) asks:

I know the game wants me to go here, but what if I go there? When I see the ocean in Oblivion I jump in and swim as far as I can to see how the game will stop me. On my map I see I am at the border of Tamriel and a mountain rises up before me. The fact that I cannot scale this mountain is not sublime, it is a more or less cheap way of limiting my progress, and it is easily recognised as such. It does not fill me with wonder at what lies beyond but is the sign of the game’s finitude. I know when I hit an invisible wall that beyond that mountain is – nothing.

This foregrounds the negotiation of space (a discussion to which I will return shortly), and the idea of the ‘sign of [...] finitude’; Martin’s description of this as an ‘invisible wall’ highlights well the fact that the mountains of Oblivion are an indication both of the edges of the visual aspects of the game text, and also the limitations of the fabula and szujet. In the first instance this is because the player cannot physically traverse the edges of the map; in the second instance, this is

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11 Onyett (2006) notes that ‘[w]ith over 200 hours of gameplay, Oblivion’s depth is nothing short of staggering.’ I played a total of 172 hours before I felt a sense of completion great enough to retire my character.
because the mountains as a ‘sign of [...] finitude’ serve as an analogy to the finite number of quests and possible pathways to the end of the game. Firstly, this is because if the player follows the main story arc, any side quests or diversions are simply related to the fabula and szujet of *Oblivion* for that particular player during that particular playthrough. This is much like the way in which a reader of hypertext novels can skip sections, resulting in the pathway he or she takes through the novel being potentially different to other readers’ pathways, or indeed that reader’s pathways taken on any subsequent readings of the novel.

Danielewski’s narrator sums up this sentiment nicely in *House of Leaves*, when he says that ‘[t]he way I figure it, if there’s something you find irksome – go ahead and skip it. I couldn’t care less how you read any of this’ (Danielewski, 2001, p. 31). Secondly, the ‘sign of [...] finitude’ (Martin, 2011) also relates to the fact that a player of *Oblivion* could choose never to complete the main story arc, but in choosing instead to complete side quests, the player is simply choosing a different arrangement of fabula and szujet of *Oblivion* for that particular playthrough.

Citing Grant Tavinor, Espen Aarseth, Ragnhild Tronstad, and Susana Tosca, Ensslin observes that video games often exhibit the creation of personalised narratives in this way:

> [i]n conventional stories, events are arranged in the logical order or beginning, middle and end (Tavinor, 2009, p. 20) and are placed in spatio-temporal settings such as fantasy worlds and historical periods. Similarly, they feature characters, including protagonists, antagonists, main and subsidiary characters. Without a doubt, videogames exhibit many of the above features, yet they don’t tell pre-conceived, closed stories in the same way as novels and movies do. Rather, they provide open fictional worlds for players to experience in terms of personalised narratives (Tronstad, 2001; Aarseth, [2004a], Tosca, 2003). (Ensslin, 2012c, p. 143)
Of course, like Saporta’s *Composition No. 1* (and all other texts which are finite in nature), the number of possible combinations of pathways through *Oblivion* is not infinite, as the limitations on spaces through which to wander and quests to complete can only be arranged in unique orders a certain number of times. That said, certainly it seems that *Oblivion* is less about the one main story arc (which could be called a single correct linearity) and more about the player creating his or her own fabula (from the many events that could potentially be part of the fabula, should the player choose to include them in his or her interaction) and szujet (depending on the order in which the player chooses to engage with these events) from the hypertext-like nodes made available to them as they traverse the landscape.

In this respect, *Oblivion* is less akin to a game such as *Phantasmagoria* (played without reshuffling the chapter order by delving into the .vmd files) or *Catherine* than it is to *Composition No. 1*, or even to Borges’s ‘The Book of Sand’, which (as I discussed in the first chapter) describes an ostensibly infinite book, an endless source of text and pictures which appear and disappear possessing the appearance of randomness. In the fictional Book of Sand, ‘the number of pages […] is no more or less than infinite. None is the first page, none the last.’ (1979, p. 89). Of course, *Oblivion* is not infinite, but the lack of importance that is placed on the player completing the game to a set end point, but instead – as Martin does – ‘jump[ing] in and swim[ming] as far as I can to see how the game will stop me’ (2011), illustrates that the game’s interactivity, with a large number of choices available for the player rather than a ‘stricter […] form of linearity’ (Ndalianis, 2004, p. 124), draws parallels with seemingly infinite texts
such as *Composition No. 1*. In this respect, the ‘sign of [...] finitude’ (Martin, 2011) makes it clear that the player of *Oblivion*, though perhaps having more choices available to him or her than other texts may allow, does not possess an extensive degree of agency any more than the reader of *Composition No. 1* does: both texts possess the *appearance* of an infinite nature but are constrained by the limitations of the text itself – to paraphrase and extend Martin’s comment: ‘the [texts] will stop [the user]’ (2011).

The idea of what ‘the game [text] wants’ (Martin, 2011) is comparable with the idea of what the book text wants. This is linked to two factors: the apparent forcing or coercing of the reader in a particular direction and the negotiation of space in both digital and printed texts. Regarding video games, I use the term ‘space’, like Martin, to describe the available landscape in which the player can move around. Regarding hypertext fiction and materially experimental writing I use the term to describe both the imaginative spaces which are conjured by the text, and the physical limits of the pages; in the case of the former, I assume that the imaginative spaces are limited by the potential arrangements of *szujet*, and do not extend into possible (and possibly unlimited) adjacent imaginative spaces (for instance, fanonical material or similar material linked to,
but not directly emerging from, the imaginative spaces of the text). I have explored the coercion of the reader in previous discussions throughout this thesis; it is the negotiation of space in this respect that reveals the absolute importance of the ‘seemingly infinite expanse’ (Martin, 2011) of the game landscapes, hypertext fiction, and materially experimental printed texts under consideration in this thesis. When Martin (2011) notes that on ‘[his] map [he sees he is] at the border of Tamriel and a mountain rises up before [him]. [...] [He] cannot scale this mountain’, in response to the idea that ‘the game wants me to go here, but what if I go there?’, he is positing that the game wishes to coerce the player into taking a certain path (a multicursal path perhaps, but one that ultimately follows the correct linearity of the main quest). Martin’s argument suggests that this path which the player is ostensibly coerced towards exists as an apparent opposite to the mountains and bodies of water which mark the edge of the map; Martin describes these as a ‘cheap way of limiting [the players’] progress [and] easily recognised as such’. The matter is, however, more complex than that. The ‘awesome breadth of Tamriel’, with its visually stunning scenery, is designed in such a way as to allow the player freedom of exploration as much as possible. The mountains and seas are not a ‘cheap way of limiting [the players’] progress’, but a

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12 Fanonical material, as I discussed in chapter two, is ‘an addition or supplement to the canon’; it is material that adds to or varies the existing source text, and is accepted by a fan community as valid (Thomas, 2007). I have specified fanonical material, or similar, in order to acknowledge that the imaginative spaces created by a text are quite possibly unlimited (or rather, limited only by imagination). As such, I specify here that I mean the imaginative spaces conjured specifically by the text, in relation to that particular arrangement of szujet for that particular reader, to avoid any suggestion of potential imaginative spaces spiralling into the infinite.
necessary limitation of the medium. What Martin does not mention here is that an infinite text, as I have discussed in depth earlier in this thesis, is an impossibility. The edges of the map in Oblivion are like the end of the chapter maps (with my earlier ‘endless loop’ discussion in mind) in Hopscotch: both illustrate the ‘sign of [...] finitude’ (Martin, 2011), a necessary and inevitable limit to the text which does not in itself offer any sense of closure. The ‘Passenger Map[s]’ in 253 (Ryman, 1998, pp. 6 – 7, 56 – 57, 106 – 107, 154 – 155, 204 – 205, 248 – 249, 298 – 299; presented in tabular format in the 1996 Internet version of the novel) also signify this, illustrating the limit placed on the number of characters (sections, or lexias), and cars (loosely, chapters), as well as providing a visual representation of the outer limits of each (fictional) seat within each car.

