INTERFACING CHILDHOOD: INTERMEDIATION, PARTICIPATION, AND KNOWLEDGE IN CHILDREN’S MEDIA

By

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To my Mom and Dad
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This study brings together children’s literature and digital/new media studies to interrogate how children’s texts operate as interfaces and the kinds of participation they foster. Analyzing a wide variety of archival materials alongside evolving transmedia texts, this project establishes a long history of texts demanding child reader participation. Applying the work of N. Katherine Hayles, Jesper Juul, and Pierre Lévy to children’s texts shows that intermediation, emergence, embodiment, and collective knowledge are necessary for understanding reader-text participation. Combined with Marah Gubar’s and Perry Nodelman’s work on child agency, this work argues that children’s media are fundamentally responsive and participatory. Treating children’s texts as interfaces reveals the multiple, complex meanings created from text-reader interaction. The material structure and the content of children’s media limit the available meanings, but the texts’ demand for participation generates some unexpected, emergent meanings. By acknowledging the history of children’s participatory texts, scholars can better understand how children’s texts are responsive interfaces: texts that structure and enact particular performances of childhood, but also allow readers to negotiate those performances.
Chapter 1 provides an overview of important terminology from children’s literary criticism and digital/new media theory. Chapter 2 examines the history of active child readership and collaborative communities, as well as the ambivalence of the child’s position, through *St. Nicholas Magazine*’s early volumes. Chapter 3 interrogates archival game-book hybrids and books about games to show how they structure reader interactions and knowledge while revealing conflicting ideals of childhood. Chapter 4 extends the arguments of Chapter 3 to current multimodal, media-enhanced, and transmedia texts. Using books, game-book hybrids, and video games, it argues that viewing the child as a possible collaborator instead of a passive, exploited recipient clarifies how game-books define the limits for the reader-player and the openings they provide for the reader-player to negotiate the texts’ expectations. Finally, Chapter 5 explores several iterations of Nancy Drew texts, finding that the transmedia network is held together by Nancy’s role as an avatar for the child reader—the involved sleuth who is shaped by and who, in turn, shapes the texts within her transmedia constellation.
CHAPTER 1
PLAYING THE READER: CRAFTING PLAY AND CHILDLIKENESS THROUGH INTERFACES

Who is Nancy Drew? Is she the cool and unflappable teen detective within the pages of her original books? The revised, first-person narrator of her most recent imprint? The spunky sleuth from the silver screen? Or is she the guiding voice and pixelated hands of her video game persona? When analyzed together, this chaotic network of Nancys from many media reveals that Nancy is an avatar for the child reader—the active child sleuth performing for adult authority figures while simultaneously negotiating her own identity. This transmedia network of Nancys is just one case study where we see children’s texts invite the reader to become a player. Whether the reader is positioned as an imaginative player by interpreting Nancy from the novels, an embodied player navigating Nancy through a game world on the computer, or a physical player who is prompted by a hybrid game-book to try out Nancy’s sleuthing practices in the real world, the child reader plays with the text and with the system. From large transmedia constellations like Nancy Drew to stand-alone children’s novels to historical children’s periodicals, all children’s texts create a space for play and negotiation between text and reader.

Play is fundamental to children’s media in many ways, but play tends to be theorized mostly in terms of psychological development or as a broad social/cultural principle. Claus Pias neatly summarizes this problem with discussions of play in “The Game Player's Duty: The User as the Gestalt of the Ports”:

Play, whether a natural teaching tool (J. J. Rousseau, etc.), an activity mediating between the inner world and the outer reality (D.W. Winnicott), an act of self-distancing (R. Schechner), a transcending of order and chaos (B. Sutton-Smith), a force that creates community (C. Geertz), a valve for excess energy (K. Groos), a socializing function (G. H. Mead), or a culture-
building expression of the life force (J. Huizinga), is presented as a timeless concept, mostly independent of the history of particular games. (165)

This project interrogates play as both the process and the product of specific material texts. Play is socially and psychologically significant to development, but it is also an integral part of negotiations between texts and readers or players. Play requires active participation and generates pleasure and desire, but it also requires control and structure to make the space for play even possible. Examining how the material structure and media of specific texts shape the boundaries of play and invite readers into a play space as participants is an important intervention in the discussion of children’s playable media.

**Interfacing Childhood**

This project brings together children’s literature theory, new media theory, and video game theory to create a framework for investigating children’s media, especially participative or transmedia texts. Media and video game theory provide several necessary terms and concepts that benefit and extend the current arguments in children’s literature which seek to redefine the child reader as an active (if limited) participant in a process with the text and with society-at-large and allow them to include both historical, imaginatively participative texts in the discussion with contemporary technology/media-enhanced and transmedia texts. The framework I propose requires examining the material structure of children’s texts to understand how they mediate the reader’s experience of the text’s information and the gaps they leave for any unexpected or resistant participation. When we acknowledge that children’s texts are interfaces, they become mediating structures for what childhood means and provide idealized but ambivalent models that the child reader is meant to engage. When acting
as an interface, children’s texts have several shared qualities including balancing rules and narrative to achieve reader engagement, manipulating reader expectations to privilege particular behaviors, preferencing particular kinds of knowledge and ways of knowing to support favored behaviors, and structuring play to explore multiple, simultaneous beliefs about childhood at the same time.

As its source texts, this project uses both archival materials and current popular materials (e.g., book series and video games) including *St. Nicholas: Scribner’s Illustrated Magazine for Girls and Boys* (1873-1940), parlor game manuals from the late 1800s, game-book hybrid texts from the late 1800s and the late 1900s, several iterations of Nancy Drew novels and video games, media-enhanced series (The 39 Clues, *Cathy’s Book*), and video games for the PC and the Nintendo DS (e.g., *Trace Memory, Scribblenauts, Nancy Drew: The Hidden Staircase*). The intention is not to create a comprehensive history of children’s participative media, but rather to discover some of the confluences and divergences among participative texts from different time periods in order to create a framework for analyzing children’s media that will fit both traditional and contemporary children’s texts. Media and video game theory provide a language that interrogates how the structure of each text fosters and limits participation, while children’s literature theory provides the purpose of that structure: to create particular performances of childhood that readers can accept, reject, and negotiate, either within the system of the text or by leveraging her own knowledge and network of communal information to challenge what the text provides.

The primary source materials for this project (with the notable exception of the non-hybrid Nancy Drew novels) were all selected because they explicitly positioned
themselves as participatory. They included elements that asked readers to take action, to play games, to do research, or to write themselves into the text. However, I argue that reading as an act of interpreting language is already a participative process and, thus, a framework designed for these explicitly participative texts should also be extrapolated to include the imaginative participation created by reading books (several of the parlor game manuals and the Nancy Drew novels are prime examples of texts that depend on the reader to provide all the interaction with the text). This project explores the structure and boundaries of several dichotomies, especially reader/player, narrative/rules, book/game, and child/adult. Children’s texts are all on some level participative endeavors that foster play (with the text, with identities, with rules, and with idealizations of childhood), and they exist along a continuum where their positioning alters the portrayal of childhood the text creates. Situating transmedia and media-enhanced texts within this long history of reader-player participation with children’s texts allows us to move away from a discussion of these texts’ novelty and into a more nuanced discussion of how their acts of mediation are similar to historical texts and the possibilities that were not available before. To do this, we need to establish how the new media theory of intermediation applies to the field of children’s literature, how texts act as interfaces to help the reader make sense of their intermediated nature, and what the role of recursion, reciprocity, language, knowledge, collaboration, collective intelligence, embodiment, and emergence is in creating the performance of childlikeness in intermediated children’s texts.
Defining, Refining and Importing Terms

Play

In order to make sense of large participative transmedia economies, especially those including multimodal or media-enhanced texts, and to connect those texts to a historical tradition of participatory media, children’s literature scholarship needs to integrate several important concepts from new media theory and game studies. The first is to adopt a definition of play that incorporates material structure as a driving force. In “Narrative, Interactivity, Play, Game,” Eric Zimmerman offers the following definition: “Play is the free space of movement within a more rigid structure. Play exists both because of and also despite the more rigid structures of a system” (159). This definition is useful because it incorporates two levels of play—play sanctioned by the system’s structure and play that occurs as part of the unpredictable collision of the user with the system (the gaps in the structure). This definition acts as an important supplement to existing definitions of play as socially and psychologically significant by focusing on play as a process—the result of the “relationships between the elements of a system” (Zimmerman 159). Zimmerman goes on to explain the dual nature of play in a material system:

But even though the play only occurs because of these structures [rules of the system], the play is also exactly the thing that exists despite the system, the free movement within it, in the interstitial spaces between and among its components. Play exists in opposition to the structures it inhabits, at odds with the utilitarian functioning of the system. Yet play is at the same time an expression of a system, and intrinsically a part of it. (159)

The operational rules of a text create the boundaries of play, but within those boundaries, there are spontaneous, unexpected, and emergent possibilities because of
the feedback between the material structure and the subjective reader. Zimmerman concludes his definition of play by saying that successful systems are designed to guide and engender play, but never completely script it in advance. If the interaction is completely predetermined, there’s no room for play in the system. The author of a choose-your-own-adventure creates the structure that the reader inhabits, but the play emerges out of that system as the reader navigates through it. Even if the reader breaks the structure by cheating and skipping ahead, that is merely another form of play within the designed system. (159)

This acknowledges that the reader or player is also a significant element of play. Play emerges from the process of feedback and reciprocity between the system and the user. This project explores several models of creating spaces for play, defined by how each text’s system employs a different balance of narrative and rules to influence reader desires, exploits conventions of genre and medium to create engagement and provides readers with opportunities for feedback and reciprocation to foster emergent, unscripted meaning.

The space for play created by texts is a “possibility space” derived from the design and functioning of the text’s system (its positioning as an interface): “The possibility space of play includes all of the gestures made possible by a set of rules. As [Katie] Salen and [Eric] Zimmerman explain, imposing rules does not suffocate play, but makes it possible in the first place” (Bogost, “Rhetoric” 120). Without conventions, rules and structures, there could be no relationship between user and text; therefore, no process of negotiation exists between them, and there is no play. Play is “not rooted in one social practice, but in many social and material practices” (Bogost, “Rhetoric” 120). Both the structure and the content of the text shed light on how the text mediates the reader’s or player’s experience of its information. Accounting for this complex interaction of social and material practices with the unpredictable and unique reader is the main
reason children’s literature theorists should adopt a framework of intermediation to examine children’s media.

Play is also rarely an individual activity. The history of children’s games is a collaborative one. Even the solo player is interacting with a text or artifact that has been created by parents, friends, social institutions, teachers, manufacturers, etc. The possibility space of play often includes interacting with other players and working with their assumptions and knowledge. The possibility space is a contentious one that is not solely about the text structure and the individual (although that is the primary relationship discussed here); it includes all of the influencers, direct and indirect, influencing the child subject, the direct creators of the text at hand, and the social conventions, history, and institutions that shape the practices that make the possibility space the text creates possible. Intermediation demands that we account for as many of these forces as possible when examining children’s media.

**Intermediation and Recursion**

With the rise of digital media, there has been an explosion in the scope of our narrative worlds. Characters and their spaces no longer exist in only one form with a few derivative adaptations; readers no longer experience a linear relationship from text to screen, and there is no single standard point of entry to these narrative constellations. Nancy Drew becomes an intermediated network of several Nancys that the reader negotiates and how she navigates them changes her subjective experience of what Nancy (and what childhood) means. Each version of Nancy structures the reader’s interaction differently to emphasize particular kinds of power relationships, knowledge/ways of knowing, and idealized actions for an idealized child. These large transmedia narrative economies present a challenge for scholarship because they are
not bound by a single medium or defined by the rules of a single genre. Media theorist Henry Jenkins discusses the creation of transmedia narratives and their effect on storytelling: "storytelling has become the art of world building, as artists create compelling environments that cannot be fully explored or exhausted within a single work or even a single medium" (Convergence 114). Active participation and engagement with communities/networks of knowledge become the cornerstones of the reader-text experience. Jenkins calls this:

a new aesthetic that has emerged in response to media convergence—one that places new demands on consumers and depends on the active participation of knowledge communities. Transmedia storytelling is the art of world making. To fully experience any fictional world, consumers must assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down the bits of the story across media channels, comparing notes with each other via on-line discussion groups, and collaborating to ensure that everyone who invests time and effort will come away with a richer entertainment experience. (Convergence 21)

While his explanation of transmedia economies is pivotal and these transmedia texts do provide connection, participation, and community knowledge on a scale that has not been possible before digital media, his discussion here makes it seem as if texts have not always demanded active reader participation and extensive extra-textual knowledge for a rich (or perhaps enriching?) entertainment experience. Jenkins’ formulation of transmedia economies suggests that they can be defined by convergence. Convergence "represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content" and is defined by the “work—and play—spectators perform in the new media system” (Jenkins, Convergence 3). This definition of convergence has several important elements necessary to understanding transmedia constellations: active users, networks of connections, community knowledge, the role of structures and play created by the
system. But it heavily implies both a dramatic break in practices and a false sense of fusion among all the texts in a constellation. The connotation of convergence (even if Jenkins does not intend it) is one of assimilation into an ur-text, as if an entire network of texts can meld into one knowable, consistent system.

To avoid the negative implications of convergence, we should adopt N. Katherine Hayles' construct of intermediation. Intermediation respects both the active role of the user and the structuring influence of the text without implying a linear or hierarchical relationship between any of the texts within the narrative economy. Based on Nicholas Gessler's work about new media re-representing patterns from other media, Hayles theorizes that intermediation is not a hierarchy but a heterarchy:

what researchers in artificial life call a 'dynamic hierarchy,' a multitiered system in which feedback and feedforward loops tie the system together through continuing interactions circulating through the hierarchy. Because these interactions go up as well as down, down as well as up, such a system might more appropriately be called a 'dynamic heterarchy.'

Distinguished by their degree of complexity, different levels continuously inform and mutually determine each other. (Electronic 45)

Transmedia economies are complex, layered, and dynamic systems. Intermediation accounts for the multi-directional and uneven flow of information across a narrative economy, each text creating its own impact and sustaining multiple connections to other sources within the network. By adopting intermediation as a framework rather than using convergence as our framework, we resist the urge to create hierarchy and describe these complicated webs of text in terms of causality or derivation. Hayles objects to convergence as a term because "this claim has the effect of flattening into a single causal line—the convergence of all media into one—social and cultural processes that are in fact much more complex" (Mother 31). Instead, intermediation
focuses on embodiment and emergence, especially as they relate to the recursive relationship of feedback between bodies and texts.

The simple definition of intermediation is the "complex transactions between bodies and texts as well as between different forms of media" (Hayles, *Mother 7*), especially the ways the body of the user becomes entangled with the text and with digital subjects (embodiment and avatars). Intermediation requires examining “the complex dynamics by which novels, films, Web sites, and other media forms interact with one another,” where instead of identifying “a unitary convergent work to which variants can be subordinated,” we examine texts “as clustered in assemblages whose dynamics emerge from all the texts participating in the cluster, without privileging one text as more 'original' than any other” (Hayles, *Mother 9*). This is why I use both transmedia economies (transaction) and transmedia constellations (clusters/assemblages) as synonyms to describe large intermediated networks of texts. Because intermediation focuses on transactions and entanglements, texts and users exist in a space of mutual negotiation (a possibility space of play). As the user plays with the text and uses it as an interface or node to access the rest of the narrative economy, her individual experience is shaped by the way the text facilitates interactions. This is a transaction—there is an exchange and permanent change made as users and texts come together. Even if the negotiation here is mutual, every transaction is unique because each text and user holds its own power, has its own structure, and brings with it a different network of information to the exchange. This is why we cannot afford the linear or causal connotation of convergence. Intermediation is a way of examining these transactions without erasing their messy, unique and uneven nature. Sometimes the
structure of the text is the strongest part of the transaction, leaving the user with few ways of providing useful feedback or influencing the mediation the text provides. However, some systems do allow for more feedback and go beyond reacting to user input. These systems actually generate new possible meanings based on the user’s influence (creating emergent narratives rather than scripted ones).

Information (especially information about childhood) is never neutral and cannot be separated from its body (or its medium) without changing its meaning. Intermediation as a framework acknowledges the importance of both bodies and texts, structures and information: "Perhaps most importantly, 'intermediation' also denotes mediating interfaces connecting humans with the intelligent machines that are our collaborators in making, storing, and transmitting informational processes and objects" (Hayles, *Mother* 33). Texts act as an entry point, inviting the reader into that potential space of play and transaction, collaborating rather than passively transmitting values. The main method of transaction and play in intermediated networks is recursion (feedback loops that continuously work and rework the information in a system until change occurs). Intermediation asks us to consider "meaning making as a spectrum of possibilities with recursive loops entangling different positions along the spectrum" (Hayles, *Electronic* 52). Texts must be treated as interfaces because the way they are crafted to generate, react to, or foreclose feedback significantly alters the possible meanings that can emerge from the system.

Intermediation as a framework also addresses the problem of novelty raised by Jenkins’ convergence. Instead of seeing transactions, feedback and recursions as traits that are only possible with digital and emerging technologies as convergence implies,
intermediation allows us to acknowledge that texts have always had traces of transaction and feedback. What digital and new media texts offer instead are more possibilities. This is true in two important ways. The first is that their feedback loops allow for more meaningful interaction between user and text where the user’s feedback has more influence on the text: "Because the computer’s real agency as well as the illusion of its agency are much stronger than with the book, the computer can function as a partner in creating intermediating dynamics in ways that a book cannot" (Hayles, *Electronic 58*). The second (and similar) way is that the feedback is multi-directional (feedback and feedforward), which was harder to accomplish before automated and digital technology: "The new component possible with networked and programmable media is the cycle’s completion, so that the feedback loops run in both directions—from the computer to the player and from the player to the computer" (Hayles, *Electronic 83*). So, while media-enhanced texts have more opportunities for emergence, reflexive and recursive feedback and more linkages across more media than historical children’s periodicals, intermediation can be used as a framework for examining the core similarities in all (children’s) texts: the transaction and play between text and (child) body.

The primary trait of intermediation is its complexity. While this project makes mention of historical and ideological impulses that shape the reader/player practices and inform the texts discussed here, it focuses primarily on the structural possibilities that the texts allow. While this flattening is necessary to allow for meaningful discussion of the negotiation between an imagined reader and the text, the actual interaction among real child readers and texts is far more complicated and specific to that particular
experience than can be accounted for. Creating a general theory of intermediation and its applications for children’s media requires looking specifically at possibility spaces created through reader-text interaction, but it is important to remember that the reader-text relationship is never a one-to-one relationship. Wherever possible, this project tries to include historical and social influences that play a part in shaping the possibility space of play created by intermediated texts, but the need for in-depth analysis has the unintentional consequence of flattening out some of the complexity intermediation implies.

**Child-as-Collaborator**

How does intermediation apply to children’s literature theory? Intermediation is defined by transaction, negotiation, and play. These elements require active participation on the part of the reader who enters a relationship with a text. While Hayles’ intermediation helps us understand the influence of the structure of the text as it collides with the user, children’s literature theory helps us understand the child reader-player-user within that transaction. The two models work together to suggest that child readers are what Marah Gubar has termed collaborators-after-the-fact (or artful dodgers). Gubar’s *Artful Dodgers: Reconceiving the Golden Age of Children’s Literature* makes the argument that we have misread the Golden Age of children's literature. She says both

Golden Age children's literature and the cult of the child….must be reconceived to reflect the fact that many of the male and female artists who participated in them were conflicted about the issue of how to conceive of children rather than fully committed to a particular ideal of innocence. Moreover, far from being oblivious to the possibility that adult fantasies about childhood might impinge upon children, the Victorians and Edwardians frequently manifested a high level of critical self-consciousness about the whole problem of representing, writing for, looking at, interacting with, and worshipping children. (Gubar viii)
*Artful Dodgers* makes an important and necessary intervention in the field that restores the ambivalence authors and readers feel over childhood and the possibilities for some limited but significant agency on the part of the reader. By showing how authors had great respect for active engaged readers (readers who were willing to do the research, develop social and cultural literacy, transform language on their own terms, refuse identification with child protagonists, and identify with child narrators as creators and editors), Gubar challenges Jacqueline Rose’s positioning of the child as always outside the text and as nearly powerless to do anything besides accept the idealized version of childhood that texts create. The child’s position within a knowledge network and as an active manipulator of that network is acknowledged in the ways Golden Age authors characterize the child reader and the child character as a "literate, educated subject who is fully conversant with the values, conventions, and cultural artifacts of the civilized world" (Gubar 6). Their stories use content, structure, and style to "suggest that young people have enough resourcefulness or recalcitrance to deal with (and even profit from) worldly influences" (Gubar 6). This characterization (counter to the naïve, innocent and helpless version of the Romantic child) gave the child an ambivalent status, which models children as collaborators who have some influence over their own identities and social power. It acknowledged the *belated* nature of the child’s subjectivity—the fact that young people are born into a world in which stories about who they are (and what they should become) are already in circulation before they can speak for themselves.... Self-conscious about the fact that adult-produced stories shape children, they represented children as capable of reshaping stories, conceiving them as artful collaborators in the hope that—while a complete escape from adult influence is impossible—young people might dodge the fate of functioning as passive parrots. (Gubar 6)
This positioning of child-as-collaborator is more about how the text offers collaboration to the child through content and by shaping behaviors through interactions with its structure than it is about the actual actions of the child reader. The text depends on the child reader to be active—to bring knowledge of conventions and culture to bear on the text and to question the way child characters are represented and the rewards and consequences of their behaviors.

Understanding the child as a savvy reader or an artful dodger capable of critically interpreting the ways the child is portrayed in the text and of manipulating and narrating their own lives, creates a space for transaction and negotiation between reader and text. The text does not transmit a single, absolute ideal of childhood directly to the passive reader, and the reader does not have to accept without question whatever ideals of childhood the text presents.

In fact, Gubar suggests Golden Age authors wanted readers (adult and child alike) to question how children were positioned in society and just how far they could go to alter that portrayal without inciting punishment. Echoing the definition of play from video game theory, Gubar's analysis suggests that the reader-text transaction is a “potential space”: “The adult's primacy and power—both in the child's daily life and in the field of fiction—are undeniable and sometimes overwhelming, but child characters cope with this pressure in creative ways, treating even the most didactic text as a ‘potential space’ that they can annex and imaginatively transform” (Gubar 42). Another way of saying child-as-collaborator is to theorize the child as a player, using the potential space of play opened up by the interaction between the rules of the text (its preferences and ideals) and her skills/knowledge (creative, imaginative participation).
How she is invited to play and the leeway she is given by the text to create emergent possibilities and actual textual alterations might have changed since the Golden Age, but Gubar’s formulation is useful beyond the Golden Age context. This construction of the child as a collaborator helps identify the similarities that create a long tradition of active, playful, participative readers that places children’s periodicals from the late 1800s in the same constellation as media-enhanced texts from the 2000s like The 39 Clues series. When confronted with the ambiguity implied by the positions of the child characters, readers can see "these artful dodgers [as models], inviting them to view fiction not as a set of marching orders from an omnipotent author but as a shared playing field" (Gubar 42). The child is a negotiator, which dovetails with Hayles’ concept of intermediation as a transaction/negotiation between body and text. While she might have to play within a shared playing field (otherwise there would be no pleasure, structure, or meaning to her actions), she does not have to passively accept any positioning and, in fact, her texts encourage her not to. The effect of these layered presentations of childhood and the ambiguity authors felt over the position of children as both helpless and powerful suggests to the savvy reader that she need not be the ideal child but rather don a mask of childlikeness—a kind of camouflage that she can use to her advantage to negotiate her positioning.

**Childlikeness**

The ambivalence children’s texts present to their reader is one of the key elements that Perry Nodelman argues defines children’s literature (and I would argue children’s media as well) as a genre. He says that "children’s literature not only expresses ambivalence about childhood but also, and perhaps most centrally, invites its reader to share it. It is characteristically a literature that addresses a divided child
reader” (Nodelman, *Hidden* 185). The child is constantly being asked to have both innocence and experience: children’s literature "simultaneously celebrating and denigrating both childhood desire and adult knowledge, and therefore, simultaneously protecting children from adult knowledge and working to teach it to them. It is both conservative and subversive, and it subverts both its conservatism and its own subversiveness" (Nodelman, *Hidden* 243). It is one of the only genres that actively tries to push its reader away—the child is supposed to learn from children’s literature and then move beyond it. Like Hayles’ transactions and Gubar’s negotiation/collaboration, Nodelman states that analysis of children’s literature should show how specific texts of children's literature are complex sites of social action—how, far from being purely distinctive produces of uniquely individual human minds, they find their place in and contain within themselves the manifestations of numerous power relationships—not just between children and adults but also among writers, editors, reviewers, and purchasers, as well as between the field of children’s literature and various other fields: adult literature, the toy industry, the field of education, the economy, and so on. (*Hidden* 125)

All three scholars are describing how to make sense of texts and readers who are part of a broad intermediated network. Their answer is to examine the structures of the text to uncover the social actions they make possible and how the reader becomes involved in those actions.

The ambivalence, the complex social actions, and the dual role of teaching and protecting knowledge within children’s literature serve to present childhood not as a state of being but as a performance. Through children’s texts, readers are taught "to occupy or enact that childlike point of view” that adults craft for them (Nodelman, *Hidden* 243). By internalizing and deploying this performance of childlikeness, child readers can
camouflage themselves and any power or knowledge they’ve gained from adult authority/interference:

[children’s literature] is nevertheless hopeful and optimistic in tone and tells stories with what purport to be happy endings, as child or childlike characters purportedly achieve maturity by retreating from adult experience and accepting adult protection and limiting adult ideas about their own childlikeness. Its characters achieve innocence after having experience. (Nodelman, Hidden 243)

The way children’s texts are structured to allow participation and to foster play (imaginative and physical) conveys specific traits of childlikeness to the reader that she might adopt and makes her status as collaborator/artful dodger/savvy reader more palatable to the authority structures around her. But by teaching the child that she can perform traits to manipulate outcomes for her benefit, these texts also suggest that their own structures and rules are up for negotiation and the savvy reader can play with the system until she can discover any gaps or exploits she might use to her advantage.

Since the child-as-collaborator and childlikeness are socially constructed, readership and player practices as well as parental and institutional influences have a large role (and stake) in the textual dynamics of intermediation. It is no surprise that the source materials for this project are published after reading and schooling became important forces in children’s lives. The literacy practices and economic forces shape the existence and presentation of “childlikeness” that is available and whether or not that identity is worth performing. Anxieties over parental control over and collaboration with (read aloud, read together, etc.) reader play a large role in shaping the possibility space created by the structure of the text and in establishing the intertextual connections and actions the child reader associates with reading and play. The adult’s nostalgic impulses and gatekeeping function affect both childlikeness and the child
reader’s intermediated experience. Whether texts are explicitly didactic or implicitly
didactic, adult concerns deeply inform the childlikeness that the texts discussed in this
project create. From the adult who selects appropriate or beloved books/games for the
child to the adult who plays/read with the child influencing the play, the structure, and
the rules in particular ways, to the adult who acts as a gatekeeper controlling the
performances of childlikeness the child encounters, intermediation tries to account for
these influences that act as part of creating textual meaning. Childlikeness is not one
identity but a complex, negotiated set of values created by parents, society, educators,
manufacturers, authors and children. When examining children’s media, the structure of
the text and its possibilities indicates a great deal about the text’s positioning of
childlikeness and can reveal important historical and contemporary insights about the
role of childhood in society.

**Knowledge, Collective Intelligence and Intertextuality**

So far, this framework suggests that children’s media operate (and have always
operated to some extent) as intermediated networks where systems and readers
negotiate with each other through feedback loops of various power in order to present
specific performances of childlikeness that the reader can evaluate, adopt, adapt, or
reject based on her willingness to actively and critically participate in the transaction.
These transactions happen in the “possibility spaces” between readers and texts and
are informed by the knowledge and connections each has to a larger network of related
materials. The behavior that most marks these possibility spaces is *play*—play within
the structure and play against the structure. Given this, the tools the reader uses to
become a player and to collaborate with the text are knowledge, intertextual
connections, and collective intelligence.
One of the key traits of children’s literature is to both teach mastery to the uninitiated reader and (hopefully) provide a site of manipulation for the already skilled and literate child. If the child reader is an artful dodger, then including knowledge that is beyond her level of mastery is not a betrayal but rather a compliment (Gubar 22). The text relies on the reader to bring in her own network of knowledge to interpret what it provides her. It also helps broaden her connections to knowledge and tries to focus the child on specific ways of knowing as more valuable than others. If children’s texts are interfaces, then one of their primary functions is to filter knowledge and to carefully transmit accepted practices of knowledge and exchange while denigrating others. The reader has two powerful tools at her disposal to negotiate the text’s influence over knowledge: intertextual connections and collective intelligence.

While the scale of intertextual references might be enormous for transmedia constellations, all texts are intertextual on some level because they depend on language, conventions and patterns. Intertextuality can be broadly defined as "the interconnectedness of human language, its patterns, images, and meanings. To focus on a text’s intertextuality is to focus on the ways it depends on the reader’s knowledge of its connections with other writing" (Nodelman and Reimer 184). To understand the transactions of intermediated texts, we have to understand how and when the text depends on the reader’s knowledge. The magazines, manuals, series, game-books, and video games that are the source material for this project all depend on the reader’s knowledge of conventions and language to drive engagement and to make meaning possible. The depth of the reader’s existing intertextual knowledge and the level to
which the text acknowledges the reader’s knowledge alter the possibilities of the system.

Intertextuality presents another problematic duality for children’s literature because on the one hand, there can be no presumption that the audience has been previously exposed to specific pre-texts or conventions of narrative; on the other hand, however, because intertextuality is a strategy whereby a text relates to existing discourse and achieves intelligibility, it often plays a major part in attempts to produce determinable meanings and to acculturate the audience. (Stephens 85-86)

Since these children’s texts are partially didactic, they build in elements that provide knowledge and help uninitiated readers make sense of how the text works and its relationship to other media. These didactic elements support the text’s ideals of childhood and are often limited to make sure only valuable knowledge and connections are made. Readers with deep intertextual knowledge, however, are more likely to see the text’s ideals as markers of a performed childlikeness. She can then use her intertextual knowledge to evaluate the usefulness of that performance for reaching her own goals. Intertextual knowledge is a key trait of the active reader: "the act of opposing passive literacy can set into motion a sort of domino effect: once an author introduces the possibility that readers can rewrite or reject textual elements that do not appeal to them, nothing is sacred" (Gubar 62). The reader can leverage her knowledge of how the text works, especially in relationship to other objects, in order to alter its outcomes to suit her desires. Participative children’s texts fall along a spectrum from texts that leave very little engagement or research to the reader all the way to texts that depend greatly on the reader to provide context or to do research to fully generate meaning from her play.⁴
The other tool that becomes an important method of negotiating knowledge in intermediated networks is collective intelligence. All of the children’s texts represented in this project create or portray communities as powerful sources of knowledge. Sometimes communities control and shape knowledge (like the gossip communities of women in Nancy Drew) and the child must to learn how to access that community in order to mature and to accomplish her goals. Other times readers and players form authorized or unauthorized communities in order to thwart the rules and structure of the game/text and use those communities to cheat, share, or rewrite texts together. These knowledge communities give readers access to collective intelligence: “a form of *universally distributed intelligence*, constantly enhanced, coordinated in real time, and resulting in the effective mobilization of skills….The basis and goal of collective intelligence is the mutual recognition and enrichment of individuals rather than the cult of fetishized or hypostatized communities” (Lévy, *Collective* 13). While digital technologies and new media enhance the ability of all individuals to access the pooled resources of knowledge provided by others (distributed intelligence), precursors were seen in the editorial communities created by magazines like *St. Nicholas*. The magazine’s “The Letter-Box” was a bit more centralized and less spontaneous than the collective intelligence Lévy associates with cyber technology, but readers became contributors and added their knowledge of their part of the world and their experience to the magazine’s collection in hopes that others would find that contributor’s skills and knowledge useful to their own endeavors. Jenkins elaborates on the importance of collective intelligence: "Consumption has become a collective process…None of us can know everything; each of us knows something; and we can put the pieces together if we
pool our resources and combine our skills” (Convergence 4). This trait is even more pronounced in media-enhanced texts like Cathy’s Book, where readers help each other navigate the text and its game by pooling their knowledge on internet forums. Not every individual has the skill necessary to fully participate with texts, but, through collective intelligence, readers can harness knowledge to play against the structure and desires of the text (subverting the “proper” ways of playing).

**Embodiment and Avatar**

Bodies and embodiment are central to Hayles’ discussion of intermediation. She proposes intermediation because she feels convergence and other media theories have forgotten an important element in their discussion: the body. Both the subjective user and the information of the text have a body and that body is an essential shaping factor. The text acts as an interface—a non-neutral body that structures the information, shapes it, and then shares it in a relationship with the reader. In Play Between Worlds, T.L. Taylor explores the importance of bodies and avatars: "As with offline life, bodies come to serve as mediation points between the individual and the world (both social and material). What they are and, more important, what social meanings they are given matters" (110). The avatar is another “potential space” where negotiation between the system and the reader occurs. To understand children’s media, we need to question not only the body of the information, but how the body of the reader becomes part of the text. Is there physical participation? Or, is there an imaginative embodiment where the text creates an avatar for the reader to inhabit and experience as her interface into the heart of the text?

Avatars and embodiment also play a part in fostering emergent narratives and shaping player desire. The avatar (or the imagined, embodied form of the reader in the
text) is both a representation of self and also the possibility of being other. Successful avatars (e.g., Nancy Drew) provide enough detail to be recognizable as a character with certain traits (consummate sleuth), but are also unstructured enough to allow the player to embody that character (Reader-Nancy)—flexible enough that the reader can identify with the avatar and feel immersed in its actions. The ways children’s texts tie the body to the mediating structure influence the connection the reader feels for the text and her willingness to accept its presentation of childlikeness:

This identification and immersive experience during the game play remains compelling, even addictive, because our surrogate body on the screen mirrors our desires and bodily experiences; it represents us. It is directly controlled and affected by us, and our (real bodies') actions, even involuntary ones (like blinking!) carry dire consequences for the game world. In this sense, our pleasure is based on blurring the distinction between the player and the character: we jump, fly, shoot, kick, and race when we are actually clicking the mouse or tapping the controller. And correspondingly, when we blink, our avatar dies or crashes. (Lahti 163)

The avatar is a method of embodying the ideals of a system and the capabilities, controls, and tasks the game assigns to the avatar influence the meaning and knowledge the player can glean from the text.

**Blurring Dichotomies: Reader/Player and Game/Book**

The value of intermediation as a framework for interrogating children’s media is that its focus on the importance of the material body of information means that medium and structure are essential but it does not restrict what structures can be analyzed. It works for all kinds of participative media including novels, magazines, physical games, book-game hybrids, and video games. But why does children’s literature need to include games as part of its repertoire?

On a practical level, more and more texts are being produced that include game elements with text, especially as we continue to develop smartphone applications and
hybridize reading and computing. Picture books, readers, and young adult novels are increasingly combined with extra-textual elements connecting them to commercial networks, fostering online communities, and/or including large-scale games as components of the reading experience. Creating a framework that can handle books, games, and hybrids is to our benefit because both children's books and video games occupy positions of similar status. They are often seen as trivial, simple, and something to grow out of (Bogost, *Persuasive* vii). However, games (like children's literature) are “an expressive medium. They represent how real and imagined systems work. They invite players to interact with those systems and form judgments about them” (Bogost, *Persuasive* vii). Both share *play* as a fundamental element defining the interaction between user and text. Digital media may be creating some shifts in our reading practices but they share an integral connection to language and knowledge with traditional children’s novels: “Digital media deliver knowledge and language, just like writing and print do. But they do so faster, more widely, more easily, and in a way that allows rapid modification and wider participation. In the end, they greatly enhance a function that literacy already had: the proliferation of specialized knowledge and language” (Gee and Hayes 88). The relationship between reader/player and the book/game is strong because of the connection between narrative and rules. Narrative storytelling and imaginative or digital world building are intertwined in children’s literature and media. Critically examining the interfaces and structures of both books and games will allow us to understand the influence those structures have on readers’ perceptions of childhood. Too often we allow medium (and interfaces) to become an invisible and unspoken force. In *Expressive Processing*, Noah Wardrip-Fruin states:
Similarly, we aren't finding greater potential in obviously 'natural,' 'immersive,' or 'invisible' interfaces. It is instead those that expose the evolving state of the underlying system and the opportunities for audience action in connection with their fictions that are creating exciting new roles for us (no longer simply visual 'viewers,' textual 'readers,' or formal system 'players') as well as helping us develop new modes of understanding for fictional worlds.... Coming to understand fictional worlds as systems—and exploring their potential through play—is also a powerful means of coming to understand our evolving society, in which (often hidden) software models structure much of how we live now. (19)

Chapter 3, Chapter 4, and Chapter 5 deal directly with this question of the relationship between book/game and reader/player. They are linked by the same traits and the same connection to play as a way of knowing and negotiating subjectivity. Both books and games depend upon a balance of narrative storytelling and rule-based world building to encourage active participants to internalize messages about childhood. Books and games act as interfaces, limiting the possibilities for the user and providing a context for the user’s pleasure or mastery. In “The Rhetoric of Video Games,” Ian Bogost says:

This is really what we do when we play video games: we explore the possibility space its rules afford by manipulating the symbolic systems the game provides. The rules do not merely create the experience of play—they also construct the meaning of the game. That is to say, the gestures, experiences, and interactions a game’s rules will allow (and disallow) make up the game’s significance. (121)

More broadly, the structures of children’s texts (analog and digital alike) create play and meaning by encouraging readers to become players. As a reader-player, the child is both interpreter and manipulator, negotiating an intermediated network of messages about what it means to be a child.

**Project Overview**

*Interfacing Childhood* examines how children’s texts operate as interfaces within an intermediated network in four contexts. Chapter 2, The Edited Child: Collaboration
and Responsiveness in *St. Nicholas*, examines how readers are invited to become participants in the editorial sections of the early volumes of *St. Nicholas* magazine (1873-1881). By examining how the magazine offers opportunities to negotiate adult authority and play with formal instruction/knowledge, to master and then manipulate language, I show that *St. Nicholas* offers a “space between” or a “possibility space” where collaboration between adult, text, and child is possible. Similarly, the contact between the editors and the readers of these sections demonstrates how both parties are constantly negotiating the child’s access to authority and agency. The ways the editors structure participation and the ways the contributors use that space to covertly challenge the knowledge and authority perpetuated by the magazine show how even these historical texts depend on active participation and open up “possibility spaces” for playing childlikeness. By allowing for dissention in its editorial section, *St. Nicholas* allows multiple depictions of the child to operate side-by-side. These conflicting images suggest to readers that they do not need to be ideal children; rather, they need to be savvy performers of childlikeness to gain entry to and status in the magazine’s community. *St. Nicholas* encourages the child reader to actively play with authority and language, but still leaves adult authority intact. The magazine’s ambivalence over the child’s position of power allows the reader to engage in a meaningful process with the text and moves it beyond simple transmission of a message into an area for emergent meaning. *St. Nicholas* very much depends on intertextuality, intermediation, and emergence to engage readers and intermediation is an invaluable framework for understanding how the magazine approaches adult authority, the child’s relationship to language, and the valuing of and control of knowledge.
Chapter 3, Playing with Children’s Literature: Game-books and the Participative Reader, focuses on historical game instructional manuals such as Henry Chadwick’s 1884 *The Sports and Pastimes of American Boys* and game-book hybrids such as the McLoughlin Brothers’ 1870 *Home Games for Little Girls* (where the book functions as a game board or otherwise becomes part of the physical game) discovered in the Baldwin Archive of Historical Children’s Literature at the University of Florida. Children’s texts that act as games were thriving as early as the late 1800s and these game-books—books that outline games or physically become part of a game—demand that the reader participate, often physically as well as mentally, with the text in hand. Chapter 3 focuses on these participative opportunities and moments of collaboration between text and reader. Early game-books, although ideologically motivated and socially constructed, are points of entry for an active, engaged child reader—they are texts that ask the reader to become a player and help to narrate, create, define, and destroy the possible actions the text enables. These game-books illustrate the complicated negotiation between the child and the adult, the text and the reader, the player and the game. Understanding the various ways a reader can become a player in historical works lays the groundwork for uncovering how current, media-enhanced children’s texts invite readers to participate and the terms of that participation. Finally, the ways these historical game-books act as interfaces (structuring reader interactions and knowledge) for the child reader reveal conflicting ideals of childhood and how those ideals are both enriched and resisted. Studying both the material structure of each text and its content help to illuminate how they frame childlikeness and the ways the child is allowed to become a collaborator in creating textual meaning.
Chapter 4, Recursion and Reciprocity: Becoming Player through Intermediation and Intertextuality in Recent Game-Books, extends the argument from Chapter 3 by focusing on contemporary media-enhanced and multimodal texts including The 39 Clues and Cathy’s Book, as well as video games including Trace Memory and Scribblenauts. These texts are intermediated and their meaning develops from the collision between subjectivity and materiality. There are three essential elements common to all the texts which shape a specific version of childlikeness: the constraints of the system, the method of interaction between the reader and the text and the management of reader expectations and genre conventions. These texts create “possibility spaces” where play is generated by acknowledging and manipulating reader-player expectations, balancing rules and narrative, and using recursive feedback loops and collective intelligence to enrich reader-player experiences. By examining where the materiality of the interfaces (codex, computer, game system) meets the playfulness of the subjective user, we have a better understanding of how media-enhanced texts allow meaning to emerge and how reader-players conform to and reshape textual expectations, especially those of childhood. While historical game-books are just as intertextual and collaborative as their contemporary counterparts, digital enhancements like avatars, styluses, feedback-driven game worlds, and multiple interfaces allow for more direct physical embodiment and emergent meanings that react to the reader-player; they embed particular performances of childhood deeply across multiple media and need careful examination because of the complexity of their networked connections to the child.
Finally, Chapter 5, The Nancy Node: Girl Sleuth as Avatar in a Transmedia Constellation, is a case study of rich transmedia economy (with special attention to books, games, and hybrid forms) analyzed through the framework of intermediation. The Nancy Drew transmedia constellation concretely illustrates how structure and medium craft the space of play and participation. Focusing on how select iterations of the series act as loci in the intermediated network (gateway points to specific information in the Nancy Drew universe), Chapter 5 exposes the process of entanglement among reader, texts, and network. Each text in the constellation uses Nancy as an avatar for the reader-player, giving her structure and recognizable definition but allowing her to be flexible enough to accommodate social and cultural change. Tracking how various Nancys manipulate reader’s expectations, create balance between storytelling and world building, and depend on collaboration and collective intelligence shows that it is Nancy’s position as sleuth that links each individual piece of the transmedia cluster. Nancy as avatar mediates readerly engagement and active negotiation/performances of identity that children’s media require. Examining the hybrid Nancy Drew Sleuth Book: Clues to Good Sleuthing, the 1930s and the 1950s revisions of the Nancy Drew Mystery Stories and the more current Nancy Drew: Girl Detective imprint reveals Nancy’s dual role as a vessel for transmitting multiple ideals of adolescence and as a point of entry where the reader can become a sleuth—a player who can view those idealized characteristics of adolescence as tools to master and adapt into a collaborative performance of childlikeness.

Children’s participatory media, especially game-book hybrids, have a varied and complicated history. Each participatory text discussed in this project acts as an
interface, structuring the reader-player’s possibilities. Whether children’s periodicals, instructional game manuals, game-book hybrids, or video games, these participatory texts are playful and responsive. They manipulate and manage the reader’s expectations, build mastery and connect new skills to familiar ones, define authorized ways of knowing, and encourage reader-players to become collaborators and negotiators—imaginatively, intertextually, responsively, and/or physically. Each text creates its own unique relationship to knowledge, authority, community, and collaboration, but they all rely on the interaction between the material structure of the text and an active reader-player to generate meaning and play childhood.

Notes

1 This is not to belittle the importance of the psychological definitions or broad social definitions of play. Some of these important studies include: Jean Piaget’s *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood*, which discusses play as related to developmental stages of assimilation and accommodation; D.W. Winnicott’s *Playing and Reality*, which discusses play as essential to the authentic self through creativity, transitional objects and the potential space between baby and mother; Johan Huizinga’s pivotal but broad definition of play in *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*: “Play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is ‘different’ from ‘ordinary life’” (28); or, finally, Roger Caillois’s reworking of Huizinga, *Man, Play, and Games*, which creates a continuum of play from ludus (structured with explicit rules) to paidia (unstructured, spontaneous play) but also claims that the regulation of play and the fictive element of play are mutually exclusive. Jesper Juul, whose theories on games and play I use here, challenges Caillois’ division of rules and fiction, showing that the two categories work together to create the space, possibilities and context of play in *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (13).

2 I identified 25 texts of interest in the Baldwin Library of Historical Children’s Literature at the University of Florida (14 American, 11 British), which all negotiate different relationships between book, game, and reader through their respective relationships to narrative and structure. The earliest text I have cited from the archive is Eliza Leslie’s *The American Girl’s Book* (1846) and the latest text is Susan Ramsay Houget’s *I Unpacked My Grandmother’s Trunk* (1983). My sample is comprised of texts from every decade of the 1800s after 1840, texts from the 1920s and a few texts from the late 1970s and early 1980s. The sample of texts provided by the archive does not allow for broad generalization about trends over time as much as it preserves many of the possibilities created by game-books. Books included in the archive represent a small sample of what was available and may not be representative of all the books of the time period. As such, this project avoids making historical claims about the books in favor of examining the continuum they inhabit. I have examined the extremes of participation and structure through these books in hopes that understanding the variety of book-game hybrids will help establish the complexity of the text-reader (and the text-reader-society) relationship negotiated by these texts.
The meaning of childhood is constructed and contested by so many parties that it provides a great context for a study of how intermediated networks function. Parents, educators, corporations, librarians, families, lawmakers, etc., and, to some extent children themselves, all have a significant investment in shaping childhood to suit their own purposes and ideals. Intermediation asks us to pay as much or more attention to the material structures of the texts that exert these shaping influences as to the information those texts contain. They say just as much about childhood based on their form and medium as they do with their narrative.

