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**THE TEXTE FLEUVE AND INFINITY:
THE PLAY OF FINITUDE AND ENDLESSNESS IN PROUST, WOOLF,
AND THE OPEN WORLD VIDEO GAME**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

IN

LITERATURE

by

Sophie Bargues Rollins

September 2015

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Abstract

Sophie Bargues Rollins

The *Texte Fleuve* and Infinity: The Play of Finitude and Endlessness in

Proust, Woolf, and the Open World Video Game

This dissertation examines the impulse — explicit in some texts, and at
work in all — to go beyond endings and encompass the infinite. It describes and
elucidates the category of the *texte fleuve*: those texts, regardless of their media,
that most clearly foreground, operationalize, and adumbrate the infinitude shown
to be at work in and among all texts by theorists such as Roland Barthes and
Jacques Derrida. In the *text fleuve*, I include both canonical (print) works of
"high" literature and works more commonly thought of as popular culture
artifacts. Along with Proust's *Recherche*, Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, and Alison
Bechdel's graphic memoir *Fun Home*, I examine "open world" video games (in
particular, Mojang AB's *Minecraft* and Bethesda Softworks' *Fallout 3* and *The
Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*).

In my chapters, I consider the theoretical issues surrounding the *texte
fleuve* and lay out its characteristics, notably the various "endlessnesses" that it
depicts or enacts (such as looping narratives, potentially infinite combinations of
elements, endless networks, unlimited extension in time and virtual space, and so
on). In tandem with my examination of these endlessnesses, I discuss the ludic
aspect of the act of reading, this aspect being part of why novels and games can
elucidate each other. My argument is based on a conception of reading as an
interactive process that is never a passive act of consumption. Following the work
of Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois and Barthes, I claim that reading is a process
with rules, the primary one being to find meaning.

I also explore the text's relationship with what I call the "circumtext," a
work's networked assemblage of textual responses (readings, rewritings,

adaptations, translations, etc). This network, its growth driven by something like the infinite potentiality of Barthes' "writerly," prolongs the "central" work through a process of translation, and thus helps the work to resist its inevitable finitude, its own forgetting, its own death.

Acknowledgements

I could not have finished writing this dissertation, or gotten to the point of writing one, without the help of what seems an almost endless network of people. I am humbled to have been the recipient of such generosity. My words in these acknowledgements are inadequate, but my thanks are sincerely meant.

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The staff of the Literature Department helped me, as they have so many others, to deal with years of paperwork and the occasional administrative hurdle. I

encouragement throughout my graduate work; he helped me greatly in the final stages by providing readings of various drafts. I am very lucky to have had him and his unshakeable faith in me.

My mother, Yvonne Bargues Rollins, taught me to read: to look, to pause, and to think over. She taught me the value of beauty, the imperative to find it wherever possible, and the importance of translating and expressing it. She introduced me to French literature, and gamely tried to follow my pop culture interests. Without faltering and often through great sacrifice, she has given me every kind of support she could provide. It is thanks to her that I have been able to focus exclusively on writing for the last six months (and, indeed, that I got through graduate school). I owe her everything.

I dedicate this dissertation to her, to my father, and to Dick.

Chapter 1

Narrative in Video Games

1. The *texte fleuve* and the ludic

In this dissertation I wish to delineate and examine a category of texts I call the *texte fleuve*. The term is meant to harken to the French notion of the *roman fleuve* (the image is of a novel running with words as endlessly as a river flows with water); the most famous *roman fleuve*, Marcel Proust's six-volume, three-thousand-page *À la recherche du temps perdu*, is one of the primary texts I've chosen to help me elucidate this category. In this chapter, my goal is first to define the *texte fleuve* and to start laying out the ludic aspect of reading. I understand the term "reading" to indicate an engaged, co-creative activity or process that is, despite significant differences in how the process is embodied, essentially the same as the activities involved in engaging seriously with other aesthetic and ludic artifacts (playing a game, watching a film, listening to music, et cetera).

Because it may at first seem strange (if not absurd) to include in the category of *texte fleuve* such disparate media as the print novel and the video game — the latter of which is still subject to negative cultural biases — I will then move on to the question of narrative in video games in order, first, to show that games can indeed be narrative artifacts; second, to discuss the game-specific networks of quests used to structure designer-authored fragments of stories in role-playing games (RPGs) in particular; and third, to elaborate the ways in which players draw narrative from video game spaces.[1] In my following chapters, I will discuss print texts such as Proust's *Recherche*, Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, and

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[1] For reference, here is a short list of some of the many works justifying the serious examination of video games: Sherry Turkle's *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* (1984); Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (1997); James Newman's *Playing with Videogames* (2008).

to a lesser extent Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir *Fun Home*, while expanding my examination of certain games.

The category of the *texte fleuve* is constituted of those texts that most explicitly foreground, operationalize, and adumbrate the infinitude that theorists such as Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida have shown to be at work in and among all texts. The *texte fleuve* is the text that most clearly attempts to overcome finitude. It is not limited to a medium, a genre, or a form; instead, it is primarily characterized by what I will call "endlessness," manifesting in various ways. Primary among these are depictions or enactments of a world that is both fragmented and potentially limitless in spatial and/or temporal extension, and in which most everything (and especially the self) flickers between multiplicity and singularity (discussed in chapter 2); the suggestion or implementation of a potentially infinite recombination of the text's fragments (chapter 3); the representation and establishment of infinite networks; a representation or encouragement of the desire (always frustrated) for total knowledge of the world; a preoccupation with death and its survival; and the text's provocation of, translation in, and proliferation through what I will call the "circumtext," the assemblage of texts responding, reading, and rewriting any given work.

These characteristics are those of infinity revealing itself without having to be tracked down, of the infinite showing itself, putting itself on display. The infinitude of texts and intertextuality discussed by Barthes and Derrida (among others) is often detectable by an attentive reader in terms of a given text of even minimal complexity. For instance, the Deconstructive criticism elaborated by Derrida can show the infinite play of signification at work in an aporia or a pharmakon (essentially, irresolvable paradoxes or contradictions) present in three

words, two, even one alone.[2] However, only a relatively small subset of texts can really be said to foreground this infinity, to operationalize it, to wrap themselves in it instead of, to one extent or another, hiding it away. This subset is the *texte fleuve*.

As I indicated above, the category of the *texte fleuve*, being defined as it is not by generic structures but by elements like its deployment or embodiment of infinity (meaning limitless extension or duration), is cross-medial and cross-genre. Because of my particular training as a critic I have limited myself to discussing *textes fleuves* that are written in or engage at length with verbally- or visually-based signification. I am certain, however, that there are *textes fleuves* in every medium capable of transmitting even minimal narrative elements. As Barthes writes in "L'Analyse structurale du récit" (1966), narrative comes in almost infinite forms and can be found in what an almost endless range of media: "Le récit peut être supporté par le langage articulé, oral ou écrit, par l'image, fixe ou mobile, par le geste et par le mélange ordonné de toutes ces substances; il est présent dans le mythe, la fable, … le drame, la comédie, la pantomime, le tableau peint … le vitrail, le cinéma, les comics," etc (Barthes 2:828).[3] In some of the texts I've chosen to examine, such as Proust's and Woolf's, narrative is paramount; in others, like Mojang AB's "open world" "sandbox" game *Minecraft* (2011), narrative is in most cases almost entirely up to the player, who is the "reader."[4] The *texte fleuve* seems to always involve at least this minimal amount

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[2] Indeed, in "La pharmacie de Platon" (in *La dissémination*, 1972), Derrida shows the workings of this infinite play in the single Ancient Greek word "pharmakon," which means both "medicine" and "poison."

[3] "Narrative can be supported by articulated language whether oral or written, by the image whether fixed or moving, by gestures and by the ordered mixing of all these substances; it is present in myth, fable … drama, comedy, pantomime, painting … the stained glass window, film, comics…" (Barthes 2:828, translation mine)

[4] The phrase "open world" is used to refer to video games that allow the player to move more or less at will through the space of the game world (as opposed to games that limit the player's capacity to explore). The term is associated primarily with games dominated by 3D graphics. Famous examples include the *Grand Theft Auto* series, the *Assassin's Creed* series, and the *Far Cry* series. All games examined in this dissertation

of reader-imposed narrative (as opposed to text-offered narrative), which is unsurprising since the *texte fleuve* operates by opening time and space, the breeding grounds for narrative.

Textes fleuve operationalize and foreground an infinity of *play*. There is the endless play of *différance*, of signifiers and signification, of connotation and association, of supplementarity. Beyond the play at work between elements in the structures of the text, there is the play of text with text, against text and *in* text in the infinite net or assemblage relation that is intertextuality. Any attentive reader can find a play of meaning somewhere in any text worth studying, but there is disagreement regarding whether this kind of semantic textual play is akin to the kind of obviously interactive, haptic-based play involved when one is engaging with video games. Critics such as Espen Aarseth — and particularly critics who lean towards the "ludological" school of games criticism strongly influenced by Aarseth — have objected to arguments, such as those made by Structuralist and Post-Structuralist thinkers, that games and "traditional" print-based texts involve the same kind of play. Aarseth considers the problem to be the misapprehension of what is, in his view, a metaphor. Discussing claims about the game-like nature of "linear" texts (as he calls them), he argues that any such claim is a "spatiodynamic fallacy" based on the confusion of metaphor and reality, that confusion being one in which "narrative is not perceived as a presentation of a world but rather as that world itself" (Aarseth 3-4).[5] Literary theorists who have

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are "open world," though not all video game *textes fleuve* would commonly be considered so (an example would be Bay 12 Games' *Dwarf Fortress*).

"Sandbox" refers to games that allow the player to create new elements of the game world. The term is often associated with open world games, as the latter often involve a sandbox element.

[5] Aarseth defines the "linear text" as an instance of "nonergodic literature, where the effort to traverse the text is trivial, with no extranoematic responsibilities placed on the reader except (for example) eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of pages" (1-2). This is contrasted with his "cybertext," a product of "ergodic literature," in which "nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (1); "a cybertext is a machine for the production of variety of expression," and examples include hypertexts,

studied games or spoken of texts in terms of play and game, he writes, have "mis[taken] texts with variable expression [such as computer games] for texts with ambiguous meaning" (3).

My answer to objections such as Aarseth's involves shifting the spotlight from texts themselves to the act of reading. Aarseth writes of the reader of a "linear" text that s/he is "powerless," and that "[his/her] pleasure is the pleasure of the voyeur. Safe, but impotent" (the reader of a "cybertext" such as a video game, on the other hand, "is not safe") (4). I disagree, and argue that the act of reading is never passive — the reader is never "impotent" — regardless of the medium of the text being read. Following Barthes and other thinkers, I see reading as an active process, characterized and enabled not just by conventions but by rules, and notably one rule in particular (which I will turn to in chapter 3): the necessity of finding or making meaning. The text is a ludic production regardless of medium because at least some part of it, as Barthes argued, is constituted in the act of reading, and reading itself is the game.

Writing and artistic creation in general have been widely discussed as games or game-like processes. The sociologist and theorist of play Johan Huizinga tells us in *Homo Ludens* that art, as imaginative work, is a form of play born of the "play-element of culture" and a manifestation of every human's — every mammal's — play-feeling, or drive to play; he concentrates particularly on music and writing (especially the writing of poetry). Michel Foucault, in "What is an Author?," speaks of writing as something that "unfolds like a game that inevitably moves beyond its own rules and finally leaves them behind" (Foucault 1477). Barthes takes the idea of aesthetic creation as play further by arguing that reading is a game, despite having so often been conceived as a passive act of pure consumption (this is, of course, still a common conception even in the context of

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computer games, and the *I Ching* (3). To Aarseth, the "average literary work" is linear or nonergodic (3).

video games, despite all the evidence to the contrary). In 1970's "Écrire la lecture," an essay about the writing of *S/Z* (which Barthes figures as the writing of a reading), Barthes states that "la lecture la plus subjective qu'on puisse imaginer n'est jamais qu'un jeu mené à partir de certaines règles" ("The most subjective imaginable reading is never anything but a game played on the basis of certain rules") (Barthes 3:604). He continues:

> D'où viennent ces règles? Certainement pas de l'auteur … [;] ces règles viennent d'une logique millénaire du récit, d'une forme symbolique qui nous constitue avant même notre naissance, en un mot de cet immense espace culturel dont notre personne … n'est qu'un passage. (Barthes 3:604)[6]

Barthes, whose use of "jeu" here must clearly, given the use of the article "un," be translated as "game" (as opposed to the "play" that is often used in translating his work), is placing the game of reading in a structure of rules that is those produced by the cultural space of which we are a transitory part. *We* carry the rules for reading; perhaps it can be said, as Barthes seems to imply, that we *are* the rules. A bit later in the essay, Barthes makes the equally striking pronouncement that

> …il n'y a pas de vérité objective ou subjective de la lecture, mais seulement une vérité ludique; encore le jeu ne doit-il pas être compris ici comme une distraction, mais comme un travail — d'où cependant toute peine serait évaporée: lire, c'est faire travailler notre corps … à l'appel des signes du texte. (Barthes 3:604)[7]

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[6] "Where do these rules come from? Certainly not from the author … [;] these rules come from an age-old logic of the narrative, from a symbolic form that constitutes us even before our birth — in one word, from that immense cultural space of which our person … is only a passage" (translation mine).

[7] "There is no objective or subjective truth to reading, but only a ludic truth. The game should not be understood here as an entertainment, but as work — a work from which, however, all difficulty has evaporated: to read is to make our body work … at the call of the signs of the text" (translation mine).

Again the translation of "jeu" as "game" is clear, and Barthes' evocation of the body emphasizes that what he means is a physical game, a game of the senses and the material, not some abstract intellectual activity (as if such a thing could exist disembodied). The only truth of reading is a ludic truth, he tells us; the game aspect is privileged over everything else in this passage.

Barthes is coming at this idea from a conception not only of the text as constituted by and participating in an infinity of intertextual play, but also of the reader as being, on one hand, the site of signification — "ce *quelqu'un* qui tient rassemblées dans un même champ toutes les traces dont est constitué l'écrit" ("that *someone* who holds, assembled in the same field, all the traces from which writing is constituted"), he writes in "La mort de l'auteur" — and, on the other hand, as a being intertextually constituted by the constant play of culture, connotation, and association (Barthes 3:45, emphasis his, translation mine). All of the world is at play in intertextuality in Barthes; that is true not only of the text but of the reader, him/herself also a kind of writer, involved in the text's creation and co-constituted with it. The world itself is game, as we see in this passage on "writerly" texts in *S/Z*: "…le texte scriptible, c'est *nous en train d'écrire*, avant que le jeu infini du monde (le monde comme jeu) ne soit traversé, coupé, arrêté, plastifié par quelque système singulier…" ("the writerly text *is us in the process of writing*, before the infinite play of the world (the world as game) has been traversed, cut, stopped, or laminated by some singular system") (Barthes 3:122, italics his, translation mine).

What is ludic about reading to Barthes is, I believe, the way the text inspires — necessitates — engagement. What he conceives of in *S/Z* as the hypothetical epitome of the "texte lisible" or "readerly text" — a text without pluralities — might involve minimal engagement (though engagement is still there; eyes still read words on a page), but he makes it clear that most texts are "pluriel" (plural) to one extent or another. He writes of an ideal "writerly" text

("texte scriptible"), which, in its purest form, is indeed "*us in the process of writing*," has achieved total engagement between the reader and the text, and has made of the reader its own creator. As of the moment when Barthes is writing this segment of *S/Z* in 1970, he believes that no literature written so far is truly "writerly" (see Barthes 3:123). He goes on from this passage to concentrate on the most interesting "readerly" texts: those that are heavily plural, that most closely approach an ideal of total plurality of the "readerly" text and share characteristics with the ideal "writerly" text.

"*Us in the process of writing*": we have stepped out of any passive notion of reading here and into a ludic stance demanded not simply by the writerly text but by any readerly text that is sufficiently plural. Video games have been defined in many ways and as many things, as I will discuss in the next portion of this chapter, but games always involve possibility, always involve playing in and with time, always necessitate an action and a reaction (the nature of which is to at least some extent up to the player), an act of imposition or creation, and that is what happens between a reader and a text of sufficient complexity like a *texte fleuve*.

Games also, according to both Huizinga and Roger Caillois — for whom the "agon" is one of the four basic game types — very often involve an agonistic element (in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Janet Murray refers to "the agon, or contest between opponents" both as "the most common form of game" and "the earliest form of narrative" [145]). This is key to the ludic element of the reading of *textes fleuves*. Its complexity and its deployment of endlessness means that the *texte fleuve* is difficult. It is usually very long and/or wide in scope — sometimes literally infinitely so, as is the case with many contemporary open-world and sandbox video games like the ones I will discuss, as well as, in its own way, Proust's *Recherche*, with its infinite narrative looping (to be examined in chapter 2). Depending on the specific work, other difficulties arise, such as stylistic elements in Proust (the complexity of his often endless-seeming sentences, his

paragraphs that go on for pages, his relative lack of chapter breaks, his saturation of detail, etc), or the difficulties (notably in terms of demands on physical skill) of gameplay. The *texte fleuve* does not let itself be read, be finished, easily if at all; it fights back, seducing readers all the while, thereby enabling its interminability. It competes with the reader and dances with the reader at the same time; the text and the reader play with each other.

Though Huizinga conceives of games as things that take place in a "magic circle" consisting of a limited, specific space (not necessarily physical) and a limited duration in time, and Caillois follows him fairly closely on that point, this idea simply doesn't hold up in the defining of certain kinds of games. A subset of contemporary video games, as well as many "tabletop" role-playing games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, take place in effectively unlimited game spaces. Beyond that, most games of all sorts are capable of being played endlessly or almost endlessly (a fact Huizinga acknowledges), either simply through one's playing them over and over or (assuming the game's structure allows this) ignoring the ending conditions and going on.[8] The reader-text game itself, given the infinities involved, is always a potentially endless one. Barthes, in fact, in an essay of 1972, defines reading explicitly as "that which never ends": "*La lecture, c'est ce qui ne s'arrête pas*" ("*Reading is that which does not stop,*") (Barthes 4:172, italics his). Because of the endlessness of the reading game and given the *texte fleuve*'s deployment of infinity through its own endlessnesses, as well as the sheer degree of focused (sometimes obsessive) attention needed in order to meaningfully engage with it, the *texte fleuve* is particularly well suited to showing the ludic elements of reading.

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[8] See Huizinga, 10. He has just put forth his argument that games are limited in time – they end – but goes on to write that, at the same time, "[a game] can be repeated at any time… [i]n this faculty of repetition lies one of the most essential qualities of play." He would not agree that changing the ending conditions enables a game to be played endlessly; I suspect that he would argue that changing the ending conditions would be a changing of the rules that would transform

Finally, I wish to make clear that my claim is not that reading a print text like Proust's is exactly the same kind of game we play when we sit down with our controller in front of *Grand Theft Auto* or set up the chess board. It *is*, however, a game of its own kind — the world is full of many kinds of games —that in certain basic respects significantly resembles the playing of a video or board game. By examining the ludic qualities of the reading of non-video game *textes fleuves* we can, I hope, gain a greater understanding of how the ludic operates in the process of reading all kinds of texts. We should also gain a better understanding of the way the narrative operates along with the ludic in the video game.

2. Video games and narrative

Video games — at least, depending on who is talking, certain kinds of video games — have been telling stories (often simple, but sometimes quite complex) for at least the forty years since the 1974-1975 creation of Will Crowther's *Colossal Cave Adventure* (a.k.a. *Adventure*), Don Daglow's *Dungeon*, Gary Whisenhunt and Ray Wood's *dnd*, and Rusty Rutherford's *pedit5*, the first computer adventure and role-playing games. The latter three games in that list are, in fact, the earliest adaptations of the first role-playing game ("RPG"), *Dungeons and Dragons*, a "tabletop" game first published by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson in 1974 that is essentially a system for the generation and playing out of stories that, as Nick Montfort writes in *Twisty Little Passages* (2003), consists of "a framework for a theatrical interaction, for the exploration of simulated spaces, and for puzzle solving" (Montfort 65). Arguably, video games can be said to have been telling simple stories since their inception with artefacts like William Higinbotham's *Tennis for Two* (1958), an electronic game played on an oscilloscope, and Steve Russell, Martin Graetz and Wayne Wittanen's *Spacewar!*

the game into a different thing. Huizinga, of course, had never been exposed to anything like a sandbox video game in which there is simply no ending of the game world.

(1961) (written for the PDP-1 mainframe at MIT), often cited as the first "true" computer or video game.

The idea that games are narrative, or can be vehicles or spaces of narrative, has not by any means been taken as a given. The question of whether computer games could function as narratives — and, if they did, *which* games were narrative, and whether that narrativity was important in terms of their study — was particularly hotly contested from the late 1990s, with the publication of Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck* and Aarseth's *Cybertext,* through the mid 2000s in what came to be known as the "narratology versus ludology" debates; the stakes of these debates seemed to be the future direction of the nascent field of video games studies. The "ludological" school of games criticism includes theorists (a number trained in literary theory) such as Aarseth, Gonzalo Frasca, Markku Eskelinen, and Jesper Juul. Media theorist and narratologist Marie-Laure Ryan, in her rebuttal of various ludological positions in *Avatars of Story* (2006), summarizes the subject of the debates as: "is the concept of narrative applicable to computer games, or does the status of an artifact as game preclude its status as narrative?" (181); she also notes that "the terms ["ludology" and "narratology"] are slightly misleading, because the ludology camp enrolls the support of some influential narratologists, while the … narratology camp includes both straw men constructed by the ludologists … and theorists who use the terms 'narrative' and 'story' rather casually" (181).

She describes the ludological school's "implict battle cry" as "games are games, they are not narratives" (though I note that some ludological critics such as Juul and Eskelinen did concede, or have by this point conceded, that many games involve a narrative element of some kind; Eskelinen, for example, has worked towards fashioning what he writes of as a "more comprehensive literary theory, narratology, and game studies") (Ryan 183; Eskelinen 3). I add that ludological work commonly seems to express anxiety or uneaseness about what Eskelinen,

taking up a familiar ludological trope in his *Cybertext Poetics* (2012), calls the "hegemonic theories" of literary criticism and narratology, which in various ludological writings seem to be conceived of as theories that, having been formulated for the understanding of print texts alone, are taking over (or threatening to take over, or have taken over) game studies (Eskelinen 1).

My own impression on the debates is that, indeed, part of what was at work were (sometimes wildly) varying definitions of, and confusions between, words like "story" and "narrative," which were (and are) often treated as if their meaning is obvious. I therefore want to lay my cards out quickly and clearly. As H. Porter Abbott puts it in his *Introduction to Narrative*, narrative is a complex topic, but, at base, "*narrative is the principal way in which our species organizes its understanding of time*" (Abbott 3; italics his).[9] He goes on to explain that, while "non-narrative ways of organizing time" such as seasons, night and day, clocks, years (as cycles of seasons) and so on "are abstract in the sense that they provide a grid of regular intervals within which we can locate events," narrative, on the other hand, "turns this process inside out, *allowing events themselves to create the order of time*" (Abbott 3; italics his). As Gérard Genette has pointed out in the introduction to his *Narrative Discourse*, there seem to be three meanings commonly ascribed to the word "narrative." He identifies the first as the "narrative statement, the oral or written discourse that undertakes to tell of an event or a series of events"; this is the type of narrative he concerns himself with in that book (Genette 25). The second meaning he gives on the same page is the meaning Abbott is writing about, and the one with which I am concerned for the moment: "the succession of events, real or fictitious, that are the subjects of this discourse." (The third meaning he gives is of narrative, and the one he writes is

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[9] I note that Abbott does not consider games capable of being narratives because they take place in the present rather than the past. See Ryan's discussion and rebuttal in *Avatars of Story* (186).

the oldest, is of narrative as "the event that consists of someone recounting something" [Genette 26].)

I am proceeding, then, on the basis of the idea that narrative is the event-oriented way in which we organize our understanding of time. A game is an organization of time. All games exist in time, a defining quality agreed upon by the great majority of critics. Time is always an element of play, which itself can be seen as a series of events, no matter how minor those events are (I push the right joystick of my gaming console controller up, then right, then down in a narratable series of events that produces the more interesting event that is my PC ("player character") punching his opponent onscreen, for example). Events are narrative markers, or things that provoke the construction of narrative; we string them together into narratives in order to make sense of them. We often recount the playing of interesting games to others, in at least some summarized form, and as Ryan notes, "the greater our urge to tell stories about games, the stronger the suggestion that we *experienced the game narratively*" (Ryan 193, emphasis hers).

The above said, I do think it's problematic to conflate games — or, at least, all games — with *stories*. A narrative is not necessarily the same thing as a story, depending on how we define "story"; it's certainly not necessarily the same thing as a *good* story, whatever our aesthetic criteria may be. There are a wide range of text-based games and hypertext works, sometimes discussed as "interactive fiction," which do seem to tell stories in a fairly straightforward manner (relative to computer games at large), with the choices given to the player leading to narrative branches that continue moving the story forward. Such works include the original text-based *Adventure* itself; the popular "text adventures" of the 1980s created by the company Infocom (the most famous Infocom game being *Zork*); Michael Mateas' and Andrew Stern's *Façade* (2000); the work of contemporary "IF" authors like Andrew Plotkin and Emily Short; the many browser-based hypertext story games produced since the 2009 release of the

Twine authoring system by creators such as Anna Anthropy, Merritt Kopas, and Zoe Quinn; and so on. Text-based games, which are easier to see as story-driven because of that basis in text, have a long history and, despite their relative lack of popularity, are still created in quantity; unfortunately, I do not have the space to examine them here, as my focus is on games that take place in virtual worlds rendered with 3D graphics, and the kinds of narratives they construct along with the reader/player.

Story-telling – the potential of computer software to tell stories, for computers to serve as the "creators" and conduits of stories -- has been taken quite seriously by researchers, programmers and academics since the early days of the computer. Research in Artificial Intelligence has overlapped with and profoundly influenced the research and creation of video games on many levels, and perhaps its most widespread influence has been in the realm of story generation. This field of study has naturally been quite important to creators of video games, especially action-adventure and RPGs (role-playing games), as they've become ever-increasingly concerned with writing computational processes and building electronic gameworlds capable of producing engaging storylines, quest lines, and dialogue, as well as NPCs (non-player characters) capable of interacting with the player character in complex, "realistic" ways.

Joseph Weizenbaum's 1966 conversation (or chat) program *Eliza/Doctor,* known widely as *Eliza*, was an early and extremely influential attempt to create a program that could simulate a believable human being (the criterion for passing Alan Turing's famous "Turing Test," which, arguably, has never been accomplished by an AI).[10] The software presented the user with a chat interface featuring a software character (a predecessor of the talkative, conversational computer processes we now call "bots"), taking on the role of a Rogerian

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[10] See Noah Wardrip-Fruin's extensive discussion of *Eliza* throughout *Expressive Processing*, where he puts forth the idea that the Turing test itself is a game (84).

therapist, which could conduct a conversation with a user in which the program asked questions and responded to user input. *Eliza* used relatively simple algorithms to respond to this input in a way that could, for the first few minutes, seem uncannily human, involving far more understanding than a computer was supposed to be capable of — until the inevitable breakdown point at which the computer's lack of any actual understanding would become clear. *Eliza* provides Noah Wardrip-Fruin, who calls her "the first well-known digital character," the inspiration for his elaboration in *Expressive Processing* of the "Eliza effect," a term used to describe the phenomenon of the complexity or apparent sophistication of a system's output serving to camouflage the relative symplicity of its processes (84).[11] Eliza is for Janet Murray "the first completely computer-based character," brought "compellingly to life" by Weizenbaum, who she deems "the earliest, and still perhaps the premier, literary artist in the computer medium" (Murray 68, 71, 72).[12] The program has been followed by a long line of programs -- written by AI researchers, chat bot creators, and, more recently, video game programmers -- designed to generate stories and convincing dialogue.

One of the most interesting of these programs for generating stories is James Meehan's *Tale-Spin*. Written as Meehan's PhD thesis in 1974 (the year *Dungeons and Dragons* was published and the creators of *Dungeon* and *dnd* began to adapt that game to the computer), *Tale-Spin* was an attempt to create a story-telling program based on Russian Formalist Vladimir Propp's 31 functions of stories (laid out in Propp's 1922 *Morphology of the Folktale*) which would generate Aesop-like animal fables.[13] *Tale-Spin* works, on the level of computer

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[11] For a thorough exploration of the Eliza effect, see Wardrip-Fruin, *Expressive Processing* (throughout).

[12] I must note that Murray is incorrect in referring to the computer itself as medium (something she does repeatedly). A computer is a machine that produces many other virtual machines and is capable of running, displaying and enabling the creation of works in many different media.

[13] For discussions and descriptions of *Tale-Spin*, see Wardrip-Fruin's *Expressive Processing* as well as Sack, Warren, "Russian Formalism and Software Studies" (2013).

processes and code, by constructing a "simulated world, processes for behavior in and of the world, and characters and objects that populate the world" (Wardrip-Fruin 116). While *Tale-Spin* has not generally been discussed as a game, it seems clear to me that it has game-like qualities. *Tale-Spin* is somewhat interactive, requiring a modicum of creative effort on the user's part; in order to construct the virtual world it will use to generate an animal story, the program has to ask the user a series of questions (what animal characters should it use? Do they know each other? Are the characters friends? Do they trust one another? And so forth). The answers to these question set up the conditions by which the program will evaluate what happens in the internal world it has created, and thus helps to determine the report it gives on the characters' actions and their results — the story it tells.

Owing to the various difficulties (so great that they have so far been, in certain senses, insurmountable) involved in creating processes "intelligent" enough to interact with virtual worlds without making basic logical mistakes, *Tale-Spin* stories are generally error-ridden. It is nevertheless a fascinating artifact on the level of both narrative and world-creation, generating narrative as it does from the virtual world it has co-constructed with the program's user. It also points up how various computerized narratives have *not* been seen as games, and thus how designers and critics have tended much more often to discuss games as narratives than narratives — or, following Barthes, texts — as games; even Wardrip-Fruin, concerned with showing the links between AI research into story-generation and the expressive (including narrative) power of video games, does not really discuss story-generators like *Tale-Spin* as game-like, even when they require — when they *play with* —user input.

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Let me return to what I wrote just above about the way *Tale-Spin* generates narrative from a world. Whether or not it can be seen as a sort of game — at the very least it seems to be a program with game-like qualities — *Tale-Spin* is a case of narrative being created from a world, of a world that produces story. In that sense, it provides a contrast to artifacts like the more obviously story-heavy games I listed when I touched on interactive fiction a few pages above. In most cases, those games are (arguably) more about creating a world from narrative description and the user's input.

Many video games are far less story-driven than those games listed above — if we understand "story-driven" to relate to a game's being explicitly dominated by or centered on a reasonably coherent story being "told" by the convergence of the computer program and its user. The most "story-driven" games are those (more similar to traditional print stories) through which we are being in some significant way guided by the game's structure, the texts and/or visuals telling each part of the story, etc. Perhaps equally "story-driven" are those games in which each choice we make, like the choices available in one of the American "Choose Your Own Adventure" novels popular in the 1980s, takes us down another narrative pathway towards what may be, depending on the work, one of a number of different endings or a single ending to which all paths lead. The playable media that can easily be seen to fall under the header "interactive fiction" are arguably – though this impression may well be the product of an illusion produced by extensive use of linguistic text – the most "story-driven" computer games of all.

This is not the kind of relationship to game and story that I am most interested in examining in *texte fleuve* video games, in part because the story-driven games that I consider *textes fleuves* — *Dungeons and Dragons* itself (among other tabletop role-playing games), as well as multiplayer role-playing games that are run in computerized virtual worlds such as the text-based Multi-

User Domains (MUDs, MOOs, MUSHes, MUXs, etc) common in the 1980s and 90s, Massive Multipler Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) worlds, and other communal virtual worlds (*Second Life*, *Minecraft* shared worlds, etc) — are beyond the scope of this dissertation.[14] This is in part because I have chosen, even in terms of games like *Minecraft* that have multiplayer modes, to focus on the experience of single-player video game *textes fleuves*, the better to elucidate the engagement between the reader and the text.

In terms of video game *textes fleuves,* then, I am dealing first with games that are less obviously story-driven: role-playing games (RPGs) that, rather than being constructed from linguistic text on a screen that involves the player/reader in what is obviously the co-creation of a story, instead provide story elements to be combined into stories by the player and, as Wardrip-Fruin writes, "often work to motivate players to engage in a variety of types of play (e.g., exploration, combat, and intellectual puzzle solving) via character development set in a larger story" (Wardrip-Fruin 47). Secondly, I am discussing video game texts that have little or no "built-in" or "pre-authored" story at all, instead offering the player "pure" sandboxes (*Minecraft*) or simulations (*the Sims*) in which narrative is entirely emergent.

How is narrative produced by and with – how does it come into play in -- video game texts that emphasize the game world, the game space, over any built-in story elements? The key is the spatial dimension of narrative. There are stories, and then there's the *space* for stories, and stories that *are* space. As Henry Jenkins writes in "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," it is in many ways more interesting, and certainly for my purposes more fruitful, to examine games "less as

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[14] MUD = "Multi-User Domain"; MOO = "MUD, Object-Oriented" (a reference to MOO code being object-oriented); MUSH and MUX are "backronyms" chosen to show that these are other variants on MUD, though MUSH is often explained as "Multi-User Shared Hallucination." These and many other lesser-known codebases are variants and evolutions of the original MUD and MOO created by Richard Bartle (of Essex University) and Pavel Curtis (of Xerox PARC) respectively.

stories than as spaces ripe with narrative possibility" (Jenkins 119). He calls both

for narrative and stories in games to be thought of through space, and for game

designers to be rethought as "narrative architects." Discussing the problem of

defining narrative in the context of games, he points out (echoing many

"ludologists") that "the experience of playing games can never be simply reduced

to the experience of a story," and that "[i]f some games tell stories, they are

unlikely to tell them in the same ways that other media tell stories" (Jenkins 120).

Video games tell stories and, more generally, produce (or help the player produce)

narrative not only through temporal structures (and strictures) but also through the

use of game spaces. As Jenkins explains, "spatial stories can evoke pre-existing

narrative associations; they can provide a staging ground where narrative events

are enacted; they may embed narrative information within their mise-en-scene;

[and/or] they provide resources for emergent narratives" (Jenkins 123). (Celia

Pearce, also writing in *First Person*, gives a workable if rough definition of

"emergent narrative" as "a story that evolves over time as a result of an interplay

between rules and players" (Pearce 149); I also understand it to be narrative that is

not specifically planned out by the game designers).

Will Wright, creator of the series of simulation games *The Sims* — heavy

with emergent narrative — writes in *First Person* that "[his] aspirations for this

new form [the computer game] are not about telling better stories but about

allowing players to 'play' better stories within these artificial worlds. The role of

the designer becomes trying to best leverage the agency of the player in finding

dramatic and interesting paths through this space" (Wright 13).[15] The implication

is that game narratives, for Wright as well as Jenkins, arise from the traversal of

game space. Part of the way *The Sims* in particular enables the emergence of

narrative from space is to make the inanimate objects in the gameworld generators

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of events, as opposed to giving that role only to the characters or to insertions of story elements via text boxes or cut scenes. The player of the *Sims 3*, for example, can direct a "sim" (one of the game's simulated people) to wash its hands in the kitchen sink, an action which triggers an animation of the sim washing its hands as well as a change in the visual bar that tracks the sim's state of hygiene. Because of the way sinks are programmed, there is also always a risk that the sink will spring a leak, spraying water all over the sim's floor. This in turn triggers animations of the sim reacting with distress, an appropriate change in the sim's mood (also tracked onscreen), as well as options for cleaning up the mess, repairing the sink, calling a plumber, etc. These options are only available if the user clicks on the puddle, another object programmed to trigger animations and other changes. If the puddle is left where it is, it will affect sims that pass near it, triggering more animations of distress, possibly some audio of the sims reacting in the game's gibberish sim language ("simlish"), and more mood changes. The sink and puddle objects are what Michael Nitsche would call "evocative narrative elements" (Nitsche 3).

As Nitsche writes in *Video Game Spaces: Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Worlds*, "game spaces evoke narratives because the player is making sense of them in order to engage with them. Through a comprehension of signs and interaction with them, the player generates new meaning" (Nitsche 3). To Nitsche, narrative in the context of games "is a form of understanding of the events a player causes, triggers, and encounters inside a video game space"; one of his stated goals is to "[understand] space and movement therein by ways of narrative comprehension" (Nitsche 7). He lays out the idea of "elements that are implemented in the game world to assist in comprehension" (Nitsche 3) – these are the aforementioned "evocative narrative elements," which he later defines

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[15] Wright, Will. Response to Ken Perlin's "Can There Be a Form between a Game and a Story?" *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*. Ed. Noah

more specifically as "anything and any situation encountered in a game world that is structured to support and possibly guide the player's comprehension … players encounter and read these elements, comprehend the information in the context of a fictional world, and learn from them as they build contextual connections between elements" (Nitsche 37). "Stimulated by the game," he later elaborates, "the player weaves the connections, creates a narrative context" (Nitsche 43).

The evocative narrative element is a very useful concept. An evocative narrative element need not, however, be encoded in the game world or programmed by the desigerns to create potential narrative event. As Barthes showed in "the Death of the Author," the player as reader (interactor, user, etc) is also the site of comprehension.[16] Evocative narrative elements are simply those elements that evoke narrative for the reader, whether or not they were placed by the designers with the intention of adding to a story. As Nitsche writes, they "do not contain a story themselves but trigger important parts of the narrative process in the player," a process that "can lead to the generation of a form of narrative" (Nitsche 3). They can be inanimate objects, scenery, behaviors, glitches, etc — "anything and any situation," as Nitche indicates (37): anything the player can use to spark the play of associations and from which he or she can pull narrative elements.

Video game *textes fleuves*, like all *textes fleuves*, embody endlessness, and the bulk of them do this most obviously in a way unique to graphic-based video games: by providing the player with vast, highly explorable, heavily visual game worlds. These so-called "open world" games are fundamentally not only about time but also about space, and, more specifically, a space that is navigable by the user via the mediation of the player character — a space, as Jenkins puts it, "ripe with narrative possibility" (see above), full of evocative narrative elements in the

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Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002. 12-14.
    [16] See Barthes, "La mort de l'auteur," 45.

form of objects and behaviors as well as designer-written text (story elements). While many (possibly most) "open-world" games, being either RPGs or some variant thereof, do involve pre-packaged story elements (especially in the form of quests) to be combined into a longer story by the player, these story elements can often be avoided or ignored. In Bethesda Softwork's 2011 *Skyrim*, for instance, the player is under no obligation to follow any questlines suggested by the game after he or she has gone through the heavily scripted first few minutes of the game, in which the player character is often piloted by the computer (rather than the player) in order to ensure that the designers' intended story narrative is followed. This bit is the only moment in which the player does not have any degree of agency over the order of narrative events. Afterwards, the player is entirely free to explore the game world, finding his or her own evocative narrative elements and using them to make narrative sense of the game.

As is the case with a tabletop RPG like *D&D*, "many [video game] RPGs," writes Wardrip-Fruin, "give the sense that the story itself is *playable* by offering the player freedom to roam across a world infused with quests that operate on many scales, can sometimes be completed in different ways, and are often optional or available for partial completion" (47). Open-world RPGs, then, can be seen as combinations of programmed gameworld — a virtual space full of locations to explore, things to see and manipulate and interact with, and programmed story elements written by the designers, designed to be part of questlines players can follow in order to participate in the co-creation (with the game software) of a story, but which the plays can often ignore in favor of doing something else given the spatial constraints and operational logics of the game in question.

In the interest of establishing my approach to narrative in this medium, I want to examine how narrative works in two video game *textes fleuves*: *Fallout 3,* a role-playing game that combines both an open world capable of producing

emergent narrative and an attempt at a fairly traditional quasi-linear narrative story arranged into the quest format common to video game RPGs, and *Minecraft*, a "sandbox" building and exploration game that provides no predesigned story elements but only an open world rife with evocative narrative elements (*not* dependent on some sort of authorial intent) and rich with the possibility of emergent narrative.

3. Half quest, half world: narrative in *Fallout 3*

Fallout 3 is a complex, almost cartoonishly ultraviolent post-apocalyptic science-fiction role-playing game, released by Bethesda Softworks in 2008 for both the Windows OS and the Xbox and PlayStation 3 video gaming consoles. The game is set in a vast, lushly-rendered open world. As is typical in open-world games, nearly all of the landscape depicted on-screen can be traversed and explored (the exception is a thin band of inert, painted scenery around the game world's edges, past which the player cannot go; unlike the spatially endless worlds of *Minecraft*, the *Fallout 3* game world, while relatively big in extension, has definitive borders). *Fallout 3* is somewhat less open world that some; where in Bethesda's *Elder Scrolls* RPG titles *Morrowind* (2002), *Oblivion* (2006), and *Skyrim* no building is depicted which cannot be entered and explored in full, many of the bombed-out buildings in *Fallout* are impregnable façades acting as set dressing, and the ruined streets of the Washington D.C. (one of the primary settings of the game) are often blocked with unpassable rubble in a way that can be frustratingly reminiscent of games that limit the player to very specific paths. Still, the ruins of the capitol are so big that the spatial limitations *feel* less limiting, and the bulk of the *Fallout 3* world — the blasted "Capitol Wasteland" of brush, mutated animals, vicious raiders, houses reduced to matchsticks and crumbled highways that surround the ruined city — serves as a vast space of player freedom and exploration.

Fallout 3, in the form in which it was first published — the "core" game, before the later-released "downloadable content" programs (DLCs) have been installed — is a relatively rare instance (especially rare in the context of Bethesda RPGs) of an open-world game that incorporates both immense player freedom and a "main quest," its arc written by the game designers, that has not just a beginning but a clear and truly *final* ending past which the player cannot continue playing. Despite providing the player with considerable freedom to explore and discover, to experience the game world, to witness and create emergent narrative, the core game finishes — *if* the player chooses to follow the main quest all the way to the end, which is not mandatory — by reincorporating the player character into a relatively traditional, relatively linear narrative story. Unlike the main quests of other games in Bethesda's contributions to the *Fallout* series (the first two games were created by Black Isle studios) and Bethesda's *Elder Scrolls* RPGs, the main quest storyline of *Fallout 3* has a definite, the-game-is-over-and-the-credits-are-rolling kind of ending—an ending in which, depending on the player's choices, the player character can actually die for good.

Without *Broken Steel* installed, *Fallout 3* involves an ending it does not try to go past, and is thus not a *texte fleuve*. I therefore want to clarify that in this discussion, I am referring to *Fallout 3* as it exists after one has installed *Broken Steel*, the first DLC released to the public by Bethesda after *Fallout 3*'s publication. A DLC is a software package, sold a bit more cheaply than the original game, that is installed on the player's computer or gaming console. The packages install themselves in such a way as to blend into and become part of the main, or "core," game. If you install a DLC modifying your copy of *Fallout 3*, when you load a saved game file you will find new elements added to an otherwise familiar gameworld (objects, places, NPCs, quests, etc).

The first *Fallout 3* DLC released by Bethesda, *Broken Steel*, undoes the final ending of the "core" game. Once *Broken Steel* is installed, if the player

character has died at the end of the unmodified game, he or she is depicted waking up a few weeks later having miraculously been saved off-screen at the last second. The character is then sent by NPCs to explore the new elements of the game world. At that moment, the game enters the temporal ceaselessness I will discuss in chapter 2 as one of the major endlessnesses of the *texte fleuve*. In the same way as other Bethesda RPGs in which there are no final endings, *Fallout 3* with *Broken Steel* installed starts to subvert any notion of a "traditional" "linear" narrative, since the ending has been taken away and, while the set questlines offered by the DLC can be played through to their own endings, the game world will go on forever (at least until the materials making up the game and the computer or console degrade), and the narrative possibilities will go on with it.

The game designer-written story content of *Fallout 3*, like that of most contemporary video game RPGs, operates in terms of *quests* and *dialogue* (with NPCs -- non-player characters, or characters that cannot be maneuvered by the player through the use of the controller or keyboard). As Wardrip-Fruin writes in *Expressive Processing*, "two operational logics have come to prominence in the story and NPC presentations of computer RPGs. These are *quest flags* and *dialogue trees*" (Wardrip-Fruin 46).[17] In this section I am going to favor discussion of quests and quest logic because that logic is the dominant one in terms of how open-world RPG games such as *Fallout 3* are designed to tell structured stories written by the designers.

