Reading Again for the First Time:
A Model of Rereading in Interactive Stories

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Abstract. When a non-interactive story is reread, the experience may change, even though the text remains the same. But what if the text is potentially different in each reading session, as is the case in an interactive story – how does rereading change in the context of interactive stories? In our earlier empirical studies of rereading we found that, surprisingly, readers of interactive stories reported that they do *not* feel that they are rereading until after they reach an *understanding* of the story, even if the story is unchanged between readings. To explain this, we propose a model of rereading in interactive stories in which readers are initially rereading to reach some form of *closure*. After achieving this goal, readers *do* feel that they are rereading, focusing on their understanding of the story as invariant. We demonstrate this model by using it to explain why inexperienced readers of Mateas and Stern's *Façade* initially reread to explore the story, but quickly shift to "playing with the system", and do not continue to reread for long.

Key words: interactive storytelling, rereading, theoretical models

1 Introduction

There are many reasons why people may want to reread or rewatch a story – for example, to recapture the experience, to compare different perspectives, or to reflect on the techniques used. In a non-interactive story, the *text* remains the same between readings. If the experience of reading the text again is different from previous readings, as Galef observes, "[w]hat changes is the reader, not the invariant text" [1, p. 21]. For an interactive story, this is no longer necessarily the case. Choices a reader makes during a reading session may lead to different texts being encountered on each reading. If the text itself is literally different each time it is read, what does it mean to "re-read"? In our empirical studies of rereading in interactive stories [2, 3] we observed that, before they reached an understanding of the story, readers reported they did *not* feel that they were rereading, even if the story did *not* change between readings. It was only when they "got the gist" of the story that they *did* feel that they were rereading, even if the text of the story changed between readings. In this paper, we propose a model of rereading in interactive stories to explain these observations.

We use Calinescu's [4] framework of rereading in non-interactive stories as a starting point for our model. Calinescu categorizes rereading in non-interactive stories into *partial*, *simple*, and *reflective* rereading. Partial rereading, or backtracking, takes place in an effort to recall details or understand information which was missed on the first reading. This implies an incomplete first reading. Simple rereading is an attempt to recapture the experience of the first reading. Finally, reflective rereading involves stepping back and looking at the text in a more analytical manner. Note that Calinescu's framework may not apply directly to interactive stories, as the underlying assumption is that the text is fixed, and that the reader's role is to interpret the text. In an interactive story, however, the reader is not just interpreting the text, but is also *making choices* (what Aarseth [5] describes as an *intervention*) which may *change* the text, and consequently the discourse and/or the story. Calinescu's model does not take this into consideration.

According to our model, readers of interactive stories initially read again in an attempt to reach some form of *closure*. This can be seen as analogous to partial rereading in a non-interactive story. After achieving their initial goal, what readers are doing changes. At this point, readers focus on their understanding of the story as invariant, and are engaged in an activity equivalent to simple or reflective rereading. This model suggests new ways of designing to support rereading in interactive stories, and new ways of looking at rereading in general.

This paper is structured as follows. We begin by providing an overview of the related work, and stating our research problem and the scope of our paper. We then summarize our earlier empirical studies, and describe our model of rereading. Next, we use the model to explain why inexperienced readers of *Façade* begin by rereading for the story, but soon shift to "playing with the system", and do not reread for long. We end by discussing implications and future work.

2   Related Work

In this section, we provide an overview of the related work, covering theoretical discussions, implementations of interactive storytelling systems intended to support rereading, and empirical studies of rereading in interactive stories.

There has been some theoretical discussion of rereading in interactive stories. In terms of hypertext fiction, there are differing opinions about the nature of rereading. Some critics focus on the relationship between rereading and variation, whereas others focus on rereading for closure. Focusing on rereading for variation, Bernstein [6–8] sees rereading as opening up the possibility for multiple meanings to emerge as fragments of text are encountered in different contexts on subsequent readings. Similarly, theorists such as Selig [9] and Peacock [10] suggest that the variations, multiple meanings and challenges that readers face in hypertext fiction will encourage rereading. In contrast, researchers such as Harpold [11] and Douglas [12] argue that readers return to hypertext fiction, not to experience variation for its own sake, but rather to seek closure. Harpold feels that it is the promise of eventually finding a conclusion which provides the

motivation for rereading. Douglas suggests that readers are looking for some indication as to when they have reached the end of a text, and that there is some possibility of reaching closure in a hypertext fiction. These close readings suggest a somewhat different model of rereading than the model implied by the theorists who emphasize variation.