N. Katherine Hayles also discusses the importance of intertextuality to the functioning of intermediated clusters: "The implications of intermediation for contemporary literature are not limited to works of electronic literature but extend to contemporary print literature and indeed to literary criticism as a whole. They include the in-mixing of human and machine cognition; the reimagining of the literary work as an instrument to be played, where the intertextual dynamics guide the player to increased interpretive and functional skills; deconstruction of the relation between sound and mark and its rearticulation within environments in which language and code are in active interplay; the rupture of narrative and the consequent reimagining and representation of consciousness not as a continuous stream but as the emergent result of local interactions between cascading neural processes and subcognitive agents, both biological and mechanical; the deconstruction of temporality and its reconstruction as an emergent phenomena arising from multiagent interactions; and the performance of an adaptive coevolution cycling between humans and intelligent machines envisioned as cognizers embodied in different media at different levels of complexity" (Electronic 83-84).

The avatar is an interface between body and system: "Importantly, as Erkki Huhtamo has argued, these two forms of subjectivity and corporeality, the virtual and the physical, are not mutually exclusive but continuous and complementary. The monitor guides us into (a perceptual and corporeal) interaction with the computer and, as a technologized form of vision, it becomes a component and extension of the body; it replaces our body, or rather extends its capacities, and becomes both a representation and a source of bodily experience, thus creating a hybrid condition resonant with the cyborg” (Lahti 164).

I would argue that the framework of intermediation would work for any text as imaginative participation and interpretation of language as essential elements of reading practices.
CHAPTER 2
THE EDITED CHILD: COLLABORATION AND RESPONSIVENESS IN ST. NICHOLAS

Children’s media are an especially rich arena for examining participation between users and texts because there are so many parties (parents, educators, institutions, corporations, etc.) with a stake in defining and transmitting what the child is or should be. Children’s books, magazines, games, etc. all serve at least a dual purpose: building traditional mastery and subverting/transforming that mastery into actionable knowledge. Children’s texts school the child in acceptable values and skills while at the same time prompting the child to reshape those boundaries. While contemporary and especially digital texts clearly offer the reader greater access to and involvement with information, we should also acknowledge the possibilities for agency and involvement contained within historical children’s texts. The responsive and participatory nature of historical children’s texts and contemporary children’s media requires a theoretical position that examines the intertextuality, recursivity, and community/collective knowledge demanded when a reader engages with a text. One of the best examples of a historical children’s text that showcases the importance of recursive process between reader and text and the complex collision of desires (adult, child, community, nation, etc.) involved in that process is *St. Nicholas: Scribner's Illustrated Magazine for Girls and Boys.*

*St. Nicholas* debuted in November of 1873 with Mary Mapes Dodge as its editor. It was a sister publication to *Scribner’s Monthly* and a clear extension of Scribner’s mission into the juvenile magazine market (Kelly 386). Dodge was chosen as the editor partially because of her writing for children (*Hans Brinker*, works for *Hearth and Home*, etc.) and because of her letter published in *Scribner’s Monthly* about creating the ideal children’s magazine (Gannon, “Fair Ideals” 28-29). While Dodge respected Scribner’s
support for genteel and literary values, she laid out her own nine point editorial policy for

*St. Nicholas* that remained in effect until her death in 1905:

- To give clean, genuine fun to children of all ages.
- To give them examples of the finest types of boyhood and girlhood.
- To inspire them with a fine appreciation of pictorial art.
- To cultivate the imagination in profitable directions.
- To foster a love of country, home, nature, truth, beauty, sincerity.
- To prepare boys and girls for life as it is.
- To stimulate their ambitions—but along normal progressive lines.
- To keep pace with a fast-moving world in all its activities.
- To give reading matter which every parent may pass to his children unhesitatingly. (Meigs 280)

Dodge emphasized that a children’s magazine could not directly preach to children; as children are only obliged to read what they want for leisure, the magazine must appeal to their interests. Since *St. Nicholas* was advertised as entertainment, any didactic or moralistic impulse must be disguised. Dodge’s editorial policy and her investment in gathering serious, well-known authors as contributors made the magazine a success.

But even though *St. Nicholas* had a strong, involved editor, her editorial ideals were tempered by the necessities of running a profitable, Scribner’s magazine. The transformation of the magazine’s editorial sections into a dynamic and conflicted interface for negotiating knowledge developed in part because of *St. Nicholas*’ broad audience (both children and adults) and the requisite compromises that come from responding to audience demands and article availability. The conflicting ideals of childhood that Dodge allowed the editorial sections to present are evidence of an implicit (at the very least) acknowledgement of the reader’s role in mastering and manipulating knowledge.

Although *St. Nicholas*’ subtitle suggests it is for “boys and girls,” it, like other highly popular children’s texts, is cognizant of its adult audience and the continuing
maturation of its child readers. Its stories and editorial sections each illustrate the complex relationship the magazine has to both adult and child readers. Susan Gannon has outlined the way *St. Nicholas* appeals to its adult (parent) audience:

But St. Nicholas was also for adults. And I think the magazine did offer its readers something of a 'space in between,' where differing—sometimes age-specific—visions of child-adult relations could be figured, tested, and vigorously discussed.... In terms of vocabulary, the presence of child role-models, illustration, and even many details of address, such stories look child-oriented. Yet they were constructed to offer the possibility of an alternative kind of reading for adults. (“Best Magazine” 154)

Gannon’s “space in between” acknowledges the responsiveness of the magazine to its readership, but this responsiveness is not limited to appealing to multiple age groups.

*St. Nicholas*’ “space in between” highlights the interaction between mastery and subversion that make the magazine an important historical touchstone for understanding participatory textual communities. The magazine develops the child reader’s depth of intertextual knowledge and social/cultural navigation skills and allows readers who already have intertextual knowledge and command of language to challenge the boundaries of possible social actions. The conflict and dissention evident even in the magazine’s highly controlled editorial sections allow the reader to participate in a process with the text—a recursive feedback loop of absorbing and challenging the magazine’s desires.4 Despite the censoring and sanitizing of child behavior implemented through *St. Nicholas*’ editorial practices, the reader is encouraged to perceive language as a necessary and subversive key to building and actualizing knowledge. By controlling language, the child reader can play with the boundaries around her and negotiate adult authority.

*St. Nicholas* has two primary editorial sections: “Jack-in-the-Pulpit” and “The Letter-Box.” “Jack-in-the-Pulpit” is a two page column of miscellaneous items written by
Dodge. It appeared as a regular feature in every issue of the magazine until the 1890’s (Gannon, “Here’s to Our Magazine” 87). While it attempts to cultivate appropriate social behaviors and desirable traits in its readers, it does so indirectly through stories and letters. “Jack-in-the-Pulpit” asks readers to participate in building knowledge; it employs plants and animals to provide a contrast to and critique of human behavior. Its characters explore the world through facts, myths, and tales of everyday life. Dodge employed three main characters. The main persona was Jack himself; he was a Jack-in-the-Pulpit flower and his section was always graced by a picture of a little preacher man in a flower pulpit speaking to several child pupils. The Little School Ma’am and Deacon Green served as main instructional characters, providing the adult voices within the section. “Jack-in-the-Pulpit” should, ideally, represent the core values of Dodge’s nine point editorial policy. Aside from her occasional letter to the boys and girls at the beginning of the magazine, the section is Dodge’s most direct voice and a prime place to see how the child reader is encouraged to participate with the text and collaborate to build knowledge. While this section offers less in the way of emergent knowledge and direct participation with readers, it does present a model of a knowledge community and exemplify how the child’s access to knowledge is both controlled by adult authority and subverted by savvy child characters.⁵

The second editorial section, “The Letter-Box,” involves much more direct reader participation and it became a knowledge community where readers were integral to the process of knowledge creation. Dodge initially resisted publishing a section for young contributors. “The Letter-Box” did not appear in St. Nicholas until its fifth issue in March of 1874 (Roggenbuck 148). Dodge had reservations about encouraging young readers
to display their knowledge: "She particularly worried about encouraging an
unwholesome precocity or self-consciousness among young correspondents" (Gannon,
“Fair Ideals” 32). Despite her concerns over young letter writers and her private
concern at their lack of grammatical and literary skill (Gannon, “Fair Ideals” 35), “The
Letter-Box” became one of the most popular sections of the magazine. There were
constant requests from participants that “The Letter-Box” be expanded by several
pages.7

“The Letter-Box” represents another ‘space in between.’ It created a community
of readers and writers who could participate with each other by asking and responding
to questions each month. Gannon notes: “It is clear that the editors of the magazine saw
the scene of its reception as an interaction between the children and the significant
nurturers in their lives—an interaction that replicated the lively multi-voiced
conversations about the contents of the journal found in its editorial departments and
the Letter-Box columns” (“Best Magazine” 159). Children, adults, and editors all have a
voice in “The Letter-Box” and all of their desires are negotiated. “The Letter-Box”
reveals the reader’s dynamic role in the process of making meaning and the necessity
of intertextuality and collective intelligence to that process. “The Letter-Box” (and St.
Nicholas as a whole) acts as an interface for child readers to access, master, disrupt,
and (re)distribute knowledge.

In Convergence Culture, Henry Jenkins discusses the difference between
interactivity and participation:

> Interactivity refers to the ways that new technologies have been designed to
be more responsive to consumer feedback…. The constraints on
interactivity are technological…. What you can do in an interactive
environment is prestructured by the designer” whereas participation “is
shaped by the cultural social protocols…Participation is more open-ended, less under the control of media producers and more under the control of media consumers. (133)

While Jenkins uses these qualities to describe our current digital transformation, they are applicable to these early years of St. Nicholas’ history as well. The development of “The Letter-Box” was a way to make the magazine more interactive. It was intended to create a controlled location where readers could feel like their feedback to the magazine mattered, but it was meant to remain pre-determined through editorial choice. However, as the child readers became an engaged community negotiating the boundaries of power, language, and knowledge, “The Letter-Box” became more about participation—the readers’ demands overshadowed Dodge's objections to youth contributions and the community began to produce its own knowledge and rules of engagement in collaboration with the editors. St. Nicholas motivated the engaged child not just to interact with the magazine (submit to the contests, respond to questions) but to become a producer within its community. The community of real contributors represented by “The Letter-Box” and the fictional community depicted by Dodge in “Jack-in-the-Pulpit” both depend on collective intelligence and ask children to become both consumers and producers of knowledge, sharing that knowledge with the networks of communities around them. Both editorial sections make claims about what counts as knowledge and how child reader can access that knowledge to create “unauthorized and unanticipated ways of relating to media content” (Jenkins, Convergence 133). These emergent possibilities are the core result of the conflicting messages St. Nicholas sends about the child’s relationship to authority, language, and knowledge. In the end, both “The Letter-Box” and “Jack-in-the-Pulpit” position the reader as Gubar’s child-as-collaborator, a reader who adopts childlike qualities to access adult authority and become a knowledge
producer. By examining the ways “Jack-in-the-Pulpit” and “The Letter-Box” approach adult authority, the child’s relationship to language, and the valuing of and control of knowledge, we can see that these early, historical texts benefit from and model a focus on intertextuality, intermediation, and emergence.

**Performing Childlikeness: St. Nicholas’ Child Readers and Contributors**

The editorial sections of *St. Nicholas* provide the most useful sample sections because of their consistent editorial control. “Jack-in-the-Pulpit” and “The Letter-Box” were more directly composed by Mary Mapes Dodge and her editorial staff; they chose the topics they wanted, included the correspondence that best fit their purpose, and wrote the responses that they thought necessary. The editorial mission and the assumptions made about children and knowledge for *St. Nicholas* as a whole, then, ought to be most evident in these sections. As these sections were produced by a consistent editor, the conflict over both the authority allowed the child and the power language and knowledge hold for the child becomes more than just the dissonance created by various authors. The conflict is instead an editorial choice (consciously or unconsciously) to respect reader-collaborators and an example of society, editor, and child meeting through the magazine.

The early volumes of *St. Nicholas* (pre-November 1881) are of most interest because they establish the tone and development of the sections before the magazine was acquired by The Century Company:

The first eight years of *St. Nicholas* truly represent a developmental stage in the life of this new periodical during which there was continual interaction between the editor and readers. At the same time that *St. Nicholas* was establishing its own identity, it was evolving into a periodical that readers could more and more identify as their own. (Roggenbuck 168)
While “The Letter-Box” and “Jack-in-the-Pulpit” remain distinctive and continue the traits discussed here after volume 8, Dodge shifted her interest in the sections; Gannon and Thompson speculate:

During the 1890s, Dodge’s conduct of the ‘Jack-in-the-Pulpit’ column gradually began to change. Perhaps, having established the tone, manner, and relationship with her audience so thoroughly, and with the addition of other departments and special avenues for reader interaction, Dodge no longer needed the ‘Jack’ feature so much…During the later years of Dodge’s editorship, the ‘Jack’ feature appeared less often and relied more on such contributed material; then, with the January 1896 issue, it ceased appearing altogether. (120)

After the 1881 change in ownership, the participative elements of St. Nicholas become more distributed across the different departments of the magazine and, because Dodge has less monolithic control over the magazine, the energy of collaboration between editors and children that make the first 8 volumes such compelling examples is not as prominent a feature of the magazine.

Because the early volumes establish the magazine’s position toward the child and most clearly show the evolution of the boundaries being negotiated between readers and editors, I focus on St. Nicholas pre-1881. These early volumes of St. Nicholas display the continual tug-of-war faced by children’s literature (periodical or otherwise) over allowing the child agency while at the same time limiting her access to adult authority. The magazine is often in conflict with itself over the power and position of the child reader (offering her independence while still inculcating values of obedience, asking her to participate in creating knowledge but sanitizing that participation, and allowing her room to play with language but insisting on its correctness). This conflict is revealed in the child’s relationship to authority, language, and knowledge represented in St. Nicholas. The magazine’s ambivalence over the child’s position of power allows the
reader to engage in a meaningful process with the text and moves it beyond simple transmission of a message into an area for emergent meaning.

Traditionally, the ideal child is passive, sweet, obedient, and silent. But both “Jack-in-the-Pulpit” and “The Letter-Box” allow the child reader to take on a significant participatory role beyond that ideal. The child is meant to be an active collaborator, not accepting adult knowledge and authority as absolutes through passive transmission. Both sections ask the reader to search out answers, pay attention to what interests her, and value her own experience, but they also allow the editorial voice a level of power over the child and her contribution. In these sections, there is often tension over what children ought to read, what kind of knowledge and ways of knowing should be available to them, and over their status as autonomous or dependent beings. Through these tensions child reader learns to perform childlikeness—a feigned innocence that pacifies adult authority figures and disguises the growing knowledge and competency of the child reader.  

Throughout *St. Nicholas*, editorial authority is exercised to present an idealized child: "Behavior that might offer a bad example to children was also censored. In the magazine’s illustrations, Gellett Burgess’s goops were not allowed to stick their tongues out, Twain’s Huck and Tom could not go barefoot, and a maiden’s skirts could not swirl immodestly" (Gannon, "Best Magazine" 157). The child figure is also made appealing to the adult audience by emphasizing her helplessness, illness, and need. But this image of the ideal child in need of saving is also subverted by child characters’ performance of their own innocence. Gannon helps make these contradictory positions clear:

Children rescued miraculously from need are inducted into the very establishment that created their problems; the young learn to leverage their
neediness into a powerful claim on their elders by a calculated presentation of their own “innocence.” The critical viewer might even, for the briefest moments, get a hint of the secret on which both versions of the story turn: that if children need adults, adults also need children—their cooperation, docility, and innocence, as well as their resistance, awkward questions, and waywardness. ("Best Magazine" 161)

These moments of contact between innocence and “resistance” or “waywardness” are indicated in the relationship of the child reader to Jack in “Jack-in-the-Pulpit.” The layering of editorial authority (Dodge/Jack/Reader) and the places the child reader is allowed to exert her own desires generate a space between the ideal child and the child reader where authority can be tested and reworked. Gubar notes that this concern over the reader’s relationship to authority is a prevalent trait of Golden Age children’s literature, "Far from downplaying the presence and power of grown-ups, these stories grapple directly with the issue of adult influence" (41) and child characters often "function as artful dodgers: subjected to the undeniable force of adult influence, they nevertheless manage to cope with this pressure in creative, subversive ways" (52). St. Nicholas presents Jack’s childish curiosity and exploration as ways to camouflage the child reader’s developing knowledge and skills from interference by adults and traditional institutions (e.g., school). By placing Jack in a position of fluctuating authority, “Jack-in-the-Pulpit” allows engaged readers to question what it means to have and to exert authority and how that authority is built/maintained.

Jack’s relationship to the child reader is normally parental and friendly. Jack’s overall tone is one of authority and the section’s purpose is to pass on facts and instill correct behaviors in the child reader. He directs the reader to answers and provides clues to aid her in her own research. In this way, the primary voice of “Jack-in-the-Pulpit” acts as a guardian and guide. The other personae are even more explicitly adult
and provide definite, authoritative voices. Jack, Deacon Green, and the Little School Ma’am all set tasks for the child reader, suggesting a hierarchical relationship in which they lead and the child follows: “[Jack:] Now if this is news to you, I advise you to look into the subject a bit. Find out just what a berry is” (Dodge, 2.8 514).

At the same time though, Jack often points out places where the reader has a choice or can rebel against the authority of parental/teacherly/editorial authority figures. Jack completes many anecdotes by posing a question and indicating his own ignorance. He solicits (not commands) the reader to find out the answer and, occasionally, to write to St. Nicholas so that the reader might educate Jack (Dodge, 2.8 514). This movement establishes the child’s power over Jack, giving her the power to control and transmit knowledge. Jack also notes that participation in his proposed experiments is not compulsory; the reader does not have to participate “unless you feel like it” (Dodge, 2.10 648). This establishes Jack as a friend who depends on the reader’s knowledge and goodwill instead of a bearer of adult authority: “Through Jack, Dodge could talk to children, not as a teacher, mother, minister, or even editor, but as a friend—a fellow creature still ‘trying to grow’ and as wide-eyed at the world’s wonders as themselves” (Rahn 98). The reader becomes a conspirator and collaborator—her information could be just as useful to Jack as that of the Deacon or the School Ma’am. Beyond her own sense of mastery, the reader is also treated to Jack’s performance of childlikeness, which is highlighted by his multiple levels of authority. If he can simultaneously be the arbitrator of knowledge, the seeker of knowledge, and the recipient of knowledge, then his fluid relationship to authority becomes a model for the child reader’s position as an active participant with the magazine’s information.
Sometimes Jack even occupies a subordinate position to the reader, “I’m your own faithful, loving, Jack-in-the-Pulpit,—in rain or shine, yours to command, and may we honor and help one another to the end!” (Dodge, 2.1 54, emphasis mine). The reader commands Jack and he responds to her questions and gives her credit for the knowledge she passes on to him. The reader’s relationship to Jack then becomes a microcosm of the concern over authority St. Nicholas struggles with. The idealized child has little authority and does not care to have it; the actual child is allowed to research, write in, and command Jack. The reader is supposed to both respect Jack’s parental guidance and educate Jack when he does not know the answer. The hierarchy of authority no longer directly proceeds from the editor to the child reader, but the child negotiates a position in a web of different relationships with both Jack, and by extension, the editor. The magazine does not present a staunch line of adult authority, but rather a series of negotiations by Jack that the child reader might emulate. Jack adopts a guise of childhood innocence and ignorance to elicit a response from the child reader and the very next week presents a more authoritative persona. Jack exists in a feedback loop of authority with the child reader. Each acts on the other and alters their respective levels of authority and access to knowledge, unless or until the child reader outgrows the column and the magazine, relegating Jack and the performance of childlikeness unnecessary. This loop is one of the magazine’s strengths—it reinforces that knowledge acquisition is part of a process and performance that the reader must master and manipulate. By becoming an active reader, the child is able to make a difference by critically researching the knowledge transmitted by an adult authority (after
all, if Jack is parent one week and pupil the next, how much can the reader trust his knowledge?) and manipulate her self-presentation to gain more authority.

Another way the child’s relationship to authority is manipulated and questioned is through the mirroring of the child/parent and Jack/editor relationships. Jack’s relationship to Dodge mirrors the relationship between child and parent, creating camaraderie between Jack and the child reader. The editor can require Jack to write a column and can comment on the appropriate way it ought to be done. Jack must comply with her requests (Dodge, 2.10 648-649). Furthermore, Jack even assists the child reader in becoming resigned to her lack of authority by noting that the ideal child will patiently mind her parents and that there are worse situations than hers. In the snippet “A Hard Case,” Jack tells children not to complain when they are sent to bed early because their case is not nearly as bad as that of the 70 year old daughter who is still sent to bed early after supper because “girls must not use late hours” (Dodge, 2.7 451). This story implies that eventually the child will be free from parental authority but must be resigned to it for the time being. Both Jack and the child reader share a limited position of authority within their respective worlds.

The child reader can compensate for this limited power by skillfully deploying childish behaviors that mask her play for authority. Jack sanctions this behavior by featuring several stories that approve of children playing tricks on authority figures. He recommends Mrs. Barbauld’s book *Evenings at Home* because “it teaches children how to worm a great number of interesting statistics and scientific facts out their parents” (Dodge, 2.10 648). The child can learn to manipulate the parents into answering questions (even though it is mentioned in an educational context here). This
presentation of the power of a childish persona combined with active participation can have a powerful effect. By suggesting that the child has the ability to participate in a dialog with Jack and can occupy various positions of authority, the reader becomes aware of her power to question and to reject what is presented: "In other words, the act of opposing passive literacy can set into motion a sort of domino effect: once an author introduces the possibility that readers can rewrite or reject textual elements that do not appeal to them, nothing is sacred" (Gubar 62). Jack relates several other stories where children outsmart the Deacon and the Little School Ma'am through riddles or language games. For example, the children ask the Little School Ma'am's to spell "need bread." She spells k-n-e-a-d and they point out that her mistake was thinking "knead dough", not "need bread" (Dodge, 2.9 587). So while the ideal child might passively minds her parents, the actual St. Nicholas child is one who appears to mind her parents but manipulates her way into what she wants.

Through “Jack-in-the-Pulpit” the child is located in a complex web of authority, partially subject to the editors’ whims and partially able to manipulate authority figures. Jack is simultaneously a guiding figure, a buddy, and a younger sibling. He allows the child to see herself in a give-and-take relationship with both the magazine's ideals and parental authority. Jack’s fluid negotiation of roles acknowledges the inevitable authority the adult has over the child while simultaneously offering the child models for resisting a passive acceptance of that authority, creating "stories about collaboration, in which the weaker party (the child, who owns nothing) must learn to deal with the more powerful party (the adult, who owns everything)" (Gubar 58).
While “Jack-in-the-Pulpit” presents anecdotes about children and their relationship to authority, the child reader is allowed more direct ability to negotiate authority in “The Letter-Box.” It is the one section of the magazine where the reader’s particular life is her most important asset; “The Letter-Box” is also the place where the conflict between editorial authority and child reader-writer authority is most apparent. Dodge’s editorial policy makes it clear that child readers are important to *St. Nicholas*. The magazine caters to their interests and their whims. However, the readers are still subject to its editorial desires.

During its time, “The Letter-Box” was an improvement in both tone and the amount of authority wielded over the child contributor. As Rahn noted, there were significant differences between the way *Our Young Folks* (a precursor to *St. Nicholas*) and *St. Nicholas* responded to young contributors: "Readers of the magazine [*Our Young Folks*] were children who had to work hard to win adult approval. Children were not encouraged to see their own lives as interesting, unless they were invalids, who were called 'dear' and allowed to feel thoroughly sorry for themselves" (95). On the contrary, *St. Nicholas* encouraged children to share interesting facts about their lives with other readers. Children were active participants in the letters and questions on the page. It gave child contributors a sense that they had authoritative and unique knowledge to share with a community. “The Letter-Box” was not as much about getting approval from or parroting the ideas of the editor as it was about writing in to share knowledge, ask a question, tell a story about where one lives, and/or ask for help from other readers. As “The Letter-Box” aged, there were fewer editorial insertions and more of a community of readers responding to each other.
Other magazines, especially *Our Young Folks*, issued humiliating corrections to contributors in their letter boxes. Rahn provides a great example of the different levels of authority the child is allowed to access when she discusses the different magazines’ reactions to a request for a definition of “runcible spoon” from the poem “The Owl and the Pussycat.” *Our Young Folks*’s response was: “‘Runcible’ is a nonsense word introduced in the nonsense poem for the comical effect of a well-sounding epithet, without any shadow of meaning [8 (Nov. 1872): 703]” (qtd. in Rahn, 99). This response is curt, meant to inform the child from the position of an expert, and leaves no recourse for the imaginative power that the nonsense word might hold. *St. Nicholas* responds differently:

Runcible spoons are not made now-a-days, so it is not to be wondered at that Oscaretta did not find the word in any modern dictionary. If our little friend could only find an encyclopedia that was published in the time when all these things happened…she would not be kept long in ignorance. But we’ll whisper a word or two in Oscaretta’s ear. There’s a great big, big volume called Imagination; and in this volume, right among the R’s she’ll find “runcible.” (qtd. in Rahn, 99)

*St. Nicholas*’s response acknowledges the question (and the child reader as novice meaning-maker) as worthy of exploration. The response acknowledges the child reader’s previous effort to locate a definition as valuable, upholding the power of the reader’s participation in her own learning. It suggests the child can use her imagination to find the answers, making her own opinions worthy of expert status. *St. Nicholas* is not talking down to the child and declaring that the editor’s knowledge is the ultimate authority for the child. The response style is an invitation to the reader to participate further and to see the magazine, not as an ultimate authority, but as a knowledgeable resource to be used. The style also respects the reader’s previous knowledge and
depends on her literacy skills to understand the playfulness of the “great big, big volume called Imagination” instead of providing a straight forward definition.

“The Letter-Box” did participate in shaping acceptable behaviors and reminding child contributors of their “after-the-fact” status. The child contributors’ participation was monitored and manipulated to reflect St. Nicholas’ editorial mission. The section provided corrections to child participants’ mistakes by silently correcting and editing their letters:

Though Dodge privately expressed exasperation with the often messy, ill-spelled letters she received, St. Nicholas, unlike other magazines of the time, neither preserved children's errors because they were cute, nor lectured them on spelling or grammar. Her practice of silently correcting errors and of excerpting natural, appealing letters was noted in a contemporary review and reprinted in the magazine’s own advertising. (Gannon, “Fair Ideals” 35)

While “The Letter-Box” may feel like a community of readers and writers, the editorial selection and revision of correspondence inserts editorial authority over the child. While the child is meant to see written participation as empowering, her language and material could be altered to sanitize/perfect the image of the child St. Nicholas preferred. In many ways, St. Nicholas made children feel like their participation and involvement in the community mattered beyond pleasing the editors, but contributors had to contend with the limitation that to be printed in the magazine, they had to submit to (or be revised into) the magazine’s ideal in some form.

Dodge attempted (at least for the first two years of the section) to dissuade children from writing original literary works, but occasionally she printed them. This reply to a twelve year old girl’s submission of a translation of one of the French stories in the magazine seems positive on the surface: “although we are not in favor of urging children into the literary field, still when we ask merely for prose translations and get
such a remarkably good poetical one from a little girl, we can but print it” (Dodge, 1.5 309). The girl’s translation has merit and deserves publishing, giving her some authorial and participative clout. However, the editor is quick to note that the submission has merit not because of her ideas but because of the quality of the translation (her method). The implication remains that had this been an original poem, *St. Nicholas* would not have been interested in her work.

For another example, take Dodge’s response to Elaine whose verses were published in the March 1874 issue, “Dear little Elaine! don’t write verses yet, cleverly as you do them for one of your age. There is time enough for that. Put your ‘heart and voice in tune,’ [parodying a line from the girl’s poem] dear, by frolicking in the open air; by enjoying your dolls and playmates, and by being a sweet, merry, good little girl” (Dodge, 1.5 308). This example directly contrasts the ideal, innocent child with the child-writer who has agency and is attempting adult crafts. Elaine should stop expressing herself in verse and mold to *St. Nicholas*’ ideal of a sweet, doll-playing girl who does not use language to claim authority in the magazine. Yet, Dodge published Elaine’s verses despite Dodge’s negative reaction to them, sending a mixed message about what the real child should actually do. By presenting the image of the ideal child as one to aspire to, *St. Nicholas* reinforces that the child reader can have power through writing if she hides her savvy within a performance of innocence (brackets her skilled participation within a supposed reprimand). The policing of behavior that the magazine participates in is also what allows for the more subversive messages about authority to remain unchallenged.
Even if the magazine was not wholly supportive of young contributors within its pages, *St. Nicholas* was very supportive of children’s writing and their growth outside of its pages. While the editors refused many submissions the authority that publishing would have lent them, they encouraged the children to still participate (reinstating some of their authority as writers): “We shall be very glad to see specimens of your work from time to time, that we may know what improvements you make” (Dodge, 1.6 372). There are several correspondences with the editors of *St. Nicholas* that show children developed relationships with them over time and participated in a mentorship process with their writing outside of the magazine itself. The magazine, even as a pre-digital medium, establishes feedback loops—a central concept to N. Katherine Hayles’ intermediation and a necessary element to the evolution of the collective intelligence community *St. Nicholas* creates. Hayles notes that “recursive loops allow the designer’s intent, the creatures, the virtual world, and the visualizations to coevolve into a narrative that viewers find humanly meaningful” (*Mother* 196). The feedback loops that connect the child contributors, the editors, and the editorials sections allow for repetitive actions (the shuttling of information and critique among the parties involved), which generate the knowledge the community will utilize and acts on/transforms the rules that define participation in that community. As the child contributors push for more voice and more personal experience, the editors respond to that desire and together they redefine what will fit within the columns of “The Letter-Box.” While this feedback loop may not be as dynamic as the human-computer loops Hayles discusses, it does put the reader into a process where she develops mastery over written authority and then once that mastery
is achieve, she is able to wield that voice within the magazine and make a claim on the group’s collective knowledge. 

Critique played an important role in the feedback loop among the editors, the community, and the individual contributor to “The Letter-Box.” Replies to children’s writing were not outright mean or humiliating as with some previous magazines, but contributors were still chastised in front of the entire community. The editors occasionally used the power of the community against their correspondents. For example, upon receiving a few negative responses to one of their puzzles, the editors directly call out the complainants for their stupidity in front of the entire community:

It has been a surprise and a pleasure to us to note that out of all the nine hundred and more who sent in answers to our conundrum picture, only seven have since expressed any dissatisfaction whatever, and, strange to say, the things that they find fault with are the very answers…that a very large majority of the children sent in without hesitation. (Dodge, 2.4 260)

The magazine leverages the weight of the community to uphold the magazine’s authority and disarm the seven dissenters. The community becomes a powerful authority, but one that reacts to editorial shaping. For example, the editors directly replied to some of the contributors within the section as follows: “Your story with a long name, though fair for a first effort, is not suitable for publication in St. Nicholas. It is rather too strained in style. In writing, first decide in your mind what you wish to say, and then say it as simply and clearly as possible” (Dodge, 2.2 125) or “Your verses are quite good considering your age. Beware of being too sentimental. God gives us some thoughts to hold and to live with, not to spin out in labored rhymes” (Dodge, 2.2 125) or even just “S.A.A.—St. Nicholas says ‘No.’” (Dodge, 2.5 326). The last example is the most elusive; there is no way to know what St. Nicholas has said no to nor what kind of inquiry or submission S.A.A. made; there is a simple refusal of S.A.A. him/herself
through the editorial choice not to provide any more information. The community does not even have the opportunity to contradict *St. Nicholas*’ simple “no.” The community can only make assumptions about the rejection—is S.A.A. being rejected? S.A.A.’s work? Or is the “No” a response to a question posed by S.A.A.? This ambiguous rejection places all of the authority in the hands of the editors and denies S.A.A. any position within the section’s community. When contrasted with the other two examples of rejections which give a reason for the rejection and advice for how to improve, the savvy child reader can identify the boundaries of what is acceptable within “The Letter-Box.” To gain authority in “The Letter-Box” she must write in the style the editors like and include content that the editors think is not “to hold on to and live with” but is necessary to print. Or she has to perform this style until she can leverage the community to change the rules of participation.

Perhaps the discussion of the ways editorial authority masters children’s correspondence seems all together negative, but “The Letter-Box” really provided a space between where children could keep testing the waters and challenging the ideas and submissions that did make it into the pages of *St. Nicholas*. As Rahn stated, “A new pattern was established in which the children themselves, their opinions, personalities, their individual lives and circumstances, were more important than the objective information they had to offer or ask for” (100).14 “The Letter-Box” is one of those spaces where "children were shown how dependent youngsters might negotiate for greater autonomy, while parents could observe the way the adults rather like themselves might respond to the dependency of the young and their desire for self-realization" (Gannon, "Fair Ideals" 42). The voice of the editors, parent correspondents, and child
correspondents were all published in “The Letter-Box” and the children’s additions were not, on the whole, seen as lacking or framed in a patronizing way. The child participant was able to become an important part of the community; she could write about her personal life and share with other readers; she was seen as a knowledgeable resource for answering questions and finding information.

“The Letter-Box” and “Jack-in-the-Pulpit” are what Nodelman has called “complex site[s] of social interaction”: “far from being purely distinctive products of uniquely individual human minds, they find their place in and contain within themselves the manifestations of numerous power relationships—not just between children and adults but also among writers, editors, reviewers, and purchasers” (125). St. Nicholas, as a whole, acts as an interface among adults, children, editors, and text. It is a scaffolding that allows for more than static, factual transmission of knowledge—it creates a space between where the engaged child reader can locate emergent meaning, understanding her position in the world through negotiation and dynamic processes with the text. The feedback loop between the text and the reader facilitates the child’s mastery over the social skills that will give her access to adult authority, and once she has mastered those skills (command of language/cultural capital and control of knowledge), she can break out of this recursive loop and use those skills to manipulate her position in the world. This recursive relationship, which depends heavily on the ability to create dynamic, emergent knowledge from the interaction between user and text, is particularly visible in children’s culture because of its dual purpose of engaging the child as she is and maturing the child so she can master/control the text and leave it behind.
Relationship to Language

While *St. Nicholas* provides a space where child participants can read about and attempt negotiations with authority, one of the main ways the magazine acts as a site of complex social interaction is through its presentation of language. *St. Nicholas* emphasizes the responsiveness of children’s texts by showing readers that not only do they need to work on mastery (learn from the text) but that they can actualize knowledge to their benefit. On one hand, language is a tool and it must be used correctly if children wish to join adult society. On the other hand, however, language is playful and powerful and children can use it imaginatively to manipulate boundaries and control their performance of childlikeness. The ideal child is presented, of course, as one who uses correct grammar and spelling, who defines and uses words correctly, and who follows adult rules for its usage. Those skills are mostly passive skills that depend on simple transmission of rules from the magazine to the child. But *St. Nicholas’* child goes beyond these denotative ideas of language and uses language to revolt against adult authority, suggesting that knowledge is more than rules alone and creative usage can interfere with any simple transmission. By presenting language as transformative and powerful, the magazine continues a tradition that Gubar establishes as characteristic of Golden Age literature. By exposing that language is not transparent, authors persuade "child readers to pay more attention to the constructedness of texts, to notice that authors employ certain conventions in order to hoodwink their audience" (Gubar 53). By presenting language as a flexible tool, the magazine not only develops the reader’s database of facts but also teaches her that presentation of those facts is the most important element of its reception.
While the rules of grammar and style are policed within *St. Nicholas*’ pages, the anecdotes and range of language uses leads the engaged reader to question traditional knowledge:

child readers are likewise encouraged to become more skeptical readers and subjects: to challenge conventional wisdom and differentiate themselves from prescribed ways of being. Indeed, the humor of Ewing’s tale often depends on child readers picking up on the limitations or blind spots of her child narrator, rather than accepting whatever he says the gospel truth. (Gubar 61)

*St. Nicholas* suggests to the child reader that nothing, not even the magazine’s facts, can be taken at full face-value. The reader must do her own analysis and careful evaluation of the language and authority that the information relies on. This trait is exemplified in the stories within “Jack-in-the-Pulpit” as well as in the corrections and games in “The Letter-Box.”

Child characters in “Jack-in-the-Pulpit” are able to challenge authority figures and control knowledge if they show their understanding of and creative use of language. “Jack-in-the-Pulpit” simultaneously clarifies, defines, and pins-down language into something knowable and glorifies its fundamental creativity, flexibility, and instability. Jack, Deacon Green, and the Little School Ma’am all impress upon the reader the importance of correct grammar, exact diction, and formality in writing. Jack includes sections such as “Grammar in Rhyme” (Dodge, 2.9 586) to teach the reader the proper parts of speech. The Little School Ma’am includes several misspelled stories (stories written in homophones) and holds contests where readers submit the stories spelled correctly.¹⁵ These contests were popular:

In February, 1876, "A Short Tail" was published in which the spelling reflected the pronunciation of the words. The Little Schoolma’am offered prizes of colored pictures with accompanying stories for the twelve best "corrected stories." More than two thousand entries were received. Fifteen
boys and girls, instead of twelve, were awarded prizes. In addition, a Roll of Honor listing contestants' names extended over nearly two pages of *St. Nicholas.* (Roggenbuck 142)

These contests asked readers to accept grammatical rules and reinforced the readers’ submission to language as step toward the mastery necessary for adulthood by honoring the most “correct” submissions. By emphasizing that there was one correct way to rewrite the story, these exercises miss an opportunity to make readers into active collaborators, instead favoring a simple transmission of rules and answers that strictly defines what the child needs to know about language.

The magazine overtly stresses that knowing the exact meaning and usage of words is important to mastering childhood. Deacon Green underscores the necessity of understanding the full meaning of words: “Whenever you come across a word that you don’t understand thoroughly, don’t rest until you have found out all you can about it” (Dodge, 5.6 438). To that effect, there are several snippets in the section that define words and try to refine their meaning. For example, Deacon Green defines discontent noting that it is “not always a bad quality” and showing that “if there is any hope of your being able to improve yourself in any way, or better any course of action, by all means be discontented with your present plan” (Dodge, 4.10 698). Furthermore, in her “A Crooked Story” and “The Crooked Story Straightened,” the Little School Ma’am emphasizes that the homophones are “the wrong words” (emphasis original) and that although the puzzle presented the reader with imprecise sound words (wen for when, ah for are), the reader must be careful to avoid this error in her own speech/writing: “but now that the puzzle is solved, we must be doubly careful to sound our r’s and h’s, and give each word its full value” (Dodge, 2.12 774; 3.2 130). Suggesting that there are “wrong words” implies that there must be “right words” that the reader should strive to
employ. The demand for proper grammar and clear definition of language become mechanisms for shaping how the child understands and speaks her knowledge. The insistence on correctness negates some of the potential collaboration between reader and magazine. There is little room for collaboration and participation if language is solely about repeating the correct words rather than transforming the knowledge of the community.

Spelling, pronunciation, and definition make up large portion of the discussion in “The Letter-Box” as well. For example, there is a snippet devoted to defining “foolscap paper” and its origins (Dodge, 2.1 57-58). The magazine also makes sure to secure authorship and correct quotes, fixing knowledge into a static, traditional authority system. “The Letter-Box” prints the following without any editorial comment: "'A Reader.'--H.H. was mistaken, and Jack is right. The Rev. Charles Ludwig Dodgson, of England, wrote 'Alice in Wonderland'" (Dodge, 3.3 204). There is no editorial discussion of pen names or even a correction for the title as Alice in Wonderland is not the full title of the actual text. Instead, the editors choose to reaffirm their own correctness (Jack, i.e. “Jack-in-the-Pulpit,” was right in his assertion of authorship) and emphasize the importance of connecting “real” names to the published texts. They also spend a painstaking amount of time and space correcting attribution errors and locating bibliographic information. This illustrates an investment in making language and texts knowable, definable items that can be categorized and authorized (literally). This kind of knowledge does not depend on the contributor community and dynamically produced information. It presents the child reader as a vessel to receive correct knowledge, not produce, critique, or manipulate the knowledge at hand.
And just as “Jack-in-the-Pulpit” dealt with issues of grammar, children wrote to “The Letter-Box” to find out how to pronounce words so they could be assured of their (obedient) correctness. Here is an answer to one such request: "It is a matter of taste whether to anglicize the 'young lady's' [Clytie] name, as very many well educated persons do… The rule for the pronunciation of Greek and Latin consonants is not hard to understand, and can readily be applied in this case. We give it [the rule] in full" (Dodge, 2.2 126). While there is no “correct” pronunciation, St. Nicholas spends two inches of text space explaining the Greek and Latin pronunciation, which makes it seem more correct (as well as more distant from the children’s actual lives). The ideal child should call on Greek, Latin, French and other romance languages and learn to recite poetry, not think about vulgar words or the implications of Anglicized language. Highlighting the change in language over time and rejecting a hierarchical implication that earlier languages are in some way better would emphasize to readers that language (and by extension, traditional methods of claiming authority and building knowledge) is not concrete.

The editors become arbitrators for correct usage and designation of phrases as slang. Consider these two examples: "The expression, 'can't see it,' is not necessarily slang, but it may be used as slang, and is then disagreeable to refined persons. Whether it is slang or not depends entirely on the motive of the persons using it" (Dodge, 2.4 260) and "Harry L. Graham… The expression which you mention, as generally used, *is* slang" (Dodge, 2.6 388). “The Letter-Box” is performing a regulatory function by declaring some language off limits (the slang word submitted by Harry Graham that we are never allowed to know), what language is borderline (Minnie
Thomas’ “can’t see it”), and what language is acceptable (Greek, Latin, correct grammar, clean definitions, etc.). For an even starker model of the ways “The Letter-Box” pins language down, consider this response to Clara Hannum: “Is it correct to call the spectators of a pantomime the audience? We think it is not…. The word audience (from the Latin, audio, to hear) implies that those who compose it have assembled to hear something. If they attend merely to look on, they are spectators” (Dodge, 1.5 308, emphasis original). The child readers respect the editors’ authority over language and the idea that there is a single correct usage of a word or phrase or way to pronounce them is transmitted to the readers. The ideal child is careful of her words, avoids slang and vulgarity, and knows to use language ‘correctly.’ These moments foreclose participation and limit any kind of emergent knowledge that might come with creative contributions. By emphasizing linear magazine-to-child transmission of knowledge, St. Nicholas misses an opportunity to engage the child reader as an integral node in an intermediated system.

However, this impulse to strictly define, delineate and authorize is tempered by the ways that the redefinitions and exhibitions of word play are used to implicitly make the reader reflect on the unstable meaning and arbitrary nature of language. While the ideal child might accept the transparent nature and use of language, the actual use of language in the editorial sections often belies this; it shows that the child can use language as part of a performed childhood, where correctness is a way of camouflaging her language play and negotiating received knowledge. The reader can become a collaborator if she understands that correctness is a marker of mastery and her mastery/increased knowledge allows her to choose not to identify with the ideal child.
The magazine’s subtle encouragement of childlikeness allows the reader to critique language and transform it to fit her own purposes.

Despite its attempt to offer strict definitions for words, “Jack-in-the-Pulpit” shows the imprecision of language as a referent. Jack adamantly calls for the abolition of the word penknife because it is no longer useful. The word is a “small sham,” which no longer refers to the actual purpose of a penknife. It would be better to say “a pocketknife, a furniture-scratcher, a chestnut peeler, a chip-maker, anything but what it is n’t—a penknife” (Dodge, 1.10 621). While this illustrates the need for precise language and accurate description, it also shows the reader the arbitrary meaning assigned to words and their instability over time. The word carries authority; it names, defines, and creates identities—which is why Jack castigates the “dictionary men” for assigning his name “Jack” to all sorts of negative terms (Jack-a-Napes or Jack Tar, e.g.). But the word is never a transparent and complete descriptor and must constantly be policed for correctness. This policing opens up an unstable space where the child can claim agency by leveraging her own intertextual knowledge and literacy skills.

The “Jack-in-the-Pulpit” snippets revolving around the use of language present problems of translation and defamiliarization. Jack consciously brings up “Sailors’ Language” as puzzling and incomprehensible. He has to consult seafaring birds to help him define phrases like “smooth as blubber” or “all s’ls” (Dodge, 2.4 258). The strangeness of these idiomatic expressions reveals that the apparent transparency of language that the magazine emphasizes through defining and correction is a false construction. Jack denaturalizes language by showing that his frame of reference (his home valley; the world of flowers) does not provide him a way to understand
expressions like “The teacher’s eyes shot fire” or “Nelly Jones coughed fit to split her sides!” (Dodge, 2.5 322, emphasis original). The meaning of language becomes contextual—unstable and unsure. The dangerous quality of this realization is emphasized by the power children gain in the magazine when they play with language.

