PUZZLES AND POSSIBILITIES:
NEW FORMS OF COMMUNICATION IN THE ELECTRATE AGE

By

ERIN FERNANDEZ

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Erin Fernandez

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Chair: Gregory Ulmer
Cochair: Terry Harpold
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Imagetexts offer new possibilities for language, for pairing text with images in increasingly complex ways. In a close examination of *Myst*, a seminal computer game and an almost completely image-based text, I identify patterns of communication unique to the genre. These patterns are necessary to the pleasure of playing *Myst*. The "lingo" pattern is a visual language unique to a game, and the player enjoys learning the language and therefore the logic of the game's world. The "mood" pattern is based on a myriad of tiny details, that added together create an atmosphere designed to draw the player into the game. In *Myst*, the player is asked to judge characters' morality based on the sum total of these usually insignificant details. This mood puzzle is unique to the imagetext because it relies on the visceral and emotional effect of an image to communicate information to an audience.

The new structures of communication clearly seen in *Myst* can be abstracted and used to understand other texts like *Quimby the Mouse* and *The Three Golden Keys*.

These texts seamlessly integrate these devices: Chris Ware's *Quimby the Mouse* reconfigures comic book conventions in order to explore the genre's lingo possibilities, and Peter Sis's *The Three Golden Keys* creates meaning through an intricate mood pattern. Much like *Myst*, both books explore the possibilities of imagetext, using imagery and texture to create an atmosphere of play and discovery.

INTRODUCTION

Much has been made of the white noise of media, the many bars of text and

tickertape on news channels, the omnipresence of advertising. The consequences of these

facts of modern living are yet to be fully understood, but it is certain that in the glut of

information surging against a finite attention span, the audience must make a choice. On

CNN, the viewer must focus on the talking head and its voice or she or he must ignore

the voice in order to read the headlines scrolling along the bottom. There is a tension

between the possibility of a sustained barrage of information and the need for coherence:

between an audience that is increasingly accustomed to the factors of choice and chance

in entertainment, and the need for a controlled narrative. These issues are increasingly

seen in other traditionally linear forms of media as audiences become more electrate.[1]

New Media and electracy offer new possibilities for language, new possibilities for

pairing text with images in increasingly complex ways. Video games depict intricate and

pixel-perfect worlds, designed to draw the player into an atmosphere. The first time I

played *Myst*, a computer game very much concerned with atmospheres, I felt so involved

in the mood of the game that I shivered, shrieked, and gasped during the eeriest parts,

completely in the game's thrall. The unique effect the game had on me never left my

mind. In writing this paper, I set out to understand how these atmospheres, or moods, are

[1]Ulmer, *Internet Invention : From Literacy to Electracy*

created in imagetexts.[2] I wanted to better understand what makes certain texts capable of engaging a player's viscera as surely as every written text engages the mind. Theorizing answers to these questions was more difficult than I first imagined.

An ontological approach to video games is somewhat hard to find, but Roger Caillois' *Man, Play, and Games* and Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext* are both helpful in this regard. Caillois published a sociological theory of gaming in 1958. *Man, Play, and Games* sets out different categories of gaming: *agôn*, or competitive gaming, *alea*, or games of chance, *illinx*, or 'dizzying' games, and *mimicry*, acting out roles as in a play. His methodology is helpful here, in that he is interested in the characteristics that set one species of gaming apart from another. Though his study does not address much of modern gaming, most notably solitaire and almost every adventure game, his approach is helpful for thinking about games within an organizational system.

Aarseth's *Cybertext* characterizes texts as "ergodic" that is, he understands them as systems of pathways that a reader must engage with "nontrivial effort" (1). This approach helps to free adventure gaming from what Aarseth considers academia's failure to "grasp the intrinsic qualities of the genre" (106). This approach does goes very far in defining and categorizing the mechanisms of games that fall outside the scope of Caillois' work. But Aarseth focuses on textual adventure games, 2D platform games, and hypertext. *Cybertext* does not address games whose presentation is three dimensional and almost purely visual, and therefore is not concerned with how images affect the moods and atmospheres of an imagetext.

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[2] Ault, *ImageTexT*

The larger context of Neo-Baroque criticism is helpful in understanding the ways imagetexts can create mood. In recent scholarship, a historical connection has been drawn between seventeenth-century Baroque aesthetics and our current information-driven mode of aesthetics. Angela Ndalianis' innovative book *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics* explores this connection in the context of interrelated genres. Ndalianis defines Neo-Baroque entertainment forms as concerned with "engulfing and engaging the spectator actively in sensorial and formal games that are concerned with their own media-specific sensory and playful experiences" (3). She explores what she calls "the aesthetics of wonder," the interconnectedness of varied forms of modern media and the pervasiveness of media spectacle (245). Her analysis of video games highlights the ways they intersect with their parents, movies, or their siblings, theme parks, and the ways in which these intersections create possibility for a more active reader/player. Ndalianis sees Neo-Baroque as a pervasive net of media, in which a narrative can take many forms and surround an audience with information. This understanding of New Media as "engulfing" a player underscores the new possibilities for audiences to interact with a text: to walk through, to touch, and to choose.

Mieke Bal's *Quoting Caravaggio* offers a detailed look at the relationship between imagetext in modern art and its roots in Baroque-era art. Her close readings of Neo-Baroque art are helpful in understanding the mechanisms imagetext uses to work on an audience, and her example of Christiensen's *Ostentatio Vulnerum* provides an example of Neo-Baroque art and its ability to affect its audience. In the piece, Christensen takes a detail from Caravaggio's *Doubting Thomas* and magnifies it. Then, beneath in a contiguous frame, she displays a sheet of red Jell-O. Either part of the piece would not

function alone. Together, however, they create a powerful mood in the viewer. The viewer feels "wound" when she looks at the piece. The feeling created in the viewer is not logical, nor is it sympathetic. "If that wound is what the critics need to get away from," she notes, "it is because it attracts the eye; it is literally fascinating, holding you riveted while frightening you away." For Bal, the Neo-Baroque is defined by this ability to affect its audience viscerally. While the wound is Baroque, the Neo-Baroque is created in its juxtaposition with red Jell-O. The mood of "wound" is magnified by its neighboring Jell-O, displayed at room temperature on a museum wall, passively undergoing an inevitable decay.