Researchers and theorists of AI-based interactive drama have tended to focus on the need for variability and agency for interactive stories to be satisfying, and argue that this requires repeated experiences for readers to be able to see the impact of their choices [13]. For example, Murray [14] has suggested that readers will want to repeatedly experience interactive stories to see different perspectives, and eventually achieve a form of second-order closure when they are able to perceive the larger system underlying the variations. Mitchell [15] suggests several new motivations for rereading of interactive stories, including rereading to find out more, to experiment with different choices, and to figure out how the system works. However, Mitchell and McGee [16] caution that rereading may actually impose limitations on agency and variation.

Most of the research into implementing interactive stories has focused on *single* experiences of an interactive story. There have, however, been some systems explicitly designed to address repeated readings by the same reader [17–19], and some discussion of the trade-off between focusing on single versus repeat experiences [20]. The emphasis tends to be on using variation to encourage and reward rereading by ensuring that a reader has an experience which matches her choices in a given reading, as distinct from choices made in previous readings.

Although there has been much theoretical discussion of the issue of rereading in interactive stories, and some implementation work to explore these issues, there have only been a few empirical studies which directly address the question of rereading. Most of these studies [21–23] have focused on Mateas and Stern's interactive drama *Façade* [17]. Studies of other systems which focus on rereading, such as [24], have evaluated the algorithms rather than readers' responses.

3   Research Problem

Although our discussion of the related work shows that there has been some exploration of rereading in interactive stories, there has not been any work to examine how rereading actually changes in the context of interactive stories. This is the question we address in this paper, by developing a model of rereading in interactive stories. We now define the scope of our paper, explaining why we use the term "reading" for interactive stories, what types of rereading we are addressing, and what forms of interactive stories we are examining.

We use the term *reading* to refer to the process of making choices and perceiving the responses to these choices in an interactive story, regardless of the medium through which the story is conveyed, and of constructing an understanding of the story from these choices and responses. This emphasizes the experience of the *story*, as opposed to other terms, such as "playing" or "interacting", which suggest different types of experience. We consider a *repeat reading*,

or *reading again*, to mean the process of going back and reexperiencing an interactive story. Although this can occur any time after an initial reading, we are focusing specifically on reading again *immediately* after the previous experience has been completed. In addition, we are limiting our focus to repeat readings which involve the reader completing a reading session and then going back to read the work again in a *new* reading session, as opposed to reencountering a section of the work during the same session through looping or repetition.

We focus on interactive stories where the reader makes choices in terms of exploring story fragments or changing parameters which impact the story. We do not consider interactive stories in which the reader contributes new connections or content, or where the reader is restricted to unlocking the next part of a linear story. In addition, we will limit ourselves to situations where a single reader interacts with a computer-based interactive story.

4   Empirical Studies of Rereading in Interactive Stories

To develop our model, we conducted two empirical studies of people rereading interactive stories. In this section, we briefly describe the design of these studies, and summarize our observations[1].

The first study investigated why readers reread interactive stories [2]. The study involved 12 participants who were asked to repeatedly read 2 short hypertext fictions. We conducted a series of semi-structured "clinical interviews" [25], during which we observed and probed readers' reactions, looking specifically at what they were doing as they reread. In this study, we saw that readers were rereading *to arrive at something*. This could involve looking for the "best version", "what really happened", or some other form of closure. Regardless, they tended to be goal-directed, and continued to reread until they either achieved this goal, or they felt that it was not achievable.