These examples from print and hypertext novels are not ‘cheap way[s] of limiting’ the reader, but rather, like in Oblivion, a necessary restrictive element within the spaces of the text. As Martin quite rightly states, ‘Tamriel is bounded and we have seen the boundaries’, and in fact the game is divisible into a ‘set of discrete, manageable spaces’ (2011); this, too, is comparable to print texts such as The Unfortunates and Composition No. 1 which consist of (as I discussed in chapter two) discrete units, bounded on all sides because they are boxed. Even Hopscotch is bound within its covers; so too is 253 (1998), or alternatively bound within the limits of its text within its web pages (1996). Martin’s comment about ‘cheap’ limitations, and the apparent appeal of the (impossible) infinite text, stems from his reading of Joseph Addison (1712), rendered through Walter John Hipple’s 1957 The Beautiful, the Sublime, and the Picturesque in Eighteenth Century British Aesthetic Theory. Martin notes that, in Oblivion, ‘[t]he world [he
is] in is signalled by these mountains as a thing encompassed and finite. The restraint that this involves is, following Addison, “hateful” (Addison, 1712, cited in Martin, 2011). This is discussed in more detail throughout ‘The Pastoral and the Sublime in *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*’; Martin explains earlier that:

Addison contends that these pleasures of the imagination derive from three sources: the great, the uncommon and the beautiful. The great is most associated with a vastness of prospect: “By Greatness, I do not only mean the Bulk of any single Object, but the Largeness of a whole View, considered as one entire Piece” (Hipple, p. 17). The imagination takes pleasure in things that are “too big for its Capacity” (Hipple, p. 17). Also, the mind enjoys the lack of restraint that wide vistas represent: “The Mind of Man naturally hates every thing that looks like a Restraint upon it” (Hipple, p. 17). (Addison, 1712; Hipple, 1957, cited in Martin, 2011)

The natural tendency of man to ‘[hate] every thing that looks like a Restraint’ explains the desire, expressed by Martin, for an ‘infinite expanse’ of text with which to interact. The player/reader tries to find ways around this ‘Restraint’: he or she moves files in *Phantasmagoria*, or tries to glitch his or her way up mountains further than a direct path will allow, with persistent zigzagging jumps in *Oblivion*. When the reader of *UFO 54-40* finds paradise by breaking the rules of the (game; print) text, he is congratulated:

[y]ou did not make a choice, or follow any direction, but now, somehow, you are descending from space – approaching a great, glistening sphere. It is *Ultima* – the planet of paradise. As your ship slowly and gently descends, you look down on a meadow filled with flowers. Beyond them white-capped mountains tower above hills of golden green and smoky blue. Before you lies a crystal city, adorned by sparkling lakes and flowering trees. [...] “No one can choose to visit *Ultima,*” says Elinka. “Nor can you get here by following directions. It was a miracle you got here, but that is perfectly logical, because *Ultima* is a miracle in itself.” (Packard, 1983, pp. 101 – 104)

All of these relate to the idea of the pleasure associated with a lack of restraint – with a greater perceived sense of agency. When Saporta wrote the
instructions for *Composition No. 1*, and included the statement that ‘[w]hether the story ends well or badly depends on the concatenation of circumstances. A life is composed of many elements. But the number of possible compositions is infinite’ (1963, ‘The Reader is Requested’), he was promising his readers textual vastness from the first opening of the book. Martin notes that in *Oblivion*, Tamriel is not ‘the terrifying vast landscape promised in the game’s opening. [...] It does not extend beyond the horizon but is bounded on all sides’ (2011). *Oblivion*’s lava pits, seas and mountains are akin to the boxes and covers that hold experimental novels, and deconstructing these ‘promis[es]’ of ‘terrifyingly vast’ texts, and the texts themselves, illustrates how the negotiation of space reveals the crucial fact that as readers and players of texts we do indeed desire the ‘terrifying vast’ (Martin 2011) and ‘[hate] [...] Restraint’ (Addison, 1712, cited in Martin, 2011), pursuing the ‘illusion that [...] you [the reader or player] are Godlike and omniscient [...] a very pleasurable sensation’ (Ryman, 1998, p. 4).

It is in both the ‘digital realm’ (in digital textuality), and in print textuality, that the player desires to be the ‘god’ that Ndalianis describes; desires to be ‘Godlike [until they] close the book’ (Ryman, 1998, p. 4); desires, whilst interacting with the text, to enter the ‘realm of the gods’ (*Catherine*, 2012); phrased in more productive terminology, desires to possess a high degree of agency, or at least to perceive that he or she does during the time he or she is interacting with the text (whether print, hypertext, or video game). Ryman’s comment that once the player turns off the game or ‘close[s] the book, [he or she] is no longer Godlike’ (Ryman, 1998, p. 4) posits the player or reader of a text as perceiving a high level of personal agency because they are interacting with the
text: this perception is at the kernel of the player or reader’s interaction with the text. Hussey’s (1981) discussions of Cortázar again prove useful here: when interacting with the texts under consideration the reader or player is often involved in the construction of the text in some way, for instance in the reordering of szujet or following of multiple pathways. In this, he or she is creating a version of the text that is marked ‘with the reader’s signature’ (Aarseth, 1997a, p. 95) or, as I have previously put it, a version of the text specific to that particular reader during that particular reading of the text. In this respect the reader or player of these texts is always already ‘participating in the immediate creative process of the author’ in the way that Hussey describes it, following Cortázar’s reasoning that ‘when a great jazzman dies, a record company will frequently produce, from its archives, a recording of several “takes” of one theme [...] a work in multiple variations of itself [...] opening the door on the artist’s activity’. These ‘takes’, constructed and reconstructed from the original piece of music, ‘[offer] the reader a sense of participating in the immediate creative process of the author’ (Hussey, 1981, p. 57). Following this logic, the reader or player who is involved in the construction or reconstruction of elements of the text is, as Hussey describes it, able to create versions (takes) which are ‘at once a new experience and a repetition’ (1981, p. 58) rather than ‘mere echoes’ of the original, much like the reconstruction in *Hopscotch* of chapter 55 in chapters 129 and 133. That said, that interaction with the print and digital texts in question, as I have discussed throughout this thesis, actually offers a *limited* form of power to the reader or player, negotiated within a set of controlling factors. As such, the texts in question are only *representing* to the reader or player a reflection of ‘godlike[ness]’, or
rather of a high level of agency; an ‘opening the door on the artist’s activity’ (rather than fully engaging in this activity as the artist) and a ‘sense of participating in the immediate creative process’ (rather than a full participation in the actual creation, or authoring, or the text; emphasis mine).

