Antimimetic Rereading and Defamiliarization in *Save the Date*

Alex Mitchell
Department of Communications and New Media
National University of Singapore
alexm@nus.edu.sg

ABSTRACT
In repeat experiences of story-focused games or interactive stories, players tend to expect to experience something different in each play session. At the same time, they usually expect that each play session will be self-contained, in the sense that there are no explicit, diegetic references to earlier play sessions. Through a close reading of the visual novel *Save the Date*, I argue that breaking this expectation of self-contained play sessions creates a sense of defamiliarization, disrupting the mimetic nature of the work at the level of the individual play session and foregrounding the process of rereading, resulting in poetic gameplay. I suggest that such antimimetic interactive stories or story-focused games render the acts of reading and rereading unfamiliar, drawing attention to the act of rereading and encouraging players to think about the process of rereading in new ways.

Keywords
Rereading, replay stories, defamiliarization, poetic gameplay, unnatural literary games

INTRODUCTION
In repeat plays of interactive stories or story-focused games, players tend to expect to experience something different from their original experience (Mateas and Stern 2000; Magerko et al. 2004; Mitchell and McGee 2012). At the same time, the expectation generally is that one play session will be self-contained, in the sense that there are no explicit, diegetic references to other, earlier play sessions. For example, players generally do not expect characters to refer to events that took place in previous play sessions unless the current session is clearly a continuation of the previous session. Similarly, while players are used to certain gameplay elements only becoming available in the current play session as the result of actions they took in previous play sessions, they generally do not expect the "unlocking" of these elements to be justified, or even referred to, *within* the storyworld.

In this paper, through a close reading of the visual novel *Save the Date* (Paper Dino Software 2013), I argue that breaking the expectation of a self-contained play session creates a sense of defamiliarization, disrupting the mimetic nature of the work at the level of the individual play session and leading to an experience of poetic gameplay within what can be considered an unnatural literary game. This defamiliarization serves to widen the scope of consideration as to what constitutes a "play session", shifting focus from within individual play sessions to a broader sense of the player's larger engagement with the game.

My analysis builds upon several concepts: defamiliarization, poetic gameplay, and unnatural narrative. I will now briefly explain these concepts. The Russian formalist literary critic Shklovsky argues that "[t]he technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,'

Proceedings of DiGRA 2018

to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged" (1965). This process, which Shklovsky refers to as *defamiliarization*, has been applied to games, with Mitchell (2016) suggesting that the defamiliarization of gameplay can lead to what he calls *poetic gameplay*, or "the structuring of the actions the player takes within a game, and the responses the game provides to those actions, in a way that draws attention to the form of the game, and by doing so encourages the player to reflect upon and see that structure in a new way" (2016, 2). I argue that the undermining of expectations for a self-contained play session defamiliarizes the experience of rereading, creating a sense of poetic gameplay.

The other, related concept that I will be using for my analysis is that of *unnatural narrative*. According to Richardson, "the unnatural consists of events, characters, settings, or acts of narration that are antimimetic, that is, elements that defy the presuppositions of nonfictional narratives, the practices of realism or other poetics that model themselves on nonfictional narratives, and that transcend the conventions of existing, established genres" (2016, 389). This builds upon Shklovsky's notion of defamiliarization, suggesting that aspects of a narrative that violate the expectations of mimetic narrative will be seen as unnatural. Drawing on Richardson, Ensslin suggests that unnatural (literary) games "deliberately violate the ludonarrative conventions of their genre and the medium itself in order to evoke metaludic and metafictional reflections in the player – as well as other types of philosophical and critical processes" (2015). My claim is that interactive stories and story-focused games, such as *Save the Date*, that defamiliarize the process of rereading by violating the expectation for self-contained play sessions can be considered unnatural literary games in Ensslin's sense.

For clarity I am going to follow Mitchell (2015) by using the term "reading" to refer to the process of engaging with a work and in the process forming a mental model of the storyworld (Ryan 2006), and "rereading" to refer to repeat engagement with the work. However, to highlight the role of gameplay in this process, when discussing interactive stories or story-focused games I refer to the person interacting with the work as a "player", and each encounter with the work as a "play session".

WHY DO WE REREAD INTERACTIVE STORIES?

To understand the process of repeatedly experiencing interactive stories and story-focused games, it is worth considering previous work on rereading of both non-interactive and interactive stories.

There have been a number of discussions of rereading in non-interactive stories (Leitch 1987; Galef 1998). The most comprehensive study is Calinescu's (1993) taxonomy of rereading, where he distinguishing between what he refers to as partial, simple, and reflective rereading. Partial rereading involves going back to reread to make sense of things, to understand a story with the assumption that some of the meaning was either missed in the first reading, or not accessible without information provided later in the text. This implies an incomplete or inconclusive first reading. In contrast, simple or unreflective rereading involves revisiting a work to recapture the original experience. Finally, reflective rereading involves stepping back into a text to reexamine it analytically, for example to compare different perspectives, reflect on the techniques used, or look for deeper meanings.

In terms of interactive stories, rereading is often seen as an essential element of the reading experience (Ciccoricco 2007). Much early work focused on the tension between rereading for variation (Bernstein 1998; Bernstein 2009; Bernstein, Joyce, and Levine 1992) and

rereading for closure (Douglas 2001; Harpold 1994). Moving beyond this dichotomy, Murray (1998; 2011; 2015) suggests that readers initially re-experience interactive stories for variation, but eventually work towards what she calls "second-order closure". Similarly, Mitchell and McGee (2012) suggest that readers initially reread for closure, but have some goals that inform that repeat reading, and expect to make progress towards these goals, similar to Calinescu's partial rereading. It is only after these goals are achieved that readers can potentially switch to the equivalent of simple or reflective rereading.

