

2.1.2 The Wind and Where It Decided to Go

Pathfinding and Lost Paths

Having established that ergodic narratives require readers to actively navigate, we can now delve into the mechanics of that navigation. When confronted with a story that isn't laid out in a neat sequence, what do readers actually do to construct the meaning? Here I draw on literary theorists who have examined open, non-linear texts. Roland Barthes, in his distinction between readerly and writerly texts, provides a crucial insight: the writerly text is 'ourselves writing', he says, such that the goal of literature is 'to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text'. In a nonlinear narrative, the reader becomes a kind of co-author, choosing how to assemble the story from fragments. Barthes imagines literature as a galaxy of signifiers through which the reader must trace their own route, rather than a single railway line laid down by the author. Likewise, Umberto Eco describes the open work (*opera aperta*) as a work of art that invites the audience into an 'interpretative dance' - its full realisation only happens through the choices and imagination of the reader/user. Eco notes that such a work comes to life in the midnight of each reader or spectator, potentially yielding 'countless different interpretations' that do not exhaust the work's meaning. Every act of reading becomes both an interpretation and a performance of the piece. These theories suggest that navigating a nonlinear story is an intentional creative act; readers select links, revisit sections, piece together out-of-order snippets, and thereby write the emergent narrative in their own minds.

Wolfgang Iser's theory of the 'implied reader' adds an important dimension to this model. In the *Act of Reading*, Iser argues that meaning in literature arises from the negotiation between what the text provides and what the reader fills in - the 'blanks' left by the author. These structured absences guide the reader's imaginative participation. In regards to ergodic literature, Aarseth would typically not consider this means of interaction as non-trivial, and as such, non-ergodic. The term extra-interpretative could be applied to this manner of meaning-making within the subtextual walls of linear texts. However, the premise of meaning making by filling in the blanks can still be lifted and when applied to nonlinear or ergodic structures, this becomes a theory of reader navigation: the story is not entirely self-directed, nor wholly preordained, but sculpted through gaps that invite interaction. Much of what affects the cognitive decision making, and embodied intuition of navigation

within both ergodic and non-ergodic texts stems from mental schema and cognitive bias - our perspectives are intrinsically different, culturally, religiously, personally - and this impacts how we chose to interact with a story. However, the gaps we fill with these mental schema have a tendency to be larger through design in an ergodic text. In an RPG we have a tendency to project much of ourselves into the story. In ergodic rehearsals these gaps could exist in the form of scattered artefacts. What performers choose to connect - and what they choose to leave behind - generates unique iterations of narrative meaning. One may argue that this is precisely how we move through life.

Another perspective comes again from Tim Ingold, whose concept of wayfinding can be applied metaphorically to reading. Ingold emphasises that 'a path is not drawn first and then walked, but is formed by walking'. In terms of story, this implies that a narrative path is created by the reader's traversal, rather than pre-existing in full. The meaning of the story crystallises through the act of reading (or interacting). Each reader/user's journey may be unique. We might say, following Ingold's imagery that the reader is like a canoeist on the open sea: there is no highway to follow, but through continuous adjustment - following a clue here, a character thread there - they orient themselves and move in a chosen direction. The process is iterative and experiential. If one route leads to confusion, the reader might backtrack (physically turning pages or conceptually re-evaluating earlier clues) and try a different route. The navigation itself generates the story's coherence. In polygodic practice, for example, the actors who open the door into an ergodic space, or open up an ergodic artefact, must navigate through the space to position themselves within it and decide which piece of content to examine first, and then next. In doing so, they create a sequence that becomes *their* first version of the narrative. This not only embeds their own mental schema into the character they are to assume within the story, but primes their journey with greater capacity for personal, emotional resonance. As a group, the actors might collaborate to focus on one specific pattern which diverges from the motifs selected by a different group, and yet both are valid navigations of the same archive. Here, as Barthes and Eco would appreciate, the 'work in movement' remains open for each to complete in their own way.

This reframing of navigation as a lived, meaning-generating act finds further resonance in the work of Epeli Hau'ofa, whose essay *Our Sea of Islands*, challenged Western-imposed views of the Pacific as a fragmented geography.