On this inspection we see that what the reader or player is really exhibiting is the ‘illusion that [they] are Godlike and omniscient [...] a very pleasurable sensation’ (Ryman, 1998, p. 4; emphasis mine). This illusion also exists in player interaction with interactive movies (such as Phantasmagoria):

[t]he interactivity of interactive movies is described as selective, branching-type, or menu-based [...] Most importantly, it is a closed interactivity in which “the user plays an active role in determining the order in which already-generated elements are accessed.” The interactivity in question is in fact an illusion. (Perron, 2003, pp. 238 – 239; Perron’s citation from Manovich, 2001, p. 40)

It has been stated that ‘[d]ebates over whether hypertext empowers readers or deprives writers or autonomy are irrelevant’, because ‘at the outset the audience is always interested in the creator’s choices, and in time their thoughts are bound to pursue fresh paths and unexpected avenues’. In this way, ‘the reader is always tearing apart and piecing together, always decoding, always making connections’ (Bernstein, 2009, p. 8). This is true – the reader, or player, of interactive texts is always engaging with the text in the way that Mark Bernstein describes; however, this does not make discussions around the subject of agency in these texts ‘irrelevant’. As I noted in the introduction to this thesis, Bell, Ensslin, and Rustad have recently called for research which establishes the cultural and social importance of literature by looking closely at particular texts, rather than by
isolating broader issues to do with the media used to create the text: putting ‘trust in the [importance of the] literary work itself’, rather than finding that importance ‘outside the fictional work’ (2014b, p. 3). Closely examining the interactive texts on which I focus in this thesis (the materially experimental writing, hypertext fiction, and video games), reveals that they certainly do ‘say something important about literature as an art form, about the media ecology of our time, and about our society and cultural practices’, and shows that this importance is indeed found by looking ‘within the text’ (emphasis mine): it is from within the text that we establish the existence of reciprocal concerns to do with multicursality, the realistic representation of truth, and reader and player agency. Dovey and Kennedy argue that:

whilst it might be possible to interpret *The Sims* (Electronic Arts 2000) as a reinforcement of the hegemonic values of consumerism (see, for example, Kline *et al.* 2003: 275 – 6), this would be to overlook the extremely widespread use of money cheats by players; in this alternative reading we might just as viably see the game as training in the art of the rip off rather than consumption. (2006, p. 63)

They note both John Storey’s argument that ‘[c]ulture is not something ready-made which we “consume”; culture is what *we make* in the practices of consumption’ (2000, p. 59), and Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witherford, and Greig de Peuter’s argument that the computer game is the ‘ideal commodity’ of Post-Fordism (2003, pp. 74 – 75); the significance of this lies in the point that ‘the computer game represents, in both production and consumption, the ideal product of the contemporary moment’ (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006, p. 39). When plotted as a feature on the continuum of interactive texts I have discussed, this appears to link directly to the concerns raised in earlier chapters. In chapter one I
acknowledged the argument that post-war social life had become ‘totally fragmented’ (Comfort, 1948, p. 11) and that the novel, which should display a ‘coherent attitude to history and events’ (p. 21) was ‘patently not succeeding in coping with the material’ of reality (p. 75); ‘the novel, exhausted as a form, unable to meet the demands placed on it by a changing world, and challenged by the mass media, was thus thought to be in terminal decline’ (Gasiorek, 1995, p. 1). B.S. Johnson, in his quest to ‘successfully embody present-day reality in exhausted forms’ (1973, p. 16), was seeking to represent the ‘contemporary moment’ in the ‘ideal’ way highlighted by Dovey and Kennedy. Like the way in which experimentalism in writing was a response to the cultural backdrop of its time, hypertext, as I argue in chapter two, ‘seems also to characterise [its] historical moment’ (Tomasula, 2012a, p. 495), so too do some video games, as the ‘ideal product of the contemporary moment’, ‘say something important about [...] our society and cultural practices’ (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006, p. 39; Bell, Ensslin, and Rustad, 2014b, p. 3). In this respect, Bernstein’s argument that debates about ‘empower[ed] readers or depriv[ed] writers or autonomy are irrelevant’ (2009, p. 8) is disregarding an important point: by having discussions about agency in interactive texts, and looking closely at those texts plotted on a continuum, we can understand how they ‘say something important’ (Bell, Ensslin

Further to this, Tomasula points out that electronic literature is arguably, by its very nature, absolutely tied to the present cultural moment:

[y]oked to the computer as electronic literature is, it is easy to see its glass half full of 0s: an electronic poem or story is in danger of becoming anachronistic every five years, i.e., the typical lifespan of a computer’s operating system. Alternatively, if your digital glass is half full of 1s, electronic literature is always about the now. (2012a, p. 484)
and Rustad, 2014b, p. 3) about their contemporary cultural backdrops and about how our relationship with agency is bound up with issues of pleasure and the perception of empowerment.

Throughout this thesis I have argued that the texts I have discussed speak to their own historical moments, but I have also identified transhistorical concerns that relate to the ways in which those texts offer a pleasurable interactive experience through their illusory agency. Ensslin notes that the ‘aesthetic of disorientation’ associated with ‘the overall impression of spatial infinity’ suggests ‘illusory agency [...] and raises the question of whether “real” agency is indeed a desirable quality in videogames’ (2014b, p. 152). I posit that it is, in fact, illusory agency that readers and players desire, and that this desire for perceived agency exists in response to the aforementioned longing for ‘vast[ness]’, the ‘seemingly infinite expanse’ which with to interact (Martin, 2011) and the tendency of ‘[t]he Mind of Man [to] naturally [hate] every thing that looks like a Restraint’ (Addison, 1712, cited in Martin, 2011). The concept of the godlike (or, more accurately, empowered) reader or player has perhaps emerged in part as a response to theories of the death of the author: the literary text cannot be defined or limited by authorial intention but rather exists independently, its ‘unity [lying] not in its origin but in its destination’ (Barthes, 1977a, p. 148). The ‘death of the Author’ and the associated ‘birth of the reader’ highlight the idea of an active reader and also denigrate passivity (Barthes, 1977a, p. 148). Similarly, a slightly different, though linked, approach might suggest that the desire to be an active and empowered reader or player has emerged as a response to the individual’s anxiety regarding his or her powerlessness in the face of external controlling
forces, described by Timothy Melley as ‘agency panic [...] expressed most dramatically in fiction and film’. Melley argues that our fears about our individualism stem from a sense of ‘diminished human agency, a feeling that individuals cannot effect meaningful social action and, in extreme cases, may not be able to control their own behaviour’ (2000, p. 62). Agency panic has two features in the majority of cases. The first is ‘nervousness or uncertainty about the causes of individual action’; this is often manifested in the belief that the world is full of subjects who have been brainwashed, programmed, or otherwise ‘mass produced’, as apparent in Joseph Heller’s Catch 22 and Ken Kesey’s One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest (Melley, 2000, p. 62). The second is that, as well as fears about the status of individual people, agency panic also often involves a sense that large organisations are in themselves agents, i.e. that they are ‘rational, motivated entities with the will and the means to carry out complex plans’ (2000, p. 63); this is apparent in the representation of the CIA in Don DeLillo’s writing or, in a less concrete sense, in Burroughs’s ‘junk virus’.  