While many of my concerns are framed by recent scholarship, some questions have yet to be dealt with directly. What, specifically, does greater interactivity and choice mean for an image-based text? How do New Media organize and communicate information? Are there new patterns that characterize imagetexts; patterns akin to classic text devices like metaphors, enjambment, and interrogative sentences? Perhaps the tools for addressing the ontology of imagetext/reader interaction do not exist yet. I aim to address these questions or at least to offer possible tools for their further exploration.

My method here is theoretical; I am less concerned with scholarship concerning the application of semiotics to videogames, or the small body of critical literature on *Myst*, and more concerned with imagining new possibilities and approaches for analyzing an imagetext. I intend to examine the implications of reader[3] agency and choice by using Roland Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text* to examine some of this phenomenon's New

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[3] There is some awkwardness of terms here, "reader" connotes a classic text, "player" seems to evoke a person playing a game (and implies a lack of serious engagement with the text), and "audience" seems to mean more than one person. All three are true for the issues I am addressing, so I will use the three terms interchangeably, to mean a person who is engaging with an imagetext.

Media roots in one of the earliest (and most popular) examples of three-dimensional

gaming, *Myst*.

   In discussing the effects and management of gameplay and narrative choice in

Myst, I will try to answer what may be the most pressing video game question to my

mind: what makes successful imagetexts work? *Myst* performs the striking feat of

making the written word all but unnecessary to the completion of its narrative.[4]

Encountering few words, spoken or written, *Myst*'s players are able to navigate a world

whose diegesis frequently does not follow the player's extradiagetic knowledge and

experience.[5] While *Myst*'s diegesis remains somewhat similar to our own, its logic and

functioning remains a complex system for the reader to navigate.

   I posit that, from an authorial standpoint, the challenge of creating a

comprehensible narrative in a purely visual environment is enormous. On any given

screen in *Myst* there are multiple places a player might click, but only four or five will

yield a response. Beyond this, if every click is a furthering of the narrative, then a

random reading of *Myst* is potentially maddening, with threads that loop, diverge, and

back track enough to frustrate a player who does not become comfortable with the

game's diegesis. From this vantage point, the need for an authorial control over the text

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[4] It is important to note that there are quite a few pages of text to read in *Myst* (there is a shelf that contains several books with information about the Myst worlds), but few of the details they relate are absolutely necessary to beat the game. Interestingly, the books seem like a perfect opportunity to spell out hints to the puzzles, but the diagrams, maps, and patterns found in the books are the only useful information in a teleological sense.

[5] Objects in *Myst* often have different functions than objects in the player's extradiegesis. A tree works as a hydraulic elevator, and a dentist's chair is used to view stars, as through a telescope. Though the physical laws of *Myst*'s worlds (gravity and inertia, for example) usually do match up with the player's 'real world,' sometimes even these rules are bent or changed. A player can use a 'linking' book as a physical gateway into another world, actually dematerializing into its pages and materializing in the world it depicts.

is obvious. Because *Myst* is almost purely image-based, the solutions[6] the creators of

Myst, brothers Rand and Robyn Miller, developed to solve these issues in *Myst* can be

generalized to address the question of how imagetext works and communicates in

general.

After an examination of *Myst* and its modes of player interaction, I will abstract the

patterns it uses in order to apply them to two more recent examples of imagetext media.

Chris Ware's *Quimby the Mouse* and Peter Sis's *The Three Golden Keys* are ideal texts to

use for a trial of this theory. Much like *Myst*, these texts seamlessly integrate imagetext

possibilities, demonstrating an obsessive attention to detail and marginalia, systems of

mapping and guidance, and multiple narrative threads.

Since I am mainly concerned with the interaction, audience agency, and play that

imagetext yields, Barthes' *The Pleasures of the Text* is an appropriate starting point. In

this text, Barthes is concerned with a reading experience that allows for choice, with

readers that meander and authors whose style encourages them. In theorizing these more

interactive aspects of classic text, Barthes grapples with questions that are situated at the

heart of the modern media spectacle. That is, what are the implications and problems

with choice in narrative?

In addressing this question, Barthes frequently asserts his own experience of a

connection between a reader's choice and the pleasure inherent in reading:

> Our very avidity for knowledge impels us to skim or skip
> certain passages (anticipated as "boring") in order to get
> more quickly to the warmer parts of the anecdote…we
> boldly skip (no one is watching) descriptions, explanations,
> analyses, conversations…it is the very rhythm of what is

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[6] i.e. the possibilities for meaning through imagetext

read and what is not read that creates the pleasure of great
narratives. (13)

This exploration of the conditions necessary for play and pleasure in classic text suggests a similar question in the study of New Media: what does the image add to the pleasure of text? *The Pleasure of the Text* is such a cryptically written and amorphous text that it allows for flexibility in application, and is a useful tool in exploring the ontology of the Neo-Baroque.

As an avid reader of these new forms of media, I have noticed that the imagetexts I find the most "engulfing" and pleasurable are often the texts that allow for choice, whether in the freedom my eye is allowed as it explores the details in an illustration, or the ability to choose among the varied paths of a complex video game narrative. This subjective experience of pleasure in choice echoes Barthes. In his understanding, bliss can only occur when the author gives over some control of the narrative.