Child characters challenge the authority of the Little School Ma’am by outsmarting her in language play. They also creatively use language to establish power amongst themselves. Playing with language becomes a tool for the children to use as part of their performance of childhood (one that meets their own goals) rather than a passive set of rules they must abide by. In “The Longest Word,” Rob and Tom trade language riddles—stumbled is the most dangerous word in English because “you are sure to get a tumble between the first and last letter” and the longest word in English is smiles because “there is a whole mile between the first and last letter” (Dodge, 2.6 387). Tom challenges the supremacy of Rob’s smiles by adding beleaguered, “a word that has over three miles between its beginning and end” (Dodge, 2.6 387, emphasis original). These words take on more than their denotative meaning; their letters and construction give them a second set of meanings and authority. Readers find that they can use language for more than transparent communication and obedience to the image of an ideal child; language becomes a tool for mediating their experience and changing their social position. They are encouraged to "practice fickleness rather than fidelity to texts, to revise rather than plagiarize the discourse of other authors" (Gubar 141).17 Readers learn that they can be selective with what they accept and that selection gives them the ability to negotiate with adult authority and perform elements of childhood that work to readers’ benefit.
While “Jack-in-the-Pulpit” does demarcate and categorize through clear definition, it also indicates that only certain redefinitions are useful. While the Deacon’s redefinition of discontent and Jack’s desire to redefine penknife to ‘say what it is’ are considered worthy, the redefinition attempted in a letter by “A Constant Reader’s Mamma” is not treated as a valuable redefinition. The Mamma wants to show that the glass slipper from Perrault’s *Cinderella* is a “philological blunder,” and glass is a mistranslation for fur. While “Jack-in-the-Pulpit” would generally be expected to uphold the necessity of precise language and the importance of ‘getting it right,’ Jack responds: “Now, dear mother of a constant reader, if you take Jack’s advice, you’ll treat this so-called item of information [the mistaken translation] as a base slander. Let it go. The children don’t want anything more of that sort” (Dodge, 4.5 355). In this instance, the desire of the children (to keep their fairy tale) overrides the necessity of precise language and research. Language then becomes a way for children to exert and obtain their desires. “Jack-in-the-Pulpit’s” project of showing language as knowable and classifiable conflicts with its impulse to illustrate the creativity and general peculiarity of language, leaving its point-of-view about language and power ambiguous.

This ambiguity reinforces that the magazine ultimately focuses on emergent meaning, letting each child reader draw meaning from her complex interaction with the multiple factors affecting the magazine. The collaboration between creator, reader, and text is fluid, with the child occupying each role to some extent. Her primary role, of course, is as reader, but as she engages with the research tasks and/or writes into the magazine, she becomes a creator, allowing other readers to access her knowledge and react to/rewrite it. Finally, she also becomes the text through *St. Nicholas*’ investment in
portraying the ideal child, writing those traits onto child participants, who are also finding that they can merge with, resist, and rewrite the ideal child presented to them. These complex layers of negotiation make the meaning of the text and the meaning of the child are unstable and can only be understood if the reader is an intrinsic part of the process along with the text.

“The Letter-Box” also destabilizes its relationship to language thereby opening up a space for participation and collaboration with the magazine. It presents “Word Play” in most issues where children rearrange letters to make other words and compete with each other to see who can come up with the most words: “Minnie L.G. says that she has made ninety-seven nouns out of the letters of the word 'ILLUSTRATION,' and asks the boys and girls of St. Nicholas to try what they can do” (Dodge, 1.5 308). This competition highlights some of the fluidity and arbitrariness of words. Rearranging the word “illustration” into other words helps make creative connections between it and the other words, as well as defamiliarizing the letters and the process of producing words. Language is also shown as a direct form of play and diversion. The children are encouraged to work with it and to use their mental power to react to language. It also forges a community through competition and collaboration where readers react to each other and to the magazine, actively working to transform their relationship to the magazine.

The editors also have fun with how language is put together and derived. Take for example the request of a child reader to know what “hippodrome” means:

The word “hippodrome” is derived from Greek words, signifying a horse and a course. If you had looked for this word in Worcester's or Webster's big dictionary, you would have been spared the trouble of writing to St. Nicholas. This explanation will help you to comprehend several other words
beginning with hippo (a horse), as hippopotamus, hippocamp, hippocogriff, and hippocophagy. When you discover that two syllables in “hippophagy” are derived from a Greek word signifying to eat, it may interest you still further to know that the Tartars are known to practice hippocophagy. This throws new light upon that moderate request, “Oh, give me but my Arab steed!” (Dodge, 1.10 622)

Knowing the root words of common words can change the way we look at popular phrases. The editors show that language is far from definitive; it is colored by all kinds of social and historical context that they make accessible to their correspondents. While they do get in a subtle stab about being too lazy to look up the definition on one’s own, this segment goes beyond passive definition of the word and models how the child might use language creatively to create her own meaning. This is similar to Gubar’s analysis of E. Nesbit’s works for children: “eager for all of her readers to get in on the fun, Nesbit broadcasts the fact that knowing exactly what a word means can provide extra enjoyment and even indicates how such information might be obtained” (139).

Acknowledging the reader’s abilities to include intertextual knowledge alongside the text in hand makes the child reader a savvy collaborator with the ability to influence textual meaning. The child’s ability to bring outside knowledge to bear on St. Nicholas gives the reader the option of choosing not to identify with any simple presentation of an ideal and passive child. The reader who is not yet savvy enough to participate in the “joke” by understanding its multiple levels can build up her language and research skills until she has enough outside knowledge to challenge and analyze the information the magazine presents. Since St. Nicholas asks the reader to process its conflicting presentations of how language can be used and, thereby, question the language and information in its pages, it acknowledges that the reader is capable of criticizing the ideal and working with the text beyond its surface-level transmitted messages.
Not only do the editors show that redefinitions of language can be accepted or rejected based on personal desires or social needs, they acknowledge that language and the printed word are fallible by spending a lot of time correcting errors. For example, when asked about the meaning of a phrase from Shakespeare, the editors give this reply:

The quotation is from Shakespeare's play of 'Macbeth,' act v, scene 3, where it reads, however: "My way of life/ Is fallen into the sear, the yellow leaf.' Thus written, it was somewhat hard to understand, and the line, as Lulie quotes it, is a reading of Johnson's, who first suggested that the w might be an m inverted by a printer's error, and that if read, 'My May of life,' the meaning would be clearer. (Dodge, 2.5 324)

The editors have to research and correct the phrase before they can make meaning from it. The child now has the right to speak back to the written word and challenge its correctness. This creates a point of conflict with the passive ideal child who accepts language as transparent and the participative, childish reader who can challenge the authority and validity of the written message.

Just as "Jack-in-the-Pulpit's" children gain power by defeating adults in word play, the children in "The Letter-Box" assume authority though their use of language. William Burton submitted a letter about a fourteen year old girl named Mary Knowles who wins a spelling bee despite the fact that her competition is an adult who runs a printing shop (Dodge, 2.8 516). Mary uses her knowledge of spelling to triumph over an adult expert and the magazine applauds her abilities. The implicit message is that skillful, savvy children can take advantage of their position and presentation of childlikeness. The reader-writers of "The Letter-Box" are empowered by and have fun with language. One boy writes in: "St. Nicholas: You have a conundrum in your February number from E.B., about 'The Cooky with a Hole in it.' The verses end with the
question, ‘But how do you eat the hole?’ I raise my hand to answer. If you will just do as I would, you will Eat the [W]hole” (Dodge, 2.6 388). By substituting whole for hole, he cleverly solves the conundrum. The child contributor is able to come up with solutions outside the official St. Nicholas approved correct answer and the magazine respects his ability to do so. By presenting this outside effort as laudable, the magazine encourages challenges to traditional, inherited knowledge. The language play of St. Nicholas goes far beyond instructing the ideal child to use language correctly; it asks the child to creatively resist social rules by showing that she may take power and fulfill her own desires by adapting language to her purposes.

Knowledge and Collective Intelligence

St. Nicholas’ position on knowledge is perhaps its most critical contribution to developing collaborative participants from its readership. It is not enough for the child to passively accept facts about the world, she has to actively engage in analyzing, using, and producing knowledge. The recursive feedback loop created by the intermediation of the reader and the text is only useful because it leads to “enaction” of knowledge. Hayles contends, “enaction sees the organism's active engagement with its surroundings as more open-ended and transformative…. enaction emphasizes the links of the nervous system with the sensory surfaces and motor abilities that connect the organism to the environment” (Posthuman 156). The reader can only enact her knowledge in connection with the text and her environment and as part of a transformative process. Just like recursive loops in a computer program, the process between reader and text has to cause a transformative change that meets and exceeds the limits of the loop (or text) itself. The child who participates with St. Nicholas soon learns that there is more than traditional, institutional knowledge—community
knowledge provides the child with a point of entry to adult authority and, thereby, moves the child beyond needing *St. Nicholas* to school her in the intricacies of negotiating culture.

Overall, the magazine asks the reader to become a producer and emphasizes the communal and contextual process the reader engages in with the magazine. By presenting multiple types of knowledge and validating the most communal and available methods of accessing information, *St. Nicholas* makes it possible for child readers to become collaborators and gain agency in their own lives. “Jack-in-the-Pulpit” preferences experiential knowledge learned through testing and gained through personal observation. The magazine continually calls on the child reader to put the text down and perform an experiment or go outside and view the natural world. It also refuses to give the reader the answer to the questions it poses, instead setting her the task of finding the answer through study and questioning. Yet, for all its emphasis on learning for oneself, the knowledge passed down by Jack is often second hand.

Since Jack’s is a flower in a field where school classes and children often wander by, he is limited in the kind of information he can receive and transmit. He learns from a network of birds and flower friends all over the world, and Deacon Green and the Little School Ma’am are often espousing little tidbits of interesting information when they pass by. Jack’s knowledge is all obtained through gossip and eavesdropping; it comes from a web of sources that the reader is asked to question and confirm. For example, in the story “The Dandy and the Desert,” Jack notes: “How do I know it? Why, the artist told his little girl, his little girl told it to a little boy, the little boy whistled it close by the canary’s cage, the canary told it to another little bird and the other little bird told me”
(Dodge, 1.6 370). This oral transmission of knowledge that trickles down to Jack through the grapevine is considered a valid source of fact. The transmission of ideas is treated as transparent and, when the message reaches Jack, it is assumed to be correct.

This same sort of gossip/oral transmission route to knowledge is mentioned in other issues. Jack (as a flower) must lend credibility to his information by discussing his access to a network of informants who pass items along: “I know a bird which belongs to a boy who knows a girl who knows a lady whose sister married a man who had read every word of Governor Seward’s ‘Travels Around the World.’ This, you see, gives me a great stock of anecdotes” (Dodge, 1.8 497). Jack (as the principle voice of the section) is comfortable with his removal from the original source for his anecdotes. This acceptance of oral transmission is in keeping with the section’s larger focus on experiential knowledge instead of “book” knowledge. The oral narrative can be found and transmitted outside (literally) the confines of academic study and assists in freeing children from their desks. Unlike written texts, these recorded oral transmissions do not need to meet the same standards for sources. Their worth as stories of virtue will come through to the reader despite their authorship (or lack thereof):

Your Jack has heard—O, so many wonderful things this Summer! And you shall be told them all, in time. No matter how he has heard them, so that they are true and worth hearing, and the young folk are ready to listen. Dear, dear! What an astonishing world this is, and how busy we Jacks-in-pulpits are from morning til night, with the heaps and heaps that have to be told! (Dodge, 2.2 714, emphasis mine)

But this emphasis on oral transmission (gossip) as a valid way of knowing is a point of conflict within “Jack-in-the-Pulpit.” The positive characterization of gossip is challenged by Jack’s commentary on the credibility of some of his sources, as well as the direct
indictment of gossip by the section’s other personae. Occasionally, Jack slips in a question about his sources that, perhaps, is meant to entice the reader into researching the anecdote being presented. After telling a story about dogs that don’t bark, Jack notes that “this sounds like a hard story, and I’ll not say yea or nay to it, though it was told to me as a truth that had been endorsed by Mr. Darwin” (Dodge, 2.2 714). Jack will not vouch for the story, but his invocation of Darwin should be enough to secure the truth of the information (at least with a little research on the reader’s part). Sometimes Jack even acknowledges that his sources would not want their information shared: “Did you ever hear about it, my children [Trowbridge and the Drowning Boy]? The little bird who told me said he was sure Mr. Trowbridge would n’t be willing to have it mentioned, but I can’t help that. He had no business to do it then” (Dodge, 2.1 54). Jack seems to endorse gossip as justified and an important way of amassing and transmitting knowledge, even as he show the limitations and problems of source attribution that come along with it. He validates networked knowledge and entices readers to become critical recipients (and producers) of gossip within their community (by writing to Jack).

The section’s point-of-view on gossip as knowledge is further complicated by Deacon Green’s story about gossip: “I knew a lady once who went about in high spirits gossiping and telling tales, thereby openly proclaiming herself a gossip and a tale-bearer, and yet she was furious when told that she had not a good ear for music” (Dodge, 3.6 399). The deacon shows those who gossip often do not like to hear gossip about themselves. While this excerpt in itself is not a strong condemnation, it precedes a discussion of the “slanderer’s mask,” which makes a strong statement against gossip as a valid way to know:
If people would only see how a matter is apt to be exaggerated when repeated from mouth to mouth! Many sensitive persons have suffered for a life-time from only ‘a little piece of news,’ which someone confided to a ‘bosom friend,’ who told a very dear acquaintance, who told his friend in strict confidence, and so sent the story on, until the harmless item stretched into a disgraceful scandal, which tale-bearer number one could never have recognized. (Dodge, 3.6 399)

This set of connections seems strikingly familiar to Jack’s descriptions of how he gathers his information. Gossip in this rendition is painful and inaccurate, but for Jack it is a way of experiencing the world and understanding new places and people. The reader has to consider her relationship to Jack and to the Deacon to weigh their conflicting advice. Jack approaches the reader as a friendly confidant whereas the Deacon represents adult (institutional) authority—which Jack has push the reader to question already. This conflict over the nature of gossip and oral transmission is not a shortcoming of the section, rather it is an inroad to understanding the conflicted relationships children’s texts have with their readership. “Jack-in-the-Pulpit” proposes to teach through entertainment and indirect models. It uses anecdotes, snippets, and stories to reach the child. At the same time it borrows from these non-scientific sources, it also displays a preference for studious, methodical, tested knowledge. The child must be taught by indirect means to use direct scientific means to understand her world.

Using gossip as a validated form of knowledge is necessary to understanding how St. Nicholas supports the development of collective intelligence in a pre-digital era. Jenkins suggests that gossip fuels convergence:

The specific content of the gossip is often less important than the social ties created through the exchange of secrets between participants—and for that reason, the social functions of gossip hold when dealing with television content. It isn't who you are talking about but who you are talking with that matters. Gossip builds common ground between participants, as those who exchange information assure one another of what they share. Gossip is
finally a way of talking about yourself through critiquing the actions and values of others. (Convergence 84)

By supporting gossip and networks of producers as a source of knowledge, St. Nicholas exemplifies the traits that Jenkins outlines. In “The Letter-Box,” participants pool their knowledge about their locations and lives. The content of the forum is less important than the sharing that the child contributors do. Being linked together though the discussion is more important (and more pleasurable if the section’s popularity is any indication) than gaining factual information.

While “The Letter-Box” is certainly not as spontaneous and reactive as the transitory digital networks Jenkins discusses, it still attempts to cast child readers as experts and teachers, despite its strong editorial control. For example, Rosie S. Palmer wrote:

Dear St. Nicholas: I thought you might like to know how to press flowers. The first thing to do, after you have gather them, is to lay them smoothly between tissue paper; then you must have felt drying-paper to put each side of the tissue-paper...Will you publish this, so that all the little girls who take St. Nicholas may have the opportunity of pressing flowers? (Dodge, 5.9 636)

The child’s knowledge is printed in the magazine along with traditional stories and informative pieces, giving credence to her skills and passing them along the network of other readers. It is clear from this quote, however, that the magazine becomes an arbitrator along the gossip string. The readers direct their information to St. Nicholas or to “The Letter-Box” as a centralized location/clearinghouse for the information instead of sending the knowledge from many points in the network.

Through the informal network created by “The Letter-Box,” child contributors are able to express and negotiate their own identities. They are able to test different roles (questionee/expert/sharer/observer) and different levels of mastery over the ideals the
magazine presents. For example, there are letters that critique the values of others in order to shore up the group identity forged by Letter Box readers; J.R. Siddall writes in to inform the community about a German “girl we had” who used one of his father’s medicine bottle labels to copy the American address for her German friends to send to. She failed to take out the name of the medicine being sent and J.R. writes, “We had a good laugh over it, to think that anybody would put ‘Tinct. Of Myrrh’ on the direction of a letter. I thought I would send you this to put in the St. Nicholas, so that everybody who reads this could have a laugh over it” (Dodge, 5.6 446). While culturally insensitive, this submission defines the boundaries of the community and reinforces the members’ common knowledge. The German girl’s mistake is funny because it falls outside of the community, whose members are obviously knowledgeable enough not to make this kind of language mistake.

A more innocuous entry in “The Letter-Box” might be H.M.R.L.’s submission of a drawing “The Horse and the Scare-Crow” accompanied with an explanation, “I suppose city children hardly know what a scare-crow is. I will tell them. It is old clothes stuffed with straw or hay to resemble a man, and stuck upon a stick in a corn-field to keep the crows away from the corn when searching for grubs” (Dodge, 4.10 701). She goes on to request that readers “Excuse all imperfections. I am a little girl not yet twelve years of age” (Dodge, 4.10 701). She shares her knowledge with a portion of the community that would not otherwise be exposed to “scare-crows.” While she has some expert authority (asserting that she will tell the city children), she still feels the need to validate any mistakes she make by reinforcing her age (innocence) with the editors. She performs
her innocence to make sure that her entry is not excluded by editors for claiming more expertise than she should be allowed.

The readers on occasion use “The Letter-Box” to comment on and critique the editors: “Mrs. Dodge: Please don’t make any mistakes in having our delightful magazine in Chicago on time, as I get into all sorts of trouble when the 20\textsuperscript{th} passes without it” (Dodge, 4.4 292). While this submission was from a parent who had disappointed children when the magazine did not arrive at its normal time, it illustrates the variety of contributors and the ownership the contributors felt over the community if they were willing to critique the editors publicly.

While the community of “The Letter-Box” may seem tedious or limited, it is a precursor to many of the traits described by Pierre Lévy about collective intelligence. By allowing individuals to grapple with identity, share expertise, and connect to a network of others, St. Nicholas begins the process of creating a (far from perfect) intelligent community:

Through a process of transmission, invention, or forgetfulness, heritage becomes an element of individual responsibility. The intelligence of the group is no longer the mechanical result of blind or automatic activities, for it is individual thought that perpetuates, invents, and mobilizes that of society.... In an intelligent community the specific objective is to permanently negotiate the order of things, language, the role of the individual, the identification and definition of objects, the reinterpretation of memory. Nothing is fixed. Yet, this does not result in a state of disorder or absolute relativism, for individual acts are coordinated and evaluated in real time, according to a large number of criteria that are themselves constantly reevaluated in context. (Lévy, Collective 17)

St. Nicholas certainly did not manage the real time connectivity or scale that Lévy discusses here, but it was striving for a community whose objective (seen in both editorial sections) was to negotiate the complexities of language, authority, and knowledge. The contributors, adults and children, were transmitting heritage—individual
cultural knowledge—and maintaining it for the community connected to *St. Nicholas*, from a little girl who wants others to press flowers to one who wants others to understand scare-crows. And, even though the jumble of items included in “The Letter-Box” each month might seem disconnected or like trivial moments of individual lives, the members of the community are transformed by that knowledge: "Through their interaction with diverse communities, the individuals who animate the knowledge space are, far from being interchangeable members of immutable castes, singular, multiple, nomadic individuals undergoing a process of permanent metamorphosis (or apprenticeship)” (Lévy, *Collective* 17). “The Letter-Box” and “Jack-in-the-Pulpit” make readers constantly challenge and rearrange knowledge. *St. Nicholas* strongly suggests that knowledge is not static and that readers are integral participants in deciding what knowledge can be enacted within the network of correspondents. Jenkins states: "What holds a collective intelligence together is not the possession of knowledge—which is relatively static, but the social process of acquiring knowledge—which is dynamic and participatory, continually testing and reaffirming the group's social ties" (*Convergence* 54). For *St. Nicholas*, the “process of acquiring knowledge” is surprisingly social and participative, considering the technological constraints of the period.

**Conclusions**

*St. Nicholas* was a very popular periodical. According to Erisman, the subscribership stabilized at around 60,000-70,000 (16). The magazine reached even further than these subscribers as it was picked up by teachers, schools, and libraries. It was passed from child to child, and the editors emphasized the importance of passing your copy on to children who were too poor to afford the $3 subscription fee. The readers felt so connected to the magazine that they treated “Jack-in-the-Pulpit” as a real
person and thought of *St. Nicholas* as an actual entity. Letter after letter from “The Letter-Box” exclaims: "I wish Mr. Jack-in-the-Pulpit could have accompanied me and admired the lovely plants" (Dodge, 2.5 324) or "You have come to our house every month since you were born, and we like you better as you grow older" (Dodge, 3.7 469), and "I have taken you from your birth, as a writer to your magazine said. I think you are grand, and I hope you will live forever" (Dodge, 4.5 357). One little boy wrote: "I am going home to Grosse Ile, Michigan, next summer. I should like to stop in New York and see you, *St. Nicholas*" (Dodge, 4.5 357). Part of the magical pull of *St. Nicholas* was its ability to open up spaces in between—between adults and children, between the ideal and the real. By destabilizing its own image of the ideal child, *St. Nicholas* allows the child reader to take up a position of power in relationship to authority and language, but still leaves adult authority intact. By allowing for dissention in its editorial section, *St. Nicholas* creates a gap between the idealized child and what the actual child can do to resist and redefine that image. Perhaps one of the reasons that *St. Nicholas* was so long-lived and beloved was its ability to allow multiple images of the child to thrive side-by-side, and its focus on making readers active participants in an intermediated process. *St. Nicholas'* readers were supposed to be childish (savvy, maturing performers), using and critically thinking about the knowledge of the magazine rather than being ideal, passive receivers (static, simple children).

Hayles explains why intermediation is important to understanding literary and digital texts:

An important aspect of intermediation is the recursivity implicit in the coproduction and coevolution of multiple causalities. Complex feedback loops connect humans and machines, old technologies and new, language and code, analog processes and digital fragmentations. Although these
feedback loops evolve over time and thus have a historical trajectory that arcs from one point to another, it is important not to make the mistake of privileging any one point as the primary locus of attention, which can easily result in flattening complex interactions back into linear causal chains. (Mother 31)

*St. Nicholas* is one of the many important loci that exemplifies the power of participative media. Participative texts can only be understood in relationship to their users, a connected analysis of the material structure and the spontaneous/unexpected results that come from its collision with human subjects. *St. Nicholas* created a strong, connected community invested in producing knowledge and distributing expertise. It made a strong case for the power of language and a multiplicity of ways the child might collaborate with the adult editor to manipulate what it means to be a child. While the magazine certainly had limitations, it also offered an opportunity for mastering and enacting social skills. It became a space not just for interaction, but for participation and performance—for emergent meaning to grow from the process of working with the text and with outside knowledge, instead of passive acceptance of the text’s surface meaning.

**Notes**

1. The magazine had two different titles. It was known as *St Nicholas: Scribner’s Illustrated Magazine for Girls and Boys* until July of 1881 when it was sold to another publisher and renamed *St Nicholas: An Illustrated Magazine for Young Folks*. Here I deal exclusively with the magazine before it was renamed.

2. *St. Nicholas* was in print from 1873 to 1941; Dodge edited it from its first issue until 1905, but in the last few years of her editorship, she depended heavily on her assistants (Gannon and Thompson 112).

3. As Saler and Cady note, although Dodge “valued moral and other instruction, she held that ‘it must be by hints dropped incidentally here and there’” (163).

4. The process between reader and text is recursive both in the word’s broad meaning as a repetition and recurrence and in its specific computational meaning where a process runs over and over until it causes a change in the information being computed (a state change), which then allows the program to move on to a new process. Here, the reader and the text work on each other through feedback loops until desires are shaped and negotiated and, hopefully, the reader grows out of or beyond the initial skills and surface level involvement with the text. See N. Katherine Hayles’ *My Mother Was A Computer*.  

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This is consistent with Marah Gubar’s formulation of the child as an artful dodger. The child reader is an active collaborator who negotiates the meaning of the text and is cognizant of but not helplessly lost to the power imbalance between the adult authority and child reader. See Gubar’s Artful Dodgers: Reconceiving the Golden Age of Children’s Literature.

“The Letter-Box” served as the magazine’s major outlet for reader contributions until January 1876, when Dodge was persuaded to allow a “Young Contributor’s” section. After this change, “The Letter-Box” focused more fully on personal letters and questions from readers instead of attempts at stories and verse (Roggenbuck 151).

As Roggenbuck notes: “[THE LETTER-BOX] was sometimes as small as a page and a half and other times ran to three pages. However, smaller sizes of type were used in THE LETTER-BOX than in the body of the magazine. Thus, much content was crowded into this section” (148).

Perry Nodelman discusses this performance of childlikeness in The Hidden Adult: “It would be imposing a vision of childhood innocence and incapability on children in order to suit the needs and desires of adults—something that I have suggested texts of children’s literature always and centrally do. And in doing so, of course, it would also be replacing actual childhood innocence with an adult vision of childhood innocence—inviting child readers to value their lack of knowledge, to develop an understanding of the meaning of the lack rather than just to lack it” (45).

Jack has the power, however, to dismiss the child audience and speak directly to adults, giving him authority to command the child just as the child can command him (Dodge, 2.10 648).

This focus on soliciting information from other readers is especially true after the establishment of the “Young Contributors” department in 1876, which allowed children to present their original written work in a separate section.

This silent correction is, in some ways, more of a violation of the contributor’s trust and participation than the direct correction and humiliation practiced by other magazines. By manipulating the contributions, Dodge created an idealized “real” child contributor without offering the chance for readers to recognize the editorial interference and critique it. The contributions to the editorial sections must be read with this manipulation in mind. That there are still conflicting presentations of childlikeness after Dodge’s effort at tidying up indicates that the performance of childhood is best understood as a constant process rather than a singular identity.

For the first two years of its existence, Dodge used “The Letter-Box” to comment on contributions and, ironically, keep children from attempting their own verses and stories: “Dodge published a small amount of the children’s contributions during the first two years in THE LETTER-BOX and also sometimes addressed critical comments in this department to individuals who sent in writings and drawings which were not published” (Roggenbuck 151).

In other words, the editors, the community of writers, and the contributor-to-be work on each other over and over until the contributor-to-be either meets all of the editorial and community requirements or manages to change the rules of participation to suit her contribution. The feedback loop eventually produces a change in state, either of the system or of the participant. All of the examples here suggest that St. Nicholas illustrates this constant struggle where both the system (the magazine/editors) and the participant (child readers) are integral to what meaning and knowledge is created and both are changed and challenged; it is a process rather than a linear transmission of information.

Here Rahn is referring specifically to “The Letter-Box” after the “Young Contributors” department started.

See Dodge’s “Jack-in-the-Pulpit” sections of St. Nicholas in issues 2.12 and 3.2 for further examples.
The contests in both "Jack-in-the-Pulpit" were very popular: "Contests were often featured in the JACK-IN-THE-PULPIT department. In February, 1876, 'A Short Tail' was published in which the spelling reflected the pronunciation of the words. The Little Schoolma'am offered prizes of colored pictures with accompanying stories for the twelve best 'corrected stories.' More than two thousand entries were received. Fifteen boys and girls, instead of twelve, were awarded prizes. In addition, a Roll of Honor listing contestants' names extended over nearly two pages of St. Nicholas" (Roggenbuck 142).

While Gubar is specifically discussing E. Nesbit's stories from 1899-1906 in this quotation, her description applies to several of her earlier examples from the Golden Age and aptly describes the results of St. Nicholas' contrasting presentation of language, even if the magazine predates Nesbit's books.
CHAPTER 3
PLAYING WITH CHILDREN’S LITERATURE: GAME-BOOKS AND THE PARTICIPATIVE READER

In order to make sense of emerging media-enhanced, cross-platform texts for children, we need to understand the history of game-related texts and how game-book hybrids structure what it means to be a child, as well as the participative opportunities available to the reader-player. Books like The 39 Clues series\(^1\) (2009-2010) by various authors or the Cathy’s Book trilogy\(^2\) (2006, 2008, 2009) by Sean Stewart and Jordan Weisman are created with an active, participative reader in mind, and they extend their reach beyond the codex to include websites, voicemail messages, playing cards, etc. as part of the reading experience. Often these kinds of young adult texts are treated in one of two ways: (1) as commercial-driven, fluff without value for the scholar or the child or (2) as exciting, new objects that break with tradition and create a rupture within children’s culture, completely different from anything that has come before and transformative for the child user. Both of these responses gloss over the history and continuum of participative texts and devalue the rich tradition of active negotiations between reader and text.

Historical children’s texts reveal a long history of reader participation, especially forms of narrative engagement and play, which ask the child to become an active player in the game of the text. They call on the reader in a variety of ways: implicating her in a web of intertextual references, depending on her to do research outside of the book, asking her to play games, positioning her as a sleuth who must solve the mystery, presenting her with riddles to puzzle over, or asking her to be an imaginative participant in the textual action. While participatory texts do provide structured worlds through rules and narrative, they also offer possibilities for reader-players to exert agency and
negotiate a relationship with the text’s expectations and desires. These reader-text negotiations are fraught with contradictions that reveal both the social purpose of the child as a container of adult/social desire and the child’s position as a limited agent (or as Marah Gubar’s *Artful Dodgers* terms them “collaborators-after-the-fact” (8)). Historical game-books do not expect unconscious innocence and simple reception from the child reader, but rather encourage a conspicuous performance of childlikeness. From these texts, child readers are meant to "develop knowledge of what one particular adult philosophy understands to be the meaning of their own existence as young human beings, and possibly […] even learn to view themselves and their own actions as this philosophy understands them. They learn childlikeness from children’s books" (Nodelman 13). Game-books treat the child reader as "well-read, socialized, and sophisticated" (Gubar 16) and capable of "extrapolate[ing] more complex information by referring to a 'repertoire' of knowledge already possessed" (8-9). The game-book hybrids examined here clearly show that despite their ability to shape desires and privilege certain behaviors, they "still [allow] for the possibility that children—immersed from birth in a sea of discourse—can nevertheless navigate through this arena of competing currents in diverse and unexpected ways" (Gubar 32-33). These texts act as interfaces; they structure information in particular ways, but they also allow for participation and emergent, unscripted possibilities.

Often, newer technological forms (such as video games) are heralded as more interactive and, therefore, more likely to provide the child agency and transform her from mere consumer to active producer. However, these new media are part of a historical tradition of active, involved users, rather than a radical departure from passive
reader to active player. By combining various approaches to new media with children’s literary criticism and acknowledging the history of children’s participatory media, discussions about emergent, media-enhanced children’s texts can move away from assertions of novelty to an understanding of how these texts act as interfaces, encouraging readers to develop performances of childlikeness through intermediation, participation, and negotiation.

Children’s texts that also act as games were thriving as early as the late 1800s and these texts can be further connected with a much longer history of riddles and language games. These game-books ask the reader to participate, often physically as well as mentally, with the text in hand. The reader engages with elements of both story and play, becoming both reader/interpreter and player/world-builder. Although these texts are purposely structured to support particular ideals of childhood, they are also points of entry for an active, engaged child reader—they are texts that ask the reader to become a player and help to narrate, create, define, and resist the actions the texts enable.

I have identified two interrelated categories of game-books that illustrate the multifaceted relationship between game and book. One type is the book describing games/game play which teaches the reader to play the game (“books about games”). The other type includes books that act as games themselves by transforming into game boards and functioning as part of the game they discuss (“books as games”). The game-books within these two categories are far from homogenous; they each demand varying levels of participation, and they structure knowledge in different ways to influence the child reader. The variety of game-books illustrates a tension that cannot
be encapsulated in a single historical trajectory. Books that present games through simple, declarative instructions and books that ask the reader to imagine herself playing or even build active, physical elements of play into their structures develop simultaneously—perhaps because each variation of game–book promotes its particular ideal child. The general ideal of the child is stable but, even within a single game-book, the representation of the child and its relationship to the child reader is ambivalent. Even the most rule-oriented, didactic game-books are unable to present a single ideal child, which is the case for children’s literature in general as well: “The texts confirm what they want to oppose in the very act of opposing it—that which needs to be imagined and introduced so that it can be denied” (Nodelman 80). Even when enacting strict rules and refusing the reader the fulfillment of desire and motivation that comes with narrative, game-books cannot eliminate the engaged reader’s interference with that ideal. If nothing else, the historical game-books emphasize that the boundary between book and game is flexible, and the image of the child that these game-books put forward is constantly negotiated and (re)performed by the reader. This flexibility contributes to the survival of game-book hybrids, and the current interest in creating this type of books may be a result of the layers of participation they demand (imaginative, intellectual, physical, historical, communal, social, etc.).

One of the tensions at the core of any game-book is the conflict between game rules and game narrative. The rules of the game (or in this case, the way the game-book constructs the possible ways the reader can participate) create a structure, but the narrative invites the reader to think about and participate within that structure. Each game-book negotiates the balance between rules and narrative differently, and in doing
so, they privilege certain actions and desires. When the rules are privileged, the reader is often excluded from participation with the text itself—instead, she is expected to learn and apply the rules at another time. When the reader is given more narrative, she is provided with a context for her actions, and the game-book instills a desire to participate with the text. When the reader becomes a participant, she enters into a web of negotiations that affect not only her knowledge of the world and social norms, but her physical actions. Game-books make use of intertextual references and the reader’s previous knowledge to position her as student, spectator, and/or actor and work to place her body (real and imagined) within the texts’ systems of exchange and structures of knowledge.

The convergence of rules/game and narrative/book in children’s books is an accessible site of N. Katherine Hayles’ intermediation. While Hayles’ intermediation focuses on human-machine relationships and the digital, her term is pertinent even for pre-1900 game-books: “Perhaps most importantly, 'intermediation' also denotes mediating interfaces connecting humans with the intelligent machines that are our collaborations in making, storing, and transmitting informational processes and objects” (Mother 33). While these game-books may not be “intelligent machines,” they are interfaces that actively seek to structure (mediate) the reader’s relationship to knowledge. By asking the reader to become a player and enact the information the books convey, they illustrate the performative nature of childhood.

As Perry Nodelman suggests in The Hidden Adult, through children’s literature, the child learns to exhibit the childlikeness that adults desire and that children’s books “seem to conjure this sense of nostalgia [celebration of the childlike] in order to block
out the knowledge of (or acknowledgement of the knowledge of?) the actual complexity and uncertainty of childhood for both children and adults” (79). Examining children’s texts, and more specifically participation-oriented children’s texts, through the frame of Hayles’ intermediation allows us to see the “complexity and uncertainty” of the image of the child. These children’s game-books are a microcosm of the collision among the concerns of medium, of content, and of the various binaries that child readers master and then negotiate: child/adult, game/book, narrative/rules, knowledge/desire, and reader/player.

Narrative and play are the strongest connections between book and game, and each of the game-books analyzed here approaches games from a different narrative perspective; sometimes game rules are integrated into stories; other times the games exist side-by-side with narratives; some games use player’s previous knowledge of narrative to fuel player motivation; and for other games, narratives are built into the game play itself. The sampling of game-books illuminates the variety of relays among books, narratives, games, and players, breaking down the rigid divisions between these separate categories. It also suggests that the tradition of texts that offer representations of games (books about games or where games are played as part of the content) and the tradition of books that are games (physically involved in the game play) are intertwined, not separate, trajectories. Analyzing how books represent games and players alongside how those books become part of the game play are both integral to understanding how the child reader/player is shaped and the social functions she performs.
Book to Game-Books and Childlikeness: Active Readers & Narrative Play

By predicting and structuring user interaction, game-books open up a space for the reader to participate in as well as constraining the actions available to her. Doing so, they act as interfaces that mediate between the reader and the information the text provides (whether that means listing the rules of the game or presenting stories about people playing games). At the same time, these books (and the games they showcase) depend greatly on the reader’s willingness to participate within their limits and actively imagine the game. The reader plays an active part in creating the meaning of the game and in internalizing or negotiating its values. As Pierre Lévy indicates in *Becoming Virtual: Reality in the Digital Age*, even in the most traditional sense, reading involves a significant, mutual relationship between text and reader: “The space of meaning does not exist before the text is read. It is while moving through the text, mapping it, that we fabricate and actualize meaning…The text serves as a vector, a substrate, or pretext, for the actualization of our own mental spaces” (48-49). The child reader of game-books is depended upon to create a “space of meaning” and the texts often demonstrate the tension between exerting control over the reader and encouraging her to influence the game world and the text itself. Even those game-books that resist including narrative in order to impartially transmit rules often fail to entirely remove the opportunities for the reader to participate with the text; they cannot exert complete control over the way the games are played and the ways the reader becomes familiar with those games.

The reader is guided by the way the text positions the game and suggests the ways she might participate with it, but she can also provide her own alternatives. Whether she chooses to walk away from the book altogether, to “cheat” by reading in different ways or by subverting and altering the game rules, or to alter the intended
meaning by bringing her own knowledge to bear on the text, she plays an active part in the creation of textual meaning and in deciding on her relationship to the ideal child the text puts forth. Her resistance may be as simple as refusing to identify with the position she ought to embody or by enjoying the game in ways she is not supposed to (by purposefully losing, by creating different goals, etc.). These moments of resistance move her from passive recipient of the game’s ideals to participative performer of childlikeness that fulfills the players’ desires.

Game-books create systems of order and act as intermediaries between users and information. In his seminal study on play and games, *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga acknowledges the structuring nature of play: “it creates order, *is* order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection. Play demands order absolute and supreme. The least deviation from it ‘spoils the game’, robs it of its own character and makes it worthless” (10). Game-books set up the rules of the game, attempt to make the reader see the value of the game world, and ask the reader to participate on certain terms. Huizinga rightly notices that even the person who cheats has bought into the game world and its rules, but the person who walks away and refuses the text/game altogether is a spoil-sport, a non-player:

> The spoil-sport is not the same as the false player, the cheat; for the latter pretends to be playing the game and, on the face of it, still acknowledges the magic circle [i.e., the game world]. It is curious to note how much more lenient society is to the cheat than to the spoil-sport. This is because the spoil-sport shatters the play-world itself. (11)

The division between spoil-sport (non-player) and cheater rests in the person’s willingness to acknowledge the rules. With the game-book examples that follow, I am more interested in the way rules and game worlds are presented and how users then acknowledge and deal with them, rather than the ability of the user to refuse to play.
The child who walks away from a game-book and refuses its limitations on her agency is powerful, but she is also denied any influence in the game world and access to the skills or mastery it provides. Her performance of childlikeness remains unaltered or unchallenged by the game-book. Only when she agrees to the rules, becomes a player, and actively participates in the creation of the (real or imagined) game space do her actions matter to the textual negotiation of her identity as “child.”

Game-books offer the reader an opportunity to critically examine the child they present. Child characters and child readers are positioned as active collaborators with the text, similar to the positioning that Marah Gubar discusses with Golden Age children’s literature. Using Lewis Carroll’s work as an example, she notes that writing with an active reader in mind is almost a violent act: such literature "demands a great deal of imaginative exertion from child readers; it prods them into participating at a higher level of engagement. Taking someone who is used to being passive and forcing them to be creative is an aggressive act" (Gubar 119). Carroll’s aggression is not one of a digital form asking the reader to reach outside of the codex but one that forces readers use prior knowledge (that of primers and other texts) to make Carroll’s characters’ actions meaningful. The act of including intertextual references asks the reader to collaborate with the author and the text to create its significance.6 “How doth the little crocodile / Improve his shining tail” (Carroll 28) is meaningful by itself, but its meaning becomes more significant when the reader has already experienced Isaac Watt’s “Against Idleness and Mischief.”

Gubar demonstrates that the Golden Age authors’ willingness to include references to other works and cultural events inside children’s texts does not violate the
child subject by including adult knowledge that excludes her. Instead they invite her to collaborate with the text through her own knowledge and research by building and mastering external knowledge (creating a repertoire and set of conventions for future use). This trust in the reader leads to a feedback loop between text and child, where each iteration involves a new set of knowledge and experiences. The reader becomes a performer of childlikeness through mastery and selective use of knowledge, rather than a passive recipient of what the game-book presents as ideal:

Self-conscious about the fact that adult-produced stories shape children, [Golden Age writers] represented children as capable of reshaping stories, conceiving them as artful collaborators in the hope that—while a complete escape from adult influence is impossible—young people might dodge the fate of functioning as passive parrots. (Gubar 6)

Game-books for children participate in this same process of structuring but questioning the role of the child reader-player. While these game-books create rules and encourage correct participation, they also acknowledge as the Golden Age authors did, “the tremendous power that adults and their texts have over young people, while still allowing for the possibility that children—immersed from birth in a sea of discourse—can nevertheless navigate through this arena of competing currents in diverse and unexpected ways” (Gubar 32-33).

Books About Games

“Books about games” is a broad category and can indicate many different types of texts: those that include small scenes of characters playing games, those whose whole narrative is about playing a game (e.g., Jumanji), children’s periodicals that include games as content (riddles, word games, mazes, etc.), and texts whose function is to outline the rules of a game. Here I use it to refer to texts whose primary function is to transmit knowledge of game rules to readers. These books about games illustrate the
vast differences in the ways games are represented and in the relationships between the game and the child reader. There are three major approaches books about games take to encourage/discourage the reader to embody the game. Some of the books about games attempt to remove themselves from narrative and distance the reader from participating with the text itself—acting as a record of the rules rather than an embodiment of the game. A second type narratively describes games, asking the reader to imagine various characters participating in the games and transmitting game rules indirectly through story. Finally, the third type makes the child reader part of the narrative by using second person address to include her in the action. This spectrum of narrative engagement describes the complex continuum between book and game and also highlights the history of active reader-player participants in both creating game play and adding meaning to narrative.

Within my sample there are two basic divisions among books about games, those that focus on transmitting game rules and those that use narrative to show games in practice and leave the reader to discern the rules for herself. The difference between these two categories is their placement on the spectrum between story and game—the former have a less meaningful story in favor of setting up the game and the latter have more meaningful connections to an overarching narrative which embodies the game instead of convey its rules.

Some of the compendia of games for boys illustrate the ways the rule-based texts try to keep the categories of book and game separate. These compendia almost always include sections on athletic games and “minor” sports (badminton, riding, archery, etc.); often they have sections on science experiments and the care of
domestic animals; several of the books have sections for riddles, magic, playground games, and parlor games. These books have a tendency to transmit rules by listing actions or providing vague narratives rather than presenting a story that embodies the game play; they are more concerned with conveying the rules and laws of the sport rather than a visceral sense of how the game is played. They attempt to resist intermediation by refusing an exchange between the body and the text and to resist intertextuality by limiting themselves to clear lists of rules. Books in this category would include: John Aikin’s *The Boy’s Book of Sports and Games* (1851), *Every Boy’s Book of Games, Sports, and Diversions* (1852), William Clarke et al.’s *The Boy’s Own Book* (1880), Henry Chadwick’s *The Sports and Pastimes of American Boys* (1884), and J.G. Wood’s *The Boy’s Modern Playmate* (1891).

That many of the books about games for boys operate in this mode probably stems from the idea that “[t]he boy’s library is not considered complete without a Book of Sports. The little fellows like to have a printed authority for the laws of the game; and they take delight in reading descriptions of those games and amusements which afford them recreation in the intervals of labour and study” (Aikin iii, emphasis added). Narratively representing game play and asking the reader to participate in imaginatively embodying it does not carry the same “legal” authority as a straightforward book of rules. In order to enforce a strict sense of “the value of command, and the importance of subordination” (Pardon 2), these books try to dissociate themselves from story, embodiment, and feedback. They present the games as if they were played by faceless players who do not add any meaning to the game. Take for example this description of the game “Nine Holes” from *The Boy’s Book of Sports and Games*:
This game is played as well with leaden bullets as with marbles. They are to be bowled along a level course, at a board having arches cut in it, with numbers marked over each arch; viz., supposing there are eight arches, they may be numbered thus 2 0 5 1 0 4 3 0. If the bowler strikes the side of the arch, he loses his marble, but receives as many from the owner of the board as the number over the arch through which his marble passes. (Aikin 13)

While the narrative conveys the facts of the game, it does not present the game as if it was inhabited by real players. This cold third person approach keeps the reader focused not on play but on the rules themselves. The reader is not asked to supply any knowledge of the game, its history, or the reader’s associations or past experience with "Nine Holes."

"Nine Holes" could similarly be explained by a fictitious bowling match among Johnny, Peter, and Frank, or between "you" the reader and the other boys, or as a game with the ambiguous group "we." By choosing to refuse the story element of play, the book does not ask the reader to engage the game "Nine Holes" through imaginary world building and character creation. *The Boy’s Book of Sports and Games* does not encourage the reader to become a player who participates with the imaginative game world, but instead gives the reader the role of passive receiver of the rules. This posits the child reader as a vessel for the information transmitted by the book (one-way) instead of as a collaborator who transforms that information within a feedback loop with the text (intermediated, multidirectional).

This desire to remove the reader from direct participation and protect him from supplying his own knowledge is more greatly evident in George Pardon’s 1873 *Book of Manly Games for Boys*. The book goes so far as to omit both science and riddles in favor of physical activities, but each for different reasons. In the introduction, Pardon states,
In this volume I have purposely omitted subjects which, in my opinion, do not fairly come within its scope. Lads who really want to study Optics, Photography, Chemistry, and other recondite sciences, must read less meagre treatises than can be squeezed, between Riddles and Pegtop, into books like this. By aiming at too much we accomplish too little. (vi)

Although he suggests there is no room for rigorous science in the book, he makes no mention of also omitting the riddles and word games that science is often “squeezed” between. The riddles and word games actively designate the reader as a participant with the puzzles on the page. When the reader is asked to play with language, meaning becomes destabilized—the reader is asked to pull from his own knowledge and experience (individual, social, and communal) to provide a solution. These solutions often involve recognizing a clue as misleading or acknowledging the multiple meanings of words. Just as there is not enough space for rigorous science (i.e., to fully and completely explain the facts of the world to the child), there is no room for game play that asks the child to play with the book itself. To do so would destabilize the direct, rule-based control of knowledge the Book of Manly Games for Boys strives to provide. Trick answers and independent thinking lead to a questioning of the rules’ validity and an understanding of their dependence on context that the book cannot allow. In the end, it errs to the side of refusing to narratively embody games or allow play with language in order to more rigidly construct an obedient, rule-based knowledge that the child will passively accept.

