

Chapter 2

Narrative Interpretation: Tacit and Explicit, Analogue and Digital

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“The twenty-first century ... belongs to the tacit,” say Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown (2011, p. 76). They point out that people learn many elements of how to manage their digital tools by simply starting, “doing it, learning by absorption and making tacit connections” (2011, p. 76). Explicit instruction is less useful for many digital challenges than simply playing around in the company of more expert friends and colleagues.

I agree with this assertion and find it helpful. I am less inclined to agree completely with their counter-assertion that the twentieth century was more profoundly linked to forms of overt and articulated learning. Certainly schooling was explicit (even rote) for much of the twentieth century, and Thomas and Brown’s reference to the role of the encyclopedia is well argued (2011, p. 76). But even in the twentieth century, even when texts were all analogue, a great deal of learning was tacit; such implicit work simply attracted less attention than it does today.

In an era where young people learn about computers and mobile media almost by osmosis, the issue of the tacit is of considerable significance to educators, and we need to be alert to its silent and invisible importance in many forms of interpretive activity. The examples I propose to investigate in this chapter raise the question of how contemporary young people learn to comprehend narrative forms and strategies. Much of what they absorb about the shape and role of story can be “delivered” to them in explicit classroom presentation, but a great deal more (and I would argue a great deal of the more important) knowledge must be acquired tacitly, implicitly, through exposure to story and through the experience of bringing a story to life in the mind.

One tacit challenge facing interpreters is to understand the need to align with the implied reader. As Peter Rabinowitz points out, authors must design their creations to speak to an imagined audience:

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An author has, in most cases, no firm knowledge of the actual readers who will pick up his or her book. Yet he or she cannot begin to fill up a blank page without making assumptions about the readers' beliefs, knowledge, and familiarity with conventions. As a result, authors are forced to guess; they design their books rhetorically for some more or less specific *hypothetical* audience.... Artistic choices are based upon these assumptions—conscious or unconscious—about readers, and to a certain extent, artistic success depends on their shrewdness, on the degree to which actual and authorial audience overlap. (1987, p. 21)

In other words, authors (and other creators) make rhetorical choices based on an (often tacit) assessment of their readers' likely repertoires, both explicit and implicit. Interpreters, in turn, must develop ways of aligning themselves with the assumptions of the text, and learning how to process this necessary orientation is an important but often invisible element in becoming a successful reader—or a successful user of digital materials.

In this chapter, I will explore the interfaces between explicit and tacit as they develop in different settings in which articulating the implicit is a natural and unforced outcome of a particular situation that entails forms of narrative understanding. My initial example involves Marilyn Cochran-Smith's study of young children hearing books read aloud in a nursery class. I will follow up this introductory illustration with a more extensive discussion of a study of my own, involving collective work with a novel, a film, and a video game. My examples cross over between analogue and digital in ways that offer a constructive reminder that the tacit is not new.

Learning to Think in Narrative Ways

Understanding a story involves the kind of active rumination that allows an interpreter to vivify the events and characters in the mind. Bringing the story to active life in the mind can involve visualization, or the activation of voices and other sounds, and/or a sense of movement and inter-relationships among characters. There is no one right way to activate a narrative in the mind, but the step is important for comprehension and for enjoyment (not necessarily in that order).

This subtle and distinctive mental activity can be facilitated by the company of more competent others; young children often gain understanding of how story works by having stories read aloud to them by adults who already know how to make sense of a narrative. This social form of reading embodies forms of both explicit and tacit attention, and is helpfully observable in ways that more private and interior mental activities of reading are not. An investigation of story-reading events can offer insight into an oblique connection between, on the one hand, visible and audible experiences of the read-aloud story and its associated pictures and, on the other hand, the interior world of readers. In so doing, a study of this kind can shed light on some of the behaviours involved in narrative interpretation that we nearly always take for granted.

Marilyn Cochran-Smith recorded many early-years story times in a pre-school nursery classroom, and her observations about the kinds of learning taking place

in that setting—published in 1984, long before the digital began to take hold in popular culture—make instructive reading. I will quote her findings at some length because they offer an unusually explicit account of an activity that is often entirely tacit.

Making sense of the uncomplicated narratives in many children's picture books is easy to take for granted, to consider a given. What is actually a given, however, is the assumption that readers of picture books will have learned to take information from their pools of knowledge in particular ways in order to make sense of texts. In other words, readers/listeners will take the knowledge that they have gained from direct or secondary experiences outside of texts and use this knowledge to make sense within texts (1984, p. 174).