> [The author] must seek out this reader (must "cruise" him)
> *without knowing where he is*. A site of bliss is then created.
> It is not the reader's "person" that is necessary…it is this
> site: the possibility of a dialectics of desire, of an
> *unpredictability* of bliss: the bets are not placed, there can
> still be a game. (4)

That is, the crucial element in gaming is one of the reader's choices, or an element of "unpredictability" to the narrative. The author must allow for this freedom, this ability of the reader to interact with the text in ways the author might not foresee.

In a narrative that is too tightly controlled (Barthes refers to this as a "prattling" text) the reader is offered no freedom. Imagetexts offer points of escape from this prattling. There are certainly frustrations and breakdowns of communication in gaming, but in a functioning imagetext, the reader has choice: where to look on a page, where to

click on a screen, and sometimes which narrative thread to pursue. Because the

author/text/reader relationship is central to a critical evaluation of New Media, I enlist

Barthes as an almost-oracle, keeping in mind his theories on the pleasures and

possibilities of reader agency to help reconsider interaction between the reader and the

text.

IMAGETEXT POSSIBILITIES: *MYST*

The first action taken by the player in *Myst* is a gesture of opening a book and entering into the world it depicts. (Figures. 1 and 2) The world of *Myst* turns from a two dimensional animation into a three dimensional world.[7] At this point, the narrative switches from a traditional linear narrative into a webbing sprawl of possibilities. The player suddenly gains agency to choose, within certain parameters, where to go and what to do. In a post CD-ROM world, the goal in designing a three dimensional[8] game world is ostensibly to afford an experience as immersive as everyday life. There is a tension here between the infinite possibilities of a three-dimensional space and the necessity of a narrative drive, between the freedom and 'realism' that players increasingly demand and an absolute need for an authorial guiding hand.

This tension is resolved in the course of three types of puzzle patterns in *Myst*.[9] The first type is a puzzle in the most traditional sense of the word, an obstacle that requires calculation and planning, assessment of if/then relationships, or formulation or reading of a spatial map. The second type is so seamlessly blended into the game itself

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[7] There are many examples of multilinear narratives in a purely textual format (Michael Joyce's *afternoon* comes to mind), but here I am specifically concerned with the narrative possibilities of a rendered three-dimensional space as they differ from the space afforded by a page.

[8] *Myst* is not, of course, literally three-dimensional. In fact, the halting screen-by-screen gameplay of the original and "Masterpiece" versions of the game is arguably less 3D than a later remake called *RealMyst*, which allows a player to move smoothly through the game environment. However, for the purposes of this paper, I use this term "three-dimensional" to refer to a demand the game makes on a player's spatial mapping. That is, unless the player perceives the topography of *Myst* as corresponding to a three-dimensional space, it is difficult for her to navigate the space and discover all the parts of the puzzles.

[9] I do not mean to explore every gaming pattern. There are other mechanisms for gamer/game interaction that lie outside the scope of this paper. Most notably, games that demand reflex reactions from their players (as in Mario games, where a well-timed jump is crucial to success), and games that demand accuracy and gauging of the effects of gravity, weather, etc. (as with the *Tiger Woods* golf series). I choose these three patterns to detail because of their immediate relevance to imagetext structures in other media.

that it is easy to miss, but it is more important to the text of *Myst* in many ways. This

puzzle requires a mastery of the *language* of *Myst*. The player has to become

comfortable with *Myst*'s systems of representation and meaning, learning to separate the

logic puzzles from the atmosphere that surrounds them. The third type of puzzle is one

of practical wisdom. The player is asked to solve the final problem of the game using her

understanding of the *atmospheres* of *Myst*, the general feeling she has about the

characters, based only on the evidence of their abandoned environments.[10] The two men

revealed to be trapped in the red and blue linking books say they are brothers, and beg the

player to free them from their book, to bring their book more pages and not the other. In

three out of the four worlds that Myst Island links to, the player discovers rooms the

brothers inhabited before they were trapped inside the blue and red books. The rooms are

abandoned, and the contents and differences between the rooms, often side by side, offer

clues to the final puzzle of the game: which brother, if any, should go free? This type of

question demands an entirely different level of interaction with the game.

The Lingo Puzzle

In thinking about *Myst*'s various puzzles, is helpful to outline the relationship

between its various islands and the books that link them together. In order to travel from

the main island to the various other island worlds, the player must solve puzzles in order

to find that world's linking book. These logic-based puzzles of *Myst* are conspicuous

within the environment of each age. They are almost always associated with in

mechanical devices, things obviously made for interaction: gears, levers, pulls, matches,

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[10] The terms "puzzle" and "problem" are not exactly equal, the former connotes a game scenario and the latter connotes an interpersonal interaction, which allows for a more ambiguous solution.

and buttons. These puzzles require logic, in part, but they also require a Rube-Goldberg type understanding of a logic specific to the world itself.

In *Myst*, interaction with a map or model of an object often influences the larger topography it depicts. Clicking on a painting of a bookshelf causes a bookshelf in the same room to sink into the ground, revealing a passageway. Raising a submerged model ship raises a much larger counterpart across the island. These puzzles, while they are not patterned after real-world interactions, are exemplary and internally consistent. There are usually two parts to the puzzle: one, recognizing the elements to the puzzle itself, and two, using logic and spatial mapping to solve it. Often the pieces to the problem are scattered throughout the island. In order to open the large gears that lead to the Mechanical Age, the player has to perform a complex series of tasks without any written or verbal instruction. A shorthand description of the steps a player has to take should look something like this:

Flip the marker switch by the gears, marking the gears on the tower map in the library. Click on the picture of the bookshelf, making the bookshelf disappear and reveal a passageway to the tower. Recognize that the map in the library is a representation of Myst Island. Click the circle that represents the tower. Pair the sound made as the overlay on the map turns with the *actual* tower's movement. Realize the sightline of the tower window changes red whenever it hovers over certain places (and leave the sightline over the line drawing that represents the gears). Climb up the tower and look at the plaque that says 2:40, 221. Leave the tower and go across the island to the clock tower. Figure out that one wheel controls the minutes and the other controls the time, and put in 2:40. Cross the bridge of gears that arises with solving the clock puzzle. Enter the clock

tower and pull the levers until the numbers read 221. Watch the miniature gears open and realize the large gears may be open too. Return to the large gears to find the linking book.