While these books about games for boys often attempt to keep the book (record of rules) separate from the game (to be played after mastery of the book and without the text itself), they are not fully successful—often to give examples of play style the books must include a basic narrative about the game. Admittedly, these exceptions often happen in third person, which is a secondary attempt at resisting the narrative impulse
to both create characters and establish an imaginative world. The rules-based books about games also do not exert complete control over the reader’s ability to bring outside information and experience to bear on the rules the books provide. The associations the reader makes can lead to him questioning the books’ authority over the game, if his experience contradicts the information presented. For these kinds of books, however, the text is intended to transmit information instead of play a part in the game itself, and the reader is not invited to slip imaginatively between reader and player; he must “delight in reading” the game descriptions and hope to be able to play them one day, not join in as a player through the text’s narrative (Aikin iii, emphasis added). This desire and yet failure of rules-based books to completely foreclose reader participation is exemplified in the description of the game of “Tops” from Every Boy’s Book of Games, Sports, and Diversions:

The other amusement is to have an encounter. Two boys each with tops set them well spinning and then drive them against each other, if one top is struck down the owner of the second top wins…Two boys will often spin the same top, to do which they must stand at different sides of it. We have also seen one boy keep up two tops, but this is very difficult to accomplish. (13)

While the reader is not explicitly included and the characters are not given names or traits, there is a subtle invitation to imagine the battle of tops being played out. The reader can participate imaginatively in the scenario of keeping up two tops or spinning the same top as another boy, but he is not invited into the authority of the “we” who has seen the phenomenon happen. The participation here is so limited that it does not add to a meaningful encounter between reader and text. The reader is not really provided with a structure to imagine himself as a player, unlike the books that strive for narrative embodiment of games and instruction through story as their mode of operation.
Two compendia specifically for girls illustrate the more narrative style that the boys’ books about games might have utilized: Eliza Leslie’s 1846 *American Girl’s Book* and Emily Huntington Miller’s 1896 *Girls’ Book of Treasures*. *Treasures* is not explicitly a book about games, rather it has three sections about games. It interjects sections about in-door games, out-door games, and charades among its regular stories. This physical mixing of stories and game instruction places it in a middle ground between the boys’ compendia and the more explicitly narrative *American Girl’s Book*. It encourages the child to alternate between reader and player. It questions the rigid of the boundary between book and game; as standard narrative stories and narrated game rules exist in the same text, their juxtaposition invites the reader to see each through the lens of the other. The weaving back and forth between the sections suggests that games and stories occupy the similar spaces in texts for children. *Treasures* emphasizes the blurred boundary between story and game by narrating the process of games instead of giving a list of instructions: “Two little girls come in to the room where the others have gathered. One pretends to be a doctor, the other a somnambulist or seeress, who knows more than ordinary people” (Miller et al. 16). The little girls then engage in guessing games with particular strictures and rituals for their responses, while the audience tries to guess how the “seeress” knows what object the doctor is holding. The game instruction is folded into a narrative about the little girls and the narrative provides a sense of significance for their actions. The player’s narrative investment in the game (the tricking of the audience into believing in the power of the “seeress”) indicates that by becoming a player, the reader can gain access to adult control and manipulation. She should follow the model that *Treasures* gives her for the game, but she can have
power over the audience through her command over the game itself and the objects she chooses to perform the game with. Her desire to play the game is a product of her engagement with the story and is influenced by her associations with magic, the doctor, and the seeress. Her desire to participate with the text (both by reproducing the game and by imagining the scenario the book presents) depends on her understanding of the game as a powerful illusion, the doctor as a character with intellectual power, and the seeress as a slightly taboo, exotic figure. If she can make intertextual connections with those narrative elements, the reader’s reasons to embody and comply with the game rules Treasures provides increase. The more integrated story and game become, the more the reader becomes an active player with the text, a performer and collaborator rather than a passive container of textual knowledge.

The American Girl’s Book exemplifies the more narrative-centered type of game compendium. Whereas Treasures has separate game sections but concerns itself mostly with stories and articles, The American Girl’s Book is a true collection of games. It consists of “sports and pastimes,” “plays with toys,” “little games with cards,” “riddles,” and “amusements.” The narratives of these games illustrate something that rules alone do not; the games are deeply invested in promoting community participation and good consumer behaviors. Through story, recitation, group interaction, and exchanging of items, these games put forth an image of the girl player as a deft consumer who learns the rules of her community and then uses those rules to form a base for her own power. They also more directly illustrate the “transactions between bodies and texts as well as between different forms of media” that forms the core of intermediation (Hayles, Mother 7). Girl players physically embody the game and are asked to use their knowledge of
their communities and their experiences to give meaning to the games they play together. Reader-players are meant to use the text as a prop, a guide, and a source of various scripts, making the textual object itself at least tangentially necessary to the game.

The reader of *The American Girl’s Book* is meant to feel like a collaborator with the text from the very first page of games. It begins with the important word “We”: “We will imagine five little girls engaged in this play, and their names may be Fanny, Lucy, Mary, Ellen, and Jane” (Leslie 22). From the outset the reader is included in the process of imagination as part of the “We” with the author. While the game world the reader is to imagine is limited by the text’s authoritative statement of “will imagine” and its assignment of names and roles to the girls, the reader is at least brought into the text as a participant by picturing the story world. The “We” also indicates that the reader is established as an authority over the other little girls; she is given the opportunity to refuse identification with their position and to develop a sense of mastery and superiority over any childish behaviors the narrative might assign the five characters. The reader is freed to become both the imaginative outside collaborator (with guidance from the text of course) by internalizing, refusing, reusing, and rewriting the game and the sampler of the performances of child identity the characters create by embodying the characters and games as they were written.

*The American Girl’s Book* acknowledges its overall style choices in its set up for the “Sports and Pastimes” section:

Some of these plays require a more minute explanation than others. We will suppose a company of very young girls engaged in them; and, designating each child by her name, we will give a short sketch, in the dramatic or dialogue form, of what may be said or done on the occasion, whenever we
think such an illustration will answer the purpose better than mere description. (Leslie 21)

From the beginning, the reader is given the rules of play, not just for playing the games in the book, but for playing the book itself as a collaborative mental game—she is set the task of imagining the company of girls and their actions in the games they play. Her enjoyment of the book and her ability to learn the games hinges on her ability and willingness to participate in building a rich imaginative world where the book’s games are enacted. Her inclusion as a collaborator here (part of “we”), however, also underscores her exclusion in the same paragraph. While she is allowed to imagine the relationships presented she has no control over the “short sketch” the author gives, its form, or whether the sections need more illumination than “mere description.” The “we” works against the reader’s collaboration in these instances as it applies only to the author’s power over the text and not the reader’s imaginative engagement in playing with the scenarios she is provided. Gubar highlights this tension in reference to Golden Age writers and their representations of child storytellers:

Thus, these writers rarely characterize child authors as independent agents who effortlessly produce original work. Instead, child storytellers function as ingenious collaborators, who are far more likely than traditional narrators to describe their experiences in first person plural (“we’)... The use of a communal voice therefore reflects how deeply the child narrator draws not just on the help of her peers but also on the creative property of adults. (42)

_The American Girl’s Book’s “we” simultaneously implies the child reader is meant to feel like a collaborator in the creation of these games and reveals the restrictions the text places on her participation and the “creative property” that _The American Girl’s Book_ represents. It does, however, trust the reader to understand the games by imaginatively participating with and creating the story in her own mind rather than memorizing a list of
instructions. It acknowledges the importance of embodied experience to meaningful
play and learning, rather than focusing on simple transmission of facts.

_The American Girl’s Book_ depicts the child player similarly to the child storyteller
that Gubar identifies “as highly socialized, hyperliterate subjects who work with grown-
ups, peers, and preexisting texts in composing their stories” (7). She goes on to state
the importance of “the first person plural” as a gauge of “how deeply [child narrators] are
embedded in communities, surrounded by other children, adults, and adult-produced
texts that inspire (and sometimes impede) their own forays into fiction” (Gubar 7).
Authors use the first person plural in order to represent child figures as powerfully
connected to their communities and as “artful dodgers,” who can manage adult authority
and piece together their own meaning. The child reader becomes aware of her own
performance of childish behaviors by experiencing first person narrative and
understanding the web of intertextual relationships the child characters call on. _The
American Girl’s Book_ participates in this representation of the child character as a user
of adult commodities, positions, and subjectivities to her own ends. The reader is meant
to imaginatively play along by identifying with the scenarios the book has set up and
inhabiting the little girls it presents. The child reader becomes a player of childhood by
identifying with, questioning, and redeploying the character models she encounters.
Game-books (and children’s magazines, novels, video games, etc.) allow her to develop
an awareness of and test various elements of childlikeness, gage their effects, and add
them to her repertoire as tools for negotiating her position with adult authority.

The significance of each game presented in _The American Girl’s Book_ depends
upon the child reader’s level of understanding of communities and social situations.
Take for example the game “Lady Queen Anne”: the game requires the girl who is “it” (Fanny) to scrutinize the other players to identify who possesses the ball. Once Fanny has decided who has the ball, she approaches that girl (Lucy) and repeats “Lady Queen Anne, who sits in the sun, as fair as a lily, as brown as a bun, she sends you three letters and prays you’ll read one” (Leslie 23). Lucy replies “I cannot read one, unless I read all” and Fanny responds “Then pray, Miss Lucy, deliver the ball” (Leslie 23). This ritual is the same for each round of game play. If Lucy has the ball, she becomes “it,” leaves the room, and the other players choose someone to hide the ball again; if however, Fanny has guessed incorrectly, she must leave the room and come back in to guess again. The call-and-response game is meaningful both as a game (the object is to figure out who has the ball and issue the correct command to obtain it) and as a story with social history (refusing to read the letters of the queen or accepting the duty of reading the letters; historical English class relationships; etc.) and social purpose (teaching the importance of correct language, of the exchange of commodities, and of community decision making). The child figure created by this game is complex. She is trusted to invest the game with her own meaning—what does Queen Anne mean to her? She is also expected to follow the rules and patterns of the game without breaking them (not becoming a spoil-sport). She is depicted as having the power within a community of girls to choose who holds the ball and how to best hide it—the narrative is silent about this process, allowing the reader to imagine the game and play it as she will within the boundaries of its structure.

In *The American Girl's Book*, most of the games in “Sports and Pastimes” ask girls to memorize and recite rhymes to each other and elicit the appropriate responses.
Games like “Lady Queen Anne” have elements of recitation and movement which teach a process of call-and-response and require the correct question and the correct response to trigger behaviors. These call-and-response behaviors reinforce both a sense of community and the boundaries of one’s social roles. If a girl learns to respond correctly, she finds herself advanced in the game community (more likely to win), and in the imaginary community of the game, she exerts more savvy control of the game commodity (the ball). The story The American Girl’s Book creates to explain “Lady Queen Anne” focuses on the game as a collaboration among the players—giving the reader an understanding of their positions as character-performers subject to implicit and explicit rules if they want access to what they desire (to win).\(^8\)

While these games do instill rigid structure and formal manners, they also implicate the players in communities of exchange. One player has the desired object, and it is passed from girl to girl, implicitly preparing the girls for negotiating their community and dealing with commodity exchange. These games enforce the necessity for the correct response to commercial exchange through language rituals. In “Robin’s Alive,” the game is introduced like this: “This is played by the children sitting in a row, with a small lighted stick or a rod that burns slowly; which had better be held with great care, that there may be no danger of setting anything on fire. Fanny, being at the head of the row, takes the lighted stick in her hand, and blows out the flame, so that there remains only a spark, or a dull redness on the top of the stick” (Leslie 24). Then the girls pass it around and whoever ends up with the stick when it goes out (similar to hot potato) is admonished with the threat, “your mouth shall be bridled, your back shall be saddled to send you home to the king’s Whitehall” (Leslie 25). Then she (Mary, in this
case) is blindfolded, made to lie down, and the other girls put an object on top of her reciting “Heavy, heavy, what lies over you?” (Leslie 25); she is forced to guess what the object is based on how its weight and if she is correct, then play starts over again. If she guesses incorrectly, the girls pile another object on top of her and again repeat, “Heavy, heavy, what lies over you?” Despite the dangerous implications of the ritual threat of bridling/riding and of physically piling things on top of a blindfolded girl, the game demonstrates the power of correct response to yield positive results and of the social rituals that accompany language rituals in general.

The presence of narrative ritual patterns further connects story and game. The spoken portions of “Robin’s Alive” imply a story about the actions the girls are taking part in; game actions (passing the stick, placing objects on the girl) become driving elements behind the narrative process of the game, even while the game is being presented narratively to the reader, who is then expected enact the behaviors she read about. This constant movement between reading and playing reinforces the convergence between the two categories as ways of knowing. In both reading and play, story and action become valuable ways of evaluating your position within a community and your relationship to the goals you have been presented with. The game is not without authorial control as the narrator intrudes with the didactic admonition that the rod “had better be held with great care” (Leslie 24). The book presents the ritual patterns and social context as important to the player (who wants to follow the rules to win the game) and to the reader (who can understand ritual and context as elements of a performance that meets social goals).
The riddle sections of the game compendia also present complex relationships among reader, text, and game. In these games, the reader is automatically assumed to be a participant—she is assigned the task of solving the riddle (answering the text’s question). These riddle pages are handled in two different ways, each implying a different relationship between text and reader, game and player. Often in the texts for boys or for mixed company, the solutions to the riddles are listed at the back of the book. In *The American Girl’s Book*, however, the answers are listed directly under the riddle. Leslie notes:

*We believe that few of our young friends will be displeased at the plan we have adopted of inserting the solution immediately after every riddle. It will save the trouble of turning continually over the leaves and searching out the corresponding numbers . . . When there are several children, each in turn can take the book and read aloud to the others a page or two of the riddles, while they, not seeing the answers, endeavour to guess them.* (174)

This change reinforces the community play-style, making the riddles only valuable to groups of players. Individually, it would be hard to solve the riddles and not notice the answers. The riddle sections then provide a point of entry to understanding how the material construction of the text changes the way the information is accessed and its significance (i.e., the way the text acts as an interface between reader and information). Riddles with answers in the back lend themselves to solitary activity and individual thinking. Flipping back and forth between the riddles and the answers with a group without reading the text aloud would create a lot of down time with each person waiting upon the others to discover the solution. Placing the answers beneath the riddle excludes the reader-player from playing alone without introducing another artifice for controlling the information (like a sheet of paper slid over the answers). Thus, a seemingly simple change to the way the text is organized changes the way knowledge
is conceived of—in this case as a singular activity or as a group activity where communal knowledge is more highly valued than individual knowledge.⁹

A specific example of privileging games as a communal activity appears in *Guess Me* (1895), which provides the answers to its puzzles directly after the puzzles appear: “418. Why is a huntsman like juvenile card-players? —His game mostly runs on *all-fours*” (Planche and Cruikshank 23).¹⁰ If conundrums are meant to be solved alone, then this form of game-book would have poor results because the answer is readily available (in fact, almost impossible to miss). If, however, riddles and conundrums are meant to be experienced communally through a process of read and response, that suggests a different relationship to knowledge acquisition. One style suggests that children are meant to generate knowledge alone while the other suggests that children should expect to come up with answers together in a process of dialogue. The value of knowledge and how it is formed is transmitted through the way the “rules” of the game are presented by the book. As the method of presentation of the game changes, so does the relationship among reader-book-game-player, and what is at stake are the permissible and valued ways of knowing and understanding the world.¹¹

What these divergent examples have outlined so far is not a linear history of how book becomes game; these different styles of instructional game manuals do not follow a model of development that starts with the reader alone and moves us to a model of extremely free and powerful player. Rather, they illustrate the ways the books’ presentations of games alter the relationship between the reader and the game, the reader and the text. They provide us with a sense of competing and compatible traditions of game-books. Non-compendium game-books also create a slippage
between reader and player, asking the text’s user to negotiate multiple subject positions. These books give up their absolute authority over game rules by inviting the reader into a narrative relationship with the game, similar to the “we” of *The American Girl’s Book*. One example is L. Valentine et al.’s *Aunt Louisa’s Alphabet Book* (1872). Because of the brief nature of the entries in the text, it is easy to assume the alphabet book is not attempting narrative embodiment of each game, but solely transmitting game definitions and rules. However, *Aunt Louisa’s Alphabet Book* is often invested in narrating the games it uses as examples—asking the reader to imagine the game in action, even if it is not asking her to play the game itself. Patricia Crain acknowledges the importance of narrative to alphabet books post 1750 in her book *The Story of A*:

> Here is an overt story, generated by aggressive verbs, characters for a child-reader to identify with, and the presence of a vivid, yearning narrative voice… As it comes to the surface, narrative makes manifest or brings into existence other elements of the alphabetical environment, among them hunger and strife, comedy and satire. Narrative thus permits the alphabet to express as well as to contain and regulate the passions. (65)

While Crain is concerned mostly with what narrative means to the alphabet and literacy, her assertion that narrative opens up a space for expression, for identification, and as a point of entry for the child reader to engage with the text holds true for *Aunt Louisa’s Alphabet Book*. The narrative provides the possibility of identification with the characters through its strong language and description. It invites the reader into the game even as the alphabet book format provides a strict structure regulating what kind of information can be shared. The entries must be short and must be categorized in alphabetical order. But within that, the reader can participate by collaborating with the narrative actions of the characters in the book.
Aunt Louisa’s Alphabet Book assigns each letter of the alphabet to a specific game and then transmits a sense of how that game is played. For example take the text for the letter S: “SHUTTLECOCK is a very pretty game. Milly can keep it up for a hundred times; but Annie is not so clever at it. Shuttlecock can be played by two as well as by one. You see John and George are playing together, and it is rather a better game than the single one” (Valentine, Evans, and Kronheim 52). This snippet sets up the basic concept of the game and, although it employs only a bit of narrative about Milly, Annie, John, and George, it does ask the reader to create an imaginative game world. The narrative authorizes the child reader to go beyond the rules of the game and place value judgments on some game play as “better” than others. The reader has to imagine the scenario and its characters to make sense of what the text presents. The use of “You see” explicitly places the reader into an evaluative, participative position, and then the reader can take issue with its obvious privilege of communal vs. individual play. The text is also supported by pictures of the children following through with the actions described. Also, since these four characters recur throughout the alphabet, they create an implicit narrative arc of the children’s activities. While the reader is not actively prompted to transform herself into a player (imagine herself alongside the children), she is invited to evaluate and test the positions of the child characters as a mental collaborator with the text.

Aunt Louisa’s Alphabet Book is not consistent in its solicitation of the reader-as-player through narrative engagement. Several of its other entries remove the narrative element of play and serve only to inform the reader about a game rather than invite the reader to imaginatively experience it: “QUOITS is a very old game. Greek and Roman
boys used to play at it, and the old English people loved it also. But very little children cannot play at quoits; they must wait till they are big enough to do so" (Valentine, Evans, and Kronheim 50). While it includes a picture that vaguely gives a sense of the game, the action of the game remains unexplained. This shift away from specific narrative with identifiable characters discourages the reader from relating to the book as a collaborator. The book, in this case, does not provide enough description of the game for the reader to participate in imagining how the game would be enacted. The biggest possibility for engagement here is for the reader to use the moment in time shown in the picture and make up her own game rules to match it. However, that game would have little official relationship to the one presented by the text itself.

Other books about games are even more invested in narrative as a way of engaging the reader as a player and performer of childlikeness. Books like *Fireside Amusements* (1886) set up their instructions for games inside a larger narrative about groups of children (and families) playing games. Gubar notes the importance of authors representing children in communal activities: "In choosing to model his pictures around this communal activity, [Lewis] Carroll implicitly characterizes the child as a sociable and socialized being, involved with adults and enmeshed in their culture. Indeed, his albums are full of photographs of the cultivated child" (102). These game-books help the reader understand her position as embedded in a network of social information and prompt her to bring her own experiences to the text. *Fireside Amusements* asks the reader to become a player by including her in the narrative, "What shall we do to amuse ourselves, and keep our fingers warm? Oh we know that very well! . . . Tell me, girls and boys, tell me honestly, if you were ever happier than on a cold, dreary winter evening,
surrounded by a company of your young companions?” (Chambers and Chambers 3-4, emphasis added). This introduction of “we” without specifying the children characters it includes, implicitly calls on the reader as a participant in the creation of an imaginative game world where the events the authors are writing about will take place. The authorial voice then distances itself from the reader and the child characters by asking them to respond to him and by saying “you” and “your young companions.” The reader is meant to imagine herself in a room of her “young companions” and work through the games as an imaginative participant. _Fireside Amusements_ consciously chooses stock characters and stock names (e.g., Miss Piano, Mamma, the leader, the youngest) to allow the reader to replace those figures with the populace of her game world. The reader, then, moves between the functions of reader-interpreter and player-creator. She is allowed to substitute characters of her own imagination into the scenarios provided.

By engaging in this imaginative play with the text, the reader is made aware of the characters as performers of childhood that the reader-player can use as avatars to reach certain social goals. The text cannot always depend on the reader to identify with the characters as it sets them up or to willingly become part of the “we” that it creates. Readers can refuse to identify with narrators and stock characters, sometimes choosing to feel superior to the character or grouping they are intended to embrace. Often these moments of refused identification come from a conflict between the knowledge the child reader-player possesses already and the system of knowledge set up by the text. Here, the reader may decide not to imagine herself as part of the “we” enjoying a winter evening of games because she does not find the narrative compelling enough to motivate her to imaginatively participate. She may also find that the text’s stock
characters are still too specific for her to comfortably imagine herself interacting with and she might feel excluded from any role other than observer of the game rules.

Books about games have complicated relationships with readers. Those that focus exclusively on transmitting rules also exclude the reader from collaborating with the text and participating in the imaginative play that narrative provides. Those books about games that include narrative show how fundamental the narrative is to providing context for game rules and desire for readers to participate with the text itself. While the book does not become integral to the game play in these books about games, it does act as a structuring interface that privileges specific types of knowledge and certain performances of childhood. By leaving spaces for the reader to become an imaginative player, whether through language play, use of “we” and “you” to address the reader, or through rich description of child characters, these game-books teach both mastery and manipulation of childlikeness. The reader learns the skills of the player, the consequences of using those skills, and how to negotiate rules to generate her desired outcome. Then she is expected to enact the knowledge she has gained by playing the actual game or using her new understanding of social rituals to manipulate outcomes of community interactions to her advantage. Understanding how these historical books about games structure reader experiences can help us identify the similar ways current, multimodal children’s texts invite readers to collaborate and become savvy intermediated users.

Books As Games

Thus far, my analysis has focused on the implicit relationships between book and game through narrative and structure. Home Games for Little Girls (1870) is an example where the physical book becomes a necessary game play component and supplies
minimalist directions for playing the game. This particular book has six separate games: “A Game of Croquet,” “Game of the Spider and the Fly,” “Game of Pearl Fisheries,” “Game of Falconry,” “Game of Fishing,” and “Game of Naval Engagement” (McLoughlin 2). These games are interesting because the instructions are offered within a narrative framework. For the “Game of Croquet,” the directions read:

The scene which this picture represents is a country home on the banks of a beautiful river. City friends have come on a visit and have brought with them a game of Croquet. You can initiate the game on this little board by throwing two dice . . . When one person's button comes on a number already occupied, he moves that button back one number. Continue around the field until you arrive home. (McLoughlin 1)

The directions and the game board invite the reader to imagine herself in the environment and, as such, collaborate in imaginative world building and participate physically with the book itself. The pages of the book are used as the space for reader to become a player and the narrative encourages that shift. These game-books use narrative to mediate the child’s position between reader and gamer. The narratives that transmit the game rules in Home Games are not necessary; the directions could easily be given in a list. However, because of the dual nature of game-book, the narrative reminds the reader that she is not only a player, but she is interacting with a codex text and, thus, also a reader and interpreter of her journey. The narrative provides a context for and a desire to play; the selection of the book as medium creates expectations that the reader is supposed to imaginatively participate with the text and not simply perform the actions the rules demand.

One of the six games in Home Games refuses to follow this narrative model and depends on mostly the reader to create context from the picture and rules. “Naval Engagement” includes brief instructions with only a bit of imaginative instruction; it
depends mostly on the game board illustration to provide the game with a sense of visual narrative. Switching between modes of narrative/book and game/play within one text asks the user to continually renegotiate her role as reader-interpreter-imaginer and player-creator-actor. Furthermore, games like the “Game of Croquet” lend themselves to creating imaginatively immersive settings and player roles, which affect the meaning of who wins and how she wins (Is she the city friend bringing the game to the country? How is she treated by the others? What is the nature of the labor dynamics at play? The visual design of the board and characters indicates specific class designations). The narrative set up of “Game of Croquet” changes the way the players relate to one another as participants in the text and as tokens on the game board. “Naval Engagement” does not invite the players as readily to think of themselves as readers and producers of an imaginative role to inhabit. It does provide tokens as avatars for the reader, and she has the ability to invest some significance in those tokens to deepen the game’s meaning. The child reader can use her existing knowledge of the specific class and gender characteristics presented and the various histories that come with the game’s connection to naval warfare to make choices about who she wants to play and how she is willing to play.¹²

A more recent example, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory: A Game* (1978) functions similarly to *Home Games*. *Charlie* is mostly game board and a small bit of narrative. The game lends meaning to players’ actions by investing itself with the narrative meaning of the Roald Dahl book—drawing on players’ web of cultural knowledge to enhance the game experience. Unlike *Home Games*, the narrative does
not serve to establish game rules, but to support player desire. The game’s back cover claims,

Now, fans of Roald Dahl’s classic *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* can pick up a Golden Ticket and come along with Willy Wonka and the cards of Adventure as they lead players through the delights and hazards of *The Charlie and the Chocolate Factory Game*. Become Augustus Gloop and disappear in the chocolate river . . . But hit a Wonka “Switch” space and you too may become Our Hero Charlie Bucket and win the Chocolate Factory. All the characters of the beloved bestseller are here, including the crazy little Oompa-Loompas. It is a game that embodies as much as possible the fun and flavor of the book itself. (Sackson and Dahl)

This description conflates the Roald Dahl book, the game, the characters, and the player. The player is invested with desire to play the game (motivation) by reading the original book. She is (supposedly) so moved by her love for the characters that she wants to embody them (i.e., “Become Augustus Gloop”). The characters have meaning insofar as the player was a reader in the past. Then, the game’s pitch shifts from the narrative of Roald Dahl’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* to the game’s version of *Charlie* where the player can “hit a Wonka ‘Switch’ space,” a concept that does not exist in the original book. The switch spaces make sense not because the player was a reader but because the player has experience with game conventions. This movement between reader and player exemplifies that the child’s past experiences as a reader has an effect on the richness of the game world and the player’s motivation to help “embod[y] as much as possible the fun and flavor of the book itself” (Sackson and Dahl back cover). Game as embodiment of book and narrative suggests a deep connection between these two ways of knowing and mediating information. The book element provides imaginative desire and the game element provides embodiment and motion, but both offer (especially when combined) points of access to cultural values and processes of meaning-making.
Charlie is an example of the importance of both intermediation and intertextuality in arbitrating the meaning of childhood. The text assumes that its player is an intertextual subject in order to create the desire to play and to provide the context that makes the game world significant. The text also has consequences for the real and imagined body of the child. She is at once supposed to perform physical actions (moving on the game board), make mental connections (giving the game context and meaning), and displace her physical body with the game piece and the game piece (avatar) with the imagined Dahl character (previous knowledge). While her participation might not be informed by all of these elements every time (perhaps she has never experienced the Dahl book or she refuses to think of her game piece as a story character), the game-book itself acts as an example of the importance of intermediation and intertextuality to participatory texts.

My next example, Rambles Through Our Country: An Instructive Geographical Game for the Young (1881), is a book that is not used as a game board but as a supplemental text to a map (supposedly the reader will have one handy to act as a game board). Each player takes a “counter” to represent her and travels across the map with the others by spinning a “teetotum.” The number on the spinner relates to a geographical blurb in the book about the location on the map. The game seems painfully boring and, unless the player is deeply invested in the geographical landmarks of the United States, the only advantage to reading out the blurbs at is the occasional special direction that allows the player move her counter farther along the map. The game is predicated on the enjoyment of learning geographical facts, but its form is interesting. It asks the child to “read” the codex in an unnatural way, consulting only
those pages that correspond with the number on the spinner at any given time. That means that every time the game is played, it is different and every time the book is “read,” it is read in a different sequence.

*Rambles* blurs the line between book and game by altering the way the codex is accessed and the way knowledge is produced. Normally knowledge is gained from a book by reading in sequence and not in spurts. On the whole, books that act as games disrupt the importance of sequential progression (the same is true for *Charlie or Home Games* where the turning of pages in order is not essential to meaning-making).

*Rambles*, a travel game, has no real sense of narrative like *Home Games* does, but it does come in book form, which implies a (somewhat) linear arc from beginning to end and sets up the expectation that there is some kind of narrative to be discovered. The game does make overtures at reader-player participation beyond following the rules by occasionally directly asking questions: “67. **Three Sisters**: Is the give to a group of peaks about eleven thousand feet high. Do any of our players know of any other sister of equal height?” (Warren et al. 38, emphasis original). It also employs mini-narratives in some entries to impart environmental facts about the nation and describe how U.S. citizens interact with their home country. These mini-narratives reconnect the form to its roots as a book but are tangential to the actual game play (i.e., for the most part, the narratives do not affect the movement on the board). In this book-game, the child shuffles back and forth from reader to player similar to the movement in the book about games, *Girls’ Book of Treasures*. The child is expected to both interpret the text and to physically/mentally react to the game world it creates. The disruption of the questions directed toward reader-players requires the child to add knowledge to the game and
build on that knowledge with the other players. In games like *Rambles*, we see early examples of texts privileging collective knowledge as a worthwhile pursuit. Much like *St. Nicholas* asks its contributors to discover information using observation and gossip from others, *Rambles* asks players to learn from their symbolic crossing of the map and from the travel experience of other players.

Later iterations of books used as games include *Each Peach Pear Plum* (1979), which is loosely related to the *I Spy* books, and *I Unpacked My Grandmother’s Trunk* (1983), which is a spoken word game put into book form. The game in *Each Peach Pear Plum* is not explicitly clear, and it does not have an obvious set of rules like the other game-books. It suggests that the reader might search for the character the text names, but it does not explicitly tell her what to find. The only preparation that tells the reader about the game is the single instruction: “In this book, / with your little eye, / take a look, / and play ‘I-spy’” (Ahlberg and Ahlberg i). The rest of the book has a rhyming narrative where the primary character for each page is connected to the character the child is supposed to search for. Then the hidden character becomes the main character for the next page. For example, “Cinderella on the stairs / I spy the Three Bears” (Ahlberg and Ahlberg 7) makes the child search for the Three Bears hidden in a window. Then the next page says, “Three Bears out hunting / I spy Baby Bunting” (Ahlberg and Ahlberg 9). The bears are obvious in the foreground and the reader has to search the background for the baby bassinet. *Each Peach Pear Plum* can only function as a game if the child brings in her prior knowledge of characters (what counts as Baby Bunting?) or has assistance from adults in building that knowledge as she plays. For the uninitiated child who has no adult help with the game-book, it uses the illustrations and
the repetitive patterning of the pages (secondary character becomes next page’s primary character) to help the child build mastery over the knowledge. So even though *Each Peach Pear Plum* is more book than game, it still performs some of the same functions of creating mastery and fostering manipulation (the child can then play “I spy” for other characters and items not mentioned by the text) as the books about games like *The American Girl’s Book*.

Like *Each Peach Pear Plum*, *I Unpacked My Grandmother’s Trunk* takes the form of a picture book. But instead of developing the game from the book by allowing the reader to participate and define the game, *I Unpacked My Grandmother’s Trunk* starts with a familiar game and then destroys any sense of playfulness and participation by statically inscribing it. It takes a traditional memory-based word game and reworks it into a linear narrative that no longer has any possibilities for substitution by the reader. While the book purports to be “a picture book game,” the book interferes with traditional game play and does not create slippage between reader and player. Instead of reader and player roles being utilized in the text simultaneously, the user is either reader or player, never both. Supposedly, “If using this book for the game, players should first go through the book, then close it and play the game from memory” (Hoguet 1). Putting this dialogue-based, memory-ritual game into book form removes the spontaneity of word play and differentiated vocabulary of the actual game. The book does not call on the reader to imagine a game world or a narrative context, but to participate in rote memorization. The book does not seem necessary to the game at all—often defeating the purpose of the game altogether. The reader of the book must put it away before she can proceed with the game, which creates a stark division in purpose between the
narrative list of stuff in the trunk from the book and the communal, witty, bantering conversation of the original verbal game. *I Unpacked My Grandmother’s Trunk* represents the moment where the book fails to use game to increase participation and collaboration. *I Unpacked My Grandmother’s Trunk* shares more in common with the boys’ games compendia, which only allow for game rules and try to keep narrative separate from game play. Here the game is only intermediated and participative once the reader is outside the book itself. The reader of the book is expected to passively memorize information rather than provide her own elements in the rhyme. She becomes a player only if she adapts the rule of the game and begins to spontaneously substitute her own items (refusing the items that are depicted in the book itself). The narrative in the book short-circuits the desire to play the game because it violates the generative nature of the rhyme game rules, placing the strict, narrow structure of the book into irreconcilable conflict with the playfulness of the game. The reader’s ability to exert choice in *I Unpacked My Grandmother’s Trunk* is curtailed, and she cannot proceed as a player without violating the rules of the game (cheating), refusing to play the game through memorization, or setting the book aside entirely, thus removing herself from a meaningful relationship to the text.

**Game-Books: Narrative, Rules, and Playing the Child**

Both books “about games” and “as games” indicate that the relays between book and game often depend on the engagement between reader and narrative. The categories of book and game are not mutually exclusive, nor do all game-books invoke the same process to ask the reader to become a player. In his book *Half-Real*, Jesper Juul makes a case for the importance of both narrative and rules (specifically in video games):
That the rules of a game are real and formally defined does not mean that the player’s experience is also formally defined. However, the rules help create the player’s informal experience. Though the fictional worlds of games are optional, subjective, and not real, they play a key role in video games. The player navigates these two levels, playing video games in the half-real zone between the fiction and the rules. (202)

Juul’s comment pertains just as much to nineteenth century game-books as it does to current video games. The reader negotiates between the narrative (fueling her desire to play, giving actions context, and adding meaning to her participation) and the game rules/game world (structuring her encounters and limiting the range of available options). The game-books exemplified here employ different levels of balance between narrative and rules, some erring on the side of structure over context and some more concerned with story than allowing the reader to engage with the game world. If the point of the rules is to “add meaning and enable actions by setting up differences between potential moves and events” (Juul 19), then the point of the narrative is provide a context and extend an invitation to the reader-player to collaborate with the text.

Game-books are just one example of how texts encourage readers to perform childlikeness and participate in the development of the childlike identity. Each of these game-books was purposefully structured to guide the child reader into specific actions and each privileges a different kind of knowledge and social meaning. In doing so, they struggle with fundamental "questions of desire, as well as questions of knowledge: what children or other childlike beings want and whether or not it is wise to want it; also, what adults want children to be (or to seem)” (Nodelman 79-80). Studying both the material structure of each text and its content together help to illuminate how it frames the child and the ways the child is allowed to become a collaborator in creating textual meaning. As Gubar notes, these texts for children acknowledge “the belated nature of the child’s
subjectivity—the fact that young people are born into a world in which stories about who they are (and what they should become) are already in circulation before they can speak for themselves” (6). These games-books allow the child to develop mastery over skills the texts deem important (how to play, how to follow rules, how to win, how to interact with others) and learn to manipulate those skills to her purposes. She learns physical and educational skills (using a map, counting spaces, reading narrative, identifying pictures, making intertextual connections) and mental skills (imagining and manipulating the game world, decoding social values and behaviors, testing the reactions to different performances of childhood). Once she has mastered these skills, these texts serve as testing grounds for the child to manipulate the rules and see tweak her performance of childlikeness to reach her goals (how much is she allowed to cheat? Can she cheat more if she pretends to misunderstand? Must she follow the rules to win the game? Can she repurpose the game or the narrative to help in other situations?). How the child reader-player is represented and how she is expected to interact with game-books show a great deal of ambivalence over what knowledge and skills the child should control; these game-books represent children as needing the guidance and skill-building the structures provide but, through narrative and mode of address, also as powerful collaborators using adult materials and working in communities to generate and question knowledge.

Historically there has been an important relationship among all of these categories (book/game-reader/player) that affects the way the child is represented and the kind of knowledge available to her. Understanding the historical tension among the great variety of game-books and how they structure their relationship to the reader
helps us develop a framework for discussing the many children’s texts that borrow game elements. Even these early game-books are intermediated: involving “complex transactions between bodies and texts as well as between different forms of media” (Hayles, *Mother 7*). Reintroducing the body into a relationship with the text is important. The information in these texts is far from neutral; the ways the reader’s body is called upon and implicated in the text itself and the ways her knowledge and experience is used as a network to create meaning from these game-books is significant to the fragmented ideal child these texts represent. While the reader of these books may not become digitally represented (as information or through an avatar) as Hayles discusses, the reader’s body is still called into question in the ways the game-books ask her to participate—as a learner of rules, as an imaginative spectator or as a part of “we.” The ways knowledge and cultural values are encoded and transmitted, the ways these texts are formed, and the ways the child is asked to physically use them are all integral to understanding the performances of childhood they create. The boundaries represented by these books (book/game, reader/player, child/adult, subordinate/powerful, narrative/rules, etc.) are useful but unstable, and this instability tells us just as much about the relationship of text and user as the categories themselves do.

The reader has always been a participant with the text. To recall the work of Pierre Lévy: “The space of meaning does not exist before the text is read. It is while moving through the text, mapping it, that we fabricate and actualize meaning . . . we help erect the landscape of meaning that inhabits us. The text serves as a vector, a substrate, or pretext, for the actualization of our own mental spaces” (*Becoming* 48-49). The way the text works as a “pretext” (Lévy *Becoming* 49) and the kind of meaning that
the text privileges are important, but so is the network of knowledge the reader brings to the text. Perhaps the multiple levels of participation that the reader is offered by the disparate texts I have presented here are one of the reasons that the full variety of game-books still persist. Each different textual iteration and each medium position the user in a different way. Children’s texts and games need to be analyzed for the ways they act as interfaces, influencing how information is presented and received. Similarly, the way the reader-player can use those interfaces in powerful ways (and not solely as a passive recipient of information) should be acknowledged. To understand these game-books as well as the variety of contemporary adaptations and media-enhanced texts that have become popular, we need to understand how children’s texts are intermediated and the effects intermediation has on the reader-player.

Notes

1 These books include game cards and the reader can go online, collect the cards, and solve puzzles that assist in uncovering more information about all the characters in the book, as well as information about the massive family treasure hunt that the characters are on. Readers are even assigned their own family affiliation based on a personality quiz when they sign up for the series' website.

2 These books are modified Alternate Reality Games (ARG). While they are meant to be played mostly alone, the reader has a packet of clue information and the story gives cues like phone numbers and passwords that the reader can use online to supplement the book itself. The reader can ultimately solve the mystery before the characters in the book do, but the story is not contingent on readers actually playing the game.

3 In part due to the 19th century interest in parlor games and entertainments.


5 I identified 25 texts of interest in the Baldwin Library of Historical Children’s Literature at the University of Florida (14 American, 11 British), which all negotiate different relationships between book, game, and reader through their respective relationships to narrative and structure. The earliest text I have cited from the archive is *The American Girl’s Book* (1846) and the latest text is *I Unpacked My Grandmother’s Trunk* (1983). My sample is comprised of texts from every decade of the 1800s after 1840, texts from the 1920s and a few texts from the late 1970s and early 1980s.

6 Particularly Kristeva’s intertextuality (via Bakhtin) which emphasizes the text (and textual meaning) is always in production. Kristeva suggests that any given text is a compilation of other texts, a dissonant mix of social tensions and ideological conflict over meaning. Despite the age and limited experience of their readership, children’s texts often assume that their readers are familiar with cultural and social meanings;
it is impossible for these texts to completely hide the fissures in their constructed meanings underneath a veneer of unity and simplicity.

During this time period, many game-books were published both in London and in New York. The authors and publishers borrowed, rearranged, pirated, and redistributed the materials. Many of the materials in *The American Girl’s Book* are influenced by British traditions and folk games. With so much shared material, the distinction between the instructional game books published in London and those published in New York did not greatly affect the categories I have defined. The imperial purposes and re-enactment of empire that comes along with embodying the games in *The American Girl’s Book* would make for an interesting further study.

You can imagine scenarios where the players of the game can use the game’s community against the girl designated as “it.” The girls might decide to hide the ball incorrectly as a method of excluding/punishing the girl who is it. The players might also develop a pattern or method for working against the discovery of the ball. The narrative of “Lady Queen Anne” does not provide any of these stories of improper play, but it does build in discussion time for the girls hiding the ball and lets the reader interpret that discussion and decision-making process however she likes. Since the book sets up the reader as an imaginative contributor to its imaginative journey from the outset, the reader can extend her powers beyond imagining this one scenario—the meaning and enacted play of every game within the compendium is now open to interpretation and renegotiation.

The community play style also suggest that one person holds the question and the answers (is the arbitrator of correctness/knowledge) and others have to depend on that person’s knowledge for the game to function. So while the community of players may come up with multiple solutions that sound good to them, the text and its authorized agent acknowledge only a single correct answer. The pleasure from the game then comes from either accepting that the text is correct (enjoying finding the correct, winning answer) or allowing the community to take over and have lively discussion of the riddles (enjoying the communal process instead of the win).

This language riddle also builds mastery by using italics as a cue to emphasize the existence of the joke. It is schooling the child who does not already understand the joke and cluing her into the intricacies of language that make the joke work (without outright explaining to the uninformed child thus making the relationship between game and player too authoritarian and didactic for pleasure). The joke makes more sense if the child has intertextual knowledge (or a repertoire) that includes cards and hunting, but the text makes sure she will not miss what makes it a joke, “all-fours,” even if she does not understand its full significance.

The gendering of these two methods (answers beneath and answers in the back) is interesting to note and clearly illustrates the texts’ social context. The riddles for girls and mixed company are constructed as communal activities and lead to the creation of knowledge communities. The riddles for boys are meant to be tackled individually, showing the cultural investment in fostering individualism in young men.

These games are also interesting because they represent careers and pastimes that are culturally unacceptable for young women, thus allowing women to participate (or perhaps sublimate their desires for?) using frameworks that they cannot socially engage with (as pearl fishers or naval officers). Perhaps these games also perform a function of expanding women’s skill sets, in case these behaviors should ever become necessary (a societal safety net). This becomes an interesting way of complicating the symbolic child (at once following the rules and yet infringing upon them).

e.g., “I unpacked the trunk and I found this item starting with ‘a’…” where the players compete to add an item from each successive letter of the alphabet and remember all the items that have come before

Even *Ramblings* (the geography game) made the book integral to the machinations of the game play. The book is what allows the players to advance along the map and is what provides the context and motivation for player actions. *I Unpacked My Grandmother’s Trunk* assumes that rote memorization of the rhyme is enough motivation to create game play; book and game never act together.
There is a long history of game-books, children’s magazines, and children’s games that position the child reader as collaborator and that showcase the tensions among child, medium, genre, writer, adult, and society. Late 19th century children’s magazines like *St. Nicholas* asked children to become part of a community and become an active participant through imagination, research, and language. Books that taught readers to play games shaped that participation in culturally specific ways and encouraged readers to both conform to and manipulate their rules. Books that included game components asked readers to become more than imaginative players, using a balance of narrative and rules to encourage specific performances of childhood. All of these participatory texts (periodicals, manuals, game-book hybrids), demand active, engaged readers, transforming the readers into players and giving them a role as collaborators in creating textual meaning. These participatory texts also acted as shaping interfaces, establishing modes of interaction that limited the possible meanings and actions available to the reader. While current texts are often lauded for their groundbreaking interactivity, they make explicit the active reader that nineteenth century texts imply and make “player” an expected and necessary component of reader/child identity.

Collaboration and reciprocity are central to Marah Gubar’s discussion Golden Age children’s literature, but they are also central to discussions of new media such as Henry Jenkins’ argument about the kinds of participative communities current media create. These communities are “defined through voluntary, temporary, and tactical affiliations… [and are] held together through the *mutual production* and *reciprocal*
exchange of knowledge” (Jenkins, *Convergence* 27, emphasis added). While the specific form of the community created by current game-books or video games offers new possibilities for technology facilitated connections (minimizing the challenges of distance, temporality, and some social divisions), these texts’ dependence upon shared/reciprocal knowledge communities differs from earlier game-books and children’s periodicals more in level/amount of access and speed rather than in purpose. They all share the trait of negotiating generic conventions, expecting readers to bring knowledge to texts and build on that knowledge with communities of other players (figuratively and literally). While current media-enhanced texts offer a more emergent and meaningful intermediation because they incorporate and transform user input and actively demand that readers become players who generate textual meaning, the act of reading itself has always implied an active imaginative role with texts. Pierre Lévy’s *Becoming Virtual* envisions all readers as “makers” who engage with texts in acts of “correspondence,” allowing the reader to answer, ignore, or destroy the authored meaning:

As makers of text, we travel from one side to the other of the space of meaning, guided by the system of addresses and pointers that the author, editor, and typographer have prepared for us. But we are just as capable of disobeying those instructions, following different paths, rearranging the text incorrectly, establishing secret, clandestine networks, allowing other semantic geographies to emerge. (48)

Making sense of language means readers actively explore interpretive possibilities and build/use/modify social and literary conventions. It is the reader’s process of connection and interpretation makes meaning possible, whether that reader is engaged with a single periodical or with an intermediated constellation of books, games, websites, and other media.
Lévy continues describing the reader’s effort: "the reader’s work involves tearing, rubbing, twisting, and repiecing the text to create a living environment in which meaning can be established. The space of meaning does not exist before the text is read. It is while moving through the text, mapping it, that we fabricate and actualize meaning" (Becoming 48). Texts that foster participation by including transmedia components provide useful examples of the possibilities and preferences created by the structural components text because they often overtly emphasize the process the reader uses to discern meaning from her experience. An example of this might be Patrick Carman’s Skeleton Creek whose book jacket proclaims “Read the book. Watch the videos. Uncover the mystery” and “Read it. Watch it. Live it.” These taglines privilege not the content but the new, shiny method of access—it screams to the reader that she does not just read, but she watches and in doing so she lives the text. The implication is that the transmedia element gives a unique level of embodiment and immersion derived from the way the user is allowed to become involved with text. These new transmedia constellations have their foundation in the reading experience that Lévy describes, that Gubar locates in Golden Age literature, and that I have shown to be present in the language, intertextuality, and communal knowledge-building of children’s periodicals and early game-books. Online videos, user forums, tactile artifacts (clue packets, playing cards, etc.), and global information networks increase the reader’s ease at making connections and physically modifying the text at hand, opening up more opportunities for all readers to become players. However, with any text, it is the reader who, as Lévy says, actualizes the meaning by mapping her way through, locating herself within, and negotiating the meaning of the texts she selects. Media-enhanced
(multimodal, technology-driven) texts explicitly shift readers into players, making play a necessary component of the reader’s identity and asking the reader to become a creator and navigator of a rich, narrative game world.