We conducted a second study to explore the question of whether readers consider rereading an interactive story to be *rereading* [3]. This study involved 22 readers repeatedly reading a complex hypertext. In this study, we asked participants if they were "rereading", and probed their responses using a "clinical interview" approach. Interestingly, many of the participants in our second study struggled to describe what they were doing as "rereading". Instinctively, based on their experience of non-interactive stories, this seems to *not* be rereading, because the text was different in each reading. After some time, readers tended to report that they had "got the gist" of the story. At this point many of the participants who were initially uncertain as to whether or not they were rereading now changed their minds and said that they *were* rereading, even if the text they encountered was different on each reading. The participants, having reached some form of closure, were now able to focus on their *understanding of the story*, rather than the text, as invariant across readings.

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[1] Please see the original publications [2, 3] for complete details of these studies.

5 A Model of Rereading in Interactive Stories

Based on the observations described above, we have developed a model of rereading in interactive stories. We now describe this model:

1. *Reading again to reach closure*
   Readers initially read again to reach some form of *closure*. On each reading, although the text may change, what the reader is doing does not change. This is equivalent to partial rereading in non-interactive stories. Readers do *not* consider this to be rereading, even if the story (as opposed to the surface text) does not change between readings.

2. *Rereading after closure*
   Once a reader has achieved closure, the reader's goals when reading again will change: to either simple rereading to reexperience the interactive story, or to a more analytic, reflective rereading. This requires a change in what the reader is doing while reading the story. Readers *do* consider this to be rereading, and shift their focus to their *understanding of the story*, rather than the text, as invariant across readings.

By *closure* in an interactive story, we mean a feeling of resolution or completion, such as reaching an understanding of the story, reaching the "best ending", or finding the "most interesting" version of the story. This is similar to Carroll's definition of narrative closure in non-interactive stories as "the phenomenological feeling of finality that is generated when all the questions saliently posed by the narrative are answered" [26, p. 1]. In the context of an interactive story, however, this feeling of finality is best regarded as a cluster of related experiences resulting from the process of pursuing specific goals while reading the interactive story, which are felt in relation to the reader's experience of both the *narrative* and the *choices* she is making.

We will now discuss the two stages of our model of rereading in more detail, and explain how the model relates to the observations in our empirical studies.

5.1 Reading Again to Reach Closure

Our model states that readers initially read again to reach some form of closure. This is based on our observations of reader behaviour in our first study [2]. This view of what readers are doing when reading again is supported by some of the related work. For example, in Douglas's extended discussions of reading (and rereading) *afternoon, a story* (Joyce, 1990) [12], she describes her desire to find closure within the work, and how she stopped rereading when she felt that she had got what she wanted from it. Similarly, Murray describes how, even in a "kaleidoscopic" narrative, readers are looking for some form of closure, albeit not the same type of closure that they would get from a traditional narrative [14, p. 180].

Our model also states that, when reading again to reach closure, readers do *not* consider what they are doing to be rereading. Although what the reader is

doing stays the same across reading sessions, the *text* which the reader specifically encounters may change. This makes it difficult for readers to consider what they are doing to be rereading.

This can be compared with what readers are doing when rereading a non-interactive story. During partial rereading, it can be argued that the reader is actually still *reading* rather than rereading, given that partial rereading involves looking for things that the reader missed the first time round. In this case, the reader is continuing the process of refining their understanding of the story, and responding emotionally to that understanding. In this case, the reader is actually doing the *same thing* in each reading, i.e. trying to understand the story and work towards closure.

In a non-interactive story, readers are not made aware of the problematic nature of partial rereading (which is more like reading than rereading), since the text is fixed. This makes it easier to call the act of going back over the story "rereading". Even in the case of a complex narrative, which forces the rereader to engage in a certain amount of partial rereading although she has clearly seen everything in the first reading, the rereader can focus on the invariant nature of the text, and call this action "rereading". In an interactive story, however, this is problematized by the fact that the reader is aware that there are literally paths not yet taken, and text not yet seen, even though she has "completed" the initial reading. This makes it unclear whether a repeat reading is actually a rereading, since the reader is uncertain if she has really finished the initial reading.

