Motivations for Rereading in Interactive Stories: A Preliminary Investigation

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Abstract. This paper describes a preliminary investigation into the concept of rereadability in interactive stories. Through a close reading of the text-based interactive fiction *Alabaster*, seven possible motivations for rereading an interactive story are identified. This close reading suggests that, while there are many ways in which rereadability in interactive stories is similar to rereadability in traditional (non-interactive) fiction, there are also forms of rereadability that are unique to interactive storytelling.

Keywords: Rereading, interactive fiction, player motivations, close readings.

1 Introduction

In literature, the tendency for readers to want to reread a work is often seen as an indicator of the quality of the work [1, 2]. Similarly, rereadability can be seen as an important aspect of interactive storytelling. Despite this, there has not been much work done to look at rereadability in interactive storytelling [3]. This paper describes a preliminary investigation into this issue, looking specifically at the motivations for rereading the text-based interactive fiction *Alabaster* (2009), a retelling of the traditional fairy tale "Snow White" created by John Cater, Rob Dubbin, Eric Eve, Elizabeth Heller, Jayzee, Kazuki Mishima, Sarah Morayati, Mark Musante, Emily Short, Adam Thornton, and Ziv Wities.

2 Motivations for Rereading

As a result of the close reading, seven possible motivations for rereading were identified. These motivations will now be described in detail.

Making Sense of Things
As with a traditional work of (non-interactive) fiction, the player may be motivated to revisit *Alabaster* in an attempt to *make sense of things*. In the process of moving through the story, the player encounters numerous fragments of text, either in the form of dialogue with Snow White, or as descriptions of the setting, objects and

characters in the storyworld. These fragments need to be reconciled into an overall understanding of the story. This can be compared with the process of reading a traditional text [4]. As each new piece of information in a story is encountered, the reader must fit that information into her existing mental model, and possibly revise that mental model to accommodate the new information. Particularly if the discourse structure is complex, a second (or third) reading may be necessary to clarify causal relationships between events.

Finding Out More

Rereading to make sense of the work is similar to rereading in a non-interactive work. In addition, a player of an interactive story may reread to *find out more*. As there are numerous fragments of information contained within the story, many of which require that the player's character ask specific questions of Snow White, it is possible for the player to finish the story without encountering every text fragment. In addition, there are frequent indications that there is more to the story than can be seen on the surface, suggesting that there is the possibility to unlock additional information if the player can discover the correct questions to ask or actions to take. For example, the story contains a number of interwoven subplots: the King's disappearance, the Queen's madness, Snow White's possible demonic possession and/or vampirism, the disappearance of the huntsman's dogs, and so on. All of these subplots provide reasons for the player to go back and try to dig deeper to uncover hidden information.

Trying Out "What-if" Scenarios

In addition to taking action to find out more information during a rereading, the player may want to *try out "what if" scenarios*. Unlike a traditional story, an interactive story presents the player with choices that can lead to different outcomes. There are certain points in *Alabaster* where the player is given very specific choices. For example, when deciding to return to the palace, the player is asked whether she will do so with or without Snow White. There is a very clear connection between this decision and the way the endgame plays out. There are, however, more subtle decisions that the player has to make throughout the course of the story that may or may not impact the outcome. For example, the type of questions that the player asks Snow White and the information that the player mentions to her will subtly change Snow White's disposition. The player may be motivated to experiment with different choices to see whether there is a change in the direction and outcome of the story.

Seeing Things From a Different Perspective

The active search for additional information and different paths through the narrative described above leads to a further motivation for rereading: the desire to *see things from a different perspective*. The events and information revealed in an initial reading may suggest a reframing: a radical revision of the player's model of the storyworld, the characters' personalities and motivation, and the causal connections within the narrative. Reading through the story a second time can lead to the meaning of events shifting based on new information that was not available to the player in the first reading. This process of rereading from a different perspective is similar to the process of making sense of things discussed above. However, rather than trying to reaffirm a stable mental model, in the case of rereading from a new perspective there is a complete reworking of the player's understanding of the story.

