"friendship isn't an emotion fucknuts": Manipulating Affective Materiality

to Shape the Experience of *Homestuck*'s Story

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ABSTRACT

Homestuck is a textual and experiential chameleon that manipulates its own

structure to shape the audience's affective experience of the story by mimicking

not just the storytelling techniques of other media forms, but their modes of

engagement as well. This article introduces terminology to illustrate how and

why the online serial *Homestuck* qualifies as a distinctive form of storytelling.

I introduce the term *transmodal engagement* to illustrate how *Homestuck*

uses the affective, experiential affordances of different media forms to sculpt and

shape the experience of the text in completely different ways to 'transmedia'

storytelling.

The second term this article introduces is *metamedia storytelling*, which

describes how the audience's familiarity with storytelling across multiple media

forms can be used to manipulate their experience of fiction. *Homestuck* deploys

metamedia storytelling to continually destabilise the reader's understanding of the

text and their investments in the storyworld by forcing re-evaluations of not just

what is happening, but what kind of mediated relationship the readers have with

the content of the story.

Keywords

Affect, media-specific analysis, modes of engagement, materiality, metamedia

storytelling, textual structure, transmedia, transmodal engagement,

INTRODUCTION

  Homestuck's (Hussie, 2009) story begins with four thirteen-year-old

friends and their attempts to play a new videogame together, often thwarted by

comedic timing, bad luck, or their own over-complicated plans falling apart.

Structurally, it is a hybrid between hypertext fiction and webcomics that also

features animation and music. However, this description gets the rough idea

across to new readers while missing much of what makes it distinctive:

Homestuck manipulates its own textual structure to shape the experience of the

story. It uses modes of engagement from other media forms to set up expectations

and connotations for the reader that are based in the reader's own familiarity with

the wider media landscape. *Homestuck* uses this familiarity as another dimension for storytelling.

Storytelling experiences have always been shaped by the labour required of the people engaging with a story, in terms of the physical and mental processes required of them as they negotiate the text that frames the story – and textual structures shape that labour. Turning the pages of a book is far from neutral; the action itself shapes the experience of the story the book tells. For example, the novel *House of Leaves* (Danielewski, 2000) manipulates the affective experience of reading by reducing the words on each page to single figures during tense sequences so that we physically turn the pages faster and faster as we read. Another example is that simply knowing how far through a book we are changes how we anticipate what will happen next in the story. For cinema, our structural inability to engage with the text in the context of a movie theatre is part of why and how we can be left on the edge of our seats with anticipation, unable to do anything to intervene but look away. In these cases, the form of media that a story is expressed through has an impact on how storytelling texts generate meaning by shaping how people engage with them.

It is possible to analyse storytelling across multiple media forms by considering how differences in their modes of textual engagement shape the phenomenological and affective experiences of those texts. For example, readers of horror-novels often describe them as 'page turners' when immersed in the experience, and sometimes speak of reading deep into the night because continuing the story is less threatening than going to sleep without knowing what happens next (Veale, 2005: 52, 2012: 4). In comparison, players of horror videogames can experience paralysis rather than momentum due to being confronted with the dread of personally exploring a threatening unknown, rather than reading about other characters doing so. I have had difficulty persuading myself to leave a room within a horror game because it was a safe, controlled space, and everything outside of it was uncertain and threatening. Likewise, the experience of watching television where each episode largely exists in isolation and doesn't require other episodes in order to be coherent, such as in sitcoms like *Married with Children* (Moye and Leavitt, 1987) or shows like *ER* (Crichton, 1994), is fundamentally different to something like *Lost* (Abrams, 2004) or *Veronica Mars* (Thomas, 2004). The reason for the difference in the modes of engagement is that the latter cases are part of what Jason Mittell refers to as

'forensic fandom,' where understanding the story requires the audience take on a "detective mentality" as they engage with the text (Mittell, 2006: 35, 2009a: 128–129, 2009b: 2.3; Veale, 2013). Currently, approaches to critical analysis don't account for how textual structure can shape the processes required to negotiate a given text, or how those processes themselves have an affective dimension that influences the experience of the story. Creating a framework to fill a critical gap in understanding how our processes of textual engagement influence our affective experience of fiction will show insights into how we have been telling stories for a long time.

This article uses *Homestuck* as a case-study in order to argue that media-specific forms of analysis which consider the affective impact of modes of engagement on our experiences are vital components in understanding the effect the media has on storytelling. I will begin by exploring how different modes of critical analysis have located textual meaning relative to the labour of the person negotiating the text. Next, the article uses *Homestuck* to illustrate how some relevant modes of engagement grow out of different textual substrates, and explores how those modes of engagement can be used to shape the affective experience of the story. Establishing how modes of engagement impact the

experience of storytelling will allow me to illustrate the concept of *transmodal engagement*, or how *Homestuck* carries readers across multiple distinct modes of engagement common to other forms of mediated storytelling in order to shape the experience of the text. Doing so will also lay the groundwork for illustrating how *Homestuck* uses *metamedia storytelling* – a technique where the audience's pre-existing and intuitive familiarity with modes of engagement from the wider landscape of mediated storytelling is used as a tool to shape and manipulate their experience of the text. These insights into how the individual experiences of *Homestuck* as a text are shaped would not be possible without the lens provided by examining its modes of engagement.