Exploring related concepts, Short (2009) introduced the concept of the "accretive" player character, a playable character for which the player has little knowledge of the personality or backstory, but must instead engage in repeat playthroughs, each time making use of previous knowledge to move closer to a "solution" to the story-game. An important point here is that this accumulation of knowledge is not reflected *within* the storyworld, but only in the *player's* understanding of the storyworld. Similarly, Kleinman, Fox and Zhu (2016) have looked at the notion of the "rewind" as a metagame mechanic, allowing players to engage in what is very close to Mitchell and McGee's concept of partial rereadings in an interactive story, and also bearing a resemblance to Short's accretive player character.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The type of partial rereadings described above generally add to the player's understanding of the story and the storyworld. There is an underlying assumption here that there will be some consistency across readings, helping the player to come to an understanding of what Murray (1998) calls the "story physics" behind the storyworld. Without cross-session consistency, the building up of this understanding would be impossible (Mitchell and McGee 2011). This problem can be seen, for example, in *Symon* (Gambit Game Lab 2010), where the puzzle relationships between in-game objects are randomly generated across sessions, leading to inconsistent story relationships, and the lack of a consistent story physics. At the same time, there is an assumption that actions carried out in the previous play sessions will *not* carry across to subsequent play sessions. While the player's knowledge can be used to take action to solve puzzles, characters in the storyworld are normally not shown as being aware of what has happened in previous play sessions. A good example of this can be seen in *Alabaster* (Cater et al. 2009) – the player accumulates knowledge about the true nature of the main non-player character, Snow White, but is prevented from taking action based on that knowledge until the player character in the current play session has encountered that information (Mitchell 2010). This allows the player to build upon knowledge obtained in previous play sessions, without violating her expectation that each play session will be self-contained.

However, there have been recent examples where these expectations are explicitly violated. For example, in *Oxenfree* (Night School Studios 2016), players are able to send a message to another version of their character, and receive that message in a subsequent play session, *after* completing the game and reloading. Similarly, in *UnderTale* (Fox 2015) actions in previous play sessions have consequences in later play sessions, drastically impacting non-player characters' reactions to the player character. Finally, *Save the Date* (Paper Dino Software 2013) makes repeated use of cross-sessional memory and metanarrative to disrupt expectations for both repeat play and closure (Koenitz 2014).

These examples raise the central research question explored in this paper: how does this undermining of expectations for self-contained play sessions during rereading impact the player's experience of rereading an interactive story or story-focused game?

METHOD

To explore this question, I conducted a close reading of *Save the Date*, a visual novel created using RenPy. What is particularly interesting about *Save the Date* is the way it makes use of persistent state to allow the player's actions to have an impact on the story *across* play sessions, even when the player has explicitly restarted a new play session. This is distinct from other works such as *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe 2013) that often present the appearance of having restarted, whereas in actual fact the "new" play session is simply a continuation of the previous session.

Close reading is a technique for analysis of interactive works such as games involves repeated play of the work, with specific attention paid to particular "analytical lenses" selected to highlight the phenomena being explored (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 2011). For this analysis, I made use of the concepts *defamiliarization*, *poetic gameplay*, and *unnatural narrative* as the lenses that focused my investigation. I looked for ways that the process of rereading, and reference to previous play sessions, defamiliarized the play experience, and could potentially be creating what could be considered poetic gameplay. I also considered whether this suggested that *Save the Date* could be seen as an unnatural literary game.

RESULTS

Based on my close reading, I suggest that the type of rereading involved in *Save the Date* can be considered antimimetic (or unnatural) rereading, creating poetic gameplay that draws the player's attention to the act of rereading, and encouraging her to see that process in a fresh, new way. The work does this through several antimimetic moves. The game begins as a simple visual novel, with choices revolving around going out on a date with a woman named Felicia. This quickly changes into a puzzle as to how to literally "save the date", as every choice you make on the date seems to lead to Felicia's death. However, as I will describe below, the game changes direction several times, each time playing with the player's expectations for what it means to replay a story-focused game, and encouraging the player to rethink her assumptions about the act of rereading an interactive work.

Initial Expectations: Solve a Puzzle to "Save the Date"

Initially *Save the Date* seemed to be a typical "dating sim" game. The game fits the usual model for a visual novel-based dating sim, consisting of a static scene depicting the player-character's apartment, overlaid with a mobile phone and a series of dialogue choices related to asking Felicia out for dinner (see Figure 1). The opening sequence of a ringing phone and the conversation with "Felicia" made it clear that I should be working towards a successful dinner-date: the goal is to "save the date" in the most basic sense.

However, from the start there were hints that all was not what it seemed. Choosing any of the first three options led to slightly different scenarios, but in all cases the "date" quickly went wrong, ending with Felicia's death. For example, when I choose to go for Thai food, Felicia choose the Pad Thai, but unfortunately it turned out that she has a peanut allergy, so she had a severe allergic reaction and died. Similar events played out at the other two dinner locations: at the Burger joint she was the victim of a drive-by shooting, whereas at the Taco place the patio collapsed, plunging her to her death.