5.2   Rereading After Closure

One a reader has reached closure, our model states that the reader will change focus from looking for closure to looking for something new, and the reader *will* consider this to be rereading. This raises two questions: what has changed after readers reached closure, and why do they consider this to be rereading?

We can answer these questions by considering what the reader is doing after reaching closure in a non-interactive story. At this point, any rereading will not be partial rereading, but instead will be simple or reflective rereading. During simple rereading, the reader wants to go back over the story to recapture something of the initial experience. The key difference from an initial reading is that the reader has *already* experienced the story. Thus, what the reader is doing is not quite the same as during the initial reading. Although the cognitive process of reading during simple rereading is the same, the difference is that the reader knows (and expects) that the story will be satisfying. The reader also already has a model of the storyworld, characters, and events, although depending on the complexity of the narrative the reader may have forgotten some of the elements of the story. What the reader is doing is *not* quite the same as during the first reading. Instead of trying to reach closure, she is seeking to recapture the previous experience. In the case of reflective rereading, the reader is consciously stepping back and approaching the text in a different manner: to analyze the use of technique, symbolism, intertextuality, and so forth. In this case, the reader is very deliberately *not* doing the same thing as during the initial reading.

This suggests that, paradoxically, for simple and reflective rereading in a non-interactive story, the reader is actually *not* reading again, at least not in the same manner as in the first reading. Simple and reflective rereading actually involve *doing something different*. The key insight here, which we can apply to our investigation of rereading in interactive stories, is that when the reader is rereading, there is *no* invariant in terms of what the reader is doing. Instead, what the reader is doing *changes*.

Recall that in the case of reading again for closure in an interactive story, the reader is still doing the same thing – looking for closure. It is only when she "gets it" that it becomes rereading in the way that she expects: there is now something which can be held invariant (the reader's understanding of the story), and any further rereading would involve doing something different. Although the core mechanic, the action which the reader literally performs moment-to-moment, may stay the same, what the reader is *trying to achieve* has changed: from looking for closure, to looking for something *new*. This is why it is only after reaching an understanding of the story that readers feel that they are rereading.

6   Applying the Model to Explain Reader Behaviour

Having developed our model of rereading, we tested this model by using it to provide insight into why inexperienced readers of *Façade* tend to initially reread to explore the story, but quickly shift to "playing with the system", and do not continue to reread for long. We argue that readers of *Façade* respond this way because the core mechanic does not afford inexperienced readers taking action to pursue narrative goals, which frustrates their initial goal-oriented rereading, and makes it difficult to move on to rereading beyond closure; instead, readers find it easier, and more rewarding, to form non-narrative goals related to, for example, undermining the system.

Façade is an interactive drama which was designed specifically to support repeated experiences [17]. The reader of *Façade* takes on the role of an old college friend visiting the two main characters, Grace and Trip. As the session progresses, it quickly becomes clear that the reader's character is caught in the middle of the breakdown of Grace and Trip's marriage. The reader interacts with *Façade* through two different mechanisms. The reader is able to construct utterances by typing in text, which is converted into a set of discourse acts [17] which in turn trigger reactions from the system. These reactions can consist of local responses from the characters, or involve the transition to a new set of such "beats" within the system's overall model of the story. The reader can also navigate and interact with the 3D simulation of the physical environment.

The session is structured roughly into two parts, during which the reader is taking part in three psychological "head games" [17]. The first, a "hot-button" game, involves triggering off specific hot topics about which Grace and Trip will argue. In the process, the reader will encounter fragments of story which uncover some of the background to the couple's current marital problems. The second, an "affinity" game, involves the reader making statements which determine whose

"side" Grace and Trip think the reader's character is taking. These two games take place simultaneously during the first half of the story. During the second half, the reader is involved in a "therapy" game, in which the reader's discourse acts increase either Grace or Trip's level of self-realization. Eventually, the session moves towards one of several different endings, which involve either one character or the other deciding to leave, or the reader's character being asked to leave.