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[17] See Wardrip-Fruin's Chapter 3, "Computer Game Fictions." *Expressive Processing*. 41-80. Wardrip-Fruin defines the "operational logic" (a term he coined) as "a pattern that arises in the interplay of the elements of a digital media system"; he gives as examples of the elements in question "data, process, surface, interaction, author, and audience" (Wardrip-Fruin 13-14). In calling quest flags and dialogue trees "operational logics," he is not simply looking at their operation "inside" the text, but is working at a level of abstraction which includes the author(s) and the audience along with elements more easily seen as those of the text (its data, its processes, its surface – what can be seen on the screen, for example). The term appeals to me because it describes the (co-)constitution of a logic not just as a textual element but as an intertextual one.

Jeff Howard, examining quests both as they function in the Western literary tradition and in terms of their implementation as structures of contemporary gameplay, describes the quest as "a journey across a symbolic, fantastic landscape in which a protagonist or player collects objects and talks to characters in order to overcome challenges and achieve a meaningful goal" (Howard xi).[18] Contemporary video game RPGs like those Howard examines and those I am discussing here involve a networked structure of multiple quests written by the designers and offered to the player.[19] Depending on the game, at least some of these quests — sometimes all of them — are arranged into "questlines," a questline being a series of related quests, building on each other, that are designed to, as the player completes them, carry forward a coherent story written by the game's designers.

Though quests and questlines are written by the developers and as such do not involve emergent narrative, in a complex RPG they contribute to each gamer's singular experience of the game. Games as complex as *Fallout 3* allow the player potentially very different experiences on each play-through, depending on the choices s/he makes about which quests to accept, which to finish, and how to go about completing them. As Wardrip-Fruin writes the typical contemporary RPG game world is

> infused with quests that operate at many scales, can sometimes be
> completed in different ways, and are often optional or available for partial
> completion. As each player chooses which quests to accept — as well as
> how, whether, and when to complete them — this creates a different story
> structure for each player. Some of the player's nonquest activities may be

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[18] Howard, Jeff. *Quests: Design, Theory, and History in Games and Narratives*. Wellesley, MA: A K Peters, Ltd, 2008.

[19] Jill Walker has written on the pleasures, and the world-building power, of networks of tightly-connected quests in the MMORPG [Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game] *World of Warcraft*. See *Second Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media*.

directly related to this structure … but the structure also provides one

context in which even world exploration for its own sake can be situated.

(Wardrip-Fruin 47-48)

As Wardrip-Fruin implies, quests and the space of the game world are tightly knit together. A common type of minor quest in these games is for the PC simply to be asked to carry something to, or fetch something from, another space on the map; the quest thus serves as an impetus for the player to go explore that other space, and perhaps to talk to an NPC who might offer the player character yet another quest.

All Bethesda RPGs have a quest structure dominated by a main questline the player cannot avoid accepting, upon which s/he is automatically launched at the beginning of the game. The player can choose not to pursue the next stages of the questline, but this first moment of the main quest, if none other, must start; there is no way to play the game and avoid it. Bethesda games thus seem to be designed to try to push the player into a story structure whether or not the player is interested. This is a typical aspect of video games with RPG elements: player characters are not simply dropped into the world as they are in *Minecraft*, but are made to embark, at least briefly, along at least one questline.

Fallout 3 starts, like many games, with a cinematic episode with no interactive element. We first see a shot of the wrecked dashboard of a broken-down vehicle, the colors muted and drab aside from a dash of pink in the costume of a bobble-type dashboard statuette of a grass-skirted woman playing a ukelele. A light on the dashboard radio suddenly crackles to life, and as the "camera" slowly starts to pull backwards, the radio begins playing the Inkspots' 1948 single "I Don't Want to Set the World on Fire." As the bus' front window comes into view, and as the "camera" pulls backwards out of the bus, the player is treated to the sight of a wasteland of concrete and steel rubble, which is abruptly revealed, via the sight of a blasted Washington Monument, as the ruins of Washington, D.C.

A robot-like armored soldier turns to look at the player, the game's soundtrack swells and the voice of actor Ron Perlman solemnly intones that "war never changes." The game now cuts into a series of images, accompanied by Perlman's voice-over, explaining the history of the setting. It is 2271, and two hundred years ago, the United States was annihilated in a brief nuclear war with China.

The player character is the descendant of humans who survived by fleeing into an underground vault, Vault 101. The game cuts to the character's birth, using the game "camera" (the point of view chosen by the designers) to show the baby's father. The first interactive elements come at this point, when the player is asked to choose the character's sex, race, and "future" appearance. A series of cuts in time take the player through the character's toddlerhood (another interactive element serves as a tutorial in how to manipulate gameworld objects), childhood, and adolescence, with interactive moments imparting both information about the physical movements needed to get through the game —which buttons to push — and information about the character's history and the gameworld. Eventually, the character wakes to find that his or her father has fled the vault, and s/he must find him. A prolonged gameplay sequence follows in which the player must fight mutated roaches and security guards, interact with various other NPCs, and escape the vault. While the player has agency in terms of the fighting — who to shoot, and when — and can make one of several choices when talking to the NPCs, some of which choices affect the continuation of the story, the player has no choice about fleeing or talking to the NPCs who are necessary for the plot to go forward.

Up to this point, the game has been much more obviously an interactive story than anything else. Insofar as the player is acting on the player character through the controller, s/he is essentially just taking the character from one segment of story to the next, with no real option to veer off the storyline's course and see what evocative narrative elements there might be available for integration into a story more of the player's own creation. Still, what's at work here in terms

of narrative co-creation is interesting. The player has in a sense been playing in the holes of the story presented by the game, and, in an important sense, filling in those holes. As Pearce writes, speaking of this kind of story narrative, "the key to game narrative is that it is, by definition, incomplete. It must be in order to leave room for the player to bring it to fruition" (Pearce 146). This bringing to fruition, this filling in of the gaps in the story, is a form of "closure," the imaginative act on the part of the reader that makes fragmented stories like those of comic strips and video games into unified, coherent narratives; comics theorist Scott McCloud defines it as "*observing the parts* but *perceiving the whole*" (McCloud 63, emphasis his). However, after the player character leaves the Vault for the blasted landscape of the Capitol Wasteland and the player obtains maximum control over the player character's actions, the game becomes an open world game, meaning that it gives the player much greater freedom to roam the world and to decide which (if any) other quests to accept; whether and when to participate in pre-designed stories becomes the player's choice.

The player character has been informed by this point that the escaped father has probably gone to the nearby settlement of Megaton, a small town built around an unexploded nuclear bomb. A player who has become caught up in the story told by the first section of the game is likely to go in that direction, and an added impetus to an experienced player of this type of games is the recognition (based on RPG coventions) that Megaton, given when and how it was mentioned by the game, is bound to be a place where many quests will be offered and supplies can be obtained. Still, the player is not actually under any obligation to go to Megaton immediately — or at all. To top it off, the ruined houses and fallen highways of the wasteland — not to mention the sense of alienation and *dépaysement* likely produced by the scenery in a player who is at all familiar with the D.C. area — make it easy to get lost. Getting "lost," in an open-world game, is

one of the quickest ways to end up witnessing emergent narrative and constructing player narrative from the elements available in the world.

During my first play-through of *Fallout 3*, I had my player character wander in the general direction of Megaton after leaving the vault. After getting turned around for a few minutes, I ended up inside "Springvale Elementary school," an abandoned building that had been taken over by the "raiders" who roam the wasteland — human pirates and slavers who shoot on sight and dress in chains and leather reminiscent of the vicious road warriors of George Miller's post-apocalyptic science fiction film *Mad Max* (1979). Upon entering the school, I discovered a scene of grisly carnage featuring the school's walls and ceilings decorated by grafitti written with blood as well as headless, dismembered bodies hanging from hooks (*Fallout 3* can be breath-takingly gruesome not just in its fight sequences, in which shooting creatures in the head produces an extravagant spray of blood, brains, and eyeballs, but also in its set pieces). As distasteful as this may sound, it did a thorough job of establishing the madness and danger of the broken, vicious world the player character now had to navigate after growing up in the safety and comfort of the vault.

Because of the narrative explanation of these horrors that I constructed in my imagination based on what I was experiencing in the space of the school, the school's blood-soaked interior also gave a certain affective punch to hunting down and killing the raiders infesting the building who (I inferred) had committed this atrocity. Because pre-designed story elements and my own choices during the game's initial interactive story segment had established my player character as young, well-meaning and relatively innocent, the experience of Springvale school gave me a lingering sense that my character had surely been traumatized by what she had seen. This sense of her character influenced later decisions I took when presented with quests or dialogue options; the events at the school — both those I had inferred from the visuals and the events I participated in during gameplay —

became part of the overall narrative experience of my character's wanderings of the wasteland. As far as I know there is no specific quest in the game designed to take the player to this school (at least, I was never offered one); it is just there for the exploring, containing crazed raiders to kill, supplies to loot, and horrifying decor to take in and incorporate into one's sense of the world and one's place in it.[20]

Though the experience of navigating the Springvale school is informed (in different ways depending on the player and the player's choices) by the characterization of the player character imparted during the game's initial mandatory quest, the school does not have to be part of a quest structure — a fragmented, episodic story the bulk of which is written by the designers — in order to come alive for the player, to create a real affective moment, to be memorable (writing this more than five years later, I still vividly remember the sight of the carnage as I walked into that school). In navigating the Springvale school the player takes the space, the evocative narrative elements that are the space and in the space — the building, the grafitti, the bodies, the hooks, the lurking raiders, the rubble, the floors scattered with rusty cans and broken bottles, all of it — and from it constructs narrative.

This is narrative from *space*, constructed by the player on the basis of the elements in the space of the gameworld, whereas the main quest story of the abandoning father being searched for by his child, the player character, is

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[20] An interesting detail is the name of the school, which appeared in text at the top of my screen when the computer recorded my discovery of the location and then marked the area on my map. "Springvale Elementary school" is an obvious reference to the D.C. suburb of Springfield, Virginia. The real Springfield contains a school called Springfield Estates Elementary and is situated vis a vis D.C. and the Potomac River in the same way that the Springvale of the gameworld is situated in relation to its ruins of DC and its Potomac River. The effect of these sorts of overlappings of reality and gamespace on anyone who knows the D.C. area is discomfiting; a friend who had attended Springfield Estates Elementary found the juxtaposition quite disturbing. The *Fallout 3* and *Fallout: New Vegas* games create fascinating, uncanny moments of recognition and alienation in players familiar with the real-life versions of their settings, and this phenomenon also, necessarily, affects what narrative the player is going to draw from the game space.

narrative from *quest*, from pre-designed storylines written and integrated into the game by the game designers. These two types of game narrative are by no means separate from each other in RPGs like *Fallout 3*. The most common sort of RPG quest, after all, involves the traversal of space ("carry/fetch x object or person to/from y place"), and spatial narrative is potentially present anywhere in the game space; it's a matter of encountering an evocative narrative element like the Springvale school. It is perhaps interesting to note indications that one of the methods used by Bethesda's development teams in creating the *Elder Scrolls* and *Fallout* RPGs is to create the gameworld and its population of NPCs first, before writing any quest stories. In a 2008 interview with the games industry-centered website Gamasutra, Todd Howard, game director of *Fallout 3* as well as *Oblivion* and *Skyrim*, was asked how his team at Bethesda Studios went about creating something as big and complex as *Fallout 3*. His response:

> I don't know that there's something specific I could point to, and go, "Here's how we go about it." The one thing we do is we lay out the world. One of the first things we do is draw the map, and come up with the people and places. And the rest of it comes out of that. (Howard in Chris Remo, "Falling into *Fallout 3*")

While *Fallout 3* puts a great deal of emphasis on space, however, it remains fundamentally a combination of space and quest. I will now examine a game in which *all* the emphasis is on space and all narrative is either derived from the space by the player in a way similar to my experience of the Springvale school, or consists of emergent narrative, its constitutive events arising from interactions between elements of the game world.

4. *Minecraft* as spatial narrative

Minecraft is a "sandbox" game (a game in which the player has enormous freedom to build and destroy) first created by Swedish game designer Markus

"Notch" Peterssen and originally released in "alpha" form, meaning officially incomplete and bug-ridden, for the PC/Mac in 2009.[21] Peterssen and a friend subsequently founded the firm Mojang to develop and "finish" the game, and the game has been regularly updated since.[22] The game is open-ended and different players play it very differently, but in its single-player form its focus is primarily on exploring the game world, acquiring resources, "crafting" items by combining other items, and — since it is a sandbox — both creating and destroying aspects of the game world.[23]

Minecraft consists of a procedurally-generated world of colorful, more-or-less 3D and rather Lego-like graphic "blocks" — representing elements such as wood, stone, grass, ice, water, sand, and so on — piled on top of each other to make landscapes that can be surprisingly beautiful once one is accustomed to their apparent crudeness, their weird combination of linear crispness and the vagueness of the enormously pixilated.[24] The player, via the player character or avatar (a figure commonly known as "Steve"), can manipulate these blocks in order to "mine" them for necessary game resources such as coal, iron, gold, etc, but also to create (and/or destroy) basically anything that can be imagined in 3D blocks.

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[21] Over the course of 2011-2013, Minecraft was "ported" to — meaning reprogrammed to be playable on — the Xbox and Playstation gaming consoles as well as Android and iOS devices. These ports are significantly different from the original computer version in that, in all of them except the Xbox 360 port (as of fall 2014), the gameworlds, through procedurally-generated and therefore unique, are not infinite in extension. I discuss spatial infinity in chapter 3. The version of Minecraft I am dealing with is the PC/Mac, with its infinite worlds.

[22] Mojang declared Minecraft officially finished in 2011. This is a problematic statement given the continued updates, each of them automatically downloaded for free to every player's gaming device; many of them involve significant changes to the game world (the adding of new animals, new resources, etc).

Mojang was bought by Microsoft in the fall of 2014. Petersson and the other founding members of Mojang left the company, further complicating the already complicated question (as it is in terms of most computer games) of identifying the author or authors of the current version of Minecraft.

[23] Nitsche gives a workable definition of the sandbox video game in Video Game Spaces. Writing of the online virtual world Second Life, he explains that "The world functions like a giant sandbox that allows its inhabitants to form structures out of its rule system and already existent objects." Nitsche 171.

[24] I will explain procedural generation below.

In the game's default "survival" mode, monsters, known by *Minecraft* players as "mobs" (for "mobiles"), attack the player character at night or in the dark. The player — whose character is dropped into the game world without instructions of any kind — must figure out how to build a shelter and tools/weapons if s/he wishes to play without getting killed very quickly over and over (in chapter 3, I will give a demonstrative account of my first attempt to do these things). In "survival" the player is also given "health" and "hunger" bars and must eat by killing livestock for meat or figuring out another method for obtaining food. The game controls are somewhat counter-intuitive, especially to players used to being given instructions and those accustomed to the tutorials and story-based guidance provided immediately by many games, including Bethesda's RPGs. In "survival" mode, then, the game puts up an unusual and formidable level of resistance immediately — a resistance essential to the function and success of the engagement that makes it possible to read and comprehend the *texte fleuve*. The resistance offered by the lack of instructions is easily overcome by looking online for tutorials, crafting "recipes" (instructions for producing certain in-game objects by combining others), and so on – but even this requires an extra effort.
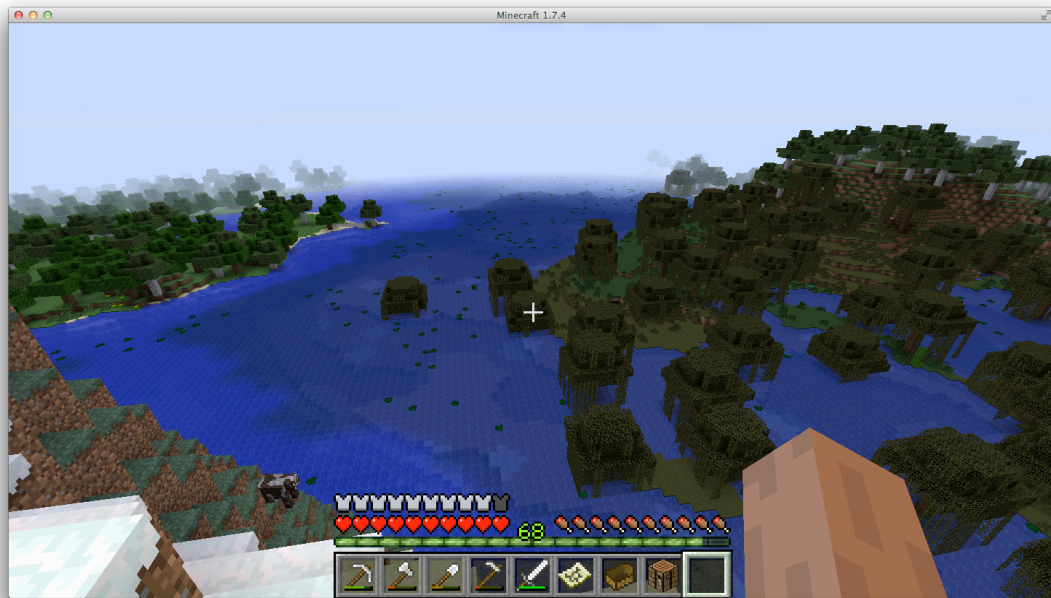
Fig. 1. A typical *Minecraft* landscape with a river and a jungle biome seen from a mountain. The oblong on the right is the player character's "hand"; other icons represent health, hunger, armor, and held items. Mojang AB, *Minecraft* 1.7.4.

The other primary game mode, "creative," allows the player complete control over the sandbox that is the game world; any blocks one wants can be created and placed wherever one wants (the PC can fly, for ease of block manipulation), and the monsters are gone. *Minecraft* is perhaps best known as a multi-player game and is often played with others online or in a LAN (local area network) setup; it can, however, just as easily be played by a single player, alone in the gameworld. As my focus is on the relationship between the individual reader of a *texte fleuve* and that work, I am going to limit myself to talking about *Minecraft* as a single-player game.

The most obvious way in which *Minecraft* qualifies as a *texte fleuve* is in its treatment of virtual space. Rather than featuring a single pre-designed game world like *Fallout 3* or Bethesda's *Elder Scrolls* games, in which the world is essentially the same from one player character to the next, *Minecraft,* unless told to produce a specific world, produces a new, pseudo-randomly generated world

each time the player creates a new game (in the sense of "game" as the state of the game world and the events that are associated with a specific player character and series of save files). This world is built of endless fragments, the blocks. Those fragments are as truly endless as is (currently) possible given the constraints of computer technology; *Minecraft* game worlds are effectively infinite in extension. When the player character is moved far enough in any given direction, the software generates a new part of the world (which it then remembers and to which the player can return). While, in theory, if a single game instance were played long enough, the software would eventually (and gradually) become incapable of rendering new space and storing it in the computer's memory, it would take a player more than a human lifetime to reach that point; *Minecraft* worlds are thus effectively limitless. On the level of code, this infinite extension is implemented via a technique called "procedural generation."

Procedural generation is a method of generating unique and enormous, indeed potentially never-ending, game world spaces. In procedural generation, a "seed" — a long number either generated by a software pseudorandom number generator or inputted by the player — is used by the game program to create, following the rules of the program's generative algorithm, new configurations of virtual objects and virtual space. In the case of *Minecraft*, the algorithm provides rules regarding what kind of 3D block should (generally) go where, so as to create recognizable ground, sky, oceans, and distinguishable "biomes," but at no point are there designers in the background placing blocks in specific places like there are in the creation of most games (including *Elder Scrolls* and *Fallout* games). No one designed the specific jungle biome in the screenshot above. Humans designed the algorithms that the software followed in producing this particular combination of different blocks (and designed the blocks themselves, at least in the sense that each block on the screen is a copy of a block designed by a human), but there was no immediate human agency at work in constructing this space. It is not "couture

content," as human-designed content is sometimes called. What's more, the landscape depicted here is unique — or, at least, while it is technically possible that another computer somewhere has at some point randomly hit on the particular "seed" involved in the generation of the world depicted, and that a player has played in a game world based on that seed in such a way as to happen across this exact bit of virtual landscape, the likelihood of such a thing is vanishingly small.[25] Given the sheer number of possible seeds, there is an overwhelming chance that in all the millions of *Minecraft* game instances that have existed since the game's alpha release in 2009, in all the moments human players have told the software to generate a world and then explored that world, this particular combination of blocks has never been generated, much less seen.

Minecraft has no pre-designed plot. There are no quests; the player's goals and motivations are set entirely by the player. There is no opening sequence narrating the history of the game world, and no cinematic cut scenes. There are NPCs of a sort in the form of the game's "mobs," including humanoid villagers with whom the player can trade resources, but none of them talk. In a single-player instance of the game in which there are no other avatars controlled by human players, there is very little written text and no written or spoken dialogue at all (trading with NPC villagers is done via minimalist pictures, the meaning of which is not immediately obvious, representing which resource the villager is offering in exchange for what). There is in fact nothing, at first glance, that is narrative in the first sense Genette gives of that word (a discourse that tells of an event or series of events) (see Genette 1980 26); *Minecraft*, unlike *Fallout 3* or *Skyrim* or other games with quest structures, at no point offers a *telling* of

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[25] A "spawn point" is a set point at which a player character generates, or "spawns," inside the geography of a game world either at the beginning of the game or after a virtual death. The spawn point is perhaps unusually important in *Minecraft* since, as the game does not provide any useful mapping functionality and new players tend to "die" (and be respawned) a lot, the player's spawn point is often the most reliable spatial referent available.

anything. What it does offer is a practically infinite space of potential evocative narrative elements — blocks, larger objects (both static and mobile), landscapes, constructions, sounds, and so on, all of which serve to allow the player to produce the sort of discourse Genette has in mind. *Minecraft* thus seems to embody particularly well Pearce's (ludologically inflected) conception of games when she writes that "[g]ames do not ask the player to construct or interpret what the author is trying to 'tell' them. Rather they function as a kit of parts that allows the player to construct their own story or variation thereof" (Pearce 147).

The above said, *Minecraft* does make some concessions to the encouragement of potential narrative, told by the player, of the second kind Genette describes – the succession of events that are the subject of narrative discourse. The game does this in terms of certain kinds of objects the program spawns in every game world and in, for instance, its hinting that the gameworld has a history prior to the PC's first spawning inside it.[26] On one level, the game world seems entirely devoid of the sense of history created by many spatial and textual elements in Bethesda's RPGs (ruined buildings and other set pieces, verbal exposition from NPCs, in-game books and audio recordings, et cetera). In *Minecraft*, the linguistic story elements of RPGs are replaced entirely by spacial elements that seem particularly likely to become evocative narrative elements for the player. In the course of exploring, the player might stumble across underground abandoned mineshafts, populated only by monsters but otherwise full of indications that they were once worked by someone (scaffolding, minecarts and mine cart railings, chests, etc). Some of these mineshafts involve "strongholds," stone structures that contain "libraries" (not of readable in-game books, as is the case in *Skyrim* libraries, but of blocks that look like book-filled shelves). Pyramids and other temple-like structures sometimes spawn in certain

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[26] Of course I don't mean that it actually *does* have a history; the gameworld is created by the software in a brief moment immediately before the PC first spawns inside it.

biomes, complete with treasures and what look like altars. Certain biomes contain "witch huts," empty treehouse-like structures with doors, windows, and potted plants in said windows. Villages and farms populated by voiceless villager "mobs" dot the landscape here and there. If a player wants to imagine a world with a human history, s/he has many elements with which to construct such a history, but once the evocative narrative element has been encountered, the entirety of that narrative construction rests on him/her.

There is also, notably, the "End" and the "Ender Dragon." At some point over the course of the development of *Minecraft*, Mojang seems to have felt compelled to inject *something* that smacked more clearly of the kind of quest-structured designer-produced narrative with which so many games are filled. The *Minecraft* game world was already split into two parts: the (for all practical purposes infinite) "overworld," which is the main site of player activity, and the "Nether," a hell-like cavernous underworld of darkness and molten lava. A third playable space was added: the "End," consisting of a stone island in an infinite expanse of void. It can only be reached if the player goes through a difficult, complicated and time-consuming process of mining and crafting. The End is populated most notably by the "Ender Dragon," the only unique "mob" in the game (once it is killed it does not respawn inside that game world). Killing the dragon triggers the on-screen scrolling of a long text (again, the only text of note seen in a single-player game), structured as a quasi-philosophical dialogue between two off-screen figures, about the nature of the player and his/her relationship to the universe. This is followed by the rolling of the credits... after which point the player can transport back to the "overworld" and continue playing as if nothing had happened. Thus, even "the End" fails to give the player anything like the structured quest of fragmented but linked bits of story provided by games such as *Fallout 3*. At no point is the player "given" a quest. In fact, the only real way to discover the existence of the End and the Ender Dragon is to do research

online or to read one of the many *Minecraft* user's guides available in bookstores.
Any impetus to treat the existence of the Ender Dragon as some sort of challenge
or quest hook must come from the player or from sources outside the game. If
anything, the existance of the almost comically-titled "End" only serves to subvert
the idea of any designer-offered narrative or narrative closure.

While *Fallout 3* with *Broken Steel* installed engages in the same sort of
subversion, it does provide the player who wants author-designed moments of
narrative closure with that closure in the form of the endings of quests; *Minecraft*,
on the other hand, only appears, in the thinnest possible way, to offer that closure.
In *Minecraft* we have thus fallen completely out of quest structure and into
something else; we have fallen out of any pre-designed *quest time*, which I will
generally refer to as episodic time, and more fully into what I will call "ceaseless
time," the endless present that constitutes the temporal "background" of the *texte
fleuve*. This brings me to my next chapter.[27]

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[27] For Frank, see Frank, Joseph. *The Idea of Spatial Form*. New Brunswick: Rutgers
University Press, 1991. I will discuss Frank's spatial form in the following chapter.

Chapter 2

Perpetual Time

1. Endlessness and fragmentation in the *texte fleuve*

What I refer to as "endlessness" is not only (in most cases) one of the most immediately obvious qualities of the *text fleuve*, but is one of its essential characteristics. As I wrote in Chapter 1, the *texte fleuve* is the text that — via formal, material, and narrative elements — operationalizes, embodies and performs the infinity, discussed (most notably) by Barthes and Derrida, at work in and between all texts. This process of operationalization occurs along three primary axes: endlessness in time and space, endlessness of potential recombinations (to be discussed in Chapter 3) and endlessness in the text's capacity to provoke and proliferate through response, and in its intertextual/circumtextual influence. Spatial and especially temporal endlessness are the focus of this chapter, and I will discuss interminability in the last chapter.

It may at first seem counter-intuitive to talk about "endlessness" in texts that have endings, whether material or narrative. Proust's *Recherche,* for example, despite a length (not just of total pages but of sentences and paragraphs) that can give the impression that the work is going on forever, has, at least if we respect conventions on how to read a book, a last line printed on a final page — a last line often followed (in the French at least) by the all-capitalized, decisive declaration-cum-exhortation "FIN." On a material level there is no question that *La Recherche* can be traversed in full from the first to the last page. Given the time and the inclination, any competent reader can read every word and "finish" the work in

the conventional sense of "finishing a book." Because of the particular nature of their embodiment as well as the reading conventions that assign the first page or word to the "beginning" and the final one to the "end," all print works — no matter what might be happening on the narrative or formal levels, no matter whether their author(s) "finished" writing them or not — have endings in the form of a last word on a last page. Though there are some exceptions (such as Raymond Queneau's *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* or the *I Ching,* hypertext-like combinatory works neither of which can be entirely traversed in a human lifetime), the vast majority of print texts can be read "in full" (on a material level, in the sense of perceiving every word and combination of words involved) by a reader with sufficient time and attention. Films and television series are possibly even more bounded in this way, in the sense that all such works have one or more endings in time; even if a tv show is still ongoing (new episodes are set to appear in the future, for example), any given episode has an ending, and even the longest video installation must come to an end. Besides all that, even if one takes up Barthes' conviction (discussed in Chapter 1) that "*la lecture, c'est ce qui ne s'arrête pas*" ("*reading is what does not stop*"), it seems clear that the physical act of reading itself — the time-bound consuming of the text via the senses — necessarily has an ending, if only at the moment of the reader's death (Barthes 4:172; emphasis his, translation mine).

All this said, it's clear that the material end point of a text and the temporal end point of the physical act of reading are by no means the text's only endings, or even its most important ones. When we speak informally of the endings of texts, we're at least as likely to mean the ending(s) of a narrative rather as we are the

last few words, the last image on the screen, or whatever else serves as the text's material ending. Most of the time, if someone asks me how, say, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* ends, it's safe to assume that s/he wants to know about Clarissa's party rather than hearing a recitation of "For there she was," the text's last line. And, of course, the concept of a narrative ending is often complicated. If I were asked that question about *Mrs. Dalloway*, I would include in my response the information that Septimus kills himself, even though the suicide takes place well before the end of the book; the death of a main character, marking the end of a major plotline, is too important an ending to leave out.

There are multiple endings in narratives of any length, just as there are many endings in our experience of the world. When engaging with narrative texts, just as when we engage with the world, we perceive narrative ends not simply because they're "there," but because, as Frank Kermode argues in *The Sense of an Ending*, ends are vital to our processes not just of comprehending the world and our place in it but of perceiving time and duration. The end, to Kermode, is *the* vital part of the "fictive concords" (or "concord fictions") he speaks of throughout his book, concords necessary for our comprehension of the world, concords "with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems" (7) — and, crucially, to our perception of time. "We can perceive a duration only when it is organized," Kermode writes; we need the end, a defining component of "what we call plot, an organization that humanizes time by giving it form," in order to perceive and make sense of time (45). Paul Ricoeur agrees when he takes up this idea in *Time and Narrative*, stating that "*time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode*" (Ricoeur 1:52; emphasis his). Time

without narrative is, to humans, incomprehensible chaos. "It is not that we are connoisseurs of chaos," writes Kermode, "but that we are surrounded by it, and equipped for coexistence with it only by our fictive powers," meaning our capacity to construct concord fictions, narratives with beginnings and ends (64).

Discussing the human need for the end, Kermode writes that "[w]hen we survive, we make little images of moments that have *seemed like* ends; we thrive on epochs" (7; emphasis mine). Having just speculated that all fictional ends may be figures for our own deaths, he goes on to write, regarding our fascination with the epoch, that "…our interest in it reflects our deep need for intelligible Ends. We project ourselves … past the End, so as to see the structure whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot of time in the middle" (8). He is referring to the Apocalypse (hence the capital E), but he's also saying something important about all ends. We perceive ends — which can simply be things that have *seemed* like ends — and thereby create "epochs" (spans of intelligible narrated time) in order to comprehend time. This perception/creation of ends is a part of the narrative process that, as Kermode and Ricoeur would both put it, humanizes time. Simultaneously, we travel past those ends either simply by continuing to live or by imagining a final ending (death, Apocalypse) and, indeed, projecting ourselves past it. Following Kermode, I suggest that, in one way or another, we *always* project ourselves past an imagined e/End. It seems true enough that we are all incapable of really imagining death, our own final ending. As Kermode writes, "the final end, death, is something else that cannot be faced in its inhuman coarseness … your own death lies hidden from you" (160-161).

Following Kermode's thought on our self-projection past the End, I go forward on the assumption that there is a sense in which, in our perceptions, not only are *we* endless, but also that *no* end is completely final to us, comprehensible as well and truly final, even if our lives have included experiences of destruction, of the deaths of others, that have confronted us with the fact of final endings. In other words, our existence is one that is at the same time rife with continual endings (of our and others' lives, of states of being, of stories), governed by the inevitability of our own (incomprehensible) End, and governed as well by a kind of endlessness. Sigmund Freud, after all, famously wrote in "The Unconscious" that the unconscious knows no time. Just as we exist with both ends and endlessness when we are not reading (or playing or watching or otherwise engaging with artistic phenomena), the texts that we create and perceive contain both endings and the endless; the *texte fleuve* is the text of greatest or most obvious endlessness.

The endlessness of the *texte fleuve* is not (or not simply) a smooth, unified continuation in time and/or space; it is also fragmented. The *texte fleuve* presents us with a shattered (and shattering) world, a world in fragments, a world built of fragments and falling back into them again. There are multiple endlessnesses in it, not simply one, because the *texte fleuve* is concerned with showing the multiple in the singular, and the singular in the multiple; as I will discuss below, it is a machine, among other things, for depicting and creating multiplicities which are folded up into singularities and concurrently blooming out into multiplicities. Nothing in it is fully two-dimensional. It is a network of fragments at the same time that it is a continuous flow; it juxtaposes the eternal, the infinite, with the

momentary, the instantaneous; it is the depiction, exploration and play of the flickering state, at once, of the many and the one, the container and the contained, the signifier and the signified.

In order to explore these ideas I turn first of all to the role of *perpetual time*, the concurrently episodic and continuous temporality of the *texte fleuve*.

2. Perpetual time

Ceaseless time: the eternal present and the time of narration

What I call *perpetual time* is the dominant order of time of the *texte fleuve*. There are two primary aspects of perpetual time: first, *ceaseless time* or *ceaselessness*, the endless temporality upon which the second aspect depends and within which it operates. This second aspect is *episodic time* or *the episodic* — the bounded, narrative time of beginnings and ends, of story, of action, of quest. I will first discuss ceaselessness, the background time of the *texte fleuve*. It is the time of depiction and description; the time, inextricably tied with space, from which is pulled the narrative, humanized time that is the episodic. It is the time that runs throughout, eternally, endlessly, with no full stop other than the death of the reader or the material destruction of the text. It is the *fleuve*, the river, but a *fleuve* of infinite duration, without banks or boundaries. It is the eternal present, the present M.M. Bakhtin calls "the incomplete process of a world-in-the-making" (Bakhtin 30).

In his "Epic and Novel," Bakhtin defines the time of the epic as closed, circular, conclusive, and finished, distant from any contact with present reality. He contrasts this with the time of the novel — itself a "new way of conceptualizing time" — which is "structured not in the distanced image of the absolute past but in the zone of direct contact with inconclusive present-day reality" (Bakhtin 38-39).

The novel, Bakhtin writes, is the genre that touches contemporaneity, the genre that "comes into contact with the spontaneity of the inconclusive present" (Bakhtin 27); it is a product of the gradual valorization, over the course of Western literary history, of the artistic representation of "'life without beginning or end'," of a "contemporaneity [that is] flowing and transitory, 'low,' present" (Bakhtin 20). To Bakhtin, "the present is something transitory, it is flow, it is an eternal continuation without beginning or end; it is denied an authentic conclusiveness," and this, he argues, led the ancient Greeks to believe that it also lacked an essence and was thus inappropriate to the "high" forms of art such as epic and tragedy (Bakhtin 20). Later in the essay Bakhtin elaborates that

> the present, in its so-called "wholeness" (although it is, of course, never whole) is in essence and in principle inconclusive; by its very nature it demands continuation. It moves into the future, and the more actively and consciously it moves into the future the more tangible and indispensable its inconclusiveness becomes. […] For the first time in artistic-ideological consciousness, time and all the world become historical: they unfold, albeit at first still unclearly and confusedly, as becoming, as an uninterrupted movement into a real future, as a unified, all-embracing and unconcluded process. (Bakhtin 30)

The novel, then, is a representation of and contact with this present moving continuously into the future, only making clearer its inconclusiveness as it moves. "Determined by experience, knowledge and practice (the future)," that future into which it continuously moves towards an ever-receding conclusion, the novel is "the genre of becoming" (Bakhtin 22).

No matter the medium or genre (or configurations of media/genres) in which a given *texte fleuve* exists, the ceaseless time of the *texte fleuve* is essentially Bakhtin's time of the novel. Ceaselessness is not simply perpetual time, but more precisely the perpetual present. It is a time that articulation through

narrative (the domain of the episodic) has not yet humanized in Ricoeur and Kermode's sense of time as something that is humanized by narrative. As perpetual present, ceaselessness is not a narrative temporality, though it is the site of narrative and is what becomes narrative; it is, indeed, the present of *narration*. Ricoeur discusses the present of narration in *Time and Narrative*:

> as the author of some discourse, the narrator in fact determines a present — the present of narration — which is just as fictive as the instance of discourse constituting the narrative utterance. … characters unfold their own time in the fiction, a time that includes a past, present, and future — even quasi-present — as they shift their temporal axis in the course of the fiction. It is this fictive present that we attribute to the fictive author of the discourse, to the narrator. (Ricoeur 2:98)

The concept of ceaselessness I wish to delineate touches on both Bakhtin's conception of the novel's relation to the eternal present and Ricoeur's identification of a text-suffusing present that is the present of narration: the overlap of these two elements in a text is ceaseless time. Ceaselessness in the *texte fleuve* then, is an eternally flowing, inconclusive, ever-moving present of narration, an endless present in which exists the potential for other times (like those of the characters Ricoeur mentions), times which can be unfolded and become narrative — become moments or fragments of narrative time, of the *episodic* — via the act of narrating. This episodic time is the second aspect of perpetual time.

Episodic time: the narrated fragment

Episodic time in the *texte fleuve* exists entwined with the endless "background" time of ceaselessness. Episodic time emerges from ceaseless time, is pulled from ceaseless time by the narrator and the reader in the reader's

perception and organization of ceaselessness (which is the domain of the chaos Kermode speaks of, the incomprehensible endless time of the world that we need to arrange into comprehensible durations). The organization of ceaselessness produces a length of coherent time with a beginning and an end — an episode, a moment of set duration within ceaseless time.[28] The episodic is thus the time of boundaries in the *texte fleuve*. Given that it is bounded time while ceaselessness is the eternal present, the episodic is also the primary time of what is narrative in the *texte fleuve*; it is the time of plot, or of comprehensible story. Relatedly, it is also the time of *doing* (perhaps most spectacularly in the video game, where the reader/player's role as co-narrator is expressed -- literally played out -- through physical action using the keyboard or controller; as Alexander Galloway writes, "*video games are actions* … they exist when enacted" [Galloway 2]). Where ceaseless time is the time of description or depiction, and the temporal site of potential narrative, episodic time is the time of action, of event, of the actualization of that potential narrative. It is ceaseless time organized, and therefore humanized, by a beginning and an end.

Despite the narrative aspect of a given unit of episodic time and the sequentiality of many episodes, and in contrast to what may seem like a linear element in the ceaseless, the *texte fleuve*'s episodic time is not inherently or neatly linear. As I wrote above, the *texte fleuve* depicts a universe in fragments, a world built from a multiplicity of crumbs of time and space and, in some cases (like Proust's), of subjectivity. These fragments are essentially bounded (in space, in time, in character), but still interact with each other; they are networked and/or juxtaposed with other fragments, swarming with them, clustered, or folded up

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[28] To clarify: I am not using "duration" here in the same was that Gérard Genette uses it (to indicate the length of time required by the reader to traverse the work). I am primarily referring to a length of time, defined by a beginning and an end in its narration, experienced by a character (or the narrator). This can coincide with duration in Genette's sense, especially in video games, where the time of the player character is so closely entwined with that of the player.

together in such a way as to form a singularity out of a multiplicity. As I will discuss at greater length in chapter 3, the *texte fleuve* is a sort of *combinatoire*, combining and recombining, and permitting *us* to combine and recombine, the aforementioned fragments into different configurations. Italo Calvino, himself a writer of *combinatoire* novels, writes in "Multiplicity" (the sixth of his *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*) that "[modern and postmodern] literature is attempting to realize the ancient desire to represent the multiplicity of relationships, both in effect and in potentiality" (112). The *texte fleuve*, regardless of its medium, is part of this effort (and this is a way in which *textes fleuves* which are not print novels are still novelized, in Bakhtin's sense of that word).

In any case, in the temporal, narrative realm, the fragments that make up the network, that are being enfolded and (to some extent) synthesized by it and by us — by our reading and playing of and with it — are narrative episodes: moments of episodic time. In order to show and discuss the workings of perpetual time in the *texte fleuve*, I turn now to Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* before going on to *Skyrim*.

3. "Cette notion du temps incorporé" ("this notion of an incorporated time"): Perpetual time in *À la Recherche du temps perdu*

It is for good reason that Marcel Proust's *À la Recherche du temps perdu*, the most famous example of what is referred to in French as a *roman fleuve* ("river novel"), led me to use the term *texte fleuve*. Proust's immensely long work imparts that sense of endlessness from the moment one takes note of its multiple volumes and thousands of pages. Reading any part of it reveals its exhaustive descriptions and ruminations, its countless narrative tangents, its paragraphs that go on for pages without a break, its "chapters" comprised of hundreds of pages, and, of course, Proust's style — what Walter Benjamin evocatively calls Proust's "syntax of boundless sentences (the Nile of language, which here overflows and

fructifies the plains of truth)" (Benjamin "On the Image of Proust" 237). I argue

that it is not just Proust's sentences that are (figuratively) boundless, but that *La

Recherche* itself is rendered (literally) endless — the infinitude of its being as text

is reified, made perceptible, pulled into the open — by the infinite loop that is its

narrative structure, in which the text's end is also its beginning, and by the mixing

(sometimes synthesis) of times with which Proust depicts the multiple in the one,

the eternal as a plurality of times enfolded in the single moment.

Time in the *Recherche* is not just lost, elusive, vague. It is fluid, mutable,

multiple, prone to folding onto itself, fond of flashing forward and back,

disrespectful of any notion of temporal linearity. Perhaps above all, it is iterative

— Genette has written of Proust's "intoxication with the iterative" — and it is also

circular (Genette *ND* 123). "La spirale fermée" ("the closed spiral"), Julia

Kristeva has called *La Recherche* (Kristeva 14); Ricoeur terms it a "cycle," "an

ellipse" organized around the foci of *Du Côté de chez Swann* and *Le Temps

retrouvé* (Ricoeur 2:132). As analogies, these closed, curved figures are

appropriate. Despite the hero's more or less linear progression from childhood to

middle age (if one can really call "linear" a disjointed progression characterized

by continual prolepses and analepses) and despite the work's functioning as what

Ricoeur, Gilles Deleuze, and Georges Poulet (among others) identify as a quest

narrative, *La Recherche* is a loop (see Ricoeur 2:131, Deleuze *PS* 10, Poulet 11).

It has an end of sorts, to be sure, but "its end," to quote Genette, is one "*which is

also its origin*" (Genette *ND* 226, emphasis his); Edward Said, speaking of the

same "end," writes that in it *La Recherche* "is beginning itself: it begins, and it is

the beginning" (Said 246). If the time of the novel's narrative progression is a

linear thing at all, that thing is not a fixed line, not a ruler, but a loop, a rubber

band, a piece of string. This loop is an infinite one, a sort of narrative Möbius strip

forever curving back on itself; it is one of the reasons that at the end of *Le Temps*

retrouvé, just before the text circles back to its beginning, we find, to steal a phrase from Ricoeur, "the hero converted to eternity" (Ricoeur 2:142).

La Recherche's narrative loop is drawn by the relationship between one of the earliest scenes of the work (specifically the second, starting about six pages into *Du côté de chez Swann*) — the "drama of going to bed" of "Combray I" — and the last scene of the work, the Guermantes matinée that ends *Le Temps retrouvé*.[29] The matinée scene is the moment when the infinite begins to inscribe itself into that loop, when the text circles back to its beginning by tying the last scene to the beginning of the work, overlapping and intermingling them, welding them together. Marcel, while mulling over the vicissitudes of memory and the nature of literature after experiencing a series of episodes of *mémoire involontaire* on his way in to the Guermantes' party, suddenly reaches the end of the quest that is the search for his vocation when he realizes not only that he's about to embark on a great work (that is more or less the work we are reading) but also starts figuring out the content and form of that work.[30] This revelation of the vocation is in itself part of what drives the circling of the text, since up to this point we've been largely — though not entirely — unaware that Marcel is involved in such a quest. Ricoeur calls Marcel's revelation of the work to come "the sudden illumination that retrospectively transforms the entire narrative into the invisible history of a vocation," a transformation in our conception of the work which is almost its own demand for a re-reading; as Ricoeur continues, "the originality of *Remembrance* lies in its having concealed both the problem and its solution up to the end of the hero's course, thus keeping for a second reading the intelligibility of

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[29] I use the word "last" here to refer to the scene's material location in the text, and to acknowledge the likelihood that few readers will immediately follow the loop by re-reading the text.

[30] I should note that, while the narrator is the future self of the hero in this work, they never overlap in the narrative, and thus I want to distinguish them from each other. Any reference to "Marcel" is a reference to the hero; the narrator is always "the narrator." I also consider the narrator entirely distinct from Proust, the author; the narrator is, in terms of my analysis, a fictive construct.

the work as a whole" (Ricoeur 2:131-132). Ricoeur is not alone in noting this aspect of a kind of forced re-reading; Jean-Yves Tadié had already written in *Proust et le roman* that "le 'plan secret' de la *Recherche* n'apparaîtra-t-il pas pleinement qu'a la fin, imposant au lecteur un gigantesque regard rétrospectif, une lecture toujours seconde" ("the 'secret plan' of the *Recherche* will not appear in full until the end, imposing upon the reader a gigantic retrospective view, an always second reading") (Tadié 239, translation mine).