Figure 1: Setting up the player's expectations for the game: you need to "save the date".

This sequence reframed the game as one in which I am meant to literally "save the date". Rather than aiming for a successful dinner-date, I needed to work towards making sure that the "date", Felicia, survives the evening unharmed. My initial rereading was driven by a desire to "save the date" in this new sense. However, no matter which choices I made, Felicia eventually died, unless I chose the option not to go on the date at all. Following this option led to the player character losing touch with Felicia, and her meeting someone else and having a happy life with that other person. In this path, I had "saved the date" but my character didn't actually go on a date, so (at least at this point) this did not feel like a satisfactory conclusion to the story.

At this point, I was engaged in what Mitchell and McGee (2012) refer to as partial rereading. I was goal-directed, intent on figuring out by repeated play how to stop Felicia from dying while at the same time actually having my character go on a date with her.

Using Knowledge *Across* Sessions to Solve a Puzzle

As I replayed the game beyond this point, trying to find a way to "solve the puzzle" and stop Felicia from dying, there were two ways that the game started to suggest that something unexpected was happening: the game was starting to reflect my accumulation of knowledge *across* sessions. The first, most obvious way that this happened was the addition of an option to the dialogue choices in each of the three restaurant variations, an option that provided a direct way to avoid the cause of Felicia's death. For example, in the Thai Restaurant, I now had the option to alert Felicia to the fact that the Pad Thai contains peanuts (see Figure 2, left). In addition, after I had made several unsuccessful attempts at saving Felicia, the option to warn Felicia that going for dinner would be too dangerous appeared in the list of options at the start of the game (see Figure 2, right).

Figure 2: Providing options to the player based on knowledge *across* sessions.

In both cases, knowledge I gained in a previous play session changed the options available in a subsequent play session. While the notion of "unlocking" options in subsequent play sessions is quite common, what is unusual here is the fact that the player's *character*, as well as the player, seems to be aware of this information. This blurring of the boundary between my knowledge and my character's knowledge brought a strangeness to the experience, starting to undermine my sense that there is a coherent storyworld involved in the experience of the game.

Figure 3: Starting to break the boundary between the game and the player.

Despite the suggestion that the coherence of the storyworld was being eroded by this apparent bleed-over of knowledge from previous play sessions into the current play session, the integrity of the storyworld was somewhat maintained by Felicia's expression of surprise at the player character's seemingly unnatural access to information. For example, in the Thai Restaurant scenario, she asks "But how did you know I was allergic? I don't think I've ever told anyone at school" (see Figure 3). Here, I was given a series of possible explanations, from the naturalistic "I didn't – I was just making a joke, and I guess we got lucky!", through to a series of unlikely explanations, such as "I'm psychic", "I'm a

wizard", and "I reloaded from a saved game." Interestingly, although these explanations are unlikely from the perspective of the characters within the storyworld, the final option, "I reloaded from a saved game", is accurate, but from the perspective of me as the *player*.

Solving Puzzles *Across* Sessions

Through repeated replays, it became clear that the only way to move beyond Felicia's repeated deaths was to try to figure out a way to engage directly with the fact that the player character seems to have access to knowledge from previous play sessions, and to convince Felicia that this explanation was valid within the world of the story. I soon discovered that I could make use of repeated play sessions and the information gained in previous sessions to progress a little bit further in each session. For example, when I chose to have the player character tell Felicia that they are aware of her peanut allergy because of the action of reloading from a saved game, and then continue to insist that this is the reason, Felicia initially refused to believe this and walked out, resulting in her death. However, the game also provided an option for the player character to ask her for information that could be used to "prove" that they are reloading from a saved game – specifically, by asking her to think of a word, with the intention to then guess that word correctly in the next play session.

Interestingly, the first time I took this branch of the dialogue, there were only two options – to ask Felicia what her word was, or to make a wild guess. In both cases, Felicia assumed the player character is joking, and the game ended with her death, as usual. However, in the subsequent session a third option was available, in which the player character tells Felicia the word she had provided in the previous play session (see Figure 4, left).

Figure 4: Convincing Felicia that she is a character in a game.

Once this option was chosen, Felicia became convinced that something strange was going on. This led to an additional challenge: I now needed to convince Felicia that the player character was not a crazy stalker, but was instead somehow trying to "save" her by repeatedly reloading the game (see Figure 4, right). What this meant was I was shifting from solving the puzzle of how to "save the date" within individual play sessions while making use of knowledge acquired during previous play sessions, to instead progressively pushing the game forward in terms of in-session knowledge, fully aware that the current session will end in failure, but then using that knowledge, and the options the knowledge will have unlocked, in subsequent play sessions.

This shift in focus had an impact on my play experience on at least 2 levels. In terms of gameplay, I went from thinking of the game as a series of isolated play sessions to instead thinking about the series of play sessions as a single, continuous play session, with repeated

attempts and failures forming part of the process of moving forward in the "larger" game of figuring out how to convince Felicia to listen to the player character's warnings, and then (presumably) not die. It also, quite strangely from a narrative perspective, required that I (or at least the player character) engage Felicia's help in solving this puzzle *across sessions*, with her dying at the end of each session.

In terms of narrative, there was a clear break here with what most players would expect from an interactive story: there was a violation of both the boundaries between the individual play sessions and the boundaries between what is usually considered "in game" and "out of game". I will discuss the impact of this violation of boundaries on the narrative experience in the next section.