This ‘intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy or self-control – the conviction that one’s actions are being controlled by someone else, that one has been “constructed” by powerful,

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Junk yields a basic formula of “evil” virus: The Algebra of Need. The face of “evil” is always the face of total need. A dope fiend is a man in total need of dope. Beyond a certain frequency need knows absolutely no limit or control. In the words of total need: “Wouldn’t you?” Yes you would. You would lie, cheat, inform on your friends, steal, do anything to satisfy total need. Because you would be in a state of total sickness, total possession, and not in a position to act in any other way. Dope fiends are sick people who cannot act other than they do. A rabid dog cannot choose but bite. Assuming a self-righteous position is nothing to the purpose unless your purpose be to keep the junk virus in operation. And junk is a big industry. (Burroughs, 1966, p. xxxvii)
external agents’ (Melley, 2000, p. 62) has perhaps contributed to the emergence of the idea of the ‘godlike’ reader or player. Agency panic can ‘be understood as a nervous acknowledgement, and rejection, of postmodern subjectivity’ (Melley, 2000, p. 65), and explains, at least in part, our desire for interactive experiences that grant us the illusion of empowerment and our desire for interactive texts, like those discussed throughout this thesis, which allow us to experience the ‘very pleasurable sensation’ that is the ‘illusion [of being] Godlike’ (Ryman, 1998, p. 4). I agree with Melley’s basic analysis, but not his claim that this is a particularly American phenomenon, as fears about a loss of agency can be seen as a more general effect of postmodernity rather than a specifically postwar American condition. Melley’s examples, of course, come from American literature but similar issues can be seen in postwar British fiction; for instance, in the influence of the mass media landscape on the individual in J.G. Ballard’s The Atrocity Exhibition (1970).

At the beginning of this chapter I acknowledged Dovey and Kennedy’s argument that ‘the pleasures of gameplay lie in [the] negotiation of and submission to the rules of the game – a pleasure that lies in an oscillation between activity and passivity.’ Dovey and Kennedy argue that while we are playing a game, we ‘actively participate in the creation’ of that game, whilst also ‘passively submit[ting] to rules which limit our possible behaviours’ (2006, p. 26). This highlights the fact that following rules when interacting with texts does, in itself, offer an element of pleasure. I noted earlier that the choice between the two methods of reading offered in Hopscotch is really no choice at all, having effectively ‘eliminated rather than suggested an option’ by ‘singling out and
attacking the passive reader’ (Hussey, 1981, p. 59): this highlights further the fact that we want to possess the appearance of being active, but also to negotiate this agency within a set of limitations (rules) determined for us. Similarly, as I argue in chapter one, in Composition No. 1 we feel responsible for the fate of X. because of our involvement in constructing the szujet. This fate is fictional, so it offers only the illusion of responsibility. We are not really empowered by the text: we are given a limited number of potential pathways to follow but with the impression that ‘the number of possible combinations is infinite’ (1963, ‘The Reader is Requested’). As Mitchell argues, the pleasure of The Unfortunates lies in the ‘act of reconstruction: for the narrator, the piecemeal remembering of Tony delays the process of forgetting and repays a debt of friendship […]; for the reader, the activity of ordering invokes a pleasure in perceived agency and intentionality’ (2007, p. 63). As I discussed in chapter two, Ryman’s addresses to his reader in 253 and more jocular elements of the novel such as his Reader Satisfaction Survey, foreground just how illusory the reader’s agency is. We, as readers and players, seek the ‘illusion that [we are] Godlike and omniscient’, because this is ‘a very pleasurable sensation’ (Ryman, 1998, p. 4): we perceive that we have a degree of empowerment, but are not burdened by any real responsibility, and that is a pleasurable state of interaction.

3.6 Conclusion
Beginning with a clear purpose to build on and draw together the discussions of the first two chapters, this chapter has explored the relationship between print textuality and digital textuality, investigating what part is played by video games in the textual continuum on which this thesis focuses. It has examined the ways in
which the video game texts under consideration illustrate some of the concerns that emerge in discussions of the texts studied in previous chapters. In doing this, and by drawing comparisons between key texts in different media – such as, for instance, *Composition No. 1* and *Phantasmagoria* – it illustrates how a framework focused around close reading can work, and also provides evidence for the productivity of a method which considers texts with reciprocal, and transhistorical, concerns in this way. The chapter has considered specifically some examples which have been mostly ignored by scholars to date (for instance *Catherine*), alongside examples which have been explored in discussions in the periphery of those discussions on which this thesis focuses (for instance *Phantasmagoria* and *Oblivion*), in order that I could establish my own argument as clearly distinguished from, but within the context of, previous research. The chapter has also looked more closely at the issues surrounding agency that have been raised throughout the thesis, and drawn links between the desire for perceived agency in interactive texts and those texts’ contemporary cultural backdrops.

In doing these things, the chapter has explored how the texts in question in this thesis (and, by extension, perhaps others like them) can be understood in new ways by plotting them on a continuum and looking at their shared concerns and reciprocal elements: clearly centred within their own historical moments, the emerging transhistorical concerns revealed by my comparison enable us to understand the individual texts, and their broader significance, more thoroughly. These texts demonstrate a common concern with allowing the reader to experience a degree of agency (limited, and often purely illusory) not found in
less interactive texts. The importance of this lies in how this comparison deepens our understanding of our complicated relationship with agency. By looking at the texts considered in this thesis as part of a continuum, my comparison historicises and illuminates our contemporary relationship with agency; it reveals that this relationship is bound up in our seeking of pleasure through experiencing a perception of agency within predetermined restrictions, and with no real responsibility attached: we seek to experience the ‘illusion that [we are] Godlike and omniscient’ through interactive texts because this experience, though transitory and illusory, is ‘very pleasurable’ (Ryman, 1998, p. 4).
Conclusion