Hau'ofa proposed instead that the sea - often viewed by colonisers as a barrier - was, for Pacific peoples, a connective space. 'We are the sea,' he wrote. 'We are the ocean.' Movement between islands was not deviation, but culture in action. This idea deepens the claim that navigation is not merely instrumental. It is how stories travel. How memory is carried. In this light, ergodic literature may be understood not as experimental, but as reflective of ancestral methods of orientation, connection, and maybe even metaphorical, autobiographical, lived-in narrative.

We can also look to current real-world analogues for how people navigate nonlinear story spaces. Consider escape rooms, a form of live, interactive game where players are placed in a room full of clues and must figure out how to "win" (usually by escaping or solving a mystery) within a time limit. There is no strictly linear script handed to players - instead, they must search the space, discover hidden compartments and clues, interpret codes, and decide in what order to tackle puzzles. Each team effectively writes its own sequence through the room's 'narrative' by the order in which they uncover the clues. Interestingly, escape room designers often embed a storyline (e.g. 'find the treasure of the pirate') that players piece together gradually. This is ergodic storytelling in a physical space - a clear demonstration that readers/players become path-makers. Of course, not everyone agrees. Aarseth himself didn't consider escape rooms to strictly be stories - but rather a series of puzzles. His skepticism reflects a broader tension between ludologists (who prize rules and gameplay) and narratologists (who foreground story), a divide that still simmers beneath much interactive theory. Yet if we can accept that narrative can be experiential - not just consumed but constructed - then escape rooms offer a compelling model. The logic players use ('we found a key with a skull symbol, maybe it opens a chest with a skull symbol') mirrors the logic readers use in a nonlinear novel ('this chapter mentions a minor character from chapter two; perhaps I should reread that section to see the connection') The skills involved are pattern recognition, hypothesis testing, and synthesis - all aspects of narrative wayfinding (and to a large degree, configuration). Marie-Laure Ryan would likely remind us that narrativity is a spectrum, not a switch. Escape rooms, then, may be narrative not because they tell a story, but because they provoke one.

Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler* provides a literary example; this novel notoriously begins anew several times, as the reader-protagonist keeps starting books that get interrupted. The reader of Calvino's novel experiences a series of false starts and fragments, yet by actively knitting together these disparate beginnings (and interspersed second-person narrative addressing 'you, the Reader'), one eventually grasps the metanarrative Calvino is constructing about the act of reading itself. The novel is essentially about the reader's quest for a complete story. In a playful way, it reaches the reader how to navigate a shattered narrative - how to carry themes and questions from one fragment to the next in hope of resolution.

As readers carve their paths, a few key patterns emerge. First, the route chosen affects the meaning derived. The order in which events are encountered can colour their significance. (For instance, reading a character's diary before reading a scene of their death creates a very different emotional arc than if those events were reversed.) Second, non-linearity creates both freedom and uncertainty. Readers may enjoy the interpretative openness, relishing the chance to speculate and assemble the story like a puzzle. But they may also experience disorientation - a sense of being lost. The ergodic artefact (an old, battered, Wayfinder brand shoebox filled with disparate items connected only by mysterious motifs and lyrical script) that I will refer to as *Wayfinder* for the sake of ease, could cause performers to initially feel disorientation faced with a box full of unconnected pieces; part of the Polygodic Practice's tension (and theoretical point) is the transformation of that confusion into a meaningful performance through navigation and play. A skilled reader-navigator learns to tolerate ambiguity while searching for anchors; recurring motifs, or strong emotional beats, serve as 'landmarks' in the narrative landscape. We might compare these to Kevin Lynch's notion of landmarks and paths in city navigation: just as a city with clear landmarks and paths is easier to navigate and 'read', a nonlinear story provides points of reference (a vivid scene, a key clue) that help the reader form a mental map of the narrative. In *Everything Ancient Was Once New*, Emalani Case builds on Hau'ofa's ideas by framing navigation as an act of remembrance and resistance. 'To navigate is to remember, and to remember is to resist erasure,' she writes. This casts reader-navigation in nonlinear texts as more than cognitive play - it becomes a political and cultural act of reclaiming fragmented knowledge. In this light, the ambiguity faced by performers in *Wayfinder* is not a flaw, but a rite. An invitation to piece together something meaningful in a world designed to forget. Even in seemingly chaotic texts, readers will impose a coherence by

mapping relations: this scene happens earlier than thane; this document was written by the same person as that letter, these three threads mirror each other at different stages of the character's life. In doing so, they make the story their own. As Barthes would say, they have become the producers of the text's meaning.