APPROACHING HOW LABOUR SHAPES TEXTUAL EXPERIENCE

Textual structures function as a metaphoric 'coal-face' where members of the audience labour to generate meaning from texts. Different textual structures require different modes of labour to negotiate, and different modes of labour have an impact on the meaning of the experiences produced from negotiating those textual structures. As a result, the people who create texts can arrange for their

textual 'coal-face' to lean towards particular kinds of labour in order to shape the experience they want the people engaging with the text to produce.

This shaped production of meaning is neither abstract nor a new process, and it simply describes how authors and other creators have been shaping the experiences of their audiences for as long as there has been mediated storytelling. For example, Neil Gaiman wrote *American Gods* (Gaiman, 2001) with an awareness that it is comparatively rare for people to read books aloud anymore. As a result, he relied upon the modes of engagement associated with reading text from the page in silence as a storytelling tool, concealing the identity of a key character in a way that would be immediately obvious if read aloud.[1] Structuring the text to take advantage of modes of engagement in this way instantly creates two different forms of experience for readers: those who are 'in on the secret' can read on to see how long it takes for the trap to spring on the unaware characters within the story. In comparison, those readers who are themselves being tricked only notice when the trap springs on them as well – and are aware even as it closes on them that the evidence was in front of them the entire time. Essentially, the readers inside the trap and those waiting for it to spring produce meaning very differently from the same textual structure as a result of different modes of

engaging with that structure, resulting in distinctions in narrative pacing and their affective experiences of the story.

Experiential and affective distinctions resulting from how a textual structure shapes the labour of the person engaging with a given text have not previously been considered by established forms of textual analysis. Speaking in very broad terms, semiotic analysis anchors meaning to the text itself. However, the role and labour of the person engaging with the text is considered important to generating meaning, because of the culturally specific context that they engage with the text from. Essentially, the specific processes of labour required to engage with the structures of a text are not considered relevant to meaning generation within semiotic analysis, while the way the reader's social situation and cultural context influence their reading of the text is.

The genesis of multimodal discourse was an attempt to consider semiotic analysis in more detail by separating out the content and expression of communication, and then by breaking semiotic resources into a series of strata, all of which have an impact on signification: *discourse*, *design*, *production*, and *distribution* (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001: 21–22). While this does explore multiple parallel dimensions of semiotic and aesthetic meaning-making, there are

no strata for considering the ways that different textual structures require different forms and modes of labour to negotiate, or how that negotiation impacts meaning.[2] Neither semiotic nor multimodal discourse analysis factors in how the processes required of the people at the coal-face of engaging with a text shape the meaning they generate with it.

In comparison, N. Katherine Hayle's 'media-specific analysis' considers the ways that different textual structures require different modes of engagement to negotiate, and argues that meaning is an emergent property which grows from the interaction. Hayles argues that the 'materiality' of a text is

> an emergent property created through dynamic interactions
> between [the work's] physical characteristics and signifying
> strategies. (Hayles, 2005: 3, 103–104)

The significance of materiality as a concept is in recognising that the meaning of a work emerges from a complex interplay between the work's underlying structure, how the user engages with that structure, and the user's 'interpretive strategies'

(Hayles, 2002: 33). The meaning of a text cannot be entirely predicted before the user engages with it, as a result of the interplay that produces materiality.

Primarily, N. Katherine Hayles has approached materiality and medium-specific analysis in the context of the written word and the significant changes to meaning produced by moving it from print environments to digital ones (Hayles, 2005: 89, 109). Despite this, materiality and medium-specific analysis are equally relevant for shedding light on the emergent process of meaning-making in other media forms across both sides of the analogue/digital divide: humans and texts co-create meaning as a result of the labour of engagement, and authors are able to influence that labour through textual structure. However, while Hayles' body of work alerts us to the importance of understanding the role of materiality on generating meaning from texts, it does not explicitly consider the role of affect.

Part of the meaning generated as people negotiate with texts is affective, rather than aesthetic or associated with semiotic signification. Misha Kavka frames affect as "...potential emotions – emotions that have not yet been perceived as such and thus constitute a 'primordial soup' of feeling" (Kavka, 2008: x).[3] Affect requires investment on behalf of the person involved, and that investment is contextual in that it reflects what is relevant to both the individual and the

situation in which the investment takes place (Veale, 2015: 3). For example, the experience of someone watching a television series they enjoy is going to be different and distinctive when watching it to relax than it will be when they're studying it for an assignment. Affect is significant to the experience of fiction because investing affectively in a story is part of the labour undertaken by people negotiating with texts.[4] As a result, we respond more powerfully after we've been engaging with a storyworld and its characters for some time than we do just as we are starting. Since there are affective dimensions to negotiating a given textual structure, different modes of textual engagement are affectively distinctive. As a result, authors and creators can shape different textual structures to manipulate the affective dimensions of the experience – as has already been discussed in terms of *House of Leaves* making readers emphasise their own tension by turning pages faster and faster, or the difference between readers of horror novels being unwilling to stop reading, where players of horror games are unwilling to turn the corner. The materiality that Hayles identifies is already affective, because there is an inextricable affective dimension to the meaning that we generate from engaging with texts and their underlying structure.