In this thesis I have examined materially experimental writing, hypertext fiction, and video games, illustrating and elaborating upon several reciprocal concerns – realism, multicursality/potentiality, and agency – present in the texts on which I have focused. I have argued that these connections allow these texts to be considered as part of a textual continuum that is revealed through studying the reciprocal relationship between print textuality and digital textuality. By analysing critically the texts within the framework of this continuum, I have established new critical readings of those texts, and created a better understanding of their broader significance within their contemporary cultural backdrops. Through close examination in this manner, I have argued that the texts exhibit a common purpose to allow the reader, or player, to experience a high level of perceived agency: that is, to feel that when interacting with the text he or she is experiencing an exceptional degree of agency (even if that agency is in fact decidedly limited). The primary question asked, and answered, by this thesis is: what new critical understanding of materially experimental writing, hypertext fiction, and video games, can be developed by considering key examples as part of a textual continuum? To answer this fully and productively, this thesis has produced new critical readings of the key texts in each chapter and, in doing so, confirmed the productivity of looking critically at those texts with reciprocity and a textual continuum in mind.
Chapter one focused on materially experimental writing, examined the form, function, and reception of key texts, and unpicked issues that emerge from these texts in order both to instigate the discussions of the thesis as a whole and to provide new critical readings of B.S. Johnson’s *The Unfortunates* (first published in 1969), Marc Saporta’s *Composition No. 1* (first published in 1962), and Julio Cortázar’s *Hopscotch* (first published in 1963). All three of the key texts in this chapter have been described as proto-hypertexts (respectively in Bell, Ensslin, and Rustad, 2014b, p. 8; Ensslin, 2007, p. 11 and Bell, 2010, p. 2; and Landow, 1992, p. 38, Ciccoricco, 2012, p. 470, and Bell, 2010, p. 2), and chapter two discussed how the reciprocal concerns illustrated in these texts extend this comparison. Within this materially experimental writing I explored themes of realism, multicursality/potentiality, and agency (key themes that emerge throughout the texts under consideration in the thesis as a whole), and thus built on the idea of the ‘proto-hypertext’ whilst also establishing the foundations for the textual continuum on which I have plotted my examples of materially experimental writing, hypertext fiction, and video games.

To begin the discussions of the thesis, I explored B.S. Johnson’s concern with ‘truth’ (1973, p. 14) and showed how this concern is linked to a broader cultural concern that the ‘novel [was] exhausted as a form’ (Gasiorek, 1995, p.1) and that ‘[n]ovelists must evolve[...] forms which will more or less satisfactorily contain an ever-changing reality’ (Johnson, 1973, pp. 16 – 17). The connection I made here between the texts on which I focus and the concerns present in their contemporary cultures is one repeated throughout the thesis. Chapter two argued that hypertext fiction is a digital form of reading and writing which reflects its
digital culture. I consolidated several pieces of existing research (Carr, 2010; Olds, 2008; Merzenich et al., 2006; Pascual-Leone, 2005; Doidge, 2007) which together illustrated that the plasticity of the brain in conjunction with our increasing use of digital media has caused our brains to be ‘turned over’ to mental skills associated with digital media (Doidge, 2007, p. 59). If this is the case, I argued, then hypertext fiction forms a clear connection to its cultural backdrop, as does materially experimental fiction as I argued previously. I confirmed this connection again as a feature on the continuum in chapter three, citing Dovey and Kennedy, who state that ‘the computer game represents, in both production and consumption, the ideal product of the contemporary moment’ (2006, p. 39). I argued that all of the texts on which I focus in this thesis contain a clear connection to their cultural moment. Those moments of culture may be historically distinct, but by looking at the texts closely I showed that they display a concern for readers, or players, to feel that they possess a high degree of agency during interaction, without being burdened by any real creative responsibility, and that is a pleasurable state of interaction to experience.

I built on this argument further in chapter one when laying the foundations for my discussions of realism and the realistic text. I argued that the concern to accurately represent reality, as illustrated in The Unfortunates and its critical and cultural contexts, stems from the same desire that strives to create, in digital literature, ‘something [artistic] that we, at our moment in time, can believe, in ways that allow it to be said, at our moment in time, as no other way can’ (Tomasula, 2012a, p. 495). I argued that the idea that texts should display something that we can believe evokes Johnson’s call for a writing form that could ‘satisfactorily’
represent reality (1973, pp. 16 – 17). The perceived increase in reader agency achieved through the reader’s involvement in constructing the szujet in The Unfortunates represents the reader as a figure of perceived empowerment: a figure who has power over the arrangement of the (fictional) representation of the ‘world we seem to know’ (Belsey, 2002, p. 47). Building on these discussions in the first chapter, chapter two examined further ideas of realism and the death of a friend in 253, drawing comparisons with The Unfortunates. Here, I argued that in constructing his or her own (finite and temporary) journey through the szujet of the texts, the reader experiences the temporariness of the fictional train journey, the temporariness of the lives of the fictional characters on the train heading towards its fatal crash, and the temporariness of the real lives in Ryman’s own (and, for that matter, everybody’s own) external ‘world that is’ (Fowles, 1969, p. 105). I argued that this reflects the finitude of human life and the impact this has on those still alive, and highlighted that this is a concern also demonstrated in The Unfortunates, for example when Johnson acknowledges that the reasons behind his friend Tony’s death do not matter, but that ‘only the fact that he did die, he is dead, is important: the loss to me, to us’ (1999, ‘Last’, p. 6). In doing this, I showed how realism in this instance is connected to the overarching concern with the level of agency perceived in the reader’s interactions with the text: the reader appears to possess control over a believable world, which thus enforces the pleasurable ‘illusion that [we, as readers, are] Godlike and omniscient’ (Ryman, 1998, p. 4). The reader is simultaneously aware of the fact that themes of death and chance/accident are central to those (believable) fictional worlds (in terms of both the train crash and the connections between passengers in 253, and the contracting of cancer and
unpredictable workings of memory in *The Unfortunates*), which foregrounds how little genuine control we have over those aspects of our real ‘world that is’ (Fowles, 1969, p. 105); this highlights further the illusory nature of agency.

Chapter one also showed the connection between the critical reaction to some materially experimental writing and the critical reaction to hypertext fiction, noting that in both cases readers seem ‘delighted or annoyed’ (Schnierer, 2003, p. 96; stated in relation to hypertext). I eludicated by stating the arguments that “‘[e]xperimental’ to most reviewers is almost always a synonym for ‘unsuccessful’” (Johnson, 1973, p. 19), and that ‘[n]ot to read [Cortázar] is a grave invisible disease which in time can have terrible consequences... I greedily devour all the fabrications, myths, contradictions and mortal games of the great Julio Cortázar’ (Neruda, cited in Bisaillon, 1984, p. 18). I demonstrated that ostensible randomness is a concern apparent in both *The Unfortunates* and *Composition No. 1*, and pointed to this as a concern also apparent in hypertext fiction: regarding *The Unfortunates*, Coe notes that ‘Johnson’s central conceit of randomly ordered pages [is] a tangible metaphor for the random interplay of memories and impressions in the human mind [and also] for football itself, where play proceeds randomly within a framework of rules and conventions’ (2004, p. 22); Saporta, in the instructions he addresses to his readers, states that ‘[a] life is composed of many elements. But the number of possible compositions is infinite’ (1963, ‘The Reader is Requested’). This sense of textual infinity contributes to the reader’s high level of perceived agency: the reader perceives that he or she is able to construct infinite variations of pathways through the text, contributing to the ‘illusion that [we, as readers, are] Godlike and omniscient’, which is ‘a very pleasurable sensation’ (Ryman, 1998, p.
Bolter argues that, in hypertext writing, the process of moving from link to link ‘can continue indefinitely as the reader moves through a textual space that, in the case of the World Wide Web, can extend throughout the Internet’ (2000, p. 27). I then highlighted previous research that notes that there are $10^{263}$ possible combinations that can be achieved by arranging the pages of Composition No. 1 (Grimm and Scher, 1978, p. 282). I debunked the notion of the infinite text, arguing that the idea of randomness in literature is fundamentally problematic: in a text comprised of finite, countable units, every outcome is predictable; thus any randomness offered is illusory. This built the foundations for discussions later in the thesis, in which I argued that the importance of the key texts on which I focused lies partially in their apparent randomness (which, I argued, is actually better described as potentiality) and/or multicursality, and the way in which they satisfy a desire for empowerment through creating a perception of a high degree of reader or player agency.