Unnatural Narrative, Self-Reflexivity, and Metalepsis

At this point, there was a tension between the mimetic world of the game and the enacted play experience. At the level of the storyworld, the player character seemed to be able to remember things that had happened in previous play sessions, and was using this knowledge to move the story forward. This was done by repeatedly convincing Felicia that she is a character in a game. It is worth considering whether, as a result, the narrative has effectively been rendered irrelevant, or at least highly antimimetic.

The option for the player character to explicitly state that the story was reloaded from a saved game, and the use of progressive fragments of knowledge across play sessions, can be seen as examples of both self-reflexivity and metalepsis (Genette 1980; Bell 2016). The revelation that the player's character is aware of the nature of the work, as a game, is an unexpected breaking of the fourth wall. It also bridges several layers of narrative framing, making the boundaries between the player's character, the player's character-as-player, and the player herself, somewhat unclear. In addition, by making explicit reference to the fact that this is a game, the work was becoming highly self-reflexive.

Here, the experience clearly became antimimetic (Richardson 2016), as there is no possible natural way for a character within a story to have access to knowledge from a previous "play session", or even to be aware of the existence of previous play sessions. At least, this seems to be the case at one level of framing, from the perspective of the player character and Felicia. However, stepping up one level of framing, it is possible that *Save the Date* can be considered a coherent, mimetic story at the level of the player-as-character. At this level, the player-as-character, controlled by the actual player (me), is taking part in a story about a player who is working to "save" a character within a video game by controlling the player character (the character who is going on the date with Felicia in the lowest level of framing). This draws attention to the nature of the player/character relationship, defamiliarizing and foregrounding the complexities of this relationship. This created what can be considered poetic gameplay, as I was encouraged to reflect upon the structure of the game I was playing and see it in a new way.

Undermining of the Game as Narrative Experience

What is problematic about this shift from a focus on the story of Felicia and the player character to the story of the player-as-character is that it seemed to trivialize the story of Felicia. The revelation that "it's all a game", coupled with the increasingly nonsensical ways that Felicia was killed, removed any feeling of sympathy that I may have had for the character of Felicia *as a character*, and instead led me to think of her as simply a playing piece to be used to solve the puzzle of how to move the game forward towards a winning condition. What this did do, however, was draw attention to the fact that this is exactly

what most games do. Although they may be trying to tell a story at some level, many games are, at the core, a set of rules within which the player is working to find an optimal solution, creating various "builds" to "win" the game, with little or no emotional attachment to the non-player characters being used to reach that winning condition. Again, by defamiliarizing the position of the player and my relationship as a player to the characters in the game, attention was being drawn to the form of the work, encouraging reflection and poetic gameplay.

Figure 5: Breaking the loop of solving puzzle across sessions.

Even once I had managed to solve the problem of convincing Felicia that the player character/player-as-character was not a crazy stalker, and had progressed to a scene where the player character met with Felicia on a hill overlooking town, there was a danger that the continuing use of the puzzles-across-sessions mechanic would completely undermine even the meta-level narrative. At this point, I was able to have the player character demonstrate to Felicia the various ways that she would have died, to which she responded: "This game of yours is kind of absurd, you know?" Immediately following this, a meteor shower began, and one of the meteors fell on Felicia, killing her. My immediate response to this was "oh no, not again!" Having been trained to use this knowledge in a replay, I of course immediately restarted the game, and was not surprised to now be given an option to warn Felicia about the meteor (see Figure 5, left). This was followed by another nonsensical death, as the Earth was invaded by flying saucers. Persisting, I tried one more time to save Felicia, and was rewarded with a way to break the loop of solving puzzles across sessions. Now I was given the option to directly ask Felicia for help solving the puzzle of the game (see Figure 5, right). Again, this is a breaking of the fourth wall, self-reflexively acknowledging the game-ness of the experience and blurring the boundaries of the narrative frames.

At this point the dialogue with Felicia shifted to a decidedly "meta" level, as she accepted that she was a character in a game, and reflected on what this might mean, complete with intertextual references to relevant works such as *Groundhog Day* (Ramis 1993) and *Chrono Trigger* (Square 1995). Although this could have come across as artificial and pretentious, this is not how it felt to me. In fact, the somewhat abstract concepts mentioned by Felicia directly mirrored the experience that I had concretely been going through by playing the game. The defamiliarization of the process of repeatedly playing the game and making use of knowledge of previous play sessions, combined with the shift from seeing Felicia as a character to simply making use of her as a pawn to win the game, and finally the reflection on the fact that I was doing this, made these concepts seem anything but abstract.

To understand why I reacted this way, it is worth looking back at an earlier sequence in the game. Before I had "unlocked" the solution to avoiding Felicia's death by meteor, and subsequently moved into the loop of Felicia's reflections on the nature of the game, there was a point where the game presented a single option: to observe the attack by the ninjas on the Thai restaurant (see Figure 6, left). At this point, I had managed to convince Felicia not to go for dinner by getting her to tell me about something secret from her childhood: her dream that the spot we were meeting was a "Hogwarts pickup spot". In the process of solving that problem, I began to feel that Felicia was a more well-rounded character than had been suggested by my interactions so far. This helped to counter my focus on puzzle-solving at the expense of any interest in the characters or the story. In fact, there was a moment soon after reaching the "Hogwarts pick-up spot" when I felt that I would rather quit and leave the game at this point, with Felicia still alive, rather than continue, but the game only gave me one option, to witness the ninja attack.