These game-book hybrids provide an opportunity to examine how they act as interfaces, participating in structuring what childhood is, as well as the ways the reader is asked to become a player (interfering with, participating with, and/or refusing performances of childhood). There is a spectrum of the reader-to-player transformation created by current game-book hybrids, hinging on the relay between narrative and rules and the kind of emergent meaning they foster. The 39 Clues series (2009-2010) by various authors and the Cathy’s Book trilogy (2006, 2008, 2009) by Sean Stewart and Jordan Weisman shape active, participative players out of their readership by asking the reader to search out the depth of the narrative they provide and discover the rules of the communities/game worlds they create. They extend their narrative beyond the codex to include websites, voicemail messages, playing cards, and more as part of the reading experience and demand that readers become detective discoverers within that world. Cing’s Trace Memory (2006) for the Nintendo DS handheld system brands itself as an “interactive mystery novel come to life,” creating a balance between narrative and player driven action. Finally, 5th Cell Media’s Scribblenauts (2009) depends almost entirely upon players to create a meaningful experience by using their input and manipulating genre conventions and narrative schemas to motivate game play.

While these texts continue a tradition of reciprocity and play, they also allow for a level of intermediation and recursion that was not possible in historical texts. These current media-enhanced texts present a problem for study and analysis because they
are not restricted to a single medium, a single source text, and/or a single method of reader interaction. They are, as media theorist N. Katherine Hayles notes, intermediated: “they involve complex transactions between bodies and texts as well as between different forms of media” (*Mother 7*), and they depend on both the materiality of the text itself, the subjectivity of the user, and the dynamic, recursive process both participate in for meaning to emerge. Hayles’ use of the computer and information science term “recursive” is a key element to understanding the value of intermediation.

A recursive process is one that turns back on itself, using the result of the process as its new input, cycling through the process again and again until the result meets a certain condition—until there has been a state change. Understanding that the collision among producer, consumer, interface, and text is recursive, each part feeding back into the other and processing/re-processing the elements that each provides in order to create a fundamental change is essential to distinguishing intermediation as a theoretical lens:

> An important aspect of intermediation is the recursivity implicit in the coproduction and coevolution of multiple causalities. Complex feedback loops connect humans and machines, old technologies and new, language and code, analog processes and digital fragmentations.[Privileging just one element of the loop] has the effect of flattening into a single causal line—the convergence of all media into one—social and cultural processes that are in fact much more complex. (Hayles, *Mother 31*)

Hayles’ feedback loops allow for the dynamic, spontaneous creation of meaning that is often not reflected in arguments for media convergence. For her, convergence implies an ur-text or a privileged hierarchy of original text and spin-off or supporting texts, which highlights chronology and authorial intent at the cost of the reader’s unique experiential process with the text. A hierarchy of originality erases the unique and dynamic experience that comes with readers experiencing texts in different ways, using different
methods and entry points. Intermediation and recursion offer scholars the opportunity to acknowledge a text’s ability to mutate and transform as it grows and shrinks, converges and disperses according to the desires of the loosely formed collectives that create it. Moving fluidly among and across media, its components take forms distinctive to the media in which they flourish, so the specificities of media are essential to understand its morphing configurations. (Hayles, *Mother* 107)

More simply put, intermediation is a way of examining “texts as clustered in assemblages whose dynamics emerge from all the texts participating in the cluster, without privileging one text as more 'original' than any other” (Hayles, *Mother* 9).

Examining how media-enhanced texts use recursive feedback loops provides insight into emergent meaning, emergent narratives, and performances of childhood they allow. These media-enhanced texts offer a level of emergence and recursion that has never been possible before, in both the physical and the mental processes that entwine text and reader-player. The ways the media-enhanced texts are structured and linked as a transmedia constellation helps define the limits of play and the possibility it provides for childhood identity. Recursive loops allow the many operative forces that come with using a text “to coevolve into a narrative that viewers find humanly meaningful” (Hayles, *Mother* 196). Emergent narratives and meaning are some of the most compelling features of current media-enhanced texts, but as Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 have shown, emergent meaning that comes from the interaction of a user with a structured system (rules) has its precursors in the negotiated transactions and communities created by some of the earliest forms of children’s literature. Emergent meaning is “not front-loaded into the system” and “such systems evolve toward an open future marked by contingency and unpredictability. Meaning is not guaranteed by a
coherent origin; rather, it is made possible (but not inevitable) by the blind force of evolution finding workable solutions within given parameters” (Hayles, *Posthuman* 286).

Since the narrative meaning and purpose are generated by forces that are constantly shifting (reader-player knowledge, cultural context, medium, interface, etc.), the exact experience of a text or textual group cannot be replicated. Thus, thinking of texts as clustered assemblages helps acknowledge the similarities and yet uniqueness of each experience. A novel can never be re-read without the knowledge of the end refiltering the information, a video game cannot be replayed without the previous play experience altering the player-game relationship, and media-enhanced texts cannot be explained solely in terms of chronology or original-derivative status because the user’s experience of those texts might not reflect that linear trajectory. Because these current game-book hybrids demand more significant and dynamic involvement among the reader and several texts across many media, the meaning any given reader discerns from the text emerges from the depth of connections and actions she makes.

Emergent narratives and intermediated texts do not require complete control on the part of the user to define textual meaning. As Hayles states, intermediation does not requires that the player be given true mastery over the system because

> the very illusion of control bespeaks a fundamental ignorance about the nature of the emergent processes through which consciousness, the organism, and the environment are constituted. Mastery through the exercise of autonomous will is merely the story consciousness tells itself to explain the results that actually come through chaotic dynamics and emergent structures. (*Posthuman* 288)

Emergence is achieved through the feedback loop created by the reader-player, the texts, the environment, the cultural context, etc. and full mastery is not possible when both the material and subjective are essential elements of the process. The reader who
becomes player will always be constrained by the text’s structure and the text will always be subject to interpretation and interference from the reader-player. Since the player’s prior knowledge and experience cannot be dictated and every text leaves gaps for an active reader-player to exploit, an understanding of their reciprocal relationship is paramount to discovering the texts’ purposes and effects.

Hayles’ use of recursion also has metaphorical resonances with one of the main traits of children’s literature (and I would argue, children’s media) as a genre—children’s literature is pushing for a psychological state change in the reader by placing her in a feedback loop with the text. The child reader is both learning the skills necessary to be a reader, a player, and a child, and is also being asked to move beyond childhood into a new stage of development. Through her experience of the text the reader is meant to internalize her power relationships to adults and the text’s version of what childlikeness is. Nodelman argues that his key examples of children’s literature all "assume not only that child readers can change but that they must—that the ability and inevitability of change is part of what defines them as children” and children’s texts "work to change their child readers in the proper way" (31). Children’s texts move the child reader closer to adult knowledge and power (and, thus, moving them beyond childhood) but school the child reader in performing the correct kind of childlikeness to protect her from adult interference while she develops her skills. Depictions of these performances encourage the reader to become a player, gaining knowledge like research skills and how to synthesize meaning while also shaping her behaviors to conform to the novels’ and games’ rules. In this way children’s literature and media act “as the medium of a transaction between two divergent social groups, adults and children” (Nodelman 125).
Nodelman’s analysis dovetails with Gubar’s positioning of the child as artful dodger who is constantly performing and negotiating her identity as a collaborator with adults and social values. Theorizing readers as players, active collaborators who work recursively with intermediated texts to create meanings on their own terms but within the limits of generic and social conventions, accounts for the multiplicity of forces at work in all children’s texts, but especially those in media-enhanced, game-book hybrids.

The 39 Clues, Cathy’s Book, Trace Memory, and Scribblenauts position the reader as a player in a variety of ways: implicating her in a web of intertextual references and genre conventions, positioning her as a detective, and suggesting she do outside research, play games, and/or generate textual action. Viewing the child as a possible collaborator instead of a passive, exploited recipient means that the ways game-books both define the limits of the reader-player and provide the reader-player with opportunities to wreak havoc with the text’s expectations become essential to analyzing a transmedia cluster. As intermediated, collaborative experiences, children’s texts are rich, generative processes of feedback rather than static containers of information.

Participatory media require analysis of the process that comes from the engagement of the user with the interface that shapes the information these books and games provide. The material constraints of the systems (e.g., the memory and vocabulary limitations of the item libraries in Scribblenauts), the method of interaction (e.g., page turning, URL entering, shifting back and forth from book to video, using a stylus on a touchscreen), and the (mis)management of user expectations and generic schemata/intertextual knowledge are critical components in understanding how game-
books shape readers’ understanding of what childhood means. Nodelman’s insistence on the communal nature of generic schemata where each reader of a given genre “tends to have a fairly specific sense of what is or is not correctly considered appropriate or acceptable within that genre by the community at large” (111) is in accordance with Gubar’s artful dodger, whose identity is collaboratively, reciprocally developed but still contained within a (learned) performance of childlikeness. The meaning that emerges from the reader’s experience with the text teaches her the boundaries of what it means to be a child and the power of mastering particular types of knowledge, language, and skills. If readers are and, to some extent, have always been collaborators (savvy users of intertextual references and active meaning negotiators), we need to account for that process of meaning generation by examining both the text’s presentation of childlikeness and the ways the reader can exploit the text and its version of childlikeness.

By examining the ways the reader is invited to play with the text and how her participation is structured, we reveal both the social purpose of the child as a container of adult desires and the child’s position as a “collaborator-after-the-fact” (Gubar 8), who can exert force after the initial limits of the text have been set. Game-books make use of intertextual references and the reader’s previous knowledge to position her as student, spectator, and/or actor and work to place her body (real and imagined) within the texts’ systems of exchange and structures of knowledge. But in order to motivate and manipulate the reader into playing correctly, these texts are dependent on the reader-player’s expectations of the genre, the medium, and the subject.
So why are intermediation and collaboration necessary critical concepts? Part of the challenge in addressing The 39 Clues and Cathy’s Book is the struggle to incorporate the volume of distinct sources outside of the codex proper. While both texts can be read without referencing the information outside of the book, the rich variety of meaning that these game-books allow for cannot be engaged with unless their larger cross-media structure and system of interaction is analyzed. Handheld games like Trace Memory and Scribblenauts are similar in their reliance upon multiple genres, interface structures and online communities to create a rich experience with the text. The core similarities among these media-enhanced texts for children (The 39 Clues, Cathy’s Book, Trace Memory, and Scribblenauts) are their acknowledgement and manipulation of the reader-player’s expectations, their need for both rules and narrative, and their relationship to recursion, collaboration, and collective intelligence that allows these texts to generate meaning. By examining where the materiality of the interfaces (codex, computer, game system) meets the playfulness of the subjective user, we have a better understanding of how media-enhanced texts allow meaning to emerge and how reader-players conform to and reshape textual expectations, especially those of childhood.

The 39 Clues and Cathy’s Book

One of the most important and least acknowledged elements of playable children’s media is their dependence on the reader’s preconceived expectations of the texts and her experience in using them. Media theorist and digital fiction writer Noah Wardrip-Fruin notes that often we do not “account for something quite important about digital media processes: the fact that they generally don’t operate on their own. From Web-based knowledge repositories to console-based video games, the operations of
digital media are, in crucial ways, only truly realized in contact with audiences" (Wardrip-Fruin 11). The user’s expectations about how the text will function shape what the reader is willing to allow the text to do. Readers come to game-books with expectations about the genre and mechanics of the text, which give context to the messages readers obtain and whether they accept, modify, or resist that meaning. The generic schemata the reader-player uses to categorize the text and familiarize herself with it are often triggered by the interface and framing of the text. An effective game-book works with the reader’s initial expectations and uses those expectations to guide her into becoming a player by accepting the types of actions/goals that are meaningful for that particular text. The 39 Clues and the Cathy’s Book series provide compelling examples of how user expectations are necessary components (part of the recursive feedback loop between user and text) in generating emergent narratives (rich ones that grow outside of the texts’ limited, printed plots).²

The 39 Clues is a mystery series about Amy and Dan Cahill’s search for clues to their family secret and great fortune. Each novel includes a card set and supplementary card sets can be purchased. The cards can be entered into an online profile, and they give users access to a relatively robust online gaming site based on the world traveling/clue hunting that occurs within the books. To join the online community, the reader-player takes a personality quiz that assigns her to one of the books’ four competing family branches based on her skill set and ethical preferences. The website is geared primarily for 6-14 year olds; only children within that age range can win the prizes awarded for successfully completing games and puzzles. Membership in the online community is not compulsory; the reader does not need to play the games or
participate in the online community to further the plot of the novels. The website and the back cover of each novel even suggests to the reader a limited and linear view of the relationship among all of the textual objects in its transmedia constellation (books, cards, online community): “Read the Books, Collect the Cards, Play the Game, Win the Prizes” (Riordan).

The 39 Clues transmedia economy exploits the reader’s associations with mystery and detective fiction, video games, and card collecting. It gives the reader the expectation that reading the book comes first, then collecting and entering cards online, and then solving the clues on the cards and participating in online missions to garner points. The novels fulfill the genre expectations both in form and content of mystery and series novels, and they use the reader’s familiarity with those tropes to ease her into the less familiar kinds of participation The 39 Clues offers: online participation. They do this by first providing the cards with the book (linking the book with a tactile form of play) and then by allowing the reader to call on the knowledge she has acquired from both the books and cards to help her discover the actions available to her online. Participation in the online community and the site’s navigation are made familiar through the knowledge established in the novels. The online clues and missions make more sense and are easier to complete if the player has previously been a reader of the novels. But the player does not necessarily have to experience the novels to make sense of the community. The unknown level of the user’s existing knowledge and her prior experience with genre conventions or game interfaces greatly changes the meaning she draws from The 39 Clues. From the child that never cracks open the card deck and chooses to read the novels as novels alone to the child who reads and plays along to
the child who rips the card pack out of the book and immediately goes online to play in the community, each user dictates her willingness to be involved and to take advantage of all the different media available to her. The child who is both reader-player, enhances the limited world offered by the print narrative with the ever expanding back story, history, and minor character interactions that the online component provides, allowing her to experience The 39 Clues as a dynamic world to navigate rather than a prescribed mystery narrative.

Because these are transmedia texts, the touchstone elements are provided by the constellation of texts but the reader decides on the depth and breadth of her involvement with them; each player has a separate experience and that allows for a fluid, emergent narrative based on her process of discovery and discernment. While the primary printed narrative is obviously privileged, participating in the card game and the online community allows readers to construct their own side narratives and enhance their experience of the Cahill family and history. The reader-player makes the decision to participate there and what happens is that a broader but more fractured (i.e., less linear and cohesive) narrative understanding is developed. In a sense, the player is immersed in The 39 Clues world rather than the story itself when participating online and in the forums, whereas the print text immerses the reader in the plot as it unfolds. The reader-player has access to both modes and uses the many elements to contextualize her experience and give meaning to her actions as a reader-player. The reader-player who cannot recognize the conventions of online games, who does not understand what to do with the cards, or who becomes easily frustrated with the puzzles will reject the possibility of meaningful participation with the larger, deeper transmedia
constellation. Thus, the texts strive to meet users’ initial expectations and use the child reader-player’s knowledge to familiarize her with actions and goals the text prefers.

From the novels’ content, some readers will experience The 39 Clues as a straightforward lesson in children’s detective fiction, where the child’s imagination, innocence, and openness (childlikeness) are important characteristics to cultivate because the main narrative of the series lauds the supposedly innocent child as the savior of the Cahill family. However, on a deeper level, an active child reader learns that it is a performance of innocence, not innocence itself, that leads to success and protection from adult interference. Amy and Dan both discover traumatic truths about their past and are far from innocent, unknowing characters at the end of the tenth book, *Into the Gauntlet* by Margaret Peterson Haddix. While the characters are presented to the reader as internally conflicted and their actions are increasing cause for dissonance and ambiguity, Amy and Dan emerge heroic because other characters in the novel perceive them as optimistic, trustworthy, and selfless. Amy and Dan’s refusal to identify with the adult clue seekers and their corrupted, self-centered adult knowledge is what allows them to win in the end. Dan comments that they won the clue hunt not on their own merits but “They’d won because everybody else wanted them to” (Haddix 300). Amy gives insight into why the others allow them to win: “Grace thought we would win by coming to care about other people. And having them care about us. And, really, that is kind of what happened!” (Haddix 321). Amy and Dan are selected as heroes for their ability to be loveable and to present themselves as needing to be cared for and protected.
By performing the childish virtues that the novels espouse, Amy and Dan triumph, even if they have moved far beyond innocent naivety internally (coming to question and analyze the motivations and skills of every player in the game). When Amy and Dan ask what their next mission will be after finding the 39 clues, they are told to “Wait. […] Be kids. Grow up” (Haddix 312), suggesting that the adult characters in the novel still see Amy and Dan as immature despite their success, experience, and ten novels worth of growth. This reading of the novels that acknowledges the characters’ performance of childlikeness is one instance of Nodelman’s “shadow text.” This secondary reading is derived from the novels’ multiple points of view and unspoken interpretations that are left to the reader to interpret (Nodelman 8). This more complex reading allows The 39 Clues to offer an idealized child hero on the surface, while at the same time confronting an engaged reader with the ambiguities of that idealized position: "As long as everyone who knows that childhood experience is always uncertain and often complex ignores that knowledge and speaks instead of 'simple joys,' the uncertain, complex experiences most children actually have can continue in full sight" (Nodelman 41). Amy and Dan’s power is held in check by their adult caretakers and competitors—while they may be the only players who can collect all 39 clues, they continually have to accept their dependence on authority figures for assistance and protection.

Reading The 39 Clues is even more complicated because of the media-enhanced elements, however. The reader-player has access to a great deal more background and character history than the novels allow through the online database. The reader who becomes a player and accesses the online community is presented
with even more points of view and interpretations of character behaviors and motivations. This information is still officially sanctioned by the publisher and, since the Scholastic website has to be careful about children’s privacy and protection, the interaction with other players is limited. The media-enhancement does not lend itself to robust emergent narratives because the reader-player has limited options for adding to the feedback loop and most of the intermediating texts are presented to the reader-player in a strict hierarchy.

The 39 Clues intentionally structures player participation to privilege particular kinds of knowledge and this demonstrates the importance of intertextual networks and generic schemas to participatory children’s media. For example, The 39 Clues online forums and games cast the novels’ events, timelines, and characters onto real world locations and link to knowledge about historic events, people, and places that children should be familiar with (or should at least be willing to learn about). A specific example of this is online “Mission 1: Titanic – The Lost Clue”. The child logs into her profile online and chooses to play through the mission. The website then provides her a story that weaves together the factual history of the sinking of the Titanic along with a fictional character, Anne Cahill, who supposedly died in the sinking while carrying one of the treasure hunt clues. After reading through the onscreen information, the player is told that Anne did not die, but rather escaped and spent her life hiding the clue in Scotland. After some time, the clue was lost in Loch Ness (Scholastic “Titanic”). The real world Loch Ness monster myth is then written in as a cover for hiding the Cahill clue. The game uses the player’s familiarity with the Titanic and the Loch Ness myth to provide context for the player’s actions. The context provided by the player’s understanding of
those historical elements helps to limit the actions and game world elements the website has to provide, without calling attention to those limits as artificial.

A player’s previous experience as a reader supports this layering of information as a technique to create active participation as well. There is an embedded/cryptic clue inside each of the novels. For example, the reader may notice that in the first book of The 39 Clues series (Rick Riordan’s The Maze of Bones) after page 128, the page numbers turn into a mysteriously shaded series of numbers or blanks until page 154 where the normal page numbers pick up again. The clue is a simple alphabet substitution where the numbers translate to “Anne Cahill did not drown.” The clue brings together the book, the online game, and the player in a process of discovery. The clue in the novel may only make sense after playing the game online or vice-versa where discovering the clue in the novel may give the player the motivation to participate in the online mission since it prompts a need to understand the clue and a desire to access the broader knowledge of the online community. These moments of feedback and connection allow the reader-player a more emergent experience, requiring her active participation to enrich and navigate the world of The 39 Clues (in the books, online, and in the reader-player’s imagination).

The actions the player is asked to take do not directly correlate to real world behaviors, but the knowledge provided by the online database and the novels makes the game actions meaningful. After reading through the “Mission 1: Titanic” briefing, the player is told “Your mission: Try to discover what happened to Anne Cahill and find the ‘lost’ Ekaterina Clue” (Scholastic). She has to examine evidence from the cards included with the book (and also available online) and click through dialog with non-
player characters (NPCs) to discover information about Anne and the clue. Finally, she is assigned the task of completing a submarine mini-game to retrieve the clue element from the bottom of the Loch. The mini-game has everything to do with eye-hand coordination and nothing to do with actual submarine navigation. The player can move the submarine up or down with the arrow keys and give it a boost of power with the space bar. Her objective is to guide the submarine successfully through rings in each of 5 levels, with the added incentive that she can “boost through multiple rings” to increase her score. If she crashes her submarine by hitting the bottom of the screen or the rings themselves, she loses a life. After losing five lives, she encounters the mission lost screen: “Sorry! You must complete 5 levels to pick up the clue. Take a deep breath and go down again.” If she navigates through all of the rings in each level, she arrives at a goal completed screen: “You got the clue! Congratulations, captain! You steered the wee nessie down to the clue!” Then, as a reward for completing the mission, she receives one of the 39 clues, phosphorus, via watching an animation of the plane crashing into Loch Ness and the clue canister (labeled phosphorous, how convenient!) sinking with the wreckage (Scholastic, “Titanic”).

The actions the player is asked to embody are not even associated with piloting real submarines. Yet, players accept the mini-game as important beyond just the game play itself because it connects to the player’s mastery of the plot of the novels and the even larger web of associations the player can make with the real world places and events. These intertextual elements and the combination of the novel and the online community setup make this game meaningful and naturalize its structure/possibilities. The enjoyment of the text comes from the combination of the rules that make the game
and the community function and the narrative that provides a framework for those rules and the actions they foster to make sense within. Each of the online missions follows this sequence where the player reads through a briefing, reads dialog and receives evidence from other agents, and then completes a mini-game to reach a clue. Each clue reveals one element of the 39 clues she will need. Each element is entered into the player’s online profile and increases her status as a clue hunter in the community. The missions reference the events of the novels, the riddles on the playing cards and the other information posted on the www.the39clues.com site, pointing the player to all of those sources for possible help and information.

Taken together, The 39 Clues elements allows for a limited but promising possibility for emergent narrative. As Jenkins defines them, "Emergent narratives are not prestructured or preprogrammed, taking shape through the game play, yet they are not as unstructured, chaotic, and frustrating as life itself" ("Game Design" 128). Emergent narratives operate by giving the reader-player resources with which she can develop her own narrative desires and motivations. While the mini-games and missions are highly, narratively structured thereby not allowing for emergent narratives within the games themselves, the overall online experience supports emergent narratives. The site uses its interface to structure the experience of the player by passing itself off as a Cahill computer database. It is designed to let the player explore the various elements as if she were a member of a specific Cahill family branch. Collecting cards and playing games then become necessary functions of adding to a particular branch’s database of knowledge and list of collected clues. The player’s ability to navigate through the history of the Cahills (including characters and events that were not included in the novels), to
select what clues to find in the mini-games, and to play through the missions from the novels within the larger framework of her “agent” account lets her create a larger emergent, environmental story based on her selection of elements to participate with and the sequence she experiences them in.

One of the possibilities for feedback and reciprocation derives from the online community’s agent card system. A player is able to design her own agent card and share it with friends and fellow players (who become “allies”). Her card then becomes part of her allies’ online card collections, allowing her to inserting a piece of herself into the game. The agent card is significant because it places the player on the same level as the agents in the books, who all have similar physical and digital cards. The agent card allows the reader-player become a character within the story in a way that the novels alone cannot. She is also able to use her agent card as a tool for control and as a way to monitor the success of her agent allies. She can use the card to see how many clues, books, cards, missions, and medals other player agents have collected. She can also see their prestige meters (agent prestige increases as players complete or collect the aforementioned items) and compare it to her own game progress. These agent cards are an essential element to The 39 Clues’ success as a series that encourages emergent possibilities. The agent card acts as an avatar and helps fuel reader-player desire by creating goals (raise your prestige level; beat your friends to game completion; monitor the progress of others) and giving rewards for preferred behaviors. Players get medals for reaching benchmarks that are outside the narrative of the books like having allies in the game and participating in community actives. This complex web of motivations and preferences allows for each reader-player’s experience to develop its
own narrative thrust, each part providing more feedback among the player, the site, the novels, and the authors. The agent cards reward reader-players, those who immerse themselves in all parts of The 39 Clues story world. The child player quickly learns that one who has book points, card deck points, mission points, and arena points has the most status and power within the website. The reader-player also has the most contextual and intertextual knowledge to exert within the game system; thus, the game is establishing the importance of engaged knowledge to taking pleasure from the transmedia constellation.

The way the reader-player’s online experience is structured changes the behaviors she understands as acceptable and the messages she receives from The 39 Clues. When a player joins the online community, the site (simplistically) profiles her to place her into one of the family branches and give her an identity within the community. Based on her answers to six questions, she can become a cool, creative Janus agent; a brilliant, inventive Ekaterina agent; a powerful, secretive Lucian agent; or a brave, adventurous Tomas agent. The questions present a moment where the reader-player can interfere with the intentions of the text. She can use her knowledge of the novels and/or online game conventions to manipulate her way into her preferred family branch by matching the questions to the branch characteristics. For example, when asked “Tell the truth! Would you rather record a hit album or win 3 Olympic medals?” a reader-player experienced with the novels or the cards could easily discern that this is a choice between the Janus (creative, recording artist) and Tomas (adrenaline junkie, sporty) branches. The way the questions are posed using slightly threatening interjections suggests, on one level, that the reader-player is encouraged to answer the questions
quickly, directly, and truthfully. On each question screen for the Scholastic The 39 Clues registration, she is prodded into these behaviors; she is told to “Confess!” “Pick! Quick!” “Tell the Truth!” and “Remember, WE WILL KNOW IF YOU ARE LYING”. The reader-player might find this language intimidating and answer the questions truthfully, but the game does not reinforce these choices by imposing a time limit or adding other incentives for quick and truthful behaviors. The savvy reader-player realizes that the hyperbolic style and prose of the questions is designed instead to correspond with the attitude of the novels and thus make the profiling system sensible. As it is not reinforced with other structural elements (time limits, bonus points, etc.), the profiling questions do not have to be taken seriously and the game system almost encourages reader-players to scam/manipulate it to gain access to their desired family branches. Maintaining the narrative consistency across the transmedia constellation, the plots of the novels also act as a model for this kind of manipulative behavior, as Amy and Dan often use their knowledge of the family branches to gain entrance into an opposing branch’s stronghold. The savvy player who has not experienced the novels but understands the conventions of games sorting players into clans, families, or classes might also recognize the game conventions at work here and use them to help her select her answers strategically. While the reciprocity of the system here is limited, these moments of negotiation still suggest that user input is valuable to some degree and that the outcome of the interaction in the registration quiz might change the player’s approach to the game (being profiled as a Janus agent might make her more likely to use study-based tactics to complete tasks or being profiled as a Lucian agent might encourage her to find action-oriented and sneaky methods to pursue online information to fit her Lucian
persona). The reader-player’s choice are structured by the novels, online system, and the interface, but her behaviors and experience are also dependent on her intertextual knowledge, ability to recognize conventions, and her desire/willingness to meet the texts’ expectations.\(^5\)

The possibility for emergent narratives is also supported by the interface and control of information the site provides.\(^6\) While The 39 Clues online offers the reader-player the ability to enrich the stories and game world with deep background and many points of view, it also limits her ability to access information that does not fit her agent profile. The family branch the player belongs to gives her access only to that branch’s archive, which is an example of the rules of the system interface matching the narrative overlay created by the content. While it would have been easier and more inclusive to allow players access to all the information, that would have betrayed the narrative context and motivations by allowing the game world rules to be broader than the stipulations provided by the novels. This limitation is what makes the system responsive and (minimally) reciprocal. The player’s choice of branch becomes important because it has actual consequences; it makes her feel as if her input into the system is valuable. The limitations created by this choice also serve to show her how important control over knowledge and information is. When she realizes that the system denies her access to information, she can choose to use the system in unexpected ways to gain access beyond her expected role. A player can create multiple profiles (one for each family branch) with separate usernames. She can also use this technique to manufacture allies (controlling all the profiles herself). A player savvy enough to understand how online registration works and to realize that the book/code pack codes can be entered
more than once can refuse the system’s limitation on her knowledge. While she may have some latitude to manipulate her access to information, she still has to complete most of the benchmarks and goals the game has set for her to be dubbed successful. She will not be allowed to complete the last mission without first collecting all 39 clues, which again upholds the narrative context and motivation for game play but also exerts force on the reader-player to participate in all parts of the transmedia constellation (and increasing the chances that The 39 Clues will instill its preferred reader-player behaviors and transmit its sense of the reader-player’s best, most rewarding identity).

While The 39 Clues privileges linear, cause-and-effect knowledge by suggesting the player read first and then apply that knowledge to the games, the reader-player has options that allow her to interfere with that narrative of progression by pooling her resources with other players. A reader-player can use internet spoiler sites and leverage the knowledge of other players to complete her own online card collection instead of completing the mini-games and reading the novels. The reader-player can also employ other techniques the game suggests are unfavorable. For example, the quiz included in “Mission 10: End Game” asks the player to answer questions that are derived from significant events and characters in the novels (Scholastic). She can, however, pass the quiz through savvy guessing, process of elimination, and/or by opening a new browser tab to the official Scholastic “Cahill Web” to look up answers without having to familiarize herself with the novels. While these methods of passing the quiz is probably more frustrating than reading the novels to find the answers, it is a way the player can interfere with the parameters and acceptable techniques the game tries to establish. The player is supposed to “prove her knowledge of Cahill secrets” not manipulate her
way around the system (Scholastic, “Mission 10”). However, since the player must have all 39 clues in her online profile to successfully complete Mission 10, she may be able to cheat her way through the quiz, but she must enter cards from all the books to move on in the mission at that point. This is one more built in control to make sure the reader-player is both a reader and a player who is actively engaged in all parts of the system. While she may gain enough knowledge from her connections to other players and their collective intelligence at solving all the game tasks, the game system makes it hard for her to access all areas with stolen knowledge. Knowledge obtained outside of the prescribed methods is less rewarded (literally) than knowledge obtained using the pathway provided.

A reader-player who finds a particular game frustrating (like my personal experience with the skeet shooting game) or impossible to play might enlist friends, parents, or others to play that portion and attain the goal. Reader-players might also decide to pool their cards and play together on one profile, thus increasing their influence through their collective knowledge; The 39 Clues actually subtly fosters community action by allowing the player to share her own agent card with others and designating players who swap cards as “allies.” Thus, the interface itself suggests that players might ally together and create networks, even if they need to work outside of the official site to use those networks. The skeet shooting game makes for an interesting example of the tension between system and user. It is part of “Mission 0: Agent Training,” which is a set of mini-games designed to have the player practice all the game skills she will need to complete the other missions (Scholastic). It is narratively explained away as a test left for the player by Grace Cahill, and the mission states she
must complete each task to earn the right to compete in the clue hunt. The interface does not force the player to complete this mission first, but it attempts to compel the player to start with it so it can familiarize her with what she will encounter later. The second mini-game in the training is skeet shooting, where the player must score 5000 points by shooting flying targets. Without an external mouse, my laptop touchpad made targeting the moving objects with precision difficult, and I quickly became frustrated with the technological limitation on my skill and with my inability to progress and collect completion rewards. While the game interface suggests that the appropriate response on the part of the player in that situation is to practice and replay, the reader-player immersed in the transmedia constellation might realize she has access to a community of players outside the official Scholastic site. There are many forums and wiki-style sites that players use to share information and help other players navigate to the goals they want. While this use of cheats and walkthroughs is a controversial method among players, it is a startling example of how players interfere with and provide unexpected input into an intermediated system.

*Cathy’s Book*, like *The 39 Clues*, can be read like a standard mystery via a teenager’s diary. *Cathy’s Book*, however, continually pushes the reader-player to participate in its alternate reality game elements, unlike *The 39 Clues*’ which insists on the books’ central role as a point of entry into the transmedia cluster. The reader is baited into calling the phone number on the book cover, discovering Cathy’s voicemail password, checking the URLs given in the marginal notes of Cathy’s diary, and digging through the packet of evidence the book provides. Characters’ histories, backgrounds,
and relationships are developed through all of these extra-textual elements; the mystery is easier to understand and solve if the reader plays along with the cues in the text.

While *Cathy’s Book* is more seamlessly balanced and intermediated than *The 39 Clues*, it still depends on the reader-player’s expectations in a similar way. *Cathy’s Book* evokes the reader’s associations with both teen diaries and mysteries. But it also performs more subtle uses of a player’s existing knowledge of systems and genres. As an Alternate Reality Game (ARG), the text engages in a more reciprocal relationship with the reader-player, allowing for narrative possibilities to emerge and reacting to reader-player’s actions. The text indicates that clues like phone numbers and websites listed in the book exist in the real world and that a reader who wants to take full advantage of the text will perform the action most associated with the clue. The diary includes many marginal notes and side illustrations encouraging the reader to actively web search topics like the Musée Mécanique on Pier 45 (Stewart and Weisman 3)—having background knowledge of these showcased elements adds to the depth of character development and helps provide narrative foreshadowing for the reader.

One of the most compelling elements of *Cathy’s Book* as an intermediated text is the way the novel exploits the form and conventions of the diary to provide multiple levels of narration. While the bulk of the content is a traditional diary, there are also marginal comments that Cathy has written in to discuss her own earlier diary entries with the reader. This adds an illusion of non-linearity to the normally highly chronological diary genre. Older Cathy is commenting critically on what she’d written in the past, basically having a meta-conversation about the material substance and process of the fictional writing with the reader in the margins. By showing the main character’s
process of reflecting on and critiquing her own actions, *Cathy’s Book* encourages readers to be actively aware of the unstable meaning of language and to be suspicious of the narrator’s knowledge. Gubar suggest that this is a trait that evolves with the rise of the child narrator during the Golden Age of children’s literature:

Child readers are likewise encouraged to become more skeptical readers and subjects: to challenge conventional wisdom and differentiate themselves from prescribed ways of being. Indeed, the humor of Ewing’s tale often depends on child readers picking up on the limitations or blind spots of her child narrator, rather than accepting whatever he says the gospel truth. (Gubar 61)

In *Cathy’s Book*, the marginal comments point out the blind spots that Cathy has seen for herself upon reflection, but they also offer the reader the opportunity to be critical of not only Cathy of the main narrative but also of reflective Cathy of the margins as well. The reader-player can clearly see the way characters’ actions become narrativized and then are revised as Cathy gains knowledge and as her purposes change. Depicting moments of reflection and feedback like this are integral to understanding the child reader as artful dodger. Gubar notes that “child storytellers function as ingenious collaborators” (42) who rewrite and negotiate their identities in relationship to adult power. She argues that author who show children writing, modifying, and re-writing are instilling characters and readers with the power to refuse and remake their social identities: "these artful dodgers function as models for child readers, inviting them to view fiction not as a set of marching orders from an omnipotent author but as a shared playing field" (Gubar 42).

Beyond the dual narration, the marginal notes work as a savvy integration of game rules (almost like a training mission) to push the reader to become a player, an active participant in the ARG. They urge the reader to experience the book as a process
of gathering information from many sources by detailing Cathy’s own discovery process. These comments nudge the reader into taking action by following Cathy’s self-deprecating directives: “Notice how much less crazy I was then? Didn’t even think of dialing the # . . .” (Stewart and Weisman 23). These marginal suggestions are a subtle way Cathy’s Book transitions the user from her traditional role as interpreter of the text at hand to a detective who must locate outside references and do research, making the construction of the text’s meaning an emergent and chaotic process rather than a linear communication from book to reader. Cathy’s Book builds off the established rules of reading and text interpretation known to the reader to bring the uninitiated into the frenzied and playful space of the ARG.

Players who already know the conventions and methods of ARGs do not require the explanatory nudges the text offers to understand that they are expected to hunt for clues from websites, phone messages, and other resources. The seasoned ARG player or internet junkie is already patterned to recognize what real world elements are included in such a game and how to identify and research keywords to find even more information about the text; however, many first time readers find the shift to ARG player frustrating because the novel fails to meet the reader’s initial expectations of her role and does not provide enough of a compelling context to prompt the reader to the desired extra-textual actions. The narrative has to be strong enough to provide the reader with desire to become a player and the researched information has to add enough depth to the story that the reader-player feels like her play matters (generates knowledge and pleasure). An example of one way the system can fail to transform readers into players is through the game’s entry point, the website
www.doubletalkwireless.com. However, the link leads to a page that is “under construction.” Anecdotally, when I taught this book in a sophomore-level YA novel course, most of my students took this page to be a dead end and gave up on the ARG immediately. Had they taken a moment to click on the “who we are” link or to notice the suspicious check messages box, they might have found the entry point to the game itself. However, they were not prepared for the level of activity the text demanded of them in order to fully enjoy the text. Conversely, those who were versed in playing online riddle games or other ARGs found it easier to travel deeper (and understood the purpose of doing so) into the paratextual elements of *Cathy’s Book*. *Cathy’s Book* extends to readers the same respect that Golden Age writers did: “these writers produced texts that presuppose the existence of socialized, literate, and sophisticated child readers” (Gubar 25). While the novel employs dual level narration to help prepare a novice reader-player, it refuses to directly divulge its rules or confront the reader-player with the game directly. *Cathy’s Book* prefers instead to let the meaning and the game emerge based on the reader-player’s effort.

By using her knowledge of ARGs and online riddles conventions, the savvy reader-player can alter her experience with *Cathy’s Book*. She can short circuit the linearity of the information divulged in the main narrative that comes out of reading the book from start to finish. After the player has looked up some of the *Cathy’s Book* websites, she can identify the page naming conventions and use that to access information she should not yet have encountered. Reader-players can take temporal control over the narrative by exploiting their understanding of how the interface works. For example, without reading any of the book itself, the reader-player can sort through
the evidence packet and call the phone number for Chang Kuo Lao on the “FDex USA Airbill” document. Calling the number leads to a voicemail message suggesting that the listener go to luckyfortuneforyou.com. If the reader-player visits the site, she finds that she can enter birth dates (and other important dates) into the web form and produce fortunes that reveal cryptic clues about characters. While the intension is for the reader-player to enter in the birthdates that she discovers as she reads them in the text, a player familiar with the URL naming conventions can find information on Cathy, Victor, or Cathy’s father just by altering the URL. Entering Cathy’s birthday into the Lucky Fortune site yields a page with the url http://www.luckyfortuneforyou.com/cathy.html. A quick check reveals that changing “cathy” to “victor” reveals his fortune and changing “cathy” to “father” reveals clues that make Cathy’s father’s death ambiguous.

The ARG elements and the reader-player’s participation in the game have the effect of foreshadowing the supernatural plot twists and making the immortality of some main characters less shocking. As the reader-player is able to discover facts before Cathy herself reveals them, the mystery and discovery process gives the reader-player background on immortality and supernatural ancestry before they become necessary elements of the novel’s plot. This has the added effect of allowing the reader-player to feel competent and superior to the flawed child character, Cathy. The reader-player knows more about the mystery than Cathy, putting the active reader-player in a position of power and allowing her to judge Cathy’s actions from the position of a knowledgeable authority. This is not a new technique, although the media used to facilitate this mastery is. Gubar suggests that by using child narrators and by depending on the reader to actively interpret language games and narrative tricks, even Golden Age texts allowed
readers to refuse identification with the narrator’s (weak) unknowledgeable position: "That is to say, rather than feeling personally implicated when child characters make one careless, disastrous wish after another, readers have the option of feeling exasperated with and wiser than their textual counterparts" (140). Participating in the ARG allows the reader-player to feel wiser than both diary-Cathy and marginal-notes-Cathy; the reader is able to stay one step ahead and the pleasure of that position of power drives her need to more fully explore the ARG.

Readers who struggle to transition into a role as reader-player can feel left out of the discovery process and alienated from the text and its characters. This causes a disconnect between the reader’s expectations of the text and what the text actually delivers. Perhaps if my students had been able to follow along with the ARG elements, they would have felt less betrayed by the fantasy shift in the narrative and not found Victor’s immortality so shocking, disturbing and unexpected. Requiring the level of participation and play that Cathy’s Book does forces readers to confront their passive inclinations to accept the narrative as written. This intense reciprocation between text and reader is not, however, just a trait of current media-enhanced texts. Gubar suggests that Lewis Carroll’s fiction enacted this same kind of forceful feedback loop with readers but did so by requiring readers to question and access shared cultural knowledge. She notes that Carroll’s work showed "recognition of the fact that the kind of literature he prefers demands a great deal of imaginative exertion from child readers; it prods them into participating at a higher level of engagement. Taking someone who is used to being passive and forcing them to be creative is an aggressive act" (Gubar 119). So while intermediation with current media-enhanced texts opens up opportunities for complex
feedback and emergent meaning that were not possible before, it is also part of a historical tradition of forcefully engaging the reader with an assemblage of texts and intertextual knowledge.

The collaboration and collective intelligence media-enhanced texts support hinges upon their intertextual and intermediated nature. Collective intelligence is collaborative and plays a large role in structuring the connections among the components of a transmedia constellation. Pierre Lévy explains the roots of collective intelligence as inherent because we are never without language: “The exercise of such cognitive abilities, however, implies a collective or social element that has generally been underestimated. We never think alone but always as an element of a dialogue or multilog, either real or imagined….Our intelligence possesses a significant communal dimension because we are creatures of language” (Becoming 123-124). His ideas are then applied to current cultural phenomenon and media convergence by Henry Jenkins: "Collective intelligence refers to this ability of virtual communities to leverage the combined expertise of their members…. These communities, however, are held together through the mutual production and reciprocal exchange of knowledge” (Convergence 27). The knowledge present because of collective intelligence is not shared, common knowledge that every has but rather “the sum total of information held individually by the members of the group that can be accessed in response to a specific question” (Jenkins, Convergence 27). Reader-players who are working with The 39 Clues and Cathy’s Book are creating these supplementary communities of pooled intelligence, where each individual player may fail to have the skill or knowledge to
make sense of the texts but has access to the abilities of other member(s) of that community to generate the necessary knowledge.

Both The 39 Clues and Cathy’s Book create official online databases of knowledge about their worlds. Users counter the control of that knowledge through both authorized collaboration (creating allies and using official forums) and unauthorized pooling of resources and utilization of collective intelligence (creating walkthroughs, unofficial forums, and by extending the reach of the texts into other media). The doubletalkwireless site has official forums filled with posts of players looking for help identifying ARG clues and relying upon the distributed knowledge of the Cathy’s Book community to augment the individual player’s experience. These forums also allow players to start discussions about the ambiguous events in the novel, supplementing the Cathy’s Book experience with their own writing and their own solutions/desires. These knowledge communities then add more layers to the assemblage of texts and fuel reciprocation between the constellation of elements that constitutes a text like Cathy’s Book and the individual reader-players enmeshed in it.

Yet, Cathy’s Book misses one of its best opportunities for allowing reciprocation and emergent meaning. While the novel utilizes ARG elements, it does not include the major component of an effective ARG, direct participation with other players as the game unfolds. Cathy’s Book puts the reader in play with the novel’s characters and not officially with a community of other players; as such, the game is more reactive than it is reciprocal. While the users have built community forums and maintained a database of game knowledge, they are not actively cultivating collective intelligence the way most ARGs require. In a traditional ARG, players would need other players in various
locations and with a wide variety of knowledge to solve complex clues affected by distance and temporality in the real world. *Cathy’s Book* can essentially be played alone. The reader-player does not need anything but the text and its clues and game supported websites to find all the secrets. This may be in part because of the limitations of attaching a normally temporary ARG to the lasting form of the book and keeping all the resources available indefinitely. The game for *Cathy’s Book* has to be sustainable and has to allow for readers to start it up at any time; this means that the designers cannot plan temporally triggered events and must set the game up to allow the broadest access possible. In an interview with Michael Andersen for ARGNet, Sean Stewart discussed their major design choices:

> We determined that the thing HAD to work as a book, first and foremost; if you never did any of the ancillary material, you still had to have an enjoyable, satisfying experience. So I wrote Cathy’s story, if you will, much as I would a regular book. We used the extra material to fill out the life of Cathy’s love-interest, Victor. Readers looking through the extra evidence can eventually work out almost every detail of the Many Lives of Victor, from gold camp ragamuffin to WWI flying ace to mobster, and so forth. (par. 7)

The book takes the primary position and the game is meant to round out the reader’s experience. This limits the possibilities for emergence because the reader-player relationship is skewed to the position of “reader.” By relegating the knowledge confined within the ARG to background about Victor’s (unnecessary but helpful) history, the player realizes that her input and feedback with the game component of the transmedia cluster have little value and power beyond her own desire for extra context.