In chapter one I also examined closely how the texts on which I focused each present the reader with authorial instructions detailing how readers should interact with the text, and showed that in each case the instructions serve a broader purpose. Cortázar’s second chapter map – standing in opposition to his first map, which offers his reader a ‘clean conscience’ – is suggestive of readerly subversion of the conventional rules of reading, and thus presents readers with a perception of increased empowerment not available to those with a ‘clean conscience’ (those who read according to the first chapter map and thus appear more obedient to the conventions of reading). In being instructed to shuffle the bound sections of The Unfortunates, the reader is allowed some agency in terms of the order in which he
or she reads the novel – although this, of course, is limited, and is in itself a course of action dictated by the author’s instructions. In this way, the reader ‘participat[es]’ in the ‘creative process’ and thus, as Hussey phrases it, experiences the text as ‘temporary rather than timeless’ (1981, p. 57). This aspect of (perceived) reader agency in *The Unfortunates*, then, enables a particularly effective illustration of Johnson’s ‘physical tangible metaphor for randomness and the nature of cancer’ (Johnson, 1973, p. 25), as the finite (or as Hussey phrases it above, ‘temporary’) nature of the interaction with the novel reflects the finite nature of life expressed in the content of the novel. In *Composition No. 1*, the reader’s actions are instilled with a perception of responsibility in forming the narrative, as the arrangement of szujet determines (amongst other factors with perhaps less serious, and emotionally charged, implications) whether X. is responsible for the rape of an adolescent. This gives the reader a perceived sense of agency, by suggesting that the reader’s role in constructing the szujet really does influence the fate of X. However, by addressing the reader directly in the instructions, and requesting that the reader plays a part in constructing that fate, *Composition No. 1* also draws attention to the fact that it is a work of fiction. Therefore, the reader perceives that he or she possess a high degree of agency because of his or her ability to construct the szujet in any of a number of ostensibly ‘infinite’ ways (Saporta, 1963, ‘The Reader is Requested’), and also because that construction determines the status of X. as a rapist; simultaneously, the reader is aware that *Composition No. 1* is a work of fiction, and so this perception of agency does not come with any real responsibility, which thus maintains the pleasure of possessing this illusory agency.
Finally, in chapter one I highlighted the fact that *Composition No. 1* was republished in 2011 by Visual Editions, in both print and digital form (as an iPad app). The digital version attempts to mimic the reader’s shuffling with an ‘auto-shuffle’ feature (Visual Editions, 2015), which removes the pleasurable ‘non-trivial’ interaction of the print version, and makes the text ‘irritating’ (Aarseth, 1997a, p. 1; Pavlus, 2011): readers are not ‘forc[ed] to get involved’ (Visual Editions, 2015), but rather forced to accept the auto-shuffle feature and thus relinquish some of their agency. In particular, I argued that the choice made by Visual Editions to replace Saporta’s instructions in the print version with a simple ‘Introduction’, written by Tom Uglow (a Creative Director for Google), reverses the perception of agency associated with the novel and stands in opposition to Saporta’s original instructions. Uglow’s introduction suggests that our instinct *should* be to not shuffle, and, *most often*, we will all just read the novel in the order left by the previous reader. This results in a scenario where the reader is left only with the option to read the novel in the same way that he or she would read a conventionally bound novel: without shuffling, and in the order that it came. This removes the pleasure of constructing one’s own personal pathway through the novel, and also removes the associated pleasurable perceptions of responsibility and agency.

Chapter two focused on hypertext fiction and examined the significance of new technologies to the acts of reading and writing. I continued to address the idea of a textual continuum on which some examples of materially experimental writing, hypertext fiction, and video games can be plotted, and extended the foundations laid by the first chapter by illustrating how the hypertext fiction and materially
experimental writing in question demonstrate several reciprocal aspects. I argued that the hypertext fiction on which I focused, like the examples of materially experimental writing in the first chapter, demonstrates concerns regarding realism, reader agency, and multicursality. This built on, and added concrete examples to, the statement that hypertext fiction ‘extends the tradition of experimental literature in significant ways’ (Ciccoricco, 2012, p. 469), although I argued that this is not so much an extension (which could be seen to imply that hypertext is an evolution of experimental writing, implying an element of superiority), but rather a reciprocal relationship which displays continuities. In this chapter I focused primarily on Geoff Ryman’s 253 (2006 online; 2008 in print), a first-generation, canonical, hypertext (Ensslin, 2007) which is ‘considered [to be] a paradigm of hypertext fiction’ (Pleßke, 2014, p. 234).

In chapter two I developed a comparison between the key texts in focus throughout the thesis, noted that in the mid to late twentieth century the novel was considered to be ‘exhausted as a form [and] unable to meet the demands placed on it by a changing world’ (Gasiorek, 1995, p. 1), and observed that this concern was also apparent in hypertext fiction, citing Tomasula’s argument that ‘[a]t this early date in the twenty-first century, it seems that the novel [...] is once again a design problem’ (2012b, p. 445). I illustrated further connections between hypertext fiction and experimental writing by referring to established scholarly work, notably Ensslin, who argues that hypertext literature is ‘akin to print texts, from Sterne to Saporta, that defy closure and challenge readers formally and thematically’ (2014b, p. 57), and that ‘literary hypertext may be considered the digital poetic form most akin to the book’ (2007, p. 3). I posited that the hypertext fiction, video games, and
materially experimental writing on which I have focused often demonstrate a ‘seemingly infinite expanse’ of material with which to interact (Martin, 2011; stated in relation to Oblivion), and that this perceived infinite textuality highlights and fulfils our desire for a perception of agency (although, of course, a text does not have to appear infinite to produce a perception of agency in this way), which relates to the natural tendency of man to ‘hate every thing that looks like a Restraint’ (Addison, 1712, cited in Martin, 2011).

