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Interactivity – Watching Beyond the Point of View

In any narrative work, despite genre, conventions, or even medium, one element remains constant – characters. Every good (and not so good) story has at least one role, which helps provide a point of reference for the reader and something to follow throughout the narrative's events. Yet, characters are defined not just by their actions, but also how viewers see them. All forms of media have some form of perspective. Books and games predominately get defined as first, third, or the odd second person viewpoints, with qualifiers based on genre or narrator's knowledge. However, a text descriptor, panel, and camera can all be seen as variations on the eye, while directly manipulating works has a definitely tactile feel. Due to interactivity, the viewer-driven experience of games, remains something that can't be easily replicated in other narrative forms. This distinct attribute allows new twists on reader-character interactions. As such, interactivity allows a marriage of character and viewer experiences, forming narrative perspectives beyond the limits of the standard third, second, or first person view.

Even the most linear of games offer player choice, be it through movement, tactics, or weapon availability. Throughout *Half-Life*, an incredibly scripted shooter, the player character Gordon Freeman never talks. Yet, one player can have a Gordon who dutifully follows instructions, while another spends hours trying to see how many boxes

he can break as the surrounding cast attempts to drag him along. Gordon can become a cowardly scientist, dodging aliens as he crawls, broken and bruised to the next health pack. Alternatively, another player in the same encounter might breeze through it, acting more akin to Rambo than a theoretical physicist. These differences allow for a spontaneous narrative construction inside the larger story, due to how the viewer interacts with the character. Gordon, despite essentially being a silent camera with a gun, becomes an incredibly personal character, due to his nuances and subtleties being directly defined by the player. Instead, the combination of the interaction with established narrative techniques creates a more thorough experience.

A literary analogue to Gordon Freeman's alien adventures can be found in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. Alice and Gordon both get pulled along by grander powers or unlikely coincidences in their adventures through outlandish environments, meaning neither seems to be the driving force in their narrative. Rather, these characters serve as a comparably ordinary lens for the story and imagery to happen around. In *Wonderland*, the adventure gets set to Carroll's pace. Whereas the player explored in *Half-Life,* Alice gets pushed through the narrative. Confined to the action on the page, the reader gets trapped in the skits unfolding on the paper, not unlike Alice. Yet, the text remains whimsical, despite the various stressing events, mostly due to Alice's mannerisms. She's hardly mowing down aliens with automatic weapons, but even when playing croquet with a queen overly fond of decapitation, Alice remains calm, and even smug. The average reader may have found *Wonderland* terrifying if they'd fallen in, but Alice refusing to be scared despite everything creates a lighthearted tale. While *Half-Life* lets the player decide the tone and character, *Wonderland* features

a set filter, despite both narratives having similar viewpoints – the difference lies in the viewer's interaction.

While Gordon's a set character, his motivations are hardly separate from the player. The next type of interactive viewpoint getting explored has the character as an individual, distinctly separate from even an "eye" for the viewer. This idea is hardly new to film or books. Characters in these works, unlike Alice or Gordon, don't exist to bring the viewer along for a ride, but rather are there to show their story. *Hamlet* wouldn't be the same if Hamlet decided to kill Polonius off of an audience vote. Instead, the titular character's descent into insanity, despite what the audience may wish, defines the narrative. His internal struggles remain the driving force, and his actions remain powerful without reader influence or perspective. The viewer's only agency in the narrative manifests itself in the decision to keep participating, either by turning pages or watching the stage. While *Wonderland* remains evocative for its imagery as the observer joins the ride, *Hamlet* stands iconic for its titular character's arc, despite the reader's desires.

Games, however, rarely separate player from character in a distinctive manner. Throughout *Spec Ops: The Line's* first half, you'd be forgiven for thinking player character Captain Walker's nothing more than a vague body for the player to watch the narrative through, similar to Gordon Freeman. However, around the halfway point, the game breaks the connection between Walker and the player through a false choice. The viewer can either decide to assault a base's defenses, or fire phosphorus on the unsuspecting guards from a distance. Walker made his choice before the prompt appears on screen, with the narrative only continuing if the phosphorus gets used.

From that point on, Walker, like Hamlet, makes increasingly unsettling narrative decisions, and gameplay mechanics like executions change to emphasis the victims' last moments, rather than the player's triumph. The player is forced to control this growingly manic man through Dubai, firing every shot. While literary works like Hamlet may feature a man's descent into insanity, controlling that character creates a thoroughly different, and possibly more unsettling, experience. Shoving a revolver down a struggling soldier's throat, who moments ago talked about the path of needless destruction Walker created, feels more visceral when you're pulling the trigger. The standard character-reader interaction of turning the pages is replaced with performing the actual atrocities, to great effect

The last player-character viewpoint is the persona for the viewer. This avatar could be an analog for the player, or a made up identity for roleplay purposes. Not many books or films show this perspective, due to the limitations of having to produce so many outcomes. However video games, predominately series like *Fallout* and *Dark Souls***,** use this interaction for a hallmark. These type of games feature player freedom and reactive worlds, to encourage experimentation and enforce the idea that each player has a unique experience. Often, they feature character customization to more easily allow players to inhabit the world. While narrative and side events may be scripted, the path the player takes is not, separating this type of experience from any other form of narrative. These games treats the viewer and character as one entity, allowing all of the traits of the character to be grafted onto the blank slate, as the player determines. Some games, like *Mass Effect,* give a character some background, but it's closer to a *Mad Libs* sheet than a biography. These character creators encourage

players to define the important backstory and motivation through in-game actions and mental ideas of how their persona would act. The interactivity of games allows for a more nuanced approach to these type of experiences than film or books can currently offer. The only confining rules are that of the game world, which (ideally) rarely infringe on player freedom. This type of interaction can lead to much deeper relationships with the main character, as the majority of interesting and personal aspects comes courtesy of the viewer. Revenge can be so much sweeter when doing it for one's (fictional) self.

While games struggle with presenting a separation between character and audience, literature rarely unites them. The closest analogue to this character-reader relationship remains second-person viewpoints, but it's rarely employed in narrative. However, the strength of written works remain their definitive nature. While characters might not have arcs personal to each reader, they do have set ones. That said, different aspects of books shine for different readers, leading to more or less powerful moments based off of the reader's life experiences. The interactivity in literature comes from interpretations of established events, be it why a character acts or larger themes of the text. In addition, written works rely on the reader creating the imagery in their head. Books might not change the story, but each reader is allowed to experience it in a different way through more passive means.

That's not to say there are only three types of viewer-character experiences, or that they remain distinct. Rather, these types of interactions enhance reactions from the reader, working best when mixed together to create new experiences. The effect interactivity has on narratives shouldn't be ignored, as when done well, managing viewer involvement can heighten engagement. This human, interactive element can

raise a poor narrative, or undermine an excelling one. Being aware of reader-character interactions in addition to perspective allows for a more complete analysis of the narrative, especially in interactive media. Dismissing the player-character relationship because it's inherently different for each person only ejects what most distinguishes interactive tales, like games, from other forms of narrative. Books emphasize the point of view and games are defined by controls, but they both require and are enhanced with an involved audience. Ignoring the ways audiences engage with narrative assumes that a quality narrative can be told by an unread book sitting in a dark room, where no one can enter. Until someone interacts, every character, theme, and element of a story serves only to collect dust.

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