Figure 6: The only way to end the game is to stop playing and make your own ending.

Defamiliarization of Rereading Reinforced by the Refusal of Closure

As I continued to play, and eventually engaged in the reflective discussion of the game with Felicia, it gradually became clear that there actually was no way to "win" the game and solve the problem of "saving the date". Indeed, the only way to do this was to stop playing the game, and instead imagine my own ending (see Figure 6, right). Interestingly, this was exactly what I had felt like doing when I first encountered the beginning of the final sequence of the game – I had wanted to stop playing the game so as to save Felicia. The impact of this revelation was reinforced by the game's explicit refusal to allow me to reach any form of closure *within* the game, instead requiring a final breaking of the boundaries of the game by refusing to continue to play the game. It was here that *Save the Date* once again began to "work" for me as a story. It was also at this point that I felt the process of rereading became reflective instead of partial rereading. Rather than rereading to solve the puzzle, I became more interested in figuring out what the author of the game was trying to say, and how the form of the work was being used to get this message across.

As a final twist to the notion of replaying as continuation of the previous play sessions, the decision to stop playing was explicitly acknowledged in-game. When I went back to play one more time after having decided not to continue, I chose the option in the very first dialogue to *not* go on the date. This time, the final line changed to reflect the fact that by refusing to play, I had actually found the most appropriate place to end the story (see Figure 7). Whereas previously this ending had seemed disappointing, now it fit with the overall experience, encouraging me to reconsider what it means to replay a game, and enabling me to reach some form of (second-order) closure.

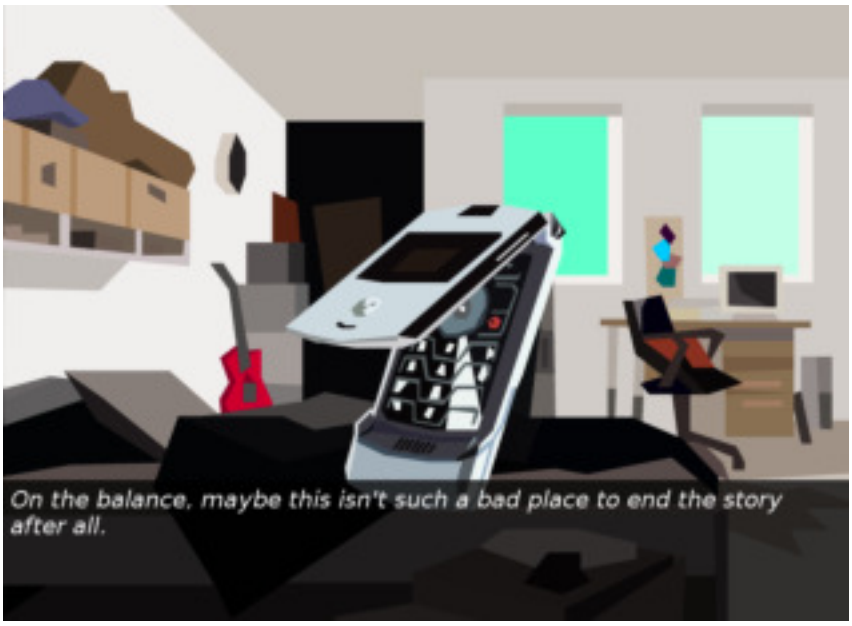

Figure 7: Refusing to start the story is now a satisfying ending.

DISCUSSION

The above analysis has explored how the visual novel *Save the Date* makes use of knowledge across play sessions, the blurring of play session boundaries, self-reflexivity and metalepsis, and the refusal of closure to motivate rereading and to encourage the player to shift from partial to reflective rereading. This type of rereading can be considered antimimetic rereading, resulting in poetic gameplay. To understand the implications of these findings, it is worth considering the use of similar techniques in other story-focused games. To do this, I will briefly consider two games: *Oxenfree* and *Undertale*.

Blurring Session Boundaries as Nonmimetic Rather Than Antimimetic

The game *Oxenfree* makes similar use of the type of cross-session reference seen in *Save the Date*. However, here the effect is somewhat different. In *Oxenfree*, the main character, Alex, is caught up in a situation involving a series of time travel loops, in which a group of ghosts trapped on an island are attempting to use Alex and her friends as a means to escape the island. There are several times during the game that the player is taken "back" through a "time loop", revisiting earlier sequences of the play session and encountering "alternative" versions of herself, visible in a mirror. A number of the puzzles within the game involve "breaking out" of these time loops. The game ends somewhat anticlimactically, with the friends escaping from the island and seemingly returning to their normal lives as if nothing has happened.

After playing the game to completion once, the player can then choose to start a new game by means of the "preserve timeline (start Oxenfree over with extended content enabled)" option or the "reset timeline (erase all save data and start Oxenfree over from the beginning)" option (see Figure 8, left). Upon choosing "preserve timeline", the game starts in a manner similar to the first playthrough. However, there are hints that something is a bit different – the game title screen is rendered with the occasional "glitch", similar to the way that "time loops" are indicated in-game. In addition, one of the first dialogue options available for Alex to speak is "This is so familiar…", leading her to speak the line: "Man,

this is… Sorry but this is so familiar, like… I dunno, I just feel like you've said all this before" (see Figure 8, right). Similar hints appear throughout the play session, with subtle differences to dialogue and suggestions that the friends are caught in a larger time loop, beyond the scope of the smaller loops encountered within the play session.