I argued in chapter two that in adapting the online 253 to print, Ryman successfully illustrates reciprocity between print and digital textuality by using each to foreground different concerns within the text. For example, I established that the online 253 uses links to make explicit the similarities and connections between passengers, and the print remix, without this capacity for links, becomes more about the distance between those same individuals. I conducted further close readings of the novel and, in doing this, established new critical readings of Ryman’s text which illustrated the productivity of examining the texts throughout the thesis as part of a continuum; for instance, that the ‘footnote within a footnote’ in 253 (1998, p. 185) enables Ryman to include a 254th character – William Blake. I argued that this mirrors the Oulipian concept of the clinamen: Blake is the intentional error in an otherwise strictly constrained writing system (253 passengers, 253 words per section, one footnote at most per passenger, etc), and breaks ‘the illusion of an orderly universe’ (Ryman, 1998, p. 2). This use of the Oulipian clinamen reflects the impending chaos of the crash in an otherwise predictable journey. In chapter two I also explored the theoretical backdrop to hypertext writing, examining existing scholarly arguments regarding the blurring of
the reader and author (Landow’s ‘wreader’ (2006, p. 20), for instance), and
developed further my earlier argument which dismissed the idea of the infinite print
text, noting that the hypertext fiction on which I focused is also comprised of a
finite number of discrete textual units (or lexias). In exploding the idea of infinite
readings, I argued that the primary impact of multiple variations (other than on a
text’s material form) is that the individual reader feels that what they are reading is
infinitely re-orderable, and that the path they have selected is an exclusive
individual choice taken from an infinite selection of paths. I compared this
perceived agency to the materially experimental writing in chapter one, and noted
that none of these texts can fulfil the promise that ‘the number of possible
compositions is infinite’ (Saporta, 1963, ‘The Reader is Requested’); however, the
way in which the reader participates in the construction of the text reveals hypertext
fiction to share the transience, and the finitude, of the experimental texts discussed
in the first chapter. This addresses this reader’s desire for a pleasurable perception
of agency without any real creative responsibility attached.

Finally in chapter two, I examined the terminology of the ‘natural’, and
‘normal’, used by some scholars in relation to the reading and writing of hypertext
(Bolter, 2000, p. 27; Tomasula, 2012a, p. 495). I argued that hypertext, which
seems to ‘characterise our historical moment’ (Tomasula, 2012a, p. 495) as a
literary form, mirrors the changing reality of contemporary brains that engage with
digital media on a daily basis. I argued that, in this respect, hypertext fiction is the
ideal digital form to represent realistically a ‘technologically textured’ cultural and
social environment (Ihde, 1993, p. 113), and that this continues some of the
concerns surrounding truth and realism which were discussed earlier: I linked this
idea of hypertext fiction as ‘characteris[ing] our historical moment’ with the ideas I discussed in chapter one regarding materially experimental writing fulfilling a requirement for the novel to ‘successfully embody present-day reality’ (Johnson, 1973, p. 16). This is connected to the readers’, or players,’ desire for a perception of empowerment during interaction: in his or her involvement in constructing the order of the szuJet, the reader or player has an increased perceived level of agency, as he or she appears to be controlling the text to a degree, and thus also possesses an amount of power over that particular ‘embod[iment]’ of reality. Though, of course, this is not actual power over any actual reality, the perception of agency that this creates fulfils the desire for the ‘illusion that [the reader is] Godlike and omniscient [...] a very pleasurable sensation’ (Ryman, 1998, p. 4).

In chapter three I focused on the relationship between print textuality and digital textuality, and examined what part is played by video games in the textual continuum on which I placed the materially experimental writing and hypertext fiction discussed in chapters one and two. At the beginning of this chapter I explained that the video games I would be examining should be seen as texts just as the examples of texts discussed in previous chapters are: in chapter two I noted that ‘[f]or hypertext, a medially extended concept of “text” needs to be assumed, encompassing various semiotic systems such as image, script and sound, their “codes” and their denotative and connotative interplay’ (Ensslin, 2007, p. 164); and similarly, my readings of video game texts in chapter three worked from the ‘assumption that [video games] are textual in nature’ due to the fact that ‘even the rules on which they are based are conceived of and articulated semiotically’ (Ensslin, 2012c, p. 41).
I began chapter three by unpicking Hayles’s idea that there exists a ‘mark of the digital’ (2008, p. 185), and extended this idea in relation to my own concept of a *mark of print*, a corresponding term to introduce my idea that just as digital technologies have affected print texts (as argued by Hayles), a reciprocal relationship can be seen between print and digital texts. I examined this idea in the context of Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* which, Hayles argues, declares its ‘allegiance to print regardless of the availability of other media’ (2008, p. 162), and I acknowledged Danielewski’s comment that ‘books don’t have to be so limited’, the context of which draws attention to the experimental nature of *House of Leaves* and implies that ‘all the possibilities’ of books have been denied in other printed texts (Danielewski, in Cottrell, 2002). Although *House of Leaves* arguably ‘reintroduced’ the ‘enormous possibilities’ of the book in the twenty-first century (Danielewski, in Cottrell, 2002), I argued that this was also achieved by the materially experimental writing discussed throughout this thesis in the post-war period. The idea of declaring an ‘allegiance to print’ (Hayles, 2008, p. 162) is, in fact, highly significant in establishing reciprocity between print and digital texts in the context of video games, specifically *L.A. Noire*. I argued that *L.A. Noire* firmly declares its allegiance to print as enthusiastically as does Danielewski’s novel: in several ways *L.A. Noire* could be called *print born* as well as *digital born*. This ‘allegiance to print’ is achieved through the use of the ‘Transcription Log’, a print record detailing everything said in the game, and Phelps’s notebook and pencil. In requiring the player to move around a digital version of a notebook and pencil in order to interact with the game (and thus reducing the PC/console controller to an intermediary device between player and pencil), *L.A. Noire* constantly reminds its
players both of the ‘pencil and paper’ approach championed by Danielewski (2003, p. 117), and of the game’s connection to a tradition of print texts. I posited that further reciprocity between print textuality and digital textuality emerges from *L.A. Noire*, through the short story collection *L.A. Noire: the Collected Stories* (2011), and also that comparing *L.A. Noire* to Robert Kendall’s digital born detective fiction *Clues* (2001 – 2008) further demonstrates the reciprocity which, I argued, allows these texts to be considered as part of the same textual continuum: *Clues* includes a set of instructions laid out by the author to ‘invite’ the reader to interact, in a similar manner to the materially experimental writing discussed in chapter one and, I argued, in explicitly framing itself as a game, and declaring that ‘[t]he pen is your weapon of choice’, *Clues* similarly maintains an allegiance to print textuality though using a digital form.

In chapter three I also closely examined *Phantasmagoria* in relation to my earlier discussions of multicursality, noting that ‘some aspects of the narrative action [in *Phantasmagoria*] are closed off until other paths are explored’ and that there exists ‘a “correct” linear path’ which is the only way to successfully complete the game (Ndalianis, 2004, p. 124; emphasis mine). Exploring this in relation to print texts, I argued that *Phantasmagoria* essentially consists of a series of questions to which the player can answer either ‘yes’ or ‘no’ (for instance, ‘yes’ the player will take the snowman ornament, or ‘no’, the player will not look at the fireplace), and thus win or lose, whereas the reader of print texts does not progress to a *win* or *lose* ending. This reveals reciprocity relating to closure. I argued that, in providing a section to be read last, and which is titled ‘Last’, *The Unfortunates* displays a single ending, in effect providing the reader with a single correct
linearity similar to that in *Phantasmagoria*. In both texts the reader, or player, can take many different pathways, but must begin at the first (in *The Unfortunates*, this is titled ‘First’, and is equivalent to the scene where Adrienne is sitting at the kitchen table) and end at the last (‘Last’; equivalent to the scene where the victorious, if bloodstained, Adrienne walks away from the mansion). This sense of a *correct linearity*, in the partial sense of an authorially determined starting point, is also apparent in hypertext novels; Ensslin argues that ‘hypertexts are never entirely nonhierarchical and decentred. Although, seemingly, all nodes are equivalent, entry pages tend to be the same, i.e. readers are initially presented with the same lexia and possible reading paths’ (2007, p. 15). In chapter three I extended this discussion to look further at the idea of the ‘game over’ in books, acknowledging the Choose Your Own Adventure series, and examining narrative loops in *Hopscotch*. I argued that the loop at the end of Cortázar’s novel enables the reader to become stuck in a permanent state of oscillation, which forces the reader to abandon his or her reading. This loop mirrors the ‘fictional web in which the reader is caught’ (Standish, 2001, p. 96), but also prevents any final sense of closure (like the closure created by the ‘Last’ section of *The Unfortunates*), and leaves the reader with a form of ‘game over’; the lack of closure created in both chapter maps – by the loop in the second, and by Oliveira’s potential suicide in the first – parallels the unsettled nature of Oliveira’s life.