While *Cathy’s Book* has some elements that place the player (with her power of selection and willingness to participate) in a complex system of interactions with the material interfaces she uses (book, computer, cell phone), its utilization of collective
intelligence and responsiveness to the user’s experience and knowledge could benefit from less structure and more flexibility to allow communal player experiences. Most of the ARG elements in Cathy’s Book lead to shallow knowledge and connections. The book gives the player a phone number for a voicemail system and then a business card in the evidence packet leads the player to the password for the voicemail. That password unlocks a message that tells the player something about Cathy’s character. While that knowledge about Cathy adds to the player’s sense of the game world and character development, it does not necessarily lead to further play (the player is not prompted to use that information to take more action). Then the player moves on to another element which has 2-3 steps to discover another bit of information. Full-blown ARGs, however, are built on the premise of deep, interconnected knowledge built from the power of collective intelligence. Artifacts lead to clues which lead to phone calls which lead to research, which leads to interactions with other players in other places. The knowledge the players’ gain in a true ARG has more of an effect on their overall experience and allows for emergent possibilities because of the multiple interactions with other players. The ARG element of Cathy’s Book is not integral. The novel makes sense without any of the enhancements, so the player feels less like her feedback matters and her experience has little influence on the larger system.

Overall, the participatory, media-enhanced texts are best understood as a process—a complex interaction between users’ expectations, the rules the systems create to govern acceptable actions, the narratives systems use to make those rules seem natural and meaningful, and the ways users collaborate with or against the system, often depending on the collective knowledge of other reader-players. A
framework of intermediation that examines reciprocation, recursion, and collaboration helps us to make sense of this complex collision of forces, acknowledging both the material and the subjective elements that influence the meaning-making process.

**Trace Memory & Scribblenauts**

The 39 Clues and *Cathy’s Book* represent the book-oriented part of the spectrum of game-book hybrids. The 39 Clues has the least integrated game experience, where book and game have little tangible influence on each other. *Cathy’s Book* operates closer to the middle of the spectrum where the novel is still the primary means of participation and the game, while meaningful, is not integral to the experience. Cing’s *Trace Memory* and 5th Cell Media’s *Scribblenauts* represent the other side of the game-book hybrid spectrum. Both are games first (rule/task driven) and narratives second. *Trace Memory* pitches itself as an interactive mystery novel, trying to balance the rule-based interaction of the game with a highly-structured, linear story. *Scribblenauts*, on the other hand, represents game-book hybrids that favor mostly game elements, but it does allow the player to generate text—making her into the writer of her own narrative as she plays. These games challenge players to think of them as participative fictions and ask the player to take on the tasks of a reader. Similar to the historical game-books and to the media-enhanced game-books, these DS games depend on users’ intertextual knowledge and generic schemata to function, giving the games coherence and making them enjoyable. The manipulation of reader-player’s expectations/knowledge and her resistance and reaction to that manipulation is part of the recursive, feedback loop that makes these video games intermediated. The ways *Trace Memory* and *Scribblenauts* create a relationship between the rules of play and the game narrative directly communicates to the player what actions, knowledge, and
identities are most meaningful. How each game enables actions and how the player is invited to participate and embody the narrative has ramifications for how the text transmits values to the player. I focus here on *Trace Memory* and *Scribblenauts* because they represent opposites on the spectrum, with *Trace Memory* as a closed, rigid structure and *Scribblenauts* as an open, user-responsive system.

While game-books like The 39 Clues and *Cathy's Book* are noteworthy examples of intermediation because of their breath of connections through various media, DS games like *Trace Memory* and *Scribblenauts* are compelling because they privilege a different aspect of intermediation: materiality and embodiment. They illustrate more concretely the “entanglement” of user and media:

A major implication of entanglement is that boundaries of all kinds have become permeable to the supposed other. Code permeates language and is permeated by it; electronic text permeates print; computational processes permeate biological organisms; intelligent machines permeate flesh. Rather than attempt to police these boundaries, we should strive to understand the materially specific ways in which flows across borders create complex dynamics of intermediation. At the same time, boundaries have not been rendered unimportant or nonexistent by the traffic across them. […] Boundaries are both permeable and meaningful. (Hayles, *Mother* 242)

*Trace Memory* and *Scribblenauts* show the ramifications of entanglement—what happens when boundaries are “permeable and meaningful?” Because the boundaries of the system (the DS) are much clearer in these games than in the multiple interfaces of the media-enhanced novels, these games provide an opportunity to understand the significance of the interface to the player’s subjective experience and why a discussion of the interface is inseparable from any understanding of participative children’s media. The player’s encounter with the physical manifestation of information yields many possible narrative meanings, all of which emerge from the process of the player and the technology (the DS) working together. *Trace Memory* is far less successful than
Scribblenauts at creating game play that allows for emergent narratives (a balance between narrative and rules; user desires, motivation, control, and the system’s goals); Scribblenauts includes game play that dynamically changes based on the knowledge and attitude the player brings to the game. Trace Memory, on the other hand, is designed to follow a rigid, linear narrative that the player cannot meaningfully disrupt. Both games, however, further illustrate the position of the reader-player as one of narrative interpretation/generation, negotiation and questioning/enacting knowledge in relationship to a system.

Trace Memory is the story of Ashley Robbins as she tries to discover the truth about her parents’ deaths and her own memories. She travels to Blood Edward Island to meet her father (who she had thought was dead) and to confront him about his disappearance. She arrives on the island the day before her 14th birthday and must search for her father, her aunt and key memories of her past. The player controls Ashley and must explore the game area, solve riddles and puzzles, and respond to quizzes at the end of every “chapter” of game play in order to uncover Ashley’s past. Trace Memory’s storyline and play options are not particularly innovative. Successful completion depends primarily on players achieving certain goals and those actions trigger new dialog or open up new areas for exploration. The player cannot do anything of consequence out of sequence, although she can spend a great deal of time wandering hopelessly around without completing any goals if she likes.

The intriguing element of Trace Memory then is the way the system calls the player’s knowledge and expectations into question and, subsequently, the player’s ability to interfere with the game’s demands and ideological preferences. A seasoned
mystery adventure game player would come to *Trace Memory* with the expectation that she should explore all playable areas, pick up whatever she can, and use those items on whatever objects are available until she triggers task completion. Most adventure games do not require or reward knowledge of dialog or character development; the rules and tasks of the game take precedence over the narrative, even though the narrative that provides the motives for and meaning of the actions the rules stipulate. *Trace Memory*, however, forces the player to take on the identity of a reader and commit the narrative and character relationships to memory by literally quizzing the player about the plot and dialog. The game literally reinforces its positioning as an interactive mystery novel by explicitly calling the game sections “chapters.” To prepare the player for this divergence from popular game conventions, the game tries to trigger the player’s interest in the dialog at the outset by issuing a warning. Captain, one of the first characters the player meets, cautions Ashley about remembering the game’s events: "Just keep repeating whatever [you want to remember] in your head." Ashley recalls this for the player at the end of the game’s first chapter, "I'm suddenly reminded of Captain's words from earlier.' Just keep repeating whatever it is in your head. You won't forget.' Repetition is the key. Yes. I have to keep repeating the facts in my head." The player must then take the first chapter quiz. The quiz questions challenge the reader-player to recall character names and solidify character traits in the her mind.

Whereas most games make the player sit through dialog and cutscenes but do not make the experience of the narrative integral to advancing the game later, *Trace Memory* instead forces players to actively keep the narrative in mind. To achieve narrative cohesion, the game disguises quizzes as Ashley’s internal monologue where
she struggles to commit the timeline of events to memory. For example, at the end of the game’s first chapter of play, Ashley says “Using the letter [Dad sent me], I tracked him to the island, but when we arrived, he wasn’t there. The first person who went to look for him was . . .” and the player selects one of the multiple choice options to complete the thought (Cing). Ashley then reacts to the player’s selection by either pretending that the answer is her sudden memory or by berating herself (and, by extension, the player) for not remembering correctly and re-posing the same question.

*Trace Memory* places a premium on dialog and the practices of “tracing” memories and building knowledge about characters’ pasts and motivations. If the player is incorrect, she must do the question over again until she successfully completes it; the game uses her failure to indicate that she has glossed over important elements and should take more care in exploring the area and remembering the dialog. Even the process of failure and having to re-do the questions multiple times reinforces the dialog and plot elements the game wants the player to remember—the narrative is inescapable.

The quiz questions are in keeping with the game’s premise, but they are in conflict with the genre expectations of most players. Often, recall of plot points is unnecessary because the game structure depends on meeting the right sequence of actions or goals, not on recall of plot for advancement. *Trace Memory’s* system of recall locks the player into a linear narrative progression with no chance at emergent meaning because she cannot change the outcome of the dialog nor the response that she gets from NPCs. Her only control comes through deciding the order in which she asks questions to an NPC, but that order does not change the resulting answer. This high level of narrative control makes the player’s few choices seem meaningless. There is no
reciprocation between the player and the system because the player’s input has no influence in the game world. While her ability to manipulate the stylus and explore the game world seem like promising elements for reciprocation (Gubar) between text and reader-player or even for recursion (feedback with emergent possibilities via Hayles), the player’s inability to create any meaningful change. The game does not make her input an essential element of the interpretative process.

While the quizzes represent a method of controlling the flow of play and emphasize a specific narrative meaning, the player does have some options for resisting the way the game structures knowledge, space, and actions by choosing the trial-and-error method for answering the quiz instead of re-exploring the area. The player might also choose to work outside of the boundaries of the game itself and consult an online walkthrough relying on the gaming community’s collective knowledge and skills to relieve the individual player’s frustration. Many of the online walkthroughs and forum posts about *Trace Memory* express frustration over the mismatch between gamers’ expectations and the game’s requirements.\(^{18}\) The tension these players express is a result of an imbalance between narrative richness and operational rules. By excluding the player from meaningful in-game control, *Trace Memory* forecloses the possibility of deep, intermediated experiences, refusing to acknowledge the user as an important component in the textual assemblage. *Trace Memory*, through its novel-esque format of chapters and long, dialog sequences, tries to shift the player from focusing on building skills for *how* to play like using the buttons, interface, and maps to building a sense of *what* they played (narrative recall). *Trace Memory* uses its structural elements to reinforce the role of reader within the reader-player.
Most games privilege rules over narrative substance, but *Trace Memory*, as an “interactive mystery novel come to life,” places a high premium on dialog and the practices of “tracing” memories and building knowledge about the characters’ pasts and motivations. Since *Trace Memory* explicitly focuses the player on the game’s narrative, how the play style and the narrative point-of-view support the narrative are important. The game is portioned out into 6 chapters and an epilogue, each marked by a chapter heading that begins the sequence and a quiz sequence at the end. Only a certain portion of the geographical area of the game world is accessible in any given chapter, and once a chapter is completed the player cannot normally regress to earlier areas. The player is also unable to replay completed puzzles and once an object has been used or an action has been taken it is irrevocable. This structure suggests to the player that the safest and best method of play is to explore all parts of an area for valuable items and extras before taking any actions that might trigger progression in the narrative. The narrative reinforces this structural preference by lauding Ashley for her childish inquisitiveness. The captain tells her: "You're a bright young lady. [...] Very Inquisitive. I'd say. So be careful, OK? . . . Don't become one of those boring adults who doesn't ask questions" (Cing). To which Ashley responds: "Yes, sir" (Cing). After this exchange, Ashley’s purpose in the game becomes to explore and question. The quizzes even reinforce this element and extend it to the player—the player should not be the kind of child who does not pay attention to the details, stories, and memories. The player learns that the correct performance of childlikeness is predicated on absorbing knowledge from exploration and from careful attention to the words of adults. The player
should be invested in asking questions and being critical about the answers Ashley (and she) receives.

An earlier conversation between Ashley and her aunt, Jessica, puts an even finer point on the qualities that make Ashley valuable. Jessica refuses to question Ashley’s father when he leaves 3-year-old Ashley in her care. Jessica explains to teenage Ashley that “I didn’t want to learn something that might put us in danger.” Her aunt’s refusal of knowledge means that Ashley’s past and memories, as well as her identity are unstable. The larger purpose of the game is for Ashley to realize that knowledge is a powerful tool and that, without memories to give actions context, a child cannot feel comfortable with her identity or powerfully in control of herself.19

As Ashley recovers her own memories of her mother’s murder, she learns that other characters in her life cannot be fully trusted. This makes her critical of all of the events in the game and forces her to keep reworking what her nightmare memory of her mother’s death means. Her narrative process is again reflected structurally in the quizzes, making the player revisit the story continually and question the events that have occurred. As the plot progresses, Ashley discovers that her father’s work was centered around creating false memories that people believe are real, which just leads her to further question herself and how she can discern truth from falsehood. All of these narrative elements encourage the reader-player to conclude that meaning is unstable and identity is created collaboratively as an outgrowth of memory, story, and action.

While the game does suggest that Ashley (and the child player) question the authority of memory, it still reinforces the need for Ashley to remain childish. She needs
to retain the inquisitiveness the captain commented on and maintain her openness and innocence. In the game’s first chapter, Ashley meets the youthful ghost, D, who has lost all his memories (even his memory of his full name). She can only see D because “People with clouded minds can only see what’s in front of them” and her “heart and mind are pure.”. On the surface, the game’s narrative suggests that childish innocence, protection from death, and open inquisitiveness are all positive characteristics—ones the adults in the game reinforce and manipulate. Ashley’s major refrains during the game are “I don’t understand” and “What do you mean by that?” While the player might understand the implications of what the adults say, Ashley has to continually ask what things mean. The captain reinforces Ashley’s status as a child by refusing to allow her to think about death, despite the importance of death to her nightmares and her search for her own identity. He explicitly asks for her age and when she answers that she’ll turn 14 the next morning, he says that death is an inappropriate topic for her, softening her exclusion from adult knowledge of death by saying, “The question of why people die is too big for anyone to answer.”

Against his advice, Ashley and D are both tackling the question of death and its relationship to identity. Ashley must help D recover his memories so he can remember why he died as a child and move on into the afterlife. By helping D recover his memories and his name, Ashley ends up facing her own memories and building a stronger identity. Her knowledge comes from confronting exactly the topic the narrative suggests is out-of-bounds for children. Ashley is only allowed to grapple with death because, on the surface, she seems constantly insecure and in need of direction (from adults especially). Her incessant “I don’t know what to do” serves to mask her
competence in the guise of childlikeness and frees her to discover what the adults (with their “clouded” minds) cannot. The game narrative is ambivalent as to the important qualities of childhood, having the adult characters voice particular redeeming traits but having Ashley succeed because she strays from those traits in acceptably cloaked ways.

By representing Ashley’s memory as faulty and manufactured, the game asks the player to question the nature of memory and discovery. This questioning requires a player who is also a reader—one who is focused on interpretive possibilities as much as she is focused on game experiences. The game’s unique positioning as a game-book hybrid encourages this kind of mind play along with the physical game play. The only user input the game truly reacts to is whether the player fully restores all of D’s memories. This makes the reparation of memory and restoration of identity the only meaningful purpose of game play. The only actual way to fail in the game is for Ashley to not recover all of D’s memories by the time she recovers her own. If she has not found all the items that trigger D’s realization, she won’t be able to help him cross over, leaving him stuck on the island while she returns home. All of the player’s choices then matter only to decide the outcome of one cut scene. Ashley’s future is assured either way.

The game also uses D beyond his narrative function as a way to naturalize the spatial limits and rigid sequencing of the game, making sure the player cannot diverge from the main goal. Several rooms that the player has Ashley enter require her to find the significant object before she is allowed to leave. When she tries to leave a room without finding all necessary clues, D chides her, “Ashley, let's look around this room a
little more carefully” (Cing, Butler’s Room). The game does not give the player the opportunity to make meaningful decisions and does not create room for the player to fail. This leads to awkward moments where the player’s knowledge is in conflict with the knowledge available to Ashley. The player’s intertextual experiences and recognition of the generic traits of a mystery adventure game mean that she is often one step ahead of Ashley’s consciousness in the plot. In game-books like The 39 Clues and Cathy’s Book the ability of the reader-player to be more competent than the protagonist can be liberating, allowing the reader-player to have more knowledge and power than the child character. However, in Trace Memory, the player’s intertextual knowledge is not respected; she must wait for the game’s narrative to reveal the context for actions to Ashley and the player cannot further the plot acting on her own assumptions. The way the system structures object collection exemplifies this tight control over sequencing and refusal to allow the player any personal control. For example, when the player comes upon a hammer in a chest, previous experience with adventure games would dictate that hammers are useful inventory items and she should collect it. Ashley, however, has no current need for a hammer (that she knows of) so she will not give the player the option to pick it up. Even after the player discovers a sealed, unopenable bottle in another room, Ashley will not recognize the hammer as a tool for destroying the bottle. It is not until the bottle becomes an important plot element and Ashley realizes (through a third examination of the bottle) that there is something inside it that the player is finally allowed to return to the chest, retrieve the hammer, and break the bottle (Chapter 3).
The game controls do attempt to help the player embody the story—making *Trace Memory* more game-like/exploratory and not just a plot with movable characters. Since *Trace Memory* wants to privilege the narrative and not the game skills, it sets up the player as a mirror for Ashley. The first item Ashley receives in the game is a DTS. The machine replicates almost exactly the design of the player’s DS. This makes the controls of Ashley’s DTS familiar to the player (evoking her existing experience instead of building new skills). This also puts the reader-player in line with Ashley’s goals in the narrative. Since Ashley is using a DS-like machine to record, facilitate, and recover her memories, the player is doing the same—using her own DS to experience Ashley’s memories as if she were in Ashley’s mind. This mirroring helps foster player identification with the character, even while the game’s strict control over the player’s movements and choices alienates her from embodying Ashley as an avatar.

The DTS is also important to the game’s message about identity. Ashley searches for and receives several DTS cards as the player explores Blood Edward Island. These cards should seem familiar to players because they look exactly like game cartridge for the DS. Ashley and the player can read journal entries and notes off of these game cards, using them to fill in the backstory and context for Ashley’s situation and helping the player solve Ashley’s mystery before Ashley herself does. The game allows some of the DTS cards to be optional—they are bonus material for intrepid reader-players who take the game’s advice and explore everything. The player who manages to find all the DTS cards and all the objects that trigger D’s memories is treated to the best ending, where Ashley touches D’s hand and allows him to move on into the afterlife. An uninvested player who refuses to be positioned as a reader and
does not follow the game’s premise meticulously does not reach the feel good ending nor does she receive the distinction of having a starred save game file, which allows her to replay the game with some story modifications and new secret puzzles. While these bonuses are relatively feeble motivation when compared to the bonuses that come from the prestige system of something like The 39 Clues online, they can increase player engagement. The low level of return on the time investment and the frustration that comes with finding every object in the game in the correct narrative order often outweighs the rewards the game offers at the end.

The point-of-view in *Trace Memory* is a strange mix of play types, and it curtails the identification of the user with the avatar divorcing her from a sense of embodiment in or power over the character. Most of the game is played from the third person perspective. The player uses her stylus on the DS’s touchscreen to designate Ashley’s path of movement, seeing a top down image and spending much of her time looking at the top of Ashley’s head. Any area that the player can examine pops an image of that part of the scene on the top screen of the DS. Pressing the “examine” icon on the bottom DS touchscreen moves a close up view of the area into the touchscreen and the player can then poke objects to have Ashley describe them out loud or do special actions like collect those objects or zoom in further. The player can also use the stylus to click on a bag icon and bring up a list of Ashley’s inventory. During dialog, an image of the speaking character and a textbox pop up on the top screen and a list of available dialog options (if any) appears on the bottom touchscreen. This maintains the third person point-of-view where the player is not inside Ashley, experiencing the world as if
she were the character. Instead the player is an observer, and she spends most of the game in this position of removal.

On occasion, however, the point-of-view moves to first person. The player completes the in-game puzzles as if she were seeing the world from Ashley’s eyes, making the player’s stylus an extension of and the controlling element of Ashley’s body. These moments of embodiment only happen when the player is collecting/examining objects or completing puzzles. They conflict strangely when actions trigger dialog and the player is moved suddenly from first person action to third person observation of Ashley’s head speaking. So while the first person moments allow for more engagement and make the player feel as if she is creating actions and the system is reacting to her, the continual transitions back to third person keep her from building an affinity for Ashley as a player avatar.

Similar to the shifting point-of-view, the dialog boxes are an element where player interaction appears to be meaningful, but through poor execution, they invalidate the player’s sense of power and control over the game play. During conversations, the game highlights important elements of the text in red. For example, when Ashley and D are discussing why Ashley can see him and what D’s problem is, all the player can do is click through each part of the conversation. The image of who is talking swaps back and forth to mimic the character dialog, until they reach a significant plot element:

D: You see past what’s right there. That’s why you can see me.
Ashley: O... K...
D: You must be the one.
Ashley: The one?
D: The one to recover my memories. (Cing, text color original)

At this point the conversation stops and the player has to select a response option. The words in red become an option in the player’s dialog screen. As she only has one
available option, the player must select “Recover memories” and then Ashley proceeds to ask D about the topic the player has selected. Since the player cannot produce new dialog options and since often the flow of the conversation only allows for one response, the pause for user input actually reinforces how little control she has instead of making her feel in charge of the game’s direction. After the player selects the “Recover memories” choice, Ashley and D continue to have a conversation back and forth, having 17 exchanges before the player’s next prompt:

D: So we’re kindred spirits. Ha ha ha!
Ashley: That was really corny, D. So, you can’t remember anything at all?
D: Well . . . There is one thing. I remember . . . (Cing)

The player again has one option called “D’s memories” and pushing it triggers another round of conversation between Ashley and D. Stopping the conversation when the player only has one selectable option (and you cannot exit a conversation in progress), serves little purpose. Since her choice does not matter (and even when she has more than one option, the order she selects has little significance), why not allow the characters to simply have the conversation from start to finish unless there is more than one dialog choice? All of the dialog choices in the game are necessary and none of them can lead to negative actions, which further erodes player confidence in her power to exert force in the game. As the player cannot respond incorrectly, the dialog choices are illusory and do not fulfill the purpose of generating player motivation and engagement. The failed attempt at embodiment (requiring the player to drive the meaningless conversation choices and the dissonance of the changes in point-of-view) discourages active, engaged play.
While I have thus far described *Trace Memory* as a mostly closed system that refuses many of the necessary elements of Hayles’ entanglement and recursive process of feedback between user and system, the game has a few moments that allow for the user to be a significant part of the process with the system. The first person puzzle solutions use the DS’s touchscreen and stylus to embody the game actions. The affinity between the game world action and the motions the player makes to cause those actions increase the player’s tactile connection to the game world. When Ashley needs to lower a drawbridge, the player grasps the drawbridge crank with the end of the stylus and rotates it as if she were turning a crank. This action is similar enough to the real world action that it seems natural and increases the player’s embodiment within the game. The player’s knowledge is respected and the game manipulates that knowledge to produce desired game outcomes. The game also uses innovate methods like having the player blow out candles by blowing into the microphone, closing the DS lid and opening it again to mimic making stamps on the screen, and by partially closing the DS screens to reflect the images from each screen onto each other. Each of these game skills closely replicates the actual real world action a person would take in the game situation. The game uses player’s familiarity with human actions to generate play that is different from common, disembodied game skills (space bar to jump, control to fire). These moments of parity help the player feel like part of the systems and momentarily confirm that her actions and abilities matter within the story.

One of the features of Ashley’s DTS is its ability to take pictures. The player, then, has the ability to take up to 30 pictures of any scene or observable object in the game. The DTS’s functions become a cover for the game to help the player enhance
her own memory and represent one area of significant player decision-making. By limiting the amount of photos the player can carry but including them as an element of game play, *Trace Memory* allows the player to decide within the game what elements she needs to recall. When Ashley discovers strange symbols on a sign, the player can choose to take a picture and thus avoid having to backtrack when that same symbol crops up in a mini-game later. The player can also help keep characters straight by taking pictures of their portraits or of the family tree that Ashley discovers. Since the camera function is left to the discretion of the player, it allows her to gauge what knowledge will be important later based on her understanding of game conventions and the narrative and to convert her knowledge into power later when she will have the tools to complete a puzzle without having to re-navigate the game as she is intended to.

The limitation on the player’s ability to take pictures is necessary to making this feature an element of emergence and reciprocation. If the player could keep every photo, she would not need to be selective and her intertextual knowledge would not be an important part of the decision-making and meaning-making process. By enacting rules and narratively connecting Ashley’s DTS to the player’s DS, the memory limitations seem natural and make the player’s selections more important. These small facets of the game suggest that there is a slight possibility for reciprocation and emergence, even in the most closed, traditional story, but that reciprocation and emergence are fostered by a more even balance of rules and narrative that takes the knowledge and abilities of the user into account in a meaningful way.

If *Trace Memory* is more a novel in game form, then *Scribblenauts* is certainly an emergent, spatially-based game. Unlike the previous examples, *Scribblenauts* does not
create a substantial narrative to provide background and cue particular player behaviors. *Scribblenauts* effectively puts the burden on the player to provide her own sense of narration with minimal prompting. Here the player is not only a reader-player but also a writer-player. She must actually select the language that creates the action within the game world and provide her own narrative motivations. The player’s general task is to manufacture a way for her character, Maxwell, to obtain the object he desires (a Starite); how she goes about it and why she chooses that method is up to her. Every level in *Scribblenauts* has two versions: puzzle and action. Puzzle levels have the goal of fulfilling the narrative prompt. Action levels have the goal of getting the Starite any way the player sees fit. In the action levels, the player can write the word “panda” and have Maxwell ride the newly created panda across the screen to the Starite. She can write the word ladder and have Maxwell climb the brand new ladder up a cliff to the Starite. In the puzzle levels, she creates any tool or object that will match the situation prompt, and she is rewarded with a Starite. The player becomes an active producer in a far more reciprocal and recursive system than *Trace Memory* or *The 39 Clues*.

However, even though *Scribblenauts* fosters emergent narratives and makes the player a necessary part of the meaning-making process, this seemingly powerful participation is still structured and has (necessary) limitations. For example, in the puzzle version of level 1-1 “The Gardens,” Maxwell is in a field with four characters (a policeman, a chef, a fireman, a doctor) and prompts the player “Hint: Give two of them what they would use in their hands.” The user can then create any item (that the game recognizes) to accomplish this purpose and win a Starite for Maxwell. For example, she can create handcuffs for the policeman and a hose for the fireman and reach level
completion. This type of game requires a player to do the work of creating any narrative. Unlike *Trace Memory*, which does not ask for user input and includes only a few tasks where players do more than click through dialog, *Scribblenauts* makes players’ choices matter and those choices have both expected and unexpected consequences. The hazard of a game like *Scribblenauts* (which only becomes a game when enacted by an individual player) is that the game cannot cope with all of the knowledge (or lack thereof) the player might bring to it. While the structure is open enough to allow for the narrative to develop through feedback between the game and the player, its technical limitations make it hard to create a fully realized emergent, responsive narrative.

The player is limited to the game’s dictionary of available items, item properties, and items’ specific visual representations. For example, the word “ladder” always creates a wooden ladder of a certain height. Specifying other materials (like iron, metal, cheese, etc.) occasionally creates a new item, but, more often, just results in the same visual representation of the item (sometimes with different/enhanced properties). For example, a “sword” and “Excalibur” are represented by the exact same graphic and perform the same function, but count as different items/different methods of completing a level. So while the two separate items accomplish the player’s goal, they do not, contrary to player expectations (e.g., knowledge of Excalibur’s mythical significance), provide any new actions, powers, or game play events. *Scribblenauts* creates an expectation that the player has unprecedented control over how the game scenarios unfold, but that expectation fuels player frustration when the technological limitations of the system do not match the player’s abilities.
Scribblenauts lessens the impact of its dictionary’s limits by carefully crafting what few narrative goals exist to limit what the player will think of to solve the puzzle. So, for example, if you give a chef a colander, the game recognizes and produces the object but the system is not robust enough to recognize that a colander is something a chef might use. On the other hand, the player can give the chef a bucket (a seemingly less common kitchen item than a colander) and that triggers task completion. The player may also give the doctor medicine or a syringe successfully, but the game does not count a tongue depressor as an appropriate object to meet the task goals. While the narrative prompts attempt to usefully narrow the possibilities for choice to allow the player to create emergent narratives within the limitations of the system and without noticing that her choices are being shaped, the system cannot account for enough vocabulary, cultural/regional context and behaviors to match the web of knowledge the player brings to the game.

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

*Scribblenauts* also depends on a player’s ability to name the objects she wants in standard English and to spell the objects correctly. While the game includes a suggestion system for when it does not recognize a word, players with limited spelling or language skills would struggle with the game. The game’s need to police players’ spelling can also be exploited by savvy players as an engine for discovery. As she misspells words or enters objects that the system does not recognize, the player is given one to three options that she might have meant instead. Those items are guaranteed to be recognized by the game, and they help build her problem solving skills and vocabulary while still technically being a function of her failure to enter the correct object that matched the game’s rules. This inversion of the system’s purpose is an example of an unexpected way a player can exert power by exploiting the system setup to accomplish her own goals and augment her own knowledge.23

While the initial sense of collaboration between system and user to create meaningful interactions seems liberating, in practice the coding/word database are (necessarily) not quite flexible enough to enact the game’s tagline “Write Anything. Solve Everything.” Thus, completing the various scenarios in *Scribblenauts* often becomes a collective enterprise. Players share tips, tricks, and solutions through web forums and walkthroughs. They encourage each other to test the database of words and find its limits. They create outlandish combinations of items in order to turn the frustration of limitations and unexpected object actions into enjoyment and building of collective knowledge. The game is then unintentionally becomes a transmedia
experience, with the forums becoming a site of motivation and narrative creation. By challenging each other online to come up with more combinations and test the limits of the system, the players use their collective intelligence to spawn more materials for other players to feed back into the game. The player community then alters the game’s purposes and designated tasks to fit players’ own desires for community play, repurposing the system and adding the motivation of playing against and with others to fuel continued play. *Scribblenauts* is an important example of how even the most reciprocal and intermediated text has limitations on the level of player control and involvement, even when a game-book creates an emergent experience that changes with each user.

**Intermediated Play: Game-Books, Transmedia Constellations and Shaping Reader-Players**

What all of the media-enhanced texts analyzed here show is that their meaning is far more complex than any one of their individual parts. The key element in understanding these texts and their place in the field of children’s culture is that their meaning and purpose comes from a *process* of entanglement between user and texts. These texts share many similar concerns and methods: their manipulation of reader-player’s expectations, their evocation of narrative storytelling and rule-based world building, and their use of collaboration and collective intelligence. These game-book hybrids encourage the child to become a reader-player by inviting her into the texts’ world in specific ways, responding to her (either passively requiring intertextual knowledge or actively, aggressively requiring her action and input from her) and creating official and unofficial knowledge communities. Understanding these elements is essential to discovering how complex systems like The 39 Clues shape our
expectations of the child. Viewing the child as a necessary collaborator (a player) in the textual assemblage does not mean that she needs to have control over the text. These game-books are part of the larger history of children’s texts that focus on building mastery over important social skills but presenting options for rebellion under the guise of a safe performance of “childlikeness” for adults: “But these are hardly narratives that portray children as autonomous masters of the universe. Rather, they are stories about collaboration, in which the weaker party (the child, who owns nothing) must learn to deal with the more powerful party (the adult, who owns everything)” (Gubar 58). If Golden Age texts presented stories of collaboration that the reader related to vicariously, these media-enhanced texts create embodied, collaborative feedback loops between the reader and the texts, asking the reader to both read/interpret and play/manipulate directly (as a “agent,” as an ARG player, as a stylus holder). While these current texts make use of the intertextuality, reciprocity and collaboration that we see in the historical game-books and children’s periodicals of the late 1800s, they also use digital and internet technologies to make possible a level of recursion, emergence, and embodiment that earlier participative texts could not.

Viewing the child as a possible collaborator instead of a passive, exploited recipient means that both the ways game-books define the limits of the reader-player and provide the reader-player with openings to wreak havoc on the text’s expectations and limits become essential elements to any analysis. As the historical games-books of Chapter 3 show, each text occupies a different position in the continuum of narrative-based or rules-based approaches to participation, and those choices help to define just how much of a player the reader can become. These texts are significant when seen
together as “game-books” because they showcase the importance of understanding how the reader-player is inserted into the text (embodiment through point-of-view, illustration, performance, physical manipulation, etc.), the ways the reader-player becomes involved in communities, and how the rules and narrative together affect the reader-player’s engagement with the text.

Game-books exist along a spectrum of entanglement, each positioning the adult/child, creator/reader-player, system/user differently to support that text’s ideals of childhood and knowledge. Intermediation, reciprocity, and recursion are models of understanding textual processes that are valuable beyond these media-enhanced game-books. As Nodelman states, "literary genres also exist as social actions—ways in which writers work to offer readers specific experiences of significance to a community and in which readers take part in or even are constructed as members of that community" (113). When discussing children’s literature as a field and as a genre, intermediation, collaboration and childlikeness can help us account for both traditional texts and media-enhanced or transmedia texts in a way that acknowledges their social actions. Language itself is communal and, therefore, any thinking, processing, writing, and acting we do stem from community action and our thoroughly intermediated and intertextual knowledge (Lévy, Becoming 48).

Transmedia constellations are easier to create, reproduce, and network with other constellations; the major shift we are seeing is not a fundamental change in how children’s literature operates but rather the ability to make readers into players on a much broader scale. Children’s texts have been demanding active (mental) participation and play since their inception—from children’s magazines and game-books from the
late 1800s, to tabletop role playing games like Dungeons and Dragons, to interactive fiction, choose your own adventure novels, and computer- or console-based adventure games. Focusing on the collisions between the material and the subjective via Hayles’ intermediation and interrogating how the child character and the reader are invited to become playful collaborators with texts provides us with a model to evaluate all children’s texts on the same terms. The core question at the heart of this model is: how does the text communicate to the reader/player/child the actions and knowledge that are meaningful within its specific model and what are the ramifications of that relationship for the reader-player.

Using Hayles, Gubar, and Nodelman together allows us to both acknowledge the binaries texts set up (child/adult, game/book, narrative/rules, knowledge/desire, and reader/player) and realize that those binaries are rigid but rather continually performed and modified on both sides. None of these game-books manages a seamless, unambiguous message or completely immersive, unmediated experience. Some create a more emergent, reciprocal experience; others privilege structure and narrative control; still others seek to shape behaviors by rewarding reader-players with knowledge, community status, or a sense of power; but all of these game-books illustrate that how the reader puts her knowledge and intertextual resources into play is invaluable to producing the meaning(s) of the text. The child readers of *St. Nicholas* magazine could not use Google to link up with a community of other players and pool their knowledge, but they could write in to the Letter-Box and create lasting relationships with other readers and the adult editors. While the editorial staff of adults may have had a greater control over the content of a community zone like the Letter-Box in the 1870s than the
control over a spontaneous online community today, both serve the same function of building readers’ knowledge base, introducing information reader-players might not have access to on their own, and hijacking a modicum of control over spaces that define childhood. Gubar writes, "Craik, Ewing, Molesworth, and Nesbit all characterize artistic agency not in terms of innocence and unproblematic autonomy but as a struggle that involves recycling, resisting, and revisiting preexisting narratives" (Gubar 42). Even in the Golden Age of children’s literature, children's agency and identities were being represented as reciprocal processes with complex relationships to adult power and the material text itself. While historical game-books are just as intertextual and collaborative, digital enhancements like avatars, styluses, recursive game worlds, and multiple interfaces allow for more direct physical embodiment and emergent meanings that react to the reader-player; they embed particular performances of childhood deeply across multiple media and need careful examination because of the complexity of their networked connections to the child. These game-books represent this contentious position of the reader-player both in content and in form, intentionally and unintentionally. Adopting the double frame of Gubar’s child collaborator and of N. Katherine Hayles’ intermediation will better allow us to analyze children’s culture and further reveal the complexity and uncertainty surrounding the portrayal and performance of the child.

Notes

1 Nodelman also states that children’s books create this performance of childlikeness by giving “the message ‘To please adults, you must pretend to a childish innocence you no longer possess. You must, in effect, enact childhood for an audience of adults who, the story has suggested, expect and want you to do so’” (Nodelman 27).
While some user expectations are predictable (what readers expect a diary to look like), others are unpredictable and depend entirely upon the level of experience and connections the user can and will make from her own existing knowledge.

The interweaving of the real and the fictional also serves to educate the uninitiated child to some real world social facts that she will be expected to master. The transmedia network simultaneously helps the child build and master knowledge while using that knowledge to move the games forward and forge other connections.

These mini-games do meet other of Henry Jenkins' qualities of environmental storytelling (necessary for “immersive narrative experience” in games (“Game Design" 123)) such as connecting to the storyworld of the novels and allowing the player to spatially experience the familiar narrative from a different perspective. The game element adds to the experience and depth of reader-player engagement: “Games, in turn, may more fully realize the spatiality of these stories, giving a much more immersive and compelling representation of their narrative worlds” (“Game Design" 122). Their possibilities for emergence are stymied by the mini-games' lack of flexibility to react to player input in any significant way that influences the outcome of the game.

The reader-player must decide if she is willing to take on the characteristics of the family branch she is slotted in to and whether she is willing to alter her play style accordingly. She must also decide whether to take the profiling quiz at face value (answer truthfully) or whether she recognizes the playfulness and multiplicity of interpretations that it invites her to make with its hyperbole and intense tone. If the player has no experience with the novels or cards (i.e., is a player only), she may not have enough knowledge to recognize her options for resisting the game's profile. On the other hand, if the reader has little experience with online games, she might not recognize the importance of separating characters into classes based on profiles. Familiarity with game conventions allows her to better understand that each branch of the family has special skills and unique weaknesses. Her ability to find places to add her knowledge to the transmedia narrative is predicated on her ability to recognize conventions and interfaces.

The online community does miss some opportunities for more user-system feedback and engaging, emergent experiences. The player’s online identity (username) is not integrated into the missions. NPCs refer to her not by her username/agent name but as "the player," which breaks some of the immersive qualities and excludes the player from coded-in participation (she is not invited into the game as a person with a unique identity). The mini-games also fail to change based on the player’s branch loyalty. “Mission 3: The Lost Diamond” has the player breaking into an Ekaterina safe, even if she belongs to the Ekaterina branch and should have easy access to what is inside (Scholastic). Moments like this show fissures between the narrative created by the books and the rules systems create by the games and limited by the game programming/options.

The interface is set up to focus the player in on the clue hunt, the playing cards and books available, the games and prizes she could win, and the game world information she can access. The website is built like a slick portal for a secret agent with screens the slide up and down, cool graphics, maps, and animation. It is meant to make her feel like an agent in the game and help immerse her but it actually gives too much access and misses some of the fun of discovery and possibility that it could include by making her work harder for access to all elements. The media-enhance components are constantly trying to strike a balance between the inclusive commercial impulses (the more players with easy access, the more product sold) and withholding enough info to make the experience within the community pleasurable and challenging (without losing player interest).

The 39 Clues online game continually pushes the player to read the books and buy the artifacts, but the actual books stand alone more effectively and are far more separate from the game component than those in Cathy’s Book. The appeals for the reader to become a player in The 39 Clues are mostly present in the extra-textual elements and on the book covers, with the embedded clues in the novels acting as a
hopeful overture toward joining the game online but with no direct references by the novels’ characters to
the game components.

9 Only the hardback book provides the evidence packet as a tangible artifact. The paperback version has
all of the evidence reproduced visually in the casebook insert in the middle of the book. The evidence
packet greatly affects the reader-player’s experience. For those who have the hardback edition, the
evidence packet with its newspaper clippings, napkins, business cards, notes, etc., is an automatic trigger
that this is not a conventional novel. The evidence packet needs to be explored and figured out, activating
generic schemas (or at least providing dissonance with the traditional reader’s expectations). However,
the paperback casebook does not replicate the feel and look of the artifacts, instead placing full color
picture inserts into the middle of the novel. The casebook is then easily overlooked and it does not trigger
the sense that Cathy’s Book is different from any other novel. The reader may not discover the evidence
until she is halfway through the text, missing an opportunity to spur her motivation to be a more active
participant and provide a gateway to the ARG elements that allow for emergent narratives. Note: the
original hardback is also the only version to include the controversial CoverGirl branding in the
illustrations and the body text.

10 This layering is also an example of how the reader is invited to play with the text. Cathy’s marginal
comments are obviously not written with Cathy as the audience but with the reader (and other characters)
in mind. Instead of drawing the reader in as part of “you” or as a character through an avatar, Cathy’s
Book draws the reader in as a participant in this reflective side conversation. The reader may not be part
of the plot but she’s part of the investigative dialog running alongside the plot.

11 ARG’s refer to this initial blend of game and reality as a “rabbit hole.” Readers who become players fall
down the rabbit hole much like Alice into a new set of conventions and points of view. They have to make
sense of a new world and the kinds of knowledge that other players in the world find valuable. Readers
who refuse actively participate with (play) the ARG miss out on the adventurous world building and
discovery that comes with playing along and exploring the depths of the extra-textual information.

12 This could be read either as a failure by the Cathy’s Book system to provide enough structure and
training for all readers to become players or as a gatekeeping system where only the already initiated and
the most engaged reader-players have access to the breadth of information about the story and game
world. Uninitiated readers must settle for the limitations of the diary by itself until they build up their own
mastery of game play and conventions to be able to return to the book and find the rabbit hole
themselves. Cathy’s Book is willing to provide some indicators of game play (through marginal comments)
but is unwilling to break the narrative immersion of its world to give direct instruction to readers about
exactly the game is played.

13 The different editions and formats of the novel (hardback vs. paperback) also played a role in this
frustration. The hardback version has a packet of physical objects and papers taped to the front flap
whereas the paperback has image reproductions of those same objects inserted in the middle of the
novel. Students with the hardback version of the book were more likely to explore and play along. When
presented with the more standard format of the paperback, the students were less willing (and less
prepared) to play because the format was that of a traditional novel.

14 It is interesting to note that Gubar uses Carroll as an example for the violence of forcing readers to be
active players with a text when ARGs have adopted the “rabbit hole” as the terminology for both hiding
and providing an entryway into their games.

15 Cathy Vickers has her own Facebook page boasting over 2,000 FB users as friends! While the page
was created as part of the ARG and product promotion, the information shared between the reader-
players on that page acts as a spontaneous database of knowledge about the novel and game.

16 In an interview with Michael Andersen of ARGNet, Sean Stewart was asked what his favorite “out-of-
book” element in the Cathy’s Book trilogy was. He answered: “I think my favorite thing we did was to build
a gallery for readers to post their art…and then put some of those pictures in the printed books. There is
something very beautiful to me about closing that circle: the books invite you into Cathy’s life beyond the page, and then, eventually, circle around until your life is part of her printed world. That for me is a lovely version of The Dance – that cooperative give-and-take between artist and audience that seems so clearly to be part of what the next evolution of art will be” (par. 11).

In an interview with Michael Andersen of ARGNet, Sean Stewart noted that in a moment of very tangible reciprocation, readers are able to leave voicemails for Cathy when they call in: “There are THOUSANDS of them, and an incredible number are girls saying, ‘Oh, Cathy! What a bummer! Let me tell you about MY rotten boyfriend…’ And they share their stories with her, as girlfriends will” (par. 13).

The game can also cause frustration because it interferes with the normal atemporal experience of DS games. The player cannot just put the game down after each save point. If she leaves the game too long, she can no longer answer the narrative questions and has to replay, guess, or cheat to advance. So instead of relying on the player’s spatial memory or hand-eye coordination as primary methods for advancing the game, it makes recall essential and, therefore, encourages players to sit through the game in one “read.”

This is further reinforced by the types of questions the quizzes ask. They often want the player to recall people’s names which privileges naming as an important part of identity. By fixing people’s names and relationships to Ashley in her memory, Ashley is able to hold power over them, create a narrative around those named people, and use the stories and knowledge she discovers to shore up the gaps in her own identity.

This is another example of the power of naming on identity. When D regains his memories, he regains his name. Once he has a name, he can move on into the afterlife. Without a name, D remains incomplete and inaccessible. Owning a name/identity is put forth as an important component of maturation and coming into social power.

In a way, the DTS’s incorporation within the game and the supplemental cards the player can pick up to learn the characters’ backgrounds create a meta-transmedia constellation. The virtual DTS and cards are an extra layer on top of Trace Memory the game that helps deepen the player’s immersion in the game world and encourages interpretative and playful reading of the game.

The list of inventory items is a common game convention but here there is a missed opportunity for embodiment by not having the player actually rummage through Ashley’s bag for items instead of opening the bag only to be presented with a list of its contents.

The sequel to Scribblenauts, Super Scribblenauts, introduces an even more robust dictionary that allows for adjectives. This added player control addresses some of the limitations of the first game. Items can be modified by adjectives and those adjectives change the appearance of objects. Suddenly a dinosaur can become a “beelike mini dinosaur” and the game creates a tiny dinosaur with bee wings and yellow and black strips; or, the player can create an “equine bathtub” and get a furry bathtub that moves like an animal. The complexity is greatly increased and items merge together to generate all kinds of combinations, including a “zombified floating knight,” who proceeds to slowly float over an attack Maxwell. The player can certainly exhibit more creativity in coming up with combinations, but the game falls prey to many of the same limitations because it requires users to think of very specific combinations to complete levels that may not match the player’s existing knowledge.
CHAPTER 5
THE NANCY NODE: GIRL SLEUTH AS AVATAR IN A TRANSMEDIA CONSTELLATION

As shown in Chapters 2, 3, and 4, children’s participatory media, especially game-book hybrids, have a varied and complicated history. Each participatory text has acted as an interface, structuring the reader-player’s interaction with the information it contains. Whether children’s periodicals, instructional game manuals, game-book hybrids, or video games, these participatory texts are playful and responsive. They manipulate and manage the reader’s expectations, build mastery and connect new skills to familiar ones, define authorized ways of knowing, and allow the reader-player room to become a collaborator—imaginatively, intertextually, responsively, and/or physically. Each text creates its own unique relationship to knowledge, authority, community, and collaboration, but they all rely on an active reader-player to respond to the material structure of the text to create meaning.