How do children learn to make this transfer? Cochran-Smith describes the processes involved in group storyreading as “part of an initiation process.... a kind of apprenticeship ... offering the children mediated literary experiences wherein an adult storyreader monitor[s] and guide[s] literary sense-making”. (1984, p. 175)

The adult storyreader, in this scenario, bridges the gap between the abstract implied reader inscribed in the text and the real learning listeners sitting in the story circle.

To help them make sense of texts, the storyreader guided the listeners to take on the characteristics of the readers implied in particular books. To shape real reader/listeners into implied readers, or whenever a mismatch between the two seemed to occur, she overrode the textual narrator and became the narrator herself, annotating the text and trying to establish some sort of agreement between real and implied readers. The storyreader mediated by alternating between two roles—spokesperson for the text and secondary narrator or commentator on the text.

In order to mediate, the storyreader had to continuously assess and interpret both the text—its lexical and syntactic structures, the storyline, temporal and spatial sequences, the amount and kind of information carried by the pictures and by words, and the interrelationships of these two kinds of information—and the sense that the listeners were making of it all. (1984, p. 177, emphasis in original)

The storyreader, in other words, models ways of interacting with a book by drawing on relevant, appropriate, and useful life experience to help the listeners comprehend the narrative elements of the story. Children are not born with this understanding, though they are quick to develop it when exposed to a variety of story materials. In the nursery school setting, this kind of learning is articulated when the storyreader acts as an intermediary between what the story assumes and what the young listeners know. In order to accomplish the connection successfully, she must explain many points that are normally simply absorbed—the explicit enactment of a normally tacit process.

Articulating the Tacit in Multiple Narrative Formats

I have long valued Cochran-Smith's work with these very young children, and greatly admired the skill with which she exposes and explores mental activities that normally remain unspoken. Ironically, however, my awareness and appreciation

of this work itself subsided into the tacit zone of the partially forgotten; I was not explicitly aware of its power as I designed a study aimed at enhancing our awareness of how implicit and articulated knowledge work together to create narrative understanding. It was only after my study ended that I became aware of the potential for overlap.

Like Cochran-Smith, I wanted to find or create a setting in which it would be natural for some normally implicit thinking to surface and be made available to others. I was, however, interested in the other end of the spectrum of narrative skills and worldliness. Instead of working with young children, I recruited participants whose capacity to interpret narrative was well developed and thoroughly internalized, although more so in some formats than in others. I was also interested in exploring at least some aspects of contemporary crossovers between analogue and digital storytelling, to see if sophisticated interpreters could help me shed light on some contemporary cultural changes and challenges.

In setting up my project, I had a number of conditions in mind. I wanted participants in my study to encounter complete narratives (just as Cochran-Smith investigated complete readings in the nursery school, but without the advantages of brevity that attended her text set). I wanted a social setting that would seem, if not natural, then at least comparable to naturally occurring social settings. I wondered if a contrast might emerge between the narrative formats of novel and film, which I expected that my participants would have thoroughly internalized, and the newer vehicle of video game. I also wanted as much recordable information as possible so that I could investigate the transcripts in slow motion—yet I knew that much of the activity below the visible surface could only be reported, not recorded as it happened.

In the end, I achieved most of my goals with a study that is relatively simple to describe (though complex and lengthy to carry out).

The Study

I worked with university undergraduates, most of whom were aged about 20 years of age. Because I recruited them through an advertisement in the student newspaper rather than via a single campus course, my participants came from a broad variety of disciplinary backgrounds. Twelve students participated in my study, nine men and three women. They arrived with varying levels of skill and comfort with the three formats on offer: film, novel, and video game. Most of the variation involved levels and comfort and skill in gaming, as I had anticipated, but one man was a bit uneasy about reading a whole novel. He was an expert gamer but described himself as “not really a reader.” Nobody was concerned about the challenge of making sense of a complete film, though *Run Lola Run* turned out to be not what they expected.

To create a social arrangement that would mimic relatively familiar settings, I organized my participants into groups of three. My advertisement had specified that groups of friends were welcome to apply, and one set of three represented a friend-

ship group: these young men (Group C below) had been gaming together since junior high. Another pair of friends also participated, and for these five students, some forms of social connection based around texts were already established.

I asked the four groups of three to take part in three activities: film viewing, novel reading, and game playing. These activities were distributed over a variable number of sessions, but at the beginning all our meetings bore a strong family resemblance.