Critically exploring affective materiality – how engaging with textual structures shapes the affective experience of a story – also has broader implications for media studies. Jason Mittell has discussed the significant changes introduced by the time-shifting technology of the VCR, and how the resulting changes to the processes of watching television had an impact on televised storytelling (Mittell, 2006: 30–31). In a context where convergence culture is collapsing different modes of engagement together onto the singular media platform of the computer screen (Jenkins, 2006), examining how processes of textual engagement shape the affective experience of texts will highlight differences between outwardly similar forms of media. As an example of this process, Mark Stewart notes conversations with his students where – despite the fact that they are aware of current programming, have 'favourite shows' and frequently watch episodes if not seasons of television content – many of them don't believe they 'watch television' (Stewart, Mark, 2014: 1). The students' perspectives on what it means to 'watch television' involve modes of engagement connected with broadcast schedules beyond their control, specific hardware platforms, and particular viewing practices. These are foreign enough to the students' own processes of engaging with the episodic and seasonal content that

originates from television broadcasting that it qualifies as something distinct. As a result, what "watching television" means in the context of convergence culture becomes increasingly complicated (Bennett and Strange, 2011; D'heer and Courtois, 2016; Gillan, Jennifer, 2011; Greer and Ferguson, 2015; Ross, 2009) and methods of analyzing how the shift in context changes the experience of mediated storytelling will be valuable.

Medium-specific analysis that studies affective materiality by exploring how modes of engagement shape meaning will provide ways of better understanding how the labour of engaging with texts is shaped by their structures, and thus provide tools for understanding the effect that the media has on storytelling.

Methodologically, this article follows the work of Hayles by investigating texts through personal engagement and medium-specific analysis in order to consider how structural elements of texts shape the experience that emerges from the labour of negotiating with them. One example of Hayles' approach is her extensive analysis of *House of Leaves* (Danielewski, 2000; Hayles, 2002: 110–131) – where she explores how the book deliberately destabilises its relation to wider media:

The computer has often been proclaimed the ultimate medium

because it can incorporate every other medium within itself. As if

imitating the computer's omnivorous appetite, *House of Leaves* in a

frenzy of remediation attempts to eat all the other media, but this

binging leaves traces on the text's body, resulting in a transformed

physical and narrative corpus. In a sense *House of Leaves*

recuperates the traditions of the print book and particularly the

novel as a literary form, but the price it pays for this recuperation is

a metamorphosis so profound it becomes a new kind of form and

artifact. (Hayles, 2002: 112)

As such, the discussions of *Homestuck* to follow are grounded in analysis of the

affective materiality that makes up the text: the article explores how *Homestuck*'s

textual structures produce affective meaning by shaping the modes of engagement

involved in negotiating the story.

HOMESTUCK'S ANATOMY AND TRANSMODAL ENGAGEMENT

Exploring how *Homestuck'*s textual structure shapes the labour of people engaging with the text, manipulating their modes of engagement in order to influence the affective experience of the story in turn, will illustrate the utility of applying medium-specific analysis to textual storytelling.

Given that *Homestuck* uses different forms of media in articulating its story, an obvious conclusion would be that it can be understood as a transmedia text[5] – but this isn't supported by key elements of how transmedia texts are defined:

> Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story. (Jenkins, 2011)

Homestuck is not dispersed across multiple delivery channels, because all of its content is available through one core website. Instead, it is one delivery channel telling a story across multiple forms of engagement.

As a result, from a structural perspective *Homestuck* can fairly be described as a webcomic: it shares the modes of engagement that sets webcomics apart as a distinct storytelling form, and will initially be understood through that lens by new readers. The textual features and modes of engagement that *Homestuck* and webcomics share are numerous:

They are largely linear arrangements of the information blocks that Barthes refers to as *lexia* (Barthes, 1974: 13–14), connected by hypertext links. Each comic page exists as its own lexia. Each individual lexia is simultaneously a self-contained segment of narrative time, and a link in an unfolding chain of events. Different webcomic texts exist on a spectrum regarding how 'self-contained' a given comic page is within the text, and thus the extent to which each page makes sense in isolation versus requiring an understanding of previous events in the narrative.[6]

Where webcomics feature an on-going narrative, each page functions as a miniature 'cliff-hanger' by raising questions about what will happen next. This

makes webcomic texts very 'moreish,' in that if a reader is invested in the

storyworld, it's very easy to chain pages together into an extended reading

experience because each page is small, and the transition to the next page is easy.

If the specific webcomic has no dates attached to each comic, there will be no

contextual information about how far you are through the text, or how far remains

to be read. As a result, it is even easier to spend far more time than anticipated

reading webcomics than it is reading books.

    Reading webcomics means moving between two distinct modes of

engagement separated by a temporal dimension, based on where the reader is

relative to the creator's progress through the story. As the author advances

through the narrative, completed comics become accessible through the 'archive'

as functionally just another page in the ongoing story. The mode of engagement

for reading webcomic archives is where the reader links each new 'page,'

available at the touch of a button – akin to turning the page of a book – into their

understanding of events in the story. As mentioned, it's easier to read 'just one

more page' than a book due to a lack of external cues about the context of reading

and how long the process is taking (Veale, 2012: 123).