This is a case study of a transmedia constellation that includes both books, games, and game-books. Based on one of the most iconic characters of popular children’s literature, the Nancy Drew transmedia constellation illustrates how participation is crafted and (re)defined, using examples from the original 1930s novels, the 1950s revisions, the game-book hybrids, and the current Her Interactive video game series. Focusing on how select iterations of the series act as loci in an intermediated network (gateway points to specific information in the Nancy Drew universe) allows us to see the process of entanglement among reader, texts, and network. Each text in the network uses Nancy as an avatar for the reader-player, giving her enough structure to make her recognizable in each form but allowing her to be flexible enough to accommodate social and cultural change. Tracking how various Nancys manipulate
reader’s expectations, create balance between storytelling and world building, and depend on collaboration and collective intelligence shows that it is Nancy’s position as sleuth that links each individual piece of the transmedia cluster. Nancy acts as a stand in for the kind of reader engagement and active negotiation/performances of identity that children’s media require. The original and revised Nancy Drew Mystery Stories exhibit similar characteristics to the more explicitly participative game-books discussed in Chapters 3 and 4. Their plots shape readerly desires and put forth a particular understanding of knowledge and performances of adolescence, which works in tandem with their structural impulses as interfaces which create and exploit conventions/predictability to foster narrative engagement and present childlikeness/adolescence as a performance and possible collaboration between adult authority and the character avatar/child reader. Examining the game-book hybrid, The Nancy Drew Sleuth Book: Clues to Good Sleuthing, alongside the 1930s and the 1950s revisions of the Nancy Drew Mystery Stories and the more current Nancy Drew: Girl Detective series helps illustrate the flexibility of Nancy as an avatar within a transmedia economy—she has a dual role. On one hand, she acts as a container for transmitting multiple images of the ideal adolescent, requiring only a few transcendent characteristics to make her identifiable while the context and narrative around her reflect the norms and values of the texts’ historical moment. But on the other hand she acts as a point of entry where the reader can become a sleuth—a player who can view those idealized characteristics of adolescence as tools to master and be adapted into a collaborative performance of childlikeness.
When the original Nancy Drew Mystery Stories hit the shelves in 1930, it is
doubtful that the Stratemeyer Syndicate, which controlled the novels, or Mildred Wirt
Benson, who ghostwrote the original novels, could have predicted Nancy’s longevity.
While many of the other Stratemeyer series for girls folded after a few years, Nancy
Drew survived. Her success has been attributed to many things, including her
empowered femininity, her positioning as an older teen (capable of driving/traveling
alone), and her portrayal as “levelheaded, quick-witted, fearless, and not always taken
seriously by adults, at least not at first. By the end of the story, though, she has
changed their minds and earned their respect” (Greenberg 70). While I think these
character traits add to Nancy’s durability, I posit that the Nancy Drew transmedia cluster
is compelling because Nancy functions so well as an avatar, a structured but flexible
embodiment of the reader in the text. Many of the Stratemeyer series for girls folded
because they made their heroines too specific to act as effective avatars. For example,
Carol Billman notes that while the first half of the Ruth Fielding series focuses on school
and adventures stories, “the other half of the series – the last fifteen titles – are stories
of Ruth’s skyrocketing career in the movie industry and of her personal growth from
schoolgirl to single career girl to wife and mother” (60). She goes on to say that the
Syndicate learned from the errors in the early series when they created Nancy Drew:
“they should freeze their protagonists in time by not allowing them to age” (Billman 77).
Ruth becomes a character—her situations are formulaic but her coming-of-age story is
very specific making her hard to transfer across media and too rigid to change with the
times. Conversely, Nancy becomes an avatar rather than a rigidly defined character—
she represents a set of skills (sleuthing behavior), remains in the amorphous “teenage”
category, and her romantic attachments are not developed to point that it affects
Nancy’s character (no wife/motherhood as development for Nancy). Nancy’s most important function (one that appears in every iteration) is her position as sleuth. She becomes a model for the reader and an accessible interface or topos for performances of childlikeness.

Nancy’s character has persisted, not unscathed, through a major revision of the Nancy Drew Mystery Stories in the 1950s, through the late 1970s TV show she shared with the Hardy Boys, through several films, and through the proliferation of Nancy series after the rights were sold to Simon and Schuster in the early 1980s. The newer series include the Nancy Drew Notebooks (1994-2005) and Nancy Drew and the Clue Crew (2005-) for younger readers and Nancy Drew on Campus (1995-1998) or most recently in the Nancy Drew: Girl Detective (2004-2012) for young adults. Nancy also stars in several video games including more than 25 computer games produced by Her Interactive, a company whose brand is almost exclusively built on selling Nancy Drew games, and several games for the Nintendo DS. While the context surrounding Nancy Drew and the medium through which she is conveyed has shifted over the past 90 years, her position as sleuth (and avatar for the adolescent reader-player) keeps people reading, watching, and playing her.

Nancy becomes the main vehicle for a reader-player to become involved the distributed, intermediated network of Nancy Drew texts. How the text chooses to push the reader-player toward mastery of skills and social meanings and the complexity of the feedback loops created when text and user interact are exemplified by the many
points of entry the Nancy drew books/games provide. In *Electronic Literature*, N.

Katherine Hayles points out that

> The book is like a computer program in that it is a technology designed to change the perceptual and cognitive states of a reader. The difference comes in the degree to which the two technologies can be perceived as cognitive agents. A book functions as a receptacle for the cognitions of the writer that are stored until activated by a reader, at which point a complex transmission process takes place between writer and reader, mediated by the specificities of the book as a material medium . . . Because the computer’s real agency as well as the illusion of its agency are much stronger than with the book, the computer can function as a partner in creating intermediating dynamics in ways that a book cannot. (57-58)

The Nancy Drew novels and the Nancy Drew video games are structured in specific ways to encourage certain “perceptual and cognitive” states within their users, but each requires the reader to become a sleuth (actively researching and creating meaning) like Nancy to create meaning from the text. The novels require an active reader who is willing to imaginatively participate and apply her intertextual knowledge to the text to create mastery and actualize knowledge. The games seem to offer an even more dynamic form of creating state change, allowing the player to test her knowledge against the rules of the game world and having the game world react to that knowledge. However, at least in the case of Nancy Drew games, the agency the games offer is often as illusory as that presented by the Nancy Drew books. The reader-player’s experience of the structure of the texts or games shapes and controls most of the information and messages she can access from them. By understanding how the reader-player is invited to participate with the text (embody the avatar) and the ways that invitation creates idealized performances of childhood (Nodelman’s childlikeness), we can also better recognize the possibilities of shadow texts and the intervention the child reader-player might make in a transmedia constellation.
Becoming Sleuth: The *Nancy Drew Sleuth Book* as Game-Book Hybrid

While the Nancy Drew novels clearly function based more on narrative and the Nancy Drew video games use operational logic and game rules to create immersive worlds, one of the most interesting iterations of Nancy Drew is the game-book hybrid, the *Nancy Drew Sleuth Book: Clues to Good Sleuthing* (first published in 1979 and reissued in 2007). This text demands both mental and physical participation from the reader, casting her as a reader-player who must embody the girl sleuth and test out her behaviors/skills. The novel is a collection of 10 short Nancy Drew stories and corresponding activities for each story that teach the readers basic elements of detective work. The introductory preface to the book reads:

“Of course we can solve mysteries as well as grown-up detectives.” This was Nancy Drew’s answer to a question from a group gathered in her living room in River Heights. “How would you like to form a detective club and have meetings at my house? Later we can solve some mysteries. What do you say?” Cheers and applause greeted this remark. Nancy suggests that you readers work along with the club and learn how to become amateur detectives. (Keene, *Sleuth Book* i)

Similar to the *Girls’ Book of Treasures* (1896) discussed in Chapter 3, the *Nancy Drew Sleuth Book* uses narrative to explain how its game is played. Each story revolves around learning one skill (handwriting identification, fingerprint identification, code breaking, etc.). the story presents the group of young women of the detective club taking direction from Nancy Drew in investigating a mystery where they must learn and then use a necessary sleuthing skill. Then the story is followed up with an activity explicitly addressed to the reader where she has to use those skills that were exemplified in the narrative. Here the narratives provide the context so that the rules for sleuthing become important. That the activities follow each specific narrative is telling for the text-reader relationship. The narrative is meant to help the reader feel engaged
with the activities; it gives the activities purpose and the reader should stay engaged because of her affinity for or identification with Nancy Drew and her detective club. For example, in Chapter 6, “Airport Chase,” the detective club learns how to be observant. First, the narrative describes the club meeting where Nancy instructs the members on “being observant so that from one quick glance at a person, you can describe him or her accurately” (Keene, *Sleuth Book* 66). This encodes the rules for suspect observation (the rules for the reader’s later activity) smoothly within the narrative, giving her the narrative to give her reasons to engage with the rules. Nancy’s instructional activity is then followed by a conflict within the story that requires the detective club to solve a case using the skill Nancy just taught the group.

The book invites more direct participation than the regular Nancy Drew novels by setting up the reader as an active investigator, but the rigid division between the activities (places where she actualizes knowledge) and the narratives keeps the participative functions of the book contained and separated. The reader must carry her narrative enjoyment over into the activities of her own accord to give those activities purpose. For example, it is hard to see the fun in reading the lost and found column of newspapers without the narrative promise of Nancy’s adventure with finding lost and found items. The narratives provide the playfulness and meaning that the activities alone lack. The relegation of the activities to the very end of each chapter makes this text more like *Girls’ Book of Treasures* (1896) where the divided book and game elements keep the reader from seamlessly performing as reader-player.

Similar to the *American Girl’s Book* (1846), the narrative sections of the text show a community of girls in action, playing along together. The novel is structured to inspire
the reader to play the game by showing how it is done (how a sleuth like Nancy Drew behaves) and then having the reader imaginatively participate through her identification with Nancy as the reader-player’s avatar. The Nancy Drew Sleuth Book makes the reader feel mastery over the text by giving her cues to help her solve the mystery along with Nancy (and perhaps before the other members of the detective club). In Consumerism and American Girls’ Literature 1860-1940, Peter Stoneley observes that in the Nancy Drew novels: "even the slowest reader is given emphatic hints as to how to construe the evidence. This means that when Nancy seizes on the truth, the reader does so at least as quickly" (133). Since the reader is privy to Nancy’s observations because of the omniscient 3rd person style of the book, the reader can draw conclusions and solve the mystery without being as limited as the novice detective characters Nancy is instructing. The reader is then explicitly called on to use the skills she learned from imaginatively experiencing the cases along with (or as) Nancy, putting them in action in the real world. For example, one of the stories ends with a large box saying “Activity:” “Nancy suggests that you play detective-for-the-day and go to your local mall or movie theater and observe people’s traits. Write down your notes and observations of passersby. Always remember to be subtle and try not to stare . . . too hard” (Keene, Sleuth Book 80). The reader is now asked to go beyond her role as interpreter/identifier and become a player—enacting the rules of observation the narrative has set up in her real life to embody being a sleuth. Similar to the early game compendia, these activity sections require the reader to take physical action to become a player. The narrative elements supply the reader with the desire to participate and the activities (and the rules for the skill) provide the structure for the reader to play within. This also suggests to the
reader that she is performing childlikeness (an appropriate presentation of non-threatening innocence). The child can “play” detective but even with her learned skills she should not mistake herself for a “real” (read: adult) detective. Nancy, then, becomes the face of what a performance of childlikeness would look like—powerful when she acts on her own, capable of instructing other more childlike than herself, but appropriately respectful of her status as non-adult. The other similarity between the Nancy Drew Sleuth Book and the early game compendia is the insistence on games as a communal/community activity. Just like the early game-book manuals’ riddle sections, the Sleuth Book uses the narrative to show a group involved in play (the girls’ detective club) and uses the structure of the text to reinforce group activity as positive (the activities that explicitly ask the reader to complete them with friends). The activity of sleuthing (researching, investigating, observing, active participation) is represented as a skill set that brings together a community and also places the reader-player-child into a network of knowledge that she must filter and access with others. Community knowledge and networked/intertextual connections are presented as important functions of childlikeness, which the reader experiences through identifying with Nancy as an avatar. Nancy is an embodiment of childlikeness that is adaptable; she can be used to present a broad variety of skills and can be used to deploy a wide variety of social messages about how the child should act in the real world and what knowledge is useful, should be discarded or should be hidden.

While most of the participation must be generated by the reader with minimal reciprocation from the text, the Nancy Drew Sleuth Book engages the child as both reader and player. The book is structured to pose Nancy Drew as an authority figure for
the child to aspire to. While the Nancy Drew novels allow the reader to identify with Nancy as supremely confident and capable, in the *Nancy Drew Sleuth Book* the reader is encouraged to identify Nancy as the instructor. The preface implies that learning sleuthing skills from Nancy allows the reader to take on adult positioning: “Of course we can solve mysteries as well as grown-up detectives” (Keene, *Sleuth Book* i). The inclusive “we” in the preface is an important indicator of imaginative involvement with the reader. Initially, the “we” operates similarly to that of the *Fireside Amusements* (1886) game-book. It asks the reader to become a player by including her in the narrative. But the preface also pushes the reader outside of the group of detectives in training and away from inclusion with “we.” The final sentence of the book’s preface states: “Nancy suggests that you readers work along with the club and learn how to become amateur detectives” (Keene, *Sleuth Book* i). The reader is decidedly excluded from the narrative “we” that will now be present in the rest of the novel—the reader is outside of the club, setting her learning apart from the text and simultaneously places the reader under Nancy’s authority. The *Nancy Drew Sleuth Book*’s narratives may provide the reader with a sense of engagement, but the participation it allows is designed to replicate traditional power hierarchies, and while Nancy as a character can triumph over adults and convince those in power of her conclusions, the reader’s relationship to Nancy is meant to be that of pupil. The tone of the instructions for the activities reinforces to the reader’s position as child—each activity starts with Nancy suggests and is then followed by a command that the child is expected to follow. The mode of address within the activities is also inconsistent across the book as a whole. The preface speaks to the readers directly as “you” and most of the activities follow this
style as well. However, Chapters 3 and 7 again distance the reader from engagement by slipping into 3rd person. The example from Chapter 7 states: “Nancy suggests that readers look in local newspapers under the Lost and Found columns and see if they can find any mysteries to solve” (Keene, Sleuth Book 98). The use of “they” here excludes the reader who is actively following along with the action.

While the Nancy Drew Sleuth Book offers more opportunities for physical participation than the Nancy Drew novels, its structure still potentially limits the reader’s participation. It makes small attempts to instill the value of community and to engage the reader in intertextual and transmedia play by suggesting she find her own sources to add depth to her experience. The use of the plural, “readers,” throughout the text implies that the single reader is part of a larger network of readers. The narrative further supports the structural push to a community of reader-players by asking her to become imaginatively involved with the detective club and, perhaps, replicate it with her friends in real life. Several of the activities explicitly request not only the reader’s participation but also include her network of friends: “Nancy suggests comparing your fingerprint with several of your friends’. Dip your thumb in blue or black ink and press it on white paper. Notice the different designs you and your friends have made” (Keene, Sleuth Book 24). The Nancy Drew Sleuth Book is structured to encourage a childlikeness that values community learning and group contributions, presenting a model for an intelligent community—one consistent theme in participative game-books is the trend to show the importance of collective intelligence (pooled resources) for child characters and readers. The child is even explicitly asked to research intertextual sources and place them in dialogue with the rules that the book has set up. Examples of this include the
aforementioned Chapter 7 activity that requires the child to find newspapers and
Chapter 9’s activity requiring libraries and maps: “Nancy suggests that you go to your
local library and see how your town or city was originally laid out. Look at aerial maps
and see how your town has grown and changed over the years. Compare how your
town looked when it was established with how it looks today” (Keene, Sleuth Book 128).
While the Nancy Drew Sleuth Book is not structurally transmedia or intertextual to the
extent of The 39 Clues series and does not fully integrate game and narrative like the
ARG book, Cathy’s Book, it does tangentially engage with other media as part of the
action and participation with the reader. However, without the embedded transmedia
links of The 39 Clues or Cathy’s Book, the burden of participation and engagement falls
to the reader to transform herself into a player instead of creating a more reciprocal and
seamless reader-player experience.

The Nancy Drew Sleuth Book is an important example of the permeable
boundaries between book and game. While it invites the reader to participate through
direct address, narrative involvement, and physical activity, it strongly structures play
and sleuthing as performed modes of childlikeness. The child can “play detective-for-
the-day” but the text encourages her to stay within the boundaries of adult authority.
The potential for negotiating the ideals of childhood are not as strong as they are with
more explicitly participative or ambiguous texts. Similar to the nineteenth century
periodical St. Nicholas, there is a subtle suggestion the reader might negotiate her own
performance of childhood by leveraging the skills she learns. She is encouraged to
become an operative in her real life community where she might solve her own
mysteries and use her skills to challenge passive reception of what happens around
her. However, the text still cautions the child to keep her skills covert: “Always remember to be subtle and try not to stare . . . too hard” (Keene, Sleuth Book 80). The child is reminded of the ever watchful presence of adult and social authority that might object to her attempts to be more than a play detective. The Nancy Drew Sleuth Book shows the reader that her function as player is important and can be transformative. Play is collaborative (both with the text and with the game community) can be used both to master necessary social concepts and to question those structures safely. Seeing Nancy as an avatar (a figure to aspire to, master, and then manipulate) encourages the reader to see both internalize and manipulate how the text (and the larger transmedia cluster) positions her as a child.

Structuring Participation: Revising the Nancy Drew Novels

Heretofore most of the examples of participatory media I have given have had a direct claim to participation and interaction. Children’s periodicals have editorial sections where child correspondents collaborated in creating performances of childhood. Books about games (instructional game manuals) narrated games and through the slippage of reader to player demanded mental and physical participation with the text. Books that operated as games required physical manipulation and used the narrative and rules to support reader-player engagement. Media enhanced game-books required users to switch seamlessly among media, depending on active, willing engagement and creating emergent rather than static meaning from the intermingling of source texts. The original and the revised Nancy Drew series novels, however, have an indirect connection to participation—they require only the most basic participation between user and text: a reader interpreting the written word (or image) and making meaning from it based on
the context of the reader’s experience. The reader becomes a player only insofar as she imaginatively inhabits the Nancy Drew character as an avatar. This interpretive participation is fundamental to all children’s media and the technology of the text (codex, gaming platform, etc.) is at least minimally interactive:

Interactivity refers also to reader and book. The changing formats of books enable a more active, involved reading. All books require active readers—that is, readers must construe meaning and interpret the text, regardless of format. But some books seem to expect readers to react in one particular way while others seem more willing to encourage a wide range of differing responses. (Dresang 12)

On the continuum of participation and interaction, the Nancy Drew novels are more rigid, with fewer possibilities for emergent meaning coded into the texts themselves. But the novels are an important entry point readers encounter as they enter the larger transmedia economy of Nancy Drew. The structure of the novels and how they yield imaginative participation and preference certain performances of childlikeness has an influence on Nancy Drew’s longevity/flexibility and her operation as a transmedia constellation. Nancy Drew has become a topos: "a stereotypical formula evoked over and over again in different guises and for varying purposes….Cultural desires are expressed by being embedded them within topoi. Functioning as shells or vessels derived from the memory banks of tradition, topoi mold the meaning(s) of cultural objects" (Huhtamo 28). Nancy Drew as an avatar for the reader-becoming-player/sleuth is a manifestation of the power of a topos. Because she is a topos, her traits are just generalizable enough to allow her to be desirable but not specific enough to exclude readers from inhabiting her. The avatar is an amalgamation of rules and narrative elements; the rules (Nancy’s basic transferable-to-most-Nancy-iterations skill set and boundaries of what she can be…teen, detective, girl, middle class, mobile, etc.) and the
narrative (her essential character, her Nancy-ness) create a vessel that the reader can actively play with (in).

Nancy Drew debuted in *The Secret of the Old Clock, The Hidden Staircase*, and *The Bungalow Mystery* in 1930 by Carolyn Keene. These novels were ghostwritten by Mildred Augustine Wirt from an outline assigned to her by Edward Stratemeyer. These original Nancy Drew Mystery Stories, including all of the 23 books ghostwritten by Wirt, were revised at the end of the 1950s and into the 1960s by Harriet Stratemeyer Adams, who had taken over the Stratemeyer Syndicate after the death of her father (shortly after the first Nancy Drew books hit the shelves in 1930). The revised 1950s editions of the novels are the familiar, yellow cover hardbacks and they quickly became the only versions available until Applewood Books reissued the 1930s versions in 1990. Depending on the history you read, the 1950s revisions were either Harriet Adams’ attempt to claim authorship of the series for herself or they were her tireless reworking of the series to meet the demands of parents and the publisher to eliminate racist material and outdated content. The conflicts between Harriet Adams and Mildred Wirt led to different conclusions: some favored Wirt as the true author of the real Nancy Drew and some sympathized with Adams’ overhaul and the outlining work done by the Stratemeyer syndicate. Either way, the authorship and development of the Nancy Drew Mysteries is messy; it is a story of the competing voices and desires that yield an iconic literary character (and eventually film, TV, and game character as well). The Nancy Drew Mystery Stories highlight Nancy’s function as a mediating structure (an interface) for cultural and social ideals of adolescents. Tracing some significant transformations
between the 1930s and the 1950s versions of the novels exposes the ways the text’s material structure shapes its relationship with and the embodied experience of the user.

While it is well documented that the editorial revisions of the 1950s eliminated racist elements of the originals, created faster-paced books, and reduced the books’ length to decrease publication costs (Murray 163; Beeson and Brennen 194), the revisions were much more wide ranging than these motives alone suggest. The novels were ideologically overhauled, altering many of the character relationships to reflect the ideals of 1950s suburban femininity. While many of these changes perform the recasting that we would expect, by refocusing female characters on “appropriate” domestic roles and removing many of the ambivalences of the 1930s novels, the revisions also perform changes to what kind of knowledge is valued and how that knowledge is verified and transmitted. By comparing the 1930s and 1950s versions of the Nancy Drew Mystery Stories, we find that the additions and omissions of the 1950s books serve to reinforce family ties, establish acceptable modes of obtaining and acting upon knowledge, and erase ethical quandaries.

My purpose in this comparison is not to make an overall claim about the revision efforts as a whole so much as it is to carefully examine how structural changes and revisions highlight how the novels attempt to shape readerly desires and set boundaries on knowledge. The flexibility of Nancy’s relationship to knowledge makes her a successful avatar that can be invoked through countless adaptations and over many media, ensuring her permanence as a cultural icon. As an avatar, some elements of Nancy’s character are essential and remain intact despite the contextual and historical changes the multiple revisions of the novels represent. Comparing the changes the
1950s novels make to Nancy reinforces the unchanged sets of skills that are important to positioning Nancy as a sleuth (and inviting the reader-player to become one as well).

The 1930s Nancy reflects the Depression era by refusing to depict its devastating effects (acting as wish-fulfillment and a nostalgic elision for better times) and by setting Nancy the task of recovery. Stoneley discusses this tension:

In the Stratemeyer-produced Nancy Drew Mysteries, it is as though the Depression is not happening. Nancy still has her 'snappy little roadster' and her charge accounts at all the downtown stores. She can still unhesitatingly suggest to a friend that they go on a 'shopping orgy.' But her role as a detective in search of lost fortunes might be read as an oblique recognition that vast sums of money had disappeared after 1929. (17)

Stoneley goes on to argue that the 1950s revisions resonate with Cold War era concerns and firmly suburbanize Nancy: “Before the Second World War, Nancy was a prototypical feminist heroine, but during the cold war she was made safe” (126).

Stoneley quotes Carolyn Heilbrun’s “Nancy Drew: A Moment in Feminist History” about the shift in Nancy’s character:

A few examples: official positions originally filled by women are now given to men. Where Nancy drove policemen in her car, they now drive her. At camp, in the new versions, the girls are supervised by a chaperon. What Nancy once did for herself is done by her boyfriend Ned in the revised version, or else she is carried off by him to rest after combat. (16)

This shift in gender roles is visible in the individual changes made in both The Secret of the Old Clock and The Hidden Staircase during the 1950s.

The 1950s revisions reassert the primacy of the family and the woman’s domestic role within it. The character relationships and mystery plots have been altered to place Nancy more firmly within a network of families and tie her more tightly to her community. In the revisions, her clients have more family connections either through Nancy’s friends or to others involved in the case. The 1930 The Secret of the Old Clock
features two unmarried sisters (Edna and Mary Turner) who will inherit a sum of money based on a will Nancy must locate. They are minor characters and appear only a few times in order to provide Nancy the names of people to interview or possible suspects. The 1959 version, however, makes the Turner sisters into main characters, who are heroically raising their orphaned great-niece, Judy. Instead of being generalized supporting characters, the revision purposefully places the unmarried aunts in motherly relationships. The revision reassures Nancy (and thereby the reader) that the Turner sisters sacrificed the possibility of marriage in order to support their niece and her mother. The sisters provide an example of selfless motherhood, which Nancy appreciates and wishes to support by finding the will that will help them support their ward. The novel further reinforces the family relationships here by noting that the Turner sisters nearly married the Matthews brothers. By tightly linking peripheral characters to families, the text attempts to implicitly shape the reader’s views on the importance of family connections. The 1930 version’s focus on working for random individuals or friends of acquaintances conveys to the reader that it is Nancy’s curiosity and labor (the sleuthing) that should drive her choices. The reader is encouraged to identify not with Nancy’s emotional connections but with Nancy’s drive to question situations and find justice. The 1959 texts restructure the plot to emphasize shifting cultural values and encourage the reader to value families and networks of affection. While Nancy’s sleuthing skills remain unchanged between the versions (her intelligence, her competence, her logic), the revision gives those skills a different context, revising the situations in which sleuthing skills prove useful and appropriate for Nancy (and for the child reader). The proper performance of childlikeness means benefiting and supporting
family and adolescents’ skills should remain contained in tight-knit communities. Nancy’s skills are less of a threat to adult authority if she only uses them within the context of networks of family and friends.

The structural plot changes to *The Hidden Staircase* show the same agenda and shifts in what kind of knowledge is valuable as in *The Secret of the Old Clock*. In *The Hidden Staircase* (1930), Nancy’s task is to assist a friend of a former client. Her talents are marketed by word-of-mouth and the characters from the 1930 *The Secret of the Old Clock* are interwoven as references: “‘Nancy is just the girl to help you out of your difficulties, Rosemary,’ Abigail said significantly. ‘She helped me get my inheritance and I know she’ll help you if you ask her’” (Keene 34). Family relationships among the women are not emphasized. Nancy is portrayed as free to create her own networks of acquaintances based on her labor (she worked for one client and is recommended to another). Instead of having Nancy take a client referral (helping an unknown pair of elderly sisters), Stratemeyer-Adams revised the 1959 *The Hidden Staircase* by recasting the entire novel. Now, Nancy must assist her best friend Helen Corning in discovering the cause of strange occurrences at Helen’s grandmother and aunt’s home:

“You’ve heard me speak of my Aunt Rosemary,” Helen began. “Since becoming a widow, she has lived with her mother at Twin Elms, the old family mansion out in Cliffwood. Well, I went to see them yesterday. They said that strange, mysterious things have been happening there recently. I told them how good you are at solving mysteries, and they’d like you to come out to Twin Elms and help them.” (Keene, *Staircase* 1959, 1)

Her skills are bartered not from client to client but from family friend to family friend (as personal favors rather than social kindness and curiosity). Beeson and Brennen also discuss this change:

*Although the newer Nancy is helpful and ultimately successful as a detective, efforts are taken to portray her as a "regular" young woman.*
There are no extended discussions of the unfortunate individuals she has helped. The two women she befriends are relatives of her friend Helen, rather than less fortunate members of the community. (198)

The novels’ characters act as significant elements of its interface (how the reader accesses the message/information the novels provide). Revising the plots to completely alter the characters’ relationships changes the kinds of behaviors the 1959 novel wants to include as part of childlikeness. Nancy becomes more deeply invested in the household; she participates with other characters not merely as a guest/detective, but as a surrogate niece. She takes on household duties and chores of a far greater variety than she did in the 1930 version. The 1959 *The Hidden Staircase* finds Nancy speedily preparing meals, dusting, vacuuming, tiding up rooms and making beds to preserve the health of her elderly hostesses (Keene 82-83). Nancy is portrayed as doing as much caretaking as she does investigating, curtailing her detective impulses to protect and care for her family of the moment. Stoneley summarizes the overall effect of these revisionary changes: "Nancy's ambitions are strategically curbed, and the narrative encourages girls to look for power in enclosed spaces" (127). This insertion of the domestic role alongside the sleuthing (and often as a required precursor to sleuthing) is naturalized by the increased number of familial relationships between characters and by Nancy’s close ties to her clients. That sleuthing comes second to family concerns and domestic tasks vividly reflects a shift in where knowledge and power are located and how the adolescent might access them. The reader who identifies with Nancy in 1959 is encouraged to use her knowledge and power within the domestic network/community to avoid upsetting the careful performance of childhood that the series puts forth (and that adults are comfortable with).
Aside from the changes in the relationships of the peripheral characters, the most obvious change to family relationships is the one between Nancy and Hannah Gruen, the Drew's housekeeper. Stoneley discusses this change: "When Harriet Adams took over editorship of the series, she made changes on the grounds that Nancy had been 'too bold and bossy.' Subsequently, the housekeeper, Hannah Gruen, was given a slightly bigger part, and Nancy began to treat her more considerately. This was to give domesticity an enhanced role" (125). The 1930s Secret of the Old Clock mentions Hannah as a servant and has Nancy issue kind commands about the household work, but Nancy is in control of the relationship. The first interaction between the 1930s Nancy and Hannah comes when Nancy consults Hannah about the day's work and states: "I'll not be back for luncheon today . . . I have made out the dinner menu and ordered the groceries, so I guess you won't need me for a few hours" (Keene, Old Clock 1930, 13). Other than this brief encounter, Hannah figures only as a message relay system between father and daughter, with little personality or visible effect on the Drew household.

The 1959 Secret of the Old Clock, however, expands Hannah's role as a mother figure, greeting and embracing Nancy, participating in the family meals, and offering gossip and criticism of other women in the community. In American Children’s Literature and the Construction of Childhood, Gail Schmunk Murray discusses the significance of Hannah's more involved role as an intrusion of adult authority:

These 1959 revisions also simplified and streamlined the plots. Diana Beeson and Bonnie Brennan agree that in the process of updating the plots, 'Nancy's independent character is softened and . . . She relies much more heavily upon others for help and guidance.' Originally Nancy had solved most mysteries virtually on her own and went to the police only to have the criminal apprehended; in the rewritten books, Nancy relies on
advice from her housekeeper and works much more closely with police to track down criminals. By 1959, it had become unacceptable for her to work 'outside the law' or to be completely independent minded. (163)

Instead of resolutely informing Hannah of her schedule, 1950s Nancy assists her in the kitchen and asks her if she has any errands for Nancy to do. Hannah is far more familiar with Nancy than the housekeeper's 1930’s counterpart, answering: “Yes, dear. Here’s a list . . . and good luck with your detective work” (Keene, Old Clock 1959, 21). While still a servant to the household, Hannah holds more power (and sway) over Nancy in the 1950s version of the Old Clock, benevolently releasing Nancy from her domestic duties to play bearer of good news, saying “Never mind helping me today. You run along and make those people happy as soon as possible” (Keene, Old Clock 175). While altering the relationship between Hannah and Nancy does reassert a more traditional family hierarchy, the revisions do not completely domesticate Nancy, as Hannah remains a servant, even while she plays the role of mother. Through Nancy's relationship with Hannah, the reader of the 1959 Nancy Drew Mystery Stories is shown a performance of childhood that is more contained; while Nancy must still have mobility and some freedom to sleuth outside of adult sanctions, she has learned to temper her powerful detective role with a performance of domestic obedience. Nancy as an avatar is flexible enough to allow for this socially-driven change, while still maintaining key elements that highlight that she can mask her skills and power by performing the right kind of adolescent identity for each audience she encounters.

The expansion of Hannah Gruen’s participation in the series and her role as surrogate mother for Nancy stabilizes the Drew family, while still allowing Nancy enough freedom from parental supervision to pursue sleuthing. In Bobbie Ann Mason’s The Girl Sleuth, Mason notes the importance of Hannah’s ambivalent status: “Nancy has a
housekeeper, Mrs. Hannah Gruen, a jackie-of-all-chores who plays the maternal role (worry-wart and cook), but Nancy is mistress of the household, and her power extends beyond the home” (50-51). This revision is significant because it emphasizes the home as an important nexus for knowledge and power. Hannah ties Nancy to the home as a source of information, and Nancy often calls to update Hannah or request information from her. Nancy has enough authority to reach outside the home and pursue sleuthing because she first establishes herself in relationship to the domestic knowledge and tasks at home. These revisionary differences point out the flexibility of Nancy as a topos to portray an idealized and historically specific relationship to knowledge and how that knowledge is authorized. While the actual relationship presented between knowledge and the child varies, the child reader is asked to identify and evaluate her relationship to knowledge and authority through Nancy as a filter for cultural/social information.

The 1959 revisions to Hannah’s character do more than safely reinstitute a level of adult/family authority in Nancy’s life; they also reflect on gossip, rumor, and word-of-mouth knowledge as valid forms of understanding the world. In the 1959 Secret of the Old Clock, Hannah provides the social commentary that instructs Nancy in the social system of River Heights (Keene 14). Hannah speaks for a different, more communal kind of knowledge than the expert knowledge of Mr. Drew or the police officers that frequent the book. Hannah’s implicit approval of gossip gives credence to Nancy’s penchant of overhearing pivotal information and solving mysteries through rumor, storytelling, and personal interviews, excusing Nancy from any guilt or reproach for eavesdropping. Hannah’s adult authority marks rumor and gossip an acceptable way of knowing and policing social behaviors that Nancy must master and leverage to become
a great sleuth. Villainous female characters are those who cannot access the network of gossip to control their own identities; Nancy’s control of her own identity

“Belligerent” and “Uppity,” Mrs. Topham is placed outside of the power of the gossipy network of townswomen—a target rather than participant (Keene, *Old Clock* 1959, 172, 178). Mrs. Topham’s inability to access and/or control the power of gossip and word-of-mouth as a source of knowledge allows Nancy to identify her as a villain. It also emphasizes to the reader that having control over modes of knowledge is important as well as highlighting the ways social groups are involved in negotiating identities.

Nancy learns to put forth the identity that will allow her the most latitude without negative attention, and the reader is given the opportunity to see those negotiations of identity as performed rather than sincere identities. The changes to the plot structure in the 1959 revisions make gossip and rumor methods of community control and a powerful way of knowing for Nancy to master. Nancy (and the reader imaginatively embodied within her) must learn to listen to and evaluate gossip as well as how not to violate the implicit terms of participation in the feminine network. The narrative content of the 1950s novel and Nancy’s positioning within its network of characters significantly alter the sources of authority for ideal adolescents, but each version of the novel uses Nancy as an interface for messages about knowledge and what acceptable performances of adolescence will help Nancy-reader negotiate power/authority.

The plots of the Nancy Drew Mysteries have always been driven on some level by oral transmission—gossip, eavesdropping, interviews, and rumor. Gossip and oral tradition are, after all, one of the most accessible ways of knowing available to the child. Just as *St. Nicholas* presents children as able to use their oral networks to build and
maintain knowledge that might help them understand and access authority, oral transmission plays a necessary role in the Nancy Drew novels. Because the 1950s novels are invested in creating a more contained performance of childhood, they highlight not only the power of gossip but limit Nancy's access to it and her trust in it as a way of knowing. The 1930s Nancy Drew acted on the barest snippets of rumor she received without having to acknowledge or foreground the adult, female network that the later books use to make knowledge verifiable. Nancy's oral knowledge was validated in the 1930s, not by adult intrusion beforehand, but by the positive outcome of events and the voice of the omniscient narrator complimenting Nancy's intrinsic good judgment and evaluative skills for the reader. The sleuth-reader is exposed to these formulations of knowledge—learning both official and informal modes of knowledge acquisition. While the kinds of knowledge valued might change over time, the function Nancy plays as an interface for the reader to experience the role knowledge acquisition plays in mastering adolescence does not.

In the 1959 texts, Nancy's relationship to knowledge follows a stricter guide; she requires some kind of institutional validation (most often from the police) before she can act. This is most strikingly evident in *The Hidden Staircase*. In the revision, Nancy goes from occasionally passing information to the police (making their authority unnecessary to her conclusions) to asking for police protection and stopping by multiple police departments with every update on her case (making adult authorization a necessary step in processing knowledge). In 1959, Nancy seems to require continual reassurance from adults such as “It certainly looks as if you picked up a good clue, Miss Drew” before she can take further action (Keene, *Hidden* 110). Her dependence on expert
confirmation is a far cry from the original text where Nancy follows up on her finds without engaging any other authority or validation. Nancy spends a good portion of the 1950s *The Hidden Staircase* appealing to legal means and upholding ethical practices that she refused to observe in the earlier novels. The 1950s versions portray a complicated relationship between Nancy and knowledge. While gossip and rumor are useful, they must be mastered as part of a community of adult women. Her control over gossip and her acceptance in that community will mark her transition to adulthood, so Nancy can never be allowed to fully control knowledge. Instead she must learn to manipulate her performance of adolescence so that the adult authority figures will not be threatened by her prowess, and she will still be allowed to make progress on her cases. While Nancy is able to research and investigate, she must have at least perfunctory permission from adult authority (the police, the law, Hannah) to actualize her knowledge into social change (to solve the case!).

Nancy’s relationship to direct adult authority is altered by this change in how knowledge is represented (a cultural shift in valid ways of knowing). The 1950s revisions tighten the relationship between the ideal adolescent and institutional demands. Instead of investigating the hidden staircase on her own, Nancy must call in the police and a guide to help her. Also, in the 1930s version of *The Hidden Staircase*, Nancy is willing to sneak into the villain’s home to discover the hidden staircase. In the 1950s version, she will not investigate until she has the permission of the realtor who is in charge of the property. The increasing acquiescence to legal practices parallels the shift away from valuing solely her own intuition and logic as the source of appropriate information. Nancy must contain her methods of sleuthing within the established
conventions of the law and must rely on experts and authority figures to verify/authorize her knowledge (i.e., to make knowledge actionable and powerful, the adolescent must establish a relationship between that knowledge and adult institutions). This also parallels with the introduction of Hannah as a parental figure. Despite her position as a nexus for gossip and collective knowledge, she also helps contain the power Nancy is allowed within the text. In the 1950s versions, Nancy must find a way to relate her gossip-based knowledge to accepted institutional knowledge before she can actualize it. Although it is less noticeable, the same trend is present in the revisions to *The Secret of the Old Clock*. In the 1930s version, Nancy illegally takes the old clock and hides it from the police, but in the 1959 version she confesses to the detective that she has the Topham's stolen property, excusing her behavior by noting that she took it to help prove that the stolen property belonged to the Tophams (which also happens to be a lie, but allows her to stay in the good graces of the law).\textsuperscript{10} The 1959 version seems much more anxious about restoring Nancy to the good graces of outside authority and making sure that her actions are vetted by adults in charge.\textsuperscript{11} Examining the revisions shows us the limits and boundaries the texts institute by altering Nancy's context, while still allowing the reader to engage with her as a sleuth.

One final significant stylistic revision is the reworking of the table of contents and chapter titles of the novels. The renaming of the chapters shows one way the texts try to manage the reader’s expectations and guide the reader’s evaluation of events. The 1959 version of the *Secret of the Old Clock* renames the novel’s final chapter a “Happy Finale” rather than a “Reward.” This change seems motivated by a need to resolve any ambiguities present in the 1930s version and manage the reader’s feelings about the
disowning of the Topham family and the legality/morality of Nancy’s involvement in the case. The reader is assured in the 1950s that she is supposed to find the ending a “Happy Finale,” where everyone has gotten what they deserved. The 1930s final chapter “Reward” does not imply the same strong sense of resolution—Nancy may be rewarded but the reader is not led to believe in the inevitable correctness of the resolution. *The Hidden Staircase* also clarifies its resolving chapter title when it is revised: “Captured” becomes “Nancy’s Victory” in the 1950s. The structure of the text and the way the reader is guided to experience it are much more direct and allow for less interpretative participation on the part of the reader. This is an extension of the trend the 1950s versions have of authorizing and verifying knowledge in traditional (status quo) ways. By removing the ambiguity, the texts allow the reader fewer opportunities to experience anticipation and some of the possibilities for imaginative participation and engagement are foreclosed. The revised texts are structured their language to make sure the reader knows that Nancy will solve the case and that the solution will be positive (victorious and happy).

While these narrative changes demonstrate how the changes in childhood ideals are encoded in the narrative and structure of the various Nancy Drew novels changing how the child reader encounters knowledge and understands authority, the similarities that are maintained among the revisions are perhaps even more important to understanding how Nancy becomes a topos (the material of the container that is endurably Nancy rather than revisable content contained within her). They also more clearly show the ways the reader is invited to participate with the texts and the limitations of that participation. The *Nancy Drew Mystery Stories* share key participative
characteristics with the game-books discussed in Chapters 3 and 4: dependence on conventions/predictability to foster narrative engagement and the presentation of childlikeness/adolescence as a performance and possible collaboration between adult authority and the child character/reader.

For both historical and contemporary game-books, managing and exploiting the reader-player’s expectations and intertextual/genre-specific knowledge was integral to making meaning from the text. The game-books were structured in specific ways to utilize the reader-player’s existing knowledge and to build new knowledge to support the text's specific performance of childhood. While the Nancy Drew novels do not need to help readers understand the rules of play and the limitations (or defining principles) of the game world, they do use reader’s intertextual knowledge and expectations to build mastery and, if the reader agrees to active imaginative participation, actualization and negotiation of knowledge similarly to game-books. This recalls the discussion of feedback loops (recursive processes of intermediation) and how the goal of a feedback loop is to repeat a process until you can create a state change in the information being manipulated. These feedback loops operate as a metaphor for the function of children’s literature as a whole, working on skills mastery and conveying modes of knowledge to help move the child from childhood into adulthood (or at least into savvy, reflective performances of childhood that hide the reader's actual capabilities). The series novels' "predictability and repetition" is a strategic choice for the kinds of performances the Nancy Drew transmedia narratives put forth because the structure helps establish "basic story patterns and narrative lines" in preparation for more complicated reading later (Haugland 56). It builds the uninitiated reader’s literacy competencies, allowing her
to later recognize deviations from the pattern as significant and helping create a familiar process (schema) she can use to make meaning from the text: "The very characteristics that most literary critics find reprehensible—predictability and repetition—are precisely what makes these books so popular. As girls and boys struggle to find their places in a confusing adult world, a familiar formula suggests 'the reassuring orderliness of a stable and reliable world' (Appleyard 84-85)" (Haugland 56). The reader’s (growing) familiarity with the structure allows new and unfamiliar information to be more easily organized and assimilated. This is a feedback loop with different possibilities for engagement. The reader can read and re-read the Nancy Drew Mystery Stories to master the form, genre, and information; once she has mastered those skills (a state change) her relationship to the text takes on new possibilities and she moves into a more reciprocal relationship with the text, negotiating its meaning by tempering it with her own opinions, knowledge, and experience.

While the formulaic and repetitive nature of the Nancy Drew novels initially seems to invalidate engaged reader participation, they can actually be “imaginatively satisfying” for the younger reader:

The specific developmental task of children of this age, after all, is to gather and organize information about the new world they have been launched into. They have a strong interest in both its newness and its regularity; they have to keep filling in the blank spaces in their knowledge of the world, while learning the rules that prevent facts from just being random and confusing data. What to adults seems repetitive in these stories must to the child appear as confirmation that in diverse new areas of experience, what counts is still recognizable and familiar. (Appleyard 62-63)

Like the game-books that use the tension between rules and narrative to create compelling play, the Nancy Drew series novels use easily identifiable plot patterns and mystery conventions to help the reader access the meaning of the text—the child reader
is learning to master, categorize, and use information (transforming it into knowledge). The implicit rules that govern Nancy’s knowledge (need to connect to official sources; need to be part of a gossip/oral community) in the novels’ narratives are emphasized by the numbingly repeated pattern of the heroine story. As Nancy works through cases over and over again, the child reader works through that knowledge as well until she masters the story form and can use her mastery to change the meaning she creates with the text. It also suggests to the child reader that Nancy is performing an idealized adolescent role that the reader can engage with.

Once the reader has mastered the Nancy Drew conventions, her relationship with those conventions can become more reflective. Repetition and predictability become markers of performance rather than tools of instruction. The child reader (especially one who encounters more than one version of Nancy) can use her familiarity with the constructedness of the plots and sequences to understand Nancy as a product—a manufactured performance of childhood the reader may or may not buy into:

The fluidity of Carolyn Keene, of River Heights, and of Nancy again points towards the performative aspect of the girl’s tradition. There is always something assumed and pretended in the production of the series…the vast numbers of titles and numerous, unlikely, but often similar adventures perhaps also invite the reader to acknowledge that this is a ‘good product’ as much as a ‘good story.’ The claim to the ‘real’ is sustained within the narrative, but so thinly veiled that the reader may feel more free than usual to re-specify and editorialize her experience as she goes along. (Stoneley 125)

As the reader becomes aware of the artificiality of the generic conventions shaping the narratives, she can understand Nancy as both an idealized container for social knowledge about adolescence but also an avatar that the reader might embody to test the limits of adolescence. No matter what the particular historical context is (thus the fluidity of the specific meaning of Keene, River Heights, and Nancy that Stoneley
comments on), Nancy can be recognized as an impossibly perfect combination of “idealized traits,” “idealized relationships,” and heightened abilities (Appleyard 75). The novels make Nancy into an avatar (structured by expectations, but fluid enough to allow for reader identification and variation) by refusing to internalize her; she is defined primarily through action and dialogue: “Nancy lives in and through her adventures, and there is no sense of another, introspective Nancy, a Nancy who thinks about her dead mother, or who wonders if her boyfriend really loves her. I would argue that this enhances the reader's sense of Nancy as a performance in which we may join” (Stoneley 127). The text allows the reader to be the internal Nancy and be the arbitrator of how Nancy interprets the meaning of the narrative world.