- In the first 2-h session, we watched a complete movie. I stopped it at intervals and canvassed their opinions about what was going on and how they knew.
- In the second session, we spent the first hour on a book. I asked them to read a few specified pages at a time, and then we talked about that small segment. I gave them sticky notes to attach to the side of the page when anything struck their attention and they used this mnemonic device as a prompt to their conversation. This exercise was repeated in five intervals all the way up to page 58; then I asked them to take the book and the sticky notes home and keep reading to the end, in circumstances more closely approximating normality. When they returned the following week, we talked about the complete novel, and then I collected their novels with the stickies still attached. I labelled each book with the reader's name, and the sticky notes serve as a kind of very rough and ready set of "footprints" of their progress through the book.
- In the second half of the second session, I set up a PlayStation video game for them to play together. They took turns managing the controller and I told those who were observing that they should feel free to advise the player as extensively as seemed useful.
- In the third session, we began with the discussion of the complete book, which everyone had now read through to the end. We moved on from that conversation to more general discussion about differences between watching, reading, and playing. They then returned to the game for however much time was left in the 2-h session.
- We carried on with game-playing for as many sessions as it took for each team to complete the game. The Christmas holiday disrupted our scheduling as class timetables changed, and one student left university altogether. Consequently two teams were merged into one, and that team continued to game. Thus 12 participants completed the film and novel segments and began the game, but only 9 finished the game.

The sessions were normally recorded with two video cameras (one on the participants, one on the text). Sessions were also audio-recorded and transcribed. The video records and the transcripts were loaded onto the software program Transana, which allows for analysis of such materials; and some preliminary coding was done. Transana also permits the researcher to hear the recorded conversation and view both the game screen and the transcript of relevant dialogue all at the same time, a very useful capacity.

So far I have discussed this project in abstract terms but of course it involved real people with all their differing idiosyncrasies, and it explored specific, singular

texts. Choosing the movie, book, and game was a challenge as I particularly wanted them to be new to the participants—I was in pursuit of initial reactions to unknown narratives. In the end, I chose a relatively old book, a film from Europe, and a brand new game, and no participant recognized any of them. The materials accidentally manifested the further advantage that each featured surface elements from a different medium, thus rendering some differences among media explicitly available for discussion.

My film was *Run Lola Run* (Tykwer 1998). This German film includes many game elements, including a plot feature of a “restart” that allows the characters to experience the same 20-min of their lives on a total of three different occasions with changed outcomes each time. My novel was Walter Dean Myers’ *Monster* (1999), the first ever winner of the Printz Award for a young adult novel. This book is recounted in three formats: journal entries by the main character, a screenplay of his experiences also written by the hero, and some photographs and a few graphics. The game was *Shadow of the Colossus* (Uedo 2005), which was released just before the project began and was necessarily the final choice I made; this game has been described as having literary and even poetic qualities because of the long spaces of time made available for the hero (and those playing him) to reflect on the morality of his actions. For my purposes, it was helpful that a major criticism of this game on its release was that, though compelling, it was relatively short; even so, my participants took many hours to complete it.

These texts, each featuring a kind of formal hybridity, opened the door to some kinds of explicit observation that might have remained tacit with different materials. Furthermore, the social nature of the small groups meant that all participants had opportunities to take up the role that Cochran-Smith ascribes to the storyreader, that is, they were able to act as intermediary between the implied reader (or viewer or player) and the real people in the group who were “co-experiencing” the story. The combination of these particular people meeting these specific textual materials in this social setting meant that a great deal of normally unspoken understanding was articulated in the course of the study and made available for subsequent analysis. Paradoxically, this combination of *particular* elements made it possible to reach some *general* conclusions about the processes of narrative interpretation.

I went looking for crossover interpretive capacities that would function in all three media, so it is perhaps not surprising that I found them. Nevertheless, I was startled at the ease with which I identified similar approaches at work with each of the three different formats.

Three Stories

A much fuller account of this complex project is available in book form (Mackey 2011). In this chapter, I will present an overview of the findings and consider their implications in terms of the explicit and the tacit, the analogue and the digital, the old and the new.

In concrete detail of content and presentation, the three texts varied hugely from each other. *Run Lola Run* offers three versions of Lola coming to the rescue of her boyfriend Manni, who has carelessly left a bag of money on a train. Manni is a courier for a criminal gang; he fears for his life if his boss Ronnie discovers his mistake. Lola must acquire 100,000 Deutschmarks and convey them to Manni in the 20 min before he is due to meet Ronnie. The 81-min movie offers three variants on this challenge, with changes caused by tiny differences in the timing of insignificant events. In the first one, Lola is shot; in the second, Manni is shot; in the third they appear to be successful and walk away together.