When the reader reaches the most recent page produced by the webcomic's creator, the mode of engagement becomes entirely different: readers move from treating each page as part of a greater whole and being unaware of the passage of time, to waiting in real-time for the next page to be released. As a result, readers approach each page in isolation, treating them as individual additions to the storyworld they have been engaging with. Since the transition from reading the archives to waiting for the next update often happens without warning due to the lack of contextual cues about how 'far' the reader is through the text, the affective tone for the sudden change in textual gear is often *frustration*: when the reader is used to discovering what happens next at the touch of a button, suddenly having to wait a day, or multiple days, is torturous (Veale, 2012: 124).[7]

One result from the frustration of being affectively invested in the storyworld but suddenly unable to continue the labour of negotiating the text – something that is now practiced behaviour – is that readers often move their engagement onto the webcomic's paratext[8] in forums and online communities (Genette, 1997). This enables them to discuss the possibilities of what might happen next with other fans, and the members of webcomic communities tend to

be very active – even for webcomics where the overall number of people in the community is small.

Part of the reason that these communities tend to be so engaged is that the modes of engagement common to webcomics tend to produce a context of affective intimacy for readers to invest themselves in. Intimacy has a temporal dimension, and is an affective result of the ongoing labour of engaging with the characters and context of a given story (Veale, 2012: 62–65, 129–134). Webcomics have no pragmatic limit on how large the text can be: even long-running television serials or generational soap-operas are limited in that each episode has to range between 45 and 60 minutes long; as a result, they focus on the highs and lows in relationships, friendships, and rivalries. In comparison, webcomics can be quietly domestic: since there is no limit to the text, readers get to see the characters in everyday circumstances, rather than on only the best and worst days of their lives. Webcomics can illustrate the quotidian along with the melodramatic, in some cases being actively biased toward the every-day, and can be relaxing storyworlds to engage with as a result. Additionally, they do so for long periods of time: there are webcomics that have been telling a continuous narrative featuring the same characters and storyworld for twenty years. Readers

can share an investment in the lives of characters alongside their own for a significant period of time, becoming intimately familiar with the characters as people, together with how they relate to a wider world.[9]

Homestuck embraces all of these features to some extent because it is using the webcomic textual form as a backbone for how it communicates its story, but the details of how it implements these features complicate the experiential dynamic.

The first point of complication is that the panels are frequently animated to some extent,[10] even if the animation only represents a small shift in expression or change in gesture.[11] *Homestuck* uses these animations to continuously modify and recontextualise the extent to which readers must apply the essential labour found in reading comics: inferring what is implied to happen in movements across time and/or space during the gap (or 'gutter') between panels (Carrier, 2000: 12–15; Lefèvre, 2000; McCloud, 1994: 62–63). Where there is a small level of animation, the reader still needs to bridge the gap between panels or pages in order to infer what will happen next. In comparison, there are examples with more significant amounts/lengths of animation – one of them nearly fourteen minutes long[12] – where the labour of the reader changes into a different mode of

engagement. When *reading* comics, a significant portion of the experience lies in the reader inferring what happens in the gutter between panels. In comparison, when *watching* a more significantly animated page, the person negotiating the text is not required to infer what will happen next as a functional requirement of negotiating the text. Instead the labour becomes understanding the events that are represented and anticipating what might happen next – just as when watching film or animation. Equally, just as with watching animation or film, the person engaging with the text at that point has no ability to change what happens next beyond navigating away, and has no control over the pace at which the story is told. As a result, animated sections take a level of agency away from the person engaging with the text, and in comparison to the more 'readerly' sections, send them careening across a new section of narrative without brakes or an ability to steer. *Homestuck* uses these variations in the levels of 'reading' or 'watching' in the imagery on each page to control both the pacing of negotiating the text, and the reader's mode of engagement, in order to shape the experience of the story. In doing so, *Homestuck* creates an experience distinct from both traditional webcomics and other forms of mediated storytelling.

Homestuck uses *transmodal engagement*[13] to create a distinct experience of storytelling: it carries the reader across varied modes of engagement common to multiple forms of mediated storytelling in order to shape the moment to moment experience of the text.

For example, some of the lexia within *Homestuck* are embedded videogames. Initially these games are very simple,[14] but they still change the labour and mode of engagement of the person engaging with the text, and later these games rapidly expand in depth and relevance to the storytelling experience. The modes of engagement which set the experience of games apart are grounded in the fact that it is the players of videogames who progress through the text, and come to feel responsible for the outcomes of their decisions and actions in the process (Veale, 2015, 2016). Making meaningful decisions with sensible consequences within the space of the game makes the player aware of a timeline of their own decisions and frames the experience as happening *now*. As a result, the experience of playing videogames is set apart from other forms of mediated storytelling by making the player consider their own future actions and decisions with affective weight, because they know they will feel responsible for whatever the outcome turns out to be.

The responsibility associated with the modes of engagement common to videogame play mean that there is less 'affective mediation' than what is experienced through other forms of storytelling: *you* are the one who responds affectively to events, rather than a protagonist of a novel or film who the audience hopefully sympathises with (Veale, 2011: 44). *Homestuck* uses the game-lexia to provide access to the convoluted lore and inter-character relationships within the storyworld. The videogame modes of engagement involved in negotiating these sections of the text mean that the player experiences the information differently than if they were reading it as hypertext fiction – despite the amount of reading involved in playing the games. There are two individual game-lexia with enough text in each to qualify as a novelette – at over 17,500 words each. Each of these can be expected to take more than an hour to complete, despite the fact that each game is but a single 'page' of the story. The player develops a personal connection to uncovering plot points and background information about the characters within the storyworld, because everything the player learns is a result of their own labour in negotiating the text. Discovering new facts *yourself*, rather than reading about someone else finding out that information, gives the revelations impact and depth in a different way than the experience of reading

about someone else making the same discoveries would. *Homestuck* uses the modes of engagement found in videogames as a way to both shift the pacing of the wider story and create a different relationship to the contents *of* the story.