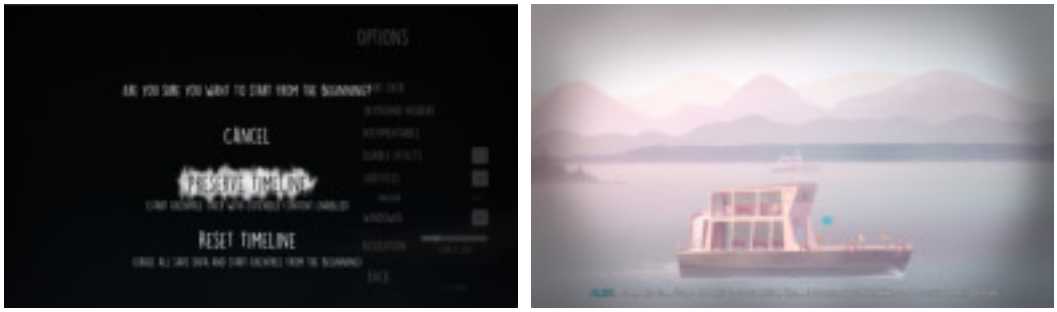

Figure 8: Restarting *Oxenfree* with the option to "preserve timeline".

Then, towards the end of the game, the player is given the option to send a message to her "alternative" self, as a way to "break out" of the larger time loop and not visit the island in the first place (see Figure 9, left). At the end of the game, as the friends are heading back to the mainland, the final sequence is interrupted by a "glitch", and the dialogue changes to a line that suggests Alex is preparing to meet her friends to head to the island. This is followed by a sequence, not seen previously, in which Alex is meeting her friends at a convenience store, just before heading to the ferry to go to the island. At this point, Alex receives the message from herself, the message sent by the player earlier in the play session, and the friends decide not to go to the island, thereby "breaking the loop" (see Figure 9, right).

Figure 9: Sending a message to "yourself" in the next play session in *Oxenfree*.

As with *Save the Date*, there is a shift here from thinking about solving puzzles within the game session, to instead thinking about solving puzzles *across* game sessions. However, unlike *Save the Date*, this seemingly antimimetic violation of the boundary between sessions actually fits within the fiction of the game: time travel is part of the plot, and the player has become familiar with the notion of "breaking out" of time loops.

This raises the question of whether *Oxenfree* can be considered an unnatural literary game in the same sense as *Save the Date*. As Ensslin (2015) explains, there are a number of competing definitions of unnatural narratives. Alber sees the unnatural as any narrative that includes elements that are "clearly and strikingly impossible in the real world" (Alber et al.

2013 cited in Ensslin (2015)). The cross-sessional "time loop" in *Oxenfree* clearly meets this definition of unnatural narrative. However, as Ensslin argues, taking this view of unnatural narrative leads many games to be included in the scope of the unnatural, making the concept less useful as a tool for critical analysis of games that actually do seem to be violating player expectations in terms of gameplay and/or narrative structure. Instead, it is more useful to apply Richardson's distinction between nonmimetic and antimimetic, in which he argues that "[a]ntimimetic texts go beyond nonmimetic texts as they violate rather than simply extend the conventions of mimesis" (2015, 4). From this perspective, *Oxenfree* can be seen as a nonmimetic rather than an antimimetic or unnatural literary game.

Another interesting difference between *Oxenfree* and *Save the Date* is the degree to which the use of cross-sessional memory is made visible to the player within the paratext (Genette 1997) of the game. In *Oxenfree*, the player needs to make a conscious decision to "preserve the timeline", and the menu option makes it clear that this will retain information from the previous play session. This is in the tradition of the "new game plus", an approach in which restarting the game explicitly lets you retain features or in-game items from previous play sessions (Lebowitz and Klug 2012, 158). Interestingly, this feature was first seen in *Chrono Trigger*, a game mentioned by Felicia in *Save the Date*.

To summarize, the key difference with *Oxenfree* is that the cross-sessional memory and use of knowledge across sessions is explained within the fiction, making it fantastical rather than defamiliarizing. In addition, the shift from a focus on a single session to an ongoing, extended play session is made explicit, and in fact relies on a deliberate player decision when restarting, reducing the defamiliarizing effect as this approach is clearly in line with the convention of providing players with extended content on replay.

Actively Resisting Simple Rereading

We can also consider the case of *Undertale*, a game that similarly makes use of cross-sessional memory and breaking of boundaries, both between sessions and between the game and the player, for poetic effect. In *Undertale*, the way the player chooses to approach the game, either killing or avoiding killing enemies, has a significant impact on subsequent play sessions. For example, completing a "genocide run", which involves killing all enemies in a given play session, leads to the destruction of the in-game universe in the final scene of the game. Upon restarting the game, the game initially shows a blank screen, followed, after a long wait, by the character Chara questioning the player as to why they want to go back to the world they destroyed in the previous play session.

As with *Save the Date*, actions in previous play sessions have an impact on subsequent play sessions, and the narrative frame is blurred, with the actions of the player and the actions of the player's character being somewhat conflated. Also similar to *Save the Date*, and unlike *Oxenfree*, in *Undertale* there is no clear way within the game to decide whether or not information from one session should be carried over to future sessions. This has led players to wonder how to "actually reset" the game so that it can be played in a similar way to the first time it was played (Spyro 2015). In fact, the only way to actually "restart" is to manually navigate the computer's file system and delete the saved data.