Monster tells the story of Steve, in prison awaiting trial for being an accessory to murder when the book opens. Steve has acted as lookout for a gang of thieves in a drugstore robbery that goes wrong, resulting in the shooting of the shop's owner. It is possible that Steve is a relatively innocent victim of circumstances, but the text is never entirely clear about that crucial fact. Steve uses his journal and the screenplay he decides to write about his court case to protest his innocence, but doubt about the extent of his involvement remains right to the end of the book.

Shadow of the Colossus introduces us to a young man on a horse carrying the body of a young woman to a temple in a deserted landscape. He lays the girl's body on the altar and invokes Dormin to bring her back to life. Dormin, whom we know only as a spectral voice and (in the English-language version) a set of cryptic subtitles, sets him the challenge of destroying 16 colossi, giant beasts represented on the walls of the temple by 16 statues. Accompanied only by his horse and armed only with a sword and a bow and arrow, the hero must first locate and then slaughter each colossus. These creatures all look different and have different lethal talents but each is enormous and intimidating, and each presents a huge strategic and tactical challenge to the would-be killer. Locating each colossus is as important as the fighting; following the focused light-rays from his raised sword, the hero must trek across magnificent but deserted countryside for many miles before locating his prey. We do not learn Dormin's motivation for wanting these mighty creatures to be slain until the end of the game, but long before that point, most players become uneasy about the need to kill the magnificent beings that are doing no harm to anyone until the hero shows up. All the participants in this study sooner or later, directly or indirectly, articulated a sense of disquiet about the morality of their fictional task.

Although the stories are very unlike each other, they do share a deeply-etched element of unreliable narrative. If Steve's efforts to understand himself better and to establish what led him to the fatal moment in the drugstore can be analyzed in these terms (and I think it can), each account could also be described as a form of quest story.

All the participants quickly perceived that the stories they were being told were profoundly untrustworthy, and the need to address what was "truthful" in the fictions being presented also led to the articulation of modality registers that often operate tacitly. I would be untruthful myself if I claimed to have selected these texts with this virtue in mind; my selection criteria were far more external to the stories themselves and largely concerned my own quest to find materials that my participants would not recognize. Nevertheless, the uneasy fit of these stories to their own frames was an asset for this study.

Crossing Platforms and Understanding Narrative

At the level of concrete observation and analysis, the readers obviously behaved very differently with each of these three texts. At a more abstract level, their behaviours were remarkably similar, no matter which group they belonged to or which story they approached. Six important components of narrative comprehension manifested themselves across the study and across all three media. With all three text samples, all four groups engaged in the following behaviours:

- *deciding how to pay initial attention*: making provisional observations and inferences about what might be important and should be watched for;
- *entering the fictional world*: making a cognitive and affective commitment to how possibilities might unfold in this particular story world;
- *orienting*: finding a way to move forward through the story;
- *filling the blanks left in this particular telling of the story*: making inferences, closing gaps, creating connections between different story elements;
- *making progress or making do*: moving through what I came to call the “unconsidered middle” of the story, where the interpreter can be most completely absorbed in the story world—or finding ways to compensate and keep going anyway when that absorption fails to occur;
- *concluding*: reaching judgments, both provisionally, throughout the story, and finally, when the end is reached—and afterwards (Mackey 2011, p. 14).

At the same time as the interpreters managed their understanding of the content of the stories in the ways delineated above, they also had to manage the technical processes by which they garnered enough information to start to make sense of the content. In *Monster*, they had to work out the relationship between the journal entries and the screenplay; they also needed to establish, within the context of the sprawling font of the journal entries, whether the differential sizes of letters and words indicated shifts of meaning. In *Run Lola Run*, they had to find ways to interpret the red-filtered images that mark the transition scenes between one iteration of Lola’s journey and the next; they also had to make sense of sequences of still photos and some short clips of animation that interrupt the live action. *Shadow of the Colossus* called for even more basic skill development; players needed to master the PlayStation controller so that they could use it as an interface connecting to the content of the story. They were frustrated when the controls instead became a processing *barrier*, whose opacity prevented the essential step *into* the story world and left them, baffled and annoyed, on the surface level of trying to decide which buttons to push.

Because the participants worked in groups of three, such moments proved very illuminating in terms of shedding light on the dual nature of how we come to comprehend a story. Normally, once interpreters attain a level of processing automaticity, the basic decoding and the broader development of understanding operate in tandem in their minds, and coordination is smoothly, invisibly, and tacitly achieved without requiring conscious attention. In the circumstances of this study, especially in the game, with one person handling the controls and two freed to think about the

story, the importance of being able to coordinate both elements of narrative comprehension—technical decoding and content development—was rendered explicit.