This narrative description reinforces the importance of "realizing" and "recognizing." There are many leaps in understanding in the puzzle's chain of events, many instances that require links and insights that logic alone cannot account for. The question of how these leaps are made is the crux of the first type of puzzle. The miniature gears *do* represent the larger ones, but they are on opposite sides of the island. The picture of the secret bookshelf passage *does* open the actual bookshelf, but this relationship has no anchor in a player's "real world" experience. This type of visual recognition is not an analytical process. Rather, a player intuits these connections because *Myst* teaches her to do so.

In the example of the picture, there are a few clues that set up the puzzle of the bookshelf. First, if the player clicks on the picture, the point of view shifts so the picture is close up and centered in the frame of her monitor. She now can see that the painting depicts the bookshelf in the room, but that in the painting it is opened to reveal a passageway. She clicks, the passageway opens, and a step of the larger puzzle is solved. From the experience the player learns two guiding principles in the world of Myst: one, in this world, a model or a map is causally connected to the actual object it depicts, and two, objects centered in the frame of the monitor are worth clicking on.

In this regard, every interactive object on *Myst*'s worlds functions as a map's legend, or a visual phrasebook. The game frequently uses very simple codes, like a one-to-one correspondence between models and 'real' counterparts, or the subtler device of

frame composition, to set up the "Aha!" moments that become a pleasure of the puzzle-solver. I call this a *lingo* pattern or puzzle, after the flexible form of this pattern and the shift in its characteristics from game to game.[11]

The pleasure of the lingo puzzle experience closely mirrors the developmental pattern of language acquisition. At the moment a player enters through the linking book into the three dimensional world of *Myst* there are no rules.[12] She inhabits an unmapped, unlearned, undefined space. While every carefully placed object in Myst offers a possibility for interaction, and theoretically a player could stumble around the world clicking on every leaf, every panel on every wall, the game still functions. The world of *Myst* is a language the player must learn, a dream-logic where the question of which objects are parts of a puzzle and which are not is a crucial part of the game.

The Logic Puzzle

In *Myst*, often a lingo puzzle segues into a logic puzzle. While lingo demands the ability to recognize a pattern that dictates the functioning elements of a puzzle against the atmosphere and background, the puzzle itself often requires planning and strategy. In the case of *Myst*, these puzzles are usually about as simple as the classic Fox, Chicken and

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[11] That is, while logic puzzles can be transported from game to game and the elements used to solve them will not change, the elements of a lingo puzzle will…even between games in a series. In the earlier game by the Miller brothers, *The Manhole*, clicking on a framed picture often transports the player to a completely other world. In *Myst*, a very similar linking effect takes place through books. Books and framed pictures are both elements of the language of these games (and are even created by the same authors) but learning their function and therefore solving the lingo puzzle is completely different from game to game.

[12] This effect was likely greater when *Myst* was first released, because the player would have no opportunity to hear the game described by someone else who played it. Also, in essence this moment and the process that so mirrors language acquisition happens with every imagetext, because one of the great pleasures of gaming even (or perhaps especially), in a series like *Mario* or *Zelda* or *Final Fantasy*) is in discovering how the game works differently from its predecessors.

Farmer river-crossing puzzle. These puzzles are the most traditional of the three types, and often can be rewritten as mathematical equations or logic statements.

These "logic" puzzles of *Myst* sustain the game's teleological character. The player is faced with situations that require planning and reason. In the Channelwood Age, she must guide water through a pipe system, using energy from the water pressure to power elevators and bridges and progress in her exploration. Abstracted, the reasoning that logic puzzles demand follows a very linear process. The player sees an end goal (i.e. powering an elevator) and, if she has solved the language puzzle of this world, she knows what tools can be used to solve it (she recognizes the pipes and the levers on their valves as tools; they do not recede into the environment). Using trial and error, the player either works through permutations or plans out the solution.

The plot of the game itself follows a logical progression as well. The more pages the player puts in Sirrus and Achenar's red and blue books, the more clearly the characters are able to communicate with the player and bring her closer to the information she needs to solve the final puzzle of the game. In this example, the puzzle requires lingo recognitions: first, the fact that the red and blue sheets are something to interact with, second, that they are pages, and third that the red pages belong in the red book; the blue pages belong in the blue book. But at the same time, the player must realize that there are a finite number of pages and that the more she finds and place in the books, the clearer the videos of Sirrus and Achenar become. (Figures. 3 and 4) The puzzle (one of the simplest in the game, perhaps because it is crucial to progression in the game) also follows a simple if/then relationship. *If* I add another page, *then* there will be less static and more information.

The Mood Puzzle

Interestingly, though, the end game itself fits into neither logic nor lingo categories. *Myst*'s end puzzle is hardly a puzzle at all. The skills required of the player are not logical, but instead intuitive. At the end of the game the player must make an entirely different decision than she has faced over the course of the game. All of the "unnecessary" elements of the game come into play suddenly as the player is asked to evaluate a *situation* rather than a puzzle. Should the player trust Sirrus or Achenar? Or neither? Instead of using if-then logic, the player must evaluate using intuition and ethics. Three characters beg to be released from their book-prisons. The player must infer their worth from the atmospheres and environments that seemed incidental before.