6.1   Rereading *Façade*

Based on our own repeated readings of the work and observations of students who were asked to experience *Façade* as part of a university course on interactive storytelling, we can describe most readers' reactions as follows. The first session can be satisfying, as the reader can see that her actions are having some impact on what is happening, and, despite the occasional frustrations, can get the feeling that Grace and Trip are actually responding to her statements. Over the course of the session, the reader will gradually uncover some of the backstory, and come to an initial understanding of the situation.

In the second session, as described by Knickmeyer et. al. [22] and supported by our own observations, the reader may try different strategies, and be rewarded with some variation in the progression of the story and the responses of the characters. The use of different interaction strategies suggests that readers are not actually engaging with the story, but are more engaged with the interface and mechanics. Although Knickmeyer does mention readers' enjoyment of story and conversation variations, it is not clear whether they are enjoying this variation as part of the story experience, or more primarily as part of the experience of local agency.

Our experiences suggest that readers are not likely to be motivated to reread more than twice. For those who do reread, subsequent sessions tend to involve "messing" with the system. This often involves pursuing emergent goals such as trying to get kicked out of Grace and Trip's apartment as fast as possible by transgressing social conventions. This is very clearly *not* behaviour which can be described as interacting with the story. Similarly, Milam et al. [23], in their study of readers' responses to *Façade*, reported that participants initially wanted to replay to explore different endings, but were dissatisfied and instead tended to "test the boundaries" of the system.

6.2   Explaining Readers' Responses to *Façade*

As described in our model, the reader is initially goal-directed, and will be reading again to reach closure. There are two possible goals which the reader could focus on: moving the story towards a specific resolution, or uncovering and understanding the backstory.

For the reader who chooses to focus on controlling the outcome of the story, the reader will quickly realize that there are limits as to how much control she can exercise. What becomes obvious is that it is easiest to get reactions which lead to early termination of the story, by acting against social conventions. This

approach quickly degenerates into playing with the system, rather than playing with the story. If, instead, the reader chooses to focus on uncovering the backstory, the inexperienced reader will quickly become frustrated. The core mechanic is oriented on the social games, which only indirectly result in revelation of backstory. In principle, a persistent reader should be able explore the underlying story. It is possible, through repeated readings, to learn which topics will trigger a reaction, leading to story fragments which contain elements of the backstory. In practice, many readings are required for a reader to learn how to trigger these story fragments. An inexperienced reader will initially feel that there is little that she can do to actively uncover the backstory, as the reader has little direct control over revelation of past information.

Reading again to reach closure is thus problematic in *Façade*, as there is a disconnect between the core mechanic (triggering responses in the social games), and the goals which the reader forms (reach a specific ending or uncover the backstory). In both cases, readers tend to exhaust the possibility for partial rereading after 1-2 repeat readings. Variation tends to be in terms of specific local interactions, and readers quickly find that it is easier to get kicked out than engage with the story.

6.3 Rereading Beyond Closure

Our model has explained why readers of *Façade* rarely engage in reading again to reach closure. For the reader who actually does reach closure (by either achieving a desired ending or coming to an understanding of Grace and Trip's situation), or has given up on reaching closure, the question is then whether there is any possibility of engaging in either simple or reflective rereading.

Simple rereading requires that there is some experience which the reader wants to recapture. At the level of interaction, the reader may be motivated to repeat certain satisfying choices, which may have led to a particularly rewarding ending. This, however, is purely at the mechanical level. At the emotional level, as Ryan [27, p. 57] describes, the reader is not able to form any emotional attachment with the characters, and therefore is unlikely to have any desire to repeat the experience. This can be explained in terms of the disconnect between the core mechanic and the reader's goals. Being unable to directly engage with the story, the reader does not have any strong experience which she would want to repeat. This suggests that readers are unlikely to engage in simple rereading.

In terms of reflective rereading, the reader may, as described by Knickmeyer et al. [22], be motivated to experiment with different interaction strategies. This could constitute a form of reflective rereading, but it is more likely to involve a desire to master the system, given the disconnect between core mechanic and narrative goals. As such, this type of reflective rereading would be disconnected from the story, and would not be satisfying as a *narrative* experience.