Interestingly, this suggests that the design of the game is actively resisting what Calinescu (1993) calls simple rereading, or rereading to recapture the first experience of the work. Although it is not quite as difficult to "reset" the game in *Save the Date* – an option to clear persistent data is available on the "options" screen – this is still a step that most players

would not be aware of, and is not something that is clearly visible on restarting the game in the usual manner.

Fundamentally Disrupting the Concept of Rereading

The fact that players need to make an extra effort to "actually" restart the game also raises the question of whether this type of rereading can still really be considered "rereading". Just as the process of shifting from solving puzzles within one play session to solving puzzles across play sessions in *Save the Date* encouraged me to rethink the boundaries of the play session, the shift from self-contained stories in each play session to a feeling that multiple play sessions are actually a larger, continuous play session, led me to question what it means to reread this type of work.

It was only when I decided to *stop* playing and accept the lack of closure within the game that I really felt I had come to the end of this larger play session. This is similar to the way Mitchell and McGee (2012) characterize rereading in interactive stories as being perceived by readers to continue to involve partial rereading, even when literally restarting the interactive story. It was only when they reached a point where they "got the gist" of the work that they shifted to reflective rereading and acknowledged that they now felt they were truly rereading the story. A question Mitchell and McGee raise, which is further highlighted in this paper, is what happens *after* this shift to reflective rereading. In *Save the Date*, I briefly engaged in reflective rereading, but the form of second-order closure that I had reached when deciding that I had "got the gist" of the work actually suggested that I should stop playing at that point. It is worth considering, as future work, what would be required for an interactive story to continue to engage the player in reflective rereading.

CONCLUSION

Through a close reading of *Save the Date*, I have explored the ways the game undermines player expectations for self-contained play sessions during rereading, defamiliarizing the process of rereading and encouraging a move beyond partial rereading to reflective rereading, while at the same time suggesting that the player should *stop* playing the work at this point. This results in what I call antimimetic or unnatural rereading.

Similar use of cross-sessional memory, self-reflexivity and metalepsis, and the refusal of closure, can be seen in games such as *Oxenfree* and *Undertale*. However, in *Oxenfree*, this process of undermining the expectation of a self-contained play session is not as disruptive, as it is explained within the game's fiction. This suggests that, rather than being antimimetic, this is an example of a nonmimetic narrative, resulting not in a sense of defamiliarization and poetic gameplay, but simply in an interesting, fantastical narrative told within a game.

As can be seen in *Undertale*, the use of cross-sessional memory and blurring of the boundaries between play sessions can also disrupt the player's attempts at simple rereading, making it difficult to go back and play the game again in a manner similar to the first time the game was played. Beyond that, the defamiliarization of the player's perception of the self-contained play session and the sense of a larger, ongoing play session disrupts the player's perception of what it means to replay the game. This creates a poetic effect, encouraging the player to see the process of rereading in a new way, and to appreciate the ways that games can support new ways of experiencing and rereading stories.

This paper has explored the connections between rereading and poetic gameplay through a close reading of a single work, *Save the Date*, and a brief comparison with two other works,

Oxenfree and *Undertale*. Future research will examine other ways that rereading can be defamiliarized in interactive stories and story-focused games. For example, it is interesting to consider works that are potentially un-rereadable due to their length, their constant variability, or their self-destructive nature. It would also be interesting to investigate reader response to these types of works through empirical studies. By exploring the ways that readers' expectations for rereading can be disrupted in ways that defamiliarize the experience of rereading and create a sense of poetic gameplay, we can gain deeper insights into how players experience and re-experience interactive stories and story-focused games. This is of value both for further critical study of these types of works, and for the design of new works that encourage deeper, repeat engagement.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research is funded under the Singapore Ministry of Education Academic Research Fund Tier 1 grant FY2015-FRC2-004, "Exploring 'Literary' Devices for Poetic Interactivity".

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alber, Jan, Stefan Iversen, Henrik Skov Nielsen, and Brian Richardson. 2013. "What Really Is Unnatural Narratology?" *StoryWorlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* 5 (1). University of Nebraska Press: 101–18.

Bell, Alice. 2016. "Interactional Metalepsis and Unnatural Narratology." *Narrative* 24 (3). The Ohio State University Press: 294–310.

Bernstein, Mark. 1998. "Patterns of Hypertext." In *Proceedings of Hypertext '98*, 21–29. ACM Press.

———. 2009. "On Hypertext Narrative." In *Proceedings of Hypertext '09*, 5–14. ACM Press.

Bernstein, Mark, Michael Joyce, and David Levine. 1992. "Contours of Constructive Hypertexts." In *Proceedings of Hypertext '92*, 161–70. ACM.

Bizzocchi, Jim, and Joshua Tanenbaum. 2011. "Well Read: Applying Close Reading Techniques to Gameplay Experiences." In *Well Played 3.0*, edited by Drew Davidson, 262–90. ETC Press.

Calinescu, M. 1993. *Rereading*. Yale University Press.

Cater, John, Rob Dubbin, Eric Eve, Elizabeth Heller, Jayzee, Kazuki Mishima, Sarah Morayati, et al. 2009. "Alabaster" [Inform 7 Game].

Ciccoricco, D. 2007. *Reading Network Fiction*. University of Alabama Press.

Douglas, Jane Yellowlees. 2001. *The End of Books - or Books Without End? Reading Interactive Narratives*. University of Michigan Press.