In conjunction with this revelation of his vocation, right before the final page of the novel Marcel is overcome by a sort of aftershock-memory triggered by his ruminations on the work to come and its relation to a particularly striking moment of *mémoire involontaire* he experienced an hour or so (and over a hundred pages) beforehand upon coming across a copy in the Guermantes' library of George Sand's *François le Champi*. This is the book his mother had read to him the fateful night of the "drama of going to bed," the night when, thinks the now much older Marcel, "tout c'était décidé" ("everything had been decided") (Proust 2:1560, translation mine); his life, and now (he realizes) his great work, had gained their form.[31] In this final ("final") moment of *La Recherche*, he finds himself once again remembering that moment long before (many years and roughly three thousand pages in the past) when he had waited up for his mother's goodnight kiss and she had, to his initial delight and soon to his chagrin, come to him to give it, before consenting to spending the night in his room. The memory is so vivid that, as in a moment of *mémoire involontaire* (a moment of which, indeed, this memory is the continuation), he experiences the past juxtaposed with the present, the two times intermingling so thoroughly that the time and space of his childhood room in Combray meld with the time and space of the Guermantes'

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[31] I note that all Proust citations in this dissertation refer to the two-volume Omnibus edition of 2011, published by Gallimard, rather than to the Pléiade edition. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from *In Search of Lost Time,* D. J.

hôtel particulier (a space he has already identified as "[un de] ces lieux …
perméables pour le passé" — "one of those spaces permeable by the past" —
permeability being an aspect of Proustian space that I will discuss in part V below
[Proust 2:1392, translation mine])*:*

> Si c'était cette notion du temps incorporé, des années passées non séparées
> de nous, que j'avais maintenant l'intention de mettre si fort en relief, c'est
> qu'à ce moment même, dans l'hôtel du prince de Guermantes, ce bruit de
> pas de mes parents reconduisant M. Swann, ce tintement rebondissant,
> ferrugineux, intarissable, criard et frais de la petite sonnette qui
> m'annonçait qu'enfin M. Swann était parti et que maman allait monter, je
> les entendis encore, je les entendis eux-mêmes, eux situés pourtant si loin
> dans le passé (Proust 2:1562).[32]

The narrator emphasizes that Marcel doesn't just hear an *echo*, a *memory* of the
sound of his parents' footsteps and of the little bell; he hears them "eux-même,"
themselves, despite their being located "so far in the past." That past is reified,
brought back to life with hallucinatory realness, in this moment of awareness of
the "incorporated time" the concept of which was so dear to Proust. Proust's
narrator emphasizes the vivid realness of this memory, or rather of this mixture of
times, by re-using three of the same striking adjectives he employed for the sound
of the same bell in *Du Côté de chez Swann*: "nous entendions … le grelot profus
et *criard* qui [nous] arrosait … de son bruit *ferrugineux, intarissable…*" ("we
heard … the *shrill* and profuse little bell, which was showering us … with its

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Enright's revision of Terence Kilmartin's reworking of C. K. Scott Moncrieff's
translation, *Time Regained*.

[32] "This notion of Time embodied, of years past but not separated from us, it was now
my intention to emphasise as strongly as possible in my work. And at this very moment,
in the house of the Prince de Guermantes, as though to strengthen me in my resolve, the
noise of my parents' footsteps as the accompanied M. Swann to the door and the peal --
resilient, ferruginous, interminable, fresh and shrill -- of the bell on the garden gate which
informed me that at last he had gone and that Maman would presently come upstairs,
these sounds rang again in my ears, yes, unmistakably I heard these very sounds, situated
though they were in a remote past." (Enright 6:529).

ferruginous, interminable sound") (Proust 1:20; emphasis and translation mine).

While the past and the present regularly overlap for Marcel (and for the narrative

itself) during the course of the *Recherche*, and the episodes of *mémoire*

involontaire in particular typically involve a similar reification of the past, this

particular overlapping and combination of the present and the past at the very end

of *Le Temps retrouvé* constitutes the place in the narrative loop where the past

begins to take over, preparing to once again become the present of the narrating.

This is the place where the hero, as Genette tells us, "*is beginning to become* the

narrator" who will, in the hero's future, write the work we have just read (Genette

ND 226; emphasis his). In this work, Marcel — having become the narrator —

will write himself back into his own childhood, into his nightshirt, standing by the

window watching his parents and hoping.

The last scene of the *Recherche*, in the looping together of the "beginning"

and the "end" of the narrative, is a sort of *spawn point* for Marcel.[33] The little boy

that Marcel once was is coming back to life inside him, preparing to supplant him

once the indeterminate, largely (but not entirely) unnarrated time of the writing is

finished, after the last line and the "FIN" (printed in certain editions) that at first

glance seem to close the text. Indeed, that little boy began to replace the older

Marcel at the beginning of the matinée scene, in the moment of Marcel's taking

François le champi down from the library shelves — but, we are told by that later

Marcel that is the narrator, the child has also replaced him in every subsequent

moment of remembrance of Sand's book, moments that have to have occurred in

the ghostly, elusive time that has passed for the narrator since he was the Marcel

of the "end" of the novel: "…si je reprends, même par la pensée, dans la

bibliothèque, *François le Champi*, immédiatement en moi un enfant se lève qui

prend ma place, qui seul a le droit de lire ce titre: *François le Champi*…" ("… if,

even in thought, I take up again from the library *François le Champi*, immediately a child rises in me who takes my place, who alone has the right to read that title: *Francois le Champi…*") (Proust 2:1403; translation mine).

This is not the first time in the text that Marcel has been invaded and replaced by another version of himself. In every other instance, however, the replacement is only temporary, since in those instances, the past Marcel who invades has no way of surviving, has no future. Much earlier in the novel, in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, Marcel is in Balbec alone when suddenly, in a flash of *mémoire involontaire*, he remembers the face of his grandmother years before as she leaned over him to unlace his shoes on the first night of their arrival in the same hotel. Instantaneously, he truly realizes (as if learning of it for the first time) that his grandmother is dead, and is overwhelmed by the grief he had not yet experienced. In that moment of remembrance and agony, he once again becomes the Marcel of the past that has suddenly arisen, who experienced the moment that has just come back to the "present" Marcel's consciousness. Speaking of "nos douleurs," our experiences of pain and grief, the narrator writes:

> …si le cadre de sensations où [nos douleurs] sont conservées est ressaisi, elles ont à leur tour ce même pouvoir *d'expulser tout ce qui leur est incompatible, d'installer seul en nous, le moi qui les vécut*. Or, comme celui que je venais subitement de redevenir n'avait pas existé depuis ce soir lointain où ma grand'mère m'avait déshabillé à mon arrivée à Balbec, ce fut tout naturellement, non pas après la journée actuelle que ce moi ignorait mais — comme s'il y avait dans le temps des séries différentes et parallèles — *sans solution de continuité*, tout de suite après le premier soir d'autrefois, que j'adhérai à la minute où ma grand'mère s'était penchée vers moi… Je n'étais plus que cet être qui cherchait à se réfugier dans les

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[33] The reference is to a point in the space of a video game world where a PC is "spawned" or "respawned," meaning brought (or brought back) to "life" when first

bras de sa grand'mère … cet être que j'aurais eu, à me figurer, quand

j'étais tel ou tel de ceux qui s'étaient associés en moi depuis quelques

temps, autant de difficulté que maintenant il m'eût fallu d'efforts, stériles

d'ailleurs, pour ressentir les désirs et les joies de *l'un de ceux que, pour un*

temps du moins, je n'étais plus. (Proust 2:163; emphasis mine)[34]

Marcel has been "expelled" from himself so that his past self may "install" itself

in him. That self is so removed from his present that, he tells us, he is no longer

linked to the day he's just spent in that present; instead, he's attached to the

moment conjured by involuntary memory, with no way to continue forward in the

"different and parallel" time in which he now finds himself. Though the narrator,

in the final line of this passage, seems to be saying that Marcel cannot pull away

from the past self back to the present self, the next line is clearly the "present"

Marcel, the hero, remembering: "Je me rappelais comme, une heure avant le

moment où ma grand'mère s'était penchée ainsi dans sa robe de chambre vers mes

bottines … j'avais cru que je ne pourrais jamais … attendre l'heure qu'il me fallait

encore passer sans elle" (Proust 2:163)[35]; it seems to be the full realization of the

death of his grandmother and of his grief at the loss that in turn expels Marcel out

of this parallel time and back into his present.

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introduced to the world or after being "killed."

[34] "…if the context of sensations in which [our sufferings] are preserved is recaptured, they acquire in turn the same power of *expelling everything that is incompatible with them, of installing alone in us the self that originally lived them*. Now, inasmuch as the self that I had just suddenly become once again had not existed since that evening long ago when my grandmother had undressed me after my arrival at Balbec, it was quite naturally, not at the end of the day that had just passed, of which that self knew nothing, but -- as Though time were to consist of a series of different and parallel lines -- *without any solution of continuity*, immediately after the first evening at Balbec long ago, that I clung to the minute in which my grandmother had stooped over me. ... I was now solely the person who had sought a refuge in his grandmother's arms ... that person whom I should have had as much difficulty in imagining when I was one or other of those that for some time past I had successively been as now I should have had in making the sterile effort to experience the desires and joys of *one of those that for a time at least I no longer was*" (Enright 4:212-213; emphasis mine).

[35] "I remembered how, an hour before the moment when my grandmother had stooped in her dressing gown to unfasten my boots ... I had felt that I could never ... live through the hour that I had yet to spend without her" (Enright 213).

The coring of Marcel's present self, the sudden hollowing that allows that present self to be violently invaded by a past subjectivity, is often tied to death. There is a similar moment in one of the most striking passages in the novel, early in *La Fugitive*, the penultimate volume. This moment is not an instance of *mémoire involontaire* — or, at least, is not identified by the narrator as such — but the violence exerted by memory in this scene is as extreme as if it were. After Albertine's death, during the period of Marcel's most intense grief, he lies in bed unable to stop being assaulted by an artillery-like barrage of memories of her: "…je me détournais violemment, sous la décharge douloureuse d'un des mille souvenirs invisibles qui à tout moment éclataient autour de moi dans l'ombre" ("…I turned violently away under the painful discharge of one of a thousand invisible memories which at all times exploded around me in the dimness") (Proust 2:996; translation mine).[36] Marcel keeps getting caught in memories of his time with Albertine, trying to move forward into a future that includes her and then being jarred out of it by the fact of her death, which has killed that future; "Toute ma vie à venir se trouvait arrachée de mon coeur," the narrator has already told us, a couple of pages before ("all of my life to come found itself ripped away from my heart") (Proust 2:994, translation mine). The passage starts out (unusually for *La Recherche*) told in the imperfect past tense before switching to the present tense in the middle of a sentence composed of clauses attached only by commas; this mid-sentence switching from past to present heightens the immediacy, the swiftness, the violence of these cycles of being submerged in memory and then jerked out of it: "Demain, après demain, c'était un avenir de vie commune, peut-être pour toujours, qui commence, mon coeur s'élance vers lui,

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[36] Samuel Beckett, in his 1930 study of the novel, wrote of *mémoire involontaire* that it was "explosive," and it seems to me that this passage could productively be treated as the depiction of an assault on Marcel by fragments of *mémoire involontaire* that are not explicitly identified as such (see Beckett 44).

mais il n'est plus là, Albertine est morte" (Proust 2:997).[37] And, a few lines later, in the next paragraph (this time entirely in the imperfect, emphasizing the transition back into the present self that remembers):

> …dans ma mémoire au bout d'une route que nous prenions ensemble pour rentrer, j'apercevais, plus loin que le dernier village, comme une station distante, inaccessible pour le soir même où nous nous arrêterions à Balbec, toujours ensemble. Ensemble alors, maintenant il fallait s'arrêter court devant ce même abîme, elle était morte. (Proust 2:997)[38]

I suggest that what creates the dead ends in these two moments of being temporarily caught in the past, when there is no such dead end in the final pages of *Le Temps retrouvé*, is the fact that the death involved is the death of another, of a loved one, rather than the death of Marcel. While the Marcel of the Guermantes matinée is worried about the possibility (even probability) that his own death will put an end to his ambition to complete his great work, that death not only hasn't happened yet but, being Marcel's own, is endlessly deferrable via his re-inscription of himself (a fictional character) into a cyclical fiction. His subjectivity at the end of *Le Temps retrouvé* is being hollowed out by the presence of death, invaded (if more slowly than in the aforementioned passages), but this time the past self that is replacing him is without dead end, has a future, because that future is *him* — and he's about to start writing himself into a loop. In fact, given that the narrator is his future self, he *already has*. Paradoxically, he can continue past his own death *because* it is his own. He could not save his grandmother or Albertine by remembering them; all he could do was suffer and, gradually, lose the grief that proves itself capable of bringing his dead back to life inside his remembering

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[37] "Tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, it was a prospect of a life shared, perhaps forever, that is beginning; my heart springs towards it, but it is no longer there, Albertine is dead." (translation mine)

[38] "... in my memory, at the end of a road that we had taken together to come home, I saw, beyond the last village, something like a distant station, inacessible that very

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self. Now, however, having decided to let the little boy associated with *François le Champi* overtake him, he can save himself — if an eternal return to a life constantly barraged by the shells of memory can be said to be a salvation.

The loop I laid out above is one that exists in and defines a more or less linear aspect of this text taken as a narrative whole. However, despite what can be seen (more retroactively than anything else) as a relatively coherent (if tangent-filled) progression from an early period to a late period of one man's life — the progression that makes it possible for the text to act as a quest narrative — *La Recherche* is anything but a "linear text."[39] In terms of its narrative structure as well as its depictions of time, space, and subjectivity, this text jumps, flashes back and forth, mixes things up. Instead of presenting us with a unified narrative flow, a neat sequence of events in which one thing follows another in linear chronological order, the text gives us a deeply fragmented, sometimes almost kaleidoscopic narrative characterized by constant anachronies. This is a narrative in which events are regularly recounted out of any kind of chronological order, and the narratives of which are constantly interrupted and intercut (by and with other events or references to those events, even when those events haven't yet taken place; tangential ruminations and descriptions; associations; etc.)[40] The overall chronology, while roughly linear, is hard (often impossible) to follow with any precision; Genette writes that "on a first reading the difficulty of this text comes from the apparently systematic way in which Proust eliminates the most elementary temporal indicators (once, now), so that the reader must supply them

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evening, when we would stop, still together, at Balbec. Still together then, but now one had to stop short before this same abyss; she was dead" (translation mine).

[39] Here I'm taking up again, briefly, the designation Aarseth uses in attempting to sketch a categorical difference between print works and electronic works like hypertexts and games (see chapter 1).

[40] Genette, in *Narrative Discourse*, writes that "in its main articulations, the continuation of the *Recherche* was arranged in conformity with chronological order, but

himself in order to know where he is" (*ND* 38-39). Barthes, in "'Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure,'" goes so far as to say that the disorganization of time is the basis for this work: "l'oeuvre… repose sur un principe provocant: la *désorganisation* du Temps (de la chronologie)" ("the work … rests on a provocative principle: the *disorganization* of Time (of chronology)" [Barthes 5:463; emphasis his, translation mine]).

What's more, the narrative contains plenty of lapses, of lacunae. Marcel's unnarrated and unsummarized military service, and his equally passed-over years in a sanitarium (both mentioned in passing in *Le Temps retrouvé*), constitute just two of the most notable of many examples. The world of this text, like the worlds produced by all *textes fleuves*, is a world in fragments. To Deleuze, in Proust "le monde est devenu miettes et chaos" ("the world has become crumbs and chaos") (*Proust et les signes* 134, translation mine). Deleuze goes on to discuss "la disparité, l'incommensurabilité, l'émiettement des parties de la Recherche [sic], avec les ruptures, hiatus, lacunes, intermittences qui en garantissent l'ultime diversité" ("the disparity, the incommensurability, the crumbling of the parts of *La Recherche*, with the ruptures, hiatus, lacunaes, intermittences which guarantee its ultimate diversity") (*PS* 140, translation mine). To Barthes, "la structure de cette oeuvre [est], à proprement parler, rhapsodique, c'est à dire (étymologiquement) *cousue* … l'oeuvre se fait comme une robe …: des pièces, des morceaux sont soumis à des croisements, des arrangements, des rappels" ("the structure of this work is, properly speaking, rhapsodic, which is to say (etymologically) *sewn*… the work is made like a dress… : pieces, parts of it are subject to crossings, to arrangements, to recalls" [Barthes 5:463; translation mine]). A drawback of the terms *roman fleuve* and *texte fleuve* is that, in their conjuring of rivers, of an eternal flowing, they get across the linear endlessness but do not properly express

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this general course does not exclude the presence of a great many anachronies in small points" (47).

the non-linear, fragmented characteristics of Proustian narrative; as Richard Terdiman writes, in *La Recherche* "Proust thinks by blocks, by tableaux, not by flow" (*DI* 152). So, in terms of the temporal scheme I am laying out, what about the fragmented, non-linear aspects that so dominate the text's depiction and deployment of time, and our experience of that time?

La Recherche, like all *textes fleuves*, is a sort of vast *combinatoire*, a combinatory text, an instrument for combination. "La Recherche [sic] est une machine," Deleuze writes in *Proust et les signes* ("*La Recherche* is a machine") (175, translation mine). Proust's work — like, according to Deleuze, all works of modern art — is specifically a machine for producing truths: "l'oeuvre d'art ainsi comprise [comme machine] est essentiellement productrice, productrice de certaines vérités" ("the work of art thusly understood is essentially productive, productive of certain truths") (*PS* 176, translation mine). Deleuze also writes at length of the work's theme of envelopment, of things being folded into other things. Taking up two images that Proust uses, Deleuze talks about elements of the book (subjectivities, names, times, places, etc) as "boxes or vases" that enfold or hold other elements (like Albertine holding in herself her multiple selves and the image of the sea at Balbec, or the Duchess de Guermantes' name enfolding all the other names, the places, the mysteries Marcel associates with it).[41] Taking my cue from Deleuze, I claim that *La Recherche* is also a machine for combining and recombining elements, for expressing multiplicities and potential multiplicities, and for folding together multiplicities — including the multiplicities that are us, its readers, which the narrator hopes the work will be able to fold into itself.

Of the machine that is *La Recherche*, Deleuze writes: "Télescope psychique pour une 'astronomie passionnée', la Recherche [sic] n'est pas seulement un instrument dont Proust se sert en même temps qu'il le fabrique.

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[41] See in particular "les boîtes et les vases," chapter II of part 2 of *Proust et les signes*. 140-157.

C'est un instrument pour les autres, et dont les autres doivent apprendre l'usage"
("A psychic telescope for an 'empassioned astronomy,' *La Recherche* … is not
only an instrument used by Proust at the same time that he is building it. It's an
instrument for others, and which others must learn to use.") (*PS* 174; translation
mine). Deleuze is referring to the following detail of the narrator's description of
what he wants his work to be, appearing in *Le Temps retrouvé* as Marcel muses
about his future readers:

> …ils ne seraient pas, selon moi, mes lecteurs, mais les propres lecteurs
> d'eux-mêmes, mon livre n'étant qu'une sorte de ces verres grossissants
> come ceux que tendait à un acheteur l'opticien de Combray; mon livre
> grâce auquel je leur fournirais le moyen de lire en eux-mêmes. De sorte
> que je ne leur demanderais pas de me louer ou de me dénigrer, mais
> seulement de me dire si c'est bien cela, si les mots qu'ils lisent en eux-
> mêmes sont bien ceux que j'ai écrits (les divergences possibles à cet égard
> ne devant pas du reste provenir toujours de ce que je me serais trompé,
> mais quelquefois de ce que les yeux du lecteur ne seraient pas de ceux à
> qui mon livre conviendrait pour bien lire en soi-même). (Proust 2:1548)[42]

The work, then, is meant — by Marcel and the narrator, at least — to act not just
as a tool for Marcel's own self-reflection, but also as a tool for the use of his
readers: a sort of magnifying glass for the examination of the book that is the self.
(This passage is a reference to and continuation of an earlier passage of the long
rumination on the nature of the work to come that Deleuze calls "la
systématisation finale," the "final systematization" of the novel [*PS* 178]. In the

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[42] "…according to me, they would not be my readers, but the readers of their own
selves, my book only being a kind of those magnifying lenses that the optician of
Combray held out to a buyer -- my book, thanks to which I would furnish them with the
means to read inside themselves. Therefore I would not ask them to praise me or
denigrate me, but only to tell me if it is like this, if the words that they read in themselves
are indeed those that I have written (the possible divergences in this regard not always
coming, in fact, from my making a mistake, but sometimes from the eyes of the reader

earlier passage, the narrator, expressing a more generalized notion of the act of reading and the role of books in the reader's self-examination, writes that "en réalité chaque lecteur est quand il lit le propre lecteur de soi-même. L'ouvrage de l'écrivain n'est qu'une espèce d'instrument optique qu'il offre au lecteur afin de lui permettre de discerner ce que, sans ce livre, il n'eût peut-être pas vu en soi-même" ["in reality each reader is, when he reads, the very reader of himself. The writer's work is but a sort of optical instrument that he offers to the reader in order to permit him to discern that which, without this book, he might not have seen in himself"] [Proust 2:1428; translation mine].)

The narrator thus goes from a general idea of the reader reading him/herself in a book, and of the book as a sort of magnifying glass or microscope (a tool, a machine for seeing the hidden), to a more specific notion of *this* book as such a machine. This machine, in the later, more specific passage, is conceived of not just as a machine for looking, for examining, but as a machine for writing the reader (or at least, those readers who have the right sort of "eyes" to use the text as a lens); the narrator wants us to tell him not just whether his words reflect a truth or a reality -- "si c'est bien cela" -- but whether the words we read in ourselves, thanks to this text, are those *he has written*. We are being written (and written on, written in) by the text, while we seek inside it for what we had been unable to see in ourselves without its help. This is essentially a desire to fold the reader up into the text — or, perhaps more precisely, a depiction or reflection not just of the reader-as-text, but of the reader as *this* text. What is shown here is not just a networked, intertextual relationship between the reader and the text, but an identification of the reader with the text, a fusing of the two — a folding up into one thing of a multiplicity of things that are related (since the different subjectivities of different readers are still similar enough that, while some readers

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not being of that kind my book would suit for successfully reading inside oneself)" (translation mine).

won't be able to "discern" well enough to use the text as Marcel would like, many other readers will find themselves in the text).

Thus the subjectivities not just of the novel's characters but also of the novel's readers are, or are imagined to be, combined by the text, multiplicities folded into singularities, in a process that happens in time (the time of the characters, the time of the reading). The same process takes place with time itself. The fragments of episodic time that make up the narrated time of the novel are scattered apart from each other — even episodes that deal with the same moment in time are sometimes extremely far apart (for instance, the bookending Combray episodes of *Swann* and *Le Temps retrouvé*, depicting the same scene). Laying out what he sees as the gradual slowing down of the pace of *La Recherche*'s narrative over the course of the work, Genette describes that narrative as "more and more discontinuous, syncopated, built of enormous scenes separated by immense gaps" (*ND* 93; I discuss the nature of these scenes below). The pasts resurrected by *mémoire involontaire* are almost always pasts that took place in periods narrated much earlier in the novel (the exception is the first instance of involuntary memory, the madeleine, which resurrects a past, Combray, some of the narrated episodes of which it precedes in the order of narration); the spontaneous recollection of the grandmother's face (mentioned above), for instance, refers to an event from the period narrated in *À L'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, a good eight hundred pages earlier. As Deleuze discusses, moments of *mémoire involontaire* are particularly striking as examples of times containing other times; in each case, a past (time, self, place) that had been enfolded in a perception — the taste of the madeleine in the tea, the feel of uneven cobblestones, the sound of a spoon hitting the side of a cup, and so on — blooms out of that sensation to invade the time, space, and subjectivity of the present Marcel.

There are relatively few episodes of *mémoire involontaire* in the *Recherche*, however; only seven or eight moments are identified as such by the

narrator, and Marcel's experience of them — with the exception of the madeleine

episode — is narrated relatively briefly. In the case of the uneven paving stones of

Le Temps retrouvé, for example, the narration of the experience of stepping on

them in the Guermantes' courtyard takes up about a page, and the narration of the

past moment that blooms from that experience is limited to a reference to that

moment's conjuring of "la sensation que j'avais ressentie jadis sur deux dalles

inégales du baptistère de Saint-Marc" ("the sensation which I had felt once upon a

time on two unequal cobblestones of the baptistry of Saint-Marc"), a phrase which

can easily be taken as part of the narration of the moment of remembering rather

than as narration of the past moment it recalls (Proust 2 1385; translation mine). In

other words, the moments of involuntary memory take up very little narrative

space in the novel. The great bulk of that space is taken up instead, as Genette

notes (above), by a small number of very long scenes or tableaux.

Apart from instances in which *mémoire involontaire* intervenes during one

of these tableaux, as is the case with the series of four episodes of involuntary

memory that occur during the Guermantes matinée (a scene roughly two hundred

pages long), the folding together of times in the context of the Proustian scene

does not involve an explicit description of another time invading and being

contained in the present. Rather, that temporal folding takes place on the level of

the narration itself, in a synthesis of habit (the repetition of past events or

processes) and of the unique incident that Terdiman calls the "synthetic mode."

As Terdiman shows in *The Dialectics of Isolation*, this synthetic mode dominates

the novel's narration; it is, as Terdiman states, "the primary mode of narrative in *À

la Recherche du temps perdu*" (*DI* 193).[43]

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[43] Deleuze argues that the enfolding process is not a synthesis, and that the fragments
— he calls them "crumbs" — that make up the *Recherche,* rather than constituting fully
synthesized unities, remain fragments even when they are enfolded or held by other
framgents (see for instance *Proust et les signes* 157: "…le temps, ultime interprète, a
l'étrange pouvoir d'affirmer simultanément des morceaux qui ne font pas un tout dans
l'espace" ["...time, the ultimate interpreter, has the strange power of simultaneously

The synthetic mode has to do with the synthesis, on the level of narration, of the habitual and the unique into a "synthetic image" in which survives the "internal variety of the material telescoped" into it (*DI* 188). This mixing can take place because of the function of the French *imparfait* (imperfect) tense (which has no direct equivalent in English), a past tense that "expresses through the same verb form both the durative (or progressive) and the iterative (or habitual) aspects of the verb" (Terdiman *DI* 194). The synthesis Proust achieves through manipulation of the imperfect creates a narrative situation existing in a sort of limbo between habit and single event. Since habit is essentially the repetition, or rather iteration, of the same past event or process, and its iterations create multiple variants of that event or process, the synthetic mode of narration also makes of the narrated scene — in my scheme, a moment of episodic time itself largely constituted (via synthetic narration) by moments of episodic time — a multiplicity folding into a singularity that is itself fanning out into a multiplicity.

Defining the synthetic mode, Terdiman writes:

What is narrated in [*La Recherche*] lies somewhere between the unique and the habitual, and seeks to seize not simply an instant, but a whole pattern of existence … [Proust's] narration strives to represent the 'eternal instant,' the essence of characteristic experience — but without blotting out the variety of the original events from which these essential meanings are synthesized. The effort to do this led Proust to the rather audacious solution of disguising habits as incidents, of casting the multiple as if it were individual. Proustian narration thus exists in a paralogical never-never land, neither completely one, nor explicitly many… (*DI* 185-186)

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affirming pieces which do not create a whole in space"; translation mine]). As I will argue below, the synthesis at work in the synthetic mode is not a neat, fully realized synthesis without tension, but is instead an enfolding concurrent with a folding back out.

One of Terdiman's examples — the example that, as he says, "recalls that *À la recherche du temps perdu* opens squarely in the synthetic mode" — is the opening of the novel, the first few lines of *Du côté de chez Swann* (*DI* 189-190):

> Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure. Parfois, à peine ma bougie éteinte, mes yeux se fermaient si vite que je n'avais pas le temps de me dire: 'Je m'endors.' Et une demi-heure àpres, la pensée qu'il était temps de chercher le sommeil m'éveillait; je voulais poser le volume que je croyais avoir dans les mains et souffler ma lumière; je n'avais pas cessé en dormant de faire des réflexions sur ce que je venais de lire, mais ces réflexions avaient pris un tour un peu particulier; il me semblait que j'étais moi-même ce dont parlait l'ouvrage: une église, un quatuor, la rivalité de François Ier et de Charles-Quint. Cette croyance survivait pendant quelques secondes à mon réveil; elle ne choquait pas ma raison, mais pesait comme des écailles sur mes yeux et les empêchait de se rendre compte que le bougeoir n'était plus allumé. Puis elle commençait à me devenir inintelligible… (Proust 1:9)[44]

Temporal strangeness — the fusion of vague, unspecified, multiple temporalities — is present from the very first line, which is also the first instance of the novel's folding a multiplicity into a singularity. Ricoeur writes that, in this first sentence, "the narrator's voice, speaking out of nowhere, evokes an earlier time that has no date, no place, a time that lacks an indication of distance in relation to the present of the utterance, an earlier time that is endlessly multiplied" (Ricoeur 2:135). The

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[44] "For a long time I would go to bed early. Sometimes, the candle barely out, my eyes closed so quickly that I did not have time to tell myself: 'I'm falling asleep.' And half an hour later the thought that it was time to look for sleep would awaken me; I would make as if to put away the book which I imagined was still in my hands, and to blow out the light; I had gone on thinking, while I was asleep, about what I had just been reading, but those thoughts had taken a rather peculiar turn; it seemed to me that I myself was the immediate subject of my book: a church, a quartet, the rivalry between François I and Charles V. This impression would persist for some moments after I awoke; it did not offend my reason, but lay like scales upon my eyes and prevented them from registering

sentence is not in the imperfect, but has an effect, I argue, very similar to that which the imperfect allows in synthetic narration; it is clearly in the synthetic mode. Instead of the *imparfait*, Proust has used the *passé composé* or "composed past," usually used to express discrete, specific, unique past actions. If the adverb "longtemps" ("for a long time") were taken out, the sentence would refer to a single incident: "I went to bed early (one specific time)." As it stands, the sentence consists of the somewhat unusual juxtaposition of an action narrated in the *passé composé* with "longtemps," an adverb that, in this context, clearly indicates both repetition of the action of going to bed, and a non-specific but lengthy past duration the boundaries of which are implied but are left entirely vague (the period involved is definitely over, but we don't know when it started or ended). This juxtaposition creates a situation in which, while what is being expressed could have been expressed *almost* identically via the use of the imperfect, the sentence's effect is heightened by the use of the *passé composé;* that tense (being generally more specific in its referent than the *imparfait*) emphasizes the sense of the verb's referring to discrete, specific moments of repeated past action, and thus emphasizes the sense of a great many actions, a multiplicity of unknown number, being packed into a single sentence. That emphasis is what results in Ricoeur's feeling of the sentence expressing "an earlier time that is endlessly multiplied."

With the next sentence, tenses switch to the *imparfait* and the narrative starts shifting even more towards the synthesis of the unique and the habitual. *Parfois* ("sometimes"), like *longtemps*, is an adverb indicating repetition, but as Terdiman writes, "as early as the third sentence of the novel, these adverbial signs disappear, and the series of verbs in the imperfect come to take on the feel of a single progressive narration. By a subtle camouflage, the stages of repeated

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the fact that the candle was no longer burning. Then it would begin to seem unintelligible..." (Enright 1:1).

experience now recalled become stages of an experience that *could be* unique" (*DI* 191). In that third sentence of the novel, we get a specificity of temporal indicators ("a half an hour later…") and of action (waking up, wanting to put down the book, etc) that hints at the narration of a single incident; we *also* get an array of disparate images (the church, the quartet, the rivalry of François Ier and Charles V) that indicates that multiple dreams, on multiple nights, are being folded both into one sentence and into the specific moment at which it is hinting. The multiple is folded up into the singular and fans back out into a multiplicity. As Terdiman writes of moments like this in the synthetic mode, "the synthesizing function of memory easily subdivides the image into an array … in which coordinate aspects appear side-by-side to increase the density and variety of representation" (*DI* 189); multiple implied moments are gathered up by the synthetic mode, and multiple implied moments are also spread out into an array, all at the same time.

The synthetic mode thus involves both episodic time and, in a different way to that of the narrative loop delineated above, ceaseless time. What is folded into the Proustian scene is, as I have already said, a multiplicity of more or less implicit, and each implicitly bounded, past events; the scene itself, with its beginning and end — boundaries which are present no matter how much one might occasionally have to hunt for them — is a moment of episodic time. The number of incidents being folded into the synthesis is never clear, however, which gives the impression, expressed by Ricoeur above, of an endless array of moments existing in one. This endlessness is the infinitude of the ceaseless, hinted at in the innumerable elements folded into the synthetic image, giving the impression of a sort of limitlessness, an endlessly multiplying ceaselessness, of the middle rather than of the end (as Terdiman writes, "Proust's scenes, and the novel which accomodates them, open up from the middle [rather than from the end] to accomodate Proust's generous expansions" [*DI* 181]). Calvino describes Proust as

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bringing about, in *La Recherche*, "an infinite multiplication of the dimensions of space and time" (*Six Memos* 110-111); Terdiman's synthetic mode is how the text does that with time on the syntactic level, and Deleuze's "boxes and vases" are how the text does it on the level of metaphor.

4. "Different and parallel series": Quest time in *Skyrim*

Because of the (perhaps surprising) similarities between the narrative worlds in question, I turn now from *La Recherche* to the computer role-playing games (RPGs) published by Bethesda Softworks (all created by Bethesda Game Studio teams led by Todd Howard, with the exception of 2010's *Fallout: New Vegas*, created by Obsidian Entertainment). I will limit my examples in this chapter to 2011's *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (known as *Skyrim*), but most of my comments apply to all Bethesda cRPGs released since *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* (2002); though they feature different settings and pre-authored stories, all of these games employ the same quest-based narrative structure, are set in vast game worlds with no temporal ending, and offer the player almost unprecedented flexibility in exploring that world and developing a unique narrative for the player character.

Like all of these games, *Skyrim* starts out, each time one creates a new player character, with a narrative "cut-scene" situating that character in the time and space of the game's fictional setting.[45] As the opening scene begins, the player — seeing through the "eyes" of the player character via the manipulation of point of view by the virtual camera — regains consciousness after sleeping.[46] The

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[45] The cut-scene is a common story-telling technique in games. A "cinematic" episode narrating a story (in whole or in part) plays onscreen while gameplay is suspended, leaving the player to watch. Bethesda uses very few cut-scenes in its RPGs, limiting them to opening sequences, but (unlike many other games) does not allow the player to skip past them.

[46] *Skyrim* starts off with a "first-person" type of point of view - what Jan-Noël Thon calls a "'subjective point of view', where the position from which the game spaces are

character is riding in a horse-drawn wagon with several NPCs (non-player characters) dressed in rags or armor reminiscent of Ancient Rome. The player finds s/he has no control over what's happening onscreen except to change the direction the player character is facing and thus what the player can see. One of the NPCs speaks; the player character, having been arrested crossing a border into a country named Skyrim, is being taken to an unknown location by soldiers of the "Empire." The NPCs are mostly members of a group called the "Stormcloaks," engaged in a rebellion against this Empire. One of the NPCs is "Ulfric," a "jarl" (chieftain) of the "Nords," the human inhabitants of Skyrim, and the Stormcloak leader; he's assassinated the High King with a magical "shout". The wagon comes to a halt in a village full of soldiers bearing swords. By now it's clear that the setting involves a roughly medieval level of technology; given that and the mention of magic, an experienced player of RPGs (or, for that matter, anyone familiar with the fantasy genre) will now expect tropes of Western genre fantasy: elves, dragons, undead, etc. The player has been introduced in a couple of minutes not only to the game's fictional setting (and been given expectations about what kinds of plots will be on offer), but also to one of the primary conflicts in the main "quest line" and one of the important NPCs in that designer-authored plot.[47]

The player still has no control over the player character as the prisoners are ordered to leave the wagon, but once the character is on the ground, the player is asked (via the conceit that the Imperials are asking for identification) to engage in what experienced players will recognize as "character generation." This is the point early in every RPG where one is asked to name and describe the player character and to generate or pick "stats" (short for "statistics," usually meaning

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represented coincides with the position of the [player character]" (Thon 86). The player character is not visible onscreen, which instead shows what the character "sees." The game later gives the player the option of switching to a "third-person" mode in which the player character can be seen traversing the landscape.

[47] A "quest line" is a series of smaller quests acting as units of a larger quest-based plotline (see below).

numbers that determine the opening levels of various in-game skills like weapon proficiencies and magical abilities). The "camera" zooms out and the perspective changes from a view of what the player character is "seeing" to a view of the character itself, at which point the player must choose the character's gender, race (meaning fictional species or nationality), name, and appearance. The progress of the game halts as the software waits for the player's input. After this moment of agency, the player again loses control of the character and can only watch the scene unfold. The Imperials announce that the character will be executed with the NPCs, and the prisoners are ordered forward to the headsman's block. A Stormcloak is beheaded, and then it's the player character's turn. Still outside the player's control, the character steps to the block, kneels, and through its "eyes" the player sees the headsman readying his axe. The headsman is about to kill the character when (on a gaming console) the controller shakes in the player's hands, a great roar is heard, and a dragon lands behind the executioner and incinerates him.[48] At this point the player gains permanent control of the player character's movements and is told to run. After being led from the village by an NPC and encouraged to speak immediately to the "jarl" of Whiterun, the nearest city, the player/character is free to go wherever and do whatever s/he wants (note the similarities between this and the opening sequence of *Fallout 3*, described in chapter 1).

The world of any given *Skyrim* game — like those of any number of contemporary "open-world" games — is dominated by the operation of ceaseless time (through which the player figuratively cuts swaths of narrative episodic time), and because of this the player, after the end of the opening scene, has all the

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[48] I should note that my discussion of *Skyrim*, like my discussion of *Fallout 3* in Chapter 1, is based on playing the game with a Sony PlayStation 3. The machine used can result in differences (mostly slight) in the play experience. A notable difference between using a computer and using a gaming console (such as an XBox, Wii or PlayStation) is that the hand-held controllers made for consoles can provide haptic feedback in the form of "rumbling," or shaking (accompanied by the buzzing noise of the motors).

time in the (game) world.[49] Aside from the destruction of the software or hardware involved, or of the game world's "save file" (which contains the parameters of a specific player character's world at a specific time), the game world has no temporal ending once initialized; as long as an appropriate "save file" exists, the player will be able to come back into a given player character's world and take up wherever s/he left off. Even if the player completes every quest and quest line provided by the designers, including the "main quest" that is the primary plotline of the tapestry that is the game's pre-authored narrative, the game world will not come to a temporal end (see chapter 1). Playing through every quest is in fact not possible in *Skyrim* thanks to a recent invention of Bethesda Game Studios' (first implemented in *Skyrim*) called the "Radiant story" system. This piece of software allows the game to algorithmically generate an almost endless number of simple quests based on a randomized combination of elements like the NPCs, objects, and places involved: this is an aspect of what is being combined and recombined in the *combinatoire* that is the RPG *texte fleuve*. The *combinatoire* that is itself the Radiant system only emphasizes the ceaselessness of the games of which it is part by producing endless moments of episodic time.

The opening narrative episode of *Skyrim*, like every opening scene of a Bethesda RPG, initiates the PC and its player into the game's "quest time." This is my way of referring to a RPG-specific variant of perpetual time in which not just the pre-authored narrative but also the game world's temporal fabric are both what Jill Walker, writing on the MMORPG ("massive multiplayer online RPG") *World of Warcraft*, has called "a network of fragments," and also an array of parallel, co-

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[49] I write here as if there were more than one *Skyrim* game and game world because, essentially, there *are*. The software creates a new instance of the game world with each creation of a new player character. While the *Skyrim* game world (in contrast to *Minecraft* worlds) is one that has been specifically designed by humans, meaning that important objects like cities and certain NPCs will be found in the same places when one is playing in the game world of a different player character, there are also notable differences because of the operation of Bethesda's Radiant AI and Radiant Story systems (see below).

existing, sequential, quest-determined temporalities (each made up of discrete moments of episodic time), different from each other but all taking place more or less concurrently in the larger context of the temporalities of the game world and of the player character (Walker 310). Instead of consisting of one continuous flow of time with a coherent, sequential chronology, the player character's temporality branches with each new quest upon which the player embarks, such that the character's temporality becomes a series (a multiplicity) of temporalities between which the player can jump by deciding which quest to pursue, and the branches of which suspend themselves and wait for the player while s/he is engaged in following another quest/plotline (or in following none of them).

As I discussed in section 3 above, Proust's narrator, recounting the moment of *mémoire involontaire* in which Marcel's grandmother's face comes back to him and describing the feeling of having suddenly been thrown into another temporality, says of that feeling that it is "as if there were, in time, different and parallel series": "comme s'il y avait dans le temps des séries différentes et parallèles" (Proust 2:163; translation mine). The quest-based structure of games like *Skyrim* and *Fallout 3* creates a version of the Proustian narrator's different and parallel series in time. The *texte fleuve* RPG is therefore a machine for (among other things) producing a multiplicity of parallel times enfolded into the main character (the player character)'s temporality, which is itself that multiplicity. In a way very reminiscent of *La Recherche*, *Skyrim* presents a fractured temporal world, a world in splinters, in which the progression of time is not a flow but a series of jumps, of jerks; it enables the further splintering of the world, a splintering which indeed is inevitable and only increases as the player traverses the time and space of that world, the player character's temporality gradually becoming more and more like Marcel's. Via the medium of the save file, which allows the player to jump back to earlier moments in the time of the PC and then play the game again from that point forward,

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experiencing other possibilities, the game enables not just this splintering but a further splintering, further "different and parallel series," through the exploration of even more branches and parallel temporalities.

I will begin my exploration of the different and parallel series of quest time by discussing the structure of pre-authored quests in *texte fleuve* cRPGs like *Skyrim*, and what that structure does with time. Wardrip-Fruin, writing about the critically-acclaimed computer RPG *Knights of the Old Republic* (BioWare 2004), describes contemporary open-world RPGs as

> often … work[ing] to motivate players to engage in a variety of types of play (e.g., exploration, combat, and intellectual puzzle solving) via character development set in a larger story. In particular, many RPGs give the sense that the story itself is *playable* by offering the player freedom to roam across a world infused with quests that operate on many scales, can sometimes be completed in different ways, and are often optional or available for partial completion. As each player chooses which quests to accept — as well as how, whether, and when to complete them — this creates a different story structure for each playing. (*Processing* 47)

All of this is true of *Skyrim*, in which, though its open-world aspect allows a player not to participate much in the designers' pre-authored stories, the tapestry of quests that "infuse" the game world — a tapestry somewhat reminiscent of the various quests (for knowledge, remembrance, women, art) that infuse the world of *La Recherche* — is (usually) important to the player's experience of the game.[50]

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[50] While most players of open world RPGs engage with the pre-authored quest network, some choose to play *Skyrim* with little to no engagement with that network. See game theorist Mattie Brice's article "Storyline? In *Skyrim*? No thanks!," on the derivation of narrative from non-quest moments in the game world, and Brice's feeling that far more interesting narratives emerge from such moments than from the fantasy clichés and

Indeed, it is not possible to avoid being "given" quests if one has one's player character engage in dialogue with NPCs or read in-game books; in a few cases, being in the same room with an NPC programmed to give a quest results in the player character being unable to leave until the quest has been accepted. The player doesn't have to play through such a quest, but s/he can't avoid knowing about it, and so most people will end up playing through at least a few pre-authored stories as a matter of course.

A "quest" in the RPG context is an episode of story, pre-authored by the designer(s), that essentially consists of a task (or set of closely interrelated tasks) that the player is asked to complete. Player characters, and their players, are "given" or offered quests through dialogue with NPCs; by reading or listening to in-game books, letters, or audio recordings (as appropriate to the fictional setting); or, more rarely, via instructions written onscreen. The simplest quests are what Wardrip-Fruin refers to as "one-stage quests" (*Processing* 60). In these, the player character is given the quest, completes it (or "fails" it by not reaching the objective), and the quest ends along with the story involved. In terms of the pre-authored story, the one-stage quest is either a stand-alone narrative episode or a minor "side quest" related tangentially to a more important quest line, meaning a series of one-stage quests that constitute a larger story. After the player completes one task or one tightly interconnected series of tasks — one quest, one stage — in a quest line, s/he is free to pursue other interests, but (unless s/he has completed the last stage in the line) another stage will be available if s/he comes back to that particular storyline.