Nancy's enduring characteristics of complete competence and infallibility (something both the 1930s and 1950s versions share) complicate the reader's identification with and evaluation of her character. She represents both the vigorous, unrestrained action of youth and the authority and autonomy of the adult: "In short, Nancy transcends youth, moving through life with assurance and without struggle... She is always right—the hallmark of adulthood to a child—always effective" (MacLeod 41). She represents both what the child reader aspires (autonomous and intelligent) to be and what she is meant to leave behind (the simplicity and externalization of the series). This is her function as the avatar through which the reader experiences the novels as feedback loops. Nancy becomes a means of practicing idealized characteristics and testing the camouflage a performed childlikeness can provide for those skills the text wants the child to value.
The novels become imaginatively participative because Nancy is at once a figure “the reader empathizes imaginatively with … as a ‘participant’ in the story” and that she “also evaluates or reacts to the character in the role of ‘spectator’” (Appleyard 104). As an imaginative participant the reader can solve the case right along with Nancy and the conventions (structure, repetition, pattern) lead the reader to make the same deductive conclusions that Nancy does. The reader is invited to identify with Nancy’s idealized characteristics and the simplicity of the Nancy Drew Mystery Stories reinforces that identification: "The fact is that even the slowest reader is given emphatic hints as to how to construe the evidence. This means that when Nancy seizes on the truth, the reader does so at least as quickly. When someone turns to Nancy and says, 'Oh, Nancy, I wish I were as smart as you are,' the reader is fully included in Nancy's smartness" (Stoneley 133-134). As the reader practices identification, she also builds mastery over the conventions and cues the text gives to indicate Nancy's process. But the reader can simultaneously adopt a position as an evaluator, noticing the idealized and flat nature of Nancy’s characteristics and the unrealistic consistency of her behavior in every conceivable circumstance. This position as evaluator is most likely left to an more experienced reader—one who has experienced the feedback loop a few times and built enough master to look beyond a surface reading to the shadow text behind the plot and structure. The novels serve the needs of many levels of reader; this more experience reader is learning to become a reader-player… one who participates with rather than accepts the dictates of the text at face value.

Much like Dodge’s Jack-in-the-Pulpit from St. Nicholas, Nancy represents a layering of authority that the child reader can relate to in a variety of ways. She is an
authority figure for the child reader, guiding the reader to logical conclusions and
demonstrating her ability to make quick to make decisions without questioning herself.
She also occupies a childlike position of authority in the official adult world, having to
forge relationships with adult authority figures even if the exact nature of those
relationships is historically dependent. The continual redeployment and remaking of
Nancy drew reflects the position of the reader as well. The reader is supposed to be
growing out of adolescence and into adulthood, but is also supposed to cling to a
nostalgic presentation of her childlikeness to appease adults who might find growth
threatening should it happen too early. One of the consistencies across all of the Nancy
Drew novels is that her sleuthing is always in the context of favor for a network of
friends or deserving characters and not as an economic endeavor: "When wrong is
righted and wealth restored, her father, the police, and her beneficiaries gather round
Nancy in awe. Someone usually exclaims 'We owe it all to you, Nancy Drew!' Nancy
never accepts cash for her services, but she does accept souvenirs" (Siegel 166).
Nancy may be frightening competent and able to out think adults on many occasions,
but she is cast to carefully maintain a level of childlike dependence and not directly
move herself into the adult realm. Using her skills is a hobby, one that makes her a
collector of trinkets and memories of her success, but not one that capitalizes on that
success. Her status as a liminal figure, sitting uneasily between adolescence and
adulthood, oral transmission and institutional authority, between historical modes of
girlhood and womanhood, gives the novels their small participative possibilities—Nancy,
no matter how constant and familiar her structure, is a vessel for warring social desires
(Siegel 171). The reader is invited to learn from Nancy and master her patterns of
performance, and if the reader is an active interpretive participant, recognize the ways performances of childhood mediate her relationship to adult authority. Nancy as an avatar is a primary example of how children’s texts, “work ambivalently both to make children more like adults and to keep them opposite to adults—both to move children past innocence and encourage them to keep on being innocent” (Nodelman 167). Nancy’s characteristics are flexible enough to allow her to embody different images of the ideal child (the untroubled heroine of the depression era, the contained and vigilant heroine of the cold war era), while the enduring insistence on her intelligence, competency, and ability to understand and navigate authority make her a compelling vessel for moving the child beyond childhood and beyond the series itself.

The Nancy Drew Mystery Series novels, like many of the instructional game-books and the mini-narratives of Jack-in-the-Pulpit, allow for a very limited range of intentional participation. The novels act as mediating interfaces that the reader must actively and willingly interpret and challenge. While the content of the stories may change to reflect shifting ideals of childhood, the narrative and the structure work together to codify the child’s relationship to knowledge and authority. The active child reader can become a participant by mastering the structures and patterns of the novels and, using that information, refuse full identification with Nancy as a character. The novels allow Nancy to become a way for the reader to process her own relationship to adult authority. However, since they are so rigidly structured and ideologically motivated all of the potential for emergent meanings or resistant readings lies in the mind of the reader. The text cannot react or respond to the child reader's negotiations of Nancy Drew. Even in the more contemporary Identity Mystery trilogy (Secret Identity (2008),
Identity Theft (2009), and Identity Revealed (2009)) in the new Nancy Drew: Girl Detective instantiation of the series, the rigid relationship between reader and text has not changed.

Nancy Drew: Girl Detective mysteries broke what seemed to be one of the cardinal structural conceits of Nancy Drew—they are written in first person rather than third person with an omniscient narrator. This change violates the expectations of reader who come to the novels with previous experience of Nancy Drew; it also changes the relationship between the reader and Nancy as avatar. Instead of having an omniscient relationship, now the reader has to identify with “I.” She is no longer becoming and testing Nancy as sleuth, but “I” as sleuth. On the surface, this seems to invites the reader into a fuller sense of participation (she becomes the “I,” imaginatively embodying Nancy). However, the novels still refuse the reader much room to reimagine and rework Nancy inside of the text. The “I” is too specifically defined to operate as a successful avatar for the reader to embody, and it also lacks the emphasis on Nancy as a performance (a separate self that can be tried on and removed; the “I” is harder to separate from self) that the 3rd person approach exploits. Each novel even has a specific introductory letter from Nancy to the reader, defining for the reader the kind of “I” the reader should imagine:

See, I’m a detective. Well, not really. I mean, I don’t have a license or anything. I don’t carry a badge or a gun, in part because I wouldn’t touch a gun even if I could, and also because I’m just not old enough. But I am old enough to know when something isn’t right, when somebody’s getting an unfair deal, when someone’s done something they shouldn’t do. And I know how to stop them, catch them, and get them into the hands of the law, where they belong. I take those things seriously and I’m almost never wrong.

My best friends, Bess and George, might not totally agree with me. They tell me I’m wrong a lot, and that they have to cover for me all of the time just to
make me look good. Bess would tell you I dress badly. I call it casual. George would tell you I'm not focused. By that she'd mean that once again I forgot to fill my car with gas or bring enough money to buy lunch. But they both know I'm always focused when it comes to crime. Always. (Keene, *Secret Identity* inside cover)

That this introductory letter is addressed directly to the reader from “I” distances the reader from occupying the space of the “I” in the narrative. It refocuses the reader’s attention on the separation from and specificity of Nancy in the Nancy Drew: Girl Detective series. The first person voice ought to be a marker of more immersion and engagement, but instead interferes with Nancy’s function as avatar.

This introductory letter is important for two other major reasons: it positions Nancy in the world of adult authority, and it attempts to redefine some of the essential characteristics of Nancy in interesting ways. The letter immediately foregrounds Nancy’s age and uses that as a way to declaim her prowess as a detective. She is not allowed the markers of authority that would make her a true detective like a gun or a license. Again Nancy’s skills are carefully structured through the language of the text as a serious hobby but not ones that give her adult power (like economic security, means of violent retaliation or employment). Her age is doubly stressed “not old enough” and “am old enough” to carefully construct an adolescent subject who knows that her place is underneath the adult authority of real detectives. The ideal child (represented by Nancy) knows that her goal should be differentiating right from wrong and making sure the appropriate authority is made aware of any violations of that morality system. Like the positioning of knowledge as needing adult authorization in the 1950s Nancy Drew Mystery Stories, the text purposefully constructs the Nancy the reader might embody, removing much of the imaginative flexibility that the novels might otherwise allow.
The second paragraph of Nancy’s self-introduction seems to transform the most important elements that mark Nancy as a topos and are constant elements that identify her avatar—her infallibility, assurance in her skill and her effectiveness. The description of this Nancy directly contradicts the positioning that marks Nancy as able to “transcend youth” and undermines her ability to appear like a powerful adult figure (MacLeod 41). Nancy loses her cool, absolute competency. She is no longer the Nancy Drew whose "athletic ability—and mechanical aptitude as well—functions as a sign of the heroine's infallibility" and it can no longer be said that "there is nothing this girl cannot or will not do" (Siegel 172). But here, the novels also open themselves up to a startling contradiction; Nancy is far more dependent on supporting characters to solve her cases, but at the same time, those characters are not idealized by the text. While the introductory letter undermines Nancy’s perfection and control, the texts structure her relationships with Bess and George to affirm that Nancy has all the knowledge that is important. The novels make it clear that the things Nancy cannot do well are not worth doing; Nancy is the model for adolescence that the reader should strive to meet (the “I”) and Bess/George are subpar (should not be embodied). In the Identity Mystery Trilogy, Nancy has to depend on Bess and George to teach her how to use BetterLife, an online social network simulation (like Second Life). Nancy is dependent on her friends specialized knowledge: “I’d e-mailed Bess and George before bed—I wasn’t hopelessly computer illiterate—to arrange a time that afternoon for them to come over to help set up a BetterLife identity for me” (Keene Secret Identity 33). Nancy’s distaste for technology and her cluelessness about online norms of behavior like not directly requesting personal or “real life” information drive the narrative. When Nancy scares a
virtual suspect into blocking communication with her, she laments her lack of skill at using technology: “Poor VirtualNancy was an outcast at the mall. My first foray into the virtual world had been a failure. ‘I think I’m ready to log out and come back to the real world,’ I muttered” (Keene Secret Identity 61). While this lack of competency is a startling change, this moment of failure opens up the possibility for the reader to reject identification with Nancy (and with the unskilled “I”). This is an interesting shift from the earlier Nancy Drew series in that it leaves room for the reader to participate by rejecting Nancy—by evaluating Nancy’s skills as inferior to the reader’s own. The reader can feel more powerful because she has mastery over a discourse and skill set that Nancy does not have access to.

The text does not particularly lend itself to that counter-reading, however. Despite Nancy’s eventual improvement in navigating online life, the overall message of the novels emphasizes that Nancy’s failings with technology are not significant and that online skills are not important to the proper presentation of adolescence. In the resolution to the final installment of the identity trilogy, Nancy reinforces that she’s comfortable with how the technology works but “the thought of joining another virtual reality world made my stomach flip. ‘No thanks,’ I told George. ‘I appreciate all the help you gave me. . . but I think I’m done with so-called Better Lives’” and Bess compliments Nancy saying “well said” (Keene Identity Revealed 198). Bess and George may have more skills and tech savvy but those skills are marginal skills. They mark Bess and George as fringe characters rather than characters to identify with. The virtual world and other technologies take away from Nancy’s mission to seek out wrongdoers and, thus,
Nancy’s superior skills as a real world crime solver are privileged over any failings or lack that the novels might introduce.

**Structuring Play: “Play Detective” Nancy on the PC and the Nintendo DS**

If the *Nancy Drew Sleuth Book* is a way for the child to safely “play detective” through imaginative narrative engagement and physical activity and the Nancy Drew novels are a way for the reader to imaginatively become the sleuth and test out knowledge/performances of adolescence, then the Nancy Drew video games are an opportunity for the child player to actually embody Nancy Drew through the technology and become a virtual detective. The boundary between book and game here is permeable and the transmedia cluster provides depth that the reader-player can bring to the games. All of the Nancy Drew games examined here use narrative to create context for the player to understand the actions available to her. They do, however, exist along a continuum of embodiment and engagement. Similar to the historical game-books and the contemporary game-books, some of the Nancy games privilege rules at the cost of fluid embodiment, some privilege narrative at the cost of meaningful action, and some try to strike a balance in between where the child player masters both narrative and rules while engaging with Nancy Drew as an avatar who contains the reader-player’s desires. There are three major different types of Nancy Drew video games and each iteration calls on player expectations, knowledge, and skill to give meaning to the interaction between game and player. The ways these games structure player interaction differently indicate their own expectations of the child player and the ways Nancy acts as an avatar for the player to embody. While there is significant work to be done on the content of these games, most notably about the mixed gender and class messages they create, of most interest here is the games’ structures and the way the
player is asked to participate because they shape the player’s interaction with the information the games contain. This section will examine the Nintendo DS games created by THQ and Gorilla Systems, as well as the computer games produced by Her Interactive.

The different interfaces that these three companies adopt to convey the story of Nancy Drew and the behaviors they require both of the girl sleuth and of the player change the meaning gameplay generates. As Julian Kücklich notes in “From Interactivity to Playability”:

The pleasure of new media texts is therefore inextricably linked to issues of control on several levels. The user might engage into games voluntarily . . . but once inside the game she is subject to the game's rules, not only on the level of the individual media text, but on the systemic level as well. The struggle for control that takes place across the media landscape necessarily leaves its traces in the media texts themselves. (245)

These Nancy Drew video games draw heavily on the player’s familiarity with the girl sleuth as a topos; the deeper their connection to other Nancy Drew texts, the more successfully they integrate their game play and fictional narrative and the more balance they find between the needs of the game and the desires of the player.

In My Mother Was a Computer, N. Katherine Hayles suggests that one of the side-effects of digital media has been the disembodiment of information. We have come to believe that information can, without consequences, be separated from the body/vessel that carries it. One of the most accessible examples she relates is the transporter in the Star Trek series. The concept of the transporter suggests that once we advance enough technologically, we will be able to transform the body into digital ones and zeros that can be rearranged and reproduced as necessary. This impulse to think of information as a pure force and the body as a hindrance to it is problematic
because the body or vessel is not simply a container, but rather it shapes and changes information. Nancy Drew embodies this tension; she is a container for information, but she is not only a container. She is a shaping force (an interface) that mediates the user experience of that information. Think of Nancy as an avatar means to think of her as a node where the reader and the text come together in a constant process of negotiating knowledge and structuring information into some kind of meaning.

As texts and users, digital objects and bodies, work together, they create meaning through their process of interaction. This interaction creates the possibility of feedback loops:

Emergence implies that properties or programs appear on their own, often developing in ways not anticipated by the person who created the simulation. Structures that lead to emergence typically involve complex feedback loops in which the outputs of a system are repeatedly fed back in as input. As the recursive looping continues, small deviations can quickly become magnified, leading to the complex interactions and unpredictable evolutions associated with emergence. (Hayles, *Posthuman* 225).

While the Nancy Drew games (and the novels as well) do not allow for emergent meaning from the texts themselves, the ways they use the reader-player’s expectations and build skills to create a change in the user result in meanings that are contingent upon the context in which the reader-player to interacts with the game and her willingness to do so. Both as readers and players, the adolescent plays an integral part in generating complex meaning from the relatively straightforward or highly structured texts: "They do so by implying a more complex shadow text—one readers can access by reading the actual simple text in the context of the repertoire of previously existing knowledge about life and literature it seems to demand and invite readers to engage with" (Nodelman 77). Pleasure from playing the Nancy Drew games derives from a combination of using the player’s existing understanding of the topos of Nancy to make
sense of the gameplay and adding to the player’s repertoire by embodying Nancy as an avatar to build more mastery over the performances of childlikeness she represents.

The Nancy Drew franchise, from its books to its TV shows and movies to its video games, is highly intermediated. It involves “complex transactions between bodies and texts as well as between different forms of media” (Hayles, *Mother 7*) and this intermediation is one of the pleasures that sustains Nancy’s popularity. Each player of a Nancy Drew game brings her own previous experience with Nancy to the table, and this collision between different media forms of Nancy provides not a unified ur-Nancy but a personal, messy, fractured Nancy that readers and players construct themselves. But the player is not free to embody *any* Nancy she wishes, the game places constraints on the interaction between the player, the character and the game world. As Jesper Juul states in *Half-Real*, “Rules specify *limitations* and *affordances*. They prohibit players from performing actions such as making jewelry out of dice, but they also add meaning to the allowed actions and this *affords* players meaningful actions that were not otherwise available; rules give games *structure*” (Juul 58). Game rules are not just arbitrary structures or meaningless procedures, they come together with narrative to create naturalized and internalized limits that players will (unconsciously) recognize and act within. By using rules to enclose the space of play, the games give meaning to the information the player encounters and create the possibility for pleasure through meaningful action. This tension among the rules, the fictional world, and the player’s desires is part of the pleasure of playing the game—it is the process of the playing that creates meaning rather than the game’s story or the player’s actions alone.
As Noah Wardrip-Fruin notes in *Expressive Processing*, often we do not “account for something quite important about digital media processes: the fact that they generally don’t operate on their own. From Web-based knowledge repositories to console-based video games, the operations of digital media are, in crucial ways, only truly realized in contact with audiences” (11). By looking at how the three kinds of Nancy Drew video games structure player interaction and depend on the Nancy Drew topos, we can better understand the user’s sense of embodiment, her desire to play, and the overlap between game processes and narrative worlds. While the Her Interactive PC game versions of Nancy Drew dominate the video game market, THQ and Gorilla have released Nancy Drew games for the Nintendo DS handheld system. Each of these companies approaches Nancy from a different angle.

THQ’s game is based on the 1950s version of *The Hidden Staircase*. Helen Corning’s grandmother thinks her house is haunted because things are being lost or stolen, so Nancy must come to her aid. The game manual states that the player’s task is to “Help Nancy discover the source of the disturbance before Helen’s grandmother decides to sell the house.” While this is a promising premise for a game because it establishes a goal (find the source) and a structure (do it before time runs out), the player’s actual tasks have little to do with discovering the identity of the culprit. Rather the entire game is spent searching for a list of objects. While THQ’s *The Hidden Staircase* positions itself narratively at the beginning and utilizes the player’s desire to “play detective” and become Nancy Drew, it does not include any skill-based tasks aside from object identification. It is a basic find-the-object game, and the avatar’s actions do not emulate the detective discovery process. For example, Nancy must search each floor of
the house and cannot move on or back until she has found every item on her list. This means that the player must be perceptive enough to locate items of interest, identify objects that will open (like doors, closets, and chests) and understand spatial arrangements to navigate the house and grounds. However, the player does not have to use any of the items she finds to identify the vandal. In other words, the game is depending mostly on the player’s understanding of video game conventions and visual cues to help her navigate and accomplish the game’s goals rather than the narrative context that would compel players to complete particular actions. She does not have to actualize her knowledge of the narrative or of the discovered objects to successfully complete the game (she’s a finder, not a detective). So while Keene’s *The Hidden Staircase* provides an expedient storyline, a connection to a popular transmedia economy and piques player interest, the actual game play of THQ’s *Nancy Drew: The Hidden Staircase* does not reflect the narrative situation. A player’s previous knowledge of the 1950s novel might help keep the events of the game from seeming completely disconnected, but understanding of Nancy Drew and embodiment of her is unnecessary for the game itself. THQ could just as easily have presented the game as the story of a girl who finds lost objects for confused and busy people. The player’s actions would have been more directly connected to that kind of context. THQ’s game illustrates how the rules and setup of a game world can be at odds with the franchise and narrative from which it borrows. The game refuses to engage with the lasting elements of Nancy Drew, drawing primarily on gaming for context rather than invoking Nancy’s defining characteristics or narrative patterns to create player engagement.
One of the most interesting elements of THQ’s game is how it asks the player to embody Nancy. As with most find-the-object games, the game is a first person experience where a player plays as if she is inside a character’s head and is looking at the world through her eyes. This move is similar to the shift in the Nancy Drew: Girl Detective novels and seems to be a capitulation to reader-player desire to inhabit and identify with Nancy. However, just as the Girl Detective books fail to realize the power of first person by refusing to engage in any meaningful way with Nancy’s thoughts and alienating the reader with the introductory note, THQ’s game has structural limitations that violate the first person point of view and fail to make the player feel as if she is Nancy. THQ’s cut-scenes violate the player’s embodiment as inextricably intertwined with Nancy that should come with playing in first person. In the first cut-scene, the player looks on as Nancy parks her car and meets Helen Corning. The player reads through their dialog, receives a list of missing items, and then is presented with a split screen. On the bottom screen is the view of what Nancy is seeing. On the top screen is a map of the grounds, a timer, and Nancy’s list of items to find. The player is asked to embody Nancy by controlling her movements and seeing what she sees and, at the same time, she is asked to observe Nancy’s interactions with other characters as an invisible spectator. This shift back-and-forth disrupts both the game narrative and the sense of immersion the player feels. The pleasure in playing THQ’s game comes mostly from mastery of the map and location system and from completion of the game task rather than from the embodiment of Nancy or an attachment to the story.

In contrast to THQ’s thinly veiled, rule-dominated find-the-object game, are Gorilla System’s DS games, *The Deadly Secret of Old World Park* and *The Mystery of*
the Clue Bender Society. Gorilla’s games have stronger narrative ties to Nancy Drew as a topos and make the detective process a much more important element of the games. Popular characters from the series like Carson Drew, Bess, George, and Ned often appear in the game and Nancy Drew plots/tropes are prevalent. Nancy as sleuth is the dominant connection between the games and the transmedia cluster as well as the most promising element of engagement. While these games still have a rigidly controlled structure, the actions Nancy must perform match the detective process and closely follow the pattern (if not the exact subject) of the novels. The Nancy these games depict is closer to the competent and effortless teen who breaks the boundaries of adulthood that those with previous Nancy experience recognize (MacLeod 41). The Gorilla games use the familiar structure of Nancy’s sleuthing to allow the uninitiated player to gain mastery over the game mechanics, much like the Nancy Drew Mystery Stories build literacies and interpretive practices with readers. The narrative suggests to the player actions that would be logical within the context of the story. The player can use her understanding of how Nancy Drew works to comprehend unfamiliar elements of gameplay.

In the Gorilla games, Nancy talks to suspects, examines objects, records fingerprints, defuses pyrotechnics, solves riddles, and completes puzzles. While the player occasionally has to perform some actions directly mimicking those Nancy would take like dusting for fingerprints with the DS stylus or breaking the symbol code on a lock, more often the player has to participate in unrelated and narratively jarring mini-games to stand in for Nancy’s action. These mini-games call on a completely unrelated skill to move the game narrative forward, and they break the seamless confluence of
narrative purpose and game rules—they make the game stand out as obviously manufactured and interrupt the way the narrative helps the player embody the game’s information. For example, Nancy often has to convince uncooperative people to talk to her. Instead of asking the reader to be a real detective by discerning the dialog selection that is most tactful or deciding on the body language/tone Nancy should assume, the player must complete a conversation mini-game where she must catch the correctly colored ball in the correspondingly colored bucket. According to the game manual, this activity is about matching your mood to your suspect’s mood and showing sympathy. While the symbolic purpose of these mini-games is conveyed to the player, the game skills the mini-games develop (quick reflexes and matching of colors and locations) are unrelated to the actions they are meant to cause (Nancy gaining the suspect’s confidence) and fail to support the larger purpose of player-as-Nancy-as-sleuth. The needs of the game and the requirements of the narrative are at odds here. The mini-games fit into common game conventions but do not really fit into the narrative that is operating around them. They create a break where the primary pleasure of playing switches from story to game play and back again. The Gorilla games find more balance than the THQ game between narrative and gameplay to create a contextualized, embodied experience that adds to the player’s understanding of Nancy as a topos. However, the game play and the narrative are not seamless and the player is aware of the shifts between modes/roles (one part appeals to the reader-interpreter and the other to the player-actor).

Gorilla’s games are mostly interesting because they are played entirely in third person (much like the novels are written in third person). The player has a tiny Nancy
avatar to control and must move her from place to place, collecting clues and interacting with non-player characters. The player is also given the privilege of seeing Nancy’s thoughts about her current task; the player can click on task icons and Nancy will think about them; for example, if the player taps on Bess’ lost dress, Nancy thinks, “Let’s see… If I was a stolen dress where would I be?” (Gorilla Olde World). This perspective casts the player in the role of the omniscient narrator. The player must then participate in developing the game narrative. The choices she makes about whether to learn Nancy’s thoughts and how to engage her own visual and spatial memory to guide Nancy are structured by her understanding of the Nancy Drew narrative and her repertoire of knowledge about common Nancy-as-sleuth actions. The player who is more well-versed in the many versions of Nancy will have more context to help her divine the game rules and more desire to engage with the game world.

In the Gorilla games, the player is set up as omniscient and in control of Nancy, but there are moments when this third person position is violated. For example, in the tutorial sections Nancy herself teaches “you”, the player, how to use your notebook and how to control the Nancy avatar. This creates a little dissonance at the beginning of the game where Nancy’s items (her notebook) become “yours” which elides the difference between player (self) and avatar (negotiated, performed identity). Nancy also directly addresses the player who is supposed to be controlling Nancy, which diverges from their established their relationship. The tutorials could have been accomplished in the same third person style as the rest of the game. These digressions from player control of Nancy call into question how the player is supposed to embody the character. The
game sets the player up as a deity-like controlling figure but sends mixed signals about how much control the player has over the game world and its characters.

Gorilla’s choice of third person and strong narrative elements unfortunately create a fairly rigid game world and limit chances for emergent possibilities generated by player interaction. The player must follow the story in sequence and must wait until Nancy discovers information to act on that information. Even if the player becomes a great sleuth and guesses who the perpetrator is or that there is a secret passage or a hidden door, she cannot act upon that information until she has completed all of the necessary requirements to trigger that game option. For example, there are several visually obvious hidden doors in *The Mystery of the Clue Bender Society*, but Nancy cannot interact with them or explore them until after she is given the task of searching those specific locations. If the reader is omniscient and in control, she ought to be able to direct Nancy to explore these locations, but that would short-circuit the story of the game and require a significantly advanced game engine to react to the player. So, while the games initially offer a sense that the player’s feedback and control matter, the structure of the game renders player choice insignificant. The player cannot meaningfully alter the sequence or outcome of events; she can only fail by not completing a mini-game and the only consequence is that she must replay the mini-game. Her failure does not have an effect on the game’s story and other characters do not notice her failure to match their mood or convince them to give up information. The lack of consequences creates dissonance between the narrative context and the game rules. The game rules react to the player’s desire to not have to repeat game play after making poor decisions, but those rules do not make sense in the context of the
narrative. If Nancy failed to convince a suspect to talk to her in the novels, she would not get to repeat her actions over and over until she found the right sequence.

The Her Interactive games have the most harmonious integration between gameplay and narrative. Nancy does not directly address the player; instead, the player assumes the role of Nancy, seeing what she sees and clicking on the objects she should interact with. The games are narratively driven, using characters from the Nancy Drew universe and often using plot elements from the books. These games provide the player with more choices in how the story unfolds than either of the other sets of games. Occasionally, the player can solve puzzles before she ought to have enough information to complete them (either by guessing or by cheating). Players can access online walkthroughs and engage with a community of other players to solve puzzles before triggering the in-game events that give the player the knowledge to solve the puzzle. The player can also stubbornly employ the guess-and-check method, going through every viable combination to solve the puzzle rather than waiting for the narrative trigger that will simplify the puzzle for her. Because the player can participate in these non-linear discoveries, the games actually show respect for the sleuthing process and give the player with extensive repertoires with Nancy Drew narratives and with gameplay conventions the ability to circumvent some of the game’s structure/linearity.

The player also often controls time, choosing when Nancy should go to sleep and wake up to trigger time sensitive elements of the gameplay. Task-oriented elements are folded into the story of the game so that the skill activities the reader is asked to perform would match (or at least try to represent) the actual actions Nancy would perform in that situation. For example, in *The Secret of Shadow Ranch*, the player must perform ranch
chores like picking vegetables and collecting eggs (Her Interactive). None of these tasks are done symbolically like in Gorilla’s mini-games; instead the player must perform the actions through Nancy as an avatar. The Her Interactive games even offer in-game hints while remaining immersed in the world by allowing Nancy to call her boyfriend, friends, and/or father to help her work through her clues. This reflects the important communal aspects of knowledge that most versions of Nancy acknowledge (no matter what form—book, game, hybrid—she comes in). The narrative cover for these hints makes the hint system a naturalized element of the game world rather than a disruptive outside system that separates the player from engagement with the game. These built-in levels of support help the uninitiated player develop mastery and understand the game mechanics through engaging her repertoire of Nancy (i.e., through using Nancy Drew as a topos). The player who has knowledge of video game skills and conventions but limited knowledge of Nancy Drew is also accommodated because she can skip the hints (refuse to call Nancy’s network of friends) and set the level of play to “Senior Detective,” avoiding having a constant checklist of tasks to complete on screen. Even the task list is integrated into the Nancy Drew experience as Nancy’s case notebook. The Her Interactive games go to great lengths to make the player’s experience of rules and narrative seamless and support immersion in Nancy as avatar for the player.

While realistic tasks and increased amount of choices minimize the discrepancy between story and game, the Her Interactive games out of necessity limit the choices available to the player, which can lead the player to question her identification with and embodiment of Nancy. When Nancy talks to other characters, the player is prompted to select different ways of asking for information; however, it does not often matter which
method the player chooses. Nancy still ends up with the same information or can backtrack to the other method of asking the questions. The limitations on dialog are necessary to make the game world manageable, but, in practice, the player might find these options insufficient. The Her Interactive games strike a balance between allowing the player to explore the environment, allowing disruption to the linear progression of the game, and still controlling the flow of play with a structured narrative.

Unlike the stylus based DS games, the Her Interactive PC games are point-and-click adventures. In contrast to the stylus method of play which gives the player more of a connection to Nancy’s hands and the manipulation of tools, the point-and-click method can sever some of connection the player feels to Nancy’s actions. If a player clicks on an unknown object to examine it, sometimes Nancy uses that object instead—the player could not perceive what the action would be, but via the game rules, Nancy is only allowed to interact with the object in one already prescribed way. This disconnect can distance the player from the avatar and decrease the player’s sense of participation with the narrative. While many of the Her Interactive games involve frustrating repetitive actions or confusing time sequences, they also force the player to make choices that generate change in the game world. The player has the ability to take actions that lead to Nancy’s dismissal from the case or even her death. As is common with games (especially those for younger players) though, the Her Interactive games have a “second chance” function, so death is never permanent and does not have a lasting effect on game progress. Despite this function, there is more of a connection between action and consequence in these games than in the Gorilla or THQ games. Aside from enjoying the Nancy Drew story, the pleasure of playing a Her Interactive game is in
mastering the process of sleuthing and piecing together the clues the game has given both about how the narrative unfolds and about how you as a player are supposed to create action. Both the mastery of the game play and the rich, context that the story provides for that gameplay are key to the experience Her Interactive creates.

As Jesper Juul notes,

a game will demand a specific repertoire of methods (or skills) that the player has to master in order to overcome its challenges. Having mastered or completed the game, the player will have expanded his or her repertoire to include the repertoire demanded in the game. This is, I think, a quite overlooked aspect of playing games, that a game changes the player that plays it. (96, emphasis original)

The THQ, Gorilla, and Her Interactive games structure their gameplay in specific ways to alter the relationship the player has to the rules and to the narrative. These relationships have an effect on what kind of mastery the player builds and what messages she receives from the games she plays. THQ sends the player the message that it is the gameplay and the goals that are paramount, and it does not add to or draw on Nancy Drew as a topos in any significant way. Gorilla invests itself in Nancy Drew's narrative elements but allows the narrative to control the game becoming more of an interactive novel than a game experience. The Gorilla game builds the player's sense of mastery over the plot and sleuthing traits of Nancy Drew, but it comes at the cost of making the game elements seem out of place, failing to integrate player, narrative, and actions. The Her Interactive games strive to combine rules and narrative to build both the player's sense of mastery over the game mechanics (rules) and mastery over the Nancy Drew narrative through its dependence on narrative as a method of triggering player engagement with gameplay conventions.
Transmedia Nancy: Sleuth as Avatar and Adolescence as Performance

Each game has its own approach to inviting the user to play—its own method of mediating the information the player has access to. The same can be said for The Nancy Drew Sleuth Book and for the Nancy Drew novels. While the video games are focused primarily on mastery of gameplay and skills, what Juul says about gameplay echoes the comments Appleyard makes about reading series novels: "If the game is too hard, the player will experience anxiety or frustration. If the game is too easy, repetition or triviality of choice will make the player bored . . . As the player’s skills improve—that is, as the player expands his or her repertoire—the game needs to provide harder challenges to keep the player interested" (Juul 112). THQ’s dependence on rules over narrative makes the game frustrating for a player who desires significant narrative engagement and meaningful choices; Gorilla’s insistence on narrative will frustrate the player that wants to explore, sleuth, and experience the game world without narrative prompting; Her Interactive games, while balanced between narrative and rules, still have issues of repetition that can frustrate players who have already mastered both the narrative and the skills necessary to play. These functions are not that separate from the functions of the Nancy Drew novels. The novels also strive to create mastery—mastery over an ideal performance of childlikeness and mastery over literacy skills.

Appleyard reminds us:

The reader between the ages 6 and 9 does not discover this story all at once; some of it he or she already knows from infancy, but as an independent reader and as an apprentice learner about how the world is organized the child now has to assemble the parts of the story anew. The child is thus a kind of collector, systematically adding to and rearranging the jumble of images acquired as a little child. He or she needs to acquire the whole repertory of images and themes that the culture has gathered around the primary form of storytelling called romance. Breadth of reading and
repetition have a lot to do with this increasing competence, as they do with all learning at this age. (83)

The node that connects the transmedia economy of Nancy Drew is her function as an avatar. The games, the novels, and the game-book hybrid all use Nancy as an avatar to help ease reader-players into competence and move them beyond a simple comprehension of the text to a more complex understanding of the shadow text and the performances of child the text expects. The shadow text is "one readers can access by reading the actual simple text in the context of the repertoire of previously existing knowledge about life and literature it seems to demand and invite readers to engage with" (Nodelman 77). The reader-player's familiarity with the generic conventions of the text, its social contexts, and her larger intertextual understanding of the world around her are all necessary to understanding how she can process the images of childhood she encounters. As the reader-player experiences more and more versions of Nancy (1930s, 1950s, Girl Detective, first person gameplay, third person gameplay), she becomes a more savvy interpreter and investigator of the shadow texts. The primary shared function of all elements of the Nancy Drew constellation are the impulse to create a state change in the reader-player; not only are the texts structured to make sure she masters their skills but they leave openings for her to learn that she can exploit her mastery of Nancy Drew to her own ends, enlarging her repertoire and preparing her to encounter other performances of childhood.

While each Nancy Drew text (book or game) requires a different level of participation and embodiment from the reader, they all succeed by acknowledging that Nancy Drew is fundamentally playful. Appleyard explains Brian Sutton-Smith's theory on play:

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The essence of play, for Sutton-Smith, is that it "opens up thought" (1979a, 315). Many games and rituals, it is true, merely socialize us to the culture we live in, but in genuinely playful activity we negate the ordinary, and open up novel frames of reference and innovative alternatives to our conventional ideas and behaviors. Play is thus "the envisagement of possibility" (1979a, 316). (55)

Each individual Nancy Drew text may come with its own image of childhood and its own method of engagement, but all together they create a playful, flexible topos (distributed, intermediated network). Their repetitious structures and characters are valuable because they create ways for the child to make sense of small doses of the unfamiliar and move from amateur to master through imaginative and (sometimes) embodied adventures. The games and rituals represented by these texts structure their interactions with the child reader-player to influence the kinds of knowledge that are valuable and suggest Nancy as a model for emulation. However, in learning to play and to navigate between narrative and rules, the reader-player’s participation and performance become integral to making meaning from the text. And, just as “a game changes the player that plays it” (Juul 96), a novel or a game-book changes the reader who participates with it. The feedback between text and reader-player is designed to either move the child beyond childhood or to strengthen her performance of childlikeness.

Notes

1 Deborah Siegel also describes Nancy’s enduring qualities well in “Nancy Drew As New Girl Wonder: Solving it All for the 1930s”: “Needless to say, the cultural and ideological currency of the figure of the girl sleuth has adapted to changing circumstances. Yet, Nancy is most often remembered as the multitalented superteen cruising the social landscape for clues that neither man nor boy can discern; the motherless daughter of a famous father, who frequently breaks the law in order to solve mysteries that baffle both father and the police; the self-appointed sleuth in a sports dress engaged in the serious business of restoring order to a chaotic and corrupt world. A number of feminist critics have commented on what the experience of reading Nancy Drew has meant for constructions of American girlhood across the decades” (160).
Perhaps this last element is one of the reasons why the re-launched Nancy Drew: Girl Detective books (first published in 2004) are met with disdain by long time readers. Told in first person, with many of Nancy’s skills pawned off on Bess and George, and far more invested in romantic involvement with Ned, these novels remove some of Nancy’s flexibility as an avatar that the active reader can engage with. It allows for less imagination, sleuthing, and negotiation on the part of the reader because Nancy is too well defined as a character instead of being a model open to interpretation.

The example from Chapter 3 is actually one that is split between modes of address. Most of the activity is addressed to the undefined reader: “Nancy suggests that readers write down descriptions of people they pass in the street or in a car. Look for traits according to the following list. Your observation skills will improve with practice” (36). However, the last sentence slips back to the personal address of “your.”

I would argue that it is transmedia mostly because it uses whatever knowledge and affinity the reader has from connecting with other Nancy Drew texts. It forms one locus in the larger transmedia story of Nancy Drew by offering a particular experience with the character and the world that then colors the reader’s experience of any other Nancy Drew texts in the constellation.

Another way to think about this would be that the rules are like the “class” of the avatar (sleuth, warrior, etc.) which comes with certain abilities. The narrative provides the context that allows that “class” to matter and seem natural within the transmedia constellation and within the story world (Nancy’s character, warrior’s quest and history, etc.). Without the narrative element, the avatar is too general and does not generate much player interest/engagement. Without the rules element, the character is too specific for the reader to use/manipulate/re-think, and an opportunity for embodiment and engagement is missed.


Gossip here does seem to be a feminine form of knowledge. The gossip about the Topham family is careful to exclude the male head of the family (gossip is apparently not a challenge to male power) and implicate only the Topham women as unkind (or rather, only the Topham women can effectively be rebuked through the feminine system of rumor and gossip). The gendered implications of knowledge and the ways gossip is used in a community of women for empowerment in the 1959 revisions would be a rich area for further exploration.

This is similar to the parlor game manuals of the later 1900s discussed in Chapter 3 and the knowledge of “Jack-in-the-Pulpit” from St. Nicholas discussed in Chapter 2. Gossip and word-of-mouth knowledge are one of the few kinds of knowledge that are fully accessible to a pre-literate or semi-literate child. All of these texts use performances of childhood and narratives about children using gossip/word-of-mouth as positive ways to gain mastery and control.

Oral transmission also plays a large role in the Nancy Drew video games produced by Her Interactive. Much of the necessary character information, game play, and world building in those games happens through listening to character conversations and the spoken dialog is integral to generating player desire and cuing player behaviors. Nancy speaks directly to the player in the games as well. Her character’s voice is one of the main constants within the game, both directing the player (suggesting where the player might take the Nancy avatar or what they should investigate together) and being directed by the player (avatar being controlled by the player, dialog options selected by the player).

This example is also a moment of great ambiguity over the boundaries and ethical practices surrounding adolescent knowledge. The text indicates that lying (to the police no less) is ok as long as it legalizes your actions and your intentions are good. So it is a performance or mask of legality that is important, not the legal actions themselves.
Beeson and Brennen’s “Translating Nancy Drew from Print to Film” explores the historical context behind these changes: “It is not surprising that the 1959 version of Nancy Drew has a strong regard for authority. Postwar American society, with its conservative political and economic agenda, focuses on cooperation, law, and conformity. Individuals are continually urged to obey the rules, respect the law, and find legal solutions to problems rather than to take the law into their own hands” (197).

This function is especially true for the pre-adolescent or younger reader of the series. She must learn how to read the texts and how adolescence is performed. Nancy as an avatar generates reader desire for engagement despite the reader’s lack of skills because she represents an older, more powerful ideal that the pre-adolescent might like to experience. Once she is skilled at reading the conventions and didactic purpose of the novels, she can take the position of the older, wiser reader and challenge what is presented to her as a negotiated performance rather than a direct model for behavior.

For example, part of the performance of Nancy’s adolescence is her lack of economic gain from her employment—she is only allowed to gain souvenirs or tokens from her sleuthing; her labor is no more than hobby making her a precocious child but not a threat to adult systems of labor and control.

Much of the scholarship about Nancy Drew focuses on her role as a liminal figure, but the examples are often about how she is both adolescent and adult and how she is a liminal figure for femininity, rather than her function as an avatar and her relationships to knowledge networks.

This is true of all the texts (game, novel, or hybrid) in the larger Nancy Drew transmedia constellation. Only certain Nancys are authorized within the system, mostly dependent on how the various texts structure the character.

In "Dismantling the Fairy Engine: Media Archaeology as Topos Study," Erkki Huhtamo notes that “when a topos emerges, it should be treated as a node in a complex network of references and determinants” (33). Nancy acts as a node that pulls together a transmedia cluster that links texts from many times periods and with many cultural and historical concerns. When she acts as a topos, her main characteristic is to be an avatar through which the reader-player can become a sleuth both with the text and with the performances of adolescence/childliness presented. She is meant to be an active interpreter of what Nancy means and how that influences her understanding of what childhood means.

The impermanence of death is one place where game conventions often overshadow the need for meaningful player participation with the system. The game does not trust the player to save and is unwilling to make the player re-play what might be several hours’ worth of play time because of one poor choice or a route with unexpected consequences.
CHAPTER 6
TRANSMEDIA PLAY AND PARTICIPATION: A POSTSCRIPT

Children’s literature scholars desperately need a language that will allow them to analyze the complexities of transmedia narratives and digital worlds. Currently, scholars tend toward discussions of the novelty and revolutionary quality of new media and transmedia storytelling. This study shows that there is a long history of reader participation and intertextual involvement with texts, which scholars often overlook because so much of the process is internal to the reader and hard to quantify. To reconnect transmedia storytelling to its predecessors and examine its complexity and ambiguity, scholars need to understand how texts structure participation and engagement. Choosing to analyze how texts operate as interfaces becomes a framework that can fit any children’s text, not just contemporary texts. The major operational logic of text-as-interface is intermediation—how bodies collide with the shaping influence of media and the dynamic feedback between them. While newer, transmedia texts can create a more embodied, recursive, and emergent experience for the reader, the seeds of those experiences are visible in texts from the Golden Age of children’s literature.

This study does not create a unified history or progression of participatory media or game-books. Instead, it defines and investigates several spectrums that children’s texts fall along: book to game, narrative to rules, and rigidly structured to emergent possibilities. For the most part, the primary sources represent the extremes of each spectrum in order to understand the boundaries of what is possible with the structure of the text. Children’s texts operate as mediating interfaces to help the reader make judgments about the information the text provides. Each text has its own socially
constructed ideal of childhood, but each one uses similar structures to engage the reader with that ideal. By emphasizing narrative over rule-based world building, the text forecloses emergent meaning and depends on the reader to stay imaginatively engaged of her own free will. On the other hand, texts that emphasize rules at the expense of narrative lose reader engagement and fail to provide context that would make the rules interesting/natural. The texts that most successfully engage the reader in playing are the ones that balance the narrative context with rule-based structures that allow feedback and emergence. If play is about “possibility spaces,” texts use rules to set the boundaries of the play space and then narrative to create desire to act within that space. However, to create play and engagement, the reader must first know how to play; studying how transmedia texts invoke, build on, manipulate, and create new conventions and expectations for readers is a big step to understanding how they attempt to get the reader to buy into a certain kind of childhood. Finally, interrogating, both structurally and through content, the kinds of knowledge the texts present as valuable helps establish the boundaries of children’s and adults’ authority. Leveraging knowledge (often through creative use of language) is one of the few ways the child can exert agency. Knowledge and language mastery are also the skills that move the child reader beyond the text and beyond childhood itself.

One of the primary outcomes of this project is theorizing that readers are players. They are constantly participating with texts on a mental and physical level, and they are creating their own personal constellations and transmedia economies based on their experiences. Children’s texts are fundamentally responsive and playful. The “possibility spaces” they create are intermediated spaces where texts and readers test
performances of childlikeness. There is a great deal of work still to be done in exploring performativity, play, and childhood, but establishing a basic language for talking about the structures of transmedia texts helps children’s literature scholars temper their conversations about new media, no longer focusing only on the awesome revolutionary potential or on the absolutely destructive potential. Rather, the focus should be on the interface and mediation as ways of analyzing and balancing both potentials. Staying focused on intermediation, reciprocity, and recursion means acknowledging the importance of process and “potential spaces” of play.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lisa Kaye Dusenberry was born in Denver, Colorado. She completed her B.A. in English with minors in media studies and information science and technology at Colorado State University in spring 2005. She received her M.A. in English from the University of Florida in spring 2007 with a thesis entitled, “Playing Adolescent: Choose Your Own Adventure & The Subject of Participatory Media.” She received her Ph.D. in English from the University of Florida in the spring 2013. She has published several articles in the areas of children’s literature and digital media, including “Epic Nostalgia: Narrative Play and Transmedia Storytelling in Disney Epic Mickey” in the edited collection Game On, Hollywood! and “Reader-Players: The 39 Clues, Cathy’s Book, and the Nintendo DS” in the Children’s Literature Association Quarterly 35.4. She plans to continue pursuing research on participation and technology in children’s and adolescents’ media.