This final decision the player must make exemplifies a type of text/reader interaction that is perhaps the most difficult to define of the three types explored in this paper. How is it that a player can evaluate the trapped brothers by merely seeing fragments of video of their faces, hearing their voices, and by exploring the rooms they inhabited? (Figures. 5 and 6) The circumstantial evidence ranges from a secret room that contains Achenar's bloody chopping block and electrified cage, to Sirrus's moldy cheese plate, his wine collection, and his hidden coffers stocked with gold. The type of understanding demanded of the player is not logical, nor is it creative. Achenar simply *seems* off.[13] In the rooms that contain the blue pages, the wallpaper is stained. His dresser has a holographic skull sculpture that slowly morphs into a rose with the pull of a lever. As he giggles nervously from the inside of his book-prison, his eyes shift. By

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[13] In the analysis to follow, I will explore the subtle (and quite complex) mechanisms that lead to these 'simple' impressions.

contrast, Sirrus seems detached and cool. His rooms are refined, with a telescope and an elegant oil painting. He pauses when he speaks and tilts his head up in a haughty way.

In order to correctly solve the puzzle[14] the player has to intuit the moods of the brothers' rooms in the various worlds of *Myst*. She has to read the tone of the brothers' voices, their demeanor. In short, she has to make a decision based on evaluations people make unconsciously every day. *Myst* is never more involving than at this point in the narrative. The game asks the player to treat these characters as if they were real, and to regard the atmosphere felt in their homes as inseparable from their ethics. It is possible to solve the final mystery correctly, to read these characters through their worlds and determine their worth. Again, the task the game asks of the player is outside the scope of any other puzzle the player has tackled so far. Progress in the game is predicated on the gathering of these pages to free the brothers, and now *Myst* asks another question entirely: while you were gathering the pages and solving the puzzles, *were you paying attention?*

This third pattern, a "mood" puzzle, relies on a player's growing understanding of the atmosphere created by the accumulation of indirect evidence in the brothers' rooms of their actual motives. Until the final choice is put before her, a player may understand the moldy cheese, the bloodied chopping block, or the eerie ambient music as simply atmospheric elements, traces of a meaningless spooky ambiance. The game's eerie feeling, even though it might be successfully created, might be dismissed as a sort of very effective haunted house. Good for chills, but no deeper understanding is needed. So in

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[14] The answer: free neither brother, but instead, a kindly looking third character who the player learns at the end of the game is their father.

order to solve this final puzzle, the player has to rethink details that seemed like embellishment before, and understand the atmosphere they create as meaningful.

This use of mood as a puzzle element is one of the most significant aspects of *Myst*. The final puzzle achieves something very important: it is an example of the concrete communication by non-verbal cues. *Myst*'s worlds are bizarre and beautifully detailed, and all their filigree is crucial for keeping gamers entertained. In this puzzle the Rand brothers put every possibility of this then-nascent medium to the test, and developed a fascinating example of not only entertainment, but of a full immersion of the player into a digital world. When a player makes that final decision, she has to truly inhabit the world of *Myst* to answer correctly.

This question of the mood puzzle/pattern is possibly the most difficult to understand aspect of text/reader relationship. As Barthes noted, in the case of pleasure and bliss, the reader is in the most danger of being "lost;" the author may not know "where [the reader] is" (4). In effect, there is a greater possibility of coming up with the wrong answer.[15] The switch between logic and lingo puzzles to a mood puzzle is a leap from logic and language play to a question of ethics, in which no answer is *wrong* or *right*, but each answer can be described as *wise* or *foolish*. This sudden emphasis on an ethical problem, almost completely disconnected from empirical evidence, allows for misinterpretation and confusion. It is exactly this calculated risk that forms the "cruising" that Barthes says an author must perform—an act of risk as well as pleasure— in order to allow for play (4). In this type of puzzle, the lack of certainty and the inscrutability of the rules are exactly what allow for the possibility of choice and play.

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[15] Personally, when I first played *Myst* I chose incorrectly (I set Sirrus free and ended up in the book prison I freed him from), and I imagine I am not alone.

For me, one of the core problems in the interpretation of any imagetext is this question of freedom and choice. The incorporation of an image into a text is an invitation to a reader to let her eyes wander, to explore. And so every imagetext author, in her deviation from conventional text, faces the same issues of authorial control and reader freedom.

In an enigmatic sentence regarding authorial desire, Barthes claims every writer's motto is: "Mad I cannot be, sane I do not deign to be, neurotic I am" (6). If this assertion is read in the context of the types of author Barthes discusses in *The Pleasure of the Text*, the sentence neatly aligns with the three types of interaction I have discussed. "Madness" aligns with mood puzzles and texture. "Sane" refers to the classic text, and its adherence to structure.[16] "Neurotic" connotes the lingo puzzle, in many ways a link between the two, an oscillation between the play inherent in visual and intuitive understanding and the rigor of logical, author-guided communication. This equation Barthes sets up is helpful for understanding the relationship between the three possibilities for creation of imagetext meaning. Pure visual communication is often nonsensical. Adherence to classic text logic does not allow for play and pleasure. And it seems that when a text relies on images to create much of its meaning, a lingo pattern is necessary: a system of rules for understanding and navigating the text.

These designations can be applied to any imagetext, though some rely more heavily on these patterns than others. Chris Ware's *Quimby the Mouse* reconfigures comic book conventions in order to explore the genre's lingo possibilities. Peter Sis's *The Three*

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[16] I use "classic text" in the way Roland Barthes defined it in S/Z. That is, a "readerly" text, a text where "nothing is ever lost: meaning recuperates everything." (201) This parallels with the idea of a "prattling" text that he outlines in *The Pleasure of the Text*.