Discrete quest stages are clearly marked off as such by the software, making them neatly packaged moments of episodic time. This marking off is largely done, in Bethesda's as in nearly all RPGs, through a variant on the concept

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clunky writing that often marr *Skyrim*'s pre-authored stories. Brice, calling on Bethesda to abandon the quest structure, ends with: "The narrative is in the play. Let me play" (Brice).

(or conceit) of a player "journal" in which quest descriptions and instructions are stored as if the player character had recorded them him/herself. Bethesda RPGs also provide sound effects when a quest starts or finishes, accompanied by onscreen messages such as "Started: <Quest Title>" and "Completed: <Quest Title>." One is reminded of the *tick* and *tock* analogy, referring to the sound of a clock, that Kermode uses throughout *The Sense of an Ending* to describe the beginning and ending of an episode or epoch of humanized, narrative time; these sound effects and messages are the cRPG quest structure's *ticks* and *tocks*.[51] The more or less sequential grouping of episodes that make up quest lines and the main quest are also clearly marked off, using the same techniques, as discrete narrative units separate from other storylines. The "main quest," as its name implies, is the storyline meant to be the primary focus of the pre-authored narrative. As Wardrip-Fruin writes, it "provides the spine of the story [and] represents a massive undertaking on the part of the player character to — what else? — intervene in events that will shape the history of the [world]" (*Processing* 60).

In *Skyrim*, the main quest undertaking is structured around rather stereotypical genre fantasy tropes: the player character, revealed to be "Dovahkiin" (able to speak the magic language of dragons), is asked to engage in many complex tasks (gathering information, fighting enemies, learning the dragon-language, brokering a cease-fire between warring armies, and so forth) in the pursuit of finding and defeating the dragon-god Alduin, who is trying to destroy the world. This story takes place against the backdrop of the civil war (in which the player/character can take part) mentioned above. The dragon-focused main quest alone has nineteen stages, each involving multiple tasks. There are

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[51] See in particular Kermode's second chapter ("Fictions"). Of the ticking of a clock, he writes that "We ask what it *says:* and we agree that it says *tick-tock*. By this fiction we humanize it, make it talk our language… *tick* is our word for a physical beginning, *tock*

seventeen other major quest lines; many of these involve a comparable number of quest stages. There are multi-stage quests linked to sixteen religious cults as well as to many individual NPCs and places. Every major quest line, and many smaller ones, come with side quests. Overall, *Skyrim* involves several hundred pre-authored quest stages and a nearly endless number of one-stage quests generated by the Radiant Story system I described earlier. The Thieves' Guild quest line, for instance, is impossible to complete in full (meaning it is impossible to play through its entire network of side quests) because of the inclusion of seven types of small "jobs"; these are Radiant quests in which an NPC tells the player character to steal x object from y NPC in z city, forge numbers in x ledger in y shop in z city, and so on, the details changing each time the player asks for a new job, of which there are an endless supply (in the sense that the software endlessly generates another combination; eventually, at a very high number of quests, the combinations would start repeating themselves given the finite numbers of NPCs, towns, etc). Radiant quests, through their combinations of elements and randomized connecting of characters, places, and events, only add strength to the impression *Skyrim*'s quest network gives of being Calvino's "network of connections between the events, the people, and the things of the world" (150) — which is the same sort of network that Proust's Marcel, during the epiphany of the Guermantes matinée, sees at work between the individuals and events of his life (and which I will discuss at greater length in Chapter 4).

As Wardrip-Fruin writes in the long citation given above, a different story structure emerges with each play-through depending on which quests the player accepts and whether/when those quests are completed — I add that this also depends on which *combination* of discrete quest stages the player puts together as s/he traverses the time and space of the game, the combinations of the *texte fleuve*

our word for an end. … What enables them to be different is a special kind of middle. We can perceive a duration only when it is organized" (44-45).

being an aspect I will explore in my next chapter. Furthermore, not only does the story structure change, but a different temporality emerges with each new quest accepted (and that thus a new configuration of multiple temporalities is involved in each separate play-through); the RPG quest structure produces a multiplicity not just of quests, of directed goals, but also of timelines. The temporality of the player character *branches*; it splinters into multiple temporalities. In a given quest line, each episode or stage exists in a sequential, chronological relationship with every other episode in the same quest line, which progresses from beginning to end as the player moves successfully through the stages. There are no such chronological relationships, however, between the episodes of a given quest line and those of another quest line, or between a quest line's episodes and those of discrete one-stage quests like the ones produced by the Radiant story system. The result is Marcel's "different, parallel series in time."

In my discussion of *La Recherche* in part 3 above, I qualified Marcel's inscribing himself into the narrative loop of the work as a sort of *respawning*, the term for the reincarnation of the video game player character after one of its deaths (this is in contrast to *spawning*, the character's first appearance in the game world at the start of the game). Death is seldom permanent in video games, especially in contemporary games, and it is never so in any of Bethesda's RPGs.[52] The experience of playing *Skyrim* is, in fact, typically one of experiencing a tapestry of player character deaths and respawns; death is easy to come by in Skyrim, where dragons regularly attack the player character, and it is, for the most part, equally easy to overcome (granting the player character a sort of deathlessness composed of constant death, which itself becomes, analogically, a

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[52] *Minecraft* offers the option of "permadeath," or permanent player character death, in its "hardcore" mode. If the character dies, not only can it not be respawned, but the world that was created when it spawned becomes inaccessible to the player; it "dies" along with the character.

kind of forgetting rather than an extinction). Here, as in *La Recherche,* respawning marks the operation of ceaseless time, since, while there is no infinite loop of the sort I've described in that work, the player can simply respawn the player character forever.

Let me briefly explain the functioning of the save file. A game of *Skyrim* can be saved at nearly any point in the playing, even in the middle of combat. When the player saves, the current state of the player character and the game world are written into an individual file in the computer's memory that the player can use when restarting the game after the character's death or after having shut off the game; the character reappears in exactly the same place, and point in the game's temporal progression, where it was when the player saved the game. Any progress that occurs after the player's act of saving the game is destroyed if the player character dies (or the machine shuts off) before the player saves again; the player may remember that progress, but the computer does not, and the player character and game world start up again just as they were when the computer was last instructed to save them.

Skyrim, like many games, can store a large number of save files (the quantity limited only by the hardware capacities of the computer), files that record a player character's progress at various points. These files can be destroyed if the player instructs the machine to overwrite them with another file, but the default action is to create a new file. A cautious player will in any case avoid destroying too many files in case s/he needs or wants to jump back to an earlier point in the player character's temporality (because the player made a mistake that would unduly harm the character's ability to progress, for example). Ryan, writing about video game narrative in "Story/Worlds/Media," advises that, because making different choices in a game changes its outcomes, "games should be played several times for the user to experience the different storyworlds that the simulation is capable of generating" — but, in *Skyrim*, these different storyworlds

can be experienced *without* fully replaying the game (that is to say, creating a new player character and starting from scratch) (Ryan *Storyworlds* 41). Assuming the player is content with a certain player character (in other words, does not wish to play as a different gender or race, or create a character with different stats), all that player has to do in order to explore the game's various possibilities is to jump back in the player character's temporality to an earlier save file, load the game from that file, and then play forward through whatever variant possibilities s/he finds interesting.

If, for example, I had had my player character join the Stormcloaks and I found myself curious about what kinds of quests were available if one joined the Empire instead, and assuming I was willing to lose all other game progress made since I'd joined the Stormcloaks, I could reload my game from a save file made before I picked sides in the war, arrange to have my character join the Empire, and play the game forward from there. It is entirely possible for the player, by playing the game forward from different save files, to create another level of "different, parallel series" in the player character's time, series in which the same character has made different choices, experienced variant outcomes, and thus become (to its player, at least) multiple variants of itself in a way that echoes Marcel's multiplicity of selves existing in his parallel series. The player character's time is not simply one that switches back and forth between an increasing number of branches, the sequential elements of which can be combined in a near-endless variety of ways, but is also a time that can become endlessly multiplied; in fact, it always becomes multiple, since the great majority of the time, the character is not killed immediately after the game has been saved, and thus the player continually loses game progression — loses time (both the player's time and the character's) — by being sent back to earlier points in the character's temporality and having to play out once again the same (or a similar) sequence of events. Even if the player has no interest in playing through other possibilities by picking a save file other

than the last one recorded, playing *Skyrim* creates innumerable abortive branches in the player character's time (and arguably in the player's) via this phenomenon of the character "dying," being knocked back in time, and the player having to proceed by playing through some variation of what s/he has already played.

This is the multiplication of time presented by *Skyrim*. Calvino, in his "Multiplicity," writes of Proust that in *La Recherche* he "brings about an endless multiplication of space and time" (110). This statement can be applied to *textes fleuves* generally, *Skyrim* included. Since that multiplication is not only temporal, but also spatial, I turn now briefly to the *texte fleuve*'s treatment of space.

5. "Les murs … tourbillonnaient dans les ténèbres" ("The walls … whirled in the darkness"):[53] Boundless and fragmented space in the *texte fleuve*

The endless yet fragmented and multiplied temporality that is the *texte fleuve*'s perpetual time is accompanied by the boundlessness, fragmentation and multiplication of the space with which that temporality is tied; the *texte fleuve*'s juxtaposition and combination of multiplicities and singularities takes place in both temporal and spatial registers.

From the opening pages of *Du côté de chez Swann*, the space of Proust's *Recherche* shows itself to be as uncertainly bounded, prone to shattering, and subject to invasion (by other times and other spaces) as the Proustian world's temporality. The narrator describes the habitual phenomenon of waking in the middle of the night and not knowing where he is and therefore *who* he is, which of his endless succession of selves is the one current to his location in space and time: "…quand je m'éveillais au milieu de la nuit, comme j'ignorais où je me trouvais, je ne savais même pas au premier instant qui j'étais" ("…when I would awaken in the middle of the night, since I did not know where I was, I did not even know, in the first instant, who I was") (Proust 1:11; translation mine). All of

the times, selves and spaces of his life are present in a whirlwind of temporal and spatial fragments: "…tout tournait autour de moi dans l'obscurité, les choses, les pays, les années … les murs invisibles, changeant de place selon la forme de la pièce imaginée, tourbillonnaient dans les ténèbres" ("…everything turned around me in the dark; things, countries, years … the invisible walls, changing location to fit the form of the imagined room, whirled in the darkness") (Proust 1:12; translation mine). In these few seconds of confusion, as he tries to figure out which bedroom he's in, the space of whichever room he's in vacillates, the walls flickering back and forth, as he sees among the fragments swirling around him all of the bedrooms of his life (an experience that triggers long reveries, once he's situated himself, about the time periods each represents, the self he inhabited when he inhabited each of these rooms). As Georges Poulet writes in *L'espace Proustien*, "ce qui vacille ici, ce n'est pas seulement le temps, ce sont les lieux, c'est l'espace … le phénomène du souvenir proustien n'a donc pas seulement pour effet de faire chanceler l'esprit entre deux époques distinctes; il le force à choisir entre des lieux mutuellement incompatibles" ("what vacillates here is not time alone, it is places, it is space … the phenomenon of Proustian memory therefore does not only have the effect of making the spirit stagger between two distinct periods; it forces the spirit to choose between mutually incompatible places") (Poulet 16-17, translation mine).

In the period of uncertainty about which bedroom he's in, Proust's narrator exists in a space (and time) that is a multiplicity of spaces (and times). It's not just the case that times hold other times and can be (and regularly are) invaded by those times, by the past, but also that, via the invasion of the present by the past, spaces can be invaded by other spaces. The Guermantes library of *Le temps retrouvé* (see part III above) is described as one of "ces lieux … perméables pour

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[53] See Proust 1:12; translation mine.

le passé" ("these places … permeable by the past") that are found throughout *La recherche*, but the library is not just permeable by the past; it is permeable by other spaces. In the moment (building up towards his respawning in the ceaseless loop of the narrative) when Marcel is existing in the temporal overlap in which he can hear the little bell and his parents' footsteps ringing out in the Guermantes' *hôtel particulier*, he also exists in a juxtaposition of that *hôtel* and the Combray house of his childhood, which is part of the invasion by the past. Spaces also hold other spaces, in much the same way that the present holds other times; in the madeleine episode, the narrator depicts not only a past temporality unfolding from a present experience through the operation of *mémoire involontaire*, but also a space (the village of Combray) blooming out, with all its gardens and houses and people, from the space of the teacup into the space of Marcel's house: "Maintenant toutes les fleurs de notre jardin et celles du parc de M. Swann, et les nymphéas de la Vivonne, et les bonnes gens du village et leurs petits logis et l'église et tout Combray et ses environs, tout cela qui prend forme et solidité, est sorti, ville et jardins, de ma tasse de thé" ("Now, all the flowers of our garden and those of M. Swann's park, and the water-lilies of the Vivonne, and the good people of the village and their little houses and the church and all of Combray and its surroundings, all that which takes form and solidity, came out, village and gardens, of my cup of tea") (Proust 1:54; translation mine).

Just as the synthetic mode of representing time involves a multiplicity of different moments folded into (and folding out of) one moment, the eternal moment, Proust's depiction of a given space like the narrator's bedroom at the beginning of *Swann* often involves a multiplicity of different spaces folded into one, like the whirlwind of bedrooms that co-exist while the narrator tries to choose between them: in that instant of confusion, the narrator exists in an eternal space (eternity, again, being the juxtaposition of different tenses, and the bedrooms being identified with different times). These multiplicities give an

impression of spatial limitlessness that parallels the endless multiplication of times that Ricoeur sees at work in the first lines of *La Recherche* (see section III above). As Calvino writes in his *Six Memos*, Proust brings about "an endless multiplication of [both] space and time. The world expands until it can no longer be grasped" (Calvino 110-111). *La Recherche* may not continuously render an infinite navigable three-dimensional space in the way of *Minecraft*, but Proust nonetheless effectively succeeds in creating an impression of endless (and endlessly modular and combinable) space, and in depicting, as *Skyrim* does (see below), a universe of multiple spaces that can and do exist inside each other regardless of their "real" extension.

Space in *Skyrim*, in contrast to that of *La Recherche*, at first glance seems neatly bounded. Unlike a *Minecraft* world, the *Skyrim* game world is limited in extension; if you take your player character to the edges of the map (video game parlance for the edges of the game world), you will hit an invisible wall. Though you'll still be able to see scenery in front of you, it cannot be reached. "You can go no further" appears onscreen, and you must turn back. At the same time, however, the space of the game world in *Skyrim* (like those of the majority of contemporary 3D video games) is inextricably tied to the map a player can bring up with the touch of a button; the importance of this link between world and map is evident from the conflation of "world" and "map" in the "edge of the map" expression I used above. The world map and its role in the game functionality called "fast travel" (discussed below) is what introduces the element of spatial endlessness and much of the sense of spatial fragmentation to the game, while concurrently emphasizing the sense of temporal fragmentation.

The *Skyrim* world map, like all in-game maps of 3D game worlds, should not be taken for the same kind of artifact as a real-world map. As Bjarke Liboriussen writes of all such game maps, they "are not potentially flawed

representations of the world — made after exploring and measuring the world —
but two-dimensional *renderings* of the world carrying exactly the same
ontological weight as the 'world proper,'" meaning the game world; the 3D spaces
indicated by markers (symbols) on such maps "[do] not precede the map symbol
in the manner of a thing preceding its representation" (Liboriussen 531). The
Skyrim map, though two dimensional, devoid of much movement other than that
of the cursor, and thus apparently quite different from the three dimensional space
through which the player character moves, is actually enmeshed with that space, is
an extension of that space.

Fig. 2. A portion of the *Skyrim* world map. The thin white arrow in the center represents the
player character. Icons mark previously discovered locations to which the PC can "fast travel."
Bethesda Softworks: *Skyrim*, 2011.

The map is not just a reference but a method of traveling through the game
world, of jumping from location to location (from spatial fragment to spatial
fragment). When the player discovers a previously unexplored area the designers
have deemed important, the name of that area is shown onscreen, and a map
marker (which will show the place name if the cursor is placed on it) appears in

the appropriate place on the game map. Once this happens, the player can "fast travel" to that area from anywhere else, meaning that the player can bring the map up onscreen with the touch of a button, click on the appropriate map marker, and have the player character instantly transported to the place the marker represents. Things like the in-game clock and the positions of the world's sun and moons change to simulate a longer fictive passage of time, but, as Ian Bogost writes in *How to do Things with Video Games*, the "temporal expectations in video games are distorted," and a voyage that might take months of walking in the real world passes in a fictitious twelve hours for the player character and in a few seconds for the player (Bogost 50). Where, in Proust's world, "fast travel" between locations is a function of memory, perception, and spatio-temporal invasion or confusion, in *Skyrim* it becomes a cartographic function.

In a moment of fast travel, the map marker becomes a kind of metaphoric wormhole or tunnel between parts of the gameworld (while also hinting at the underlying non-3D structure of the software, in which all the game world's locations, stored in a database, can be accessed equally quickly with no need for the traversal required by real three-dimensional space and, outside of fast travel, simulated by 3D game worlds). In other words, rather than simply serving as representations, the map and its markers take on a kind of spatiality of their own (again, on the level of metaphor), and the markers permit the invasion of a space by spatial elements (the player character, its equipment, etc) of another space. Since there are a near-infinite number of beginning and end points for these figurative wormholes — you can jump to a map-marked place from *anywhere* in the vastness of the game world, not just another marked place — the space of *Skyrim* conceptually becomes an endless tangled network of spatial fragments, and the instantaneous jumps between different spaces can lead a player (especially after a pause in game play) to a moment of spatial confusion reminiscent of the Proustian narrator's dislocation upon waking in his darkened bedroom. The map

effectively splits the world into more fragments, ever increasingly as the player traverses the world and discovers more and more areas that can be catalogued and jumped to by the player character.

Though I have not discussed *Minecraft* elsewhere in this chapter, its treatment of space warrants attention here. *Minecraft* is the most perfectly literal representation of endless yet fractured space that I know of; its world is an endless and endlessly fractured and fracturable one. As I wrote in Chapter 1, thanks to the technique of procedural generation, *Minecraft*'s 3D virtual worlds are effectively infinite in extension (Persson, the game's creator, has indicated that if one moved one's player character far enough from its "spawn point" — the place where it first appeared in the game world — the computer would start having trouble rendering new landscapes, but it would take so long to reach this point that it's essentially impossible to do so).[54] In these infinite worlds, *everything* — even the sun, sky, air, water — is made of blocks, a fact immediately obvious from the Lego-like appearance of the landscape. Most visible blocks can be broken apart, usually into fragments of their own; most blocks "drop" elements when broken (a stone block drops stone, a tree trunk block drops wood, etc).

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[54] See Persson's blog post on the infinity of *Minecraft* worlds: "[The worlds are] not infinite, but there's no hard limit either. It'll just get buggier and buggier the further out you are. Terrain is generated, saved and loaded, and (kind of) rendered in chunks of 16*16*128 blocks. … If you go outside that range (about 25% of the distance from where you are now to the sun), loading and saving chunks will start overwriting old chunks. At a 16/th of that distance, things that use integers for block positions, such as using items and pathfinding, will start overflowing and acting weird" (Persson, *The Word of Notch*). In other words, the numbers would become too big to be processed quickly enough.
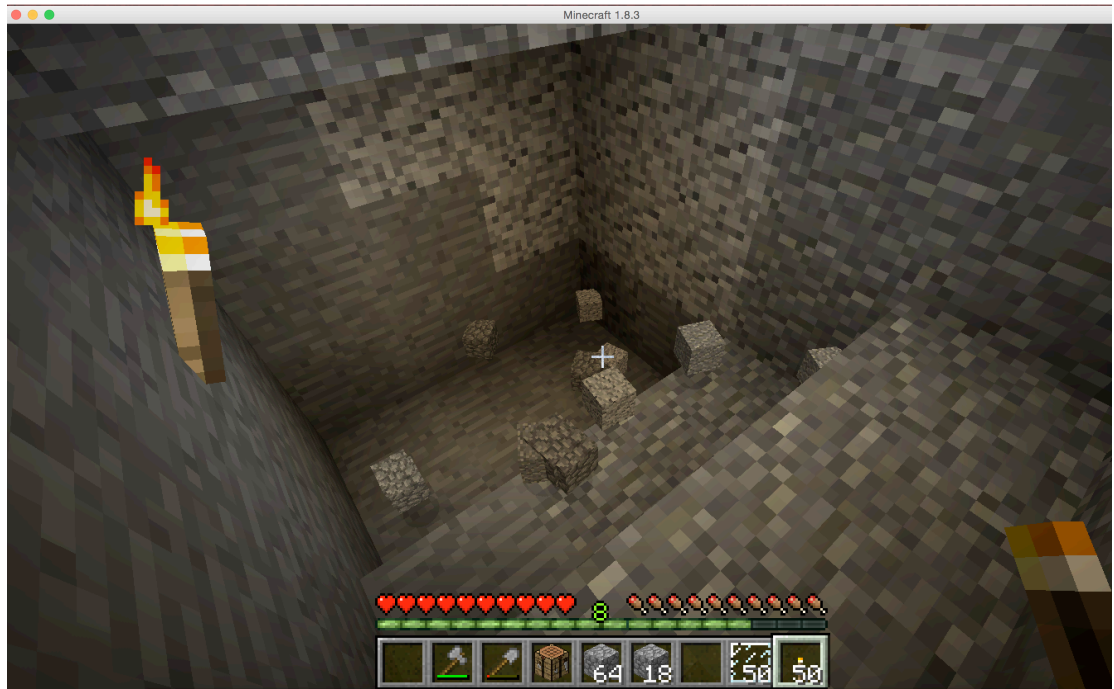
Fig. 3. Blocks of different kinds of stone inside a *Minecraft* mine. The smaller cubes are remnants of destroyed blocks. Mojang AB, *Minecraft* 1.8.3

These fragmentary elements can then be used in the "crafting" process, referred to by the game's title, that constitutes a crucial element of gameplay and is a large part of *Minecraft*'s acting as a *combinatoire* (something I will discuss at greater length in the next chapter). By combining three wool blocks (obtained by killing blocky sheep) and three wood blocks, for example, I can make a bed, which my player character can sleep in to make night pass by in a few seconds instead of twenty minutes, and thereby avoid the monsters that spawn at night (a weirdness of *Minecraft* time: there will probably be no monsters around when my character wakes because sleeping, rather than simply being a state of the character's, speeds night up for the entire world, leaving little time for the monsters to spawn). I can also "place" certain of these fragments back into the world, where they will reappear as the normal larger blocks. If I wanted to, say, build a wall, I could take some of the small stone fragments visible in the screenshot above and place them in a line somewhere else, where they would re-

appear as full-size blocks. In other words, blocks hold smaller blocks, which in turn hold bigger blocks; as in *La Recherche*, in *Minecraft* there is an endless flickering between a larger thing and a smaller thing, a thing contained and a thing containing, a multiplicity and a singularity.   I also want to make a note of the *Minecraft* player character's inventory. As is common in many games, including *Skyrim*, the player character can pick up and carry around a high number of items, shown as an array organized in a table interface that can be pulled up onscreen. There is no realism here, as player characters can typically carry far more weight and volume than is possible for a human being (a higher-level *Skyrim* character can easily carry around five hundred in-game pounds of equipment, and the *Minecraft* character can carry many tons). The player character becomes like Mary Poppins' carpetbag, a small container that can hold an enormous number of bulky items; it also becomes another singularity containing a multiplicity of items, most of which can be combined to form another singularity. Nested spaces are once again at work, and the *mémoire involontaire* of *La Recherche*, which pulls spaces and spatial objects out of experiences and into other spaces, becomes reified as the action of pulling objects out of the inventory (along with, at least in the case of memorable objects, the player's attendant memory of how s/he obtained them).

So, to recapitulate: the *texte fleuve* presents us with an endless world that is also a shattered world, a world in fragments, discrete and episodic but also networked and intermingling. As are all works of modern art to Deleuze in *Proust et les signes*, the *texte fleuve* is a machine: for endlessly fragmenting and synthesizing and re-fragmenting elements of the world (notably time and space), and for depicting, creating and deploying endless multiplicities folded into singularities that are themselves multiplicities. As is the contemporary novel to Calvino in "Multiplicity," the *texte fleuve* is the "manifold text," replacing oneness

with these multiplicities (117). It is a sort of *combinatoire*, a combinatory text creating and created by the combination of its fragments, in the ludic act of combinatory reading that it elicits from its reader. It is to this kind of reading, and to this function of the *texte fleuve* as *combinatoire*, that I turn to in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

The *Texte Fleuve* as *combinatoire*

1. Combination in the reading of *textes fleuves*

In *The Idea of Spatial Form*, the bulk of which was first published in the 1945 article "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," literary critic Joseph Frank lays out a theory of the "modern" (what we would now call Modernist) literary text as one that requires the reader to apprehend it "spatially, in a moment of time, rather than as a sequence" of the sort that art historian G.E. Lessing had identified (in *Laocoön*) as essential to literary art (Frank 10). Drawing on Lessing's conception of the spatial as what is at work when "the visible aspects of objects can best be presented juxtaposed in a moment of time," Frank also bases his theory of spatial form on Ezra Pound's definition of the image as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" (Frank 7; Pound 336, cited in Frank 11). Frank credits Pound's influence with the way that Modernist poetry "[frustrates] the reader's normal expectation of a sequence and [forces] him to perceive the elements of the poem as juxtaposed in space rather than unrolling in time" (12). Meaning in spatial form, Frank tells us as he analyzes T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," is dependent on this juxtaposition by the reader: "The meaning-relationship is completed only by the simultaneous perception in space of word-groups that have no comprehensible relation to each other when read consecutively in time… modern poetry asks its readers to suspend the process of individual reference temporarily until the entire pattern of internal references can be apprehended as a unity" (15).

In prose, spatial form enters the picture when writers like Gustave Flaubert (in *Madame Bovary*), James Joyce (in *Ulysses*), Djuna Barnes (in *Nightwood*) and Proust (in *La Recherche*) break chronology apart: "…since language proceeds in

time, it is impossible to approach this simultaneity of perception except by breaking up temporal sequence" (Frank 17). Frank identifies what he calls "units of meaning" within the novel, in which temporal sequence is preserved and the unit is therefore rendered comprehensible; these are the episodic narrative fragments I've already discussed (chapter 2). Frank tells us that novels like Proust's which break apart linear chronology while retaining comprehensible narrative sequence in smaller units "can be properly understood only when their units of meaning are apprehended reflexively in an instant of time" (18). Frank believes (and I agree) that Proust's *Recherche* follows essentially the same model of composition as Joyce's *Ulysses*, in which Joyce "present[s] the elements of his narrative … in fragments … [so that] all the factual background summarized for the reader in an ordinary novel must here be reconstructed from fragments, sometimes hundreds of pages apart, scattered through the book. …The reader is forced to read … by continually fitting fragments together and keeping allusions in mind until, by reflexive reference, he can link them to their compliments" (Frank 20).[55] Frank's most striking example specific to Proust is Proust's treatment of character (which I will discuss in section 4 below). Frank writes of this treatment that "rather than being submerged in the stream of time and intuiting a character progressively, in a continuous line of development, the reader is confronted with various snapshots of the characters 'motionless in a moment of vision' taken at different stages in their lives" (26); he continues by pointing out that "by the discontinuous presentation of character Proust forces the reader to juxtapose disparate images spatially, in a moment of time, so that the experience of time's passage is communicated directly to his sensibility" (27).

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[55] On a related note, Frank says of Joyce that, because of *Ulysses'* requiring such a reading, "he cannot be read — he can only be reread. A knowledge of the whole is essential to an understanding of any part…" (21). This is essentially the same claim made by Ricoeur, Tadié and others about the necessity of re-reading *La Recherche*, and/or its reading being always already a rereading.

Though Frank does not use any language of combination, I argue that his theory is essentially a theory of *combinatorial reading*: separate narrative units are combined and recombined by the reader in the process of reading works characterized by the sort of narrative fragmentation employed by Modernist authors like Proust, Joyce, and Virginia Woolf (though he does not mention her in the first essay, Frank includes her among these authors in the later essay "Spatial Form: Some Further Reflections," written in 1990). There are important conceptual links between Frank's theory and the theories of literature and writing as combinatorial machines and processes that started being formulated in the early part of the twentieth century, first by the Russian Formalists, and then in more explicit terms by (most notably) the French Structuralists and other thinkers working in that tradition.

For example, the idea of narrative as combination is implicit in the work of the Formalist folklorist Vladimir Propp, who argued in his *Morphology of the Folk Tale* (1928) that all Russian folk tales are sequences of the permutations of most or all of 31 "functions," basic action-based story elements or units identified by Propp (the hero leaving home, the villain being punished, the hero marrying, etc). In the same period, literary critic Viktor Shklovsky, in *Theory of Prose* (1929), first formulated the Formalist narratological concepts of *fabula* ("story-line") and *syuzhet* ("plot") (Shklovsky 170); *fabula* is "the raw material of a story" and *syuzhet* "the way a story is organized" and presented to the reader (Cobley 678). Analyzing the plot structure of Lawrence Sterne's *Tristam Shandy*, Shklovsky demonstrated that "everything in the novel has been displaced and rearranged" (Shklovksy 148); *syuzhet,* then, is the arrangement — the order of combination — of elements constitutive of *fabula*.[56]

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[56] For a much fuller account of Russian Formalist literary criticism, see for example Victor Erlich's *Russian Formalism: History-Doctrine* (1955) and Fredric Jameson's study of both Formalism and Structuralism, *The Prison-House of Language* (1972).

Claude Lévi-Strauss, in *Structural Anthropology* (1958), then proposed an

analysis similar to Propp's of the structures of myths as combinations and

permutations of function-like units he called "mythemes." Building on (among

other things) the theories of Propp and Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, in his 1966

"Introduction à l'analyse structurale du récit," argued that all narratives are

systems that consist of "la combinaison d'unités" ("the combination of unities")

(Barthes 2:835; translation mine). He explicitly identified the narrative as a

combinatoire (meaning an analyzable system of combinations following

constraints and rules) rather than as an "aléatoire" (a grouping dominated by

chance): he writes that "il y un abîme entre l'aléatoire la plus complexe et la

combinatoire la plus simple, et nul ne peut combiner (produire) un récit, sans se

référer à un système implicite d'unités et de règles" ("there is an abyss between

the most complex *aléatoire* and the simplest *combinatoire*, and neither can

combine (produce) a narrative, without referring to an implicit system of unities

and rules") (Barthes 2:829, translation mine). In the same issue of

Communications in which Barthes' article first appeared, Umberto Eco published

"James Bond: une combinatoire narrative." In this article Eco shows how, from

Casino Royale onwards, each of Ian Fleming's James Bond novels is "une

machine fonctionnant sur la base d'unités … soutenus par des règles rigoureuses

de combinaison" ("a machine functioning on the basis of unities … supported by

rigorous rules of combination") (Eco 84, translation mine); each Bond novel is a

construction based on combinations and permutations of (what Eco identifies as)

fourteen basic binary oppositions (Bond/Bad Guy, Bond/Woman, Free

World/USSR, Duty/Sacrifice, Love/Death, and so on). In 1967, citing the work of

Propp, Lévi-Strauss, and Barthes, Calvino gave and published the talk

"Cybernetics and Ghosts"; in it he argues that "writing is purely and simply a

process of combination among given elements," and that all literature is a

"combinatorial game" (Calvino *TLM* 17, 22).

The Idea of Spatial Form puts an important twist on these ideas about combinatory writing. Though he is certainly concerned to some extent with the writing process — this is clear from his assumption of the role of authorial intent, when it comes to a text's deployment of spatial form — Frank, in contrast to these aforementioned thinkers (and though he uses no rhetoric of combination and makes no reference to Formalist ideas) is essentially putting forth, as I wrote above, a theory of combinatory *reading*. To paraphrase Frank's theory: Modernist texts demand that the reader engage in a combinatorial reading process; instead of simply following a sequential narrative, the reader can only make sense of the work by juxtaposing (that is to say, combining) — often only *after* the work has been traversed — disparate images and concepts scattered throughout the text.

The same reading process is required by the *texte fleuve* (which is in this respect a Modernist or Postmodernist genre). The *texte fleuve*, as I claimed in Chapter 2, is a kind of *combinatoire*, a combinatory text, a textual machine for combining and provoking combination.[57] In its aspect as this *combinatoire*, the *texte fleuve* depicts both combination and a combinatory traversal of the world of the text, like the depictions of multiplicities folded into singularities that abound in *La Recherche*, but it also forces the reader who wishes to engage with and make sense of it — who wishes to follow the most basic, simplest rule (discussed below) of the game of reading, which is to *make sense of the text* — to engage in a combinatory reading (which, in the context of a game like *Minecraft*, becomes a combinatorial writing, as I will discuss below). Though it does not typically involve a material component forcing the reader to *see* how s/he is forced to

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[57] I use the word "combinatoire" rather than an English translation in order to harken to the work of the French writing group "Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle," better known as the Oulipo. An important aspect of the combinatorial nature of the *texte fleuve* is its opening up of possibilities, an element of this kind of text that I will discuss in Chapter 4. In this sense, the *texte fleuve* resembles the Oulipian *combinatoire,* designed to highlight the possibilities offered by combinations and potential combinations. (For an overview of the Oulipo and its members' writings regarding their goals and techniques, see for

combine different elements, as does Queneau's sonnet-generating *combinatoire* text *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* with its fan of paper strips each bearing a single line so that any sonnet can have any one of 10 possible first lines, second lines, and so on, the *texte fleuve* does, like Frank's Modernist text, force the reader/player to recall and combine what Frank would call "units of meaning" and what I have been calling episodes or fragments (of events, of depictions of characters, etc).

This combinatory reading (which can be a combinatory writing) has a ludic, or game-like, quality, and therefore, the necessity of engaging in a reading that proceeds via combination is an important part of what is ludic about the reading of the *texte fleuve* (and any other kind of text that might require combinatorial reading). The bulk of this chapter will consist of discussions of combination and modularity in three examples of the *texte fleuve* — Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, Proust's *Recherche*, and *Minecraft*. Before moving on to these texts, however, I want to make a few points about the ludic aspect of combination and combinatorial reading, and discuss the basic rule of reading that I mentioned above.

2. Combinatorial reading as a ludic process

As I have already claimed and now hope to demonstrate further, reading is ludic; it is a sort of game. Since combinatory reading is perhaps especially (or at least more obviously) ludic, given its more evident resemblance to puzzle-solving, the specific kind of reading the *texte fleuve* demands is part of what makes this category of texts especially game-like, regardless of a given text's medium.

"Ludological" video game critics, who (particularly in their work of the early 2000s) often rest definitions of the ludic and arguments about the nature of

example the collection *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature*, edited by Warren

games in the work of sociological theorists of play Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois, while dismissing the arguments of Structuralist and Post-Structuralist critics like Barthes and Derrida, generally reject the idea that reading "conventional" print texts is a form of play, instead claiming that reading this kind of text is a passive act requiring no work on the reader's part (see my discussion of ludology in chapter 1). As I noted in Chapter I, Aarseth, in one of the foundational texts of ludology (1997's *Cybertext*), has written of the "average literary work" (meaning the print narrative he calls "linear" despite acknowledging its "semantic abiguity") that "[its] reader, however strongly engaged in the unfolding of a narrative, is powerless. Like a spectator at a soccer game, he may speculate, conjecture, extrapolate, even shout abuse, but he is not a player. … [his] pleasure is the pleasure of the voyeur. Safe, but impotent" (*Cybertext* 3, 4).[58] This kind of claim about the impotence or powerlessness of the reader, and the passivity supposedly inherent to the reading of print narratives, is a staple of ludological criticism; Aarseth, for example, argues (trying to draw a distinction between linear and "non-linear" or "ergodic" texts, which require "non-trivial effort" to read) that "the effort to traverse the [average linear print] text is trivial, with no extranoematic responsibilities placed on the reader except (for example) eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of pages" (1-2). In the ludological criticism so influenced by Huizinga and Caillois, then, there is a general insistence that reading cannot be a game, and that narratives — which ludologists usually consider radically different from games or game play — cannot be considered ludic.

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[58] Aarseth's comparison of reading to spectatorship at a sporting event appears to be a reference to a crucial passage in Caillois's *Man, Play and Game*s that I will discuss below. In it, Caillois argues that spectatorship, far from being a passive act, partakes of the ludic.

However, Huizinga and Caillois themselves did not reject the idea that literature -- as traditionally conceived, whether print or orally-based -- is a manifestation of the ludic, is a form of play or of game. Huizinga, in fact, goes so far as to state, in a passage of *Homo Ludens* (1938) on the relationship between art and play, that "the function that is operative in the process of image-making or imagination is … a poetic function; and we define [that function] best of all by calling it a function of play — the *ludic* function" (Huizinga 25). Statements like this (along with passages on the play-aspect of music) make it clear that he considers essentially *all* artistic production to partake of the ludic. Referring to (among other things) ancient epic poetry — a narrative form — he writes that "poetry, in its original culture-making capacity, is born in and as play" (122). Literary critic Warren Motte has summarized Huizinga's extensive argument about poetry and play as an argument that poetry is "a dynamic, interactive ludic system" (*Playtexts* 6). Alhough, when it comes to (traditional) literature, Huizinga spends much more time on poetry and theatre than on prose, he makes it clear that the writing of novels also partakes of what he calls the "play-instinct":

> The affinity between poetry and play is not external only; it is also apparent in the structure of creative imagination itself. … *Whether in myth or the lyric, drama or the epic, the legends of a remote past or a modern novel*, the writer's aim, conscious or unconscious, is to create a tension that will 'enchant' the reader and hold him spellbound. (132; emphasis mine)[59]

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[59] The tension Huizinga mentions here, created by the novel, is an element he considers important to "the play-mood" experienced in games. Immediately after listing the characteristics of play (an activity limited in time and space, executed "according to rules freely accepted, and outside the sphere of necessity or material unity," he defines the play-mood as a state in which "[a] feeling of exaltation and tension accompanies the action, [and] mirth and relaxation follow" (Huizinga 132).

While Huizinga seems more concerned with the creative act (writing) as play than with reading or observation, Caillois goes a little further in exploring the idea of the ludic aspect of reading (or similarly engaging with a literary, aesthetic or ludic production). In *Man, Play and Games* (1958), he distinguishes four basic "rubrics" or type of game — *âgon* (competition), *alea* (chance), *mimicry* (simulation), and *ilinx* (vertigo) — that interact in various ways on a continuum (along which all games are situated) between *paidia* [sic], "a kind of uncontrolled fantasy … [a] frolicsome and impulsive exuberance" — embodied, Caillois indicates, by the unstructured play of animals and small children — and *ludus*, the principle that disciplines this fantastic exuberance by "bind[ing] it with arbitrary, imperative, and purposely tedious conventions," i.e. rules (Caillois 13; game types are always in italics in his text). Caillois' game types are not discrete categories, but are more like aspects that can be found in combination with one or more of the others in a given game; a game can involve, for example, both *âgon* and *mimicry* (as in the case of sports played before an audience).

While Caillois (like Huizinga) confines most of his references to "traditional" literature to theatrical productions, all productions of "traditional" literature clearly partake of *mimicry*. *Mimicry* is an aspect not simply of the play of actors or players involved in certain games, but is also a component of *engagement with* these games in activities like reading and observing. Sports fans, Caillois tells us, engage in *mimicry* while watching a game dominated by *âgon* — like, say, a football match. Such a match, in terms of its athletic participants, "excludes simulation" — the athletes are engaged in competition, not in play-acting that simulates an alternate reality — but "great sports events are nevertheless special occasions for *mimicry* … [in that] the simulation is now transferred from the participants to the audience. It is not the athletes who mimic, but the spectators. Identification with the champion in itself constitutes *mimicry* related to *that of the reader with the hero of the novel and that of the moviegoer*

with the film star" (22; final emphasis mine). In other words, to Caillois, *mimicry* is at work in a reader or spectator's identification with characters.

Caillois goes on to state that *mimicry* is lacking one of his chief characteristics of play (as game) — "the continuous submission to imperative and precise rules" — because "*mimicry* is incessant invention," but he then immediately provides what he calls the "unique" rule of *mimicry*, a rule that "consists in the actor's fascinating the spectator, while avoiding an error that might lead the spectator to break the spell. The spectator must lend himself to the illusion without first challenging the décor, mask, or artifice which for a given time he is asked to believe in as more real than reality itself" (Caillois 22-23). It seems clear that, in fact, Caillois is specifying *two* rules of *mimicry* here: the actor (or athlete, or novelist, etc) must work to "fascinate" the spectator, and the spectator (or reader) must work to suspend disbelief. I draw from Caillois the conclusion that to claim that reading is ludic is not at odds with his theories, since to him (as to Huizinga), any engagement with a ludic act, even if it *appears* passive, is a form of play; beyond that, the engagement involved in being a spectator or a reader is rule-dominated and therefore partakes of *ludus*, the end of Caillois' play-continuum that governs games as opposed to unstructured free play (and in fact, he states that "*ludus* is … readily compatible with *mimicry*" [30]). Caillois, indeed, specifically associates "obscure poetry" and "the addiction to detective stories (trying to identify the culprit)," along with "crossword puzzles, mathematical recreations, anagrams, olorhymes … and chess or bridge problems," with *ludus* (30). He identifies this particular list of games as constituting "many varieties of the most prevalent and pure forms of *ludus*," because they have to do with "solving a problem arbitrarily designed for this purpose … so that reaching a solution has no other goal than personal satisfaction for its own sake" (29-30). This satisfaction (or pleasure taken in such problem-solving) is, indeed, "*ludus* proper" (30).

To go back to the idea of the two rules of *mimicry* (fascination of the reader, and the reader's suspension of disbelief): I believe Caillois is mistaken in including the suspension of disbelief among the rules governing the game of reading at large, since various examples of Modernist and Postmodernist fiction show that readers can and do engage (often with the pleasure Caillois identifies as vital to *ludus*) with texts that render the complete suspension of disbelief difficult if not impossible.[60] However, Caillois is correct to point us to the idea that readership/spectatorship has rules. Reading does have rules, and one in particular, a rule so simple and so basic that I, for one, long had trouble seeing it — but then, as Tzvetan Todorov has written, the process of reading is hard to see: "On ne perçoit pas l'omniprésent. Rien de plus commun que l'expérience de la lecture, et rien de plus ignoré. Lire: cela va tellement de soi qu'il semble, à première vue, qu'il n'y ait rien à en dire" ["We do not perceive the omnipresent. Nothing is more common than the experience of reading, and nothing is more unheeded. Reading: it comes so naturally that it seems, at first glance, that there is nothing to say about it"] (Todorov 175; translation mine).

What is this rule of reading I mentioned? Aside from the rules (what Caillois might call conventions) that govern the techniques one must use to read (the ability to recognize the signification, based on conventions, of specific arrangements of letters read in a set order from left to right or right to left, for instance), the basic rule of reading is simply *to make sense of the text*. I have already quoted Barthes (in Chapter 1) on the act of reading as a game played by certain rules tied up with cultural conventions: "la lecture n'est jamais qu'un jeu

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[60] I am thinking of, for example, the kaleidoscope of disjointed points of view in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (discussed later in this chapter) that keeps that narrative from cohering into anything like a smoothly unfolding, Realist story of the kind to which Caillois must have been referring, and of the continuous asides to the reader that John Barth uses to break the fourth wall (so to speak) in his story "Lost in the Funhouse" (a technique later taken up by, among others, Don DeLillo

mené à partir de certaine règles. D'où viennent ces règles? … d'une logique millénaire du récit, d'une forme symbolique qui nous constitue avant même notre naissance…" ["reading is only ever a game played according to certain rules. From where do these rules come? …From an age-old logic of narrative, from a symbolic form that constitutes us even before we are born…"] (Barthes 4:604; translation mine). By an early age, we typically know the conventions of reading and of narrative in our bones, before we approach a text; reading, as Barthes indicates, is not simply ingrained in us, but is part of what *constitutes* us. And reading, to Barthes, is indeed the act of finding meaning, of *making sense*: In *S/Z,* he writes that "il n'y a pas d'autre *preuve* d'une lecture que la qualité et l'endurance de sa systématique; autrement dit: que son fonctionnement… Lire, c'est trouver des sens" ["there is no other *proof* of a reading than the quality and endurance of its systematization, or, in other words, of its functioning… To read is to find meanings"] (Barthes 3:127; translation mine).