Chapter three also developed further my discussions of endings by examining *Catherine*, drawing comparisons with several of the other key texts discussed in the thesis in relation to the idea of the ‘work in continual progress’ (Ndalianis, 2004, p. 123). The interactivity of *Catherine*, like the other key
examples discussed throughout the thesis, establishes a personalised end result
which is marked ‘with the [player’s] signature’ (adapted from Aarseth 1997a, p. 95), and highlights our desire for a perception of ‘godlike’ agency (Catherine, 2012) during our interactions with these texts. In chapter three I drew together my discussions regarding reader and player agency, and conducted a critical reading of Catherine which demonstrates the mockery of the perception of agency; I argued that Ryman’s ‘Reader Satisfaction Survey’ in 253 highlights that the author figure is no grander than the readers who make meaning from the novel, and that the final triumph of the player of Catherine, rendered omniscient and claiming a place in the ‘realm of the gods [with the goddess of fertility]’ (Catherine, 2012), is as big a ‘joke’ (Ryman, 2000) as Ryman’s feedback form: both texts portray a deliberate mockery of the perception of agency in interactive texts. This highlights the fact that, although we desire the perception of agency, we also accept that this agency is illusory, because with illusory agency there is no real responsibility, and thus the interaction with the text is a ‘pleasurable’ one, in which we can feel ‘Godlike and omniscient’ (Ryman, 1998, p. 4). This fulfills our desire for agency without us actually having to accept any genuine responsibility for authoring a text, or influencing anything of critical importance in the real ‘world that is’ (Fowles, 1969, p. 105).

In chapter three I examined the open world game environment, specifically that of The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion (2006), and argued that the game offers high levels of perceived agency due to the spatial freedom that the open world environment brings. I argued that this is comparable to the limitations imposed on readers by the physicality of ostensibly infinite books, for instance in Saporta’s
unfulfillable promise that, in Composition No. 1, ‘the number of possible combinations [of szujet] is infinite’ (1963, ‘The Reader is Requested’). Finally, I posited that in these texts what the reader or player is really exhibiting is the ‘illusion that [they] are Godlike and omniscient [...] a very pleasurable sensation’ (Ryman, 1998, p. 4; emphasis mine), and argued that the desire for perceived agency exists in response to the desire for textual ‘vast[ness]’, the ‘seemingly infinite expanse’ with which to interact (Martin, 2011) and the tendency of ‘[t]he Mind of Man [to] naturally [hate] every thing that looks like a Restraint’ (Addison, 1712, cited in Martin, 2011). I argued that the concept of the godlike reader or player has emerged in these ways possibly as a response to theories of the death of the author, or as a response to the individual’s anxiety regarding his or her powerlessness in the face of powerful external controlling forces (for instance, paranoia about government or corporate plots which may affect individual autonomy) described by Melley as ‘agency panic [...] intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy or self-control – the conviction that one’s actions are being controlled by someone else, that one has been “constructed” by powerful, external agents’ (2000, p. 62). In highlighting these possible cultural reasons for this desire for the perception of agency, I also pointed to potential areas for further study. Since this thesis has illuminated the ways in which interactive fictions are connected to broader anxieties about agency in a cultural context in which individualism is encouraged, but our actual individual agency is highly limited, in particular it would be interesting to examine the history behind these anxieties, and explore further ways that interactive fictions can help us to understand our interactions with both print and digital texts, and with our own ‘world that is’
(Fowles, 1969, p. 105), as well as understanding more thoroughly our own degree of power – or powerlessness.

The significance of this thesis, then, lies in how it establishes the existence of a number of reciprocal concerns in the texts on which I have focused, including issues of truth and realism, multicursality/potentiality, and in particular a concern with reader or player agency, which allows us to place these texts on what I have called a textual continuum (these texts are akin to adjacent elements like those which exist on any continuum – I acknowledged earlier that in many cases outside of the texts in this thesis, print texts and digital texts are things very distinct from each other). This enables cross-media discussions of this reciprocity, and ultimately reveals that our experiences with these interactive texts are deeply connected to our anxieties about agency in a cultural context in which individualism is encouraged, but our actual individual agency is highly limited. In chapter three I acknowledged Dovey and Kennedy’s argument that ‘the pleasures of gameplay lie in [the] negotiation of and submission to the rules of the game – a pleasure that lies in an oscillation between activity and passivity’ (2006, p. 26), and highlighted that this foregrounds the fact that, during interaction, following rules is a pleasurable experience itself. The ostensible choice between chapter maps in *Hopscotch* ‘singl[es] out and attack[s] the passive reader’ (Hussey, 1981, p. 59); in *Composition No. 1* we feel responsible for X.’s fate, but this is illusory and we know this; we desire a ‘seemingly infinite expanse’ with which to interact, because we naturally ‘[hate] Restraint’ (Martin, 2011, emphasis mine; Addison, 1712, cited in Martin, 2011): in essence, we want to possess the appearance of being active, but also to negotiate this agency within a set of rules that have already been determined
for us. We want the playfulness of interaction, without the responsibility of
determining our own rules, writing the novels ourselves, or suffering any **real**
consequences that might result from our actions. We are not really given endless
agency, but rather a limited number of potential pathways to follow with the
**impression** that ‘the number of possible combinations [for us to play with] is
infinite’ (Saporta, 1963, ‘The Reader is Requested’). We, as readers and players,
seek the ‘**illusion** that [we are] Godlike and omniscient’, and (like when suspending
our disbelief in reading something obviously fictional) accept that this is an
illusion, because this is ‘a very pleasurable sensation’ (Ryman, 1998, p. 4, emphasis
mine). When interacting with these texts, we do not feel like the culturally vilified
‘passive reader’ (Hussey, 1981, p. 59) who ‘desires an already finished text that
requires no participation in its production’, but rather we feel **active**, ‘eager for an
energetic encounter’ (Simpkins, 1990, p. 61), which requires ‘nontrivial effort’
(Aarseth, 1997a, p. 1), and ‘whose outcome is [or, rather, **appears** to be] by no
means forgone in the author’s favour’ (Simpkins, 1990, p. 61). These texts grant us
pleasure by seeming to grant us a degree of power, and this lets us, for the period of
interaction, step away from our cultural anxieties, away from our ‘agency panic’
(Melley, 2000, p. 62), leave behind our fears about our individuality, and enjoy the
illusion of agency.
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