The experience of *Homestuck*'s story is further complicated by its use of the modes of engagement associated with hypertext fiction alongside those of webcomics and videogames. *Homestuck* involves a great deal of reading: many or even most lexia feature "Pesterlogs" beneath the comic, which are a way of accessing the conversations that characters within the comic are having over social-networks that resemble IRC Chat protocols. Some of these can be over 6000 words long, and the overall amount of text in *Homestuck*'s story (not including the videogame lexia) is more than 870,000 words[15] – more than twice the length of *Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1954). The lack of external limitations to the size of the text reinforces the modes of engagement surrounding affective intimacy already found in webcomics: readers can encounter characters having relaxed, banal discussions and the kinds of bickering typical in IRC Chat environments for extended periods of time, as well as in moments of drama:

CG: IT'S REALLY WEIRD.
CG: THIS HUMAN EMOTION YOU CALL FRIENDSHIP.
EB: friendship isn't an emotion fucknuts.
CG: SEE, THAT IS WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT.
(Hussie, 2009)[16]

This allows for experiencing who the characters are and how they see the wider

storyworld 'at rest' in a way that wouldn't be possible through webcomic modes

of engagement in isolation. Webcomics, or even comics as a wider form, are

limited in the amount of text that can sensibly be provided to the reader as part of

fleshing out characters and the storyworld: dialogue in comics requires visual

space to happen inside, and increasing the amount of visual space slows the pace

of the narrative at the same time as creating more work for the artist(s).

Homestuck uses the online context to combine the depth of information that can

be conveyed through text, and the affective intimacy of webcomics, in order to

shape the content and experience of its story.

Unsurprisingly, given the amount of text involved in *Homestuck*'s story,

the modes of engagement associated with reading are themselves important for

shaping the experience of the text. On every page where a Pesterlog appears, the

labour of negotiating the text involves moving from the work involved with

reading a comic – bridging the gaps between panels and pages in order to

understand events as one cohesive whole – to reading the text and understanding how it connects to events in the comic page. The amount of text on each page varies wildly as well – many have no text at all, while some have many thousands of words. The person engaging with the text needs to continuously move across and between modes of engagement, but different pages are tailored to different forms of experience. Some pages generate meaning purely as comics, others mostly as text, or mostly as animation, while others still use varying combinations of all three. In a similar approach to what has been discussed with its animation, *Homestuck* uses this variation as a tool that allows it to change what mode of engagement does the 'heavy lifting' of storytelling on any given page, and thus to shape the experience of the people negotiating the story.

Another way that *Homestuck* manipulates its experience of storytelling is by incorporating modes of engagement from Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) within its experiential gestalt. Just like ARGs, *Homestuck* is a vast puzzle at the same time as it is a story, and readers are left trying to solve that puzzle with the same skills they have outside of the game (Veale, 2012: 182–185). Despite the fact that the text which makes up *Homestuck* is available on one site rather than broken up into fragments and multiple media platforms as ARGs are, readers

share some of the same modes of engagement: readers act as detectives, pulling together disparate strands of information, and experiencing the personal frustrations and victories of Christy Dena's "eureka discourse" as they make connections (Dena, 2008: 53; Veale, 2012: 192–193). The experience of engaging with *Homestuck* is – just like an ARG – *work* in a different way to other media forms, in that part of meaning generation only happens if the reader actively puts the pieces together themselves, and the process requires patience in a way that helps make the experience distinctive and personal (Hayles, 2012: 38). For example, readers may notice that the number '413' occurs repeatedly as a background detail. If they begin looking for repeat appearances as part of their mode of engagement, while speculating what it might mean, then that experience of trying to solve what seems like a puzzle shapes the experience even in sections where '413' does not appear.

One result of the puzzle-solving labour that is part of negotiating *Homestuck* is that the difference between encountering it for the first time and rereading it later is more emphasised compared to other texts: a huge number of tiny details must be reconsidered in new light due to both new knowledge and affective investments formed from previous negotiations with the text. For

example, I read *Homestuck* for the first time on the recommendation of my spouse, who was already a fan. My spouse often reacted with surprise, shock and fascinated consternation at what were to me innocuous and banal events that ne[17] had not remembered being 'hidden' in the early stages of the comic. Later, when I reread the text myself, I had similar surprises where events I remembered as having one narrative and affective complexion reorganised themselves into a completely different experience in light of later knowledge. Even something as banal and entertainingly profane as the "human emotion you call friendship" conversation mentioned earlier becomes re-examined in a deeper light. It is not that rereading *Homestuck* has a fundamentally different experiential register as rereading something like *American Gods*, where – as discussed – negotiating the story when 'in on the secret' is very different to reading blind; the difference is that there are a very large number of 'secrets' and they are hidden everywhere, including early in the text when readers are not yet primed to look. For example, I only noticed that the core summary of *Homestuck*'s early narrative – four thirteen-year-old friends attempt to play a new videogame together – was another appearance of '413' when writing this article.