To put it in terms more like those used by Caillois: *every* text (by virtue of its nature as a thing that must be read and interpreted) poses a problem for the reader; every text (no matter how easily traversed it may appear to be) is to at least some extent a puzzle. Reading is therefore an attempt to solve a problem — and if the text being read is remotely "plural" in Barthes' sense of the term, multiple interpretations will be possible, and thus there will be multiple solutions to the problem. The act of engaging with a problem or a puzzle is not the powerless, passive act of impotent voyeurism conjured by critics like Aarseth. The ludological conception of the "average" print text as a "linear" production, and of its reading as a passive, effortless act with no ludic element, simply does not hold up.

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in *White Noise*). Examples of this sort in 20th and 21rst century literature are too many to count.

The combinatorial reading demanded by the *texte fleuve*, then, is already a game by virtue of being a form of reading. It is made even more ludic — or perhaps just made more *obviously* ludic — by the fact that it requires at least somewhat more conscious effort on the part of the reader than would a text that seemed, at least on a surface level, more "linear"; that conscious effort brings it into the realm of the stances we take when figuring out problems, solving puzzles, putting together models, and so on. A text that demands a lot of combinatorial reading is not just a puzzle but a kind of construction project that puts into relief the work the reader does — a ludic work — in constructing the narrative and the world of the text. The text provides us with fragments: elements of a narrative, a character, a concept, etc; it provides us with the evocative narrative elements from which we spin out meaning and narrative. Given the conventions of reading and the human orientation towards comprehension via narrative that is identified by Ricoeur and Kermode, when we decide to engage with a *texte fleuve* via reading or watching or playing, we follow the implicit rule that is to interpret that text, to find sense in it. In order to do that, we combine and juxtapose its fragments so as to make something that seems at least relatively coherent to us. (To not follow that rule — or, at least, attempt to follow it — is indeed difficult; I venture that trying *not* to make sense of a text requires significantly more conscious effort than does the following of that rule, given that the rule is part of the matrix of reading conventions that, as Barthes writes, are involved in our cultural constitution as thinking and reading intertextual subjects.)

I will now go on to explore the combinations depicted and enabled, and the combinatorial reading (and writing) solicited, by the *combinatoire* that is the *texte fleuve*, as well as the modularity (of narrative, time, subjectivity, space, etc) that both creates and is emphasized by the demand for such a reading. I look first at Virginia Woolf's fragmentary novel *The Waves*, in which combination and modularity are not simply themes but structural elements.

3. "Made and remade continually"[61]: Modularity and recombination in *The Waves*

At first glance, Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931) may not seem like the most obvious candidate for the category of *texte fleuve*. Like most of Woolf's novels, it is not particularly long — 297 pages in the most recent Harcourt paperback edition — and none of the characters respawn in a loop of the kind I identified at work in *La Recherche*. I do consider *The Waves* a *texte fleuve*, however. It is dominated by the operation of perpetual time. Because of the way that Woolf uses the frame narrative (the sun, the waves, the birds) -- a depiction of cyclical endlessness -- and the way the characters' narratives begins to merge into that narrative in the form of Bernard's now fully collective subjectivity (in his final soliloquy at the end of the novel), the book's narrative overall is open-ended and implicitly circular in a way that creates its own kind of ceaselessness.

Within that ceaselessness, *The Waves*, rather than providing a smoothly sequential unfolding of events, presents us with a complex series of disjointed episodic fragments that follow each other in a recursive or iterative pattern, a bit like a helix or a corkscrew, and often involve jumps and jumblings in time (though, as in Proust's *Recherche*, a general chronological progression can be traced over the course of the book). Given its handling of these fragments and what Frank would have called images, the novel is an ideal example of spatial form (to such an extent that Frank's failure to mention Woolf at all — a failure he rectified in the much later essay "Some Further Thoughts on Spatial Form" — would be baffling if it weren't for the relative critical neglect of Woolf in the Anglo-American world from the 1940s to the 1980s).

This text presents us with a world in pieces — a world of fragments and of endless multiplicities — that is at the same time, much like the world of *La*

Recherche, also a world of flickering, temporary, always already fracturing unifications, in which multiplicities fold into singularities that fold back out into multiplicities (combination is a theme of this novel, not just a process it demands). A constant movement in the text — a metaphorically wave-like movement — is created by its way of scattering (people, subjectivities, themes), then gathering up and scattering them again. *The Waves*' structure of continually shifting points of view, of permutations of the six main characters' streams of consciousness, dominates this scattering and gathering and forces the reader to participate and to gather fragments into coherence (of narrative, of character) via combinatorial reading.

The bulk of *The Waves* is structured as a series of shifts (sometimes two or more on a given page) between episodic narrative fragments, each composed of the narration of the thought process of one of six point of view characters, a group of close childhood friends (Bernard, Jinny, Louis, Neville, Rhoda, and Susan). The book is thus dominated by a kaleidoscopic multiperspectivity or multivocality. The six characters' points of view cycle at regular intervals (though the sequence does not appear to be in any set order), so that we steadily get different permutations of all six voices. This steady cycling helps create the wave-like movement in the text that I mentioned above; it also ensures that the narrative is consistently splintered six ways with no particular character dominating (until Bernard's final soliloquy).[62] No character's narrative is presented in a continuous line, meaning that as we traverse the novel in the process of making sense of character and of the narrative (the process of following the rules of reading), the novel's structure increasingly requires us to recall previous fragments we have

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[61] Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*. 134.

[62] This final soliloquy "ends" the primary narrative, that of the characters, but precedes the last line of the frame narrative, which is the last of the novel: "*The waves broke on the shore*" (297; emphasis Woolf's).

read from a given character's point of view and to combine them with the fragment we are reading.

Each of the fragmentary point of view episodes is set off from the others by the use of quotation marks and consists — apart from the narrator's inevitable identification of who is "speaking" via the formula "[x], said [character y]" — of an individual character's thought process at a given moment in time, written as direct discourse, so that each character seems to be speaking directly to us.[63] *The Waves* lacks diegetic dialogue, though on several occasions characters can also be taken as addressing the character of the preceding point of view episode (and in one notable moment late in the novel a short "dialogue" between Rhoda and Louis, in the form of three fragments in which they seem to be addressing each other directly but still in thought rather than in speech, is set off from the rest of the text by parentheses).[64] The shifts between points of view and the moments the characters are experiencing are often abrupt, occurring with little to no transition; Woolf herself characterized the novel as "one jerk succeeding another" (*Diary* 4:36).[65]

Series of these point of view episodes are grouped in larger sections, the closest thing the novel has to chapters (none is titled or numbered), each of which is concerned with a specific moment (or sequence of specific moments) in the characters' lives (childhood, school, early twenties, their friend Percival's death, etc). In sections that are sequences of multiple specific moments set over a long period of time (such as the school years), line breaks are the only transition between moments that are weeks, months, sometimes years apart. The chapter-like

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[63] Bernard actually addresses the audience even more directly, as "you," during the long soliloquy that ends the chracters' narrative. Making of the reader a character, Bernard thus figuratively pulls the reader into the text, in a way reminiscent of the Proustian narrator's desire that his novel enfold the reader as s/he reads it.

[64] For the Rhoda/Louis "dialogue," see Woolf 226-227.

[65] Woolf's full (if brief) assessment of the novel in this diary entry (July 17 1931) is interesting. Having finished the final draft a few moments before, she writes: "…I'm

sections vary in diegetic duration, some appearing to cover a period of hours (as in the first section, which seems set in a specific childhood morning) and some a period of years (as in the series of moments at school). These sections, which take place at various points over decades of the characters' lives, are separated from each other by a sort of frame narrative consisting of ten short descriptive episodes (set off from the rest of the text by italics) taking place over the course of a single day. This intercut narrative, told exclusively in the past tense (in contrast to the present that dominates the characters' narrative), describes the rising and setting of the sun over the eponymous waves and the accompanying coastline, as well as the effects of sunlight and darkness on the landscape and its features (in particular a group of birds and a specific house, presumably Elvedon, the English seaside setting of the characters' childhood experiences).

This frame narrative is a depiction of eternity and the endless progression of time, and thus is a large part of what creates the impression the text gives of temporal ceaselessness — perhaps even, given the suggested conflation (that I discuss below) of the characters with the waves themselves, a ceaseless loop a bit reminiscent of (though certainly not as explicit as) *La Recherche*'s.[66] The repetitive movement of the sea and the sun is not just regular but without end, as the frame narrator tells us from the first page; the waves are "thick strokes moving, one after another … following each other, pursuing each other, perpetually" (7). The novel proceeds from that passage as a series (occasionally interrupted by the frame narrative's short interludes) of iterative loops constructed from the (almost machinic, almost cylinder-like) cycling or permutation of the six

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inclined to think it good but incoherent, inspissate: one jerk succeeding another. Anyhow it is laboured, compact." (*Diary* 4:36).

[66] The loop, and its correlates the ring and the circle, are a strikingly persistent image in *The Waves*. The characters (Bernard and Rhoda in particular) often describe things — time, the act of writing, social situations, subjectivities, etc — as a ring, a circle, or a loop; the first line "spoken" by a character is Bernard saying "I see a ring … hanging above me" (9).

points of view, suggesting — even mimicking — the rise and fall of these perpetual waves.

The tie between the characters and the eternal waves is brought home in the novel's last two pages by an aged Bernard, in a direct reference to the dawn and the waves of the frame narrative. Leaving a restaurant at closing time, heading into a London street at night, he feels "a sense of the break of day" despite the darkness of the sky (296). At first he decides that he "will not call it dawn … Dawn is some sort of whitening of the sky; some sort of renewal," but then his narrative seems to meet, almost to double up with, the frame narrative; despite his location in London he describes the break of dawn over the waves as if they are now visible to him, and adds that "yes, this is the eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again" (296-297). That incessant rise and fall, that ceaselessness, is at work in Bernard himself. At this very "end" of the text, the waves are cycling in *him*; the eternal renewal is his, as a being who stretches across endless gulfs of time. Earlier in this final soliloquy, he had already told us that the past and memory are as endless as they are temporally bounded: "All these things happen in one second and last for ever," he observes after remembering a series of images from his childhood — images drawn both from his own memories and those of his friends, whose subjectivities are slowly merging with his throughout this section (240). Now, in the last "spoken" thoughts of the novel, Bernard suddenly (and also again) finds himself renewed in some way despite his age, finds himself determined to fend off death and with it finality:

> And in me too the wave rises. It swells; it arches its back. I am aware once
> more of a new desire, something rising beneath me like the proud horse
> whose rider first spurs and then pulls him back. What enemy do we now
> perceive … ? It is death. … Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished
> and unyielding, O Death!" (297)

There is no particular indication that Bernard will *actually* remain unvanquished by death, but this doesn't really affect the implied ceaselessness. Whether or not Bernard survives his metaphorical battle, in this final moment of the text he finds himself part of the endless movement of the waves, of the eternal movement of the sea. The figures of the other characters have, a bit earlier in this passage, been gathered in the figure of Bernard: "We are divided; we are not here. Yet I cannot find any obstacle separating us. There is no distinction between me and them. As I talked I felt, 'I am you.' This difference we make so much of, this identity we so feverishly cherish, was overcome …" (288-289).[67] The novel thus ends with the point of view characters' six subjectivities and temporalities merged into Bernard's, and given this, all the characters are, through the linking of Bernard with the waves of the frame narrative, subsumed into a ceaseless loop of time.

As in all *textes fleuve*, the ceaselessness of *The Waves* co-exists with fragmentation. Like *La Recherche* and *Minecraft*, both of which I will discuss below, *The Waves* provides and produces a world in fragments (flickering into and out of wholes), a world of multiplicities co-existing with singularities, being taken up into the one and spread back out into the many. "Le monde est devenu miettes et chaos" ("The world has become crumbs and chaos,") Deleuze tells us of *La Recherche* (*PS* 134); *The Waves*' Neville describes existence as "illimitable chaos," and in one of the text's many moments of a flickering between unity and dissolution, Bernard observes (as he and the other five walk along the Thames)

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[67] Despite my desire to avoid suggesting (much less presuming) authorial intent, I note a detail in Woolf's diary of March 28 1930 that suggests a similar conception of the characters' subjectivities at the end of *The Waves* (the first draft of which she was finishing), as a sort of fragmentary multiple in one, a polyvocality expressed by one voice. After describing feeling "the pressure of the form [of *The Waves*] — the splendour and the greatness," Woolf muses: "How to end, save by a tremendous discussion, in which every life shall have its voice — a mosaic — a ——. [sic] I do not know" (Woolf, *Diary* 3:298).

that "little bits of ourselves are crumbling … I cannot keep myself together" (Woolf 226, 235). This fragmentation of his being, of his subjectivity — more precisely, of his subjectivity as part of the multiplicity making up the singularity that is the group of six — is concurrent with an indissoluble solidity: "Here is the station, and if the train were to cut me in two, I should come together on the further side, being one, being indivisible" (235).

The fragmentation and combination of individual and multiple subjectivities is not only a theme but a formal element, embedded in the novel's structure of shifting points of view, of permutations of the sequence of six voices. The abruptness of the switches between points of view — an abruptness emphasized both by the general lack of transitions (other than the closing of one set of quotation marks and the opening of another) and by the narrator's (always immediate) identification of the speaker of each bit of "dialogue" — only serves to reinforce the impression of disparate, disjointed slices, of more or less discrete fragments of experience.[68] The beginning of the main narrative, the first three pages of which are a series of short paragraphs that each consists of a different point of view segment of only one or two sentences, presents a striking collection (and combination) of fragments, given the particularly quick shifts from point of view to point of view as each character is introduced and the cycling between them begins:

> "I see a ring," said Bernard, "hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light."

> "I see a slab of pale yellow," said Susan, "spreading away until it meets a purple stripe."

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[68] "More or less" is a key phrase here. Given the movement of Derridean supplementarity, there is an important sense in which no fragments, including my "episodic narrative fragments", are discrete entities. My conception of the episodic narrative fragment is not meant to erase this element of the functioning of signification, but instead as a sort of convenience, a shorthand for how we apprehend the elements of a text before applying any kind of deconstructive reading to it.

       "I hear a sound," said Rhoda, "cheep, chirp; cheep, chirp; going up and down."

       "I see a globe," said Neville, "hanging down in a drop against the enormous flanks of some hill."

       "I see a crimson tassel," said Jinny, "twisted with gold threads."

       "I hear something stamping," said Louis, "A great beast's foot is chained. It stamps, and stamps, and stamps."

       "Look at the spider's web on the corner of the balcony," said Bernard. "It has beads of water on it, drops of white light."

       "The leaves are gathered round the window like pointed ears," said Susan.

       "A shadow falls on the path," said Louis, "like an elbow bent."

(*The Waves* 9)

…And so on. As will be the case through much of the novel, in this section we are given very little in the way of transition from one of these fragmentary paragraphs to another; each follows the other abruptly. The only obvious thread running throughout is the fact that each character is introduced reporting a sensory perception (and even if one notices that thread upon a given reading, it's not really enough to overcome an initial confusion about who is speaking and what is going on, since so little information is given).

       These opening fragments are short and relatively simple on the level of language, each consisting of only one or two sentences (always in the present tense aside from the narrator's past tense identification of the character). Each indeed describes a single sensory perception, a single phenomenon at work in the fragment. In the course of this first section of the characters' narrative, taking place in their collective childhood, the fragments become longer and more

complex (again quite suddenly, in a fragment of Louis' on the third page).[69]

Beatrice Monaco has written of the opening section of the main narrative of *The Waves* that in it "there is a striking sense of the birth of consciousness …: the narrative travels through the simple statements of the six, as if constructing their initial world. The actions, reactions, depths, contours and movements of these narrative percepts become increasingly more complex and involved as narrative and each child's consciousness are born" (Monaco 163-164). I would add, or emphasize, that individuation is at work here, not just construction of self and world; the characters are moving from a oneness to a multiplicity.

To demonstrate this, I will look briefly at the first six fragments (those that start with the first-person pronoun) of the section cited above. In these first six fragments, each one the introduction of one of the characters, the reporting of a perception is done using highly repetitive language (the chorus of "I see"s, "I hear"s; the next two pages also feature several repetitions of the exhortation "look" echoing Bernard's first, given in that citation). There's nothing here that allows us to tell the characters apart other than their names (which, as always, are given immediately after the opening clause of the first sentence of the fragment involved). The similarity in grammar and content of the six sentences serves to (at least somewhat) obscure that use of the names. The names are there from the beginning, suggesting a splitting apart of narrative and perception, serving their classifying function. At the same time, despite the use of different names and given the lack of more information than we're given in these simple statements,

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[69] On the page in question, the narrative fragments abruptly go from the simplicity of "'I burn, I shiver,' said Jinny, 'out of this sun, into this shadow'" — the same simplicity of each fragment given so far — to a much longer fragment of Louis' involving complex sentence structures and far more detail: "'I am left standing by the wall among the flowers … The petals are harlequins… The flowers swim like fish made of light upon the dark, green waters. I hold a stalk in my hand. I am the stalk. My roots go down to the depths of the world, through earth dry with brick, and damp earth, through veins of lead and silver…" (Woolf 11-12).

the sentences might as well be — and for all we know at this point in the text, may in fact be — uttered by a single person.

It is as if we are being given a set of iterations of a single perception or moment of perception. The effect of this iteration is that, within this block of fragments which on one level clearly represents (given the use of the names to partition and classify them) the perceptions of six different people, there is an underlying suggestion of a subjective unity that is also, always already, breaking or shaking apart into a multiplicity — a multiplicity quite reminiscent of the Proustian narrator's description of the (individual) self as existing in "different, parallel series in time" ("comme s'il y avait dans le temps des séries différentes et parallèles" [Proust 2:163]). Indeed, the idea of subjectivity as multiple-yet-singular is one of the most pervasive themes of *The Waves*' primary narrative, from these first few lines to the last lines of Bernard's final soliloquy (in which the subjectivities of all six characters are once again, as they have been periodically throughout the text, juxtaposed or combined with each other, this time in the figure of Bernard). At various points in the text, this subjective multiplicity will be folded back up into an always already fragmenting unity in a process that is essentially the same as the process, identified by Deleuze in *Proust et les signes*, of fragments — including subjectivities — constantly enfolding each other over the course of *La Recherche*.

Subjectivity in *The Waves* has a modularity to it. Individual subjectivities, and fragments of those subjectivities, can be recombined not just with other fragments of themselves but with other subjectivities. Along with Bernard ("I, mixed with an unknown Italian waiter — what am I? There is no stability in this world" [118]), Neville in particular is sensitive to human interaction as the combination of subjects, the mixing of selves. As a young man at college, seeing another person approaching him, Neville thinks: "Something now leaves me; something goes from me to meet that figure who is coming … How curiously one

is changed by the addition, even at a distance, of a friend … Yet how painful to be recalled, to be mitigated, to have one's self adulterated, mixed up, become part of another. As he approaches I become not myself but Neville mixed with somebody … it is Bernard" (83). Neville seems to find human combination threatening, and resolves to avoid it when he learns of the death of Percival (whom he loves): "Why meet and resume? Why talk and eat and make up other combinations with other people? From this moment I am solitary" (152). He will not entirely succeed in retaining his solitude, in avoiding combination. In the group's last meeting, at a restaurant in Hampton Court, Neville is one of the elements of the "six-sided flower … made of six lives," the "many-sided substance cut out of this dark," that is (or so Bernard tells us) the group of six.

Not only is subjectivity modular in *The Waves*, but the text itself is at least somewhat modular, suggesting the possibility of — even subtly encouraging — a reshuffling and recombination. The abruptness of the transitions between episodic fragments brings them into relief as both episodes and fragments, as more or less discrete units, almost as if they were a deck of cards arranged in a particular order — or, more aptly, as if they were comic strip panels and the transitions (or lack thereof) were the "gutters" (the blank spaces) between those panels. Despite its lack of pictures, there is a graphic novel quality about *The Waves*;[70] the disjointure of its parts, an assemblage of episodes that is also always already caught in the midst of a disassembly, echoes the unified-yet-fragmenting aspect of sequential art (to use the term coined by graphic novelist Will Eisner) — an art form that not only produces *textes fleuves* but always, regardless of whether a given piece of sequential art is a *texte fleuve*, demands a combinatorial reading from the reader.

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[70] Oddly (given the current popularity of graphic novel adaptations of print novels), there is no graphic novel adaptation of any of Woolf's works; there is, however, an adaptation (by Stéphane Heuet) of six early sections of *La Recherche* (more volumes are yet to be released by Heuet).

Sequential art is defined by comics theorist Scott McCloud, in his influential *Understanding Comics* (1993), as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (McCloud 9). In most cases, comics art is understood to consist of sequences of static drawings in boxes (the panels), arranged so as to tell a story. A reasonably experienced reader of comics is aware of cultural conventions governing their reading — for instance, the narrative flow (and thus the reading) most often proceed from left to right on the page in Western comics, and from right to left in Japanese *manga* — and will obey these rules in order to make sense of the text, in the same way that a reader who wants to make sense of a print novel will obey the convention of reading pages and chapters in the order in which they appear instead of jumping around in the book. The reading of any form of comics art is combinatorial in the clearest sense (any given graphic novel will at least to some extent fulfill Frank's requirements for spatial form); the reader combines information (often linguistic as well as visual) given in units (the panels), as well as whatever s/he has imagined (through a process McCloud calls "closure") as having happened between the panels, into a coherent whole that — thanks to the gutters — is always, at the same time, visibly fragmented into its constitutive parts.

The visual fragmentation of a narrative into its parts is related to another important element of how sequential art is read and its narratives apprehended. A notable difference between a graphic novel and most print novels is that, in terms of a single page, the graphic novel can offer most or all its visual information to the reader at once; with one glance, the reader can take in several (sometimes all) of the panels. In *Narrative Discourse*, Genette writes of comic strips that "while making up sequences of images and thus requiring a successive or diachronic reading, [they] also lend themselves to, and even invite, a kind of global and synchronic look — or at least a look whose direction is no longer determined by

the sequences of images" (34). The eye roams, and "ordered" sequences are disordered, creating anachronies — temporal dislocations and jumps — in the narratives involved, complicating any anachronies that may already be present in those narratives when the panels are read in the "right" order. Because of this element of reading comics, all sequential art narratives are, I propose, at least somewhat modular. Two panels displayed on opposite sides of the page may not make perfect sense to me if I read them together (in sequence with each other but out of the "proper" narrative sequence), but strictly speaking, my ability to read disparate panels together at all shows the inherent modularity of the comics panel, which — though its combination with another panel may or may not make sense — can be combined and recombined with any other panel on the page through an act of reading.

What does this have to do with *The Waves*? In terms of the kind of reading it asks of the reader, Woolf's text is similar to a graphic novel in terms of its structure. In any novel, quotation marks serve to separate instances of dialogue, of character speech, from the rest of the text (just as gutters separate comics panels from each other); passages of dialogue between two or more characters become assemblages, multiplicities, of relatively discrete units of meaning. *The Waves* (with the exception of the frame narrative's interludes) is presented as units of dialogue set apart from each other by the use of quotation marks. These create a feeling of fragmentation that is only highlighted by the particularly abrupt transitions between speakers. When we look at the first few lines "spoken" by the main characters (cited above), we are presented with a quick series of point of view fragments, of short units of meaning; I count thirteen such units on the first page of my Harcourt paperback (a reprint of a 1978 edition).

I suggest that there is an important sense in which these thirteen units act like thirteen graphic novel panels. Genette states that the reading of language proceeds in time, given that letters follow each other in a sequence that must be

apprehended temporally, owing to what Genette calls "the celebrated *linearity* of the linguistic signifier" (*ND* 34; emphasis his); however, I think it's important to note that words printed on a page are phenomena that are just as visual as drawings or other images. While acknowledging that the linguistic signifier is in fact linear and sequential -- reading a word proceeds in time -- I argue that we can and often do apprehend words (especially short words) in an instant, based on recognizing their shapes, and that many words are recognizable so quickly to a practiced reader that, even if the apprehension of them is sequential on an unconscious level, it might as well be instantaneous (in other words, what Frank would consider spatial) on a conscious one. The first page of the characters' speech in *The Waves,* and especially the first six lines, is littered with short words that a practiced reader grasps immediately, and the repeated "I"s and "hear"s and "see"s pop out on the page, drawing the eye back and forth in a way reminiscent of the way comics panels draw the eye back and forth. Whether or not the words of *The Waves* can be apprehended with the same degree of synchronicity as the panels of a graphic novel, the novel, at the very list, simulates such synchronicity.

The result is a suggestion of a certain modularity in the text and its narrative. While — especially in terms of its chapter-like sections — Woolf's text proceeds in a broadly chronological manner (the characters are children, then adolescents, then adults, etc), many of the individual fragments of dialogue within a section can be recombined within that section without significantly affecting the reader's comprehension of the text, because the fragments so often don't follow each other in any order that seems necessary for the comprehension of the narrative (in the sense of what the Russian Formalists would have called the *fabula* and what Genette would call the story, the thing being conveyed as opposed to the discourse used to convey it). The first few lines of the novel, for instance, can easily be reordered without changing the reader's ability to

comprehend them in sequence as a series of observations. I could, for example, reorder them like this:

> "I see a slab of pale yellow," said Susan, "spreading away until it meets a purple stripe."
>
> "I hear a sound," said Rhoda, "cheep, chirp; cheep, chirp; going up and down."
>
> "I see a ring," said Bernard, "hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light."
>
> "I hear something stamping," said Louis, "A great beast's foot is chained. It stamps, and stamps, and stamps."
>
> "I see a crimson tassel," said Jinny, "twisted with gold threads."
>
> "I see a globe," said Neville, "hanging down in a drop against the enormous flanks of some hill."
>
> (based on *The Waves* 9)

An argument might be made that I shouldn't do this because the resulting text is no longer *The Waves* — at least in the sense that it is not the text that was written and published by Virginia Woolf — and that my reordering may destroy some specific effect Woolf intended these lines to give (in which case, I will never know about it as she left no writing about this specific passage), or that, the question of authorial intent aside, the reordering may destroy an effect that the lines do give. My point, however, is simply that nothing about Woolf's ordering of these first six lines is crucial to the reader's comprehension of the narrative (specifically the *fabula*) at large, and also that, because of the way a reader might register this page at first glance — different parts of it jumping out, without respecting the "proper" sequentiality of reading conventions — it is possible to first apprehend these lines "out of order," as one might first apprehend the panels of a graphic novel out of order. Though a reader who first disorders the fragments in this way will probably immediately re-read them in sequence in the hope that

the sequence will make more sense, disordering this sequence doesn't actually harm general comprehension; the six speeches remain a sequence of narratives of six different sensory perceptions, with nothing to suggest what link may exist between them. Other sequences in the opening pages are not so modular. In the first long point of view fragment, Louis says "She has found me. I am struck on the nape of the neck. She has kissed me" (13). "She" is not identified until the next fragment, when Jinny, referring to Louis, says "'Is he dead?' I thought, and kissed you" (13). The next fragment is Susan's, who sees the kiss, reacts with "agony" and escapes into the woods; in the next fragment, Bernard describes seeing Susan pass him, and on goes the narrative of the kiss for several more fragments (13). This particular sequence is not as easily recombined as the first six lines. If I rearranged these later fragments, narrative comprehension would become more difficult — though not impossible, with a combinatorial reading; all the reader would have to do is treat the text as a puzzle, and mentally reorder the sequence into one that made more sense.

The Waves, then, features a modularity of point of view fragments and narrative episodes to a greater or lesser degree depending on the narrative content of a given sequence. That modularity both suggests the possibility of a rewriting, and — in cases like that of the first six lines (given the visual aspect I explained above) — even encourages that rewriting, a rewriting that is at the same time a rereading. In this text there is a strong hint of the dissolution of the (supposed) boundaries between (re)reading and (re)writing that will become an important aspect of the player's engagement with *Minecraft*, which I will discuss below.

For now, however, I turn to *La Recherche* and its own treatment of modularity, tied to its own demand for a combinatorial reading.

4. Modularity and combination in *À la recherche du temps perdu*

As I wrote in section 1 above, when it comes to examining the workings of spatial form in Proust, Joseph Frank specifically (if rather briefly) discusses Proust's treatment of the characters (other than Marcel) of *La Recherche*. This is a topic I want to take up and expand on, because fragmented characterization is indeed a striking example of an element of Proust's text that requires the reader to engage in combinatorial reading. Tied up with the work's presentation of subjectivity as fragmented and multiple, the treatment of character is disjointed, fragmented, even puzzle-like; as a result, the reader must engage in a continual process of deciphering. In his section on *La Recherche*, Frank writes that, when reading the work, "[r]ather than being submerged in the stream of time and intuiting a character progressively, in a continuous line of development, the reader is confronted with various snapshots of the characters" (26). He continues by arguing that "by the discontinuous presentation of character Proust forces the reader to juxtapose disparate images spatially, in a moment of time … Proust gives us what might be called pure views of his character — views of them 'motionless in a moment of vision' in various phases of their lives — and allows the sensibility of the reader to fuse these views into a unity" (27).

The concept of a "unity" as Frank uses it here, to mean (as I take it) a fully discrete totality, is both outmoded and suspect at best. Jacques Derrida has (throughout his work) demonstrated the always already absent and aporetic nature of presence, and the ubiquity of the supplement. Intertextuality, tied up as it is with Derrida's supplementarity and the infinite play of signifiers, can only function thanks to the lack of a neat totality. On the subject of the game that is language and signification, Derrida writes that "le langage … exclut la totalisation: [son] champ est en effet celui d'un *jeu*, c'est-à-dire de substitutions infinies dans la clôture d'un ensemble fini. Ce champ ne permet ces substitutions infinies que parce qu'il … lui manque quelque chose, à savoir un centre qui arrête et fonde le jeu des substitutions" ("La structure, le signe et le jeu," 423; emphasis

his). If signification itself has no totality, the text certainly doesn't; as Barthes writes in *S/Z*, echoing and building on Derrida's famous claim that "*il n'y pas de hors-text*" (Derrida *DLG* 227, emphasis his): "en même temps que rien n'existe en dehors du texte, il n'y a jamais un *tout* du texte … il faut à la fois dégager le texte de son extérieur et de sa totalité" (Barthes 4:123, emphasis his). The idea of "fusion" in Frank's statement is problematic as well; as Deleuze argues in *Proust et les signes*, the folding into each other of the fragments ("miettes") of Proust's shattered world never results in a perfect synthesis — crumbs mix, enfold each other, combine, but they also remain crumbs. Just as there is no totality, there is no neat unity, no clean fusion. "À force de mettre des morceaux dans les morceaux," Deleuze writes, "Proust trouve le moyen de nous les faire penser tous, mais sans référence à une unité dont ils dériveraient, ou qui en dériverait elle-même" (*PS* 149).

Frank identifies something important about the nature of the reading process required by *La Recherche* and other Modernist texts deploying Frank's spatial form. When it comes to *La Recherche*'s major characters, the Proustian narrator gives us disjointed views of them at specific points in their (and Marcel's) lives; these views are given in segments that can be hundreds of pages apart, requiring an effort of memory that would not be (as) necessary if characters were narrated more continuously (as is Marcel himself). What's more, the narrator often fails to identify as such a character we have already seen, instead giving the impression, at least for a certain period of time, that we have encountered a new character rather than a version of a previously introduced character; this only increases the sense of multiplicity and fragmentation, and the effort required to gain an overall conception of a given character.

In *The Dialectics of Isolation*, Terdiman discusses the "feint" and "revelation *ex nihilo*" techniques Proust uses to create (in the case of the feint) the false impression that something has been concluded or resolved; and (in the case

of the revelation) to suddenly reverse this sense of conclusion (see Terdiman's chapter 6, "The Devaluation of Suspense"). The feint and the revelation *ex nihilo* are often at work in Proust's treatment of character. Terdiman gives as an example the case of Odette, who appears in different guises at several points spaced throughout the text and is often not identified until much later. Of a particularly striking moment of revelation concerning Odette's identity that comes after the reader has been led to believe that she had appeared and would only appear in "Un Amour de Swann," Terdiman writes: "With [Swann's] sardonic comment at the conclusion of 'Un Amour de Swann' ('a woman I did not even like'), Odette passes out of Swann's life and out of the novel … But [this] is a feint … At the end of 'Noms de pays: le nom,' Marcel is walking in the Bois. Through a conversation he overhears … we learn that Swann in fact married Odette" (Terdiman *DI* 145). This moment in the text is shocking — *this* woman, this *cocotte*, the love of whom so tormented Swann, is the Madame Swann so often mentioned (if not yet seen) throughout the first volume? The reader is provoked into reshuffling and re-examining not only his/her assumptions but his/her memories of the figures of Madame Swann and Odette, who are suddenly rendered one after having been presented (or so we believed) as two; reading becomes a forced re-reading, mentally if in no other sense.

Odette is a particularly good example of the sort of Proustian characterization that demands a significant effort of recollection and recombination on the reader's part because, using these techniques of feint and revelation *ex nihilo*, the narrator plays several tricks on us where she's concerned (the narrator plays similar tricks with other major characters like Albertine, Gilberte, and Charlus, but does it with higher frequency in Odette's case). Starting with references in "Combray 1" to "Madame Swann," we are given fragments of Odette at different points throughout the novel. At several of these points, the narrator declines to identify her in a way that would allow us to connect her with

previous views of her; instead of consistently using one name we would recognize, the narrator often refers to her via the use of imagery ("la dame en rose" Marcel meets as a boy in "Combray 2"), or by using a name we don't yet know is one of hers (Odette de Crécy, Miss Sacripant, Madame de Forcheville).

It can be a very long time before the reader has much indication that a character described under a new name is in fact Odette. Given no hint in "Combray 2" as to the identity of "la dame en rose," for example, we have no way of knowing, for hundreds of pages, that this lady in pink is the same person as Odette de Crécy or Madame Swann. It is almost a relief when Mme de Forcheville, in *Le Temps retrouvé*, is identified as Odette within the space of a few dozen pages — but then, Proust, by that point in the novel, has already used *Mademoiselle* de Forcheville (Gilberte, Odette's daughter) as a feint in a lengthy section of *La Fugitive* involving Marcel's somehow not recognizing his first love's face, mishearing her new name, and getting caught up in a fantasy of seducing this mysterious "Mademoiselle d'Éporcheville," as he believes she's called. In other words, if the reader has a good memory, s/he will make the link between Gilberte and Madame de Forcheville when the latter appears, and suspect that this is once again Odette in "disguise." There might therefore have been relatively little point in the narrator's continuing the attempted deception for long; still, whether or not the reader realizes her identity before the narrator states it, Madame de Forcheville is, for a certain period, treated as a new character, as Odette so often has been.

The narrator's way of thus dislocating characterization instead of relying on a characterization process of continuous unfolding serves to emphasize, even put into a sort of practice, the text's theme of the multiplicity of the self — a multiplicity that makes of combinatorial reading not only something engaged in by the reader of *La Recherche*, but also a process Marcel himself has to engage in constantly throughout the course of the novel as he attempts to understand the

multiple aspects both of his own self and the selves of other people. *La Recherche*, like *The Waves*, is a text preoccupied — even obsessed — with the subject as fragmented, multiple, modular. Proust's narrator is perhaps obsessed in particular with the idea of the individual self containing multitudes of selves (associated with different times, spaces, moods, physical states), with the idea of the self as a multiplicity contained in a singularity (that is itself part of a singular multiplicity in the form of the nation-state, which the narrator figures, in *Le Temps retrouvé*, as an individual made up of a multiplicity of individuals). By splitting the characterization of Odette into these disjointed views given in disparate episodes, by giving her different names, by playing tricks on us and presenting her as if she were a new character instead of telling us that the character is in fact Odette, the narrator underlines the subjective multiplicity of Odette, her multifaceted existence as the many in the one, as a collection or assemblage of all the selves she has ever been.

In the world of *La Recherche*, every moment carries with it — every moment *is* — a different self, and the individual is the collection of those momentary selves. Individuals also appear to us — give themselves to us, enter into us (for in *La Recherche*, as in *The Waves*, the self can combine with the selves of others) — as a collection of selves each tied to a moment and the memory we have of that moment, so that the other's self, though given to us one moment at a time, blooms once again into a multiplicity once it's enfolded in our own (multiple) self. In *La Fugitive,* immediately after Marcel learns of Albertine's death, the narrator writes:

ne nous apparaissant que par minutes successives, [un être] n'a jamais pu nous livrer de lui qu'un seul aspect à la fois, nous débiter de lui qu'une seule

photographie. Grande faiblesse sans doute pour un être, de consister en une simple collection de moments; grande force aussi; il relève de la mémoire,

et la mémoire d'un moment n'est pas instruite de tout ce qui s'est passé

depuis; ce moment qu'elle a enregistré dure encore, vit encore, et avec lui l'être qui s'y profilait. (Proust 2:995-996)

As the narrator goes on to explain, this multiplicity of the self — a self which is given to others in series of "photographs," one for each "minute" or moment — is partially responsible for the difficulty and length of the grieving process, for it means that the dead (our grief for whom we can only protect ourselves from through the process of forgetting) survive in us not just as one but as many: "cet émiettement ne fait pas seulement vivre la morte, il la multiplie. Pour me consoler, ce n'est pas une, c'est d'innombrables Albertine que j'aurais dû oublier. Quand j'étais arrivé à supporter le chagrin d'avoir perdu celle-ci, c'était à recommencer avec une autre, avec cent autres" (Proust 2:996).

In this conception of the multiple self, and the specific language the narrator uses to describe it, there are links between *La Recherche* and computer games involving the simulation of 3D worlds. This image in *La Fugitive* of a multiple self constituted of photographs taken with each successive moment is a striking one, in part because it adds to a parallel between the Proustian narrator's treatment of character and *Minecraft*'s processing of the player character. The image of multiple photographs also suggests a sort of *anticipation* in *La Recherche* — odd as such an anticipation may seem — of the kind of computational process involved in the computer's construction and treatment of the player character, and the player's apprehension of that character.

Like most computer games, *Minecraft* executes a program loop (a cyclical set of instructions with which it processes information and implements changes) once per "tick," a unit of time equal to 0.05 seconds, so that there are 20 ticks per second.[71] With every tick, the program evaluates the state of the world and

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[71] Many articles explaining technical details of this sort can be found on the *Minecraft* wiki, at http://minecraft.gamepedia.com.

everything in it, checking for changes such as a command being provided by the player using the keyboard or mouse, and then (on the next tick) updating the simulation, of which the player character is of course a part. With each tick of a game as complex as *Minecraft*, the state of the world changes to at least some extent (even if the player does nothing that requires processing, other parts of the world are changing owing to things like the movements of the sun and of "mobs," the simulated animals, and the program is counting the tick itself for use in various calculations). Each tick is thus tied to a representation, both present in the code (as letters and numbers) and onscreen (as visuals), of the simulation at a specific instant; indeed, when the player saves a game, the software takes an "image" of the current state of the gameworld — an image of the world in that tick, or moment in time — from which it can then restart the simulation at exactly the same point, with everything in exactly the same state. There is therefore an important way in which the *Minecraft* world and the player character along with it, though certain aspects (like the player character's movement) are apprehended by the viewer — assuming everything is working correctly — as a smoothly-transitioning flow, are actually constituted of sequences of static states (metaphorically comparable to images), advancing with each moment in time.

In other words, like the fictional characters that are Marcel and Albertine and Odette, the fictional character and self that is the *Minecraft* player character is constructed from, constituted by, a multiplicity of variants of itself, a multiplicity of fictional selves, each associated, like a photograph, with an instant of time. *Minecraft* does not quite chop up or dislocate the presentation of the player character in a way similar to that used by Proust to fragment the depiction of characters, but the game does present us with an apparent unity that is made up, in the most literal sense, of a multitude of separate parts, of separate snapshots of the character in a specific state tied to an instant of time.

I will discuss *Minecraft* and its ties to Proust and Woolf's texts at greater length in section 5 below, but first, let me go back to the question of modularity, combination and combinatorial reading in *La Recherche*. *La Recherche*'s demand for a combinatorial reading is not only created by the fracturing and discontinuity of characterization; that reading is also demanded by the narrative at large. Similarly to *The Waves*, *La Recherche* presents a fragmented, non-linear narrative in which time does not respect notions of chronology. *The Waves'* narrative fragmentation is primarily the result of the main narrative's being split into six points of view, and of that narrative's transition-less jumps forward from one moment or period of the characters' lives to the next.[72] *La Recherche*'s narrative fragmentation comes, by contrast, not only from similar gaps in the text during which time has passed for Marcel but we are told nothing about it (as in the case of his years of military service, mentioned retrospectively in *Le temps retrouvé*), but also, more importantly, from the innumerable shifts in temporal focus that occur throughout the work as the narrator tells the story.

The text does, over the course of its three thousand pages, present a coherent arc tracing Marcel's life from childhood to some (vague and undefined) period near the narrator's present — coherent enough, at least, for us to construct that arc from the masses of material the text gives us — but the elements of this arc are given out of any chronological order. It is often impossible to ascertain what the chronological order "should" be, given the temporally ambiguous synthetic mode I also discussed in chapter 2, in which the habitual is conflated with the incidental. Ricoeur, in *Time and Narrative*, notes "the strong tendency of instants in Proust to merge together and become confused with one another"

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[72] Though the past is — quite literally — constantly present in *The Waves*, the intercutting and coexistence of the past and the present are more often conveyed through a given characters' fragmentary memory of past events than it is via recognizeable flash-backs. The characters' narrative, though broken up by lengthy gaps of unsummarized time, has a forward momentum to it that is not nearly so evident in *La Recherche*, what

(2:85). Events occurring in separate periods of Marcel's life are often told in the space of the same scene using what Genette calls "analapsis" (the recalling of past episodes) and "prolepsis" (the recounting of future episodes). Any narrative involving analepses or prolepses asks for a combinatorial reading to at least some extent, since flashbacks and flash-forwards require us, in the process of reading, to mentally reshuffle a shuffled chronology so that it might become comprehensible to us as a sequence of events with a beginning and an end. As I discussed in chapter 2, *La Recherche* is a fabric of nearly continual jumps backwards and forwards in the narrator's time; regarding analepses in the work, Genette has written that "they take up, by their extent, the quasi-totality of the text," while, at the same time, *La Recherche* "uses prolepsis to an extent probably unequaled in the whole history of narrative" (*ND* 68). Part of the combinatorial reading involved in engaging with Proust's text simply has to do with mentally recombining the elements of the narrative into something more comprehensible as a chronological sequence.

The fragmentations, disjointures, reshufflings and recombinations of the overall narrative serve to underline an important aspect of the nature of time in Proust's text. As is also the case in *The Waves*, not only subjectivity and narrative but also time itself are modular in the world of fragmented multiplicities that is *La Recherche*. Time can pull apart into constitutive moments, and those moments can combine and recombine with other moments (as well as with places, objects, sensations, subjectivities).

In chapter 2, I discussed at length the final scene of *Le temps retrouvé*, in which Marcel (among other things) discovers a copy of *François le champi* in the Guermantes' library. Encountering the book triggers an episode of *mémoire involontaire* in which Marcel remembers the night of the drama of going to bed

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with the Proustian narrator's constantly breaking off the narrative of an event to recount a past or future event.

and first feels his younger self rising up. *Mémoire involontaire* is inevitably a question of a past moment (and the self, sensations, location, and other features of that moment) enfolded in a sensation — the passage following the discovery of the book, where the narrator gives an analysis of *mémoire involontaire*, is actually the passage from which Deleuze drew the "vase" image he uses to talk about Proustian enfolding — but it can also involve combination, and it does in this instance. Right before comparing the sensation's role in *mémoire involontaire* to a vase — a container that holds (or enfolds) something else — the narrator tells us that the triggering of *mémoire involontaire* by the sight of an object such as the book, or of a word in that book, has to do with a mixing of that object and the sensations and memories with which we associate it:

> …une chose que nous avons regardée autrefois, si nous la revoyons, nous rapporte, avec le regard que nous y avons posé, toutes les images qui le remplissaient alors. C'est que les choses … sitôt qu'elles sont perçues par nous, deviennent en nous quelque chose d'immatériel, de même nature que toutes nos préoccupations ou nos sensations de ce temps-là, et se mêlent indissolublement à elle. Tel nom lu dans un livre autrefois contient entre ses syllabes le vent rapide et le soleil brillant qu'il faisait quand nous le lisions. (Proust 2:1402)[73]

The name, here — in this case, the name as a fragment of the object that is the book — doesn't simply hold memory and sensation (as the name so often does throughout *La Recherche*) but is intercalated with the sensory, affective and subjective elements that make up the moment in time in which we first read it. The sensation of seeing the book is indeed, as Deleuze would put it, a vase in

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[73] "...if we see again a thing that we have looked at in former times, it brings to us, with the gaze that we have posed upon it, all the images that filled it then. This is because things ... as soon as they are perceived by us, become in us something immaterial, of the same nature as all of our preoccupations or sensations from that former time, and those become indissolubly mixed with [the thing]. A name formerly read in a book contains in

which a moment of the past (along with all of its associated feelings) is contained, ready to fold out into the present, but in this passage the narrator is also indicating that a sensation is able to deliver the past to us because the object involved in that sensation has become mixed with — combined with, in us — the elements of that past.