Golden Keys creates meaning through an intricate mood pattern. Both books use multiple visual and textual structures to create order while allowing for the reader's freedom. I aim to demonstrate how these designations of mood and lingo might be useful for understanding these texts, whose ability to foster play and discovery are remarkably similar to *Myst*'s.
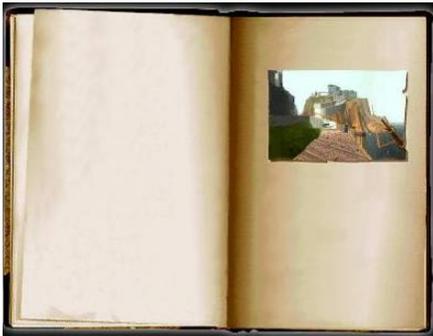

Figure 1. *Myst* linking book

Figure 2. *Myst* game play start

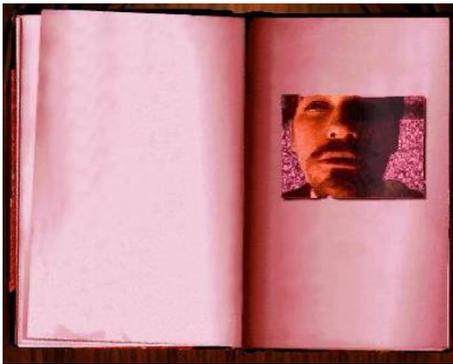Figure 3. *Myst* Red Book pre-first page

Figure 4. *Myst* Red Book post-first page

Figure 5. *Myst* Sirrus's room, Mechanical Age

Figure 6. *Myst* Achenar's room, Mechanical Age

IMAGETEXT POSSIBILITIES: *THE THREE GOLDEN KEYS*

Sis's *The Three Golden Keys* is a nuanced account of a man's fantastical trip home through his memories of the Czech Republic. The three keys stand for each story the man must remember in his quest to unlock his childhood home. He wanders through the empty streets of Prague, and at each of the city's three main landmarks he receives another key, and another tale. When he finds all three keys and the city memories they conjure, he is able to return to his childhood home and those memories as well.

The possibility of mood and the feeling of discovery that mood affords fits well with this tale of half-forgotten memories. The book relies heavily on mood to create a feeling of discovery and wonder. The Sis's visual style is decentralized; his pages have a weakened focal point, which allows a reader to let her eye wander over them. The invitation to wander is reinforced by the texture of his images, which are rendered in muted color and etched with intricate lines. The images do operate within a logic structure, because they are anchored by the focal point of the text's narrator and his cat within most of the pictures, as well as within the greater physical space of Prague. The text is also anchored by the presence of classic text. There is a guiding bit of writing at the bottom of every page, which imparts a logical progression to the narrative.

Because *The Three Golden Keys* is an intricate book it is easy to feel on the brink of being lost in its attention to detail. But it is precisely this feeling that confirms the book as having a strong mood motif throughout. Sis manages to communicate more

information about the narrator's journey through these ostensibly paratextual details than he does through the text that lines the bottom tenth of nearly every page.

When a reader interacts with this text, the almost composition-less picture planes create a wandering feel to the narrative's progression. There is little direction for the eye to follow, and instead of supporting a traditional Western left to right flow and structure, the etched lines in the woodblock prints invite the reader to deviate from a linear narrative and examine these details (Figures. 7 and 8). A picture that the eye first understands as a simple block building on an empty city street is etched with line engravings of ghostly animal and human bodies. (8) The streets are nicked with small, textured, repeating white lines. These details create sustain a resistance to an easy comprehension of the images they adorn. Their very roughness creates a possibility for play. The engravings allow a reader to linger and explore, to touch the pages with her eyes.

In some ways the use of mood in *The Three Golden Keys* is very similar to its use in *Myst*. Sis's illustrations do reflect the narrative, but the lines that decorate them are non-representational and unanchored in the text. Sis's use of both necessary and unnecessary detail is similar to the Rand brothers' carefully structured relationship between *Myst*'s narrative and the detailed atmospheres of its various worlds. The mood does not seem immediately necessary for comprehension of the narrative of the text in either instance. Especially so in *The Three Golden Keys*, because there is a solid presence of classic text, and there is no puzzle at the end of the book, forcing the reader to make sense of the feeling of wandering and discovery the details allow. But the details are as important in *The Three Golden Keys*, because just as the reader can feel eerie and

unsettled in Sirrus and Achenar's rooms (and therefore are involved in the game to the point that the worlds seem *real*), the mood here allows the reader to experience the uncanny, unsettling atmosphere of the narrator's wandering through a labyrinth of his memories.

The textured, atmosphere-laden images of Sis's Prague would border on Barthes' definition of an author's "madness," were it not for his consistent visual anchoring of each page. In every image, save for the first person depictions of the receiving of the three keys, Sis includes both the narrator and his cat. In a structural sense, this is a visual representation of the text's need for a narrative drive within the mood space. The cat leads the narrator through the ghost-ridden streets of Prague, to the three keys and then home again. On every page the cat is physically farther along the path the narrator (and the reader) must travel. So in this otherwise visually wandering structure there is a visual representation that effectively helps the narrative drive. If the cat leads, the narrator follows. This is a logic-based motif, a way to visually reinforce the telic structure of the narrative.
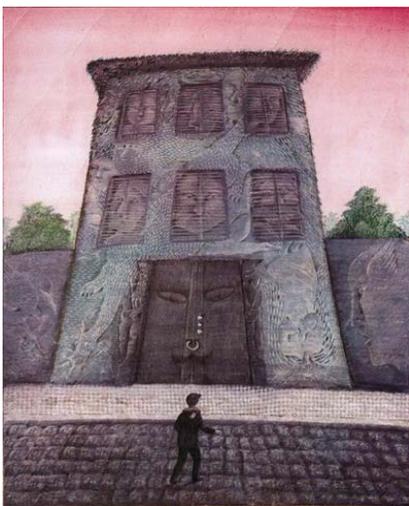

