2.1 The Wind and Where It Decided to Go

Defining Navigation in Ergodic Storytelling

As established in the introductory chapters of this thesis, Aarseth's term 'ergodic' is used in the context of literature to describe texts that require 'non-trivial effort'. In such works, unlike a standard linear novel, the reader becomes an active participant: choices must be made, paths selected, or puzzles solved for the 'narrative' to unfold. Neologised by combining the Greek for 'work' (ergon) and 'path' (hodos) - quite literally 'work-path' - the term here implies that the reader must work to follow the path of the story. Aarseth goes on to delineate three core fundamental means by which the reader/user can traverse the medium of ergodic literature - navigation, configuration, and construction (Aarseth, 1997).

In this first chapter, I aim to set the stage by defining the concept of navigation[1] in the context of ergodic literature.

Wayfinding

If ergodic literature turns reading into a form of navigation, what does navigation mean in a narrative context? Anthropologist Tim Ingold provides a useful framework. Ingold distinguishes between following a map and *wayfinding:* real navigation is an embodied process of moving through space and remembering the route rather than merely tracing a pre-given line. He dismisses the idea that our minds contain static 'maps' and instead describes humans as 'wayfarers' whose knowledge of the world is forged in movement. Polynesian navigators[2] would voyage across the Pacific guided by stars, waves, and the *wind*. Interestingly, these shifting landmarks and anchors for positioning themselves within the world were preserved through the medium of

---

[1] It should be noted that navigation, configuration, and construction do not necessarily occur in isolation of one another, and that the act of each is often entangled with another of Aarseth's trifecta. But, for the purposes of deconstructing and analysing the role of each within the ergodic framework, it is simpler to silo them one by one.

[2] Whilst it might appear that this thesis draws metaphorically on Polynesian navigation, it is essential to recognise that these practices are not merely poetic devices. They are rich, embodied knowledge systems with deep cultural, spiritual, and ecological significance. The wayfinding traditions of Pacific Island navigators are exemplary forms of applied storytelling: dynamic, intergenerational, and attuned to the natural rhythms far beyond the written word. They represent a mode of what I somewhat playfully call 'narradivergence' - a storytelling logic that resists the linear, closed-circuit narratives dominant in Western literary traditions. These oral cartographies are not metaphors for narrative - they *are* narrative, composed in currents and constellations rather than chapters and plot points. I acknowledge this, not just to be respectful of the culture that inspires much of my work, but also because it is integral to the broader argument of this thesis: that *navigation,* configuration, and construction can be a story, and that story can live outside the book.

oral storytelling traditions - not maps. They navigated by sensing and remembering, not by consulting a fixed chart. Similarly, in ergodic narratives, the reader does not receive a complete map of the plot; they find their way gradually, using cues and patterns in the text. Navigation here is a sense-making process rather than a simple direction-following process. A Polynesian way finder feeling the ocean swells or reading the night sky can serve as a metaphor: the reader of an ergodic text stands on a narrative 'beach' with no straightforward map, learning to recognise the 'constellations' of plot points and the 'currents' of theme to orient themselves. In an ergodic rehearsal, this metaphor may very well come to life - participants must literally explore an unfamiliar 'sea' of story fragments and collaboratively chart a course through them, much as a navigator charts a course through unknown waters.

The practical component of this study revolves around a box of seemingly disparate items that have been collated into an old shoebox for *Wayfinder* running shoes. The connection between the two seems a fitting homage to the thesis: storytelling is an act of navigation, movement, and discovery.

Before moving on, it's important to ask: why do these distinctions between map-following and wayfinding matter in the context of story? Because treating story as navigation shifts how we understand the role of the audience or reader. If an author traditionally provides a linear tale, an ergodic storyteller provides a space or system through which the story is discovered. They are a designer of possibility. The reader's journey *is* the story. This challenges classical notions of narrative structure. For example, Aristotle's *Poetics* placed plot (*mythos)* as the central element of tragedy and relegated spectacle (everything visual or spatial on stage) to the least importance. In classical drama, the idea that the *space* or the *path* could carry meaning on its own was minimal; what mattered was a tightly constructed plot with a beginning, middle, and end. Here we are considering something quite different: a story where the *path* the reader/user takes can vary, and meaning emerges from the *process* of navigating. Critics caution us to justify this approach. N. Katherine Hayles, for instance, has questioned whether the term 'ergodic' is over-applied - are all interactive or nonlinear texts truly demanding meaningful effort, or are some just using complexity as window dressing? She warns that not every branching or multimedia narrative actually empowers the reader; some simply create the illusion of depth without offering genuine agency. Aarseth, in fairness, also backs this point. He places high significance on the type of agency users have, and he values interaction that changes the textual

structure or experience, even going as far as to critique works that offer the illusion of choice without actual consequences on the text's outcome. However, I would argue that, even if ergodic texts (stories that are difficult to traverse) result in the same place, their value may lie in how the act of traversing - with choice, effort, and consequence - provides varying emotional resonance, and mirrors the human condition more truthfully than fixed linear narratives. To use a cliché, it's about the journey, not the destination.

In a related vein, textual scholar John Bryant argues (in *The Fluid Text*) that too much openness or mutability can threaten narrative integrity. If a text can constantly change or if every reader's path is entirely different, do we lose a coherent 'story' altogether. In this instance, Aarseth did not place a great deal of significance on narrative coherence. He was more interested in how meaning emerged from systems, structures, and user interaction than whether a story 'makes sense' in a conventional way. In this way Aarseth seems to back my own defence regarding meaning-making in the act, rather than as a result of finishing a story.

Still. These counterpoints invite us to clarify that ergodic storytelling is not about abandoning meaning or authorial intent, but about distributing the creation of meaning between author, text, and navigator (reader or participant). Proponents like Aarseth and Marie-Laure Ryan note that ergodic texts still have structure - they are *designed systems* that include 'rules for their own use' which differentiate successful traversals from unsuccessful ones. The reader may roam, but not aimlessly; the author of an ergodic work anticipates and designs for this active role.

In engaging with an ergodic artefact or environment in what I've come to call *'Polygodic'* ('many' (poly), 'paths' (hodos)) practice, process or play, navigation is a governing metaphor and mechanism; yet the work is carefully crafted so that participants navigate the story, they may encounter recurring motifs and converging threads that give shape to their experience. Thus, ergodic literature and navigational storytelling is established as foregrounding the journey of reading as a meaningful act.

Standing at the outset like a navigator on a shore, we understand there is no single map handed to us - we must move forward by recognising patterns and engaging actively. Like the wind, narrative in ergodic texts resists containment

—it shifts, guides, resists. It may not always be seen, but it can be felt. And in learning to feel it, we begin to find our way.

With key concepts now defined, we can now ask: how do readers and audiences actually find their way through such nonlinear, ergodic stories? If navigation is sense-making, what strategies and behaviours do people adopt when the story doesn't go in a straight line? In the next chapter, we will explore the experience of the reader as a navigator in practice. Examining theories of nonlinear reading and concrete examples of pathfinding in literature and games.