Like all of the episodes identified as moments of *mémoire involontaire* except the famous madeleine, the episode of *François le champi* does not actually feature a narration of the past that has been called up. It does, however, lead to a notable moment of the combination of past and present selves, sensation and location, in which the past element is narrated. I'm referring to the moment at the very end of *Le temps retrouvé* that I pinpointed as that in which Marcel's past self is coming back to life in the novel's ceaseless narrative loop — the moment when, having gone in to the Guermantes' party, Marcel (as a result of having encountered the book some moments before) also finds himself in his parents' house in Combray, and can hear the sound of the bell and his parents' footsteps echoing through the space of the Guermantes' *hôtel particulier*. The past has invaded the present — and the result is a juxtaposition, a combination, of the past and the present moment.

There is an important suggestion of this combination in the first pages of the work, as well, in one of the novel's most vivid depictions of the flexibility, plurality and modularity of time and space (and subjectivity, insofar as a specific self is tied to a time and a place). In the opening "bedrooms" passage of *Swann*, narrating his habitual waking in confusion in the middle of the night unsure of where or when (or indeed who) he is, the narrator describes how "everything" turns around him in the dark, including the unseen walls of his room as he — reduced to his body, since his self has been misplaced, but a body with an

its syllables the rapid wind and brilliant sun that was shining when we were reading it" (translation mine).

imagination — runs through the different rooms in which he's slept over the course of his life:

> …tout tournait autour de moi dans l'obscurité, les choses, les pays, les années. Mon corps … cherchait … à repérer la position de ses membres pour
>
> en induire la direction du mur … [et] pour reconstruire et pour nommer la demeure où il se trouvait. Sa mémoire, la mémoire de ses côtes, de ses
>
> genoux, de ses épaules, lui présentait successivement plusieurs des chambres où il avait dormi, tandis qu'autour de lui les murs invisibles, changeant
>
> de place selon la forme de la pièce imaginée, tourbillonnaient dans les ténèbres (Proust 1:12).[74]

It is as if time and space have been reduced, along with the narrator's body, into component parts, modules of space-time from which the narrator must now pick as they spin around him, combined in this brief moment (and space) of dislocation.

The world of *La Recherche* and *La Recherche* itself, then, like the world and the text of *The Waves*, are made up of fragments, of modules, which interact and recombine and can be recombined further. I wrote above of a sort of anticipation of some aspects of the operation of software like *Minecraft* (unlikely though it may seem) present in *La Recherche*'s treatment of character and depiction of subjectivity as a multiplicity of serial, modular selves (an anticipation that, I think, is also at work in *The Waves*' series of modular fragments). The modularity of the text and its world also give a sort of anticipation of the

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[74] "… all turned around me in the dimness; things, places, years. My body … searched … to identify the position of its limbs in order to deduce from them the direction of the wall … [and] to rebuild and name the dwelling where it found itself. Its memory, the memory of its ribs, of its knees, of its shoulders, successively presented it with several of the bedrooms where it had slept, while around it the invisible walls, changing places in accordance

modularity of *Minecraft*, which, as a game based in the movement of discrete

objects through a virtual space (and as a piece of software written in Java, an

object-oriented language involving the interaction of more or less discrete

modules of code), can be seen as existing at the extreme of textual modularity. I

turn now to a closer analysis of that game, and its ties both to Proust's text and to

Woolf's.

5. *Minecraft*, the modular world, and reading as combinatorial writing

I am now going to tell a story about the experience of playing *Minecraft*. It

may initially seem pointless for me to do so (much in the same way *Minecraft*

itself initially seemed pointless to me), but I have no other way of "citing" the

experience of playing a video game. The text that is a video game cannot be

effectively, or even very usefully, conveyed via things like screenshots, links to

recordings of people playing it, or abstract descriptions of game play mechanics.[75]

To quote Alexander Galloway: "*video games are actions*. … Without the active

participation of players and machines, video games exist only as static computer

code. Video games come into being when the machine is powered up and the

software is executed; they exist when enacted" (Galloway 2; emphasis his). I

would not go quite so far as Galloway in limiting the category of "video game" to

the action involved — a video game that I've paused while I go get something to

drink is still a game, a video game text, regardless of the fact that it's been paused

— but I agree with him that the experience of action, of *playing*, is a crucial

element of games-as-texts. I think I can best give an idea of the experience of

Minecraft, of the text itself, simply by providing a first-person account of a

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with the form of the imagined room, whirled in the darkness" (translation
mine).

[75] That said, I encourage the reader who has not played *Minecraft* and wants to get a
sense of it to do a YouTube (or general Web) search for "Minecraft walkthrough" and
spend a moment watching one of the innumerable recordings of gameplay that players
have uploaded (often with accompanying commentary).

memorable instance of gameplay, which will then serve as the textual example or passage I will analyze.

The first time I played *Minecraft*, "I," meaning my player character, spawned in a relatively featureless — and to my unhabituated eye thoroughly, even off-puttingly, weird — landscape of pixelated grass dotted with a few blocky green and brown things that, after a moment of confusion, I recognized as depictions of trees. I knew nothing about the game beyond the fact that it was extremely popular and involved procedurally-generated infinite spaces. The game (unlike most games I was used to) features no instructions or in-game help of any kind, so I spent several minutes struggling to figure out the most basic commands. Luckily, some of the key bindings — the relationships between individual keys and the commands they transmit to the computer — were the same as those commonly used in other games, so I was able to discover by myself how to look around, move the player character back and forth, and make the character punch the air with its fist. (This was a pinkish-brown rectangle on the right side of my field of view, which I knew, based on the conventions of first-person shooter games, must be some kind of tool or weapon, but it looked so unlike anything attached to a real human that for a long time I didn't recognize it as the representation of a hand. I call its movement "punching" because it is so quick, and can be used to destroy the blocks that make up the things of the world.)[76]

Annoyed by the difficulty presented by the lack of instructions but determined to explore the game, I spent some time wandering around in circles and accidentally gathering wheat seeds (produced by punching grass), which I eventually figured out how to "equip" — place in the player character's hand,

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[76] A "first-person shooter" is, essentially, a shooting game in which the "camera" shows the player character's point of view. Typically, on one side of the screen or the other, the player can see whatever weapon(s) the character is holding, or, if the character is holding nothing, one or both of its hands.

ready for use — but couldn't identify or find a use for; they just looked like an interconnected cluster of green dots, and waving them had no result. I found flowers that could also be gathered by punching them (this destroyed them in the world, but ranged smaller versions of them inside the cluster of boxes at the bottom of the screen that was clearly my character's inventory); waving these had no result either (it turned out later that what I thought of as "waving" was the player character moving its hand in an attempt to place an object back into the world, but I hadn't learned the key commands required to place objects, and in fact didn't yet know you *could* place objects in the world). I found a lake, in which (through nearly drowning the player character) I discovered that the computer's space bar, which made the character jump, also allowed it to swim. At some point, primitive depictions of cows (also made of blocks) appeared almost out of nowhere, mooing and looking at me, periodically wandering from place to place. Their movements were an odd combination of jerkiness and flow, of smooth lines mixed with halts, up-and-down bounces, and right-angle turns. (Punching *them* only resulted in a particularly strident, frightened-sounding moo as they jumped straight up, briefly flashed red, and ran away.)

After eight or nine minutes of this kind of thing, while I was still learning what I could by trial and error, I noticed the sky turning purple, the angular clouds turning pink, and realized the sun was going down. Frustration mounted and virtual darkness fell while I poked at various keys, punched every kind of object I could see and ran into trees, trying to figure out what I was supposed to do and knowing that being outside at night was probably not going to prove good for my player character's health. Indeed, shortly after the bright square of the sun had finished its movement across the sky (a movement that was another strange mix of smoothness and subtle jerks) and disappeared below the horizon, I heard loud groans — breathy, animalistic, and surprisingly hair-raising — coming from somewhere nearby. I could see nothing onscreen except darkness. The view jerked

violently several times, accompanied by smacking noises. The player character was clearly being attacked; redness drained from the line of hearts printed onscreen, telling me the character was losing health. Then the hearts went entirely black. The "camera" fell to the "ground," a red haze descended over the screen, and a message appeared: "You have died!".

Angry about what seemed like the pointless difficulty of the game, I almost stopped playing. I was still curious about *Minecraft*'s infinite worlds, though, so instead I told it to respawn my player character. The character reappeared inside the game world near the place where it had died, in the same place where it had first spawned: this was the spawn point. I noticed the player character had lost all of its inventory (this didn't matter much, since I had no idea what to do with any of the objects I'd gathered). I had hoped the game's day/night cycle would start up anew, but everything was still dark; I realized that game time had restarted immediately after the moment my character had died. The darkness was nearly total. I looked around quickly (and with a surprising amount of panic), trying to spot whatever had just killed me. No luck. Within a few seconds, I had been killed again, again without seeing whatever was doing the killing.

This went on three or four times more before I gave up in disgust and made my way to Google to figure out what was going on by reading some of the countless websites devoted to *Minecraft*. It could be objected that this was a form of "cheating," since I was looking for information not offered by the game text itself; I would counter that we do something similar when we turn to literary criticism, or take literature classes, in order to more easily understand and navigate novels like Proust's and Woolf's. In any case, my Google search revealed that a zombie had killed me (I'd finally glimpsed its mottled green-and-brown face the last time it had attacked); it would catch fire and "die" when the sun rose. I picked up a few instructions: how to destroy blocks (through continuous punching), gather them, place them back into the world, combine wood in the

inventory screen to make a crafting table, and so on. Then I respawned again and spent the rest of the "night" running here and there to avoid monsters, getting killed, respawning. Once ten real-world minutes had gone by inside the game world, the sun rose and, indeed, the zombies caught fire and disappeared, leaving behind bits of charred zombie meat that my player character gathered up (any loose objects within a certain radius automatically find their way into the inventory, whether the player wants them to or not).

Now things were different; I knew how to survive the in-game night. There was no time to lose, as day would only last for ten real-world minutes. I found a tree and punched the trunk repeatedly until that block of trunk was destroyed, leaving behind the rest of the tree (the top half was unaffected by the destruction of a segment of the trunk but instead hung there in space, there being no gravity in *Minecraft* for objects other than the player character and the "mobs," the other "living" objects). Destroying the trunk block produced, floating above the "ground," a smaller version of that trunk block (imagine a segment of log, cube-shaped rather than cylindrical); my character gathered this into itself. From my reading, I now knew that the player character was a sort of machine for transformation: I could use the small crafting interface in the inventory screen to change trunk blocks into wood "planks" (cubes that look like they're made of planks), so I did that, then combined two planks to make a crafting table. Placing the table on the ground nearby was done by right-clicking on the block of ground I wanted the table to occupy. By clicking on the table, I could pull up the full crafting interface (the functionality of which I will discuss below). I needed tools, so I combined two planks into sticks, then sticks and planks (in various configurations in the crafting interface) into a wooden pickaxe, wood axe, shovel, and sword. When I had time, I would find stone and make more powerful stone tools, and eventually, once I'd found iron ore and crafted a stone furnace for smelting, I'd be able to make iron tools.

I started building a crude shelter for the player character by placing wood cubes in the world so as to make walls. I ran out of wood before finishing, so (feeling increasing panic as the music signaling nightfall began to play) I equipped the shovel and used it to break and gather up dirt blocks from the ground, blocks which I placed back into the world to make a roof (when placed in the game world, dirt retains the shape of a solid cube). I used my axe to break apart the crafting table and get it back into the inventory, then walked the player character into my tiny shelter and placed the crafting table back on the ground so that it could be used. The sun was almost down. I boarded up the hole I'd left for a door and spent the next ten real-world minutes in darkness (I hadn't had time to find ingredients for torches), listening to zombies groan as they tried to get in. The next "morning," I would use the shovel and pickaxe to dig down into the ground until I hit stone; eventually I would find coal, the key ingredient for torches, and then I'd be able to do things at night. After that, it would be a question of finding some sheep and killing or shearing them for their wool, from which (in combination with wood) I could make a bed for the player character to "sleep" in (a process that would make the game night pass in a few seconds). I would then be left to play (mostly) during the in-game day, when I could build and destroy and explore my way through the infinite game world with less chance of being eaten, and the full range of *Minecraft*'s possibilities would open up.

I hope this account has shown that combination (most obviously, but not solely, combination in the form of "crafting") is a crucial element of playing *Minecraft*. Crafting, in tandem with "mining" (the process of destroying a block and collecting the resources it "drops") — the combination of "crafting" and "mining" being the portmanteau that is the game's title — is what allows the player character to stay "alive" and thus enable the player to explore and

transform the world.[77] Because nothing is used in crafting that is not first present in the world (as opposed to spontaneously generated), any transformation of the world that involves building something (perhaps the most popular activity associated with *Minecraft*), or otherwise placing blocks, operates via its own combinatorial process — specifically, the process of recombination I engaged in when I had the player character mine tree and dirt blocks out of the world, then place them back in the new configuration of blocks that constituted my simple shelter.

Fig. 4. The *Minecraft* crafting interface. Mojang AB, *Minecraft* 1.8.4.

In the crafting process, resources are combined into new objects via the use of the crafting table (itself produced, as I described, by combining planks in the player character's own smaller, much less powerful crafting interface). The crafting interface produced by the table is a dialogue box featuring an array of nine squares and a right-pointing arrow indicating the box in which appear any

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[77] The terms "mining" and "crafting" used in this kind of video game context are not *Minecraft*-specific; "crafting" especially is widely used to describe this functionality of

items that can be crafted from the ingredients placed in the squares. Below the crafting array, the contents of the player character's inventory are arranged in their own array of thirty-six boxes, each of which can hold up to sixty-four individual samples of a given type of item. During the crafting process, the player takes ingredients from the inventory and places them into one or more of the crafting array of nine squares. If the correct ingredients are placed in the proper configuration inside the array, a new item or set of items is produced that the player can then use. In the above screenshot, for example, I've placed pieces of coal above sticks (themselves first crafted by putting two blocks of wooden planks one above the other in the crafting array). Since a chunk of coal on top of a stick is the recipe for torches (specifically, for four torches), torches have been produced and can now be dragged from the box in the upper right to the inventory, from which they can be placed in the world to provide light. If, instead, I had placed two sticks one on top of the other in the central row of the crafting interface, then placed three of my forty-one iron ingots in a right-angle pattern filling the top left corner of the array, I would have produced an iron axe. There are many resources, many recipes (which must either be discovered through trial and error or by looking for help online or in manuals), and many possible items one can craft; more are added each time the developers release a major update of the game.

As I previously discussed, the world of *Minecraft* is, in essence, the perfect literalization of the fragmentation of the worlds of all *textes fleuves*. The *Minecraft* world is built from the discrete fragments that are the blocks, singularities that can be broken apart into multiplicities (one block of coal-rich stone, for instance, produces two or three chunks of coal) that are then folded into the segmented whole that is the player character and can then be called onscreen and displayed in the array that is the inventory screen. The individual elements of

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creation-through-combination, which is present in some form in a huge number of games (including all of Bethesda Softworks' RPGs).

the multiplicities produced by breaking blocks can then usually be placed back into the world as singularities (one of the 64 blocks of orange acacia wood my character is carrying in the screenshot could be removed from its stack and placed somewhere by itself or as part of a structure). Beyond that, they can almost always be combined with other elements to produce new items, sometimes themselves single and multiple at once (as is the stack of four torches produced by a single stick and piece of coal). The game itself is, at base, not just the exploration, destruction and recombination of the game world but also the constant folding up of elements of the world and the fanning of them back out into the world, often in some changed form produced by the combinations of the crafting process.

Much as the comparison of *Minecraft* and *La Recherche* may at first seem discordant, all of this is not so unlike the way Proust's Marcel traverses and deals with the world of *La Recherche* in the course of (what Deleuze identifies in *Proust et les signes* as) his search for truth and his apprenticeship to the deciphering of signs.[78] *La Recherche* not only requires a combinatorial reading on the part of the reader, but Marcel himself is obliged, given the fragmentation of his world and the modularity of many of the pieces, to approach the task of comprehending (for example) the selves of others not simply by deciphering signs and identifying what is container and contained, but by engaging in a kind of combinatorial reading of his own; he has to combine and reconcile the varied views of Odette, for example, almost as much as we do (it is the aged Marcel who is the narrator, not Marcel the hero, who holds all these views at once and thus can play tricks on us).

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[78] Specifically, Deleuze writes: "L'oeuvre de Proust est fondée, non pas sur l'exposition de la mémoire, mais sur l'apprentissage des signes" ("Proust's work is founded not on the exposition of memory, but on the apprenticeship to signs") (*PS* 11, translation mine); "La Recherche du temps perdu [sic], en fait, est une recherche de la verité" ("The Search for lost time [sic] is, in fact, a search for the truth") (*PS* 23, translation mine).

There is also a literalization in *Minecraft* of the production process that is the combinatorial reading demanded by the *texte fleuve* in general. *The Waves* and *La Recherche*, as I have argued, are produced as comprehensible texts by a reading process that consists of combining disparate fragments (such as narrative episodes and different facets of characters) into a coherent whole, in a sort of synchronic rather than diachronic or sequential apprehension. Their narrative and descriptive structures thus force a reading that is also a continual rereading performed as the reader is obliged to recall fragments scattered throughout the text. Since the reader is mentally juxtaposing — *recombining* — dislocated elements of the text in order to make sense of that text, a combinatorial (re)reading is also, concurrently, a combinatorial (re)writing.

Print novel *textes fleuve* like *The Waves* can suggest (even encourage) a more explicit rewriting, but it's in texts like *Minecraft* that the demand for combinatorial (re)writing becomes most explicit. *Minecraft* requires combinatorial writing in the most obvious possible way, as part of its functioning as a game. As my experience of playing that game for the first time demonstrated, it is impossible for a new player character to survive for more than ten minutes or so without the player's puzzling out, or otherwise discovering (perhaps with a web search like mine), how to fragment the world (or further fragment it) and combine those fragments into certain crucial items and constructions.[79] These items — tools, a shelter, etc — are necessary not just in order for the player character to avoid "death" (to fend off monsters, replenish hunger points, etc) — to "live" and thereby enable the player to continue reading (playing, exploring) the world —

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[79] A little more detail about the technicalities of what was happening in my first experience playing: *Minecraft* involves a day/night cycle that takes twenty "real-time" minutes. In survival mode, monsters spawn in the dark. The player character always spawns above the surface (usually in a well-lit area), meaning that a new character is likely to first encounter monsters at the first dusk. The monsters are relentless as long as the "sun" is down, and are difficult to kill even if the player character is prepared. If a player/character is as unprepared as I was — in particular, if s/he hasn't built a shelter — the character will be attacked and killed over and over again until sunrise.

but indeed in order for the player to *write* that world, to write on and rewrite the world, by traversing and transforming it. The supposed boundaries between reading and writing break down — or, rather, are easier to see as the impossibly porous "boundaries," always already dissolving, that they always were; combinatorial reading, here, is clearly also a combinatorial writing, an act of comprehension that is at one and the same time an act of creation. Thus what might seem to be the more primitive, paratactic forms of narration at work in *Minecraft* end up helping us to see what more elaborated, syntactic forms of novelistic *textes fleuve* enfold within them as paradigms of apprehension that can become so familiar that, sometimes, we no longer even apprehend them at all.

As I dealt with the subject of modularity and its link to combination and combinatorial reading/writing in both the structural elements and the worlds of *The Waves* and *La Recherche*, I want to turn now to the question of modularity in *Minecraft*.

In *The Language of New Media* (2001), media theorist Lev Manovich discusses "the modular organization of [the] new media object," a type of media artifact which, as he explains, is "rarely created completely from scratch" but instead "usually … assembled from ready-made parts" (139, 124).[80] A website, for example, is typically made from a collection of independent parts such as images, videos, blocks of text, audio files, buttons, dialogue boxes, and so on — elements which are themselves made up of discrete component parts (a digital image, for instance, is a collection of individual pixels, the smallest unit of light and color

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[80] Manovich's goal being to discuss the similarities between all productions of new media, he uses the general term "new media object" to refer to any computer-produced media artifact (from a website to a digitally-produced film to a video game. etc). He also states that he chose the word "object" to harken to programming terminology, in which the word is used "to emphasize the modular nature of object-oriented programming languages such as C++ and Java" (14). *Minecraft* is written in Java.

that a computer or television screen can display). Computer culture, Manovich

argues, is dominated by two operations: selection and combination, and more

specifically the "selection and combination of preexistent elements" (135). He

primarily discusses the operation that is combination in terms of "compositing"

("a typical operation in assembling any new media object"): this is the process of

"assembling together a number of elements to create a single seamless object"

(139).[81] Any such seamlessness, however, is illusory, because not only are new

media objects built from discrete parts, those parts often "continue to maintain

their separate identities" when in combination with each other (30). Because of

this independence, elements of the new media object "can be easily modified,

substituted, or deleted" without necessarily forcing a modification of the others or

of the whole — a whole that, I emphasize, is (since it is a combination of discrete

elements) both multiple and single at once (139). An image from a webpage, for

instance, can be pulled out of the page by the web designer and replaced with

another image either (depending on the software one is using) by changing a few

lines of code or by simply "dragging and dropping," and this action can be taken

without requiring any changes to the other components of the page.

   Minecraft, an example of the general type of new media artifact to which

Manovich is referring, is profoundly modular. It is a machine for combining that is

itself a combination; it is a *combinatoire* the constitutive elements of which

combine and recombine constantly, ceaselessly. Manovich notes that the

construction of many new media objects ends with a "flattening" process that

merges all the elements together so as to make them individually inaccessible

(limiting the full range of those objects' modularity to the production process); a

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[81] For example, digital compositing was vital in the creation of George Lucas' *Star Wars* prequel films, released between 1999 and 2006. "According to Lucas," writes Manovich, "95 percent of [1999's *The Phantom Menace*] was assembled on a computer" (138). Films such as these are collections, digitally combined into one artifact, of many separate elements such as video and sound recordings of human actors, and computer-generated images and audio.

digitally composed image, for example, is made up of various "layers," a multiplicity of separate images, which are "flattened" or fused into a single image at the end of the compositing process. Computer games like *Minecraft* that allow players to move characters in space, however, "retain [their] modular structure when [they are] distributed" (139). In such a game, "the elements are adjusted during production to form a single whole, stylistically, spatially, and semantically; while playing the game the user can move the elements within the programmed limits" (139).

In other words, *Minecraft*'s modularity — its fragmentation into relatively discrete elements that can be recombined — is what allows it to function as a game based in the PC's traversal of virtual three-dimensional space; the modularity of its parts is what allows the particular kind of interaction the program enables. Beyond that, no matter what else the player may be doing, each time s/he moves the player character (itself a discrete object both onscreen and in the code) so much as a fraction of a block in any direction, a new combination and configuration of objects is produced in the space. (This production is often the literal production of more game space — itself constituted of new combinations of blocks — since, as I explained in chapter 1, *Minecraft* manages the potentially infinite vastness of its game worlds by only rendering new "chunks," or expanses of the world, as a result of the player's movement of the player character.)

The modularity of space in *Minecraft* is thus fairly easy to see, but there is no such easy parallel between the effects of the game's various kinds of modularity and the modularity of subjectivity and narrative that I identified at work in *La Recherche* and *The Waves*. The player character's smooth movement through virtual space dominates the experience of playing *Minecraft* in a way that creates a strong impression of temporal continuity (Manovich, in fact, suggests that such games are dominated by an "aesthetics of continuity," which he opposes

to montage, a technique he associates with Modernism [see Manovich's Chapter 3, "The Operations"]) . That smooth continuity, however, is an illusion. The player character in any given moment (at least, any moment perceptible to a human) is actually the accumulation and continuation of updates to the character's state that are made by the software twenty times per second; the same is true of every object in the game. Movement itself is displayed onscreen in a limited number of frames per second, as it would be on a television or in a movie theatre; the general frame rate used by the game is adjustable so that the player can adjust to the processing power (or lack thereof) of a given computer, but, as an example, my copy of *Minecraft* is set to display the game world at a median frame rate of about sixty frames per second. We perceive movement in the game as fluid simply because our brains, unable to separately process images that are going by that quickly, stitch them into one fluid progression.

Perhaps more importantly, time and narrative progression in *Minecraft* are fractured on a perceptible level by phenomena like player character death and respawning. In my experience of first playing, I mentally constructed a narrative — perhaps a relatively simple one, but a narrative nonetheless — built from elements such as my actions as I traversed and dealt with the virtual space, as well as from the player character's responses to my commands (like "waving" when I hit a certain key) and from the actions of the "mobs," the cows and zombies, which (along with the player character) acted as "evocative narrative elements" of the kind I discussed in Chapter 1. This narrative I was constructing was continually interrupted, fragmented into more or less discrete episodes, by my in-game deaths and the pauses between those deaths and the player character's respawning — pauses which were sometimes long, as when I temporarily abandoned playing the game in order to go looking for instructions, or when I took advantage of such a pause to go get a snack. A lengthy pause requires the player to make an effort of memory — an effort that becomes increasingly

difficult as the pause lengthens — since continuity has been broken. An even greater effort of memory is needed if the player paused the game (or the player character was killed) in the midst of common situations such as the player character's being far from the spawn point, or the character having "just" (in the temporality of the game) been killed near the spawn point, as mine was during my first game session; in these situations, in order to avoid getting lost (which can be a serious problem in a world of potentially infinite extension that involves no map or "fast travel" functionality of the kind used in *Skyrim*), or being killed again by a nearby enemy, the player must be careful to remember the details of the state of the world, along with those of the narrative the player has been constructing, right before the game paused.

On one level, the episodic narrative fragments into which the game narrative is fractured by things like player character deaths or other pauses are sequential, following each other in a process of narrative unfolding that requires little in the way of combinatorial reading. Combinatorial reading, however, increasingly becomes a factor as the game is played, simply because of the nature of dealing with the exploration and construction of a virtual world. As Manovich writes of games that, like *Minecraft*, are structured around the player's traversal of virtual space via the movement of the player character, "narrative and time itself are equated with movement through 3-D space" (245). In that space, "rather than being narrated to, the player herself has to perform actions to move narrative forward — …picking up objects, fighting enemies, and so on" (247). Narrative in the game is inextricably tied with space; furthermore, I suggest that many of the narratives the player constructs in a vast sandbox like *Minecraft* are tied to specific areas in the game world, and that this is involved in the game's fragmentation (increasing over time) of narrative into separate episodes that must be apprehended, as a whole, via a combinatorial reading of the same type that is at work in *texte fleuve* print texts.

I will give an example based in my own game play experience. The *Minecraft* world of my first game session ended up being one in which I played regularly for about a year. Over the course of that year, I explored an enormous amount of terrain, built several houses in far-flung areas, and discovered interesting things (abandoned mines full of precious metals, villages, monster-infested jungle temples, etc) that were quite far apart. Because *Minecraft* involves no fast travel and the distances involved can require significant real-world time to traverse, I often didn't visit a given area for months at a time. After expanding my original crude shelter into a house and getting bored of its relatively bland surroundings, I set out to explore the world and didn't return to the first area for two or three months. During those months, I spent time in other areas, engaging in other activities and creating narrative episodes that had little or nothing to do with the first area. When I eventually returned, I had to readjust to the details of the first area, remember what I'd been doing there before leaving, and take up abandoned activities where they'd been left off (expanding the house, gathering crops, dealing with the local fauna, etc). In order to gain a full understanding of the first area and the various narratives associated with it, I had to combine my current impression of it with my memories of my past impressions of it.

There is a parallel here with the way the reader of a narrative like *La Recherche*, presented with a location or character (Combray, Odette) that has not been seen for hundreds of pages, has to recall what s/he already knows about that location or character, and combine that past view with the current one. The (re)writing of the space of the game world that I discussed above and that is the most obviously combinatorial aspect of the playing of *Minecraft* goes hand in hand with a combinatorial construction and apprehension of narrative. The game is thus a *combinatoire* on several levels, being a combination of more or less discrete parts that produces continual recombinations and enables the player's

recombinations of the world, recombinations that result in combinatorial narratives.

The *texte fleuve*, then, is a *combinatoire*, a textual machine for combining, that depicts and produces combinations and recombinations of the elements of its fragmented, modular world. The *combinatoire* aspect of the *texte fleuve* results in any reading of it being, at the same time, a rereading, which is also a writing and rewriting. This rewriting is integral to the work's existence as the metaphorical center of the "circumtext," the networked assemblage of interrelated texts with which it is in dialogue and through which it proliferates. It is to the circumtext and the work's proliferation and survival in its network that I turn in my next chapter.

Chapter 4

The Circumtext and Survival

1. The circumtext and the *texte fleuve*'s refusal of the end

In "Multiplicity," the final lecture of his *Six Memos*, Calvino writes of "the contemporary novel as an encyclopedia, as a method of knowledge, and above all as a network of connections between the events, the people, and the things of the world" (105). The "contemporary novel" he describes in "Multiplicity" is not what the phrase first seems to suggest (all novels written in recent years). Calvino obviously means something else by this designation, which he doesn't confine either to recent works or those that fall into what is usually considered the genre of the "novel." While most of his examples are drawn from the realm of lengthy novels of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as Proust's *Recherche*, Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, Gustave Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, and Georges Perec's *La vie mode d'emploi*, Calvino also discusses the short stories of Carlo Emilio Gadda and Jorge Luis Borges as well as the essays and notes of Paul Valéry; furthermore, he draws a line from these modern works to the poetry of Lucretius and Ovid, which he sees as preoccupied with the same "idea of a system of infinite relationships between *everything* and *everything else*" (112; emphasis his). What matters to Calvino is not the genre or form of a work, but its depiction and deployment of networks, multiplicities of connections and possibilities, modularity, and combination — elements that can be found in a variety of literary forms: "the scheme of the network of possibilities," he writes, "may be condensed into the few pages of a story by Borges, or … made the supporting structure of immensely long novels … the structure of which is accumulative, modular, and combinatory" (120). Calvino finishes "Multiplicity" (which he calls his "apologia for the novel as a vast net") by suggesting that this

kind of "novel" is a reflection or model of the self, of which he writes: "Who are we … if not a combinatoria of experiences, information, books we have read, things imagined? Each life is an encyclopedia, a library, an inventory of objects, a series of styles, and everything can be constantly shuffled and reordered in every way conceivable" (124).

With these descriptions of a specific type of prose work that is not limited either to what is commonly understood as the "novel" or as the "contemporary," Calvino is gesturing towards a new generic classification without naming it as such. Based on his descriptions, it is clear to me that what he calls the "contemporary novel" is in essence the same thing as the *texte fleuve*, though he limits his discussion to prose (with references to poetry) and I have expanded the field in question to include works in other media that involve the same kinds of structures and themes. Referring to Lucretius and Ovid and the "system of infinite relationships" mentioned above, Calvino writes (using the word "literature" to refer to his "contemporary novel") that "in our own times literature is attempting to realize this ancient desire to represent the multiplicity of relationships, both in effect and in potentiality" (112). This is one of what he calls the "overambitious projects" of literature, which, he continues, "remains alive only if we set ourselves immeasurable goals, far beyond all hope of achievement" (112).[82] The literary project he's describing is a project of the *texte fleuve*, a category of texts that represent the multiplicity of relationships — the "network of connections" of the first Calvino quotation given above — and that also create, depict, and enact that multiplicity and networking.

I have already discussed my primary texts' representations of multiplicity and of concurrent states of multiplicity and singularity, and their function as *combinatoires* of modular, recombinable fragments. My analysis in this chapter

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[82] The other "immeasurable goal" he suggests is that of "weaving together the various branches of knowledge .. into a manifold and multifaceted vision of the world" (112).

has two related foci. First, I am concerned with the *texte fleuve* as, in Calvino's words, "an encyclopedia, as a method of knowledge, and … as a network of connections" (105). Second, I will examine the work's relationship with its *circumtext* (defined at greater length below), the textual assemblage and networked "method of knowledge" of which the *texte fleuve* is the metaphorical center, a network whose existence the text's fragmented structure both anticipates and encourages, and into which — and into the exploration of which — it attempts to pull the reader. But first, in order to set up my definitions of terms and my examination of these topics, I want to introduce another, related project of the *texte fleuve*'s that Calvino does not touch on despite his emphasis on infinity and expansion. Tied to the text's depictions and actualizations of endlessness, of infinite extension and possibility, this project is an ambitious one (perhaps one of the "overambitious projects" Calvino endorses): it is the *texte fleuve*'s determined effort to move past its ends and transgress its boundaries, to negate finality, to encompass everything it can within the endlessly expanding network it builds and through which it proliferates, to transcend finitude and embrace the infinite — indeed, to refuse and survive death.

The *texte fleuve,* with its pluralities and potentialities, its combinations and recombinations, is a continual attempt to go beyond the end. Narrative ends are necessary for comprehension, as Kermode and Ricoeur have argued, and any *texte fleuve* contains multiple endings (the ends of narrative episodes, the last lines of a novel or final panel of a comic strip, the moment a player stops a game session, etc). Despite these, the *texte fleuve* resists finality, sidesteps closure. When faced with a "true" end, an end that would wrap things up and finish things for good, it compels itself forward.

In one way or another (appropriate to the constraints of its medium), it always keeps going.[83] Print *textes fleuve* offer representations of eternity and infinity but also, on a structural level, gesture at potential actualizations of those states; they might become ouroboroi by establishing narrative loops, for example, and all of them reach for the eternal and the infinite with the constant combinations and recombinations (both actual and potential) of the fragments that constitute them. Video game *textes fleuve* enable a potentially infinite traversal of time and space, bounded only by the limits of the player's interest and the material lifespans of hardware and software (and, for that matter, of the player); furthermore, by enabling the player to respawn the player character at will, with no limit to the number of possible reincarnations, they enact a version of (or potential for) the immortality that print texts reach for, depict or suggest through strategies like the looping narrative.

The *texte fleuve* resists its finitude and strives to continue forever, even to transcend death. The text incorporates death while refusing to accord it complete finality. This is the refusal expressed by Bernard in the defiant lines "ending" the primary narrative of *The Waves*: "Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!" (Woolf 297). Death is always present in some form, and is always in some way subverted, thwarted, endlessly deferred. The narrator of *La Recherche* describes the progression of the self — of life itself — as a series of successive deaths ("morts successives") caused by the process of forgetting and the passing of the moments to which the subject's multiple selves are linked (Proust 2:1553). By the "end" of the novel he has died many times, he explains: "…je comprenais que mourir n'était pas quelque chose de nouveau, mais qu'au

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[83] I note that, while I only discuss print and software-based texts in this dissertation, the *texte fleuve* is not limited to these media. A cinematic *texte fleuve*, for example, might attempt to go beyond its end in similar ways as a novel: by setting up a narrative loop that lets the story respawn (as in Terry Gilliam's *12 Monkeys* [1995]), or simply by refusing to come to a final ending (as in a number of television series that have been either running for decades or are continuously "rebooted").

contraire depuis mon enfance j'étais déjà mort bien des fois" ("…I understood that dying was not something new, but that, on the contrary, since my childhood I had already died many times") (2:1553, translation mine).

Constituted by the multiplicity of these deaths, Marcel survives each one and goes beyond it. As I argued in chapter 2, Marcel, though worried about the "true" (or truly final) death that might keep him from finishing his work, is in the process of (to some degree) avoiding it by reinscribing himself, as a fictional character (which he already is), in the narrative loop of the text. Marcel respawns. The Woolfian subject of *The Waves* is not so different; despite her suicide, Rhoda is as present as the other five point of view characters in the final soliloquy, when the subjectivities and voices of all six characters are folded into Bernard's. In *Minecraft*, *Skyrim,* and *Fallout 3*, the player character is typically constituted in a series of deaths from which — assuming the save file is intact — it can always recover, after which it can always respawn.[84] The *texte fleuve* is a literature of respawning, in which the self and the text itself have the potential to continue forever, to endlessly proliferate.

This respawning and proliferation take place "in" the content of the work, but also "outside" of it, in the form of those texts that respond to and rewrite the work; I call these the *circumtext*. In Chapter 3, I argued that the *texte fleuve*'s structure of modular fragments requires the reader to engage in a process of combinatorial reading, that that structure entails a concurrent rewriting of the text, and that it suggests, even encourages, further rewritings. These rewritings sometimes become externalized, in textual productions explicitly responding to, absorbing, rereading, reworking, and using the text (as a source, a tool for reading

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[84] I say "typically" here to acknowledge the subset of players who make a point of trying to play through these games without "dying." I also mention *Minecraft*'s "hardcore" mode. This is a game mode in which, if the player character dies, its particular *Minecraft* game is over for good; the player does not have the option of respawning or of re-accessing that character's world in any way (meaning that, effectively, if the character dies in "hardcore" mode, the world is destroyed).

something else, etc): translations, adaptations, sequels and prequels, "mods" (player-created versions of games), critical analyses and commentary, fan fiction (known as "fanfic"), playing/reading guides, reviews, internet forum discussions, and so on. These responding texts constitute the circumtext of a given work: the dynamic, ever-expanding assemblage or network of texts explicitly rereading and rewriting the work with which the network is in dialogue, and whose constitutive texts are in dialogue with each other.

As poststructuralist thinkers have argued (Barthes and Derrida perhaps most famously), every text is embedded in the play of intertextuality. This is the interaction between texts that makes of every text "a mosaic of quotations," as Julia Kristeva put it in the article in which she coined the term (attributing the idea itself to Bakhtin) (Kristeva "Word, Dialogue and Novel" 37). Writing, in this conception, is "a reading of the anterior literary corpus, and the text [is] an absorption of and a reply to another text" (Kristeva 39). Any given text consists of countless references, most of them untraceable, to other texts, none of which is truly original; as Jonathan Culler explains in *The Pursuit of Signs*, according to this model of intertextuality, "conventions and presuppositions cannot be traced to their sources and thus indubitably identified as grounds of signification" (102). Every text — even, as Culler notes, "any verbal construct" — is always already part of a limitless intertextual network, always in flux, in which the play of differences enables the text to produce meaning, and of which we are part insofar as we are texts ourselves (as Barthes writes in *S/Z*, "ce 'moi' qui s'approche du texte est déjà lui-même une pluralité d'autres textes, de codes infinis" ["this 'I' that approaches the text is already itself a plurality of other texts, of infinite codes"] [3:126, translation mine]) (Culler 101). As texts and readers of texts, we are enmeshed in the intertext, which, Barthes writes in *Le Plaisir du texte*, is

"l'impossibilité de vivre hors du texte infini" ("the impossibility of living outside the infinite text") (4:241; translation mine).

What I want to deal with here, however, is not the field of intertextuality as a whole, in which the vast majority of references are untraceable, but a field that will more easily allow for analysis: the somewhat more restricted field of texts that are (to a greater or lesser degree) explicitly in dialogue with a given work, in that their references to the work can be traced. I write that this field of texts is "restricted," and it is indeed restricted in the sense that the circumtext necessarily involves a finite number of texts (those whose references to a given work can be traced). However, I note that the boundaries of a circumtext are still, in effect, impossible to detect. The circumtext is a part of the larger intertext, into which bleed the unnamed echoes of the references made explicit in the circumtext. Given the play of intertextuality, the impossibility of clearly fixing what is "explicit" (a reference explicit to one reader may not be to another), and the unending creation of new texts, a circumtext cannot be a closed or discrete system. Any text is constantly in dialogue with a multiplicity of other texts, and so the individual texts that make up the circumtext's multiplicity are each enmeshed in other such multiplicities; a given circumtext overlaps with countless other circumtexts, since any text may be part of any number of circumtexts while being the center of its own.

Despite the text's lack of originality in the larger scheme of intertextuality and the intertext's absence of any center, what I call the "central" work of a circumtext has — if only in the context of that circumtext — a certain kind of originality and centrality. It is the work that has provoked response from the other texts, all of which refer to it and exist in their current form in part because of it (hence its originality); it is the referent that all elements of the circumtext have in common (hence its centrality). This originality and centrality, however, are immediately subverted by the fact that one does not approach a work or its

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circumtext in a way that respects historical chronology (meaning a linear series organized by the moment individual texts were published). Intertextuality and a text's cultural impact make such an approach impossible. For example, it is essentially inconceivable that anyone who is a product of Western culture could start reading a volume of *La Recherche* without ever having already heard or read about the work referenced in some way (whether or not the reader remembers seeing such a reference). A reader can never approach a work outside of a context, and the work can be read from the context just as elements of the context can be read from the work. In *Le plaisir du texte*, Barthes describes *La Recherche* as the "mandala" of his personal "literary cosmogony," as a work that can refer to texts published after itself and be referred to by earlier texts, because it is the text that always comes to him in the play of associations that is reading:

> …dans Flaubert, ce sont les pommier normands en fleurs que je lis à partir de Proust. Je savoure le règne des formules, le renversement des origines, la désinvolture qui fait venir le texte antérieure du texte ultérieure. Je comprends que l'oeuvre de Proust est, du moins pour moi, l'oeuvre de référence, la *mathésis* générale, le *mandala* de toute la cosmogonie littéraire … Proust, c'est ce qui me vient, ce n'est pas ce que j'appelle: ce n'est pas une 'autorité'; simplement un *souvenir circulaire*" (*Plaisir du texte* 50-51, emphases his)[85]

Like *La Recherche* in this passage, any work in an assemblage of related texts such as the circumtext can, in a real sense depending on the reader's relationship to the work, refer to a work that comes "after" it in terms of historical

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[85] "...In Flaubert, it is the blooming Normand apple trees that I read starting from Proust. I savor the reign of formulas, the reversal of origins, the casualness that brings the anterior text from the ulterior text. I understand that the work of Proust is, at least for me, the work of reference, the general *mathesis*, the *mandala* of a whole literary cosmogony... Proust is what comes to me, not what I call; it is not an 'authority,' simply a *circular memory*" (translation mine).

chronology.[86] The circumtext is a figurative cluster or galaxy of texts with no chronological beginning or end, no set order or entry point, no linearity; any of its texts can potentially refer to any other of its texts, depending on when and how a reader approaches the texts involved.

This structure of the circumtext is reminiscent of Barthes' description (in *S/Z*) of the ideal plural text, the text of "triumphant plurality" ("le pluriel triomphant") (3:123). I shall turn for a moment to this Barthesian conception to complement my discussion of the circumtext. Barthes' ideal text represents the full extent of the plurality of meanings (or, perhaps more precisely, possible interpretations) that he sees at work, to one degree or another, in every text. "Dans ce texte idéal," writes Barthes, "les réseaux sont multiples et jouent entre eux, sans qu'aucun puisse coiffer les autres; ce texte est une galaxie de signifiants, non une structure de signifiés; il n'a pas de commencement; il est réversible; on y accède par plusieurs entrées dont aucune ne peut être à coup sûr déclarée principale…" (3:123). Barthes is describing a single text rather than an assemblage, and his text of triumphant plurality is, as he indicates, only an ideal, which cannot be realized; he notes that things like grammar and narrative structure are indications that the texts we deal with, no matter the degree of their plurality, are "incompletely plural" ("l'on a affaire à des textes incomplètement pluriels") (Barthes 3:123).

Still, this model is compelling as an approximate description of the circumtext, because extreme plurality is associated with Barthes' "scriptible" or "writerly" (discussed in Chapter 1), and the writerly partakes of the infinite. The greater its plurality, the more a text — even what Barthes calls a readerly

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[86] Brenda Silver, writing about adaptations of Woolf's works, makes a similar point about originality in the context of related works: "The fact that so many people today see … versions of Woolf's works before they experience (if they ever do) the version she wrote and published … undoes the [original/adaptation] binary, transforming the adaptation into the original against which other versions are then read and measured" (Silver 213).