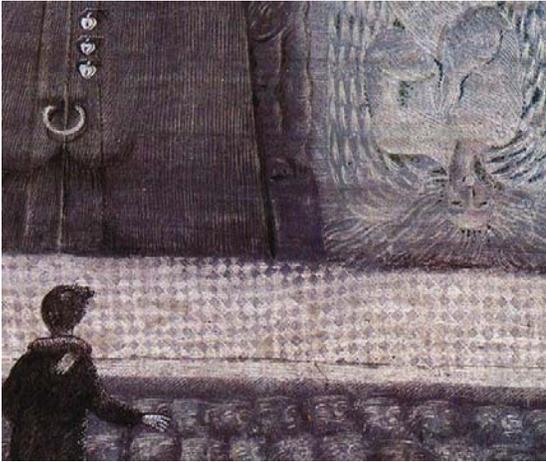Figure 7. *The Three Golden Keys* page 8

Figure 8. *The Three Golden Keys* page 8 detail

IMAGETEXT POSSIBILITIES: *QUIMBY THE MOUSE*

While Sis's work blends mood with classic structures, Chris Ware's *Quimby the Mouse* plays with the existing comic lingo to create new and varied possibilities for a visual language. The book stands somewhere between a comic book collection and a graphic novel, and partly because of this, its devices are experimental and varied. Ware uses a system of unconventional symbols and information organization in his panels, and this approach relies on his readers' ability to learn his language in order to follow his meaning. Ware's broader visual style, and therefore the mood of the text, also shifts. He graphically cites Baroque art, thirties and forties newspaper style, schematic drawings and strips of film in his comics. These visual stylistic citations serve several purposes, both to change the mood of each page, and to explore questions of language and memory. *Quimby*'s devices are so varied and complex that a comprehensive analysis of them is outside the scope of this paper. Here, I will limit my analysis to just two of his images, the collection's cover and an interesting panel that depicts Quimby's broken relationship.

The collection is very well worth analysis for the book's cover alone (see Figure 9), which is unique in its beauty and its scope. The front of the book, and some objects on the back, are embossed with golden lines, with rays shooting out from the center of the letter "Q" and the word "the" of "Quimby the Mouse." The title is surrounded by four identical plates that almost seem like white painted onto Wedgwood blue porcelain. In the center there are four figures of Quimby: one of him kissing a young mouse, the next of him slapping the mouse, the third of him running in fear, and the fourth of him

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weeping. The sum effect is incredibly like something one could expect on the ceiling of

a cathedral: an intricate, gold-embossed account of the possibilities of humanity.

It is difficult to tell whether Ware takes the refinement of his cover illustration

seriously, but the fineness of his artistry makes his statement difficult to ignore. His

invocation of Baroque styling is, in the least, a reference to the reverential air reserved for

illuminated texts. At the most, Ware is positioning himself as a scribe for the very

important subject of humankind. Whatever his intentions, the unusually Baroque front

cover certainly makes a point of Ware's interest in marginalia and detail.

The back of the cover is, if possible, more distinctive and interesting. (Figure. 10

and 11) It is covered with a complex system of panels, all interconnected with dotted and

solid lines and arrows, and even sometimes punctuated with parentheses and a question

mark. The panels depict a man at every stage of human history. Horizontally across the

page a series of panels depicts an amoeba evolving into a man and then his further

evolution. At each stage of the history, the panels are enclosed in a dotted line that leads

to a detail of that era. So the back cover illustration is an interconnected diagram of the

history of humanity. This system is complex and interrelated, but it is surprisingly

readable. Ware appropriates the visual language conventions of instruction manuals in

order to organize his system. A dotted line connecting two boxes suggests that the larger

box depicts the same events as the smaller box, but in greater detail. Arrows suggest

cause and effect or an enlargement of an object.

The use of a diagram for something as complex as a metahistory of human

existence is at once completely absurd and brilliant. Ware makes a study of the

pathos that every life encounters. In the diagram there are many scenes of desire and

need, and of pain and discovery. But Ware is also playing with the language of the diagram itself. If a reader follows the flowchart carefully, the last panel breaks off into an arrow, pointing at a question mark. As an author, Ware is keenly self aware of his place. He means to draw his audience into an insight, but even as he does so, he lays bare the absurdity of the process. In this sense, he is using a traditional logic structure either to call attention to the futility of a human life, or to the futility in forcing a life into comic panels.

This idea is explored further in the comic "I am a very generous person…" (56) The comic depicts one side of a conversation between Quimby and an ex-lover. The words seem innocuous enough if read straight through, but the words cannot be read in only one way, because they interrupt themselves. Ware curves the words around arches, slants them, reverses them, and doubles them back on themselves (Figure. 12). The first two lines can be read several ways: "I'm a very generous person but I just can't stand being around you anymore." Or, "…I can't stand being around. You make me happy." Or, "…I can't stand uh…being alone." The words are sometimes blue, sometimes red, sometimes in block print over the panels (which read in a much more straightforward way).

The changes in font size, type, color, and direction break down classic comic codes, making the experience of reading the comic disorienting. The different strands of thought and the difficulty the reader has in deciphering them evoke the mood of the conversation. The reader feels that Quimby simultaneously feels defensive, nostalgic, lonely, and sad. Ware does not give the reader any guiding arrows or dotted lines to help her navigate the space of this text. She is left to understand its meaning through her own

experience of reading the panel, of having to choose which lines to follow and experiencing the panel's resistance to a classic, linear meaning.

In this sense, the panel is breaking down the traditional lingo structure of comics, but not offering any new structures to replace them. Its play with comic conventions is purely mood-based, that is, it is neither a code the audience is assumed to know (classic), nor a code they can learn (lingo). The atmosphere created by this lack of structure is almost the opposite of both Peter Sis's work in *The Three Golden Keys*. Sis's work creates the possibility for exploration, wonder and mystery through the streets of Prague. In this panel, Ware uses mood to reflect the jumble of human emotions that necessarily follow a communication breakdown. Both Ware and Sis are concerned with the emotions involved in a narrative space. It simply seems that the space of Quimby's mind is a far grimmer place than the (certainly mysterious, but far less anxious) streets of Prague.