The layered secrets, codes and easter-eggs embedded within *Homestuck* creates another link to the modes of engagement common to ARGs: there are several different axes on which *Homestuck* can be experienced as part of a community. Firstly, for example, if a reader notices the continuing references to '413,' when reading the text and tries to figure out what it means, they might search for information online. Anyone doing so will find the theories and ideas of a huge collection of people having the same discussion and asking the same questions, possibly introducing them to related questions that they had missed.[18] Then there is the competitive dimension which invokes Dena's concepts of a community forming *tiers* around their level of engagement (Dena, 2008: 43, 2009: 239–258; Veale, 2012: 189–194). In broad strokes, the members of the primary tier are the most active members of an ARG who bring in new material; the secondary tier fits that material together, and the tertiary tier forms an audience that engages with the output of the other tiers. For *Homestuck*, there are different contexts for the tiers to function in parallel: there are the tiers trying to solve the puzzles of the story where the primary tier hunts through the comic looking for tiny details to create theories; the secondary tier works through that material and debates about what theories to support; and the tertiary tier follows along. Next,

there are the creative tiers, because from its inception *Homestuck* has been open to contributions from the audience. Andrew Hussie has solicited art and music[19] from the fan community to fold into the text (Funk, 2012), providing a way for fans to gain recognition and esteem for their contributions. In a similar way to how the television show *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (Faust, 2010) has incorporated and reflected fan engagement and theory (Veale, 2013), Andrew Hussie uses discussions in the fan community as fuel for easter-eggs to include as part of the story (Funk, 2012). This means that primary and secondary tiers are not just competing in their speculations as to what happens next, they know they are in a dialogue with the creator of the text, who might find their suggestions sufficiently entertaining to make them part of the 'official' text.[20]

Fans also generate 'unofficial' texts in behaviour shared by the secondary tier of ARGs, in that fans produce 'guides' that help new readers understand and engage with the text (Dena, 2008: 42, 51; Veale, 2012: 191–192). In the context of ARGs, there is no singular 'text' until one is created by members of the community. Despite having a specific text for *Homestuck*, members of the community create wikis and forum posts to clarify events within the story, along with highlighting the easter eggs and hidden references within it. They also seek

to create other resources that members of the community may find helpful: for example, the sources I have drawn on regarding the size of *Homestuck* as a text were created by Anthony Bailey[21] and a *Homestuck* forum poster known as 'NotEgbert' (Bailey, 2012; 'NotEgbert', 2012). *Homestuck*'s paratext includes material created for – and assisted by – the community of other people who share an interest in the storyworld. As a result, it shares a mode of engagement where 'the text' that readers generate meaning from can be supplemented and complicated by texts created by the community, meaning that readers are generating meaning in the knowledge that their labour exists alongside the labour and investment of other fans.

Homestuck's incorporation of the modes of engagement common to Alternate Reality Games is ambitious: the experience of ARGs is complex and varied precisely because they exist as community events with unclear boundaries for where what qualifies as 'the text' begins and ends (Veale, 2012: 181). Transmodal engagement means that *Homestuck* is able to arrange its textual structure to carry its audience across modes of engagement drawn from animation, comics, film, written fiction, music, videogames, *and* Alternate Reality Games, providing a rich tool-set with which to shape the experience of its story.

However, although the fact that *Homestuck* uses transmodal engagement to manipulate its own structure and thus shape the experience of the story is unusual enough – it goes further still. *Homestuck* uses modes of engagement from other media forms to set up expectations and connotations for the reader, manipulating the reader's own familiarity with the broader media landscape in what can best be understood as *metamedia storytelling*.

THE IMPACT OF 'METAMEDIA STORYTELLING'

Homestuck uses expectations established in modes of engagement specific to one media form in order to surprise the reader as they negotiate a different one, essentially using the reader's own labour to build something narratively and experientially unexpected. For example, despite the links between lexia being a standard element of webcomic engagement, in *Homestuck* they can frame events in the storyworld as if the reader is giving commands from the 'adventure game' genre of videogames, such as "John: Quickly retrieve arms from drawer."[22] The character and description of the comic then respond to the instructions, setting up a call-and-response dynamic that is familiar to the mode of engagement associated with playing games – despite being part of a webcomic. An argument could be

made that this dynamic is better understood as remediation – where new media borrow and repurpose old media (Bolter and Grusin, 1999) – but *Homestuck* complicates the situation further by *using the audience's assumption that the instructions are just remediating adventure-game commands as a storytelling tool.*

During *Homestuck*'s narrative, it gradually becomes clear that the characters can 'hear' the commands apparently given to them by the reader, and after trying to ignore the 'delusions' or tune them out, the characters start engaging with the 'voices' directly. Since the mode of engagement is familiar from videogames, readers are primed to accept it as a self-referential breaking of the fourth wall and nothing more. As a result, it comes as a shock that not only can the characters within the comic hear the commands given to them in the hypertext links used to navigate the comic, but that there are characters within the diegetic storyworld who are *giving* those commands… and always have been. The revelation instantly makes readers re-evaluate the 'commands' that they had previously taken for granted: rather than just being comedic, they are suddenly – retroactively – characterising someone the reader had not previously connected them to. I argue that *Homestuck*'s use of the audience's familiarity with modes of

engagement common to other media forms as a tool to shape and manipulate their individual experience of the text is best understood as *metamedia storytelling*.