Ensslin, Astrid. 2015. "Video Games as Unnatural Narratives." *Diversity of Play*, no. June (April). Meson Press: 41.

Fox, Toby. 2015. "Undertale" [PC Computer Game].

Galactic Cafe. 2013. "The Stanley Parable" [PC Computer Game].

Galef, David. 1998. *Second Thoughts: A Focus on Rereading*. Wayne State University Press.

Gambit Game Lab. 2010. "Symon" [PC Computer Game].

Genette, Gerard. 1980. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Cornell University Press.

———. 1997. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Cambridge University Press.

Harpold, Terry. 1994. "Links and Their Vicissitudes: Essays on Hypertext." University of Pennsylvania.

Kleinman, Erica, Valerie Fox, and Jichen Zhu. 2016. "Rough Draft: Towards a Framework for Metagaming Mechanics of Rewinding in Interactive Storytelling." In *Interactive*

Storytelling, edited by Frank Nack and Andrew Gordon, 363–74. Lecture Notes in Computer Science. Springer Berlin / Heidelberg.

Koenitz, Hartmut. 2014. "Save the Date – Cross-Session Memory, Metanarrative and a Challenge to Endings." http://gamesandnarrative.net/save-the-date-cross-session-memory-metanarrative-and-a-challenge-of-endings/.

Lebowitz, Josiah, and Chris Klug. 2012. *Interactive Storytelling for Video Games: Proven Writing Techniques for Role Playing Games, Online Games, First Person Shooters, and More*. Taylor & Francis.

Leitch, Thomas M. 1987. "For (Against) A Theory of Rereading." *Modern Fiction Studies* 33 (3): 491–508.

Magerko, B, J E Laird, M Assanie, A Kerfoot, and D Stokes. 2004. "AI Characters and Directors for Interactive Computer Games." In *16th Innovative Applications of Artificial Intelligence Conference*, 877–83.

Mateas, Michael, and Andrew Stern. 2000. "Towards Integrating Plot and Character for Interactive Drama." In *Socially Intelligent Agents: The Human in the Loop, AAAI Symposium*. Vol. 2002.

Mitchell, Alex. 2010. "Motivations for Rereading in Interactive Stories: A Preliminary Investigation." In *Interactive Storytelling*, edited by Ruth Aylett, Mei Lim, Sandy Louchart, Paolo Petta, and Mark Riedl, 232–35. Lecture Notes in Computer Science. Springer Berlin / Heidelberg.

———. 2015. "Rereading and the SimCity Effect in Interactive Stories." In *Interactive Storytelling,* edited by H Schoenau-Fog, L E Bruni, S. Louchart, and S. Baceviciute. Lecture Notes in Computer Science, Springer Berlin / Heidelberg.

———. 2016. "Making the Familiar Unfamiliar: Techniques for Creating Poetic Gameplay." In *Proceedings of DiGRA/FDG 2016*.

Mitchell, Alex, and Kevin McGee. 2011. "Rereading in Interactive Stories: Constraints on Agency and Procedural Variation." In *Interactive Storytelling*, edited by Mei Si, David Thue, Elisabeth Andre, James Lester, Joshua Tanenbaum, and Veronica Zammitto, 7069:37–42. Lecture Notes in Computer Science. Springer Berlin / Heidelberg.

———. 2012. "Reading Again for the First Time: A Model of Rereading in Interactive Stories." In *Interactive Storytelling*, edited by David Oyarzun, Federico Peinado, R Michael Young, Ane Elizalde, and Gonzalo Méndez, 7648:202–13. Lecture Notes in Computer Science. Springer Berlin / Heidelberg.

Murray, Janet. 2011. "Why Paris Needs Hector and Lancelot Needs Mordred: Using Traditional Narrative Roles and Functions for Dramatic Compression in Interactive Narrative." In *Interactive Storytelling*, edited by Mei Si, David Thue, Elisabeth Andre, James Lester, Joshua Tanenbaum, and Veronica Zammitto, 7069:13–24. Lecture Notes in Computer Science. Springer Berlin / Heidelberg.

Murray, Janet. 1998. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. The MIT Press.

———. 2015. "A Tale of Two Boyfriends: A Literary Abstraction Strategy for Creating Meaningful Character Variation." In *Interactive Digital Narrative: History, Theory and Practice*, edited by Hartmut Koenitz, Gabriele Ferri, Mads Haahr, Digdem Sezen, and Tonguç Ibrahim Sezen, 121–35. Routledge.

Night School Studios. 2016. "Oxenfree" [PC Computer Game].

Paper Dino Software. 2013. "Save the Date" [PC Computer Game].

Ramis, Harold. 1993. *Groundhog Day*.

Richardson, Brian. 2015. *Unnatural Narrative: Theory, History, and Practice*. The Ohio State University Press.

———. 2016. "Unnatural Narrative Theory." *Style* 50 (4): 385–405.

Ryan, M L. 2006. *Avatars of Story*. University of Minnesota Press.
Shklovsky, Victor. 1965. "Art as Technique." In *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, 3–24. Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press.
Short, Emily. 2009. "Analysis: The Accretive Player Charater." *Gamasutra*, June, 1–3.
Spyro. 2015. "How Do You ACTUALLY RESET?" *Steam Community*. https://steamcommunity.com/app/391540/discussions/0/490121928340874502/.
Square. 1995. "Chrono Trigger" [Super NES Game].