("lisible") text — reaches for the infinity suggested by the concept of the writerly.
"Plus le texte est pluriel et moins il est écrit avant que je le lise" ("the more the
text is plural, the less it is written before I read it"), writes Barthes, having already
told us that the writerly text, "c'est *nous en train d'écrire*, avant que le jeu infini
du monde … ne soit traversé, coupé, arrêté, plastifié par quelque système singulier
(Idéologie, Genre, Critique) qui en rabatte sur la pluralité des entrées, l'ouverture
des réseaux, l'infini des langages" ("it is *us in the process of writing*, before the
infinite play of the world … is traversed, cut, stopped, or laminated by some
singular system (Ideology, Genre, Critique) that cuts down on the plurality of
entry points, the openness of networks, the infinity of languages") (3:122,
emphasis his, translation mine). The greater the plurality of the text — the greater
the multiplicity and interplay of its networks, the more it can be accessed from
different points, the more potential interpretations can be found in it — the more it
requires the reader to write it as s/he reads, and it thus involves the writerly. I am
not saying a highly plural text becomes a writerly one, because, though Barthes
speaks of a "writerly text," he also makes clear that the writerly is not a thing
("pas une chose"), not something one could find in a bookstore (3:122). As I
understand Barthes, the writerly cannot be fixed, cannot be reified, cannot be
something like a book. It is a potentiality, a doing, a perpetual present: "un présent
perpétuel, sur lequel ne peut se poser aucune parole *conséquente* (qui le
transformerait, fatalement, en passé" ("a perpetual present, upon which can be
placed no *consequent* word (that would fatally transform it into the past)") (3:122,
translation mine). Its model is productive ("son modèle [est] productif"); it is the
novelistic without the novel ("le romanesque sans le roman"), poetry without the
poem ("la poésie sans le poème"), production without the product ("la production
sans le produit") (3:122). In contrast, readerly texts — which are the great mass of
texts — are products. Genette, in *Narrative Discourse Revisited* (1988), describes
the writerly as "the potential [as opposed] to the real, as a possibility not yet

produced … The 'writerly' is not only something *already written*, in the rewriting of which the reading plays a role and to which it contributes by its very reading; the 'writerly' is also something new, something *unwritten*"; it is "potentiality" (157).

The circumtext as a whole comes near to approximating Barthes' ideal fully plural text, which I understand as something that approaches an impossible production of the writerly — what the writerly might be if it could be reified, somehow fixed without losing its potential character. The circumtext is fueled by, fed by, created by the writerly, that potential that turns reader into writer, that act of (re)writing, that thing that ensures (given Barthes' "jeu infini du monde") that there will always be the potential for further rewritings (3:122). The circumtext is an exploration of potentialities that is driven both by what is written and what is unwritten in the central work; it is the proliferation of aspects, versions, visions, readings — in other words, rewritings — of the central work (itself, in the case of the *texte fleuve*, a potentially infinite plurality), and the dissemination of these aspects and rewritings through the links and nodes of its network.

Barthes says of the writerly text that "son modèle étant productif (et non plus représentatif), il abolit toute critique, qui, produite, se confondrait avec lui: le ré-écrire ne pourrait consister qu'à le disséminer, à le disperser dans le champ de la différence infinie" ("its model being productive (and no longer representative), it abolishes all critique, which, once produced, would become confused with it; to rewrite it could only consist in disseminating it, dispersing it in the field of infinite difference") (3:122, translation mine). The circumtext itself is productive more than it is representative; its nodes are in some sense reified readings and other transformations of the central work — its nodes are the work's rewritings — but these reified readings and rewritings involve more potentialities. Thus the nodes, the individual texts, endlessly spur their own responses and rewritings — their own respawnings through their own circumtexts — thereby coming into different

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relations with other nodes and with the central work. I would not say the circumtext abolishes criticism, but criticism cannot fix it in place anymore than it could fix Barthes' writerly; any criticism, once produced, would become confused with it just as criticism of the writerly would become confused with the writerly. As soon as an attempt is made (such as those I will make below) to interpret, critique, or describe a circumtext, that attempt becomes part of the circumtext, helping to drive its shifting and expansion, its constant movement.

That constant movement, that potentiality, that proliferation and rewriting of the central work through the links of the circumtext that generate the nodes — if that is not the writerly itself, it is the next thing to it. The essence of the circumtext is production, in the sense of ongoing creative processes — the acts of reading, writing, and rewriting, which enable the unfolding and exploration of the potentialities of its constitutive texts. Insofar as the circumtext attempts to fix the central work by trying to interpret, reify, and understand all its pluralities and potentialities, that attempt cannot succeed; a *texte fleuve* in particular, with its endlessnesses, is too complex, too highly plural, to ever come near being fixed or fully explored. (The impossibility of fully understanding and fixing in place something of potentially infinite complexity is indeed one of the lessons of the *texte fleuve*, as I will discuss below.) In "Une idée de recherche" (1971), Barthes writes of *La Recherche* that it is "l'une de ces grandes cosmogonies … dont le caractère … est précisément celui-ci: qu'elles sont des espaces (des galaxies) infiniment explorables; ce qui déporte le travail critique loin de toute illusion de 'résultat' vers la simple production d'une écriture supplémentaire, dont le texte tuteur …, si nous écrivions notre recherche, ne serait que le pré-texte" ("one of those great cosmogonies … the character of which … is precisely this: that they are infinitely explorable spaces (galaxies), which deports critical work far from any illusion of 'result' and towards the simple production of a supplementary writing, of which the tutor text … , if we wrote out research, would only be the

pre-text") (3:918, translation mine). The same could be said of any *texte fleuve*. It cannot be exhausted; there will always be the possibility of a new reading/rewriting. Furthermore, in offering rewritings of the work that both supplement it and disperse it further into its circumtext, individual texts of that circumtext create the potential for further rewritings.

And so the work continues to proliferate, in potentially endless variations, throughout the network of texts that, in rewriting it, collaborate with its attempt to overcome finitude. The work transgresses its boundaries and overflows into the circumtext, which it anticipates and helps to create with its depictions and enactments of the networks at work between the fragments "inside" itself as well as between itself and its readers. The circumtext in turn keeps the work alive by responding to it — absorbing the work, translating it, supplementing it, rewriting it — and thus creating a vibrant network and interplay of texts through which the work can respawn and thus survive, in endless variations. Every circumtextual work guards some part of the central work, in some form, from the sort of death-by-forgetting depicted by Proust's narrator. The circumtext, in the grander scheme of things, cannot be truly immortal — it is a human phenomenon and it will die, when all of its texts and its readers and writers no longer exist — but as long as it is there, the *texte fleuve* in all its versions and rewritings will breathe through the network woven by the tension between and interplay of finitude and endlessness, by the reaching of the finite for the infinite.

This reaching for infinity on the part of the work and the circumtext — the ways in which that reaching manifests — echo what I wrote earlier in this section about the *texte fleuve* as Calvino's "encyclopedia … method of knowledge, and … network of connections" (*Six Memos* 123). The *texte fleuve* is a "network of connections" in terms of itself, but also, as I just argued, in terms of the circumtextual network of connections in which it is enmeshed, into which it pulls

the reader, and which it pushes the reader to explore. It is also a "method of knowledge" both in terms of itself and in its relationship with the circumtext, which is — besides what I described above — a collective effort to explore the text's pluralities and blank spaces, to understand it, to enable its reader to traverse it more easily, to interpret and rework it, and to spin out its possibilities: to take possession of it by plumbing it for all the knowledge it can provide (as Proust's narrator insists to us over and over again, true possession is what is reached through the gaining of knowledge). At the same time, individual works of a circumtext use the "central" work to examine things and explore possibilities unrelated, or only tangentially related, to that work; the work thus acts not just an object of examination but as a tool, a method, for acquiring further knowledge.

Textes fleuve involve fantasies of total knowledge — of the possibility that all can be discovered, and that one can gain a total understanding of an event, a person, an experience, even the entirety of existence. The desire for full knowledge is one that is impossible to meet, and the texts know this; they are pulled between that desire, which is a desire for the infinite, and the impossibility of its fulfillment. In some cases, as in *La Recherche*, *The Waves*, and *Minecraft*, any desire for total knowledge that the reader or a character (like Marcel) may have is quickly frustrated, with the text acknowledging (or provoking the reader's realization) that total knowledge is impossible; in other cases, as in *Skyrim* and *Fallout 3*, the text tries, in certain important respects, to create the illusion that a complete knowledge of the world is obtainable, before (as it inevitably must) the illusion breaks down and the fantasy is shown to be what it is — a fantasy, impossible to realize.

These fantasies of total knowledge are part of the *texte fleuve*'s encyclopedic desire to reach into infinity — to go on forever, embracing everything, knowing everything, pulling everything into the network of relations it establishes between that which it encompasses, and between itself and its

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circumtextual network. The *texte fleuve* involves depictions and enactments of potentially infinite networks of relations, and the shifting network with uncertain boundaries that is its circumtext — despite being finite, as I've written — is a potential infinity, expanding as more readings and rewritings are added to the assemblage. As Proust's narrator argues in figuring Mademoiselle de Saint-Loup as the center of a network, once one starts to perceive the network of relations between all things, one enters a world of potentially infinite associative links between nodes of that network and other nodes, which themselves proliferate. There is no set end to the associative process, any more than there is a limit to the play of intertextuality. Once one is engaged in that process, one can follow chains of associations indefinitely, in any direction one wants; this is why Barthes, arguing that the logic of reading is associative rather than deductive in "Écrire la lecture" (1970), writes of the "explosive force" and "digressive energy" of the text ("la force explosive du texte, son énergie digressive"), which is capable of spawning an infinity of associations on the part of the reader (Barthes 3:603; translation mine).

Starting with *La Recherche*, I turn now to the networks depicted and enacted by the *texte fleuve*, which constitute another of the potential endlessnesses with which the *texte fleuve* engages in its effort to reach past its limits and overcome the end. I will concurrently discuss the links between those networks and the texts' preoccupation with the desire for, and the impossibility of gaining, a stable and total knowledge or understanding of the infinite complexity of the world and the subject.

2. The infinitely networked world and the finitude of knowledge

À la recherche du temps perdu

La Recherche is rife with depictions and enactments of networks and networked assemblages; as Calvino writes, "the network that links all things is … Proust's theme" (*Six Memos* 110). The structure of the text and the world it depicts are made up of endless fragments. Those fragments exist in relation to other fragments, the links between them shifting with their recombinations. Proustian time and the Proustian subject, for example, are not just series of moments, memories, or deaths-by-forgetting; they are also, concurrently, mutable assemblages of interrelated episodes, spaces, impressions, emotional states, and so on. Individual memories, in fact, are explicitly described as the parts of interlinked assemblages ("maintained" by the faculty of memory) in the final pages of *Du côté de chez Swann*, in which the narrator writes of "la solidarité qu'ont entre elles les différentes parties d'un souvenir et que notre mémoire maintient équilibrées dans un assemblage" ("the solidarity that the different parts of a memory have between themselves, and that our memory maintains balanced in an assemblage") (1:434, translation mine). As for the self (which I will use as the primary focus of my discussion here), it is the central node or crossroads of a network of relationships; it is also something partially externalized, which reaches out to fill, connect to, or combine with the fragments of extracorporeal existence in such a way as to establish a network of relations between those fragments.

The most extensive and explicit depiction of the self as a crossroads or node in a network is the narrator's description of Gilberte's daughter, whom Marcel meets at the Guermantes' matinée in *Le temps retrouvé*. For Marcel, this young woman represents not just the meeting of the two "ways" of Guermantes and Méséglise that he's spoken of throughout the novel, but also the intersection of a multitude of other elements of his life: times, people, places, events, etc. He represents these elements as points connected by innumerable paths meeting in and radiating from Mlle de Saint-Loup. "Comme la plupart des êtres," he writes, "n'était-elle pas comme sont dans les forêts les 'étoiles' des carrefours où

viennent converger des routes venues, pour notre vie aussi, des points les plus différents? Elles étaient nombreuses pour moi, celles qui aboutissaient à Mlle de Saint-Loup et qui rayonnaient autour d'elle" ("was she not like the 'stars' of forest crossroads, where roads come, for our life as well, from the most different points? They were numerous for me, the roads that led to Mlle de Saint-Loup and radiated around her") (2:1545, translation mine). The narrator follows this with a lengthy catalogue of the many points of his life to (and from) which lead the paths that intersect in this young woman, and the transversals that establish themselves between those points. Every person, he concludes, like every event, is a node in a vast web of memories and associations, woven by life, which connects everyone and everything in the world of subjective experience:

> s'il s'agit uniquement de nos coeurs, le poète a eu raison de parler des 'fils mystérieux' que la vie brise. Mais il est encore plus vrai qu'elle en tisse sans cesse entre les êtres, entre les événements, qu'elle entrecroise ces fils, qu'elle les redouble pour épaissir la trame si bien qu'entre le moindre point de notre passé et tous les autres un riche réseau de souvenirs ne laisse que le choix des communications (2:1546).[87]

Paths between nodes don't simply meet in the self, but also radiate outwards as connections established both by association and through the externalization of the self. The self transcends the boundaries of the body and disseminates throughout the world, expanding to fill the space of familiar rooms in the "bedrooms" section of *Swann*, and lodging versions or pieces of itself in every sensory impression, place, object, moment, memory — every element that makes up the vast web of its experiences. These elements through which the self disperses, with which it networks, are concurrently brought into the self. Having

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[87] "If it is only the case of our hearts, the poet was right to speak of the 'mysterious threads' that life breaks. But it is even more true that life ceaselessly weaves others between beings, between events, that it crosses these threads, that it doubles them up to

repeatedly identified the self as a momentary state — one of a "succession of moments" ("succession de moments," 2:1006) — made up of what the subject currently does and does not remember, and now speaking of the sensory impression's power to resurrect long-forgotten events and states of mind, the narrator writes (in *La Fugitive*): "La meilleure part de notre mémoire est … hors de nous. Elle est dans un souffle pluvieux, dans le parfum de renfermé d'un chambre ou dans celui d'une première flambée … Hors de nous? En nous si l'on aime mieux, puisque c'est la même chose…" ("the best part of our memory is … outside of us. It is in a breath of rain, in the mustiness of a closed room or in the perfume of a new flame … Outside of us? In us if one likes better, since it is the same thing…") (2:1048-1049, translation mine). Because we have put ourselves everywhere and in everything, every sensory experience or perception becomes more and more dangerous as we age, since any one of them might be capable of triggering pain (and other emotions) as well as "ordinary" memories and *mémoire involontaire*: "On a mis de soi-même partout, tout est fécond, tout est dangereux" ("One has put of oneself everywhere, everything is fecund, everything is dangerous") (2:1061, translation mine). We are both inside and outside, and we are everywhere, with the fragments of our selves spread out among and inside the fragments of an exterior world that is also contained in us. Those fragments of the world with which we are linked include fragments of the selves of others, since the exteriorization of the self, a function of the self's porous and uncertain boundaries, is part of the self's capacity (as I discussed in chapter 3) to incarnate in the self of another: "…les êtres que nous aimons …, nous ne les séparons pas de nous, ils ne sont qu'un lieu immense et vague où extérioriser nos tendresses" ("… the beings who we love … we do not separate from us; they are but an

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thicken the woof so well that between the smallest point of our past and all the others a rich network of memories leaves a wide choice of routes" (translation mine).

immense and vague place in which to exteriorize our tendernesses") (2:1013, translation mine).

The subject, then, is not just a series (of memories, of successive deaths, etc) but a network of the fragments in which it has invested itself and which it pulls into itself. Certain emotional states can heighten the networking of the self and external objects, and pull those objects into a closer relation; soon after Albertine's death, the narrator explains that suffering renders insignificant things significant, pulling them into closer relations with us: "Maintenant, les rideaux, les sièges, les livres avaient cessé de m'être indifférents. L'art n'est pas seul à mettre du charme et du mystère dans les choses les plus insignifiantes; ce même pouvoir de les mettre en rapport intime avec nous est dévolu aussi à la douleur" ("now, the curtains, the seats, the books had ceased to be indifferent to me. Art is not the only thing to put charm and mystery in the most insignificant things; this same power to put them into an intimate rapport with us is also given to pain") (2:1011, translation mine). The objects he associates with Albertine, which are now invested with his pain at her loss, are in an "intimate relation" with him, almost as if they were remnants of her; indeed, they can be taken as such. Fragments of her self have presumably invested themselves in the objects of her daily life over the course of her stay in that room, just as Marcel's self invests the spaces of rooms and the things inside them in the "bedrooms" section of *Swann*.[88] The externalization of the self, its transgressions of its corporeal boundaries and extension throughout the world, is not limited to Marcel, but is universal to the Proustian subject.

That universality makes full knowledge — and therefore possession — of another person impossible. This causes Marcel anguish throughout the novel,

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[88] There is a hint here of Albertine's own semi-survival of death in the form of the versions of her that exist in the self of Marcel. The narrator has already figured this sort of survival in his argument (mentioned in Chapter 3) that, to avoid the worst of his grief, he would have had to be able to "kill" the myriad of Albertines who exist in him.

especially in regards to Albertine. He describes this impossibility of knowledge in *La prisonnière*:

> …je comprenais l'impossibilité où se heurte l'amour. Nous nous imaginons qu'il a pour objet un être qui peut être couché devant nous, enfermé dans un corps. Hélas! Il est l'extension de cet être à tous les points de l'espace et du temps que cet être a occupés et occupera. Si nous ne possédons pas son contact avec tel lieu, avec telle heure, nous ne le possédons pas. Or nous ne pouvons toucher tous ces points. (2:622)[89]

Calvino, citing this passage, writes of the network of relations in *La Recherche* that "this net is composed of points in space-time occupied in succession by everyone, which brings about an infinite multiplication of the dimensions of space and time. The world expands until it can no longer be grasped, and knowledge, for Proust, is attained by suffering this intangibility" (*Six Memos* 110-111).

I add to Calvino that the crux of the knowledge attained here is the realization that one will never possess full and certain knowledge, will never know the truth: "Nous perdons un temps précieux sur une piste absurde," the narrator writes a few lines lower on the page, "et nous passons sans le soupçonner à côté du vrai" ("we spend precious time on an absurd trail, and we pass without suspecting it next to the truth") (2:622, translation mine). In *La Recherche*, in contrast to (for instance) *The Waves*, there is a persistent idea of an essential Truth to all things, despite the work's undermining of that conviction; as Deleuze writes in *Proust et les signes*, discussing Marcel's preoccupation (especially regarding people's behavior) with pinpointing what he conceives of as the underlying meaning of any given sign, the search for lost time is actually a search for truth ("la recherche du temps perdu, en fait, est une recherche de la vérité," 23).

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[89] "…I understood the impossibility against which love hurtles itself. We imagine that it has as an object a being who can lie before us, shut into a body. Alas! It is the extension of that being to all the points of space and time that this being has occupied and will

However, with the possible exception (presented by Deleuze as certain) of the truths of art — those that Marcel and the narrator formulate in what Deleuze calls the "final systemization" ("la systématisation finale") of *Le temps retrouvé* — the text makes it clear that the Truth Marcel is searching for is unobtainable (Deleuze 25). The impossibility of gaining a total knowledge, and with it the impossibility of discovering a stable Truth, is something that is taught (in one way or another) by all *textes fleuve*, but in *La Recherche* this lesson is foregrounded by the protagonist and thus explicitly part of the project of the work. *La Recherche* is a study in the frustration of the desire to obtain total knowledge, and especially that which Marcel wants most: the full, direct understanding — and therefore possession — of another person.

The frustration of Marcel's desire for full knowledge (which may also be our own), and the attendant lesson that a total understanding cannot be reached, is tied to what (following Calvino) I described as the "encyclopedic" nature of the *texte fleuve*. What I mean by "encyclopedic" here is that all *textes fleuve* foreground or revolve in some important way around not only the acquisition of knowledge but also, crucially, its classification. I am treating this last as a process in which the world, in the form of its information, is organized through its partitioning into discrete (labeled) categories. The fantasies of full knowledge involved in the *texte fleuve*, the prime example of which is Marcel's unceasing search for such knowledge, are expressed via what is often nothing short of an obsession, visible on thematic and/or structural levels, with the process of classification.

For example, Marcel's obsessive pursuit of knowledge about Albertine, taking place across hundreds of pages of *La Recherche*, is driven by his desire to possess her by knowing her. The possibility of succeeding depends in large part on

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occupy. If we do not possess his contact with a given place, with a given hour, we do not possess him. And we cannot touch all these points" (translation mine).

Marcel's figuring out what she is, how she can be classified and thus fixed in place, limited, controlled. He is therefore fixated on classifying her: Is she or is she not a lesbian? Is she or is she not a liar? (While, in general, he leans towards answering both questions, and the second in particular, in the affirmative, he's never entirely certain; this uncertainty drives him to investigate details of Albertine's behavior even well after her death, when his obsessive jealousy is gone.) The question of classification pervades *La Recherche*, in which the act of classifying is always troubled (when it is not shown, or made to be, frankly impossible).

It is troubled or thwarted for Marcel, but also for *La Recherche*'s reader. In the process of reading this work, the reader is often frustrated in his/her desire to classify in order to comprehend. To give an example, I will return to the narrator's treatment of character. In chapter 3, I discussed the narrator's habit of depicting characters in such a way as to lead us to believe that a new character has been introduced, before something — often coming much later in the text — tips us off to the fact that we've been dealing with a character we'd already encountered. My primary example was Odette, who appears at various points in the guise of Madame Swann, "la dame en rose," Miss Sacripant, and Madame de Forcheville. These differing, dispersed, disjunctive views of Odette don't just force us to engage in the combinatorial reading I was addressing in that chapter; in moments like the revelation of Madame Swann's being Odette, they also require us to reclassify the character in question. Just as we have to combine and recombine elements of the text, we have to shuffle and reshuffle bits of information from one mental category (say, "all the information about Madame Swann") to another ("all the information about Odette").

Thus, just as the narrator depicts Marcel constantly frustrated in his desire to know and to classify, or having to reclassify people and things, he frustrates us in our own desire to classify. Frustrating the classification process in this way

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gradually undermines the concept that a taxonomy of the information involved is even possible. If taxonomy is seen as an attempt to fix in place the information it organizes, then, with every shifting of bits of that information from one classification to another, the taxonomy degrades further towards chaos, and so, at some point, ceases to be a taxonomy at all. The frustration of classification emphasizes the text's lesson — a lesson the narrator seems to intend us to draw from the novel, given how often he returns to this theme — about the impossibility of achieving full or fully certain knowledge, especially when it comes to other people.

Thus knowledge, *La Recherche* teaches, is a tricky thing, subjective, uncertain, and only ever partial. Categories are always unstable, information does not behave, and knowledge of people and of the world cannot be fully grasped and fixed into place. The vast net constituting and connecting the things of the world and all the subjects within it is an ever-mutating infinity, and cannot be grasped, no matter how hard one tries.

The Waves

In *The Waves*, the characters put forth a conception similar to *La Recherche*'s of the world as a network or web of relations created (at least in part) by an exteriorizing self. Throughout the novel, for instance, Louis figures himself as a tree or plant reaching its roots "down and down" through the world and through time, connecting him to people who lived long ago in faraway places (35). "I am the stalk," he thinks as a child, holding a flower (2). "My roots go down to the depths of the world … I am all fibre. All tremors shake me … Up here my eyes are green leaves, unseeing. … Down there my eyes are the lidless eyes of a stone figure in a desert by the Nile. I see women passing with red

pitchers…" (12). Later, he tells us that the women carried red pitchers "in the time of the Pharaohs," and that he (at least in moments) is a thing capable of "realis[ing] the meeting-place of past and present" (66). He is a crossroads, and divergent times converge in him as they do in Mlle de Saint-Loup.[90]

The image of "fibres" — another way of describing nerves — will return. In the meantime, the image of filaments linking elements of the world becomes important, in an echo of the reference by Proust's narrator (in the passage on Mlle de Saint-Loup) to the "fils" woven by life between all beings and every event ("fils" means "threads," and is related to the English "filaments"). Bernard brings such filaments into the novel's developing vision of the world as a web or a net in his account of a meeting with Neville in their young adulthood. Reflecting on the link between the two men, who are (implicitly) nodes in the net that the novel is developing, Bernard muses: "How strange to feel the line that has spun from us lengthening its fine filament across the misty spaces of the intervening world. He is gone; I stand here, holding his poem. Between us is this line" (89). Jinny then takes up the metaphor of filaments (and implicitly refers to Louis' fibres) as she describes the "webs of nerve" that have, over time, started to surround everyone, and that transmit the fragments of experience that become caught in them: "…our senses have widened. Membranes, webs of nerve that lay white and limp, have filled and spread themselves and float round us like filaments, making the air tangible and catching in them far-away sounds unheard before" (135).

A bit later, a middle-aged Neville takes up the word "filament" himself in order to describe the "system" constructed by the self that links and creates a

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[90] Various critics have claimed that Louis' existence in other times involves reincarnation; Julia Briggs, for example, writes that Louis "feels himself part of a historical continuum, of eternal cycles of recurrence, or even reincarnation," and refers to his "former selves" (Briggs 249-250). Much as I'd like to draw a neat parallel between Louis' subjectivity and Marcel's conception of the self as a series of deaths, I disagree that Louis is describing former lives; he always speaks of them as if he were living them now. Louis' vision of the self is not of a series but of an eternity (in the sense of the eternal as a co-existence of different times); thus my claim that he is a crossroads.

network composed of the people and things of the world: "…we spin round us infinitely fine filaments and construct a system. Plato and Shakespeare are included, also quite obscure people, people of no importance whatsoever" (179). (Neville, here, is suggesting a networked relationship between readers and authors or works that has a bearing on my argument about the text's attempt to overcome death and to survive in the circumtext; I will discuss this in section 3 below.) Later still, Neville — his choice of words establishing yet more transversals between himself, Jinny, and Louis in the network that is the novel itself — recalls both Louis' "fibres" and Jinny's vision of the nerves reaching out from the self when he figures his own self as an "immeasurable" net holding and giving definition to the world (in which human relations are networked and create "knots," or nodes): "I took the print of life not outwardly, but inwardly upon the raw, the white, the unprotected fibre. …to myself I am immeasurable; a net whose fibres pass imperceptibly beneath the world. My net is almost indistinguishable from that which it surrounds. … I detect, I perceive … I know … how intricately love crosses love; love makes knots" (214).

The Waves, then, follows La Recherche in depicting what Calvino calls the "network that links all things" (Six Memos 110). Furthermore, like Proust's, Woolf's novel makes it clear that, no matter how one yearns for and pursues it, a full knowledge of the world — the gaining of a complete understanding of everything — is a goal that cannot be reached; the desire for it expressed by its characters is one that cannot be met. Bernard (perhaps the book's most devoted seeker of knowledge) states this explicitly in a fragment from the period of his middle age: "…I wish to go under; to visit the profound depths; once in a while to exercise my prerogative not always to act, but to explore …[;] to indulge impossible desires to embrace the whole world with the arms of understanding, impossible to those who act" (114). Networks can never be exhausted.

Bernard is not the only character who confronts the impossibility of meeting this desire. In Rhoda's last appearance before her suicide, she chafes at the frustration of this desire (a frustration she perceives as linked to her unavoidable individuation, a separation from others that causes her to suffer). To some extent recalling Neville's vision of the strands of the self embracing and holding the world, Rhoda thinks: "…far from being allowed to spread in wider and wider circles of understanding that may at last (so I dream …) embrace the entire world, I must go through the antics of the individual" (223-224). As in *La Recherche*, the boundaries of the self depicted in *The Waves* are malleable and uncertain, and the self in Woolf's novel (as in Proust's) can merge, combine and become confused with other selves (see Chapter 3). However, at the same time (especially to Rhoda), the self is — much of the time, though not always — an individual self, and even in its minglings with other subjects, generally estranged from the possibility of knowing the selves of others.

The Waves' demonstration of the impossibility of full knowledge is, as in *La Recherche* and other *textes fleuve*, bound up with the text's treatment of classification. The novel both foregrounds the process of classification and frustrates it, demonstrating the essential impossibility of a neat taxonomy of existence and of the subject in particular. Every fragment of "dialogue," set off from the others by quotation marks, is meticulously classified by the otherwise nearly invisible narrator; the speaker/thinker of a fragment is always identified immediately, within the first few words of the fragment's opening sentence. The information in every fragment is thus labeled by character, meaning that — though the thoughts conveyed may be confusing — it is, at least, always clear to the reader who is thinking what. This taxonomic signposting is important; I feel safe in claiming that it makes the work, often accused of being difficult, significantly easier to navigate than it would be if there was no such identification of the "speakers."

However, despite this act of classification on the part of the narrator, the text's depiction of the subject constantly undermines the notion that a neat classification of knowledge, especially about people, is possible. *The Waves* (as I discussed in chapter 3) presents a dispersed subject, multiple and singular at once, with uncertain boundaries prone to dissolving, and a habit of intermingling and combining with other subjects. As in *La Recherche*, information is not stable, knowledge is shown to never be certain, and there is no clear Truth. Categories of any kind are always hopelessly troubled, just as the boundaries of the self are always troubled. The characters themselves often indicate uncertainty about things such as where they end and another begins, who experienced what (and when), etc.

In addition, the narrator's methodical classification of the "dialogue" (by the name of character "speaking") is undermined in the last chapter, when the boundaries between the six characters' subjectivities — their partitioning into separate categories (into separate selves) — break down over the course of Bernard's soliloquy. The only "speaker" identified by the narrator, he describes the process of individuation that differentiated the six from each other as children, then speaks of their intertwined lives. The self is porous (as it is throughout the novel) from the beginning: "Faces recur," he thinks early on, "…Neville, Susan, Louis, Jinny, Rodha … How impossible to order them rightly; to detach one separately, or to give the effect of the whole…" (256). As the soliloquy progresses, he indicates increasing uncertainty about which of the six he is: "I am not one person; I am many people; I do not altogether know who I am— Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda, or Louis; or how to distinguish my life from theirs" (276). By the final pages, he has become all of them — as well as Percival — and taken in their experiences (including Rhoda and Percival's deaths): "There is no division between me and them … Here on my brow is the blow I got when Percival fell. Here on the nape of my neck is the kiss Jinny gave Louis. My eyes fill with

Susan's tears. I see … the pillar Rhoda saw, and feel the rush of the wind of her flight when she leapt" (288-289). Having already suggested that "this streaming away mixed with Susan, Jinny, Neville, Rhoda, Louis, [was] a sort of death," he now confirms the death — a death he has survived, transformed — of the more confined subject, or version of his subjectivity, that was called "Bernard": "Immeasurably receptive, holding everything … yet clear, contained— so my being seems … It lies deep, tideless, immune, now that he is dead, the man I called 'Bernard'" (291).

With the dissolution of what neat boundaries there were between the characters, as well as the boundary between life and death, classification breaks down completely. Bernard has always kept a book full of his "phrases" and notes classified alphabetically — "…under B, butterfly powder, under D, ways of naming death" (291) — and now, letting the book drop, he finally accepts the impossibility of pinning down knowledge and fixing things in words. "What is the phrase for the moon? And the phrase for love? I do not know. … I need a howl; a cry. … I need no words. Nothing neat. … None of those resonances … making wild music, false phrases. I have done with phrases" (295). Any remnant of the desire for total understanding, of the belief that any part of an infinite existence can be pinned down, has been swept away.

Minecraft

It may at first seem nonsensical, even silly, to discuss the worlds of Proust and Woolf and those of the video games together; it may seem that, on the question of networked relations and knowledge, these can worlds have little in common. I think, however, that these texts converge in interesting ways and illuminate each other. As my example I will use *Minecraft*, the video game text I have discussed that is most obviously infinite in its potential recombinations and rewritings, the most merciless in its denial of knowledge, and the most likely (of

all my primary texts) to drive the player to explore its circumtext. *Minecraft*, from the start — much like *La Recherche* and *The Waves* — denies the player the reassurance of an easy understanding of what is happening, and refuses to allow any conception that a total knowledge can be obtained.

As I explained in my account of my initial experience of its gameplay, *Minecraft* immediately presents the player with a level of difficulty that — in all seriousness, and despite how strange the comparison may sound — I find reminiscent of the opening difficulty of both *La Recherche* and *The Waves*, particularly the latter. As in reading *The Waves*, from the start the reader/player of *Minecraft* is confronted with a world that is somewhat familiar in the sense that, as I explained in the last chapter, a reasonably experienced player of games can recognize what sorts of things the blocky graphics are meant to represent and can figure out how to navigate the PC through the virtual space — just as a reader of *The Waves* does not have to be taught to read, and thus has the basic ability to recognize the words and traverse the novel. Still, so little information is provided by both works — so few contextual clues are given to indicate what exactly is going on and help the reader interpret — that it would be easy for a reader/player to become discouraged and abandon the text (just as, I must admit, I abandoned both *The Waves* and *La Recherche* after a few pages when, in adolescence, I first attempted to read them), and more determined readers/players may quickly find themselves searching the works' circumtexts for help.

When approached without the benefit of information provided by its circumtext, *Minecraft* sets up a situation in which, from the beginning, the player is being refused nearly all knowledge of the world and how to traverse it — all the relevant facts and instructions that would make it possible for the PC not to be killed over and over in survival mode, and for the player to engage in construction in creative mode. This withholding of information is in sharp contrast to the situation created by games like *Skyrim* and *Fallout 3*, both of which feature

unavoidable tutorial sequences meant to teach the player all the details of how to navigate the game world, and the automatic identification of every character, creature and important object in that world. There is no such identification in *Minecraft*, a game that features none of the linguistic text common in Bethesda Softworks' productions (which feature dialogue and in-game books). Though items that are "dropped" by destroyed blocks are classified (in the sense that the software automatically stacks the same kinds of items together in the boxes of the PC's inventory), those items, like the blocks themselves, are almost never identified by the software. Furthermore, the crafting process crucial to the PC's survival is left unexplained. Even once the player understands how to engage in crafting, "recipes" are not provided by the game; the player must either learn to combine items into other items by hunting the circumtext for recipes, or via trial and error — a particularly difficult process given that no items are identified, and the graphics representing them are often difficult to interpret. As I experimented with crafting in my early game, I discovered that placing two steel bars diagonally in the crafting menu produced a brown and grey oblong, but I could not tell what the oblong was. Without outside help, I would likely never have realized that I had crafted a pair of sheep shears that could be used to gather wool.

Minecraft is the perfect example of a *texte fleuve* driving the reader to explore its circumtext, precisely because the game offers so little information to the player that it becomes almost impossible to navigate without recourse to the circumtext. (In this sense, the game may actually present a greater level of initial difficulty than either the Proust or Woolf, which many determined readers have been capable of traversing without resorting to Cliff Notes.) As I wrote in my gameplay account, despite previous experience with many kinds of computer games, I found myself consulting *Minecraft*'s circumtext within the first fifteen minutes of my attempt to interpret it. Luckily for me and anyone else having difficulty with the game, *Minecraft*'s circumtext is huge and includes

comprehensive references like the *Minecraft Wiki*, a vastly detailed online encyclopedia maintained by players. Luckily for the first players of the game after its creator, Markus "Notch" Persson, released it publicly in late 2009, *Minecraft* — unlike most print texts (though like an increasing number of texts first released online) — came embedded in a circumtext from the moment it was published. Certain elements of its circumtext, in fact, were published before the game itself. In May 2009, for example, before the game had even been titled, Persson — who had already been blogging about his coding of the game — uploaded a YouTube video of an early test of *Minecraft*, which was still so primitive that "it didn't look like much more than a half-finished system for generating worlds [with] Markus gleefully jumping around inside it" (Goldberg and Larsson 96).

Whether or not one approaches *Minecraft* with a certain understanding gleaned from its circumtext, and whether or not the player knows that the game world is infinite in extension (meaning that there can be no set end to the player's accumulation of knowledge about its territory via exploration), the game immediately makes it clear that its world is one in which knowledge will be difficult to come by. The text never gives the player the slightest reason to believe total knowledge of that world will ever be possible. This impossibility is underlined once the player realizes that Mojang, the game's designers, periodically release updates that change aspects of game play and add new objects and "recipes," thus implementing a process of transformation that also undermines the notion that the knowledge one does possess can be fully counted on. Any knowledge the player is sure of might be rendered obsolete by the next update, and any desire s/he has for a total understanding, for complete familiarity with all the things and aspects of the world, is a futile one.   I note here an important difference between *Minecraft* and Proust and Woolf's texts — texts that, after all, I am not trying to conflate: in the print novels, the desire for total knowledge is explicitly stated by characters; in *La Recherche* in particular, the attempt to fulfill

and the frustration of this desire can be seen as part of the project of the text. *Minecraft*, on the other hand, can frustrate this desire only if the player is already harboring it. That said, I suspect that more players than one might think approach the game with the belief that a full understanding of it is possible; many experienced gamers approach new games having already had the experience of possessing — or feeling that they possess — a total understanding of other, simpler games.

But whether or not the player, like Proust's Marcel, desires total knowledge, there is one thing *Minecraft* teaches the player immediately: while the world may have no limits — indeed, because the world has no limits — the player's understanding of it certainly does. This is, in its essence if not in the details of its transmission, the same lesson being taught to their characters and their readers by *La Recherche* and *The Waves*. No matter how many things are explored and catalogued, no matter how vast a net of affective relations or associations the subject spins between the things and people of the world, no matter how much information is accumulated and knowledge is gained by the subject, there will always be more undiscovered. An ever-changing world of constant recombinations and proliferating associations cannot be fixed in place and has no final totality to be grasped, any more than does (as Barthes tells us in *S/Z*) the text itself (see Barthes 3:123). Infinity cannot be contained by the finite, and the world will not submit to a taxonomy.

The *texte fleuve*, then, teaches that a total knowledge of an infinite world and an infinite subject is impossible, and that the knowledge we do have about that world and subject can be unstable, shifting and difficult to classify. But that which cannot be fixed or contained — which always continues beyond, and always remains in flux — offers possibilities. We may not be able to know all, but we can discover more, know more, experience more. The infinite is seductive.

The *texte fleuve* acknowledges its necessary finitude — the necessity of finitude in general, given human mortality — but it persists in trying to overcome that finitude, in reaching towards infinity. It does this in part by depicting, enacting, and enabling its own infinities and potential infinities, those endlessnesses in some sense "internal" to it, which I've discussed in previous chapters: representations of the infinite and the eternal, narrative loops that set up implicitly unending cyclical respawnings, potentially endless combinations and recombinations, the unlimited extension in time and space of video game *textes fleuve*.

It is the circumtext created by its readers, channeling but never stopping the movement of the writerly, that completes and gives its full force to the text's attempt to expand into infinity (while still marked as itself, as opposed to simply being absorbed in the intertext's infinity of untraceable references). The circumtext, which is a result of that attempt, also enables it and makes it a cooperative one; the circumtext exists so as to help the work keep going. Circumtextual works reify one or more readings of the central work — any reading being a writing, as Barthes has argued in various works such as "Texte (théorie du)" (1973), in which he writes of "l'equivalence (productive) de l'écriture et de la lecture" ("the (productive) equivalence of writing and reading") (4:455, translation mine).[91]

Being a (re)writing, a reading of the kind reified by a circumtextual work is also a kind of translation. In *S/Z*, Barthes states that his task as a reader (who is self-consciously writing a reading of Balzac's "Sarrasine") is a moving or translating: "ma tâche est de mouvoir, de translater des systèmes dont le prospect

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[91] See also "La mort de l'auteur" (1968), in which Barthes starts suggesting this equivalence: "Revenons à la phrase de Balzac. Personne … ne la dit: sa source, sa voix, n'est pas le vrai lieu de l'écriture, c'est la lecture" ("Let us come back to Balzac's sentence [mentioned earlier in the article]. No

ne s'arrête ni au texte ni à 'moi'" ["my task is to move, to translate systems whose perspective stops neither at the text nor at the 'I'] (3:127; translation mine). The circumtext is a galaxy of interrelated translations (a few labeled as such, the vast majority not), translations of those translations, translations of the translations of translations, and so on (our ability to recognize them, to trace them to their "origin," fading with each successive translation as we approach the amorphous edges of the circumtext, where it diffuses into the infinity of the larger intertext).

The translation of works, as Benjamin writes in "The Task of the Translator" (1923), "marks their stage of continued life" (1:254). The circumtext's readings — that are also rewritings that are also translations — are the survival, the respawnings in potentially endless variations, of the "central" work. Networked with (and by) the work, they enable it to move past its boundaries, to be remembered and thus, for at least the period of the circumtext's existence, to overcome its own death.

I turn now to a closer examination of the *texte fleuve*'s relationship with its circumtext, focusing on one of *La Recherche*'s contemporary circumtextual works, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*. Proust's text presents the self as something that can reach beyond the limits of the text and communicate with its readers; it also suggests a kind of survival of some aspect of the author in the network established between itself and those readers. The idea that the author (of any work) transmits him/herself through his/her work in some recognizable form has been shared by a great many readers, with the result that circumtexts featuring significant cults of the author — like Proust's — are caught up in an attempt both to read and propagate the work, and to conjure a sort of ghost of the author. Both the work and the figure of the author are read, translated, and aided in their

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one … speaks it: its source, its voice, is not the true location of writing; that is reading") (3:45, translation mine).

proliferation by the circumtext, becoming tools with which circumtextual works make their own arguments and examine their own concerns.

As for the ghost of the author, I will argue, it may be entangled with the work, but not in the form conceived of by the many readers of works such as Proust's and Woolf's who take those works as transmissions of identifiable, fixable aspects of their writers. Drawing on Barthes and Derrida as well as Proust and Bechdel, I suggest that the text and its translations are haunted — or, more precisely, hauntings. However, what haunts is unfixable, is never entirely knowable, and — like the subject, in the lesson taught by the *texte fleuve* — it always eludes.

3. The circumtext and survival

La Recherche proposes that the self can extend through both the world of the text and the world at large; it can breach the text's boundaries, reaching through and beyond the page to touch and even invade the self of its readers, thereby creating a network of relations between those readers and itself. In *La Fugitive,* Proust's narrator conflates the author with the work in his conception of "the thought of the author" ("la pensée de l'auteur"), and figures the author/work and its readers as existing in a networked relation in which communication occurs along the strands of the net. He claims that, despite the impossibility of an exact transmission of this "thought of the author," the author can still in some sense, through his words (his work), communicate a part of himself to the reader (who is figured as the co-creator of the "impression" that arises in the process of reading). Thus, by implication, *La Recherche* not only imagines its own dissemination, as a work, through the subjectivities of its readers, but also suggests a potential survival of aspects of the author's subjectivity — transformed in the act of reading — in the self of the reader, in a sort of possession or haunting.

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Proust's text argues that the self reaches beyond the limits of the body and into the world around it, networking with the other things of that world and drawing them more tightly into itself. As I discussed in section 2 above, that externalization of the self in *La Recherche* proceeds as a result of affective investment, of memory, and of habit. It can also happen via the acts of writing and publishing — themselves, as social acts, inseparable from affective investment and memory, of which they can be seen as systematizations or technicizations. Writing and publishing multiply what the narrator refers to as "the thought of the author" ("la pensée de l'auteur") and allow it to proliferate in and through the selves of others. These others are the text's readers, who, in the process of reading, are brought by the text into a networked relationship with the author/text and with each other. In the process of writing, publishing, and reading, the author's thought (part of the author's self manifested as the work) incarnates in, colors, combines with, and is completed by the reader. The narrator's vision of the text, laid out in *La Fugitive*, is one of a collaborative, intersubjective production, arising from the meeting of the author's thought and the reader's in the network of relations established by the work.

In *La Fugitive,* Marcel opens *Le Figaro* one morning to find that his first article has been unexpectedly published. After his initial shock, he starts to reflect on the ability of the newspaper — and, implicitly, of published writing in general — to multiply his thought and allow it to penetrate the houses, and the subjectivities, of others:

> Puis je considérai le pain spirituel qu'est un journal … pain miraculeux, multipliable, qui est à la fois un et dix mille, et reste le même pour chacun tout en pénétrant à la fois, innombrable, dans toutes les maisons. Ce que je tenais en main, ce n'est pas un certain exemplaire du journal, c'est l'un quelconque des dix mille; ce n'est pas seulement ce qui a été écrit par moi, c'est ce qui a été écrit par moi et lu par tous … ce n'était pas seulement ce

que j'avais écrit, c'était le symbole de son incarnation dans tant d'esprits. (2:1085-1086)[92]

Marcel's self (or, at least, an important fragment of it) has been multiplied by ten thousand, a proliferation that delights him; he promises himself he'll ask Françoise to buy him more copies of the paper "pour donner à des amis, lui dirais-je, en réalité pour toucher du doigt le miracle de la multiplication de ma pensée, et lire, comme si j'étais un autre monsieur qui vient d'ouvrir *le Figaro*, dans un autre numéro, les mêmes phrases" ("to give to friends, I would tell her, but in reality in order to touch with my finger the miracle of the multiplication of my thought and to read, as if I were another man who has just opened *Le Figaro*, in another copy, the same sentences") (2:1089, translation mine). Part of what is miraculous to Marcel about the "multiplication of [his] thought" is that this proliferation of a piece of himself in newspaper form creates and brings him suddenly into contact with the nodes of a network made up of the thousands of others who are reading or will read his words — a process (discussed below) in which they will "complete" the full realization of his text — and who, as he imagines, will then talk to each other and to him about those words.