Homestuck uses metamedia storytelling in several different ways, including where the context of mediation increasingly becomes part of the storyworld in itself. The story spirals out from a group of four thirteen-year-old friends and their efforts to play a new game together, to the destruction of the world and the discovery/creation of multiple universes and timelines. At one point, the characters decide that the only way to undo key mistakes is to reset the universe – a process called 'scratching.' When the characters put this plan into action, it's unclear until afterwards that they are literally scratching the gigantic CD that stores the *Homestuck* 'game' within the diegesis. In turn, this leads to a quest where the reader 'cannot proceed' until the disc is repaired or replaced – something which also unfolds through the story. The 'scratch' also introduces videogame-style glitches into the narrative – which are themselves carefully considered for how they will shape the experience of storytelling.[23]

Homestuck even manipulates the experience of the story by using the audience's familiarity with the modes of engagement *previously established by Homestuck itself*. All that is required is to shift the dynamic surrounding the

commands given in the hypertext links: a character claims to have a unique agency within the storyworld, a fact that is illustrated when the 'commands' readers give through the hypertext navigation links between pages are all ignored or denied. Readers become temporarily helpless to do anything but watch as the character does what he was going to do anyway.[24]

Another example of metamedia storytelling is where *Homestuck* begins telling two simultaneous stories at once without warning, and where events will not make sense without following both sections (Funk, 2012). However, one of the stories unfolds in what is typically an ad banner on most websites, meaning that the typical mode of engagement for most internet users is to ignore that space of the webpage.[25] As further evidence that the reader is intended to be flummoxed by the transition, the 'ad banner' section is left static for many pages before becoming relevant to the action. This is specifically to help the reader 'tune it out' in order to be surprised later, probably requiring them to backtrack to figure out what they had missed. Even for discrete sections of the text, *Homestuck* sets up modes of engagement for the reader to fall into, in order to then manipulate their expectations of those modes of engagement – and via them, the experience of the story.

Homestuck deploys metamedia storytelling to continually destabilise the reader's understanding of the text and their investments in the storyworld by forcing re-evaluations of not just what is happening, but what kind of mediated relationship the readers have with the content of the story.

CONCLUSION

Textual structures function as a metaphoric 'coal-face' where members of the audience labour to generate meaning from texts. Different textual structures require different forms and modes of labour to negotiate, and different modes of labour have an impact on the meaning of the experiences produced from negotiating those textual structures. Established forms of textual analysis have not previously considered the experiential and affective distinctions caused by how textual structure shapes the labour of the person engaging with a given text.

In comparison, N. Katherine Hayle's 'media-specific analysis' considers the ways that different textual structures require different modes of engagement to negotiate. Hayles' framing of materiality as an emergent process growing out of the underlying structure of a work, and the user's engagement with that structure, is relevant for exploring storytelling across both sides of the analogue/digital

divide: humans and texts co-create meaning as a result of the labour of engagement. Authors are able to influence that labour through shaping textual structure, and thus influence the meaning generated by the people engaging with a text in the process.

Part of the meaning generated as people negotiate with texts is affective, rather than aesthetic or associated with semiotic signification. As a result, materiality is innately affective because there is an inextricable affective dimension to the meaning that we generate from engaging with texts and their underlying structure.

Medium-specific analysis that studies affective materiality by exploring the modes of engagement offers new insights into how texts create distinctive experiences of storytelling. *Homestuck* is a case-study that purposefully uses *transmodal engagement*, carrying the reader across varied modes of engagement common to multiple forms of mediated storytelling in order to shape the moment to moment experience of the text. One of *Homestuck*'s varied applications of transmodal engagement results in *metamedia storytelling*, which is where the audience's familiarity with modes of engagement common to other media forms is used as a tool to shape and manipulate their experience of the text.

Medium-specific analysis that studies affective materiality by exploring modes of engagement provides a better understanding of how the labour of engaging with texts is shaped by their structures, and thus provides tools for understanding the effect that the media has on storytelling.

NOTES:

[1] SPOILER AHEAD: A character nicknamed "'Low-Key' Lyesmith" turns out to be "Loki Lie-Smith."

[2] Multimodal discourse analysis is aware that what people do with material signifiers matters for generating meaning, but this is approached through the lens of how performers of texts can influence that meaning. An example would be a singer "adopting a soft, breathy voice to signify sensuality" (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001: 22–23).

[3] Affect is also slippery. Kavka argues that affect can shift between people, objects and situations when it "properly belongs elsewhere," and has a "loose and ever-transformable relation to both object and cause" (Kavka 2008, 30-31). For example, a reader once told Jeph Jacques, the author of the webcomic *Questionable Content* (Jacques, 2003) that they had been so upset at work over

events within the comic that a concerned boss had asked if they were okay, and the only response they could think of to describe why they were crying was "two friends of mine broke up" (Jacques, 2010). We can become downcast because of something fictional, and have that colour the rest of our day despite also feeling ridiculous about it: affect can have a powerful impact on our experiences even when we are aware of its influence *and feel it to be irrational.*

[4] Although I am discussing the ways that the labour of negotiating a textual structure has affective dimensions, this is distinct from 'affective labour' as used by Hardt & Negri, which is labour that produces or manipulates affects, such as in the context of 'service with a smile' (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 108). Equally, it is distinct from 'affective labour' framed as "labour done freely and willingly that produces value for the user," (Martens, 2011), see also (Coté and Pybus, 2007; Jarrett, 2003; Terranova, 2000).   Using 'affective materiality' to describe the affective impact of negotiating with textual structures rather than 'affective labour' helps to avoid confusion, along with highlighting the emergent co-creation of meaning discussed by Hayles (Hayles, 2002: 33, 2005: 89, 109).

