Literary Interpretation as Board Game:

A Close Reading of *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore*

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The proposed contribution will be a scholarly process essay reflecting on—and responding to—the design, prototyping, and completion of a board (or table top) game illuminating the processes behind close reading. In this case, I will design the game based on a passage from the novel *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore*. Chosen because it foregrounds a story about the value of innovative spaces for exploring knowledge, *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore* offers plenty of interesting material to inform how game design represents an innovative space for textual analysis. At the same time, the underlying contexts of discovery and secrecy in the novel serve as themes for the game play and / or the game design itself, providing a border of sorts for both the textual analysis and its representation in the board game.

The project is Inspired and informed by perspectives offered by Mary Flanagan in *Critical Play: Radical Game Design*, Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby in *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming*, Leah A. Lievrouw in "The Materiality of Mediated Knowledge and Expression," and concepts of “Critical Making” as explored by Garnet Hertz, Jentery Sayers, and Mark Ratto among others. In each case, these scholars explore the connections between materialism, or tactility, and methodologies for exploring critical thinking and interpretation. Game play and design, as a methodology for critical thinking, making, and speculation, exposes questions about interpretive bias, ingrained assumptions, and disciplinary expectations. This project’s proposed board game does likewise, representing the act of literary interpretation through game play, game design, and their representation(s).

More generally, this project is about how we might approach teaching the basics of literary studies using games, particularly through the process of designing and building board games. I am interested in how the process of designing and building board games might manifest texts—and their underlying thematic or symbolic qualities—in a material way that is not grounded in the essay (or the written word). Building the board game, it is hoped, will incorporate a particular textual moment into game design, thereby facilitating discussion about the implications of textual interpretation—why and how do we make interpretive decisions about the symbolic meaning of a text? Why do we choose to represent actions, settings, philosophies, as we do? How do we restrict or enable transgressions and ambiguities? As such, the process of designing and building a board game based on a text, or portion of text, makes visible those interpretive decisions that give rise to literary interpretation and argument. In particular, I mean to explore the material representation of characteristics that tend to underpin the practice of literary interpretation—concepts such as theme, character, setting, symbol, metaphor, point-of-view, and other general modes used to understand or interpret the role of figurative language in a text. By extension, I hope that the process of representing literary texts materially exposes a text's underlying thematic representations—imbedded issues of race or gender for instance; socio-economic status, social mobility, historical perspective among many others.

One way to better conceptualize the project is to imagine that instead of producing an essay about a close reading of a passage in *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore*, I am building a board game (and in this case writing about that process). The board game is not meant to be like an essay or even a substitute for an essay. Instead, the board game is a different process—or venue—for realizing similar ends to the essay. Unlike the essay, where the thesis is stated explicitly, the thesis of the board game is the game itself—the way one chooses to represent the passage in the design of the board game is the argument. Alternatively, the argument could also be contained in the game play—how one plays the game reveals the argument. In short, I want to think about how designing, building, and playing a game based on a text impacts how we might receive and understand the text itself and, by extension, how we understand the foundations of textual criticism we use to perform literary analysis and argumentation.

Speaking to timelines, I have already begun developing and building the board game in response to a passage in *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore* and recording the outcomes of that process. The project is in mid-form, with many interesting avenues remaining to walk down. That said, the material elements of the game have been fabricated or collected and all that remains is a matter of assembly and reflection.

Brief Works Cited:

Dunne, Anthony and Fiona Raby. *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social*

*Dreaming.* Cambridge. MIT P, 2013

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and Nicole Starosielski, eds. *Signal Traffic: Critical Studies of Media Infrastructures (Geopolitics of Information)*. University of Illinois P, 2015. 21-52.