An initial scene makes that dichotomy very clear. The hero receives instructions from Dormin to find the first colossus and slay it. He is told to raise his sword to the light, and the point where the rays cluster together shows him the direction he should follow. But even as the player sets out to explore the new universe before him, he or she must learn to master the controls for mounting the horse, raising the sword, guiding the horse in the direction specified by the focal point of the rays, and so forth. It sounds simple and intuitive, but if you are not so accustomed to using a PlayStation controller that every action is automatic, it can be frustrating and difficult. The following dialogue renders this difficulty explicit. Martin, Tess, and Sunama, the members of Group B, are playing; Martin is in charge of the controls and it would seem from these little extracts that the two women are, at least temporarily, in charge of story comprehension. The separation of the two components of comprehension is very explicit.

Martin: Pushing this down... all right, horse.

Tess: Where is the sunlight?

Martin: Okay, this is hard ... extremely difficult! Agro [the horse] is not hip.

Sumana: How easy is it to, like, point it in certain directions?

Tess: This horse is very stubborn ... ooh.

(Hero struggles with the horse and eventually re-enters the temple)

Tess: Do you remember how to do the sword-raising thing? You might want to do that then. He's running.

At this point in the conversation, Martin is at least talking about the horse. As his struggles with the controls intensified, the divergence between the terms of his contribution and that of his partners became even more substantial:

Tess: I still say you go to the sun and do the sword thing. It seems like that was the last instruction he really gave, short of kill those gigantic idols on the wall.

Martin: So you ... left analog stick is movement. You press "X" to make him go and make him stop or actually, not to make him stop. You press "X" and you can go faster and then hard back on the left analog stick.

If Martin were working as a solitary interpreter, he would have to master the left analog stick and the X button before he could even start to think about going to the sun and doing the sword thing. In this team setting, Tess and Sunama pressed ahead with the interpretation of content, while Martin struggled with basic decoding; the two elements of narrative interpretation are laid out side by side.

Another way of describing the processing issues faced by Group B is to talk about the difference between "looking at" the codes that supply a narrative and "looking through" them to perceive the story being developed (Lanham 1995, p. 5). Clearly in this exchange, Martin is "looking at" the surface of the controls and Tess and Sumana have a free pass for the moment to "look through" to the story world.

Michael Polanyi's metaphor for the distinction between these two conditions is well known, and it comes very close to the scene described above:

Anyone using a probe for the first time will feel its impact against his fingers and palm. But as we learn to use a probe, or to use a stick for feeling our way, our awareness of its impact on our hand is transformed into a sense of its point touching the objects we are exploring.... We are attending to the meaning of its impact on our hands in terms of its effect on the things to which we are applying it. (1983, pp. 12–13)

In Polanyi's terms, Martin feels the impact of the probe in his hands, and Tess and Sumana are interested in what is going on at the point of the stick.

In the normal cognitive processes of private textual interpretation, the merging of these two components is managed entirely tacitly. Once we become fluent interpreters, we notice it as an active interruption in the smooth flow of the story if we are troubled by a word we don't understand, or a cut from one scene to another doesn't make sense, or we are directed to find a cleft in the canyon wall and we can't interpret the pixels to decide what is wall and what is cleft. When these matters are being processed fluently, we are unaware that our mind is underpinning our sense of "which way the sword's rays are pointing" with specific instructions to our eyes and hands to "combine pressing X with movement of the left analogue stick." We just focus on the story's development and leave the traffic direction of decoding to our non-conscious mind, outside the range of our explicit attention. This management of varying repertoires is common to all forms of media interpretation but it flies beneath the radar and we do not often have to think about what we are actually *doing* in order to comprehend the story before us.

Moving to Tacit

The children in Cochrane-Smith's study learned to incorporate life understanding into their vivification of a story told through words and still images, and then to internalize this process so completely that it became automatic and did not distract their attention away from composing the sense of the story.

The participants in my study mostly learned to handle the PlayStation controller in such a way that they were able to focus on the challenge of the story—how to kill a particular colossus—without often having to focus explicitly on the controls. A Transana-supported chart and graph from that study illustrates how Group C, the most competent set of gamers in the project, rendered their use of the controller almost entirely automatic, and how it became relatively invisible to them except when they chose to make jokes about it. Many of their jokes played with the contrast between story discourse and controller discourse, so they would introduce specific mention of the button R1 at inappropriate moments. The table below therefore tabulates working references to the buttons, jokes about the buttons (including R1 discourse), and those jokes explicitly directed towards the use of R1. The colossi are slain in numerical order, so this table represents a chronology of Group C's game. The change from explicit attention to the buttons during the battles with the first

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