Alternately, the reader may be trying to reread reflectively to understand the message the author is trying to communicate. The underlying message of *Façade*, as described by the authors, is: "To be happy you must be true to yourself" [13, p. 9]. This is not, however, the message that is conveyed through

the interaction which the reader has with the system. The interaction tends to convey the feeling that a third party, no matter how close she is to a couple, can never really make an impact on their relationship. The reader experiences the frustration of standing to one side as two people tear each other apart. All the reader can do is attempt to "push their buttons". This quickly degenerates into "playing the system". As the core mechanic is not connected to the deeper meaning, it is difficult to engage in reflective rereading.

7   Implications

Our model of rereading in interactive stories has implications for both the design and study of interactive stories which are intended to be reread. It also has implications for the study of rereading in non-interactive stories.

One implication of the model is that, since readers initially read again in an attempt to arrive at some form of closure, interactive stories which are designed to be reread should support this goal. Otherwise, as we have seen in our discussion of *Façade*, readers will not be motivated to reread. This suggests that authors should provide interaction mechanics which allow readers to pursue *narrative* goals, and these mechanics should be designed to support the pursuit of these goals *across* readings. In addition, our observation that readers' goals *change* after reaching closure suggests that authors should provide interaction mechanics that can *adapt* to these new goals, or again readers will not be motivated to reread the story.

The application of our model to the analysis of *Façade* also suggests some issues related to simple and reflective rereading in interactive stories. It is not clear what it means to engage in simple rereading in an interactive story. If a reader wants to recapture the experience of an interactive story, does this involve making the same choices? Or experiencing exactly the same story fragments? And if so, could this type of reexperience still be considered an *interactive* story? It is also not clear how readers could engage in reflective rereading in an interactive story. Can this type of "playing with the system", if it is done with the aim of understanding the underlying "moral physics" [14] of a storytelling system, be considered reflective rereading? Or are there other categories of rereading not captured in our model? Is this type of play similar to the ways in which players attempt to break game mechanics in other kinds of games? These questions suggest that more work needs to be done to study these types of rereading.

Our model also has implications for the study of rereading in non-interactive stories. If what readers are looking for, and what readers are doing, changes in subsequent rereadings, this impacts the ways in which, for example, the question of anomalous suspense [28] and readers' reactions to spoilers [29] should be approached. The importance of partial rereading in our model suggests that this type of rereading deserves more attention in non-interactive stories. In particular, the question of how partial and reflective rereading may overlap in complex narratives is worth investigating, in both non-interactive and interactive sto-

ries. Finally, focusing on *what the reader is doing* when rereading, and how this changes after closure, may provide new insights into rereading in general.

8   Conclusion

Based on our earlier empirical studies, we have proposed a new model of rereading in interactive stories. According to our model, readers initially read again to find closure, which is equivalent to Calinescu's *partial rereading*. Readers do not consider this to be rereading. When they achieve closure, they can potentially shift to either *simple* or *reflective* rereading, which they do consider to be rereading. We have used our model to explain inexperienced readers' behaviour when rereading *Façade*. Our model has implications for the design and study of rereading in interactive stories, and for the study of rereading in general.

This paper has focused largely on reading again to reach closure, which we have characterized as analogous to *partial* rereading. Our observations suggest that more work needs to be done to look at other types of rereading, analogous to simple and reflective rereading in non-interactive stories. We have also been looking at the desire to *immediately* reexperience an interactive story. It may be worth investigating why people may want to reread interactive stories after some time, as this type of rereading is likely to be different from immediate rereading.

Finally, we have focused on interactive stories which involve the reader making choices in terms of configuring or exploring the story. We have excluded approaches where the reader contributes content or connections to the story, and approaches where the reader's actions do not change either the story or the discourse. It would be very interesting to explore the impact of changing the role of the reader on the process of rereading. This suggests that there is still much work to be done to explore the issue of rereading in interactive stories.

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