[5] Gavin Stewart touches on the difficulties in categorising digital texts that track across multiple forms of media in a discussion of the *Inanimate Alice* story (Stewart, 2010).

[6] *Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal* (Weiner, 2002) is an example where every page is entirely a text in isolation, since there is no ongoing narrative: http://www.smbc-comics.com/index.php?id=1475. *Questionable Content* is a middle-ground since reading its comics in isolation means that readers won't know the characters or the context. However, each page stands alone enough that they are still entertaining in that context: http://www.questionablecontent.net/view.php?comic=2133. In comparison, *A Miracle of Science* (Kilgannon and Sachs, 2002) has pages that rely more closely on each other, and they make less sense in isolation: http://www.project-apollo.net/mos/mos100.html

[7] Useful comparisons can be made here to 'binge watching' recorded television and then needing to wait as more episodes are released.

[8] An argument could be made that this is better understood as epitext rather than paratext, since we are moving beyond the discussion on the *Homestuck* website itself. However, this is another area where *Homestuck* complicates what would

seem like straightforward binaries: the more popular forums for its online community are hosted and moderated by Andrew Hussie on the same website as the comic, and the author has explicitly incorporated discussions on those forums into *Homestuck*'s narrative and world-building. As a result, clearly delineating whether these communities are best understood as *peritext* on the grounds that they are positioned around the text, or *epitext* since they are outside of the text itself, becomes more difficult. Considering them part of the broader *paratext* is safer, since we are dealing with the "undecided zone" surrounding the edges of what constitutes the text itself (Genette, 1991: 261, 263–264). Jessica Pawley presents a nuanced and detailed exploration of how paratextual theory needs to adapt as it moves from considering the context of printed books to texts in online spaces such as ebooks on social reading platforms (Pawley, 2016: 61–65).

[9] Long-running comics in newspaper syndication also tend towards communicating banal moments rather than high drama, but this is due to creators and publishers being unable to predict that any given reader will read more than one comic in isolation at a time. One of the distinctive strengths of webcomics is extending the everyday scenarios and building richly detailed relationships both

between the characters within the storyworld, and the readers engaging with it, over an extended period of time.

[10] This point of complication is not unique to *Homestuck*, although it occurs there with a frequency and to an extent that is unrivalled in my experience. Two examples of other webcomic texts which feature animated panels without slipping out of the mode of engagement for 'reading' comics are *Dead Winter* by Allison Shabet and *Orneryboy* by Michael Lalonde. Example comics for *Dead Winter* (Shabet, 2007) are available at: http://www.deadwinter.cc/page/200.htm, and http://www.deadwinter.cc/page/300.htm. The website for *Orneryboy* (Lalonde, 2002) is currently either closed or under development as of March 2016.

[11] The first page of *Homestuck* is a good example:

http://www.mspaintadventures.com/?s=6

[12] The first animated page 'watched' rather than 'read' is available here: http://www.mspaintadventures.com/?s=6&p=001982. A better representative example is here: http://www.mspaintadventures.com/?s=6&p=002146

[13] Christy Dena coins the term 'transmodal' to distinguish the "common semiotic principle" from multimodality, to correct conceptual slippage in Kress and Van Leeuwen's usage (Dena, 2009: 198). Although the terms are outwardly identical,

I use 'transmodal engagement' to describe a text which moves across multiple modes of engagement to shape the experience of the reader.

[14] The first game relevant to the story is available here: http://www.mspaintadventures.com/?s=6&p=002153

[15] This count was taken before *Homestuck*'s story finished, meaning it will now be considerably larger.

[16] http://www.mspaintadventures.com/index.php?s=6&p=003294

[17] My spouse identifies with non-binary pronouns.

[18] Jessica Pawley's thesis explores the impact of social eReading platforms such as Wattpad, and she engages with how the impact of 'digital marginalia' – the comments and experiences of other readers from their own encounters with a given book, updated in real time and shared with the reading community via being stored within the text – contributes to the reader's experience (Pawley, 2016: 72–81).

[19] The first comic featuring music is available here: http://www.mspaintadventures.com/?s=6&p=002153

[20] The early chapters of *Homestuck* and Andrew Hussie's other works involved direct audience participation, in that the 'commands' used for navigation across

the text – and thus the events that happened next – were contributed by fans in response to events within the story, along with the names of some of the characters (Funk, 2012). The more people who offered suggestions, the more choices Andrew Hussie had to work from in selecting what could happen next, stitching together a story co-creatively with the audience. As *Homestuck* became more popular, the number of suggestions became overwhelming and the approach was abandoned early into the story, and was replaced by tracking trends within the fandom to look for 'easter eggs' to fold into the narrative (Funk, 2012).

[21] http://anthonybailey.net/

[22] http://www.mspaintadventures.com/?s=6&p=001904

[23] http://www.mspaintadventures.com/?s=6&p=005660

[24] http://www.mspaintadventures.com/?s=6&p=004153

[25] http://www.mspaintadventures.com/scratch.php?s=6&p=005698

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