In the context of an interactive story such as *Alabaster*, this change of perspective can also have an impact on the choices that the player makes in the story. For example, throughout the story there are suggestions that Snow White is a vampire. From this perspective, the reader may feel justified in carrying out the Queen's command to kill her. However, when the player discovers in one of the endings that the main character is actually the King, and that Snow White is his daughter, what earlier seemed like a simple decision becomes more complex. When rereading, the player will have a very different perception of the events leading up to this final action, and may be inclined to make different choices.

Looking For Deeper Meanings

Beyond attempts to see things from a different perspective, the player may also be motivated to reread the story to *look for deeper meanings*, attempting "to structure the meaning potential arising out of the multifarious connections between the semantic levels of the text" [5]. Posner (quoted in [5] p. 92) sees the search for a "secondary" code beneath the primary code or schemata of a text as the source of aesthetic pleasure for a reader. The further pursuit of this secondary code, the process of looking for an interpretation of the text, can provide motivation for rereading.

The motivation to look for deeper meanings can be seen in the vampirism/demonic possession subplot in *Alabaster*, which makes reference to Biblical tales and to Christian and Jewish mythology [6]. Symbols that are drawn from both the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden and the original fairytale "Snow White", such as the apple, provide additional layers of meaning. These suggestions of deeper meanings and intertextuality motivate the player to explore these connections through rereadings of the work.

Reflecting on the Techniques Used

The player may also be motivated to *reflect on the techniques used* in the text. This involves stepping back from the text and appreciating or critiquing the ways in which the text achieves its effects. This process of reflection is something that can often only be done during rereading, as "only successive readings will allow us to focus on the development of events and characters, significant patterns of imagery and ideology, modulations of tone, and whatever else makes the story act on us as it does" [7] (p. 494). In *Alabaster* the player may start to notice, for example, the way that the system encourages the player to pursue certain topics by making suggestions as to follow-up actions. The player will quickly come to realize that these suggestions can lead to a sequence of discoveries, opening up new pathways through the story. The player may also notice that the system subtly resists changes of subject, attempting to direct the player down specific paths planned by the author. Once these patterns become visible to the player, she may be motivated to go back and play again to reflect on how these patterns affected her choices, and to look for other patterns and techniques.

Figuring Out How the System Works

Reflection on the techniques used in the work may, in addition, encourage the player to reread a work in an attempt to *figure out how the system works*, in terms of the underlying rule system that governs the way the system responds to the player's actions. This motivation is, by its nature, very specific to interactive stories. Players tend to bring a set of initial expectations to an interactive work, expectations that may

or may not be satisfied as they encounter the work [8]. As the player observes the system's responses, the degree to which these expectations are met shapes her understanding of the underlying computational model. For example, the "hints" system in *Alabaster* provides a glimpse of the underlying conversation mechanism. As the player becomes more familiar with the conversational mechanism, she comes to understand the ways in which certain actions can trigger desired responses. Through repeated rereadings the player can, with some confidence, manipulate the direction of the story. This provides a strong motivation to reread.

3 Conclusion

The close reading of *Alabaster* presented in this paper identifies a number of possible motivations for rereading interactive stories. Certain motivations - *making sense of things*, *seeing things from a different perspective*, *looking for deeper meanings*, and *reflecting on the techniques used* - are common to both interactive and non-interactive stories. The remaining motivations - *finding out more*, *trying out "what-if" scenarios*, and *figuring out how the system works* - can be seen as exclusive to interactive systems.

Note that these latter motivations apply equally to narrative and non-narrative forms. Further work needs to be done to explore which, if any, of these motivations apply exclusively to narrative forms, and to determine if these motivations can be generalized beyond *Alabaster*. Work is also needed to identify the techniques used to elicit these motivations in readers, and to describe these techniques in the form of design knowledge that can be used by authors to create rereadable interactive stories.

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