At first Marcel, rereading his article, can't help believing that readers will see the same images he sees in the words he's written — that, via the "incarnation" of those words in his readers' minds, he's conveyed his thoughts, himself, to the readers in some direct way — but the narrator knows better. Following a line of thought about the impossibility of direct communication that he's expressed throughout the work, he tells us that the reader of an article does not directly perceive "la pensée de l'auteur" any more than a listener on the

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[92] "And then I considered the spiritual bread that is a newspaper ... miraculous bread, capable of multiplying, which is at once one and ten thousand, and stays the same for each person while penetrating, at the same time, into every house. What I held in my hand is [sic] not a certain copy of the newspaper, it is one among ten thousand; it is not only that which was written by me, it is that which was written by me and read by all ... it was

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telephone directly perceives "la parole même qu'on a prononcée" ("the word just as it was spoken") (2:1086-1087, translation mine); when a reader reads the writer's words, "c'est une autre pensée qui se fabrique dans son ésprit" ("it's another thought that constructs itself in his mind") (2:1086, translation mine). Some of the beauty of an article, the narrator explains, resides in the impression it produces in its readers, an impression which cannot be derived solely from the words written by the author, and varies with the reader (see 2:1087). A text is a collective, collaborative production: "C'est une Vénus collective, dont on n'a qu'un membre mutilé si l'on s'en tient à la pensée de l'auteur car elle ne se réalise complète que dans l'esprit de ses lecteurs. En eux elle s'achève" ("it is a collective Venus, of which one has only a single mutilated limb if one sticks to the author's thought, for it is realized completely only in the spirits of its readers. In them it is finished") (2:1087, translation mine). The narrator's use of the plural "readers" here reflects the fact that the collaboration he's describing is not simply a collaboration between reader and writer, but a collaboration of all the text's readers, who each appreciate or notice different elements. "Si M. de Guermantes ne comprenait pas telle phrase, que Bloch aimerait, en revanche il pourrait s'amuser de telle réflexion que Bloch dédaignerait. Ainsi pour chaque partie que le lecteur précédent semblait délaisser, un nouvel amateur se présentant, l'ensemble de l'article se trouvait élevé aux nues par une foule…" ("if M. de Guermantes did not understand a certain phrase that Bloch would like, he in turn could be amused by a certain remark that Bloch would disdain. And thus for each part that the preceding reader seemed to abandon, a new devotee would present himself, and the whole of the article found itself elevated to the skies by a crowd…") (2:1087, translation mine). This is a model and anticipation of the

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not just what I had written, but the symbol of its incarnation in so many spirits" (translation mine).

circumtext, in which different readings of the work supplement and complement each other.

Since, for Proust's narrator, the text is necessarily completed by a collaboration, writing something that is read by others is a way to be with others — a contact that is so close, so tight, that it becomes a kind of merging. The reader doesn't just add his/her thoughts or associations to the author's thought, which the reader has taken into him/herself, but actually completes that thought — which becomes "another thought that constructs itself" (see above), an alien but related thought that can be taken as a translation. This close intellectual contact seems real and satisfying enough that Marcel briefly tries to comfort himself by thinking that, if his health deteriorates to the point that he ceases to be able to go out into society, at least he can still be with others by writing: "…si l'état de ma santé continuait à s'aggraver et si je ne pouvais plus … voir [mes amis], il serait agréable de continuer à écrire, pour avoir encore par là accès auprès d'eux, pour leur parler entre les lignes, les faire penser à mon gré, leur plaire, être reçu dans leur coeur" ("if the state of my health continued to decline and if I could no longer … see [my friend', it would be pleasant to continue to write, in order to still, in that way, have access to them, in order to speak to them between the lines, make them think as I wish, please them, be received in their heart") (2:1089, translation mine).

The narrator, then, figures the text (and its reading, in which it becomes fully realized) as something that creates networks of relations not only in terms of its content but between its readers and itself. In this way, *La Rercherche* models and anticipates its circumtext; the novel also, in at least some metaphorical sense, pulls us into a closer relation with it. Despite the fact that a direct transmission of his thought is impossible, to Proust's narrator the author can still reach the readers through the connections of the network and use it to speak to them, join his

thought to theirs in the generation of the "other thought" that is the translation of his own, and even make them think and feel like him.

La Recherche is thereby suggesting a certain survival of the author's subjectivity in the network of relationships between all things and all subjects, even if that survival is only in terms of a fragment or aspect, necessarily untraceable to a stable origin (given the impossibility of direct communication), that is supplemented and transformed by the act of reading. In the quotation from *La Fugitive* above, on Marcel's fear that he will become too ill to go out, the reference to his failing health implies that the establishing of the author-text/reader network is another way for him to avoid the finality of death in some capacity and to some degree. By writing, he can transmit part of himself to others, even incarnate and inscribe himself in them; this inscription seems almost like a kind of possession, given that he sees his communication with the reader as something that can give him the power to dictate (or co-dictate) another's thoughts. The word or thought of the author cannot be heard as it was pronounced, and thus the author's intended meaning cannot be perfectly conveyed; however, something powerful survives, if only in some form that cannot be fixed (given the impossibility of a fixed reading that is argued for by *La Recherche* itself, in its undercutting of the idea that a solid, unchanging Truth can ever be found).

In his reader, Marcel becomes a sort of ghost, or perhaps more precisely (since what is left of him cannot really be traced to an origin), a kind of haunting. Though the narrator does not transcribe Marcel's article, keeping us from reading it or participating in the network which it creates, we are, of course, readers of the work that he will go on to write as the narrator. The narrator is therefore figuring us as pulled into the network of relations established by the work, and implying that, by reading his words, we have taken at least part of him, in the form of the work, into ourselves; in some way, untraceable to its origin and impossible to

define, a shadow of him has — along with the work — (at least partially)

possessed our own subjectivity, in which it survives, haunting us.[93]

That shadow both is and is not the narrator; it is a translation. When direct

transmission is understood to be impossible, translation is what remains. As I

wrote above, it is not the "author's thought" that is completed in us, but "another

thought," at once related and alien to the author's thought; all reading becomes

translation. Translation is a form of survival. It is also something haunted. Derrida

speaks of the spectral quality of works and the haunting of translations in *Spectres

de Marx* (1993). Discussing the intricacies and difficulty of translating

Shakespeare's line "the time is out of joint" (from *Hamlet*) — and implicitly

suggesting a link between translation and survival — he writes:

> Une saisissante diversité disperse dans les siècles la traduction d'un chef-
>
> d'oeuvre, d'une oeuvre de génie, d'une *chose de l'esprit* qui semble
>
> justement *s'ingénier*. Malin ou non, un génie *opère*, il résiste et défie
>
> toujours à l'instar d'une chose spectrale. L'oeuvre animée devient cette
>
> chose, la Chose qui *s'ingénie* à habiter sans proprement habiter, soit *à
>
> hanter,* tel un insaisissable spectre, et la mémoire et la traduction. Un chef-
>
> d'oeuvre toujours se meut, par définition, à la manière d'un fantôme. La
>
> Chose hante, par example, elle *cause*, elle habite sans y résider, sans
>
> jamais s'y confiner, les nombreuses versions de ce passage, "The time is
>
> out of joint." Plurielles, les paroles de traduction s'organisent, elles ne se
>
> dispersent pas n'importe comment. Elles se désorganisent aussi par *l'effet*

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[93] In *The Waves*, Woolf's characters put forth a conception similar to that of Proust's narrator, of the world as a network or web of relations, and hint at a similar notion of the relation between readers and authors — or works, since the name of an author often stands for his/her works. In a passage I cited in my discussion (in section 2) of the novel's depiction of networks, Neville — a writer himself — describes authors/works as part of the network or "system" of relations around every person: "…we spin round us infinitely fine filaments and construct a system. Plato and Shakespeare are included, also quite

même du spectre, à cause de la Cause qu'on appelle l'original et qui,

comme tous les fantômes, addresse des demandes plus que contradictoires,

mêmement disparates. (Derrida 1993 42-43, emphasis his)[94]

La Recherche, of which the narrator is a part, moves ghost-like through us and

through the circumtext, haunting (without being confined to) our memory and the

work's various translations, of which it is the cause (though not truly the origin,

given its ghostliness). To read is to translate is to become haunted. The

narrator/work's survival in the circumtext is as a translation, a haunting, just as

Marcel's countless respawnings after his deaths-by-forgetting — similarly to the

respawnings, with their attendant changes, of video game characters — are

translations of an older self into the current self, haunted (if only in memory) by

its older selves.

A few pages later in *Spectres de Marx*, Derrida associates the "Chose"

("Thing") that haunts with the work's author: "Voici le coup de génie, l'insigne

trait d'ésprit, la signature de la Chose 'Shakespeare': autoriser chacune des

traductions, les rendre possibles et intelligibles sans jamais s'y réduire" (47).[95] Of

course, as the "Chose," the author here is a ghost, is what haunts, but, spectral or

not, Derrida's seems to be a vision of the survival Proust's narrator suggests. This

unfixable ghost of the author, sensed by readers — and sometimes appearing to let

itself be glimpsed (for instance in parallels between the work and what is known

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obscure people, people of no importance whatsoever" (Woolf 179). As a reader, he is
linked to the authors and works that have left an impression on him.

[94] Peggy Kamuf translates this passage as: "A striking diversity disperses across the
centuries the translation of a masterpiece, a work of genius, a thing of the spirit which
precisely seems to engineer itself [s'ingenierJ. Whether evil or not, a genius operates, it
always resists and defies after the fashion of a spectral thing. The animated work becomes
that thing, the Thing that, like an elusive specter, engineers [s'ingenie] a habitation
without proper inhabiting, call it a haunting, of both memory and translation. A
masterpiece always moves, by definition, in the manner of a ghost. The Thing [Chose]
haunts, for example, it causes, it inhabits without residing, without ever confining itself to
the numerous versions of this passage, 'The time is out of joint.'" (Derrida 1994 20-21).

[95] "This is the stroke of genius. the insignia trait of spirit, the signature of the Thing
"Shakespeare" [:] to authorize each one of the translations, to make them possible and
intelligible without ever being reducible to them." (Derrida 1994 25)

of the author's life) — can lead readers to replicate Marcel's error in *La Fugitive*: the belief that the author can be accessed through the text, that the author is somewhere behind the text, anchoring its meaning or parts of its meaning. The work is taken as a transmission of the author's subjectivity, if in a form involving some degree of disguise. This in turn leads to literary biography, biographical criticism, and other works entangling the central work with the details of the lived experience of its writer. A great number of Proust's readers, for instance, have taken Marcel the protagonist as a representation — even an encryption — of Marcel the writer, the once-living subject who put pen to paper. The hope for survival expressed by the narrator is answered by the circumtext's collective desire to keep the work alive, and in the case of highly influential works like *La Recherche* (or works by influential writers, like *The Waves*) — and especially if the work is a print text — that desire is often concurrent with what seems to be a desire to find and to resurrect or keep alive the author, if only as an idea or a figure.[96] Proust and Woolf's circumtexts have spawned enormous cults of the author, in which their works are examined obsessively as if to — even if their actual resurrection is impossible — find them and fix them into one "true" image.

These attempts must necessarily fail; a ghost cannot be pinned down. No matter what aspects of *La Recherche* may or may not be autobiographical in a disguised way, Marcel Proust the author is a fictional character, much like Marcel the protagonist, or *The Waves*' Bernard (claimed as a disguised representation of

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[96] This desire is much less evident in the circumtexts of video games, which have spawned far fewer cults of the author than have print texts. I suspect this is a result of two things. The first is the fact that most commercial games are created by teams of developers instead of a single auteur (the team leader may be singled out for fame, as in the case of Bethesda Softworks' Todd Howard, but this fame rarely seems to result in extensive examination of the person's biography or personal life). The second is simply that the medium of video games is so young that relatively few of the most famous game creators have died.

I suggest that this situation — in which the single, famous author seems absent — is changing. For example, "Notch" Persson, commonly viewed as the sole creator of *Minecraft* despite the team of developers who eventually joined him, is clearly the focus of a cult of the author. As of this writing, he has over 2.3 million Twitter followers,

Virginia Woolf by many Woolf biographers and critics), or the *Skyrim* player character (piloted by the player, its primary author, but fictional nonetheless). The author — our idea of the work's writer, as opposed to the embodied subjectivity that that writer is (or, if dead, once was) — is what Woolf scholar Maria DiBattista calls "the figment we conjure in the course of our reading" (DiBattista 170).[97] DiBattista (like Proust's narrator) suggests that we do obtain some knowledge of authors in the course of reading, but argues that that knowledge is "phantasmal and partial," untraceable to a specific source in the lived experience of writers as subjects; "we know them," she states, "primarily and most intimately as figments that exist only in our imagination" (172).

A figment, whether or not it has some untraceable basis in "truth" (the truth of the subject that the *texte fleuve* teaches us is impossible to pin down), is by definition a fiction. Barthes, taking up the themes expressed in "La mort de l'auteur" (and describing what has happened to the Author, as traditionally conceived, since that death), writes of the author's fictionality in "De l'oeuvre au texte" (1971). Barthes allows that the author (small a) can be present in the text, but makes it clear that the author's presence is that of a fiction:

> Ce n'est pas que l'Auteur ne puisse 'revenir' dans le Texte, dans son texte;
> mais c'est alors … à titre d'invité; s'il est romancier, il s'y inscrit comme
> l'un de ses personnages, dessiné dans le tapis; son inscription n'est plus
> privilégiée, paternelle, aléthique, mais ludique; il devient, si l'on peut dire,
> un auteur de papier; sa vie n'est plus l'origine de ses fables, mais une fable
> concurrente à son oeuvre; il y a réversion de l'oeuvre sur la vie (et non
> plus le contraire); c'est l'oeuvre de Proust, de Genet, qui permet de lire

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thousands of fans travel to see him speak, and multiple biographies have been published (see for example Goldberg and Larsson 2011).

[97] On direct knowledge of the author, DiBattista writes that "we can never know the person who writes *directly* through her writing" (5, emphasis hers).

leur vie comme un texte … le *je* qui écrit le texte n'est jamais, lui aussi,

qu'un *je* de papier. (3:913)[98]

Barthes, similarly to Proust's narrator and to Derrida, is conceiving of a kind of

haunting of the text when he figures the author as something that can be invited to

come back into the text ("revenir," to come back, being a root of the English and

French "revenant," used in both languages to describe a ghost). The author has

inscribed him/herself in the text (which is the thing that makes possible the

"fable" of the author's life), but as a fictional character with no particular

authority, and that inscription is "ludic" rather than authoritative; it is just another

part of the overall game that is the writing (and reading) of the text — a game

Barthes underlines with his ending world play, hinting at "jeu" ("game" or "play")

in his use of "je" ("I," and a homonym of "jeu").

Still, the author's fictionality, to Barthes — who extended this fictionality

to himself, declaring in the first sentence of his autobiography, *Roland Barthes*

par Roland Barthes (1975), that "tout ceci doit être considéré comme dit par un

personnage de roman" (4:573) — does not preclude the author as a subject from

being present somewhere in the text. S/he is simply lost, he writes in *Le plaisir du*

texte: "…perdu au milieu du texte (non pas *derrière* lui à la façon d'un dieu de

machinerie), il y a toujours l'autre, l'auteur" ("lost in the middle of the texte (and

not *behind* it in the fashion of a god of machinery), there is always the other, the

author") (4:234, emphasis his, translation mine). Barthes, having described the

subject as a text (and therefore part of the intertext) in *S/Z*, sees the work as a site

in which subjectivity is present, is active. That subjectivity is not just that of the

author, but also that of the reader. In "Texte (théorie du)," he writes that works are

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[98] "It is not that the Author cannot 'return' in the Text, in his text; but it is then … as a guest; if he is a novelist, he inscribes himself in it like one of his characters, drawn in the tapestry; his inscription is no longer privileged, paternal, alethic, but ludic; he becomes, if one may say so, a paper author; his life is no longer the origin of his fables, but a fable concurrent with his work; there is a reversion of the work on the life (and no

"des production perpétuelles, des *énonciations*, à travers lesquelles le sujet continue à se débattre; ce sujet est celui de l'auteur sans doute, mais aussi *celui du lecteur*" ("[works] are perpetual productions, *enunciations*, through which the subject continues to debate; this subject is probably that of the author, but also *that of the reader*") (4:455, emphasis his, translation mine).

I turn now to Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, a work of *La Recherche's* circumtext (which is also, like many circumtextual works, the "center" of its own circumtext of adaptations, critical analyses, and other translations). Proust and his work haunt *Fun Home*, in which Bechdel brings them into contact with her life (or rather, the translation of her life into memoir form), without — though translations to and from Proust's work abound — losing *La Recherche* in that life or herself in *La Recherche*. Bechdel's narrator (a representation of Bechdel herself) uses *La Recherche* and the figure of Proust as lenses through which she may view and decipher the character, life, and death of her father, and the complex intertwining of his life and her own. *Fun Home* is a book obsessed with questions of fictionality, translation, and the forms in which we do and do not survive death. Proust's work gives its frame to the central chapter in which these questions converge, and in which the ghost of *La Recherche* rises to the surface of the page, inscribed, reinscribed, translated and made visible not just by Bechdel's pen but by her brush. *La Recherche* moves through *Fun Home*, proliferates in the translation that is *Fun Home*, and helps to constitute Bechdel's work, just as Bechdel's work, in turn, helps to constitute it.

Circumtextual translation: Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*

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longer the reverse); it is the work of Proust, of Genet, that allows us to read their lives as texts … the *I* who writes the text is also, himself, but an *I* of paper" (translation mine).

Alison Bechdel's critically-acclaimed graphic memoir *Fun Home: a Family Tragicomic* (2006) is, among other things, both a response to and deployment of *À la recherche du temps perdu*. A *texte fleuve* in its own right, featuring a shuffled chronology, modular fragments (both visual and narrative) and a doubled, circular narrative welded together by the book's first and final panels as well as the links drawn between the main character (Alison) and her father, Bruce, *Fun Home* is Bechdel's memoir of her complicated relationship with that father from childhood to the time of her writing. Though the temporally fragmented narrative covers periods from the 1960s to the mid-2000s, the book is organized around Bruce's apparent suicide, aged 40, in 1980, when he was killed by a truck after jumping backwards into the road. Bechdel's narrator is engaged in an exploration of various themes, two of which particularly stand out: first, the reasons for and uncertain status of her father's death (though the family assumes it was suicide, he left no note and there is no other proof); and second, the queer sexuality and gender non-conformity she shares with him (though he was married and closeted, he had affairs with young men and engaged in pursuits a young Alison associated with his being a "sissy," as I'll discuss below [90]).[99]

Fun Home is also a text about texts, translatability, and the fictionality of translations. Everything in it is a text, and especially people — who are also

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[99] Despite the book's being classified as a memoir by Bechdel and her publisher, I do not want to conflate the author with her narrator. Following the conventions I've been using to discuss Proust and his characters, I will use "Bechdel" to refer to the author, "Bechdel's narrator" to refer to the narrator expressing herself in the captions between the graphic novel's panels, and "Alison" for the heroine depicted, at various stages of her life, inside the panels themselves.

A note on the captions and panels: Bechdel uses text between panels to convey the narrator's thoughts in a sort of direct discourse, which, taken as a whole, provide a frame narrative encompassing all the narratives represented by the drawings. Panels themselves often contain dialogue in the traditional "speech bubbles" of comics art, and, on occasion,

fictional. The book is billed a memoir, but the narrator is conscious of the

characters (and the people they represent) as fictions: "I employ these allusions [to

literary texts] not only as descriptive devices, but because my parents are most

real to me in fictional terms," she tells us after comparing her father to Jay Gatsby

(67). As texts, people are translations of other texts and can be translated into yet

more texts. Bechdel's narrator starts and ends the memoir with passages in which

Bruce and Alison are compared to and identified with (in each case, both)

Daedalus and Icarus, and the book progresses with a series of comparisons made

and identifications drawn between Bruce in particular and an array of famous

fictional characters (as well as, usually, their writers). These identifications are so

close that Bruce is repeatedly figured as a transposition or translation of the latest

character/author in the series; the things and people around Bruce become

translations of related people and things in whichever work (or authorial life) is in

question, so that the Bechdels' life becomes a translation of fiction. Alison is no

less a translation of her father, and as the narrator, she translates him, herself, and

all the translations that constitute them, into the memoir.

Proust is one of the most important loci of translation in *Fun Home*. The

book is divided into seven chapters. The fourth — the central chapter, both

literally and metaphorically, around which the rest of the work is built — is titled

"In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower" (for reasons she explains towards the

end of the chapter itself, and that I will discuss below, this is the narrator's

preferred translation of *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, as opposed to C.K.

Scott-Moncrieff's more famous "Within a Budding Grove"). This chapter is

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contain captions from the narrator drawn in squares or rectangles, without the use of

structured around references to, readings of, and parallels drawn with elements of *La Recherche* and details of Proust's life. Earlier in the book, the narrator has already suggested, perhaps as a joke, a possible link between *La Recherche* and her father's suicide: "Should we have been suspicious when he started plowing through Proust the year before [his death]? Was that a sign of desperation? It's said, after all, that people reach middle age the day they realize they're never going to read *Remembrance of Things Past*" (Bechdel 28). In the fourth chapter, the narrator fully deploys *La Recherche* and the figure of Proust as tools for examining and trying to understand the themes that concern her; in essence, she uses *La Recherche* — and the figure of Proust the author that is so often associated with the novel — as the lens or optical device that the Proustian narrator wishes the work to be.

"In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower" focuses primarily on the second theme outlined above: Bruce and Alison's shared homosexuality and gender non-conformity, which the narrator figures as creating such a tight link — and violent opposition — between them that (alluding to the antiquated term "inversion" used by Proust to describe homosexuality) she goes so far as to write, above a panel depicting herself and her father in front of a mirror, that "Not only were we inverts. [sic] We were inversions of one another" (98). Throughout the book, there is a strong undercurrent of the idea that Bruce survives death, in some form, in Alison / the narrator, the daughter who is so like him that in this chapter (as I'll discuss below) she figures herself not only as his inversion but as his translation.

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quotation marks.

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The chapter opens with several pages about Bruce's love of gardening, an activity in which he was engaged when he jumped into the road in front of the truck that killed him. Almost immediately, in captions (set between panels in which she depicts her father's attempts to teach a young Alison to garden and the "efflorescence" of flowers and floral patterns Bruce included in his renovations of their house), the narrator draws a parallel between her father's love of gardening and what she sensed, as a child developing an understanding of conventional gender expectations, to be his suspect sexuality and presentation of masculinity: "Of all his domestic inclinations, my father's decided bent for gardening was the most redolent to me of that other, more deeply disturbing bent … What kind of man but a sissy could possibly love flowers this ardently?" (90).

Proust and *La Recherche* come (back) into the work explicitly when we are told that Bruce's favorite flower was the lilac. The page's central panel is a drawing of a fragment of a page of an English-language translation of *Du côté de chez Swann.* It consists of a few lines of the scene in which the narrator describes his family's examination of lilacs near the hawthorn hedge bordering Swann's way. The translation of a part of *La Recherche* by *Fun Home* is particularly clear here, where a fragment of its embodiment as type on paper is translated into a drawing. Bechdel's narrator, who has just given us a panel featuring Bruce arranging a bouquet of lilacs, is also (literally) drawing a link between her father and Proust's narrator, who, as we know from *Swann,* also loves the lilac ("a tragic botanical specimen, invariably beginning to fade even before reaching its peak," writes Bechdel's narrator, echoing the passage reproduced from *La Recherche* and hinting at the suicide of Bruce, who briefly becomes a translation not only of

Marcel, but also of Marcel's lilacs [92]). In the captions between the panels of the

next page, she explains Marcel's "rapturous communion with the pink blossoms

of [Swann's] hawthorne hedge," and his first sight of Swann's daughter in the

garden beyond: "The young narrator, failing to distinguish this girl, Gilberte, from

the general floral fecundity, instantly fell in love with her" (93). The panels show

Bruce taking his children to steal pink dogwoods in order to transplant them in
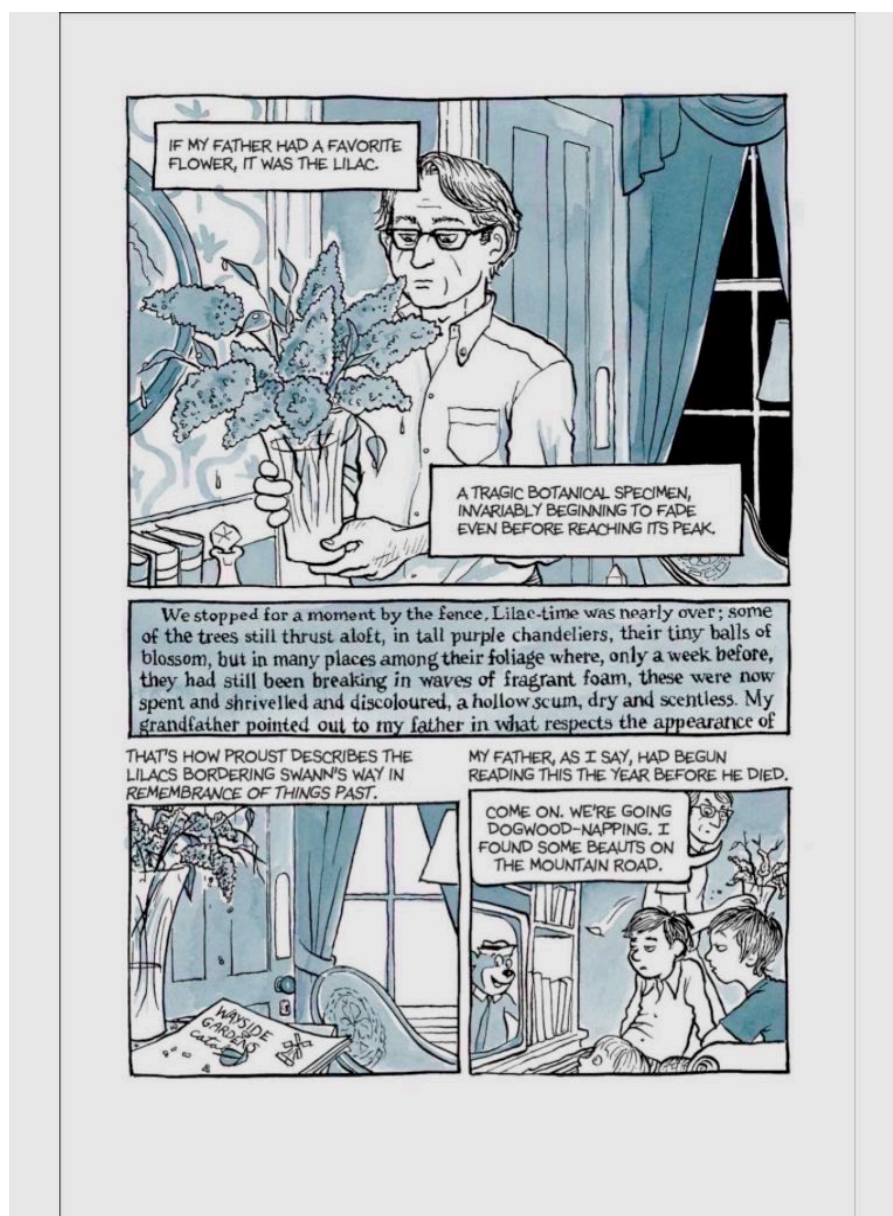
front of their house.

Fig. 5. Bechdel, *Fun Home*. 92.

Proust's narrator and Marcel, here, serve as a kind of shorthand for a love of femininity — or, more precisely, of what is traditionally considered "feminine." By drawing this parallel between Bruce's love of flowers and Marcel's love of flowers and of a Gilberte he associates (even confuses) with those flowers, Bechdel's narrator is setting up an idea to which she'll return

throughout the chapter: Bruce is preoccupied with things traditionally associated with femininity because he's trying to express something "feminine" that he is not otherwise free to express — a femininity, Bechdel's narrator is implying, with which he is somehow "in love," and that he yearns to possess. On 97 through 99, Bechdel's narrator will depict (in panels) the fights Alison had with her father as she was growing up, over his attempts to make her dress in conventionally feminine ways; she will note in her captions that, just as she was trying to express something "masculine" through her dress and elements of her behavior — even "trying to compensate for something unmanly in him" — he was "attempting to express something feminine through [her]" (98)]. "Between us lay a slender demilitarized zone—," writes the narrator (above panels showing Bruce and Alison looking together at a copy of *Esquire* magazine), "our shared reverence for masculine beauty. But I wanted the muscles and tweed like my father wanted the velvet and pearls — subjectively, for myself" (99).

After she describes Marcel's love of flowers, the narrator's focus in terms of *La Recherche* switches to Proust himself. "If there was ever a bigger pansy than my father, it was Marcel Proust," she tells us (93). Bruce's life starts to become a translation of what is presented as Proust's life. "Proust would have intense, emotional friendships with fashionable women…" — the panel below shows a picture of Alison's mother reading *Vogue* — "but it was young, often straight, men with whom he fell in love" (94); here, the panel below shows us the mother opening the door for the family's babysitter, a young man named Roy. The narrator will explain that Roy once accompanied Bruce and his children to the Jersey shore and New York City. After Bruce's death, Alison finds an erotically-

tinged photo (taken by Bruce) of a half-naked Roy lying on the bed in Bruce's hotel room; the narrator's reproduction of it, accompanied by her explanation, constitutes the only two-page spread in *Fun Home*, giving it a visual impact that emphasizes its importance in Alison's slow realization regarding — and her identification with — her father's homosexual desires (100-101).

Before discussing Roy (but while continuing to depict him in his interactions with the family in panels filling two pages), the narrator notes that "[Proust] would also fictionalize real people in his life by transposing their gender — the narrator's lover Albertine, for example, is often read as a portrait of Proust's beloved chauffeur/secretary, Alfred [Agostinelli]" (94). A parallel is then implicitly drawn between Roy and Agostinelli by the narrator's graphic choices and her explanation that, while her father could not afford a chauffeur, he could afford to hire "the occasional yardwork assistant/babysitter" (94). Proust's relationship with Agostinelli therefore serves as a lens through which Bechdel's narrator is trying to understand, from limited evidence, her father's relationship with his own young male protégé; beyond that, Bruce and Roy's relationship is a translation of Proust and Alfred's.

Translations of elements of Proust's life and work into Bruce and elements of his life continue, with Bechdel's narrator performing a sort of critical analysis of the two "ways" of *La Recherche*. While unfolding the story of Bruce's trip with Roy and the children inside the panels, the narrator uses the captions to explain the "Guermantes way" and "Swann's way" as "one of Proust's sweeping metaphors," representing binary pairs "initially presented as diametrically opposed": "bourgeois vs. aristocratic, homo vs. hetero, city vs. country, eros vs.

art, private vs. public" (102). However, she notes, referring to the description I discussed of Mlle de Saint-Loup as a network, "at the end of the novel the two ways are revealed to converge — to have always converged — through a vast 'network of transversals'" (102). She thus summons Marcel's vision of the network between all things and its converging paths in order to explore the convergence of the same oppositional elements in the marriage of her father (a middle-class homosexual man from the countryside) and mother (an upper-class actress from New York City who, the narrator suggests, her father might have "somehow conflated … with her address, like Proust's narrator [did] with Gilberte and the garden" [105]).

The chapter continues, telling several stories from different periods of Alison's life, all of which circle back around to the homosexuality and gender non-conformity she and Bruce share, with Proust never far from the narrative. At one point, wishing to hide the fact that she's a girl, Alison asks her brother to call her Albert; the narrator writes that "looking back, my stratagem strikes me as a precocious feat of Proustian transposition … not to mention a tidy melding of Proust's real Alfred and his fictional Albertine" (113) (Alison, a translation herself, is learning to transpose and translate.) Proust's *Recherche* is brought in twice more; both times, Bechdel's narrator critiques translations of the titles of certain volumes. The reason for her choice of "In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower" becomes clear: "The translation to *Within a Budding Grove* [in her father's edition of *La Recherche*] shifts the emphasis primly from the erotic to the botanical. But of course, as Proust himself so lavishly illustrates, Eros and botany are pretty much the same thing" (109). The narrator has already drawn the link

between her father's desires and his botanical interests, and now, using the word "budding," she transitions into a discussion of her distress upon growing breasts at age twelve (a painful process that she had dreaded).

The importance of the idea of translation becomes explicitly clear at the end of the chapter, when the narrator engages in a lengthier analysis of the translation of the title of *La Recherche*. "After Dad died, an updated translation of Proust came out. *Remembrance of Things Past* was re-titled *In Search of Lost Time*" (119). The narrator feels that this translation, though more literal, "still doesn't quite capture the full resonance of *perdu*. This means not just lost but ruined, undone, wasted, wrecked, and spoiled. What's lost in translation is the complexity of loss itself" (119-120). She explains that, in the same box in which she found the photo of Roy, she discovered a picture of her father — which she reproduces in the next panel — as a young man, wearing a woman's bathing suit (perhaps as a fraternity prank). In this photo, she writes, Bruce's pose is "not mincing or silly at all," but instead "lissome, elegant" (120).

In another photo, he's sunbathing on the roof of his frat house at age twenty-two; she reproduces it along with a photo of herself at age twenty-one, taken on a fire escape. The narrator wonders at the parallels between the two images. "Was the boy who took [the photo of Bruce] his lover? As the girl who took this polaroid of me … was mine?" (120). Her point comes home in the last caption of this final panel of the chapter, inserted below a drawing of the two photographs held, one next to the other, in her hands: "The exterior setting, the pained grin, the flexible wrists, even the angle of shadow falling across our faces — it's about as close as a translation can get" (120).

Fig. 6. Bechdel, *Fun Home*. 120.

A few pages before this final page of the chapter, the narrator — who, earlier in the book, explains that she cannot let go of a certain belief that she caused her father's suicide by coming out to him as a lesbian — writes that "in a way, you could say that my father's end was my beginning. Or more precisely,

that the end of his lie coincided with the beginning of my truth" (117). But the overall thrust of *Fun Home* is that Bruce has no real end (just as, insofar as he is a fictional translation of fictional characters, he has no real beginning). While explaining that belief that she somehow caused Bruce's death, the narrator writes: "The idea that I caused his death by telling my parents I was a lesbian is perhaps illogical. Causality implies connection, contact of some kind, and however convincing they might be, you can't lay hands on a fictional character" (84). What remains unsaid is that, while fictional characters die, their deaths are not those of living bodies; they can respawn, be translated, just as Bruce respawns in Alison and in Alison's translation of him into a character in her book.

Being a translation, then, Bruce survives — at least, some ghostly, unfixable trace of Bruce (and, as Bechdel's narrator knows, something is always lost in translation). And, in *La Recherche*'s haunting of *Fun Home* and Bechdel's narrator's translation of Proust and Proust's characters into Bruce (and Roy, and Alison, and Alison's mother), Proust and Proust's work survive, incorporated but also still clearly marked. The work moves, as Derrida told us, in the manner of a ghost, its spectral Thing or Cause (irreducible to an origin) haunting all of its versions, all of its translations. Haunting Bruce, haunting Alison, haunting us.

The player as a ghost

And sometimes, with some *textes fleuve*, it is we who haunt the work.

The video game *textes fleuve*, like all *textes fleuve*, survive by being read/written/played and by propagating through their circumtexts. However, where print texts suggest, perhaps even enable, a survival of the work/author in

the reader, video game *textes fleuve* go farther, implementing the reverse: a translation of a shadow of the player, fictionalized in the process, into some part of the work — a translation that suggests a survival of the player in the text.

This suggestion occurs via the game text's quantifying and organizing elements of the player's experience of playing. Many contemporary video games involve the constant classification, by the software, of certain elements of the experience of play. As a player spends time interacting with *Skyrim*, for example, the software keeps track of a variety of events, recording (and, when asked, displaying) a wide array of things such as the number of monsters, people, and rabbits killed; the number of horses stolen, NPCs stabbed in the back, and pockets picked; the amount of gold carried, potions created, and food eaten; the spells and weapons most often used by the player; the total number of hours the player has played any given player character; and so on.

Most of the information tracked by *Skyrim* and *Fallout 3* can be associated with the player character as a fictional character, by which I mean that it is part of the information constituting that fictional character. The number of pockets picked displayed by the software is a representation of the number of times the player has instructed the player character to pick pockets, and is therefore a way of counting and classifying an element of the player's experience of gameplay, but it also acts as information about a fictional character. The player character's status as a fictional character is clear from the opening scenes, which establish important facets of the character: s/he is from another place, but is suddenly thrust into the game world setting; s/he has been accused of a crime; etc. The game provides a rough sketch, and the player finishes and fills it in. The player directs or puppets the character rather than being the character, and, given that, s/he is not represented by the character any more than Marcel Proust is represented by his novel's narrator — but, somewhat like Marcel Proust in relation to the narrator, the player does have a significant measure of authorship in relation to the PC.

Within the constraints of the game, the player is writing the characther s/he is playing; through her actions, s/he is giving the character its virtual "life."

In playing *Skyrim*, I become in some form the author Barthes figures as reinvited into the text, the text into which that author inscribes himself as a fictional character. Through my play-based creation of the character — my decisions in guiding its actions and reponses, my button-pushing abilities (which define aspects of its fighting skills), the statistics recorded about my lived experience of playing (most of which also describe its fictional life) — I become fictionalized; some part of my material, embodied subjectivity, the actions of my hands on the controller, translates into electrical impulses and numbers, recorded and displayed back to me by the game for me to incorporate into my conception of my character. Some shadow of me, an echo of my existence as a subject, is translated into the form of the player character, glowing multi-colored pixels moving across a screen; I become in some sense Derrida's ghostly Thing, haunting the text (just as it is haunted by the untraceable shadows of the developers who created it). It would be impossible for a critic examining my player character to draw any fixed conclusions about my subjective existence based on my character's behavior; that behavior would remain fictional, and untraceable to its origin. I — or rather, that unthinking shadow of me — would simply be the specter of the author lost somewhere in the text, become part of the text. Glimpses of that spectre would perhaps be seen in the records of the statistics that quantified the actions I (as a living subject) had taken in playing, but it would be impossible to fix that ghost to "me."

If I die tomorrow, such records stored by game software will outlive me, and so will my various *Skyrim*, *Fallout 3* and *Minecraft* player characters — all of them, in some shadowy and partial way, translations of aspects of my lived experience, fictions created by me and my actions. The playing of these games is a writing, and I have inscribed my copies of them with translations of shadows of

myself, with fleeting, fictionalized aspects, impossible to pin down to their source in my embodied subjectivity. In my embodiment, I am not a fiction (though my "I" certainly might be) and I can neither survive death nor respawn. Once dead, I will no longer be able to use those game characters I co-created to experience the vicarious deaths and resurrections around which all of those games revolve; I will have in every way that matters (to me as a living subject) been extinguished by my inevitable finitude. However, if Proust's narrator is right, and Barthes and Derrida are right, *some* translated thread will have been brought from me and woven into texts of potential infinity. The finitude of hardware and software do not preclude infinity from existing as a potentiality, and so, in my entanglement with the work — the site and debate of the subject — I, like every other writer/reader/player of such *textes fleuve*, will have brushed, ever so lightly, the infinite.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have examined and tried to elucidate the impulse — explicit in some texts, and at work in all texts — to go beyond endings, to encompass the infinite, to continue forever. I refer to those texts that most clearly demonstrate, operationalize or adumbrate this impulse as *textes fleuve*, harkening to the French term *roman fleuve*, used to designate extremely long novels such as Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (itself the example *texte fleuve* that I have most extensively discussed). The *texte fleuve*, as a category, is not limited to a medium or genre, instead reaching across media to include works in diverse formats (though I have limited my discussion to print novels, "open world" computer games, and, to a lesser extent, graphic novels). In the *text fleuve*, I include both canonical (print) works of "high" literature and works more commonly thought of as popular or mass culture artifacts. Along with novels such as Proust's *Recherche* and Virginia Woolf's *The Waves,* as well as Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir *Fun Home*, I have examined certain "open world" role-playing or sandbox video games (in particular, Mojang AB's *Minecraft* and Bethesda Softworks' *Fallout 3* and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*).

Drawing on the work of a number of thinkers (particularly Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida) who have laid the groundwork for my approach to textual infinity or limitlessness, I have considered the theoretical and methodological issues surrounding the *texte fleuve*. In my chapters, I have laid out its characteristics — namely, the various "endlessnesses" that it depicts or enacts (such as looping narratives, potentially infinite combinations of elements, endless networks, unlimited extension in time and virtual space, and so on). I have also explored the text's relationship with what I term the "circumtext": any given work's networked assemblage of textual responses (readings, rewritings, adaptations, translations, et cetera). This network, its growth driven by something

like the infinite potentiality that is Barthes' "writerly," prolongs the "original" or "central" work in reaction, reflection and extension and thus aids it in its project to resist finitude — to resist its own forgetting, its own death.

As far as I am aware, this dissertation constitutes the first attempt to bring open world video games — possibly any video games — into convergence with the work of Proust and Woolf. This might at first glance seem disrespectful or absurd; I argue the contrary. Though computer games have been examined by literary critics with relative rarity, I believe that many such games should be taken seriously as carriers, enablers, and experiences of narrative (in the context of video game studies, my analysis can be seen as firmly situated in the tradition of so-called "narratological" criticism, though I have been influenced by "ludological" approaches as well). My intention here has been both to shed light retrospectively on the print texts via my analysis of the game experience, in a kind of *Nachträglichkeit*, and conversely to read the games through the lens provided by Proust and Woolf's work. While the combination of Modernist novels and contemporary video games may initially seem discordant, all of these texts are *textes fleuve*; they share important characteristics regardless of the differences between their media. Profoundly different as the print novel and the graphics-heavy video game may seem, in some of their salient aspects they are close cousins.[100]

Games and novels (and graphic memoirs) can elucidate each other. An important part of the reason for this is the ludic nature of the act of reading, which I have discussed in tandem with my examination of the *texte fleuve*. My argument that reading is a game is based on a conception of reading as an interactive process — essentially a kind of writing — that is not limited to the comprehension

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[100] I would in fact suggest that neither the role-playing game (in any medium) nor the open world video game would exist in the forms they do now without the novel, and perhaps the Modernist and Postmodernist novel in particular; these games are "novelized"

of linguistic text perceived with the eye or the fingers, but includes all processes involved in the comprehension of narrative aesthetic objects (notably, in terms of this dissertation, the various processes at work in playing a video game, such as reading linguistic text, listening, and pushing buttons or keys to direct the player character through the game world and to interact with — or write on — that world). It is never the passive act of consumption that it has so often been conceived as being. In my discussion of reading I draw again on the work of Barthes, as well as that of play theorists Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois, both of whom see a ludic element in the creation of and interaction with narrative art forms. Following Barthes in *S/Z* and related writings (and the common idea that games must have rules), I claim that reading is a process that does have rules, the primary one of which is quite simply "trouver des sens": to find meanings (Barthes 3:127).

"All these things happen in one second and last for ever," Bernard observes in *The Waves* (240), describing not simply the moment but also the text of which he is part. The *texte fleuve* is a paradox, and one that is often explicitly obsessed with paradoxes. Things in it — people, places, networks, the movement of time — are fragmented, momentary, episodic, and at the same time ceaseless and eternally expanding. The *texte fleuve* projects a universe in pieces that is also one; everything in it, everything it says or shows, flickers continuously between multiplicity and singularity. Reaching towards infinity, enacting or enabling potential infinities, it is necessarily finite, if only because its readers will die; in the meantime, its finitude and its infinite potentiality co-exist, driving it, giving it its generative force.

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in M. M. Bakhtin's sense of that term (see Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel"). I plan to investigate this suggestion in future research.

The *texte fleuve* is in some sense a model of our subjectivity, and as Kermode says of the human, we project ourselves past the end.[101] In the intertextual and intersubjective relation between it and ourselves, we intermingle with the *texte fleuve*. It does not simply haunt us, but is also, in turn, haunted by us. We echo in the strands of its networks as it echoes in ours; having held it and translated it as the ghost in us, we translate ourselves into the ghost in it. Its narratives sing through us as we sing through them. Through our contact with it, our intermingling, we join it in reaching for infinity, in trying to encompass the eternal. In those moments when the text's endlessnesses and potentialities allow it to brush the infinite, we are there with it. For one of Bernard's paradoxical moments that potentiality becomes ours and, in that moment, in our own existence as texts, we also, like the work, find ourselves endless.

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[101] See *The Sense of an Ending*. "We project ourselves … past the End, so as to see the structure whole" (Kermode 8).

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