In writing this paper, I noticed the distinctions I make between types of communication in imagetexts start to blur. When Chris Ware gilds the edges of his panels, is he playing with the conventional lingo of comics? Or is he using the gild to create a reverential, baroque, rich mood? With any image, the meaning and nuance can be endless, and each detail can be interpreted in many ways. The point is not to definitively label a certain pattern, but to instead to understand many ways that the one image communicates. Perhaps in naming these functions, we can gain a vocabulary to help us discuss what the image itself is. And with this ability, then we will approach the goal of understanding what an imagetext does.
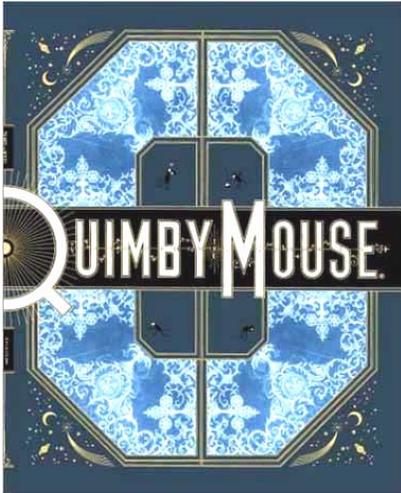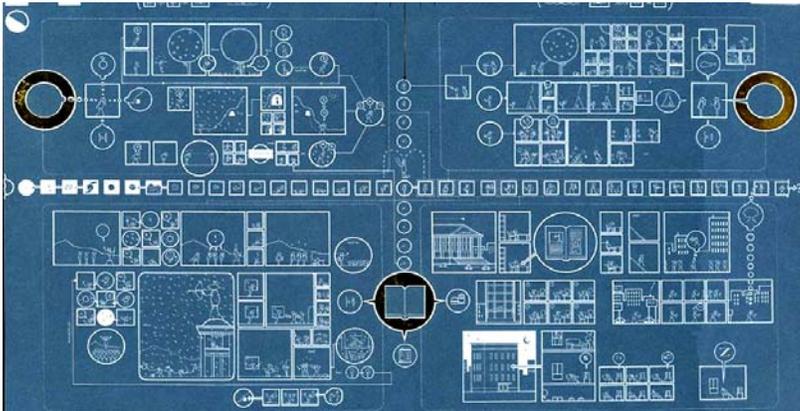
Figure 9. *Quimby the Mouse* front cover

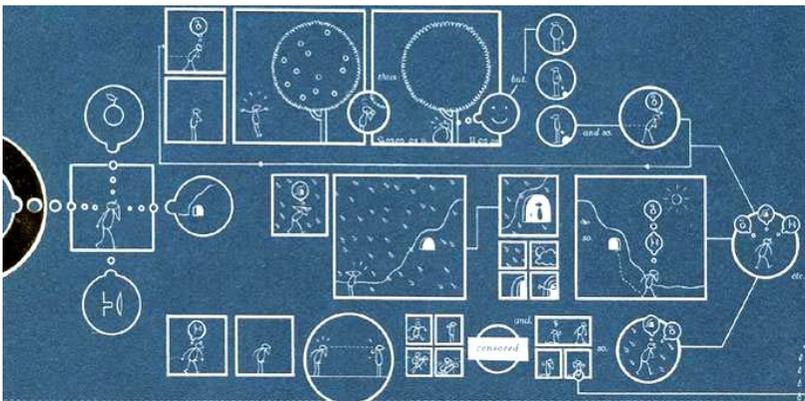Figure 10. *Quimby the Mouse* back cover

Figure 11. *Quimby the Mouse* back cover detail

Figure 12. *Quimby the Mouse* "I'm a very generous person…"

CONCLUSION

In the process of writing this paper, I have tried to work out an understanding of three imagetexts that I chose to study because of their effect on me as a reader. Each of them never fails to sting me, to upset or delight me in ways that most other texts simply do not. The study of this sting, of the Neo-Baroque, the imagetext and its trappings, is increasingly important because of its presence in all aspects of media, in children's books and comic books, in video games and even the news.

The Neo-Baroque does not seek to replace classic forms of narrative. Each of the texts I studied here relies heavily on logical, classic structures, and it is clear through reading Barthes that a text without logic can only lead to "madness" (6). Instead of viewing the Neo-Baroque as conflicting with traditional forms of media, it is more productive to understand these new possibilities and structures as a complement to more linear forms of narrative. It is crucial that scholars explore the possibilities these changes offer to the genres they affect; that we name the patterns and structures we see in order to organize our experience. As every form of media employs images, choices and moods, proficiency in understanding and analyzing these new patterns of communication will become the basis for electracy; an absolute necessity for a citizen of an electrate world.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

When Erin Fernandez was young, her parents would buy her as many books as she could read. This was a very expensive proposal, because if she liked the book she would finish it in a day and ask for another. Her parents, Kyle and Enrique Fernandez, created a household in which television was restricted and video games were forbidden (save for unforgettable spring break Blockbuster console rentals), but computer games were allowed—for "educational" purposes. She first experienced the thrall of adventure gaming when she played *Myst*, and she played the game day and night until she finished. She enjoyed her English courses at Saint Stephens Episcopal School in Bradenton, Florida. But it was not until she attended classes at the University of Florida that she realized that computer games were a fascinating field of academic study. She graduated with a B.S. in psychology and a B.A. in English in 2003.

Her areas of interest include new media and ludology. After finishing her M.A. in English she plans to take some time off, knit and embroider and generally relax while applying for Masters programs in digital arts for Fall 2006.