Not everyone is convinced, however, that reader agency in nonlinear narratives is as powerful as it appears. Lev Manovich argues that much interactive media simply gives an 'illusion of choice'. The user is not truly writing the story; they are selecting from pre-authored options. 'Interactivity is an illusion... the user is only following one of the designer's preprogrammed paths,' Manovich observes. In a branching story or game, every outcome is already written; you just pick which one to see. From this perspective the reader's role is closer to a menu selection than actual authorship - a point that calls to mind choose-your-own-adventure books, which Jenkins noted can feel 'lifeless' because the choices are predetermined. The concern of Manovich and Jenkins - that the user of interactive media is merely selecting from pre-authored paths - raises an interesting question; is pre-authorship truly the problem? After all, linear narratives are equally predetermined; their structure is fixed entirely by the author, with no opportunity for deviation. What seems to trouble critics like Manovich and Jenkins is not the existence of authored content, but the presence of visible choice within it - the illusion that choosing from multiple endings is somehow less authentic than following a single path. In terms of replayability, this is of course true. But that ultimately hinges on their own decision to experience the story again. I have to argue that visibility of choice neither reduces authenticity nor narrative depth; rather, it shifts the focus from authorship of the artefact to authorship of experience. If one is seeking co-authored stories rather than experiences, one need look no further than improvisational or forum theatre.

Markku Eskelinen, a scholar of ergodic literature and games further critiques some nonlinear storytelling for prioritising form over substance. He suggests that experimental narrative designers can get so enamoured with complex structures, multiple paths, and metafictional play, that they neglect emotional resonance or thematic depth.¹ It's a fair warning.

Critics therefore ask: does being 'lost' in a narrative ultimately lead to richer understanding, or just frustration? There is a fine line where productive

¹ Markku, if you're reading this - I have your ball.

bewilderment can turn into alienation. But one might argue that that line is fluid person to person, day to day.

I believe that, done thoughtfully, nonlinear, ergodic storytelling can produce profound engagement and meaning - precisely because the reader's active involvement yields a personal stake in the story's outcome. The key is to design the narrative space such that exploration is rewarded with insight. Echoing Lynch's idea that an environment should have 'surplus clues' and an open-ended design for the explorer, an ergodic tale should invite the reader to fill in blanks and make connections, without becoming completely unmoored.

Wayfinder contains a narrative that does not hand the story to the participants, but it does contain patterns (recurring characters across generations, echoing pieces of text, objects that relate to one another) that may reward the performer's inquisitiveness. As each actor finds a 'breadcrumb' and follows it, they may experience the thrill of discovery and the creative satisfaction of linking one piece of story to another. This is analogous to the way Calvin's novel eventually rewards the persistent reader with a meta-story, or how an escape room rewards players with the final key once they've solved all the riddles.

In summary, readers 'find their way' through nonlinear stories by actively constructing pathways - effectively performing the story as they go. They engage in a dynamic process of reading, interpreting, choosing, and revising, much like navigation in the real world. This process can transform a simple act of reading into a participatory journey, one where meaning is not just received but co-created.

To ground these ideas further, the next chapter will turn to a concrete case study: Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*. This notoriously labyrinthine novel will allow us to examine how extreme structural complexity impacts the reading experience. How do readers fare when faced with a book that is itself a maze? What 'navigational functionality' does such a text demand and how does it shape the story's meaning? The next chapter will explore these questions, bringing in perspectives on postmodern literature and cognitive mapping to analyse *House of Leaves* in depth.